

# PUTTING TOGETHER A PUZZLE: THE SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN OAXACA

Oaxaca state, in the south of Mexico, has about four million inhabitants, more than half of whom are indigenous peoples who belong to the sixteen of the sixty two indigenous nations that inhabit the entire country. At least 70% of their territory is in communal property, although they face at least six hundred agrarian conflicts. This land contains a wealth of ecological diversity, forests, minerals, and energy sources that are coveted by transnational companies.

In this territory, beginning before June 2006, one of the most important peaceful social movements in the world was initiated, that of the Popular People's Assembly of Oaxaca – APPO. This movement expanded and transformed from being primarily about the fight to remove the Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, (URO), to reaching levels of self organization never before seen in other social movements. This movement, and entire communities, like the Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca, "Ricardo Flores Magón (CIPO-RFM,) suffered targeted government violence as a result.

APPO is not a melting pot of resistance, but rather, a confluence of many stories and struggles reflected in the diverse faces of inconformity, where the movements, struggles, and cultural traditions, and people find the strength to shout "enough is enough". It is not just the result of what we have fought for, but also a movement in and of itself. It is both past and the present with all those involved made visible at this particular crossroads. It is part of history, not its beginning or end. Despite all of its faults, it is a movement that invites everyone to be part of the process, and that inspires me to share these words.



## The Origins

The capacity to listen as a way to resolve conflicts requires honesty and an ethical commitment to construct solutions that are aligned with justice and truth. This has never happened in government, especially those which have illegally taken power, like Ulises Ruiz Ortiz (PRI) in Oaxaca or Felipe Calderon (PAN) in Mexico.

An example of this is the aggression against the teachers and organizations that happened on June 14th 2006 and that marked the apex of resistance of the people associated with the APPO. This action revealed the true face of the corrupt government: they are connected to drug trafficking, organized crime, and electoral fraud, and also reaffirmed what was seen in Guadalajara and Atenco: this is a country without guaranteed rights to the individual, nor constitutional rights, with one supreme leader, the president or the governor.

That is to say, the aggression against the people in Oaxaca did not begin with their forced removal on June 14th 2006. The struggle did not begin there either. APPO has its historical origins in indigenous and community resistance.

Those who govern Oaxaca had already asserted their force through their attacks on the Union of Bureaucrats in June 2003, and towards the Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca on September 14th 2004, where there were arrests and detainments. That is why the teachers allied themselves with other social organizations and community groups, which together took over the zocalo (city square) on June 14th 2006.

## The Participants and their Demands

The removal of Section 22 of the union (SNTE/CNTE), the ongoing aggressions, the national elections, and pure survival instinct allowed the APPO to develop. Within APPO it was recognized that everyone is in struggle, and that there are no longer just individual resisters, but participants who number in the hundreds of thousands.



And it is these participants, without organization and without a leader, who we speak of and remember during the marches, the barricades, the meetings, or in the immediate responses to the aggressions, like the women's occupation of the twelve radio stations or the millions of people who marched in the streets demanding the removal of URO.

The community actions of these anonymous protagonists, who meet and are joined together in the barricade assemblies, are at the same time resolving problems of security, transport, economics, communication, etc. They organize dialogues and intend to establish laws of good governance and an autonomous government, confirming that "a barricade blocks streets but opens new routes". This shows that these are not crazy people throwing themselves into the streets, but that they are people actively building this other world.

All this has terrified the state and national governments, who have responded with new forms of violence: they have formed groups of paramilitaries comprised of the most dangerous criminals released from jail, so that they can say "the government is not responsible" and "It's a problem of the drug dealers and organized crime". The state media make accusations and generate hate. They impose a state of siege through these actions, where the rights to protest and gather disappear, and where exercising these rights results in being detained without having committed any crime. All of this is done not just to get rid of people and organizations, but to destroy entire community processes.

The most extreme result of targeted state violence left twenty three people assassinated, (including Indy Media journalist Bradley Will), more than four hundred incarcerated, (some of whom are still in jail) and many have been forcibly exiled. This does not include the injured, the orphaned, the psychologically damaged, and those imprisoned and murdered outside of this particular time, which is what has happened to some of the indigenous members of CIPO-RFM.

## What Was Learned

Infused with legitimacy, the movement opened a space for dialogue on the highest national levels, calling for the dismissal of the governor. However, it was unable to work out agreements that were favourable for the movement because many within the committee relied on negotiations as their main strategy and did not see the development of autonomous movement building as a viable strategy. This was used by the government to tie us to their rhythm, confront us, immobilize us, and in certain cases to demobilize us.

Since then, APPO has maintained its unity with its ongoing demands to release political prisoners and the removal of URO. The particular strategies depend upon the kind of organization, its character, and its forms of participation. On the one side, APPO is understood as a space of discussion, analysis, coordination of movements, and promoter and driver of societal initiatives, with a flexibility that allows for the participation of everyone from the grassroots, creating new tools and mechanisms that are in line with the rhythms and cultures of everyone. And on the other side, it is seen as needing to strengthen its bureaucratic structure, prioritize its mediating actions and obtain a space within government through the political parties, elections, and other institutions of the state.

For these and other reasons it has been said that we really only managed to create beautiful songs, but that the state of things continue to be pretty much the same. That is to say, we were defeated. This is not true. In reality, URO is not currently governing and will fall. We also managed to become visible and recognized in national and international struggles through our demands and proposals, and highlighted the ineffectual institutions, which began to generate state reform. We transcended ourselves as separate organizations and projects: the teachers helped to transform their struggle into a broader movement and that allowed them to recover support and achieve demands that they wouldn't have been able to do alone. We learned that one union or organization, however large or good it is, cannot break structures alone.

We also finished with the paradigm that social transformation is only possible through revolutionary or electoral means. This idea suffered a huge blow with the Zapatista uprising, which made indigenous autonomy visible. This is definitively rooted in Oaxaca, and defines this peaceful social movement, which is broad and diverse, as the fundamental tool to the creation of autonomy. We have definitely reaffirmed to the world the certainty that governments are vulnerable and that unity in struggle is possible. We have even managed get some of the movement members elected into office.

## The Challenge

We believe that APPO today has to be an example for others outside of it, but also has to be responsible for creating a movement from the inside. It is necessary to break corporate forms and structures that stop the free participation of union and organization members. The challenge is not just to transform the state of things in Mexico, but to transform internally the political practices of its members from the grassroots and the left. If we are not capable of this, we will just be an heroic expression of social change, but not really a living alternative. That is our new frontier.

*Kitsilano, Vancouver, July 2007*

*Raúl Gatica*