

REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL & INTERNATIONAL CARAVAN OF OBSERVATION & SOLIDARITY WITH THE
ZAPATISTA COMMUNITIES OF CHIAPAS

Introduction: Pronouncement of the Caravan, San Cristóbal de las Casas, August 12, 2008

We, as adherents of the Other Campaign, support the process of autonomy of the Zapatista communities in their territories and we recognize ourselves in this other form of doing politics, from below and to the left.

Although we may not remain here, we reaffirm that the Zapatistas are not alone and that we have the commitment to continue the struggle in the construction of another world where many worlds fit.

We will continue vigorously denouncing the three levels of government for any form of harassment, detentions, threats, or provocations that thus try to end the process of autonomy of the Zapatista communities.

We also demand the demilitarization and the end to the reactivation of paramilitaries in the Zapatista territory. We know that the attacks against the original peoples have to do with the capitalist politics, laws and programs, which we reject.

We demand the immediate liberation of the political prisoners.

And, if they ask us if we won or lost, let us say we chose to fight.

National and International Caravan of Observation and Solidarity with the Zapatista Communities of Chiapas

August 2008.

EYEWITNESS REPORT FROM THE BRIGADE TO LA REALIDAD

Approved by the Junta de Buen Gobierno of La Realidad,
Caracol 1, Mother of All the Caracoles of the Sea of Our Dreams

Collectively authored by the Brigade to La Realidad, including the Solidarity Without Borders Delegation

In our understanding, the caravan had these purposes: to observe the political, social, and economic situation in which the Zapatista communities find themselves, to show our *compañeras* and *compañeros* (from now on, referred to as *compas*) our solidarity through our presence in the communities, and to show the federal and state governments that our *compas* of the EZLN are not alone.

For that, we directed ourselves to the *Zona Selva Fronteriza* (Zone of the Border Jungle), in which is found Caracol 1, Mother of All the Caracoles of the Sea of Our Dreams, located in La Realidad.

This is the final report of the caravan. The first part consists of a brief chronicle of the days and the places we have been, and an explanation of the various themes that we have heard from the voices of our *compas*.

CHRONICLE

The brigade of the caravan destined for the *Zona Selva Fronteriza*, with participants from the USA, Germany, France, Iberian Peninsula, Iran, Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Mexico City, left on July 30 from San Cristóbal de las Casas for the Caracol “Mother of All the *Caracoles* of the Sea of Our Dreams.” Following a 6-hour journey, we were received by the *compas*.

After accommodating us in the buildings of the school, the first meeting took place with the *Junta de Buen Gobierno* (JBG), or Good Governance Council, in which they revealed the objectives of the caravan. There we showed our intention to stand in solidarity with their struggle, and to observe the situation of the communities.

The JBG noted that it would be interesting to come to know the achievements of Zapatista autonomy through interviews and visits to communities. At the next presentation to the JBG, we asked if there was some work we could do, and they informed us that if we wanted to help by making banners and painting murals, it would be welcome.

On July 31, while some caravanistas were dedicated to the brush, another group went to decide on the questions to bring to the Zapatista *compas*. These were divided into four blocks: Autonomy, health, education, and women.

The following day, the interview was celebrated with the Good Governance Council, the *promotoras* and *promotores* of education and health (from now on, referred to as “promoters”) and the *compañeras*. All made a great effort to bring themselves from the different communities to the Caracol to bring us their word and their experience. The discussion lasted over 5 hours and addressed the themes raised, and others that arose in the heat of the conversation, like the organizing of the young people.

On August 2, we transferred to the community of Santa Rosa del Copán, in the municipality of Libertad de los Pueblos Mayas (Freedom of the Maya Peoples), to come to know the clinic and to interview the local health promoters. The reception was very warm, and the whole community was present.

First, a discussion took place with the education promoters from the community. Later, the health promoters took us on a guided tour of the community clinic, in which they showed us the various spaces which they provide. After, we interviewed them and we were able to go into more depth. Next, the students of the school realized a cultural event with poems, stories, riddles, and a little parade. At night, there was a dance in which all the community participated.

The next day we returned to La Realidad, and for two days continued the works with the murals and the banners, along with discussions among the caravanistas with the goal of presenting our realities and knowing other struggles.

On August 5, we left to come to know another community. On the way, we visited the Zapatista hospital of San José del Río. Later on, we arrived at 24 de Diciembre (December 24), a community of the municipality of San Pedro Michoacán with a particular problem, in that these are lands recuperated by the Zapatista *compas* just one year ago. There we were received by the community, and planned interviews and tours of the nearby military installations.

After two days we returned to La Realidad to enjoy the celebration (of the anniversary of the Caracoles) and to present our report to the JBG, with which we ended the caravan.

To reveal all that has been discussed in these days in the different communities and in the Caracol, we have decided to divide the report into the following parts: autonomy, women, education, health, and harassment of the Zapatistas.

AUTONOMY

In the interview with the Good Governance Council (JBG), the autonomous councilors, and the promoters of health and education, they said that autonomy is a legitimate right of the indigenous peoples, but the Government has never recognized it. They observed that autonomy is that which they exercise every day in their communities, in that their ancestors had their own way of organizing themselves and making agreements, their *usos y costumbres* (practices and customs).

After the Zapatista uprising, when the Dialogues of San Andrés were initiated, the recognition of indigenous rights and indigenous culture was demanded of the government. Regardless, although agreements were signed between the representatives of the EZLN and of the federal government, these were not reflected in the constitutional reform of 2001.

From then on, the Zapatista communities unilaterally reinitiated the exercise of autonomy, creating Good Governance Councils. With them, they seek to coordinate the existing relations between the various autonomous municipalities, thus creating a balance among them.

The JBG of the Caracol of La Realidad is made up of 4 autonomous municipalities, each of which has its own municipal council. The representatives of the autonomous municipalities are elected by the communities that form them, and each community also has its own local *autoridades* (no appropriate translation).

According to the JBG, “The structure of autonomy begins from the peoples, because from the peoples comes the organization of work.” The positions are rotating. The communities elect 12-16 *autoridades* for 3 years, and the JBG of this zone varies every 15 days. The *autoridades* do not receive a salary, but rather a support from the communities that they themselves decide according to their means.

The *autoridades* of various levels—community, municipal, JBG—exercise what they define as “Mandar Obedeciendo,” or to command by obeying: “The peoples choose us according to our activities and understandings. In the communities and municipalities, they make their own laws, which we apply. It is not discussed, it is just fulfilled. The people commands. It is autonomy.”

They also spoke to us of the respect and the coordination among Zapatista and non-Zapatista communities and families, commenting that “We maintain solidarity between communities and respect for agreements, and those that are not Zapatista are also respected.” There are people who are not Zapatista who go to the JBG looking for a different form of justice, since in the apparatus of the Government, the one who has more money always wins, though that is not just.

Finally, they emphasized that for the Zapatistas, autonomy is not depending on the Bad Government, neither politically nor economically, through supposed projects of assistance or development.

WOMEN

Before beginning this part of the interview, the men left their places and the women seated themselves in front.

The Zapatista women of the various autonomous municipalities and of the Good Governance Council shared with us their role within the Zapatista movement. They explained that before the Women’s Revolutionary Law of 1993, the women were forgotten, they did not have rights.

As examples, they gave the fact that they could not choose the number of children they had, the age of marriage, whom they were going to marry, and the education and health they received. They explained that before the uprising, they were thought less than the men, including among themselves. Now they know that they are equals, that they can go forward, that they do not only exist to cook and to serve the men, that they can think for themselves.

They emphasized that this situation of discrimination and exploitation came from the time of the *patrones* or landlords, in which these gave orders to everyone and decided what each one had to do.

The women explained how, seeing that situation and their necessities, they began to organize *encuentros*, discussions with all of the women. They also created their own women’s cooperatives and various collectives with which they can receive some income.

It was beginning in August 2003, with the creation of the JBG, that the women started to participate in all the different positions, as local *autoridades*, as municipal counselors, and as members of the JBG. They also started to become promoters of education and health.

Asked about what they considered achievements, they told us that they have achieved the liberty of “deciding things that before we did not used to do, and now, we are doing them; we can walk alone, we can come forward, like the *compañeros*.”

Referring to the problems they continue to have at present, they commented that although they may know they can walk alone, there are many women who still do not dare—some yes, but not the majority.

It must be understood that to reach the various meetings, it is sometimes necessary to walk for hours, even for days. On the road they encounter those who are not Zapatistas, paramilitaries and soldiers. That means there is a real risk they could be attacked if they go alone, because it is a way of preventing the Zapatistas, and above all the women, from going forward with their autonomy.

Finally, the women sent a message to all the women of the world, indigenous and not indigenous. They emphasized that it is necessary that the women organize themselves, that they struggle for their rights, that they continue going forward as the Zapatista women have done.

EDUCATION

During the conversations with the education promoters of the communities we visited, along with the one in the Caracol, these promoters explained to us how they understand education and what it means for them.

From the start, they observed that the objective of the education in the Zapatista communities is not to obtain a title or anything like that, but rather what is attempted is to learn and thus to be able to defend themselves from attack. They emphasized that before the uprising, the majority of indigenous people in the Zone did not know how to read or write, and that they wanted to change that situation.

We also had an opportunity to talk with the education promoters in the community of Santa Rosa del Copán, in the municipality of Libertad de los Pueblos Mayas. They explained that the education promoters are Zapatistas who advance education for the benefit of the community, and who are chosen by the same community.

In this discussion, the promoters told us that the time of the work depends on the will of the promoters and of the people. That is to say there is no fixed period, but there is an attempt at continuity, and there is a commitment that before leaving this work, they have to train other promoters who will continue with the work.

They receive the support of the community in food, and their families are supported by their community in working the land for their sustenance.

The Zapatista autonomous education is accessible beginning at six years, and without limits of age. Some of the areas that they teach are Histories, Languages, Mathematics, and Life and Environment.

The education promoters spoke of the difference between the Zapatista autonomous education and the official education. Their education is not only theoretical, but also practical, like the work with the vegetables or in the shops, and the participation in cultural programs.

The Zapatista autonomous education focuses itself on the things that are useful to society, while the official education focuses on serving neoliberalism. They explain the real and truthful histories that the indigenous peoples understand, and how they have suffered exploitation and discrimination since the arrival of the Spaniards. Further, they transmit the knowledge of plants and their properties, as well as the respect and protection of nature, dedicating an area of education to Life and Environment.

As for the dynamics of the work, they emphasized that they do not do exams in which the students compete to see who knows more, but rather they look for everyone to learn equally. That means they are advancing at the level that everyone is understanding. To know that they have acquired the knowledge, the Zapatistas value the fact that they know how to resolve problems in real life, to work in the shop, to read and write, among other questions.

The time of classes varies based on what they are going to learn. There is no “school term” as in the official schools, where you have to study all of a quantity of materials in a determined time, without considering whether you have learned or not.

To give the classes, each promoter has their own dynamic of work that gets adapted also based on the suggestions of the students. That is to say there is an exchange of ideas, and from there is born the method of teaching. Thus, they do not use numbers or grades for the evaluation of the students.

HEALTH

In Caracol 1, they provide microclinics of health in the four municipalities, a central clinic, and health promoters in all of the communities. The caravan was able to see the microclinic in the municipality of Santa Rosa del Copán, and to interview the health promoters in La Realidad and in the community of 24 de Diciembre.

Although before 1994, there were already health promoters, many people died of diseases like dengue, tuberculosis, malaria, or even more preventable diseases like diarrhea. Many children died under 5 years of age. Deaths during childbirth were also very common, children as well as mothers.

After 1994, the system of health care came to be more organized, together with the construction of Zapatista autonomy. With the recovery of the knowledge of their traditional medicine, the system of education of promoters, and the collective construction of clinics, the cases of mortality have diminished drastically.

Today, in all the communities, the health promoters use herbal medicine as the first recourse to try to cure illnesses. For example, in La Realidad, they provide a center of herbal medicine, where they produce their own creams, tinctures, teas, ointments, etc. from the plants.

In the microclinic of Santa Rosa, they receive the people of the municipality who cannot be attended by the promoters of their communities. They provide various spaces, like a doctor’s office, a pharmacy, and a dental care room—though they cannot currently use it due to a lack of materials.

In the hospital of San José, they are equipped with an emergency room, a doctor’s office, a surgeon’s room, a delivery room, a dental care room, ultrasound, a laboratory of analysis, a room for sterilization of equipment, and a pharmacy, where we found “conventional” medicines and also natural medicines

they produce, since they have the necessary material to make pills and syrups. Those with more serious problems, which cannot be cured in the microclinics or with the promoters, go to the hospital.

The recuperation of their traditional medicine has not only improved their health system. Along with the struggle for the rescue of the languages, the traditional medicines are very important in the education of the promoters and in the culture of the indigenous peoples.

The promoters are also trained in areas of analysis and water quality—for example, in La Realidad, they have developed a system of producing biodegradable chlorine—and they train in areas they deem necessary from courses given by other promoters or by solidarity doctors.

They seek equity between *promotores* and *promotoras*, male and female promoters. In the municipality of Santa Rosa, 15 *promotores* and 7 *promotoras* are now working, but they are training 15 *promotoras* and 7 *promotores*, so there will be a parity. In San José, there are 8 promoters, in La Realidad 3. In 24 de Diciembre, a community recently relocated, there is only 1 promoter, but they are training new promoters and believe they will be able to have a more extensive health system in 2-4 years.

The autonomous health system is a community work, since all the communities of a municipality decide where to install the microclinics, and all the municipalities that decide where to install the central hospital. We see this community work also in the construction of the clinics, in which members of all the communities participate. For the Santa Rosa clinic, they took two years to finish it, and the materials for its construction—like stones and sand—were brought by hand from many kilometers away.

Autonomous health is not exclusively for Zapatistas, but also those who are not Zapatistas go to these clinics. The difference is that, since the Zapatistas contributed to the construction of the clinics and the training of the promoters, they do not have to pay anything for health assistance.

HARASSMENT OF THE ZAPATISTAS

The Zapatistas also described to us the threats to their autonomy that they suffer at the hands of the Bad Governments, municipal, state, and federal. These threats are shown in many forms—political, economic, social, ecological, and military. “They want to get rid of the Zapatistas, to destroy us. We are always thinking how to resist. They attack us not only with bullets but also with economic warfare.”

For example, the Bad Governments privatize the communal lands, threaten the water and the natural resources, and impose foreign grains like genetically modified corn. The caravan, in its visit to the communities of Santa Rosa del Copán and 24 de Diciembre, observed and listened to the different forms in which the threats to these communities present themselves.

In Santa Rosa, the promoters described the political and economic warfare the government wages against their autonomous municipality, exemplified in the efforts by the official authorities to “buy” the families by means of programs like PROCEDE, Oportunidades, Vivienda Digna, etc. They call this a low-intensity war in the service of neoliberalism.

These are also ways that the state and federal governments attack the Zapatista autonomous health system, seeking to divide communities and also to be able to inflate the health statistics in Chiapas. Those received in the government clinics are mistreated and rejected for the lack of some kind of credential. There is even forced sterilization which women have denounced.

In the visit to the community of 24 de Diciembre, which was recuperated by Zapatista support bases a year ago, the community conveyed to us that, at the moment, the harassment there is manifested militarily as well as in the forms described above.

A few meters from the community, a military base has been installed called Rancho Momon, of the Seventh Military Region of the Mexican Army. We caravanistas were able to walk around the base, accompanied by someone from the community, documenting with photos and video the takeover of part a part of their land.

The Mexican Army is installed in a part where the community's spring water and small lake is located, and does not permit them access. Even though the state government insists that there is a pond where the community can extract water, the reality is that barbed wire separates them from the water, and it is water where the soldiers urinate and spill waster. Currently they are storing rainwater, but they are very concerned, since in the dry season this is not sufficient, and they are forced to walk 1-3 hours to have enough water for their families.

They also told us that after 12 years in the mountains as people displaced by war, when they returned to recuperate their lands, they met strong hostility on the part of the state police and a paramilitary group called the Unión de Ejidos de la Selva (the Union of *Ejid*os of the Jungle). These were for many months encamped in the community, with the objective of impeding the *compass* from living on their lands.

Given the commitment of the EZLN not to use their weapons, they had to look for other ways to win the withdrawal of the Unión de Ejidos de la Selva. This withdrawal was obtained with the solidarity of numerous *compass* of other Zapatista communities and other countries that went to 24 de Diciembre to support them. With the permanent presence of more than 100 people, on June 17, they finally won the withdrawal of the Unión de Ejidos de la Selva from their lands, but the Mexican Army remains there...