

Zapatistas' march on Mexico City ends in accommodation with President Fox

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Seven years after launching a brief armed confrontation with the Mexican army that left 200 dead in the southern state of Chiapas, the Zapatista guerrilla movement has taken the well-trodden path of transforming itself into a political instrument of Mexico's ruling establishment.

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation's "long march" on Mexico City last month culminated in a lobbying effort for a set of constitutional amendments granting formal autonomy to the country's indigenous population of 10 million.

History repeats itself, wrote Karl Marx, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. In 1915, Emiliano Zapata of the southern state of Morelos road into the capital at the head of an army of landless Indian peasants, meeting there with the peasant army of Pancho Villa from the north. The two leaders walked through the National Palace and paused briefly for a photo in the presidential throne. Not knowing what to do with the power that had fallen into their hands, they returned to their native regions, leaving the state to be consolidated by a new Mexican bourgeoisie and what would become the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI. This process entailed the assassination of both Zapata and Villa and a reign of terror against the Mexican peasantry.

Last month the Zapatistas, who took their name from the heroic peasant leader of the last century, traced the same route to Mexico City on a chartered bus, carrying 24 people in ski masks. Far from fleeing the capital or cowering behind their doors as in 1915, the Mexican ruling class welcomed the erstwhile guerrillas with open arms, shepherding them into the Chamber of Deputies so that they could deliver speeches that some of the most reactionary big business politicians characterized as "historic" and "positive."

In advance of their trip to Mexico City, the Zapatistas and their leader, Subcomandante Marcos, had repeatedly declared themselves "radicals and not revolutionaries," insisting that they had no interest in toppling the Mexican state or supplanting the existing social order.

President Vicente Fox, the leader of the National Action Party, or PAN, invited the Zapatistas to the capital, guaranteeing their safe passage and urging them to stay as long as they liked. Fox, who was backed by the most powerful sections of the Mexican ruling class as well as by Washington in last year's election, has quickly acceded to two of the group's demands—for the release of imprisoned Zapatistas and the dismantling of several military bases near their jungle redoubt.

Fox has also declared his support for passage of the constitutional package that was negotiated between the Zapatistas and a parliamentary commission in 1996. Elements of the package still face opposition from legislators within both Fox's own party and the PRI, which ruled Mexico for 70 years without interruption before last year's PAN victory.

The Zapatistas launched their 1994 armed action to coincide with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA, which they warned would further destroy the limited share of the agricultural market controlled by peasant production. Ironically, they have

now cemented a political alliance with the most right-wing president in the country's history, a former Coca Cola executive who is firmly committed to breaking down the remaining barriers to foreign capitalist penetration and dismantling the remnants of Mexico's state-owned enterprises and social welfare programs.

Having cast their struggle as a classless one, based on the defense of "civil society" and for "participatory democracy," the Zapatistas have adapted themselves, like other former leftists who have joined the government, to the claim that the ousting of the PRI represented a victory for the Mexican masses. They ignore the transnational capitalist support for Fox as well as the essence of his social program.

With the crisis of the corrupt and repressive PRI and the discrediting of its bourgeois left opposition, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, official politics has shifted to the right in Mexico and the Zapatistas have shifted along with it.

Why has the demand for autonomy, which has been championed by the petty-bourgeois left, now received enthusiastic support from Fox?

The constitutional reforms worked out between the Zapatistas and the legislators declare that the country's indigenous peoples "have the right to free determination and, as an expression of this, to autonomy as part of the Mexican state."

This autonomy, according to the proposal, consists of "deciding their internal forms of coexistence and social, economic political and cultural organization" It affirms the right of the indigenous people to "apply their normative systems in the regulation and solution of internal conflicts," including separate courts. It declares that the use of the natural resources and land in the territories inhabited by the indigenous peoples will be ceded to them in a "collective manner," except in those areas where control remains in the hands of the Mexican state.

The proposal outlaws discrimination and calls for public education to be developed with the aim of preserving indigenous culture. Finally, the package provides for the redrawing of electoral districts to create homogeneous constituencies for the different native ethnic groups.

It should be noted that the Mexican constitution, which dates from 1917 and is the product of the Mexican revolution, formally includes one of the most progressive social compacts to be found anywhere in the world, assuring the country's workers and peasants ample rights to the fruits of their labor. None of these written guarantees have prevented more than half the population from being forced into poverty, the bulk of the peasantry from being driven off the land, and the subjection of Mexican workers to grinding exploitation in the maquiladoras set up by multinational corporations seeking cheap labor.

Constitutional guarantees of social welfare have done nothing to impede the tremendous growth of social inequality that Mexico has witnessed over the last two decades.

There is no reason to believe that paper promises of an end to discrimination against the country's indigenous peoples will change their status as social pariahs. On the contrary, the idea that declaring each of the

country's 57 indigenous ethnic groups "autonomous" will put an end to the oppression they face is a reactionary utopia. The predatory social system of capitalism remains and its relentless economic laws will predominate.

In a country where 80 percent of the national government's budget now goes to service the foreign debt, what kind of "self-determination" or "autonomy" will any section of the working population enjoy? As long as this system remains intact, guarantees against discrimination will be just as empty for the descendants of Mexico's original inhabitants as the constitutional right to work is for the Mexican working class.

Internally, the autonomy demand envisions a population in the predominantly indigenous areas that is undifferentiated by social interests and seeks only to collectively practice ancient customs free from outside interference. But Mexico's indigenous population, like society as a whole, is by no means socially homogeneous. Indeed, while the Zapatistas' armed struggle ended almost as soon as it began, bloody confrontations have continued in Chiapas and other areas, much of it stoked by the government, utilizing religious disputes between Catholics and Protestants, rival land claims between villages and a myriad of other existing conflicts.

Who will decide the forms of "coexistence" and "social organization" in these indigenous territories, not to mention the workings of the judicial system and internal policing, if and when autonomy is granted? It will not be the people as a whole, but rather the more privileged social strata that, in alliance with the Mexican government, gain control. Native autonomy will then merely sanctify a new system of oppression, with rewards for those holding the reins of the autonomous institutions, whether they are Zapatistas or traditional caciques, enforced by state-sanctioned violence against their opponents.

Large numbers of people leave the predominantly indigenous areas in Chiapas and other southern states every year to find work in Mexico's metropolitan centers, or attempt to cross the border to the United States. The solution to the immense problems faced by these new workers lies not in regional cultural autonomy, but rather in uniting the working class in a common struggle against Mexican capitalism and its international capitalist overlords. The Zapatista movement and its demands presume the impossibility of such a struggle and accept the existing social system as fundamentally immutable.

Subcomandante Marcos, a.k.a. Sebastian Guillen, a former professor and non-Indian who began a little-noticed guerrilla movement in 1984, has won more support among the petty-bourgeois left intelligentsia in Europe and North America than he has managed to gain among Mexico's indigenous peoples. He has proven adroit at media relations, promoting an image that is fast replacing that of Comandante Che Guevara on T-shirts and posters.

He espouses a political program that has an undeniable appeal to a socio-political layer that formerly adapted itself to the Stalinist and trade union bureaucracies as well as the old national liberation movements, and has been left demoralized by the political collapse of all these forces over the past decade. For this milieu, the demise of the labor bureaucracies and bourgeois nationalist leaderships proved the impossibility of socialism. They have lauded the Zapatistas' "humanitarian" agenda as an historically unprecedented program that shows the way forward not just for Mexico, but for all the world's oppressed.

Making the pilgrimage to Mexico City for last month's arrival of the Zapatistas were France's former First Lady Danielle Mitterrand, the Portuguese novelist and Nobel Prize winner Jose Saramago, the French sociologists Alain Touraine and Ivon Le Bot, and many others.

Noam Chomsky, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology linguistics professor and leading light of the middle-class protest movement in the US, spoke for this entire layer of liberals and ex-radicals when he declared that Marcos and company had the capacity to link up with other

movements internationally and "change contemporary history."

Walter de Cesaris, a deputy in the Italian parliament and leader of the Stalinist Communist Refoundation Party, predicted that the Zapatistas "will reactivate the international left, which will stop crying about the collapse of communism."

These same people and their co-thinkers in the international milieu of ex-Stalinists, radical professors and "left" spokesmen hailed Cuba's Fidel Castro, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, and El Salvador's FMLN in their day as unprecedented political movements that would "reactivate the international left." Castro long ago abandoned his revolutionary pretensions, and the Central American fronts—with the Cuban president's assistance—have negotiated settlements with the US-backed "contras" and death squads in their own countries, their leaders having transformed themselves into parliamentary deputies, police and businessmen. Now the enthusiasts of guerrillaism promote Zapatismo as a model for struggle. These elements, incapable of learning anything from history, hail Marcos as he prepares to turn his group into the equivalent of a "Non-Governmental Organization" aligned with Mexico's right-wing government.

The Subcomandante will apparently be the featured attraction at a demonstration planned in July at the Genoa meeting of the Group of Eight leading industrial countries. This demonstration is being organized on the program of "anti-globalization" put forward at similar protests in Seattle, Washington, Prague and elsewhere against the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

It is precisely the limited and, in the final analysis, reactionary demands of the Zapatistas that attract this type of international support. Their program of cultural and ethnic autonomy fits in with the orientation of those who see the answer to intensified exploitation of the working class by globally mobile capitalism as a restoration of economic power to the national state.

Thus, the *Nation* magazine writes of the Zapatistas' international significance: "autonomy may thus, and soon, become Mexico's leading export product." In response to the internationalized character of production, fueled by revolutionary developments in technology and transportation, these pseudo-leftists advance the retrograde utopia of restoring "national sovereignty" and drawing new boundaries around isolated economies.

What all of them reject is the one force that can reorganize society on a new and progressive foundation, the international working class. In Mexico, as elsewhere, the increasing global integration of the economy has meant a vast increase in the size and objective strength of the working class. In a country that was largely agricultural, the peasantry has declined to less than a third of the population, while a huge industrial belt has sprung up along Mexico's northern border, drawing large numbers from the countryside to work in factories that are directly linked with industrial production in the US, Europe and East Asia.

The immense social crisis faced by these workers—deteriorating living standards and working conditions, a polluted environment and political repression—will not be resolved through the constitutional fiction of autonomy, nor for that matter will the historic problems of landlessness, discrimination and rural violence faced by those who remain in the predominantly indigenous regions.

These problems can only be confronted through the building of a politically conscious, anti-capitalist movement that seeks to unite the Mexican working class with the workers of the United States and the world in a struggle to abolish the profit system and reorganize society on the principles of international socialism.





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