Zapatistas! Documents of the New Mexican Revolution
http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/Zapatistas/

Introduction

by Harry Cleaver

The time of revolution has not passed. Despite celebrating the collapse of Soviet-style communism and promising yet another social and economic renaissance, the world capitalist system is in deep trouble: East and West, North and South.

If you listen carefully to the celebrating voices, those of the rich and the powerful in their corporate offices and government buildings, you can pick up a nervous undertone. If you watch the policy-makers closely, you may notice that the smiles are often thin and the hands that hold champagne glasses sometimes twitch, involuntarily.

If you listen even more carefully, you can discover why. In the background you can hear another set of voices--those from below--far, far more numerous. These are voices the powerful do not want to hear, but they are having a harder and harder time ignoring them. Some of these voices are quiet and determined, talking together in bare tenements. Some are singing and reciting poetry in the plazas, or stirring young hearts with old tales deep in the forests. Some are discussing, planning their future, inventing new worlds. Many are angry, increasingly impatient, sometimes shouting on picket lines or chanting in the streets. All are talking about revolution, whether they use that term or not. The policy-makers of capitalism have good reasons to worry.

Global Crisis

Throughout the North, the old Second and First Worlds are both in deep crisis. In the East the imposition of Western-backed austerity has brought ever-wider unemployment and the destruction of social protections. Factories are closing; beggars haunt the streets. The budding "free" market is in the hands of Western carpetbaggers and local organized crime. Opportunistic politicians are fanning smoldering economic unrest into the flames of ethnic and racial hatred.

In the West--which ex-communist countries are supposed to emulate--all-time high unemployment, vicious attacks on wages and welfare benefits, and experiments with economic and social restructuring have failed to produce a new cycle of growth. There, too, factories rust, homelessness spreads, and politicians channel discontent into racism and the fear of others, especially immigrants. The capitalist societies of the North, in short, are reeling, and can no longer offer attractive models for the South.
The situation in the South, in turn, is even more dramatic. A decade of debt crisis, austerity, famine, soaring unemployment and spreading disease has spawned only a few isolated pockets of profits and growth. Here and there multinational corporations have reopened their runaway plants, taking advantage of cheap wages guaranteed by police-state repression (e.g., Mexico, China). But for the most part the postwar development project is a fading memory, and talk of "sustainable growth" has the ring of fantasy to it. The smiling "human face" of capitalist development--the rising tide that lifts all boats--has been replaced by the ugly snarl of "international competition," underdevelopment, racism, ethnic cleansing and mass murder.

The grimness of these days is that of a historical impasse. For over 20 years the very survival of capitalism has been threatened; its ugliness grows out of its desperation. For over 20 years the voices in the background have multiplied and grown louder. Protests, strikes, guerrilla war and cultural revolution threw Western capitalism (North and South) into crisis back in the 1960s and early 1970s, as new desires joined old to outstrip the ability of the system to cope. Persistent and pervasive passive resistance produced rigidity and technological stagnation in the East, bringing crisis in the 1970s and 1980s. Perestroika--the last desperate effort of the old regime to cope--was swept aside by the vast, popular uprising in Eastern Europe.

For over two decades people have been demanding change and better lives. Instead, capitalist policymakers have responded with superficial political reform, monetarist austerity, sacrifice and the imposition of ever more work. Squeezed by this reaction people have grown angrier, but also more self-reliant. When business is unable or unwilling to provide acceptable jobs at acceptable wages, when government is unable or unwilling to ensure the well-being of its citizens, people turn away; they begin to listen to the voices of their own desires, and to each other, to find their own paths into the future. Such is the genesis of revolution.

Who are those with desires not met, those increasingly inventing their own solutions, their own ways of meeting their needs? They are diverse and can be found throughout society. The simple antagonisms of the 19th and early 20th centuries between factory labor and industrial capital have fragmented and become more complex. The colonization of the whole of society by business and the state has generalized both the alienating constraints of capitalism and the antagonism to them--throughout the globe.

Listening
Everywhere voices can be heard--if we will only take the time to listen. They are voices from up and down the hierarchy of capitalist society, throughout the world. They are the voices of all kinds of people, both better and worse off, the relatively powerful and the sorely exploited, those who would live better and those who hope only to survive. And listen we must, because these voices are talking about the impasse in today's society, and discussing ways out.
The conversations are numberless, and their content as varied. Please note: I am not talking about the familiar debates of the Cold War. Neither of the old choices--between some variation of Western capitalism or Eastern socialism--is appealing, with both in crisis. There are, of course, institutionalized pundits still stuck in the past. But for growing numbers of people the old words have grown stale. And as they reject the old words, they are searching for new ones. They are rethinking not only their vocabulary, but the world.

But learning to listen is not always easy, even today. To clear the way, we have to learn to cut through the "noise" of official discourse, to recognize and avoid debates over how to "solve" the crisis within the old frameworks. We have to learn to decode the official jargon, to cut through the euphemisms that cloak the "business as usual" of subordinating desire to investment and growth, to corporate profits and state power. We have to recognize that adding an adjective to an old concept really changes nothing, e.g., "sustainable" development is still "development," and that project has failed.

The very diversity of alternative dialogues is daunting. There are many voices, of many people in many lands. They have many cultural roots and speak many languages. At the same time, desires and needs are not only multiple but cut across time, space and daily life. Nevertheless, whatever our diversity, we all share a common antagonism--the constraints that business and the state seek to impose on us--and in our common seeking for alternatives there are infinite possibilities of sharing and learning from each other. Conversation is not only possible in the absence of universal truth, it can be endless and fruitful.

Will we learn to listen? This book provides a vital and important opportunity for just such learning. In it you will hear new voices, voices "from the mountains of the Mexican Southeast" that have only been speaking to the world for a very short time. Yet, as you will learn, these voices have been talking among themselves for much longer.

Draw close and listen well, for the voices in this book are multiple and complex, direct and filtered, deadly serious and sometimes very funny. They are the voices of people in struggle.

The Zapatistas

The voices and writings collected here come primarily from the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), the army that woke up the world on January 1, 1994 by seizing four towns in Chiapas, the southern-most state of Mexico.

The EZLN has organized itself among some of the most dispossessed people of the world. Its composition is almost as diverse as the outside world to which it speaks. Its soldiers are drawn from the forests, mountains and small towns of the region, both from the Indigenous and linguistically diverse Mayan population, and from immigrants from Central and
Northern Mexico. Its soldiers have been subsistence cultivators and landless wage-laborers; they have grown and marketed their own export crops and they have worked on the plantations and ranches of others. They have cultivated their milpas (corn plots) on rocky hillsides and sought temporary manual work in the towns. They have toiled as unskilled laborers and skilled artisans. A very few are intellectuals drawn to the area over a decade ago by their ideals and hopes.

For those of us outside this movement, these de-professionalized intellectuals serve as mediators to help us understand the larger political processes out of which the EZLN has emerged, and within which it continues to operate. They have drafted many of the communique's and served as the public voice for both the Army and the wider community. They speak our language and speak to us in words that are familiar. We can understand them easily because we all share the forms of discourse common to Western political traditions.

But, the words they speak, and the way they speak them, are translations of other words and discourses rooted in other, much less familiar languages and ways of being--the diverse Mayan cultures of the region. Fortunately for us, the Zapatistas are very self-conscious speakers, and often speak to us about their own speaking, so that we will understand the words that come to us through their mouths. They are the words of those who have gone before us to the people of Chiapas; they are the voices of people who have learned to listen.

As some of the statements you will find in this book make clear, the spokespersons who speak to us today are different from the urban intellectuals who went into the mountains years ago. Those intellectuals carried with them a whole left-wing baggage of theoretical and political preconceptions which proved totally inadequate for communicating with the local population.

In the confrontation of those preconceptions (which they now call "undemocratic and authoritarian") with the collective decision-making traditions of the people living in Indigenous communities, those intellectuals were transformed (as were, undoubtedly, the locals). In these documents we only get glimpses of this transformation, but it seems to have been remarkable--one in which the authoritarian relations of the Zapatista Army came to be subordinated to the democratic processes of the communities. In the process the interlopers seem to have learned to see things with new eyes, to do politics in new ways.

Along the way they seem to have acquired a simple, vernacular way of speaking which makes reading their communique's and their interviews refreshing in comparison with the familiar, jargon-laden political diatribes of old-left guerrilla groups. It is probably this quality which has made the motivations, hopes and aspirations of the EZLN and the Chiapanecos so accessible to the wider Mexican community and beyond. The Mexican state's efforts to portray the EZLN as a group of outside agitators, of "professionals in
violence," quickly collapsed in the face of the obvious: Theirs were not old voices but new voices, and their language was not that of ideology but of frustrated desires, urgent needs and committed determination.

Their words, the spokespersons tell us quite explicitly, come from the collectivity, not just the individuals. This, they say, is one reason why they wear ski-masks--so our reception of their voice can be divorced from the face, the personality of the individual. The desire to avoid caudillismo (someone being singled out, or even putting themselves forward, as "the leader" of the revolution) is quite explicit. This approach, of course, is primarily symbolic, as the individualities of the speakers inevitably do come through, as in the best-known case of Subcommander Marcos.

Thus formed through a political process of dialogue and collective struggle, the voices in this book articulate two fundamental messages. First, they explain why they reject the current institutions and development projects of Mexican business and government. Second, they explain their own new political synthesis and their own political proposal for the future of Mexico. Let us examine the content of these two messages.

The Refusal of Development
In the North we come across the use of the term "development" rarely, usually in regard to plans to restructure the relationships between poor communities and the larger economy (e.g., community development, urban development). But in the South "development" has been the accepted framework ever since the defeat of overt colonialism. An essential ingredient of the Cold War debates was competing strategies of "development," of how "underdeveloped" regions or countries could "develop" to the point of becoming part of the "developed world."

Since the beginning of the EZLN offensive, considerable commentary from both the state and a variety of independent writers has used the language of "two nations" to talk about the situation in Chiapas. The two nations, of course, are that Mexico whose growth will be spurred by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and "el otro Me'xico," which is backward and left behind. The solution proposed, as always, is "development."

Within a month of the EZLN offensive, and following the political defeat of its military counter-attack, the Mexican government created a "National Commission for Integral Development and Social Justice for Indigenous People," and promised more development aid to the area to expand the investments made through its previous development project, Solidaridad. On January 27 it was also announced that these regional development efforts (and others in similar "backward" states) would be buttressed by World Bank loans of some $400 million--loans that will increase the already-staggering international debt that has been at the heart of class struggle in Mexico since the early 1980s.

The EZLN's responses to these proposals have articulated the experience of Mexico's
campesino and Indigenous populations—they have denounced these development plans as another step in their cultural assimilation and economic annihilation. They point out that there have never been "two nations"; Chiapanecos have labored for 500 years within the framework of capitalist development--they have simply been held at the bottom.

In their initial declaration of war, the EZLN wrote "We use black and red in our uniform as our symbol of our working people on strike." In other words, the Zapatista refusal of development quite consciously articulates a refusal of capitalist imposed work. (Not surprisingly, the state's negotiator, Manuel Camacho Solís, early on called not only for an end to hostilities but for a "return to work.")

The Indigenous also know that further "development" means a continuation of their expulsion from the land, which has gone on during economic booms (e.g., oil/hydroelectric boom of the 1970s) as well as busts (e.g., the debt-crisis/austerity of the 1980s). Reduced to wage earners, they have sometimes benefited from economic upturns financed by government expenditures, and have also discovered how transitory those benefits can be as they were subsequently devastated in downturns.

At the best of times rising income is differentially distributed, accentuating inequalities to the point of splitting communities. Even worse, "development" can mean a role well known to Native Americans in the US: attractions within the tourist industry--a strategy for areas with "primitive" peoples that takes advantage of their "comparative advantage" in exotic culture. The government, one EZLN spokesperson has said, sees the Indigenous "as nothing more than anthropological objects, tourist curiosities, or part of a 'Jurassic Park.'"

But Salinas and Clinton have promised that NAFTA will open US markets to Mexican exports; Mexico will develop faster. This, too, the EZLN understands all too well. Chiapas is already an export-oriented economy; it always has been: "Chiapas loses blood through many veins: through oil and gas ducts, electric lines, train cars, bank accounts, trucks and vans, boats and planes, through clandestine paths, gaps and forest trails."

The EZLN has also understood how NAFTA opens Mexico to US exports, and how the most threatening of these is corn, the basic food crop of the Indigenous population and an important source of cash income. Already they are suffering from low prices for coffee, another cash crop, due to the government's elimination of financial support for that production. Like all Chiapanecos they also know that export development means ecological destruction, especially deforestation. Their antagonism to development, therefore, springs not from an overactive imagination or sterile ideology, but from bitter experience.

The EZLN Prososal
The second EZLN message concerns the conclusions they have drawn from their political
experience, and their political proposal for the future of Mexico. Whereas their detailed condemnations of development have a familiar ring, their positive proposals are both novel and fascinating. Their "wind from below" carries new ideas for us to consider, a true gift in this period when the usual politicos demonstrate a total lack of imagination, as little on the Left as on the Right.

First, in terms of their own political character, at the very start of its offensive the EZLN sharply differentiated itself from the previous guerrilla movements of Central America (e.g., the Sandinistas or the URNG) and elsewhere (e.g., the Tupamaros), and explicitly rejected the traditional Leninist objectives of "taking power," "the dictatorship of the proletariat," "international communism" and "all that."

Listen to Major Benjamin: "We are not Maoists or Marxists, sir. We are a group of campesinos, workers and students for whom the government has left no other path than arms to resolve our ancestral problems." Listen to Marcos: "In the movement of the EZLN there is no perfectly defined ideology, in the sense of communist or Marxist-Leninist." "It is not a nucleus that has come, not a guerrilla foco; what has come is something you have never in your life dreamed of: this is the truth."

Although their Army has a typical hierarchical command structure, the Zapatistas appear to have achieved a new political synthesis that subordinates its actions to frameworks of collective and democratic decision-making developed out of local traditions. Strategic issues are not left to the Army, but must be decided at the community level.

The Zapatista communique's are generally signed by the "Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee-General Command" (CCRI-CG)--apparently a council of Indigenous leaders. But behind that "General Command" are an unknown number of Clandestine Committees (apparently four Committees representing four ethnic groups sent delegates to the peace negotiations); and behind them are the communities.

As the conclusion of the first round of negotiations between the EZLN and the Mexican government made clear, on basic strategic issues the EZLN reports back to the local communities for collective consultation and discussion about how to proceed. According to EZLN spokespersons, this consultation is extensive; it includes everyone so that all will consider the outcome a valid expression of their communal desires. The EZLN seems to truly embrace its own words: "The will of the majority is the path on which those who command should walk. If they separate their step from the path of the will of the people, the heart that commands should be changed for another that obeys."

Second, such democratic political processes have given rise to a new political project: AUTONOMY--a democratic autonomy for all levels of Mexican society, for regions, for Indigenous peoples, for campesino groups, for workers, for students, for women, for townships, for regional governments and so on. There is no utopian blueprint for the construction of such
autonomy; the proposal is one of principle, of the direction of movement. "This new voice... is conspiring for a new world, so new that it is barely an intuition in the collective heart that inspires it." But: "When the storm calms, when rain and fire again leave the country in peace, the world will no longer be the world, but something better."

Some of what this means is clear enough in the EZLN’s demands. They call for the dismissal of corrupt local governments and the installation of democratically elected leaders. Their "Agrarian Law" orders the return of cultivable land to the Indigenous and poor campesinos so that they can have the material basis for organizing their own lives and cultures. It also orders forests, rivers, lakes, oceans and sub-soil minerals liberated from capitalist corporations and government monopolies and restored to the keeping of the local populations (partly for use, partly for ecological preservation--yes, they are explicit about this). They demand the right of those who have been forced out of their communities (e.g., religious exiles) to return unhindered to live in their own ways. They support the local use of Indigenous languages and the reorganization of education (e.g., bilingualism) and health organizations (e.g., prevention of disease and respect for Indigenous practices). Their "autonomy" appears to be a complex but real pluralism rather than either the pseudo-pluralism we know so well in the North or any kind of secessionist separatism.

Such demands are rooted in the self-activity of the Indigenous peoples and communities who form the EZLN. They have resisted the lure of capitalism's "universal values" (work, money, the market) in favor of clear, though evolving, concepts of who they are and how they want to live. The direct democracy of their collective decision-making is part of this, but there is much more.

Most obvious, because frequently repeated, is that these people want to be rooted in the land. They want land not just as a "resource" to grow export crops, but because their milpas, the work of their cultivation and the food they provide, have provided the pivot of their culture for a thousand years.

Because the EZLN representatives are not sociologists and anthropologists, they do not give us anything like exhaustive portrayals of the various Indigenous cultures, much less detailed analyses of the complex communities of economic, political and religious immigrants in recently colonized areas. But they do tell us enough that we can understand that these communities are not stagnant "cultural survivals" from a traditional past. On the contrary, their commitment to autonomy also seems to be strong where people are fighting for change and struggling to create new identities. An example of this commitment can be found in the EZLN’s support for women’s struggles against traditional patterns of patriarchy.

The patriarchal character of Mexican society is well known; that of campesino and Indigenous communities less recognized but often no less real. In terms of family decision-making, men have generally commanded money income and ruled, sometimes with physical force. Women have often had few or no choices about who they marry, how many
children they will have or how much domestic work they must do without help from men.

But these conditions make strong women--if they don't kill them--and such women have challenged the traditional roles. This challenge has found support in the EZLN. Not only are women encouraged to join the EZLN, but they are treated as equals to the point that many women have officer status and men and women are expected to carry the burdens of work and fighting equally.

Queried about the politics of gender in the organization and in the communities in which it is based, Marcos has affirmed the EZLN's official support for women's struggles against patriarchy. This involves not only a redistribution of responsibilities and work and the defense of women against men's abuse, but also material support for women's health and birth control. The EZLN has organized sex-education classes to teach about hygiene and disease--especially women's diseases (e.g., urinary tract infections) that men do not understand and misinterpret. The organization also teaches about contraceptives and supports their use. Moreover: "The companera not only has the right to terminate pregnancy," Marcos has stated, "but the organization also has the obligation to provide the means for her to do it with total safety."

When Indigenous women organized in dozens of communities to produce a code of women's rights, the EZLN leadership--the CCRI-CG--adopted the code unanimously. The "Women's Law" included the rights of all women to such things as control over their own bodies, wages, political participation, health care, and freedom from violence and rape. According to one report, when one of the male committee members quipped, "The good part is that my wife doesn't understand Spanish," an EZLN officer told him: "You're fucked, because we're going to translate it into all the [Indigenous] languages." Clearly, the passage of this Bill of Rights demonstrates the EZLN's commitment to meaningful gender autonomy within the diverse Indigenous cultures of Chiapas.

When asked about the problems and rights of gays, Marcos has said that the position of the EZLN is the same as that on women and other "minorities". As they too begin to say "Enough is Enough!" and fight for their rights, they will be supported by the organization. What is unusual and exciting about this pattern is how these struggles are not being marginalized or subordinated to "class interests," but are being accepted as integral parts of the overall project of political autonomy. Among the 34 points presented by the EZLN to the government during the first stage of negotiations, the longest was the "Indigenous Women's Petition" detailing the specific demands of women.

Third and last, and perhaps the clearest indication of the seriousness with which they take their notion of autonomy, they present their proposal as only one among many that they hope to see emerge throughout Mexican society. They reject the notion that they should have all the answers, should be able to figure out all the solutions to all the problems.

Listen: "What we have made clear, and what we will always explain, is that we cannot lead
a process that will solve all of Mexico's problems." Thus their repeated and insistent demand that politics be stripped from the state and the political parties and reborn in the community as a whole.

The Path from Here to There
The EZLN clearly believes that the construction of autonomy in every sphere of life will involve diverse processes, and for the moment is primarily interested in clearing a path toward that goal. Clearing the path involves nothing less than the revolutionary transformation of the Mexican political system. The path to the autonomy of "Tierra" is political "Libertad."

"We are proposing a space," Marcos has said in an interview, "an equilibrium between the different political forces in order that each position has the same opportunity to influence the political direction of this country... The rest of the country shouldn't be spectators... The people have to decide what proposal to accept, and it's the people who you have to convince that your opinion is correct. This will radically change the concept of revolution, of who the revolutionary class is, of what a revolutionary organization is.... The Zapatista revolution isn't proposing the taking of power... We are saying 'Let's destroy this State, this State system. Let's open up this space and confront the people with ideas, not weapons.' " What he is describing seems to be nothing less than a generalization, locally and to the country as a whole, of the political processes of direct democracy that have been developed within the mountains of Chiapas.

As a first step in this transformation, the EZLN called in early January for the resignation (or overthrow) of the present, undemocratic PRI government and its replacement by a transitional government "of people of prestige outside the parties, who have the moral authority to lead the country." This call was reiterated in the EZLN's June communique's rejecting the government's position after the first round of negotiations.

Elaborating their initial proposal, they have called on Mexican civil society to organize a "National Dialogue on Democracy, Freedom and Justice." Local discussions "in every ejido, settlement, school and factory," they suggest, can be followed by the formation of committees to collect proposals for a new constitution and for the policies of a new government. These local committees, in turn, could organize a "revolutionary National Democratic Convention" to create the transitional government and a new constitution. The EZLN even offers itself as the nucleus of a new army "to guarantee that the people's will is carried out"!

Needless to say such proposals have been rejected outright by the central government. But, at the same time, the EZLN uprising and their audacious demands have generated a whirlwind of political discussion in Mexico and challenges to the existing system as have not been seen since the Revolution of 1910.
The Government Backs Down

Given the radicalness of their demands and the military character of their uprising, the Mexican government's response to the EZLN challenge has been surprising. With startling rapidity the state shifted from a truly massive military repression (over 15,000 troops dispatched to Chiapas, aerial bombings of villages, summary torture and execution of captives) to a cease-fire and high-level negotiations with the rebels, mediated by progressive representatives of the Catholic Church. Why?

Conventional political pundits attribute the change to the government's fear of international scrutiny of its behavior in the wake of the implementation of NAFTA and in the light of its new pretensions to First World status. Not only did the Zapatistas attack NAFTA in their very first declaration, but their uprising threatened multinational capitalist estimates of the risks of investing in Mexico. Thus, better to quiet things down quickly, to use the velvet glove of co-optation rather than the mailed fist of repression.

But this hypothesis of "sensitivity" to international opinion does not explain why the government judged that such opinions might turn negative or influential enough to affect foreign investment. To explain why it was worried we have to turn from the government's reactions per se to those of Mexico as a whole, and to those of the world beyond.

The Circulation of Struggle

An examination of popular reaction to the Chiapas uprising, both in Mexico and elsewhere, makes it very clear why the Mexican government changed its way of dealing with the situation. Its fears were based on the extremely rapid spread of popular support for the EZLN and for the communities they represent.

From the very first day, when news of the uprising went out through the media and details began to circulate through computer networks, people listened to the words of the EZLN Declaration of War, sympathized with them, and began to mobilize to block the government's repressive moves. Even as the Mexican Army poured into Chiapas, so too did representatives of human rights organizations, of other Indigenous peoples and of freelance and foreign journalism which the Mexican government could not control. Within days these observers reported Army atrocities and repression. Others mobilized protest demonstrations all across North America, and even in Europe, to denounce the Mexican government. These actions tremendously strengthened the hand of the Zapatistas, and forced the government to withdraw to the negotiating table.

In turn, this tremendous outpouring of popular support and willingness to take action in support of this uprising, must themselves be explained. As indicated above, the world is rife with antagonism and conflict; there have been many uprisings that have failed to provoke this kind of response. What was different about Chiapas?
The answer, I think, is two-fold. First, an international network capable and primed to respond was already in place as a result of the last few years of organizing against NAFTA. Second, the uprising in Chiapas was by no means as isolated in Mexico as it seemed.

The fight against NAFTA took the form of growing coalitions of grassroots groups in Canada, the United States and Mexico. In each country a broad coalition, such as the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade, was constituted by knitting together several hundred groups opposed to the trade pact. That knitting was accomplished partly through joint discussions and actions and partly through the sharing of information and analysis about the meaning and implications of the agreement. Increasingly, computer communications became a basic political tool for extremely rapid sharing among groups and individuals.

The same processes of communication linked the coalitions in each country in a manner never before seen in the Western Hemisphere. The result, both locally and internationally, was a new organizational form—a multiplicity of rhizomatically linked autonomous groups—connecting all kinds of struggles throughout North America that had previously been disconnected and separate.

The obviously concerned (US workers threatened with losing their jobs as plants were relocated to Mexico, Mexicans concerned with the invasion of US capital) linked with a wide variety of others who could see indirect threats in this capitalist reorganization of trade relations, e.g., ecological activists, women’s groups, human rights organizations and yes, organizations of Indigenous groups throughout the continent. Although the anti-NAFTA movement was unable to block ratification of the agreement, it has continued to monitor the impact of the agreement in order to facilitate struggle against it and ultimately to get it canceled.

So when the Zapatista Army marched into San Cristóbal and the other towns of Chiapas, not only did those already concerned with the struggles of Indigenous peoples react quickly, but so did the much more extensive organizational connections of anti-NAFTA struggles. Already in place were the computer conferences and lists of the anti-NAFTA alliances. For many, the first information on their struggles came in the regular postings of the NAFTA Monitor on "trade.news" or "trade.strategy" either on Peacenet or through the Internet. Even if EZLN spokespeople had not explicitly damned NAFTA and timed their offensive to coincide with the first day of its operation in Mexico, the connections would have been made and understood throughout the anti-NAFTA network.

Besides this, there was another whole area of self-organized networking in Mexico that only partly overlapped the anti-NAFTA movement: that of campesinos and Indigenous peoples.
Outside the EZLN, far beyond Chiapas, they too had been developing networks of cooperation to fight for the things they need: schools, clean water, the return of their lands, freedom from state repression (police and Army torture, jailings and murders), and so on. Given the fierce autonomy of the participating communities--sometimes based on traditional ethnic culture and language--these networks have been shaped like the electronic web described above: in a horizontal, non-hierarchical manner.

This process has been accelerating for several years, not only in Mexico, but throughout the Americas and beyond. Partly inspired by the example of the Black Civil Rights Movement in North America as early as the mid-1960s (e.g., the rise of the American Indian Movement) and partly forced into action by continuing state-backed assaults on their land in South and Central America (e.g., the enclosure of the Amazon), Indigenous peoples have been overcoming the spatial and political divisions that have isolated and weakened them.

In 1990 a First Continental Encounter of Indigenous Peoples was organized in Quito, Ecuador. Delegates from over 200 Indigenous nations launched a movement to achieve continental unity. To sustain the process a Continental Coordinating Commission of Indigenous Nations and Organizations (CONIC) was formed at a subsequent meeting in Panama in 1991. The unity sought, as in the Zapatista movement, was not the unity of the political party or trade union--solidified and perpetuated through a central controlling body--but rather a unity of communication and mutual aid among autonomous nations and peoples.

A second Continental Encounter was organized in October of 1993 at Temoaya, Mexico. One of the hosting groups at that meeting was the Frente Independiente de Pueblos Indios (FIPI) and one of the members of FIPI was the Coordinadora de Organizaciones en Lucha del Pueblo Maya para su Liberación from San Cristóbal, Chiapas.

Faced with the violence of the Mexican military's counter-offensive, the FIPI sent out a call to CONIC requesting that other Indians in the network come to Chiapas as observers to help constrain state violence. CONIC responded immediately by organizing international delegations to the battle zones. When they arrived in Chiapas they were received by the local offices of the Consejo Estatal de Organizaciones Indígenas y Campesinas--made up of 280 Indigenous and campesino organizations throughout the state.

So, we begin to understand how it was possible that such a small uprising in such an isolated part of Mexico could generate so much popular support and force unheard-of concessions from an unwilling government and political elite. A more complete understanding, of course, would require an investigation into the backgrounds of all of those who mobilized, not just the Indigenous and the anti-NAFTA militants. Whatever explains the sensitivity of these various listeners whose reactions circulated this struggle, we have witnessed a fascinating process through which the voices of a relative small number of very creative and dedicated revolutionaries have been amplified again and again.
until they can be heard around the world.

Some Early Lessons

What can we learn by listening to the voices of the Chiapas uprising? They offer political proposals for us to consider, not a specific model to be imitated. The new organizational forms we see in action are not substitutes for old formulas--Leninist or social democratic. They provide something different: inspiring examples of workable solutions to the post-socialist problem of revolutionary organization and struggle.

The efforts of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, like the anti-NAFTA and Indigenous networks that laid the groundwork for their circulation, demonstrate how organization can proceed locally, regionally and internationally through a diversity of forms. That diversity can be effective precisely to the degree that organizers weave a fabric of cooperation to achieve the (often quite different) concrete material projects of the various participants.

We have known for some time that a particular organization can be substituted for the processes of organization only at great peril. It is a lesson we have learned the hard way in struggle for, and then against, trade unions, and social democratic and revolutionary parties. What we hear from the Zapatistas, and what we see in their interaction with other groups, is a fabric of cooperation among the most diverse kinds of people throughout the international wage and income hierarchy. That fabric has not appeared suddenly, out of the blue; it has been woven over a period of years. And in its weaving many threads have certainly been broken and been retied, or new knots have been designed to replace those that could not hold.

The spokespersons of the EZLN have given us glimpses of their part in this work. Hopefully more of the story will be told over time. We also need to examine what others have contributed and how.

Today, the social equivalent of an earthquake is rumbling through Mexican society. Every day brings reports of people moving to action. Campesinos and Indigenous peoples completely independent of the EZLN are taking up its battle cries and occupying municipal government buildings, blockading banks, seizing lands and demanding "Libertad." Students and workers are being inspired not just to "support the campesinos" but to launch their own strikes throughout the Mexican social factory.

You hold in your hands a collection of the words that have set all this movement in action. Read it well. Listen to the voices. And then do not be afraid to add your own to the growing tumult. If these voices from the mountains of the Mexican Southeast tell us nothing else, it is that a multiplicity of voices can achieve coherence, and with coherence--action that can change the world.