



RECLAMATION

THE INDIGENOUS STRUGGLE FOR LAND AND AUTONOMY IN CHIAPAS

In the Sixth Declaration, the Zapatistas define capitalism as the problem, and explain that, with the other “humble and simple people” of the world they are looking and struggling against and beyond neoliberalism, seeking dignity. The Tsotsil indigenous word ‘chulel’ captures the living quality of life, all the life force or energy involved in the earth, in our own life, even the potentialities latent in objects and things. Capitalism destroys ‘chulel’, nature and community. It promotes an extreme individualisation and dehumanisation. The Zapatistas are on a path or a way of true living, emerging out of and realising ‘chulel.’ This is far beyond the artificial language of rights, it speaks to another world, different and better.

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proposal for a new life, with respect, organization, discipline, dialogue and agreements, not the vices of the system."

The Zapatistas have found it necessary to employ the language of rights, particularly in relation to women's rights. The first articulation of a rights claim made by Zapatista indigenous women was the Women's Revolutionary Law, which was formulated and presented to the EZLN in March 1993. The Law states that women have the right to participate in the army as combatants and to assume leadership in the army; to decide how many children they want to have and when they will have them; to have primary consideration in access to health services; to an education; to choose a marriage partner of their own free will, or to choose not to marry; to hold office if democratically elected in their communities; to work and receive a fair wage; and to be free from physical mistreatment from family members or strangers. This shows that they were using this language of rights even before the uprising.

Again, the betrayed San Andres Accords were "for Indigenous Rights and Culture." But perhaps it is the failure of all these claims for basic rights that leads to peoples following the alternative path to autonomy. In this case, the State's lack of real political will to participate in a dialogue, and its decision to initiate a war of low intensity instead, obliged the EZLN to change things for itself. It forced the Zapatistas to demand the construction of alternative perspectives as the only real way to transform relations. It led them to build up, gradually, a social force capable of converting their basic demands into autonomous, popular achievements.

Zapatista discourse talks a lot about responsibility, duty, and a moral and ethical basis to action, all of which are essential to their organisation, where everyone has a duty to each other. Certain people have the position of *responsables*, those who are responsible for something, and this position is taken extremely seriously. "We the Zapatistas will not run from our responsibility, lessen our efforts, or give in to the temptation of giving up." – Marcos, Dec 3rd 1994. To be a member of a Good Government Council is "a responsibility, not a privilege."

This language of duties and responsibilities, of moral obligations is common to indigenous peoples. An example from the Yaqui, which could equally have come from other peoples: "It is our duty to fight for those who fought, who even gave their lives so that we could be here, and it is our duty to leave the conditions so that we will still be here in 200 years. We should be afraid, not for ourselves, but for what we cannot do for the future."



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about the world, that you have demonstrated the possibility of values that are almost the opposite of what is going on. While in capitalism individualism reigns, here communitarian values respect the person but are developed and flourish in a community.

- Luis Villoro.

They weren't going to give us our basic rights. We had to take them.

- Pedregales de Coyoacan, Feb 2016

Faced with elimination, with a power to whom they are inconvenient, irrelevant and infinitely disposable, the indigenous have had to learn a whole new language of struggle, and unfortunately also of self-defence, in order to survive at all. As the Zapatistas say, they are not part of the market, they do not buy or sell, so for Power they do not exist.

Therefore, tactics and strategies have been developed, especially for those adopting the legal route as one method of struggle, which employ the language of the violation of rights, and international treaties and conventions have been established which enable them to do so more effectively, such as the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. Rights therefore become a means to explain what has happened. The language of these legal "rights" shows the degree to which the communities' lives and cultures have been devastated. These "rights" should not need to exist, but for the voiceless, faceless and forgotten, those who have nothing, they offer a possible path back to dignity.

However, at the same time, the indigenous peoples are developing their own alternatives, the most important of which is the building of their own autonomy, but to do this they need to know they can remain on their land. In Chiapas, among the indigenous groups who are trying to assert their own political autonomy, the state government appears to be using human rights as "another form of colonialism," and it may be that the indigenous peoples can develop their own understanding and their own language to enable them better to deal with this form of marginalisation and exclusion.

Given the devastation and the refusal of the Mexican State to respect the collective rights of indigenous peoples, men and women walk the defence of the ancestral territories from autonomy

- Frayba

"The path is made in community, if there is no justice we must walk making it," the parish priest of las Margaritas said recently. "What is necessary is a

social struggles and movements in Chiapas. Lastly we wanted to ask, that personally we feel that the use of the language of "rights" to be one of power and is debilitating, although many of the movements that you have talked about use rights as a reference point. Can you speak to this, how would you disagree or agree?

We think this is probably two questions really. The use of the language of rights, and the use of rights as a reference point in Chiapas. Rights are a western and not an indigenous concept, though they have become one that can be used as a means of struggle in desperate times, but which will finally become irrelevant.

Firstly, yes absolutely the language of rights is one of power and is debilitating. It can also be demeaning, and is very much imposed by a hierarchy, allowing those in positions of power to turn away from careful consideration and reflection of what should be the best behaviour in any situation, because they can pretend that the problem is solved. The concept of human rights is a Western neo-liberal concept which perpetrates divisions, injustices and inequalities, and can also, conversely, be used to justify oppression and repression, as it has been by different authorities in Chiapas. The language of rights can permit the perpetuation of stigma and discrimination, them and us, and is contrary to the principles of solidarity, all of us together, no one over anyone else.

Eduardo Galeano famously said: "I don't believe in charity. I believe in solidarity. Charity is vertical. It goes from the top to the bottom. Solidarity is horizontal. It respects the other person." The word 'charity' here could be replaced by 'rights'. The discourse of human rights should be replaced by one of liberties and commons, but also, we would argue, by one of mutual respect and collective responsibility, of moral imperatives, because, as the indigenous peoples have shown us so clearly, we are all part of each other, and cannot separate the individual from the collective.

The second part of this question is the use of rights as a reference point in Chiapas. It is important to recognise that different groups, peoples, movements evolve their own particular language according to their needs. The language of rights does not exist within the indigenous languages, which are based on the second person plural, the "we", nor is it part of their cosmovision. This means that when they are first displaced, indigenous peoples lack the tools to make sense of it, their identity has been taken away. Capitalism is inconceivable within a culture and tradition of communalism.

It is in Chiapas, with its indigenous roots, its cosmology and ways of thinking

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the criminalisation and repression of any form of dissent or the development of any social movements, following established patterns and no doubt developing new ones. The “leaders” will be targeted, and imprisoned or killed. There will be a continuing attempt to destroy any resistance through the creation of an atmosphere of fear – “bullets of lead,” and through bribing with social welfare programmes – “bullets of silver.” It is likely that there will be more attacks on groups who do not conform, such Las Abejas, and on those who exercise their right as indigenous peoples, such as the Ejido San Sebastián Bachajón and the Ejido Tila, and the movements among communities to support each other will continue.

It is also clear that the structural reforms, and the push for destructive megaprojects resulting in dispossession will continue. There have already been warnings of a renewal of mining activities in several areas, and highway, dam and tourism projects are being developed. No doubt networks and strategies of resistance are being developed also, but there will inevitably be a huge price to pay.

It is likely that the Zapatistas’ strategy of building ‘other geographies’ will continue to grow in influence—from the construction of the autonomous municipalities of Cherán and Santa María de Ostula in Michoacan, to the reconsolidation of the CNI; from the declaration of twenty-two autonomous municipalities in the state of Guerrero to the explicitly Zapatista-inspired Kurdish movement.

Our struggle is not local, regional, or even national. It is universal. Because injustice, crime, dispossession, disrespect, and exploitation are universal. But so are rebellion, rage, dignity, and the desire to be better.

We need to be attentive to attempts at dispossession and to all aspects of counterinsurgency which are being played out there, and which are linked to the mega-projects and the counterinsurgency-based forms of governance which are also becoming more and more dominant in all other parts of the world. Our struggles are different, but they are linked into each other.

The word of the original peoples echoes down the centuries: “We must not forget that we are the heirs of more than 500 years of struggle and resistance. The blood of our ancestors runs through our veins, it is they who have passed down to us the example of struggle and rebellion, the role of guardian of our mother earth, from whom we were born, from whom we live, and to whom we will return.”

IGD: The Zapatista movement continues to inspire us, as does the heroic

terrain and situation look like for struggles in Chiapas in the coming year?

The Zapatistas, along with the CNI, see a storm coming, when everything is going to get much worse. "We, the Zapatistas, see and hear a catastrophe coming, and we mean that in every sense of the term, a perfect storm." (The Storm, the Sentinel and the Lookout Syndrome, Subcomandante Galeano, April 1, 2015). Against this storm, they call on everyone, all of us, to organise. "Because if we don't organize, we will be enslaved." They also call for critical thinking, the expansion of critical thought against the capitalist hydra, based on the ideas proposed at the seminar, which is perhaps better described as a seedbed.

There is nothing to trust in capitalism. Absolutely nothing. We have lived with this system for hundreds of years, and we have suffered under its 4 wheels: exploitation, repression, dispossession, and disdain. Now all we have is our trust in each other, in ourselves. And we know how to create a new society, a new system of government, the just and dignified life that we want.

Now no one is safe from the storm of the capitalist hydra that will destroy our lives, not indigenous people, peasant farmers, workers, teachers, housewives, intellectuals, or workers in general, because there are many workers who struggle to survive daily life, some with a boss and others without, but all caught in the clutches of capitalism. In other words, there is no salvation within capitalism. A bloody night, worse than before if that is possible, extends over the world. The Ruler is not only set on continuing to exploit, repress, disrespect, and dispossess, but is determined to destroy the entire world if in doing so it can create profits, money, pay.

That is why we must better unite ourselves, better organize ourselves in order to construct our boat, our house—that is, our autonomy. That is what is going to save us from the great storm that looms. We must strengthen our different areas of work and our collective tasks. We have no other possible path but to unite ourselves and organize ourselves to struggle and defend ourselves from the great threat that is the capitalist system. Because the criminal capitalism that threatens all of humanity does not respect anyone; it will sweep aside all of us regardless of race, party, or religion. This has been demonstrated to us over many years of bad government, threats, persecution, incarceration, torture, disappearances, and murder of our peoples of the countryside and the city all over the world.

- EZLN, December 2015

For Chiapas, the current situation suggests that there will be an increase in

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Besides the military/paramilitary organization strategy, the most common—and for that reason most violent—way in which the state responds to any attempt at autonomy is through what they call federalism, and co-optation.

'Federalism' was first established in the constitution of the 'independent' Mexico in 1824, in which the term 'municipio' was introduced to the constitution to delimit the basic political, economic and legal unit for the administration of the resources and means of production of a territory, under the excuse of local sovereignty. With a 'democratically elected' *presidente municipal* at the head of each *ayuntamiento*, this is the foundation of the federation's governability and the beginning of all political and economic centralization. Federalism is the name in Mexico for centralism—as many of the most corrupt governors of the recent past recognize—but not centralism of any kind.

The regime of Mexico should be defined as centralized presidential despotism. The 'democratic' succession of power both in the centre of the federation and its peripheries has always been that of *dedazo* and *tapadismo*. Later the confusion between voting for democratic rule served only as an alternative for the governor to keep the preferred 'party' of each municipality in power, for him to win his own governmental election in each state; in turn this served the president of the federation and republic to keep his own party ruling in the entire territory. In 1929, the state, by making claims of being the inheritor of the ideas of the revolution, managed to establish a centralized bureaucracy that has co-opted all sorts of revolutionary ideas by disguising them under the labels of 'reforms for progress.'

This is the regime first established by the modern capitalist class born in the 1920s, and later continued after the 1940s as a contract between the business class and the ruling class. The president of the federation is the representative of this capitalist class, but pretends to be the representative of the federation by claiming that municipalities are able to choose what they want as long as they don't violate the constitution. In turn, the constitution says that the federation has to both collect the incomes of the municipalities and to give back basic services and push forward the municipalities towards 'progress', 'modernity', etc... The municipality is never seen as able to give back as much as what the federation gives to it, and hence it is in a condition of constant debt, the federation always requiring more from it. During a first

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period in Mexican history, every attempt of real social change was seen as counter-revolutionary, but in the later years any revolutionary attempt was been seen as non-progressive, or as utopistic, naive and so on.

The municipality has been the unit in which two kinds of autonomy have been fought for in the recent years. The first kind can be labelled simply as clientelist municipal autonomy and is both electoral and asistencialist. For most of its history it has been sheer despotism how the municipal presidents were established. There were two options, either being for the ruling class represented by a single ruling party (PRI, and its father the PNR) or against it. Whenever it become impossible for the clients to keep up with the economic and political debt imposed by the patron or federation, hence worsening the situation of the dominated, the dominated citizens, mixed with other sometimes middle class interests, somehow managed to force their *presidente* to fulfil more commonly basic needs, such as food, electricity, etc... In recent times sometimes this has been done by voting for a different party, but in this situation other parties, the PAN, PRD and more recently MORENA, although sometimes also the PRI, have taken advantage of the situation of debt of the citizens in a municipality to established their own agendas in their search for federal power, rather than fighting for municipal freedom, and the requests of the communities.

The central power is somehow vaguely aware of the humanitarian crisis in poor municipalities and so, to keep its power, it creates centralized aids to bring some basic needs, but not all, to the municipalities, in so far as the municipalities keep the loyalty to the central power. This is the reason underneath all *asistencialismo*. *Asistencialismo* is what defines the latest visit of Velazco Coello to the municipalities in the vicinity of the Abejas of Acteal, this is the *Cruzada contra el hambre*, the *Programa Solidaridad*, the *Conasupo*, all forms of *participación ciudadana*, are nothing but a form of governability to co-opt autonomy and the search for self-governance in order to assure basic needs.

Whenever *asistencialismo* takes place, then a higher debt is imposed on the municipalities and discontent is divided among the citizens who receive the *migajas* or crumbs given by the patron. The governor and the *presidente municipal* assume that they have done a lot but that more has to be done and then tell the municipalities that they have to do what they are told to do, claiming that what they lack can be solved by implementing a social technique or a technology, hence dismissing and diminishing the political problems underlining the exertion of political power, of domination, exploitation, land grab and pillage. In the fear of losing more than what they've already

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ly more progressive ideas uncomfortable, and once it started profiting more from other sources such as foreign capital, it started to abandon agriculture and education.

Since the neoliberal project took off, pushed by a new economic drive, Mexican politicians, and the Mexican elite have been trying to change article 3, which is the result of class struggle and of the Revolution. But civilians, who have been massively impoverished by this new economic plan, demand their constitutional right. The government is then forced to pass reforms under undemocratic circumstances, facing mass opposition, and ultimately using violence to repress dissent.

To exert this power the government needs violence and corruption, and a justification. So what they do is criminalize dissent. Therefore, we see large sections of the teachers' union supporting the movement of Ayotzinapa, and we see that the struggle against the reforms of article 3 is not isolated. The clearest example being the mini-revolution that began in Oaxaca in 2006. It must be said that the teachers' union movement has been brutally oppressed and that many killed and disappeared can be counted among them. The neoliberal project has treated all the poor like criminals, and also all the institutions that have emerged as a way to bring social equality, not only unions and state companies, but also other social agents like student and indigenous movements, like the Zapatistas.

Another good example is that of Atenco. The British architect Norman Foster and the British-based company ARUP agreed to collaborate with Peña Nieto to build the world's most expensive airport. During his period as the Governor of the State of Mexico -a State that stands out for its levels of violence and femicide- Peña Nieto used the police forces to repress the communal landholders of Atenco, who were being dispossessed of their land.

During the events, the military police killed 2 youths, sexually tortured 26 women and injured many more. 9 Atenco farmers were illegally sentenced to 31 years in prison, 2 for 67 years, and one for 112 years. It was only through a lengthy national and international campaign that called for the liberation of the prisoners that they were finally absolved and freed after 4 years and 59 days. After more than 9 years, the 26 women have taken their complaints of sexual torture to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission and are currently awaiting an in-depth enquiry. The government announces every day that they are about to start building the airport, and yet the Atenco resistance is still there.

IGD: The Zapatistas just celebrated their 22nd anniversary. What does the

working on mother earth; our own politics as a people and our own ideology about how we want to live as communities, with an other culture, governing ourselves as the collective peoples that we are.

- EZLN, December, 2015

The short answer to this question is that the state is responding to autonomous movements with repression, because autonomy is what they most fear, what they most want to crush. The national, federal and local governments respond with different forms of repression. By denigrating them, by supporting or not hindering corporations to mess with the territorial claims of autonomous movements, there are allegations of funding and training local groups hostile to autonomous movements, and the governments generally try to buy people out of or away from the autonomous movements. Impunity is about 98-99% in Mexico, so those involved in autonomous movements take significant personal risks.

As mentioned before, the state responds to all forms of dissent with a mixture of co-optation (which might be considered violence) and proper violence, and has the particular project of dismantling all forms of alternatives to the system it imposes, such as the obvious example of Zapatista autonomy or other forms of autonomy that are appearing across the country as a result of narco-state violence. Clear examples are not only the Zapatistas, but also Ostula, Bachajón, Xochicuautla, Tila, Atenco, the Yaqui tribe of Sonora, the Magonista movements in Oaxaca, the campaign against the introduction of GMOs, Cherán, independent journalists, women fighting for bodily sovereignty, migrants asking for the right to move, all of these and many more have been brutalized by the state. As an answer many of these movements end up becoming centres with the potential of being autonomous, as in the case of Ayotzinapa.

The truth is that the normal rural teaching schools are a problem for the economic plans of the Mexican governments. The Normal Rural Schools were founded in 1922 in post-revolutionary Mexico as part of the government project to bring education to farmers, and with the idea of giving some autonomy to each region to decide on what kind of education they need and want. In fact, after many decades of Callismo, when Lazaro Cárdenas, a president recognized for his democratic policies, came into power in 1934, he encouraged the schools and in particular their revolutionary, autonomous character. He did this by emphasizing article 3 of the constitution that states that every Mexican has the right to education at a federal, state and municipal level. But once the Mexican government found these relative-

lost, most citizens of Mexico are forced to succumb to different forms of *asistencialismo*.

Today, due to the new development of capitalism, the government wants to get rid even of all forms of *asistencialismo*, which sometimes the dominated see as a victory of the people, always inevitably saying that they don't have the money to sustain it because they have to pay debts. Politicians conveniently fail to see the debt that they have to their citizens of fulfilling what they want, and so whenever a municipal president is too dreadful for the ruling power because either he/she/they believes that a social change is needed, or because he used the police or the organized crime or a combination of both to suppress dissent and keep his own tiny kingdom, then he is killed.

Very often the client patron relationships established between parties and citizens and parties and criminal organizations and the business class end up in killings. This is why so many municipal presidents have been killed in the past years, in particular relation to the elections of 1988, the elections of Oaxaca prior to 2006 and since then, and in Guerrero, and this is the reason why the estimation that at least 70% of the municipalities are infiltrated by drug cartels must be false. A study should be conducted in this sense, to prove this hypothesis wrong, but such a study must contemplate that never has there been a division between the state and drug cartels, rather the division has been among members of different businessmen in single municipalities. Because that's what the drug cartels are, business corporations wanting the exact same things, through different means, as the ruling class. From drug cartels and their violent struggle a new layer of new rich and powerful men was added to the capitalist social class, fighting mostly for plazas and for putting their own candidates in municipalities

The struggle for real autonomy, from the Jaramillistas to the Zapatistas, and more recently, in Iguala, has also been fought in municipalities. The case of Rubén Jaramillo is exemplary in this sense, because he tried the political way, by organizing the agrarian party of Morelos, as well as two armed struggles and ending in land occupations in the 60s, which are in reality reparations of a history of oppression. Jaramillo was shot, in fact, under the orders of the 'leftist' president López Mateos.

Some communities have never succumbed to *asistencialismo*, or to fear, and thanks to them the real fight for real autonomy has been led. This is partly because municipalities have the poorest and most exploited and marginalized citizens in Mexico, and because whether the ruling party likes it or not, and in spite of all its attempts to eradicate all municipal freedom, article 115

of the constitution does in fact grant some legal independence giving some little tiny margin to fight for greater and real autonomy. Very often it is the *ejido* which is the first space of reclaimed autonomy, think for example of the *Ejido de Tila* or Bachajón where more than 400 ejidos were reclaimed. The Zapatistas were successful in creating the MAREZ. But there are other examples of municipal autonomy, like that of the *Municipio Autónomo de San Juan Copala*.

After the disappearance of the 43 students in Guerrero, at least 5 municipalities declared autonomy from the federal government, claiming to have the right to have their own police, and their own rules. When the state was unable to respond to the CRAC and UPEG, backed up by large sectors of the Mexican society which were in agreement with the normalistas, a popular coalition called for the cancellation of powers in Guerrero and for cancelling the elections. All the factions of the state responded to this with either political or actual violence, hence repressing the demonstrations against the elections in Guerrero, which ended up in the murder of compa Toño and professor Claudio of the teachers' union, and also displaying all the power of the state by bringing *acarreados* to reassure of the 'effectiveness' of the electoral 'democracy'.

Similar struggles happened in Cherán, not without bloodshed, which has also reclaimed political independence by not having elections to choose their leaders. Cherán seems to be an example of how things can go better when everything around you is quite wrong. The phenomena of criminal organizations and state terrorism combined have prompted many communities to establish their own police, also called *autodefensas*, and to try to have independence from drug cartels and the federal government at once. But in Michoacán and in other places almost inevitably the *autodefensas* have, by participating with the government, given way to the participation and collaboration with drug cartels. In other words, it seems that there cannot be real autonomy without it being autonomy from capitalism.

The ruling capitalist class fears real autonomy. Similar to their ancestors—the constitutionalists who advocated for Mexico to remain as part of the colonies of the Spanish empire—the new capitalist class (established mostly by Salinas) wants to create a *mando único policial* which implies the disappearance of the municipal armed forces (i.e. police), cancels the right of municipalities to have their own police and political independence, and puts instead a single federal armed body. What this *mando único* does is to ensure that the capitalists will still take most, if not all the profit of the municipalities; regardless of the situation and un-comfortableness of each locality, it

large numbers of people have been imprisoned. On March 21st 2015, more than six hundred members of government security forces burned down the regional headquarters there.

We want to tell the bad government that we are not afraid of their repression, imprisonment and death" said the ejidatarios in a communiqué on 1st January, 2016, "we know that we are not alone in this struggle, because there are other people who are embracing and struggling to transform this world into something better, and together, united, we will build a path of peace, freedom and justice.

There is also a link with climate change, as many of the measures are adopted by governments ostensibly as a result of climate change, such as the large-scale growing of monoculture crops for fuel, the development of hydroelectric power and large-scale wind-power developments, also result in the dispossession of indigenous peoples, the destruction of forests and end up being just as harmful as what they intend to replace. They are nothing to do with saving the planet, and all to do with the concentration of vast wealth in the hands of the few at the expense of the many.

One astonishing new development is the new airport for Mexico City, which involves the dispossession, flooding and deprivation of water supplies from numbers of indigenous communities. To build an airport on the site of a lake, which is not only the site of the water supply for large numbers of people, but also the home for quantities of endangered species and irreplaceable archaeological sites, as well as being unstable, subject to inundation and a totally unsuitable site for an international airport, would seem to be the height of irresponsibility.

We hear about more preposterous new schemes on a daily basis: the theft of peoples' sacred sites and the pollution of their land and water in order to develop huge mines, the theft of entire rivers to provide water supplies for industrial developments, the destruction of mangrove swamps.....the list is endless.

IGD: How is the state responding to autonomous movements?

Autonomy is life, submission is death.

We understood that it was necessary to build our life ourselves, with autonomy. In the midst of the major threats, military and paramilitary harassment, and the bad government's constant provocations, we began to form our own system of governing—our autonomy—with our own education system, our own health care, our own communication, our own way of caring for and

Not just in Latin America, but throughout the world indigenous movements are standing against these destructive developments, described by David Harvey as “accumulation by dispossession” and by Raul Zibechi as “extractivism.” The indigenous peoples tend to be the ones who live on the land most targeted by multinational corporations for the development of megaprojects they describe as “projects of death,” such as mines, dams, tourist developments, highways, monocultures, aqueducts, gas and water pipelines, hydroelectric or windpower projects, airports, and the destruction of forests. Their rights as indigenous peoples to their land and territory are ignored and violent attempts to dispossess them are the result.

It is clearly laid down in national and international treaties, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, Article 2 of the Constitution of the United States of Mexico, and the San Andrés Accords, that indigenous peoples have the right to free, prior and informed consent and consultation in relation to their lands and natural resources, and the right to free determination of their affairs. This absolute right to consultation and consent is violated and ignored time and again, with complete impunity, and more indigenous communities are mounting legal challenges to this violation.

Indigenous peoples see themselves as the guardians of the mother earth and her natural resources as they try to resist the plunder and devastation being waged on her. The CNI enables indigenous groups to come together in solidarity in their resistance against these megaprojects, in the spirit of the Sexta, “an injury to one of us is an injury to all of us.” As the EZLN and CNI said in their joint statement in October 2014: “Our roots are in the land and the heart of our mother earth lives in the spirit of our peoples.”

An emblematic example of a heroic struggle against dispossession is the case of the ejido San Sebastian Bachajon, situated in the north of Chiapas, in a very beautiful jungle area, where the Mexican government, and the transnational corporations it serves, plan to build a luxury ecotourism complex beside the beautiful waterfalls of Agua Azul. The indigenous *Tseltal ejidatarios* (common landholders), adherents to the Sexta since 2007, have since 2006 been defending their common lands against expropriation by the Mexican government. This is in open violation of the rights of the ejido to consultation and to free, prior and informed consent. During this period two of their community leaders have on different occasions been assassinated by multiple shots from high calibre firearms, the ejidatarios have been frequently attacked by local government-supporters and public security forces, and

seeks to dismantle the legal autonomy given to municipalities by the federation having organised crime as an excuse. Therefore, in all cases of autonomy, whether clientelist or real, the state being the representative of the capitalist ruling class responds with violence, when it is necessary, but more commonly with *asistencialismo* and other practices of governability such as *participación ciudadana*.



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tal funds the war against drugs, understood as the state and drug cartels, is precisely because they profit from it.

However, it is the Mexican state which is punished –although most commonly it is not- for committing crimes according to its own rules. The state uses violence against criminal organizations, and very often ends up committing the same crimes against which it is fighting. The most common of these is torture, which is a widespread problem in the country, but there are also extrajudicial killings, such as the ones that happened in Tanahuato, Tlatlaya and Apatzingan. It must be mentioned that historically speaking it was the state which controlled, for instance, the production of weed. But in spite of it being obvious to everyone that the Mexican government has committed these crimes, this war is very profitable for the Mexican state, which in as much as it spends money in militarizing itself, also receives money and support from the United States and the European Union, who back up the war of the Mexican government against drugs, regardless of its humanitarian cost.

It's a very complex topic for which you would have to look at a wide array of factors. We recommend the work of John Gibler, especially the first chapter of *To Die in Mexico*, and if you can get any more material on his recent speaker tour with Diego Osorno then this would also help. Also see the work of Anabel Hernández and Diego Osorno, among others.

IGD: We're seeing more and more communities in Mexico standing up to mining, fracking, and development. Can you talk more about this?

The rich multimillionaires of a few countries continue with their objective to loot the natural riches of the entire world, everything that gives us life, like water, land, forests, mountains, rivers, air; and everything that is below the ground: gold, oil, uranium, amber, sulfur, carbon, and other minerals. They don't consider the land as a source of life, but as a business where they can turn everything into a commodity, and commodities they turn into money, and in doing this they will destroy us completely.

- EZLN, December 2015

Part of the neoliberal government policy in Mexico is to implement a series of structural reforms to privatize electricity, education, collectively held lands, and the national oil industry and thus erode the mechanisms of redistribution that were established in the post-revolutionary constitution of 1917. More and more these structural reforms are now being seen as part of the war against the original peoples, to strip them of their territory.

zas' given to different 'families' and organizations that had to pay 'illegal taxes' to the government for the trade and production of drugs. As in the case of Mario Arturo Acosta, 'El Negro' Durazo, and many others, those who trafficked drugs were also responsible for the assassination of political dissidents and human rights defenders who were trying to fight against an ever increasingly unjust economic and political system.

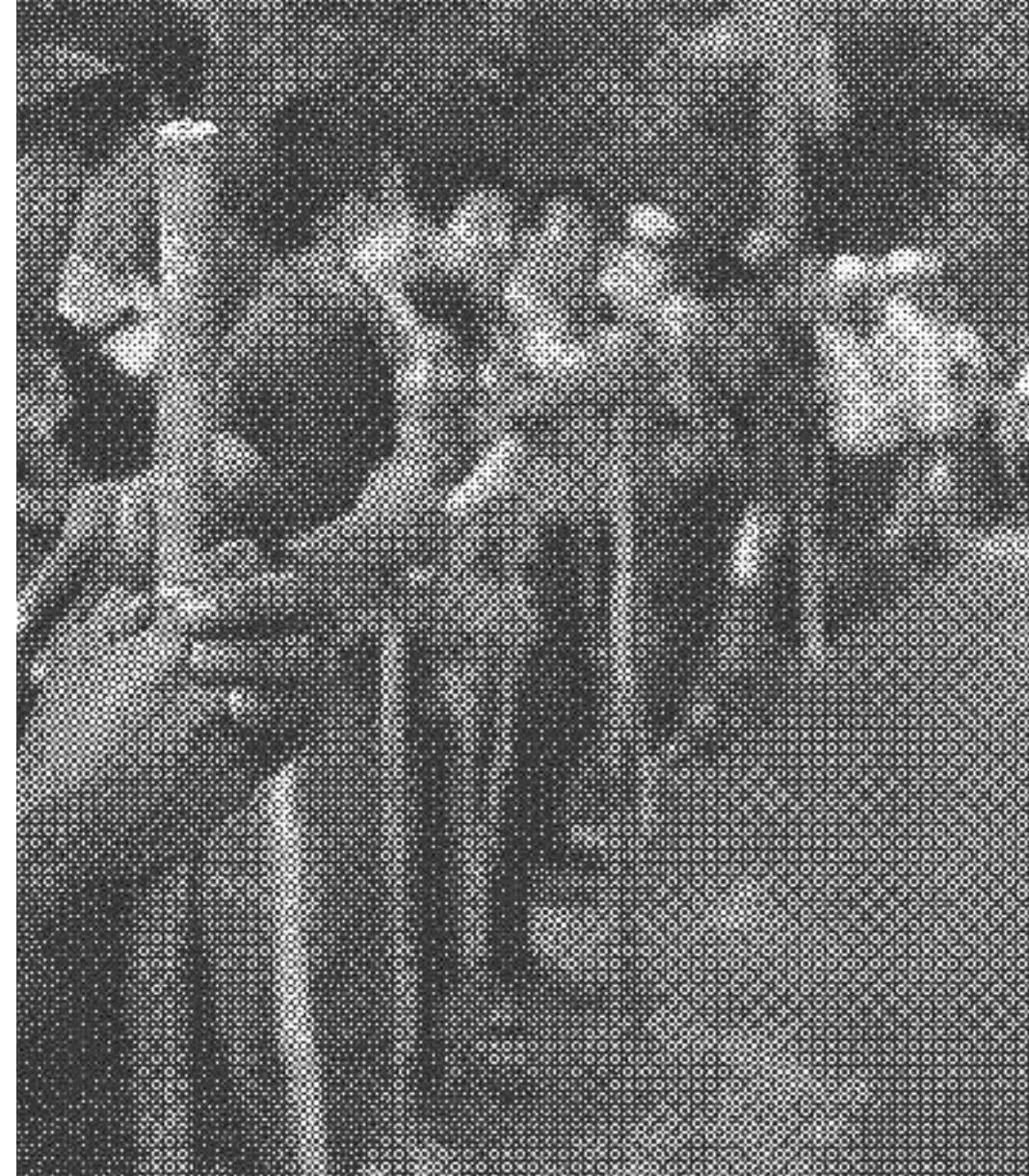
This system, which is part of the modern Mexican State, is the system we have today. Drug cartels are nothing but the uglier face of the capitalist system of production, which seeks to profit those from above by exploiting the workers, and grabbing their lands. They help to shut down dissent and the media, they charge illegal taxes on top of the government taxes, they serve exploitation not only by enslaving and exploiting, but also because in industrialized violent cities people can only go from home to work and vice versa due to violence. Due to their territorial control, drug cartels, in coalition with the government, spread violence in areas where citizens are opposed to mines, fracking, or other forms of extractivism. Once the resource of drug cartel violence is no longer sufficient to suppress dissent, then the state dares to show up using the usual strategies of state terrorism, such as torture, imprisonment, disappearance or murder.

Today the Narco-Mexican state is funded more than before by transnational capital. A clear example is that of Los Zetas, whose origins go back to an elite troop who deserted from the Mexican Army. But on the other hand, the aim of these criminal organizations is to profit from violence, or by other means. Therefore, corruption is a secondary tool through which both criminal organizations and the state manage to profit from violence. Corruption starts to unveil the falsehood of the war against drugs, because the line dividing the state from criminal organizations is either non-existent or blurred as we mentioned before.

It is estimated that 70% of municipalities are permeated by organized crime. For example, in the last elections in Sonora, the two main candidates accused each other, on very good grounds, of being members of drug cartels. But criminal organizations not only pay for campaigns and have preferred political candidates, they also they work closely with international governments and companies; a good example of this is the 'Fast and Furious' 'scandal'. The US keeps feeding Mexico legally and illegally with weapons. HSBC is responsible for failing to monitor more than \$670 billion in wire transfers and more than \$9.4 billion in purchases of U.S. currency from HSBC Mexico, which facilitated money laundering for Mexican drug cartels. Nobody has been so far imprisoned for these crimes. The reason transnational capi-

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Calles passed a law that allowed for the confiscation of the property of drug-producers. But the problem with this origin of the ‘war against drugs’ is that in both cases, the attempt was often to regulate the market of drugs and not to purge all drug consumption from societies. Thus, since then the Mexican government would need money to create institutions to treat drug consumers, and to chase drug producers, but the latter always seemed better for moral reasons and for the economy. On the other hand, since this period the state, and in particular the police and armed forces, were part of the drug-trade that they were supposed to fight against. For example, in the mid-1930s, Raúl Camargo, who had been the head of the anti-drug police since 1927, was fired for the possession of huge amounts of opium and heroin, and was portrayed in the media as the ‘largest promoter of vice’ in Mexico.

The more recent ‘war on drugs’ coincides with the transition from state capitalism to transnational capital in Mexico. Until the 1970s, Mexican oligarchs had accumulated wealth by using the state as the monopolizing force of the means of production, which lay in three main sectors: oil, an emerging and feeble industry, and the extraction of primary products. Thanks to the Mexican revolution, and later to some of the policies of Cardenismo, the vast majority of the land in Mexico is owned by small land-owners. This meant that, whether the rulers of the Mexican state liked it or not, they had to deal and negotiate with the lower and middle classes.

But since 1964 those in power tried to move the economy, previously based on agriculture, to low-paid industries or maquiladoras. This economy forced millions first to migrate to the cities to work in industries, and then to migrate to the US, hence abandoning vast regions of land. Some of those who stayed in rural areas, historically marginalized, found economic escapes in the production and selling of illegal drugs.

While Nixon in the US funded the war on drugs worldwide, in Mexico, under the governments of Díaz Ordaz and Luis Echeverría Álvarez and José López Portillo and Miguel de la Madrid, state terrorism was taking place, at the same time that rival gangs were fighting to control the Mexican drug trade. This fighting cannot be explained without the intervention of the USA selling weaponry to drug cartels and to the Mexican State. The state’s response to drug cartels was to get rid of some drug leaders and, through the Department of Federal Security and the military, to control the trade by making coalitions with rival gangs.

Thus, the territory of drug trade was divided by the state into different ‘pla-

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As in Guerrero, the repression against the people, the extraction of natural resources, and the destruction of the territories in the entire country are operated by the Narco-State, without scruples. It uses terror in order to manufacture pain and fear; this is how it governs.

- EZLN and CNI, 22nd October, 2014

In the era of speculation, transnational capitalism has transformed itself into a mafia, effectively creating a world in which political economy and criminal economy are one and the same. According to the Zapatistas, the problem is not that states have disappeared but rather that they have been entirely remade as nodes of a single global network of contemporary 'mafia capitalism' which the EZLN calls 'the empire of money'.

When people say that Mexico is a Narco-State they do so in reference to a historical truth, rather than to the simple fact that the state has been corrupted by organized crime. This latter is the opinion usually given by the media. As in the case of other places in Latin America and in the Middle East, the United States and local forces of the state are responsible for creating the economic and social conditions for the emergence of so-called 'criminal organizations.'

In the case of Mexico, the 'Narco' finds its origins in the creation of the modern state, and they cannot be disentangled. The first one is the prohibition of drugs, which began in the USA during the economic crisis of the 1930s. In both countries the prohibition of drugs was used as scapegoat. In the USA, prohibition was used to distract attention from the real causes of the economic crisis by blaming Mexicans who were still escaping from the situation of the unfinished Mexican Revolution. In Mexico, prohibition was used for the same reasons, and to secure the monopoly of drug production in the hands of the state.

In Mexico, the Spanish colonialists had prohibited the consumption of traditional drugs such as peyote, but Alvaro Obregón, and then Plutarco Elias Calles were the pioneers -even before the USA- of the prohibition of marijuana, and other drugs previously introduced by Europeans or Americans, such as opium, morphine, and cocaine. In Mexico, as in the USA, drugs were associated with poor and marginalized communities, and with migrants. From this period on, the USA, Mexico and other countries created institutions to chase mostly drug consumers, and only sometimes drug producers.

Chasing drug dealers was indeed a good business, for which reason in 1925

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In January 2016 It's Going Down held an interview with Dorset Chiapas Solidarity Group which is part of the broader UK Zapatista Network. The group is particularly involved in the translation and dissemination of news from social movements and struggles in the region of Chiapas in Southern Mexico. We wanted to know about a wave of land reclamations that have been carried out by the indigenous peoples of the region as well as growing resistance to extractive megaprojects. We also wanted to know what the role of the Zapatista Movement and the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) as well as the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) was in these expanding struggles for land and autonomy.

It's Going Down: Can you tell us a little bit about Dorset Chiapas Solidarity Group? How did it form and what kind of work do you do?

There are many individuals and collectives throughout the world who are adherents to the EZLN's Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle, or La Sexta, or the equivalent, and who in their various ways, according to their own calendars and geographies as the Zapatistas say, offer solidarity to the compas in Chiapas and at the same time develop their own struggles and resistances.

The people who on this occasion have made humble suggestions of possible answers to your questions all operate in their various ways within the UK Zapatista Solidarity Network, and some are members of different groups within their various localities. However, the questions have *not* been discussed among the network as a whole, and so anything written here does not represent the views of the network, or indeed of any of the groups within it. We do however all share the view that we would need to write a book in answer to each of these question in order to do them justice!

Some of us have been engaged in Zapatista solidarity since January 1994, while others came along later. Some are engaged in practical solidarity through appropriate technology such as water projects and some who have the necessary skills have been part of healthcare projects; others have focused on fundraising, and have contributed funding to the construction of small health clinics and schools or whatever was most important according

to decisions made by the various JBGs; some have been out to Chiapas as human rights observers, or participated in caravans; others have promoted education projects and workshops, while others have been involved in research and reporting. Many have participated in actions, whether protests outside the Mexican Embassy, street stalls in different towns and cities, disruption of events through theatre and information-sharing. We have written letters, pronouncements and statements of solidarity, organised petitions and coordinated actions. One important part of our activities has been the distribution and sharing of information in English. As part of this we have endeavoured to produce newsletters, write articles, and translate important documents, sometimes as part of the International Zapatista Translation Service.

But as such, anything we have written here should not be seen as the words of any particular group. Our knowledge is small, and we have shared with you some impressions in solidarity with the excellent work being done by *It's Going Down*.

We have quoted extensively from "Words of The EZLN on the 22nd Anniversary of the Beginning of the War Against Oblivion," which is the organisation's most recent communiqué.

IGD: You focus on Chiapas. What has been happening there in recent years and months?

Chiapas is one of the poorest states in Mexico, and the poverty is highest among the indigenous peoples, who also in many areas lack schools or teachers, healthcare, water, sewerage, electricity, floors or roofs to their houses and paved roads. The original demands of the Zapatistas were: land, work, food, health, education, dignified housing, independence, democracy, freedom, justice, and peace, and, while the situation is now very different among the Zapatista autonomous communities, for many of the indigenous, especially in the poorest areas of Chiapas, not much has changed and deep poverty remains.

However, the EZLN tell us that hunger has been eradicated in Zapatista communities, and that what is now present is dignity, represented by the fact that:

The food on their tables, the clothes they wear, the medicine they take, the knowledge they learn, the life they live is theirs, the product of their work and their knowledge. It isn't a handout from anyone. We can say this without shame: the Zapatista communities are not only better off than they were 22

by the rules of capital. Endemic chaos and corruption exists at all levels. Guerrero, the state where the 43 students were disappeared and another 6 persons, including 3 students, were killed, was governed by the PRD, a supposedly leftist party. There already were many indications of the Governor's collusion with organised crime, but with this case, the impunity and the links between the organised crime and the government in all its different levels became impossible to hide.

The places in which the protests and the boycott (and then the repression) were the largest are places such as Guerrero and Oaxaca in which social movements have pointed out for years the simulation of the authorities and their servitude to capital and to money and not to the people.

More people's eyes had become open to the reality that the state, the three levels of government, the security forces – army and police – and organised crime were all one and the same thing. Furthermore, as there was seen to be no significant difference between the different political parties, there was nothing left to believe in. The parents of the 43 also called for a boycott of the elections.

The 43 are merely a drop in the ocean. Amnesty International states that since 2007 over 27,600 people have disappeared in Mexico, and almost half the disappearances have occurred during the current administration. How can this happen?

The current administration of Peña Nieto has spent more on the military budget in 2014 than any other previous Mexican government in any year, a total of \$8.66 billion in US dollars. The purchase of military equipment from the United States has reached an unprecedented level. Meanwhile, human rights groups say that over 100,000 people have been killed or disappeared since Mexico began using the military in the war on drugs in 2006, while human rights abuses have spiked, with no oversight or accountability for the security forces. Accusations of torture and kidnappings committed by the police and the military have also risen 600 percent from 2003 to 2015. 1,219 torture investigations were launched by the Attorney General's Office from 2006 to 2013, but charges were only filed in 12 cases. The realisation of all this has finally spread much more widely through the population, resulting in complete disillusionment with the current political system and political class.

IGD: Many people speak of the Mexican government as the 'Narco-State,' or the coming together of government and drug trafficking forces. Can you explain more?

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For 26th September 2015, the first anniversary of the disappearances and deaths of the students, the EZLN released a Communiqué “From Pain, From Rage, For Truth, For Justice,” which was “for Ayotzinapa and for all of the Ayotzinapas that wound the calendars and geographies from below.” In it, they stated that “This September 26, thousands of Zapatista children, young people, women, men, *otras*, elders, alive and dead, will mobilize in our territories in order to embrace those people who feel pain and rage because of imprisonment, disappearance, and death imposed from above.” Ayotzinapa has become a symbol of all the unjustly imprisoned, disappeared, assassinated and violated peoples from below.

IGD: Last year, we saw militant boycotts of the national election. What has led so many people in Mexico to reject the established political structure?

The national elections have been the focus of much criticism since 1988, and then again increasingly since 2006. You would have to ask the individuals what has led them to reject the established political structure. Probably people would speak about abuse of power, corruption, impunity, imbrication of the political structure by organized crime. The Zapatistas and the EZLN reject any collaboration with the Mexican government, the electoral process, and the political system more widely. Their approach goes through grassroots/radical/participatory democracy.

In 2006, the Zapatistas launched “La Otra Campaña” (the Other Campaign) to go against the discourse of the official presidential campaigns. Back then, the Zapatistas argued that all the political parties were the same and that there was no difference in how they would govern if they were to win the elections. What they did then was to travel all over the country to get to know the different social movements and to try and connect all those movements. If a change was to be made, it was not going to come from the established system, but from the hundreds of independent struggles in the country. It was not until many years after this that what the Zapatistas had already experienced and explained in terms of the similarity between the different political parties and the hypocrisy of their differences became apparent to many.

It is possible that the Ayotzinapa case, as it has been called, played a role in so many people deciding to boycott the elections, but the disillusionment of many people and communities came from long before that. We say that probably it played a role because it became apparent for many people that even the parties that were supposed to be from the left were clearly related to organised crime, and ready to repress any social movements and to play

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years ago; their quality of life is better than that of those who sold out to political parties of all colours and stripesThey have built another form of life, governing ourselves as the collective peoples that we are, according to the seven principles of lead by obeying, building a new system and another form of life as original peoples.

- EZLN, December 2015

Following the uprising of January 1st, 1994, President Salinas de Gortari and his PRI successors in government avoided serious negotiation with the EZLN and sought instead to isolate them through a counterinsurgency plan, developed according to US manuals. The Campaign Plan, known as Chiapas 94, included two counterinsurgency strategies which are still very much in operation today: the formation of paramilitary organizations in Zapatista-influenced regions, and the targeted use of government subsidies to divide Zapatista communities.

As part of this counterinsurgency war, paramilitary groups, encouraged, trained, financed and armed by the three levels of government, still operate with impunity, driven by the desire for land, and over recent years and months there has been an upsurge in this activity and former groups have been reactivated. This activity has resulted in large numbers of people being dispossessed from their land, territory, history, identity and roots. A May 2014 report said there were 25,000 persons in Chiapas living in “protracted displacement,” and more than 2,000 children in the northern and highlands of Chiapas have been displaced from their communities since 2011 as a result of violence.

The Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Centre (Frayba) is currently running a campaign, “Faces of Dispossession,” which seeks to “make visible the ways in which native peoples are violently evicted from their territories,” and to “reflect the serious human rights violations which cause the forced displacement, extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances and lack of access to justice” which “constitutes a pattern of impunity resulting from the implementation of the Plan Chiapas 94 as a strategy of war against the people who build alternatives to the neoliberal system of death.” The campaign focuses on families and communities suffering displacement and lack of resolution or justice over long periods, such as the four families (19 people) from Banavil, Tenejapa, who have been displaced from their homes and lands now for four years, after an attack in which their father was disappeared and for which the attackers remain unpunished.

Chiapas remains the state with the largest number of military encampments.

Along with an increase in acts of harassment by the Mexican army, at the same time paramilitary or “shock” groups such as CIOAC-H operate with impunity in the caracoles of La Garrucha and La Realidad. Their origin is in campesino mutual support groups, which have been bought by local political parties. The appalling attack on La Realidad in May 2014, which resulted in the murder of the teacher Galeano and the destruction of the school and clinic, is well-known. The clinic and school have been rebuilt through international solidarity, and Galeano has been re-born as Subcomandante Galeano, but the paramilitaries continue their threats, intimidation and violence. The EZLN denounced that the temporarily imprisoned “intellectual authors of the murder of the *compañero* and teacher Galeano” have now “returned, fat and happy, to their homes in the village of La Realidad.”

The Christian pacifist civil society group Las Abejas of Acteal, 45 of whose members (plus 4 unborn) were murdered in the Acteal Massacre of 1997, have been denouncing and warning for several years that, as the unjustly released culprits return to their communities and acts of violence proliferate, the situation is now similar to the way it was prior to the massacre. Attacks on individual members of Las Abejas are increasing. There is great concern as to what might unfold, as the local government continues to ignore the situation.

There has also been a recent resurgence of paramilitary activity in the Highland zone of Chiapas, marked by the reactivation of the group ‘Paz y Justicia,’ partly in response to recent collective land reclamations, especially recent events in the Ejido Tila. Not all of these attacks are made by groups described as ‘paramilitaries’ or ‘of a paramilitary appearance.’ Other groups of attackers are described as ‘political party supporters’ or ‘members of the PRI,’ although all the actions are along the same lines.

Another tactic of counter-insurgency is government welfare assistance programs, most recently one known as PROSPERA, which replaced PROCEDE. These “provide and distribute crumbs, taking advantage of some people’s ignorance and poverty.” What happens is that people give up their lands and autonomy and become dependent on government handouts.

An example of what this can lead to is what happened in the community of La Pimienta in the municipality of Simojovel, an area of extreme poverty, in May 2015. As part of one of these programmes, members of the community were told it was compulsory for all children up to the age of 5 to be vaccinated. Babies as young as 28 days of age, many of whose births had never been registered, were among the 52 who received the vaccinations. It seems the

a *campesino* (peasant) and of working the land. The students there continue to work the land as many of them already did at home. In many cases, the communities where the students come from are indigenous communities. Actually, one of the careers they can study for at the rural teaching college is that of bilingual teacher, which means bilingual in Spanish and one indigenous language.

Having said this, the relationship between the normalista movement and indigenous communities fighting for the land should be obvious. The normalistas are, in many cases, indigenous themselves and have suffered the consequences of the neoliberal economic policies in the country. They come from poor backgrounds and from communities that have suffered exploitation in many ways.

Besides fighting for better conditions for their school, the students from the Normal Rural of Ayotzinapa have had an important role in supporting and accompanying different struggles throughout the years. With the disappearance of the 43 students in September 2014, Ayotzinapa became a symbol of struggle, but it only became so due to the previous history of struggle of the students at that school. Since the disappearance of their schoolmates, other students from Ayotzinapa have showed their support for different struggles, including the ones of the indigenous communities fighting for their lands.

Well-known in this context is the relationship that the mothers and fathers of the disappeared students and the killed students, as well the current students from Ayotzinapa, have had with the Zapatistas in Chiapas. The Zapatistas have shown their solidarity with the movement in search of the 43, and also with the fact that the fathers and mothers of the disappeared students have become an icon of struggle in Mexico. The Zapatistas, with their experience in the public sphere in Mexico, warned the mothers and fathers that they should build deep relationships, as it was probable that the mass movement that was then walking with them would not do so for long. The mothers and fathers of Ayotzinapa, as well as the students, have consequently strengthened the link they have with certain movements across the country, notably the *Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra* from Atenco, the Zapatistas, and the *Policía Comunitaria* (Community Police).

On Oct 22nd, 2014, a Joint Declaration was issued from the CNI and the EZLN “on the crime in Ayotzinapa and for the liberation of the Yaqui leaders,” which marked their first statement on what had happened: “We demand the return of the 43 disappeared students and the dismantling of the entire State structure that sustains organized crime!”

consistent networks of resistance against plunder on a national scale.

Since then the two organisations have worked together closely in solidarity with indigenous peoples confronting dispossession. They have met together for "sharing" and have issued joint and individual communiqués in support of the original peoples of Mexico who are facing the dispossession of their land, territories and natural resources, which are being handed over to national and transnational corporations. The community leaders are being killed and imprisoned, again and again.

In April 2015 the CNI stated its position on the wave of repression being waged against the people by "the narco-capitalist governors who seek to take control of our homelands." In response the CNI says they will not give up the struggle, they will fight for the freedom of prisoners, the presentation of the disappeared, and justice for the assassinated. Their resistance against dispossession will be as relentless as it is ancient and unnegotiable, and they will continue to weave a new world from below and to the left.

The role of the EZLN and CNI thus may not be to organise individual land reclamations, or individual actions against roads or pipelines, which communities do in their own time and at their own pace. In their joint statements the two organisations list all the different struggles, the mirrors of resistance. They spread the word, they give their word, their solidarity. The criminalisation of struggle, along with repression, violence, disappearance, assassination, displacement and imprisonment will continue. But now the communities and nations no longer struggle alone, they do so along with others, they have a collective voice, knowing the strength of solidarity, the power of denouncement, and that their struggles, along with those of others, will be known.

It should be emphasised that this question cannot be fully answered, as the actual role of the EZLN and CNI is not made clear, nor, perhaps, should it be. Hence we only give a brief overview of the situation.

IGD: Is there crossover between indigenous communities fighting for land and the Normalista movement?

The Normal Rural School of Ayotzinapa is a school that was created after the Mexican revolution to bring education to the sons of the peasants of the state of Guerrero and its surroundings. Besides studying to become teachers, the young men who decide to study at that school learn about political science, history, and many other subjects. But one other thing is important, the normal rural highlights the importance of cultivating the land, of being

medication was contaminated or out of date, and soon afterwards the babies became seriously ill. It took the anxious parents 24 hours to reach a doctor, for the only clinic in the whole area had no staff and no medicine, and there was no ambulance; by this time 2 of the babies had died, and 29 were seriously ill. The federal and state governments promised to take measures to make sure this would never happen again; however, there is still no clinic, no doctor, no medication, the road remains unpaved and two bridges still cannot be crossed in wet weather.

Nevertheless, as well as the recent intensification in these particular forms of low intensity, civilian-targeted warfare, there has also been a notable increase in organisation and activity among some of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas, and in attempts to use the legal system to defend their rights, through the institution of *amparo*, a form of legal protection or injunction. There has been a marked growth in activity and confidence among the organised communities in resistance. They are working together more, and supporting each other, forming networks of, for example, adherents to the Sexta. Different communities are coming together and building alliances against megaprojects, such as the new highway from San Cristobal to Palenque, and whole areas are declaring themselves free of mines and dams.

There has also been increasing activity among grassroots Catholic community groups, such as the Pueblo Creyente (the Believing People), which arose from the Theology of Liberation (Vatican II, 1962) practiced by the late Bishop Samuel Ruiz, and currently by Bishop Raul Vera of Saltillo. Especially in parishes in the municipalities of San Cristobal and Simojovel, huge pilgrimages have been launched against government corruption and links with organised crime, manifested in drug trafficking, prostitution, and a proliferation of cheap bars selling alcohol, which lead to violence and the breakdown of family life. The priests and members of the parish council have been threatened with death by political party supporters.

These movements are showing a growing tendency to also speak out in defence of the rights of women. For example, on November 25th, 2005, the Movement in Defence of Life and Territory held a pilgrimage in 11 municipalities in Chiapas to make visible the situation of dispossession and plunder they are experiencing as indigenous peoples; and especially to denounce the violence experienced by women. Following the pilgrimage, a declaration warning of the grave risk to communities in Chiapas from megaprojects was issued.

Since 2013 the Zapatista communities and the EZLN have organized a

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number of events that sought to strengthen their national and global connections, and they have also strengthened the autonomous communities. In August 2013 and December to January 2014, they organized the first 'little school.' They invited individuals and collectives who had been in solidarity with them into their communities. Those invited were first introduced to the topics studied in the 'little school' in the relevant *caracol* (regional governance centre, seats of the regional Good Government Councils) and were then sent to communities, where they stayed with families and were always accompanied by a guardian who also served as a translator. The students were also given study books. In this way they were introduced to life in the communities, ie. the Zapatista schools, healthcare, governance, assemblies, collective work projects, etc.

In May 2014 one of the guardians of the little school, known as 'Galeano,' was murdered by paramilitary groups in the community of La Realidad. In response to this event, the EZLN and the Zapatista communities cancelled a seminar they had planned to honour the recently deceased philosopher Luis Villoro. They also took the decision that the figure of the Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, who had been the spokesperson of the EZLN as well as one of their commanders, was going to no longer exist. The person who embodied 'Marcos' took on the name 'Galeano'. Also, the Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés has since taken a more active role in speaking in public.

The planned seminar was then held in May 2015 under the title "Critical Thinking in the Face of the Capitalist Hydra." The contributions are available in their entirety on radiozapatista.org and on enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx

Over New Year's 2014/2015 the festival of Resistances and Rebellions was organized, which emphasized the cultural and musical element of contemporary global resistance struggles in the Zapatista spirit. In the summer of 2015, the EZLN and the communities ran the second grade of the 'little school,' which was taught online by video and reading. Those who were admitted to that grade had to submit a set number of questions on the material they studied.

The EZLN seminar held in May 2015, and the second phase of the Escuelita, in July and August 2015, demonstrate that the Zapatista project continues to inspire and inform. People from all over the world continue to be drawn to Chiapas, where another world is being created, bit by bit. "During these 22 years of struggle of Resistance and Rebellion, we have continued to build another form of life, governing ourselves as the collective peoples that

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cases it has been taken from them by violence, there have been long-term displacements, in many cases land ownership is disputed and there are ongoing conflicts. Populations change allegiances, or are tempted to sell out. The struggle for the land continues.

Land reclamations often take place in December, to mark the anniversary. In December 2015 the ejidatarios (communal landholders) of the ejido Tila reclaimed 130 hectares including the city hall, and in the same month the Tzotzil community of San Isidro de Los Laureles, part of the Semilla Digna (Dignified Seed) collective, recuperated between 165 and 200 hectares of their land and territory from large cattle and sugar cane ranches, where their parents and grandparents had worked as indentured servants since 1940. They previously reclaimed the lands in 1994, but were violently dispossessed. Both communities are adherents to the Sexta, and they have both called for support in the face of possible violent eviction. In the same month, the community of San Francisco Teopisca, also part of Semilla Digna, celebrated ten years since they recovered their lands, but they are also in fear of dispossession. It should be noted that these are not Zapatista support base communities, but communities sympathetic to the Zapatistas.

IGD: What is the role of the National Indigenous Congress and EZLN in all of this?

One of the many consequences of the Zapatista uprising in 1994 is that a feeling of identity, dignity and self-belief gradually developed amongst indigenous peoples and a confidence that they too can stand up to and resist dispossession. In Mexico the Zapatistas first encouraged the re-birth (it first met briefly in 1972) of the Indigenous National Congress (CNI), representing 56 of Mexico's indigenous peoples, following the failure of the federal government to adopt the San Andres Accords. The EZLN then enabled the renewal of the CNI in August 2013, at the convocation for Tata Juan Chávez Alonso. The CNI declared itself "For the comprehensive reconstitution of our peoples – Never Again a Mexico Without Us." In August 2014, at the First Exchange, or Sharing, of the Zapatista Peoples and the Indigenous Peoples of Mexico "Compañero David Ruiz García," the momentum of this badly-needed renewal, which had been delayed by the attack on La Realidad and the murder of Galeano, was increased.

The CNI is the largest and most representative organization of the different peoples and tribes in Mexico, and this reorganization sealed the alliance established more than 20 years earlier between the Zapatistas and the national indigenous movement, and outlined one of the most relevant and

were passed down to them from their ancestors, and are where their gods or spirits or saints live, where their dead are buried, where the sacred maize is grown. The Maya are the people of the corn. Their land is their culture, their history, their identity. It is essential to understand this before talking of land reclamations. Land is essential to providing for their family, their children, on all levels; land is the only means of survival.

One of the main factors behind the uprising at the dawn of 1994 was that it marked the day when Mexico joined the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA.) The Zapatistas saw this as “a death sentence for the indigenous.” One of the conditions for Mexico joining NAFTA was the alteration of Article 27 of the Mexican constitution. This provision had been fundamental to indigenous and campesino (smallholders, people making a living from the land, a word often translated as peasant, but this word can be seen as demeaning) communities because it established and protected the system of collective landholding – *ejidos* and *bienes comunales* – established in 1917 by the Mexican Revolution. Article 27 also granted agrarian communities rights over common-use lands and their resources, making all natural resources found in the subsoil the property of the nation.

The neoliberal establishment in Mexico viewed these collective forms of land tenure as the key impediment to foreign direct investment and economic growth. Through changes to Article 27, which opened communal land to rent, sale, and use as collateral to obtain commercial credit, and through state programmes providing economic subsidies in exchange for the individual ‘certification’ of collective lands (the first step in a process that it was hoped would end in private titles), as we have explained above, the PRI attacked what they viewed as the least income-yielding sector of the Mexican economy, and at the same time opened the door to rebellion.

In January 1994, in many parts of Chiapas, thousands of acres of land were “recuperated” or reclaimed from large haciendas and ranches, by the ancestral owners of that land who had been working there as serfs. This was one of the miracles of the uprising – hundreds of people now made their living from what had been vast estates inhabited by only one family, in the spirit of General Emiliano Zapata’s call for Land and Freedom: “the land belongs to those who work it.” Although most of these land reclamations were made by Zapatista support bases, other campesino groups also joined in and took land to work to grow corn and beans to feed their families. And the recuperation of land has continued sporadically ever since.

Not all the reclaimed land is still in the hands of the campesinos. In various

we are, according to the seven principles of lead by obeying, building a new system and another form of life as original peoples.”

In summary then, we have a situation of what are in origin land-based conflicts, fomented by the authorities in the hope of breaking the resistance. They hope to represent any confrontations as quarrels between indigenous peoples rather than government-backed conflicts. Pressure on land increases as climate change affects crop production – for example there has been a plague of coffee rust this year which has destroyed much of the crop – and as more people have been tempted by the new regulations to sell off their share of the communal lands, and who then soon find themselves with nothing. The three levels of government repress with violence any form of dissent or resistance, and the perpetrators of the attacks are rewarded with land and impunity. However, despite all this the indigenous people continue to assert their collective rights and those of mother earth. *La lucha sigue*, the struggle continues.

IGD: Can you talk about the land reclamations?

Everything comes down to the land, and more recently to the resources under it. The land has been stolen from the original peoples for more than 520 years. The Zapatistas say that “capitalism was born of the blood of our indigenous peoples and the millions of our brothers and sisters who died during the European invasion.” From its beginning, capitalism was made possible by that ‘dispossession’, ‘plunder’, and ‘invasion’ called ‘the conquest of the Americas.’ This attempted conquest initiated a ‘war of extermination’ against indigenous peoples which still continues, and has been characterized by “massacres, jail, death and more death” (National Indigenous Congress, or CNI and EZLN, 2014). Since this theft and plunder took place, the indigenous in many places became peons or serfs working the lands of their grandparents as the indentured servants of great landowners who have treated them with contempt, as possessions. The indigenous have patiently waited their time to reclaim the land which is their heritage. As the Zapatistas always say “we proceed very slowly.”

For indigenous peoples, along with others whose survival and sustenance also comes from the lands they work, the land is the basis of everything; the land is part of them, and they are part of the land. The land is the mother earth, part of the original web of life. Without their lands, they are nothing, which is why there is such profound despair amongst groups of displaced people who lack the language to express the concept of their separation from their lands and territory which represent their very existence. Their lands



Burning election materials in Chilpancingo, Guerrero
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