

Zapatistas and rebirth of hope

Many people in South Africa have not heard of the Zapatistas. But as **Shawn Hattingh** writes this Mexican organisation has inspired progressive people and organisations across the world and introduced hope in a time of darkness.

Fifteen years ago, the dream of a better world outside of capitalism seemed to be part of the realm of fantasy. In those dark days, corporate globalisation had become the buzz-phrase as transnational corporations expanded to every corner of the globe.

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) was also in the process of being forged; the United States had just used its endless power to turn Mexico into a profit making haven for corporations through the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta); and the global elite were arrogantly telling us that revolutions and history itself had come to an end as there could never be anything beyond global capitalism.

Indeed, in those days, it seemed that all resistance to global capitalism had crumbled. The authoritarian states of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which claimed to be some form of alternative, had collapsed; the Sandinistas in Nicaragua lay defeated; and all of the old style Third World liberation movements, such as the African National Congress (ANC), had already begun their deep slide into neo-liberal thinking.

In short, there appeared to be no hope for a better future. All of this changed, however, on 1 January 1994 when a few thousand people wearing black ski-masks and calling themselves the Zapatistas rebelled in Mexico's poorest province, the Chiapas, and occupied all of the major towns in the area.

Immediately, they called for land, liberty, justice and equality and openly declared that they were staging a revolution in order to have these demands met. Along with this, they declared war on the Mexican state, Nafta, and corporate globalisation.

Suddenly, here was a revolution when, according to the global elite, revolutions were not supposed to exist. Here was a ray of light when only darkness prevailed. That someone, anyone, was actually standing up to challenge global capitalism appeared to indicate that, at least, not all hope had been killed.

ZAPATISTAS: SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Although millions of people around the world were happy that someone had stood up and said enough to the powerful, it at first looked as if the Zapatistas were simply a throw back

to the guerrilla movements that were so familiar in Latin America. These movements in the 1960s and 1970s had all the trappings of authoritarian hierarchies and dogmatism. As time went by, however, it became very clear that the Zapatistas were much, much more than this. The Zapatistas were not simply an old style guerrilla movement. They were something very different and new.

To begin with, the Zapatistas had openly declared that they were not interested in taking state power and wielding it in order to create a 'revolution'. They clearly stated that this was a dead end path. They reasoned that they did not want to use the same hierarchal structures that underpin capitalism, such as state apparatuses, to defeat capitalism. For them, the end results in the Soviet Union and China proved this.

Along with this, the Zapatistas also shunned the organisational forms that political parties and established trade unions favoured. These were defined by a veneration for those in office and the accompanying top down leadership style which had so effectively disempowered 'ordinary' members of these organisations.

Rather, the Zapatistas aimed to create an organisation that rejected all forms of hierarchy. To do so, they organised horizontally to ensure that power was retained at the base of the movement. Various structures, such as local assemblies, were created.

In these assemblies anyone over the age of 12 was given the right to speak and vote, and all those involved were treated as equals. In these assemblies all the decisions



The Zapatistas promote literacy and education



Members of the Zapatistas wear masks to escape identification, but also to highlight that capitalism treats the Mexican poor as an anonymous mass

around the direction of the movement, including the decision to go to war with the Mexican state and later to transform into a social movement, have been made. These are the heart and soul of the movement and are defined by their participatory form of direct democracy.

One of the central philosophies that permeated the Zapatistas movement was the belief that true liberation could only be achieved through a process of collective and self-emancipation. No one can be freed purely by another or by a leadership. To achieve the objective of individual and collective liberation, the Zapatistas literally socialised the land in the areas that they had liberated on 1 January 1994.

In this zone, they aimed to break hierarchies and capitalist relations by creating democratically run collectives, which produced anything from coffee, to maize, to bread, to clothing. Similarly, they created autonomous schools and clinics which were based on the ideology of solidarity and which offered free services to all.

In other words, the Zapatistas

created a democratic economy that aimed to meet people's needs and not make profits.

ZAPATISTAS GO INTERNATIONAL

At the start of their uprising, the Zapatistas declared that their struggle was international and outlined their belief that capitalism was an inhumane system that continuously attacked all of humanity. Within weeks, millions of people across the world had heard this message. The result was that many started to identify with the Zapatistas and their ideals. Millions of people came to believe that challenging capitalism was worthwhile. Once again people started to hope and dream of a better world.

As a consequence, people started organising Zapatista solidarity actions in the first half of 1994 throughout Mexico, Italy, Spain, the United States and Brazil. Within weeks, some of these solidarity actions had grown into massive protests. In Mexico City, students occupied universities and declared them autonomous zones; while in Rome 70 000 people took over the city centre and declared that they too were Zapatistas.

In the weeks and months that

followed, the Zapatistas began forging links with these activists and groups. For example, by late 1994 the Zapatistas had begun to form networks with Ya Basta in Italy and Spain and activists in Nigeria who were fighting Shell.

Out of this, the Zapatistas invited activists from all over the world to a meeting in 1996, which became known as the First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity Against Neoliberalism. As many as 5 000 activists from over 50 countries with different ideological affiliations including liberation theology, anarchism and libertarian Marxism attended the meeting.

The First Intercontinental Encounter lasted for just over a week. During the meeting people shared information about their struggles, how they had organised and what their understandings of capitalist globalisation were.

Many of the participants felt that capitalist globalisation represented a war, which was being waged by the elite against humanity. The aim of this war was to use economic measures, and the military, to spread capitalism into every aspect of people's lives. Everything, including culture, social relations, the environment, water and even air was being turned into a commodity to be bought and sold. As such, many participants felt that capitalist globalisation should be considered a Fourth World War (the Third World War was the Cold War).

This Intercontinental Encounter was rapidly followed with other International Encounters within the Zapatistas' territory and in Spain and Brazil. Through this, an international network, which included movements



Zapatistas in Chiapas work and produce in collectives with the aim of breaking capitalist hierarchies



such as the Landless Workers Movement of Brazil (MST), the Spanish anarchist union CGT, and the Socialist Farmers' League of India (KRRS) was formed.

The aim was for the international network to function as a forum through which each of these movements could support one another. It became the global anti-capitalist movement. The network, however, was conceived of as a flat structure, without leaders, without hierarchies, and without central decision makers.

Network participants also shunned the idea of vanguards and seizing state power on behalf of people. Rather the idea was to allow for the maximum amount of people to participate fully in the struggle, and to create autonomous zones outside of capitalism where people could define and develop their own power democratically.

The movements involved in the network also rejected capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, racism, and religious fundamentalism. Added to this, they shared the belief that direct action was an important weapon of struggle and that direct democracy should form the basis on which movements organise.

Part of the network's philosophy was that the struggle against capitalism does not merely take place on an international level, but locally. Thus, many people in the Network

committed themselves to organise locally, on a radical democratic basis, and take the fight to capitalism where they lived.

As a result, when participants returned from the International Encounters they began organising in their own countries. Many of the North American and European activists went on to help organise the massive protests that took place against the WTO, IMF and World Bank in North America and Europe.

Linked to this, many people in Europe who were interested in the actions and ideas of the Zapatistas went on to revive anarchist thought and build new movements that have been involved in such initiatives as the recent uprisings in Greece.

The Encounters also led to hundreds of thousands of activists organising in different provinces in Mexico, outside of the Chiapas, and forming new movements that were independent of the Zapatistas, but that identified with their struggle and ideals.

In 2006, one of these movements, the Peoples Assembly of Oaxaca (Appo) managed to take control of Oaxaca City through direct action for three months. In fact, many of the social movements that have arisen in Latin America since the 1990s, such as the Piqueteros, have drawn on some of the best traditions of Zapatismo as part of their struggles.

Similarly, in South Africa some of

the activists that were involved in the creation of new social movements were influenced by some of the ideals and ideas of the Zapatistas. As such, the Zapatistas came to inspire a whole generation of activists across the world.

CONCLUSION

The Zapatistas uprising in 1994, and the ideas and ideals that accompanied it, came at a time when hope for a better world had faded. It was the Zapatistas and their actions, however that inspired millions of people to dream again and become involved in the struggle against all forms of oppression.

Indeed, it marked the beginning of a new round of struggles against capitalism that erupted across the entire globe. Today, many of these struggles are still flourishing, while others have faded. The one thing, however, that has not changed is that the Zapatistas gave hope to an entire generation of activists that a better world is possible. That hope can never be taken away. It is also that hope that the elite and oppressors fear, and it is that hope that will ensure that the struggle for a world outside of all forms of oppression and capitalism will continue. LB

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