



Mexico: Masses must take power

Tue, 05/09/2006 - 22:00

Over the past few months Mexico has entered a revolutionary situation. In March strikes by copper miners and steel workers erupted. In the state of Oaxaca, a 70,000 strong teachers demonstration in May led to a mass occupation of the main square calling for better pay and state aid for poor students.

On June 14 the permanent encampment in the main square was brutally attacked by police. This provoked a huge demonstration of 400,000 people and the next day a Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO), was founded consisting of 170 delegates representing 85 organizations, trade unions, peasants organisations, human rights groups, NGOs. The strategy it adopted was to prevent the state government from carrying out its executive functions. Now the city and the state is in a situation of dual power.

After the presidential elections, on July 2 it was announced that Felipe Calderon, candidate of the right-wing neoliberal party (PAN or National Action Party) had won by a wafer thin margin. The supporters of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, candidate of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), a left populist party angrily refused to accept this. They were convinced the election had been stolen.

A series of huge mass demonstrations began. On July 31 three million occupied the streets and squares of Mexico City - seven million in the country as a whole. Under pressure from the masses, the electoral commission recounted 9% of the votes, declared that Calderon would still have won by about 400,000 votes, and refused a full recount. However even the Financial Times commented, 'Watergate is child's play compared with what went on here. But the authorities don't want a full recount because they are going to find many irregularities.' (21 August)

Obrador has said he will 'rule from the streets' and has called for a general convention of 'a million delegates' on the 16 September to discuss the way forward. Mexico is moving swiftly towards a crisis where the question - who rules- is posed point blank. The mass mobilisations confront the as yet intact state forces, though the latter have not yet been called on to exercise bloody repression. Will the revolutionary situation turn into a revolution? That depends in large measure on the strategy and leadership that the masses can find, can create, in the weeks and months ahead.

The Oaxaca Peoples' Assembly

The struggle in Oaxaca is so important because of the form of organisation that has emerged there. The Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca has become an embryonic soviet that could develop into a real instrument to establish of working class rule. In August it initiated a state-wide forum to discuss an alternative constitution and popular involvement - mirroring some of the debates in the Venezuelan revolution.

It has overseen an upsurge in popular control and politics and manages food and support for blockades, camps and occupations, and acts as a political centre including boosting the role of women. For example, last month, 3,000 women banging pots and pans, took over the national TV centre in Oaxaca and made an address to the whole country. Demonstrators have fought with paramilitaries and the army to keep control of radio stations; in mid-June they had only one, now they control 10.

The forum coincided with a state-wide strike for 18 August called by the teachers and supported by many other unions and civil organisations. The movement has polarised the state and isolated the dictatorial and reactionary governor Ulises Ruiz. Small businesses have sided with the movement while big business is threatening its own strike against inability to control the APPO and strikes.

But the movement's mass character also means that it is politically amorphous, with a large strand of indigenous politics (Oaxaca has the highest indigenous population in Mexico), reformists, bishops, NGOs, plus the teachers union, which sparked the whole crisis. Since May, the demands have shifted to the left from purely demands around teachers pay and conditions to ones about getting rid of Ruiz and changing the state constitution and taking control of the local wealth. But any solution at a state level can only succeed within the context of a national and even an international movement.

The other campaign - a diversion

Meanwhile the Zapatistas are continuing their 'other campaign' in the rural areas. They have also carried out protests in Mexico City about the repression in Atenco- a rural community - involved in a struggle over land - and last month issued a statement after a conference on the Yucatan peninsula.

However, the other campaign is in an important sense a diversion. Their mobilisations have been a few thousand rather than the millions in Mexico City or hundreds of thousands in Oaxaca. Their message that the election was a diversion - consistent with their anarcho-populist view that 'taking power' is irrelevant or downright dangerous- has left them on the sidelines when the masses were deeply concerned with the fate of the elections.

Their statement from the Yucatan conference is replete with appeals to the ancient gods, to an indigenism that ignores the mass of the working class, and even statements of support to Oaxaca and Atenco are empty of any suggestions for taking the struggles forward. Whenever the class struggle reaches any degree of intensity the question of political power is posed- shall the masses submit to the coercion of the state or shall they overthrow its forces and smash its apparatus of repression? Anarchism and its post-modern hybrids like Zapatism, quit the battlefield when this question is posed.

Where now?

The coming month will see more huge social mobilisations in Mexico, greater numbers on the streets and more violence from the state. Obrador called for a general convention of 'a million delegates' on the 16 September to discuss the way forward but already there are differences on what the assembly is for. Some say it is just a protest against Calderon and at best will inaugurate Obrador as the true president. Others are calling for it to become an organising centre to continue the protests. Others have called on the convention to become an alternative centre for power inspired by the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APP0). A million people cannot be a deliberative and executive body but it could carry the message to create such bodies to every corner of Mexico. That is the call that needs to go out.

Meanwhile the forces of reaction will not wait and see. The Mexican bourgeoisie and the United States have since the late 1980s overseen the liberalisation of the economy, imposing ever greater exploitation of workers and driving the peasants of the land. They have created sprawling shantytowns on the edge of the cities and a huge supply of cheap labour for US corporations. Mexico is a bulwark of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The USA needs a neoliberal government in Mexico as a barrier against the populist sweeping across Latin America. The US is not going to lightly allow a 'peoples power' revolution to topple the PAN. Even though Obrador, in himself is no radical, probably nearer to a Lula than a Chavez, if he were swept to power by a popular revolutionary upheaval like Chavez, this could change. For this reason Bush is certain to throw all influence he can muster to support Fox and Calderon.

The masses are therefore just not fighting over an election but they are fighting for the future of their country and their continent. But to fight against both the US and Mexican bosses, the masses need clear revolutionary class politics not the bourgeois populism of Obrador, the petty bourgeois anarcho-populism and indigenism of the Zapatistas or the corruption and bureaucracy of trade union leaders. They need revolutionary politics and a revolutionary action programme, one that can map out a path for the masses themselves to take power.

The burning question of the movement is how to throw Fox, Calderon and his party out of power. For this something

more than mass demonstrations, even by millions is necessary. An all out and indefinite general strike is needed. This is already needed to defend workers already in struggle against the bosses such as the sacked copper miners, to make the bosses feel the full strength of the workers. But any general strike which is more than a one day demonstration will paralyse the economy and pose the question to the ruling class: who rules? If the workers and the peasants can create a nationwide network of popular assemblies, such as the one in Oaxaca, then the answer can be - we do.

Such assemblies must be built in every village, town and city. These assemblies should be delegate-based and involve unions, factory committees, peasant organisations. They must become alternative centres of political power, i.e. soviets, challenging capitalist property and the right of the bosses state to rule, distributing food, and carrying out necessary work such as operating radio and TV stations.

The popular assemblies must arm the masses against the state forces and bosses' hired killers, must create a militia to defend strikes, occupations, and TV and radio stations and other amenities under popular control. They can make it well nigh impossible for the government to use the police, the army to shoot down their brothers and sisters or if they try, to win over the rank and file soldiers to side with the people.

The call for a general strike must be placed on the union leaders. But workers must fight to take control of the general strike themselves, not to let it stay in the hands of the corrupt bureaucrats - tied to the main bourgeois parties. This would ensure its betrayal and defeat. This is true of the pro-Obrador union leaders too, who called off a general strike of four million workers before the elections. Workers must build strike and factory committees to organise mass picketing and initiate workplace occupations and link up with strikers in other factories offices and mines.

The popular assemblies and general strike must raise the call for a sovereign constituent assembly and oversee elections to it. Such an assembly should debate what sort of government should replace the rotten constitution and the stolen election. Furthermore the constitutional assembly should take measures that encroach upon the rule of the bosses and their property, nationalise factories and put them under workers control and encourage the peasants to occupy and takeover the landed estates.

The popular movement should also call for international solidarity especially within the huge Latino population in the United States which this year has taken to the streets in their millions to protest for citizen rights. A call to the millions that marched in the US would paralyse any attempt of Bush's administration to intervene in support of their favourite candidate Calderon.

The need for a revolutionary party

But none of these vital tasks will happen spontaneously, they constitute a strategy, a programme of action, that must be fought for. To organise this fight a mass revolutionary party must be formed - urgently. Such a party can be built from the militants in the unions and strike committees and from the most revolutionary elements in the popular assemblies.

Such a party must fight for the arming of the masses and fraternising with the army. It must fight for a mass popular uprising, an insurrection which can smash the repressive power of the capitalist state and install a revolutionary workers' government, answerable to the peoples assemblies.

To win the broadest masses to this perspective it is vital to fight misleaders like Obrador who talk left but who will mislead the opposition into compromise or will do the dirty work of the multinationals and US imperialism when in power.

The stolen elections may have been the reason for millions coming out onto the streets. But the intransigence of the electoral commission, of Fox and Calderon has raised of the question how to get rid of them? The answer is to fight for the power of the working class and the poor peasants. This power does not need an Obrador, must not stop at bourgeois populist reforms. It is inseparable from the struggle for socialism and international revolution.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/mexico-masses-must-take-power>