



# Mexico: defend the people of Oaxaca

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The Oaxaca commune has been defeated and a wave of repression has been unleashed.

Keith Spencer argues that while the popular movement has been thrown back, the masses in Mexico must come out on the streets to defend Oaxaca and drive Calderon from office

For over a month the people of Oaxaca in southern Mexico have been putting up heroic resistance to thousands of troops and armed Federal Preventative Police (PFP), who invaded the state and occupied the centre of the city at end of October. The police, and death squads in the service of the state governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, have killed at least 14 people since then.

For months, a huge popular mobilisation has been taking place to remove the governor's corrupt and brutal regime. The striking teachers' union and other rural and urban organisations formed the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO). They took over the centre of the city and many of its public buildings and radio stations. They occupied the central square of the city, the Zocalo.

With the governor and his cronies banished from their normal seats of power and a popular militia controlling the city, this remarkable expression of people's power soon became known as the Oaxaca Commune. In fact, there was what Marxists call a situation of dual power: on the one side stood the APPO and its militia and, on the other, the governor and his police and death squads.

In part this was made possible by the simultaneous paralysis of the Mexican state in the aftermath of the presidential elections on July 6, when the right wing neoliberal candidate, Felipe Calderón, stole the election from the populist candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador. Now, the Mexican ruling class, egged on by the North Americans, are trying to end this paralysis decisively. They desperately need to restore the monopoly of repression that the capitalist state must have to continue its exploitation.

They hope to do this by crushing the Oaxaca Commune and demoralising and dispersing the huge pro-Obrador demonstrations. On 1 December they managed to swear in Calderón as president, despite attempts by Obrador and his supporters, which led to fistfights in parliament, to prevent it.

## Battle for the square

In Oaxaca, the last bastion of popular control, the radio station at the university, was finally closed down at the end of November. Since a five hour battle on the 25 November, when thousands of demonstrators tried to retake the Zocalo from federal forces, the army, police and plain clothes thugs have gone on the rampage in the city. There have been more than 160 arrests (bringing the total to more than 300 since June), a number of 'disappearances' and nearly 40 wounded. Prisoners report torture, the rape of women and beatings resulting in three deaths.

Human rights investigators have been arrested and deported. Prisoners have been taken out of the state to a high security prison where they cannot be visited by family or lawyers. Thugs belonging to governor Ruiz Ortiz's party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, plain clothes cops, and the PFP have roamed the streets picking up anyone suspected of being a supporter of the APPO. They have also raided schools, dragging out teachers suspected of being union members and activists in the five-month strike that initiated the Commune.

In fact, the month-long battle for control of the city has seen repeated mass mobilisations. At the end of October, the army and the PFP had forced protestors out of the central square. But an attempt by the army to take control of the radio station at the university on 2 November was met by mass resistance as thousands of people from across the city surrounded the soldiers. Three days later, a 'mega demonstration' of up to one million people was held in Oaxaca in support of the APPO and called for the ousting of Ortiz.

A few days later, the APPO held its constitutional congress with hundreds of delegates from throughout the state and supporters from across Mexico. Local bodies of a similar type have sprung up, including one created by the indigenous peoples of the state. The APPO also called for popular assemblies throughout Mexico and a general strike in support of it. Marches were held nearly every day including one on Saturday 25 November and barricades were rebuilt whenever they were demolished by the military.

Regular calls went out for support and solidarity throughout Mexico, but the military's job has been made easier by the conciliation of parts of the APPO's leadership, which continued with negotiations with the government while the military was deployed in the city. Some leaders of the teachers' union (which started the struggle) even tried to call off protests and return to work before a mass meeting had decided anything, however, they were run out of the APPO.

### **Betrayal of the masses**

But the real betrayal has been by the national figurehead of the popular movement, Lopez Obrador, and the corrupt trade union bureaucrats linked to his bourgeois populist party, the Party of Democratic Revolution (PRD). These bureaucrats have been busy ingratiating themselves with the PRI and the National Action Party (PAN) of Calderón and Fox.

The PRD, despite fisticuffs with right-wing MPs and an occupation of parliament during the inauguration of Calderón, has promised to work 'efficiently' with the other two parties in congress. It has also met with the governors of the other parties, including Ortiz's fellow PRI governors, and promised to work with them. Its 'Front to Extend Progress' has played the role of loyal opposition in parliament. Little or nothing has been done to challenge the government's attack on Oaxaca.

Obrador, writing in La Jornada (a newspaper linked to the PRD) at the end of October, criticised the military invasion and called for governor Ortiz to resign but did not demand any mobilisations in support of the people of Oaxaca. This is from a man who had more than a million people protesting in his favour in Mexico City in September. His National Democratic Convention, which anointed him as 'Legitimate President' in September, has been sidelined while the whole of the Mexican state has been repressing Oaxaca.

Even Obrador's call for a Constituent Assembly rings hollow. He could have made common cause with the APPO, which has also called for an assembly but, instead, he channelled the mass movement into the dead end of parliamentary fireworks. On the 20 November, three weeks after the troops went into Oaxaca, another big demonstration in Mexico City hailed Obrador as president and again he did little to take forward the struggle or offer support to Oaxaca. Members of his own party, such as the leftist historian Adolfo Gilly, have slammed his campaign for not defending Oaxaca.

In fact, while the entire country has been wracked by a revolutionary situation in which the masses time and again mobilised in hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, the political leadership has resolutely kept things at the level of mass demonstrations. It has dodged calling on workers to take all out and indefinite strike action to bring down incumbent president Vicente Fox and the usurper Calderón. The corrupt union leaders tied to the main bosses' parties have kept their workers away from the struggle, despite the neo-liberal offensive on jobs, wages and conditions. Together these misleaders have let Oaxaca bleed.

Meanwhile, the representatives of the populist and anarchist traditions of the Mexican left have done no better, despite their loud cries of support for Oaxaca and condemnations of Lopez Obrador. The 'Other Campaign', promoted by the

Zapatistas as an alternative to Obrador's presidential bid, has descended into farce as the crisis developed. Given the post-modernist clowning that Sub-Commandante Marcos regularly resorts to, it is even possible that this has been deliberate. After marching northwards, that is, away from the events in Mexico City and Oaxaca, the centres of popular revolt, the Zapatistas arrived on the Mexican/US border where, as part of the international day of solidarity for Oaxaca on the 2 November, they held a bilingual road blockade on a border highway.

Not satisfied with this earth-shattering success, their self-proclaimed 'Intergalactic Commission' called for a mass strike on the 20 November - a public holiday in Mexico. Marcos, now widely known as sub-comedian Marcos, has revealed the bankruptcy of the idea of changing society without taking power. A worldwide hero of the anticapitalist libertarian left since 1995, he recently renamed himself Comrade Zero. In terms of his usefulness to the masses fighting on the streets of Mexico City and Oaxaca this was, indeed, most appropriate.

### **Fight back against right**

The repression in Oaxaca represents a serious blow to the popular movement but it has not necessarily defeated it - yet. In any case, the real revolutionary left will always be the last to leave the battlefield. They must never abandon the workers, peasants and youth. They must work all out to build a united front of all those who oppose the repression and are willing to take action to end it.

But Calderón's victory could be short-lived. He has stolen the election and used violence against the popular movement of Oaxaca and millions know this. He backs murderous and corrupt governors like Ruiz Ortiz. He and the bosses' parties should be prevented from ruling. Mass resistance should meet every attempt to impose his programme of:

- Repression in Oaxaca, which, if it succeeds, will spread to Chiapas and right across Mexico.

- A free trade agenda to allow multinational, particularly US, corporations to exploit Mexican workers even further.

- Flat tax proposals that will boost the incomes of the super rich.

- 'Job creation schemes' which will mean slashing wages and imposing precarious job conditions.

- Socially reactionary policies on women, on abortion and contraception.

The past few months has seen huge struggles in Mexico but has also exposed the leadership of the masses has being unable to take the struggles forward. The next few months could see the workers and peasants take their revenge of Calderón and company for stealing the election and repressing Oaxaca. But they urgently need to go beyond the limits of Obrador's populism and the Zapatistas' guerillism and take up revolutionary marxism.

Where next for the struggle

Workers around the world should continue to take to the streets in solidarity with Oaxaca. We should demand:

- End the repression, all military and police out of Oaxaca! Release all prisoners. Put Ruiz Ortiz and his thugs on trial in front of the masses.

- For a general strike in defence of the APPO. Close down industry and the banks. For mass mobilisations and occupations of cities and towns throughout Mexico. Demand Obrador uses the National Democratic Convention to organise millions in defence of Oaxaca, not for his parliamentary manoeuvres.

- Build popular assemblies in every state of Mexico to resist the repression and to unite and organise the struggle against Calderon.

- For a sovereign Constituent Assembly to end the corruption and vote rigging of bourgeois politics.

- Force the usurper Calderon from office and replace him with a workers' and peasants' government.

The crisis of leadership revealed by the prolonged social upheaval of 2006 shows that the workers and the peasant masses, the urban poor and the youth urgently need their own political party, a mass workers' party, founded on a

revolutionary programme, not the leadership of Obrador and the PRD or the corrupt trade union leaders. Such a party could agitate for and help organise strikes, occupations, mobilisations and defence of progressive struggles.

But it could also go further and lead the working class to take power itself and smash the capitalist state and its armed might.

The APPO has bravely shown what can be done in one state and offered a vision of another way of organising society; a revolutionary party can unite the best militants and activists in all of Mexico and set the masses on the road to conquer political and economic power and to build socialism.

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