

# Chiapas rebellion 30 years on: The shipwreck of Mexico's Zapatista experiment

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Last week, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) commemorated the 30th anniversary of its armed rebellion in the southernmost Mexican state of Chiapas. Despite the celebration with dance and music at its headquarters, the guerrilla group once glorified as a new beacon of hope by the prominent pseudo-lefts manifests all the symptoms of an approaching collapse.

On January 1, 1994, about 3,000 Zapatistas armed with old rifles, machetes, and sticks took over ranches and a few towns in central Chiapas. Their commanders read out and distributed their "First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle," which proclaimed the goal of marching on Mexico City and deposing the federal government in order to win "jobs, land, housing, food, healthcare, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace." Within a couple of days, however, the Zapatistas had been forced to retreat into the jungle and Chiapas highlands.

With the support of the Clinton administration, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari deployed 30,000-60,000 troops, fighter jets and helicopters that overwhelmed the guerrillas. The military resorted to indiscriminate bombings and summary executions, killing in total about 200 fighters and civilians. Global protests erupted against the onslaught, including a rally with over 100,000 that filled the Zócalo square in Mexico City, and Salinas declared a ceasefire on January 12.

"Peace talks" began the following month, with Zapatista spokesman and *de facto* leader Subcomandante Marcos declaring on TV the intention of "to transform ourselves completely into a peaceful, civilian political force." He added: "The seizure of power? No. Just something more difficult: a new world."

In 1996, the San Andrés Accords were signed supposedly granting sovereignty to the Zapatistas over the municipalities they gained control of in the jungle, but reprisals continued. The most famous aggression was the 1997 massacre of 45 indigenous people, including children, at a church in Acteal, targeting a human rights group sympathetic to the EZLN.

In 2001, right-wing President Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN) invited the Zapatistas to Mexico City, where they were allowed to march undisturbed and give speeches in Congress. A demilitarization and an Indigenous Rights Act granting watered-down rights to governance and resource use were agreed upon, but only partially observed by Fox.

Nonetheless, the EZLN gradually set up an indigenous enclave in the jungles of Chiapas, which remained dependent on aid from NGOs and visitors.

## A balance sheet

The Zapatista uprising was scheduled for January 1, 1994, to coincide with the entry into force of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, the US and Canada. During the previous decade, the elimination of subsidies, price floors and social programs, and other policies to "open up" Mexico to globalized capital threatened the livelihoods of laborers at plantations, along with the viability of small

coffee, corn and bean farms in Chiapas.

A 1992 constitutional change allowing the sale of *ejidos* as a precondition for NAFTA was the last straw for the EZLN, which had succeeded in recruiting several hundred young peasant-laborers from the local Mayan communities.

The initial leaders were petty-bourgeois intellectuals who belonged to the National Liberation Front (FNL) guerrilla organization. In founding the EZLN in 1983, they decided to drop any mention of socialism and Marxism, instead peddling a mixed bag of Emiliano Zapata's radical agrarianism and conceptions of local "self-government," the guerrilla tactics of "Che" Guevara, liberation theology, and identity politics.

Behind their petty-bourgeois radical and eclectic rhetoric, there were definite political aims. As the spigots of political support, money and weapons from Moscow and Havana were drying up and finally closed with the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR, the former guerrilla movements agreed to "peace accords"—the 1986 Esquipulas Accord in Central America, the 1993 Oslo Accord between Israel and the PLO, among others—and turned themselves into bourgeois parties.

The Zapatistas never won a significant following among indigenous communities outside of a small region in Chiapas, and its greatest political impact was as a political prop for more established petty-bourgeois nationalist organizations in Europe, the US and Latin America.

Even within their territory, however, the experiment of local "autonomy" has nothing to show for it. Along with the rest of Chiapas, which remains the poorest state of Mexico, the EZLN communities have been dragged by the global capitalist crisis into the same storm of violence, repression, persistent deprivation and outward migration.

Last November, the EZLN announced the dissolution of its main political structures, the Rebel Autonomous Zapatista Municipalities and Councils of Good Governance, and the closing of its Caracol community centers to the outside public.

In a series of communiqués, it announced that, except for existing private plots, Zapatista land will become "non-property" or "common land" which explicitly will *not* be "*ejidos*", a traditional form of communal ownership of the land combined with individual use of a few hectares at a time. Instead, it will be open for cultivation by non-Zapatistas, including several hectares for "national and international civil society." The plan is for so-called Local Autonomous Governments (GAL) to manage these properties.

Removing the empty tag lines, this is a plan to set up a political structure that will encourage outside investors and increase proceeds for the Zapatista leadership, which already taxes individuals and imposes a 10 percent tax of agricultural income of families, according to a leaked military report. Among other initiatives to reach out to non-Zapatistas, their plan can be summed up as, "If you can't beat them, join them."

While itself a sign of economic and political bankruptcy, it is unclear whether the EZLN still controls any significant territory or if it will be able to hold on to it. Thousands of youth have migrated, unable to secure

decent livelihoods. Locals interviewed recently by the media and researchers say that the shut down Zapatista bodies had been unable to renew generationally, that aid from outside has dried out and that few or no Zapatistas remain in numerous communities.

This dissipation has encouraged the encroachment by drug cartels, the military and paramilitary forces tied to the government and landowner organizations. Last year, the Frayba Human Rights Center reported that thousands of families have been displaced due to the violence, which has included dozens of attacks against Zapatistas, along with the burning of schools and crops. Frayba writes: “These groups use exclusive army weapons and are uniformed.”

The EZLN blames current Mexican President Andres Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) and his Morena party, which rules Chiapas, for letting violence get out of control. They claim the government seeks “to justify military action to ‘cleanse’ the southeast and finally be able to impose its mega-projects,” in particular AMLO’s multibillion-dollar tourist attraction Tren Maya that the Zapatistas oppose for its environmental impact.

*El Pais* reported leaked internal documents of the Mexican military showing an even greater surveillance of the EZLN than the drug cartels, with one military report from January 2020 discarding any danger to the Tren Maya project, concluding that the EZLN simply does not have the resources to oppose it.

The EZLN leadership however has responded by isolating itself further and making appeals to the same capitalist government to defend it. The organization discouraged outsiders from attending the anniversary celebration, stating, “It is not safe.”

#### **A petty-bourgeois nationalist trap for the working class**

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which publishes the WSWS, was alone in opposing the international pseudo-left’s glorification of this petty-bourgeois nationalist guerrilla movement.

In different documents at the time, the ICFI stressed that guerrillaism had resulted in “far too many defeats and betrayals”, disarming workers and paving the way for fascist military dictatorships. The infatuation with such movements by the 1990s had attained a deeply reactionary character.

“Rather than providing a revolutionary road forward for the Mexican workers and oppressed peasantry,” as stressed in a 1998 lecture by Bill Van Auken, the Zapatistas “have been converted into another instrument for settling political accounts within the Mexican bourgeoisie.”

In a piece on the march by the Zapatistas to Mexico City in 2000, the same author wrote:

“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.”

By the late 1980s, the social austerity, privatizations and deregulation to better compete for this globalized capital had stripped the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had ruled Mexico since 1929, of any reformist veneer from a bygone era. The politics of the EZLN presented no real threat to these policies; on the contrary, its vague calls for democratization, autonomy and against corruption were exploited by numerous right-wing capitalist politicians like Fox and even a section of the PRI.

Only a few months after its armed action, the EZLN welcomed with honors and endorsed Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the 1994 presidential candidate of the bourgeois Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), who had recently left the PRI to give a new “left” façade to the discredited capitalist state. The EZLN would later declare its support for the governments of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and others in the so-called “Pink Tide” which had similar agendas.

In their last major political activity, in 2018, the Indigenous National Congress (CNI) and the EZLN selected María de Jesús Patricio Martínez,

known as “Marichuy”, as their presidential candidate, refusing to back AMLO. The campaign was aimed above all at reviving their own image on the basis of identity politics, claiming for instance that she is “the poorest of the poorest for the sole fact of being a woman.” Facing the anti-democratic obstacles known globally to smaller parties, the mostly student activists of the Marichuy campaign gathered only 282,000 signatures nationwide, less than a third of the ballot requirement. This was seen as yet another sign of political crisis of the Zapatistas.

#### **Briefly a model for the “New Left”**

The vicarious thrill of armed rebellion, the rejection of revolution and the emphasis on indigenous and female identities pressed all the right buttons for the layers of the so-called “New Left” across Europe and America that had been radicalized in significant measure by Castroism and other bourgeois nationalist movements.

This milieu had settled into middle class lifestyles and professional careers and, by 1991, overwhelmingly embraced the capitalist triumphalism declaring “socialism dead” after the Stalinist dissolution of the USSR. Supporting the Zapatista cause as a new model of struggle became a way to cast a “radical” light on their promotion of identity politics and embrace of post-modernism, which provided ideological tools to better advance their careers and justify their abandonment of any association with Marxism. In exchange, the EZLN leadership got wealthy patrons, at least for a few years.

Having claimed that Castroism demonstrated that a democratic revolution or even socialism and a workers’ state could be achieved without the building of a Marxist party in the working class, by the end of the century these layers had become hostile to any movement that could seriously upset the stock market and the series of US-led wars that today have metastasized into a global conflagration.

The EZLN became the most celebrated example of the “radical democratic politics” advocated by figures like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Speaking for these ex-radical layers of the middle class, Laclau and Mouffe in their 1985 book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* advanced this as a form of “post-Marxism without apologies” that rejected any significant role for the working class in history, much less a revolutionary one.

However, the upper middle class continued to shift to the right and has now switched their red star Zapatista pins for AMLO hats.

The end of the infatuation with the EZLN was signaled by an article titled “Why we loved the Zapatistas,” which was one of the first contributions of the Democratic Socialist of America’s (DSA) Bhaskar Sunkara’s to *Jacobin* magazine after its founding in 2011. Speaking for the same middle class pseudo-left milieu, he argued that “we” loved the Zapatistas “because they were brave enough to make history after the end of history”—referring to Francis Fukuyama’s phrase depicting the end of the USSR— and “because we were afraid of political power.”

As demonstrated by trips last year to the region by Sunkara, congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and other leading members, the DSA has decided that they can better serve their interests by acting as *de facto* State Department envoys to the “Pink Tide” governments. A statement published last June condemning US media attacks against AMLO states: “The DSA International Committee stands in solidarity with the working class of Mexico, the MORENA Party, and AMLO in its ‘fourth transformation’ process.”

Beyond the militarization now being employed against migrants and the partnership with the fascist paramilitary bands attacking their former Zapatista friends, a foremost aspect of the AMLO administration has been the enormous accumulation of wealth by the bourgeoisie. During the first two years of the pandemic, as the country saw 605,000 excess deaths, 21 percent of new wealth went to the top 1 percent, while the poorest 50 percent saw just 0.40 percent, according to Oxfam. AMLO’s close ally, billionaire Carlos Slim nearly doubled his wealth to \$105 billion since the

pandemic began.

In a 1995 statement, the *International Workers Bulletin*, the predecessor of the WSWs, concluded:

“The events in Mexico demonstrate once again that the only way forward for the working class in the oppressed countries is to unite with their class brothers and sisters in the imperialist centers in a common struggle for the overthrow of capitalist exploitation and the establishment of socialism.”

This struggle requires the building of sections of the ICFI in Mexico and across Latin America on the basis of a careful assimilation of its historic fight against Pabloite revisionism and all petty-bourgeois nationalist opponents of Trotskyism. It is the continuity of this political struggle that explains why the IC was able to respond to the Zapatista rebellion with a correct, Marxist assessment that maintains all of its force and validity today.



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