

Wildcat

**Unmasking the
Zapatistas**

It may seem smug to knock the Zapatistas from the sidelines. But this is a perennial red herring. The fact that the Zapatistas and their supporters live in hardship and risk their lives does not in any way demonstrate that their program is what the Mexican proletariat needs. This article should provide an alternative to the almost universal uncritical laudation which Marcos and co. have received.

"Today, we repeat: OUR STRUGGLE IS NATIONAL"

(EZLN, Third Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, January 1995).

Given its identification with the project of reforming the Mexican nation, why did anyone think the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation) might be something more? The answer is what it has done. The EZLN liberated prisoners, attacked police stations, burned down town halls, and has thrown out some of the big landholders. Many of its demands for material improvements in living conditions are fair enough. It claims to combine clandestinity with participatory decision making, which we assumed were incompatible. If they really do carry on discussions until they all agree, as they have told journalists, this must be the first time in

history an army has organised on the basis of consensus. Their claim to have almost abolished sexism and homophobia within their ranks is also difficult to believe, but according to what Amor y Rabia supporters actually saw in May 94, it is basically true, and we cannot contradict their account.

But if their organisation is remarkably close to the latest anarchist fashion, their aims are far from revolutionary, and their analysis banal. The Mexican electoral system is less than perfectly democratic. The population of Chiapas is poor, relative to most of Mexico. Conversely, it is rich, relative to most of Central America. They were not driven to despair by starvation, as some of the EZLN's proclamations seem to say. There are more complex reasons for revolt than the simplistic poverty explanation favoured by most commentators. If poverty explained anything, most of the world would be in revolutionary ferment. This is our attempt to account for this unexpected uprising, which briefly illuminated with its crimson glow the sombre clouds which enshroud the planet. But let's leave the poetry to Marcos.

Reasons for the Uprising

The most important spur to rebellion is the weakness of the social structure. Chiapas was part of Guatemala until Mexico bought it in 1830. It still has a Central American-style semi-feudal ruling class, of Spanish, German and English extraction, who have little notion of the subtleties of Mexican politics, for example they are openly racist toward the indigenous majority. The reactionary coletos of San Cristóbal, descendants of the original conquistadores, are a joke. Their attacks on the lefty archbishop have only helped his struggle with the Vatican. When Marcos provoked the coletos by claiming to be gay, they took the bait, trying to discredit Marcos by publicising the story. The redneck rancheros in the countryside are more serious, redisappropriating land and murdering opponents in the wake of the army. Consciously or otherwise, the struggle in Chiapas is an attempt to modernise the state, and bring its politics in line with the rest of Mexico. The peasants know that they can get some of their demands granted: under pressure, the state has redistributed land before. They voted to join the EZLN and launch the armed struggle when Mexico supposedly joined the First World via the North American Free Trade Agreement. They calculated that

the time had come: if Mexico is to be part of North America, Chiapas should not be left behind.

Another reason is the political awareness which grew out of the 500th Columbus anniversary, which did not coincide with a period of defeat for the indigenas, as was the case in Guatemala and elsewhere. Indigenous movements are flavour of the month, and the EZLN has made much mileage out of the ethnicity of its members. Another is the simple fact that Marcos and co. chose Chiapas to hang out in the eighties; brilliant leaders can make an important contribution. Then there is the radical Catholic Church. Liberationist priests organised among the indigenous peasants more successfully than the rest of the left. The EZLN were unable to make much headway when they first arrived because they were atheists. So they changed their position.

According to Ojarasca, February 94, citing Amnesty International's Mexico: Human Rights in Rural Areas, most land disputes in the seventies (87 out of 115) were caused by wealthy farmers invading communal land. In the eighties the tide began to turn. The Organisation of Indigenous Peoples of South East Mexico, for example, was founded in Chiapas in 1983, declaring *"We fight for a better life, for which justice is needed for the urban and rural poor. The government of our country, which is a*

government of the rich, represses and murders us, and we have found from the study of the history of man and of Mexico that only organised struggle will enable us to obtain a new way of life..."(**Ojarasca**). 128 fincas were invaded by one group of armed peasants in 1983. In June 1985, the head of one of the peasant organisations announced that his people had occupied 109 large properties in various parts of Chiapas.

In response, the state government allowed landlords to employ paramilitary forces and municipal police to prevent squatting, assisted by "anti-drug" units with helicopters and planes paid for by the USA, and the state police detained, tortured and murdered peasant leaders. Entire communities were evicted by police and private thugs, who swarmed in before dawn, forcing people to abandon their homes and possessions, which they burned. Then they took the peasants by truck to the nearest highway and dumped them. But with all due respect to the bereaved and dispossessed, this is small beer by Central American standards. During the eighties, about 50,000 refugees preferred Chiapas to Guatemala, where at least 110,000 civilians have been murdered by their government. In Chiapas, repression was sufficient to provoke resistance, and insufficient to crush it. The government spent more on social programs in Chiapas than in any other state. From 1989 to 1994, federal

spending rose more than tenfold to \$250m.. Since this was obviously a concession to political unrest, it encouraged it.

The Zapatistas did not arrive in a vacuum. They had to work with, or compete with, liberation theologians, Maoists and indigenous groups in the slow cooking cauldron of Chiapas. None of these factors explain the uprising; rebellions happen, not because of any combination of causes, but because people decide to rebel. The Zapatistas, with their vague ideology, are well suited to recuperate the class struggle in Chiapas, turning it into a campaign for national democratic reform.

In naming themselves after the original Zapatistas, the present lot are being romantic rather than historical. Zapata's contribution to the Mexican Revolution of 1910-17 was avowedly parochial. He and his followers had the aim of resisting enclosures and sugar agribusiness in Morelos. Though this state is adjacent to the Federal District, they rarely ventured outside their own backwater. It is difficult not to laugh when one reads of the fire engine incident in the capital. So unfamiliar were the moustachioed bumpkins with the big city, they assumed it was a military vehicle, and opened fire, killing all on board¹. They were defeated by reactionary generals with a less localist perspective. It is tempting to

see this as an example of natural selection. But at least Zapata and his followers wanted to defend traditional peasant community against capitalist development, which is more than can be said for the latterday Zapatistas.

The promises of the Revolution (in a word, land to the peasants, both collectively and in small plots) were often unfulfilled. By the mid-eighties, only 2.7 million families had received the promised plots, whilst 3 or 4 million peasants waited, patiently or otherwise.

Owners of big landed estates are rich bastards who live off the backs of the poor, but they are not typical capitalists. In fact their existence can be an impediment to capitalist development. Their labourers are often not wage slaves but tenant farmers who pay rent in labour and in kind, though in Mexico, and particularly in Chiapas, there is an ancient tradition of debt slavery, which in practice is almost indistinguishable from actual slavery. The land owners sell produce for money but don't feel the need to invest it in new methods of production. Unlike the dour burgers of capitalism's rosy dawn, these rakes and degenerates, after allowing for a few incidental expenditures such as arming their goons and lackeys, spend their ill-gotten gains on pleasure and luxury. The development of capitalist agriculture requires

the breaking up of these landed estates. This is where peasant movements for progress, such as the Zapatistas, come in. Peasants can be used by politicians to struggle for development against reactionary landlords. Often this is done under the guise of social justice, under the slogan Land to the Peasants. The idea is to turn the serfs, debt slaves and bonded labourers into petty bourgeois proprietors who will then compete against each other to sell their produce on the open market. Many will be ruined, and driven into the urban proletariat, desperate to work and relatively easy to exploit, and a few will become millionaires. This process has been central to capitalist accumulation throughout its history. It is continuing today on an unprecedented scale with the break-up of the collective farms in China.

Some countries, France being the exemplum, have deliberately kept a class of conservative peasants, against purely economic logic, for political reasons. In Mexico, the inefficient small producer and ejido systems have been perpetuated because of the unrest which would greet their abolition.

Even when collective landholdings are created, they have to impose capitalist discipline in order to produce for the market. More frequently, small landholders become owners of individual plots, and have to work overtime to

survive. The market price of a commodity is determined by the socially necessary labour time involved in producing it. An American farmer produces a pound of corn in a fraction of the time taken by a Mexican peasant; this determines the price. Land redistribution is also subject to the limitations of wealth redistribution in general. If wealth is more fairly distributed, without the abolition of the market and wage labour, some people will quickly gain an advantage over others through their skills at buying and selling. Soon, wealth will once again concentrate in few hands. 'The rich get richer and the poor get poorer' is in the nature of property. It cannot be ended by redistribution.

This is not to say that all peasant struggles are inherently pro-capitalist. There are very strong pressures towards a peasant becoming a simple petty bourgeois commodity producer (as in rural France) but this is not the only reason for trying to get hold of a smallholding. It can also be a place to live where you're not paying rent to a landlord and you can use it to grow food for yourself. There have always been elements of this in the rural struggle in Mexico, but it has mostly been recuperated in the interests of capitalist development. The current uprising in Chiapas is no exception.

In 1911, Zapatismo was localist when the bourgeoisie was nationalist. Today it is nationalist, but meanwhile, the bosses have regrouped on a global scale. At the beginning, in response to government allegations of foreign influence, the Zapatistas strenuously denied that any Guatemalan Maya Indians were involved. In other words, the Zapatistas' Maya indigenism is subordinate to their Mexican nationalism, which is passionately expressed in many of their writings. In contrast, the bosses have no country. The US and Mexican ruling classes cooperated against the uprising, the Chase Manhattan bank told the Mexican government to crack down, and the Guatemalan army openly sealed the border against Zapatista escapees in February 1995. The Zapatistas' internationalism is restricted to talking to foreign journalists and appealing to liberals to put pressure on Congress. This is logical, since international working class solidarity is not necessary to achieve land redistribution in Chiapas, nor more democracy in Mexico.

Amor y Rabia is not among the organisations *"that strive, with honesty and patriotism, for the betterment of Mexico"*. They asked Marcos a lot of hard questions about nationalism, and he gave some slick answers. They said *"The 'Nation' is used with an abstract feeling of a patriotism that ultimately does nothing more than pit us*

against one another, country against country"(interview in Love & Rage August 94). Marcos replied *"When we speak of the nation we are speaking of history, of a history of common struggle with historical references that make us brothers to one group of people without distancing us from other groups"*. This is called having your cake and eating it. The question of autonomy is complicated. We do not want a dreary, homogenous world ruled by the World Congress of Workers' Councils. We recognise that there must be different communities with their own traditions and cultures. Some indigenous communities refer to themselves as "nations". However, communists oppose the nation state, whereas the EZLN equivocates on the issue. Marcos wants a more federal Mexico, with respect for the autonomy of different groups and areas. But the USA was founded on this basis. This does not challenge the operation of the market economy, which forces a tendency toward centralisation on any nation state.

Not only are small farmers forced to produce for the market, neither are they good ecologists. When poor peasants take over land in Chiapas, the first thing they do is often to chop down the trees. There have been fights between peasants and police trying to defend ecological reserves. Some of the main demands of Zapatista peasants are for better roads to get their produce to

market, electricity to drive machinery and television, etc.. These uncomfortable facts are generally ignored by their supporters. People assume that the poor are good, and the rich are bad, and therefore we must support the former. The point is not to assign good or bad, but to face the fact that much environmental damage in the world is being done by desperate poor people, not just by MacDonald's. Obviously, they are driven to do this by the world market economy which has deprived them of a livelihood, but uncritical support is no solution to this. Neither is a moralistic antagonism to corporations without a critique of the capitalist mode of production. This is where we hope this article will fill a gap.

Nature of Mexican Politics

In contrast with other Latin American regimes, the Mexican state is a consummate recuperator. The Mexican army and police are almost fluffy compared with their counterparts elsewhere. Mexico is far more sophisticated in dealing with armed insurrection than Chile, Argentina, Guatemala, El Salvador, or even Britain. That is why the repression in Chiapas has been so tame. In January 94, with support for the Zapatistas apparently widespread within Mexico, fear of the insurrection spreading was a factor in the state's hesitancy. But the

continuation of the softly-softly approach is rooted in the nature of Mexican politics. The state instinctively grants some of the demands of any serious opposition, so its apparent climb-down to the Zapatistas on 12 January 94 was not as humiliating as it appears. Since then, it has again granted rebel demands, for example the resignation of the governor of Chiapas. Militarily speaking, the Mexican army could have taken out the EZLN in a few days. The biggest parade the EZLN staged for the press involved only 400 rifles, some of which were fake. In February 95, the troops deliberately allowed Marcos and the rest of the Indigenous Committees to escape before parachuting into Las Cañadas. Recuperation, or cooptation of resistance, does ultimately derive from fear of resistance, but then so does repression, so in itself this says nothing. Generally, the ability to recuperate rather than repress is a sign of strength. An Interior Minister once said of the opposition "*What resists also supports*". In 1970, left-wing president Echeverría secretly organised peasant land seizures in Sonora and elsewhere, giving him an excuse to disappropriate his wealthy latifundista opponents. In the period leading up to the Chiapas events of New Year 94, president Salinas continued the policy of incorporating rebellious peasant organisations into the state, and implemented the Solidarity program

which provides subsidised food and health care to millions, even while amending Article 27 of the Constitution to enable the sale of communal lands (ejidos), though this was less relevant to Chiapas, where the land reforms of 1915 and 1934 had never been implemented.

To summarise, NY Times hack Alan Riding: *"A traditional way of advancing politically is to emerge as an independent peasant agitator. Having gathered a group of landless peasants under the banner of 'the fight for justice', the aspiring leader can then negotiate with - and, it seems, invariably sell out to - the authorities. But the system will normally try to coopt him without destroying his appeal, thereby enabling him to continue living off 'his' peasants and, when deemed necessary by officials, to divide other groups of militant peasants"*. **Distant Neighbors2, p269**. This is too cynical, since it casts aspersions on the sincerity of simple, honest folk who risk their lives daily. But Riding is cynical because recuperation has worked. It didn't work in Chiapas mainly because of its dinosauric dynasties of backward bourgeois bastards.

Even after the massacre of left-wing students in 1968, the new government under Echeverría was able to coopt

most of the survivors, letting them out of jail, announcing a "democratic opening", and an anti-imperialist foreign policy. Echeverría boasted that lefties who were on the streets in the late sixties were in the government in the early seventies. Others were found dead in ditches - but these were, of course, an extremist minority. The Zapatistas are too clever to fall into either of these traps.

However impressive the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party)'s pragmatic populism, the rest of the world's ruling class have turned against the social-democratic corporatist style of management. The OECD admitted Mexico in March 94, during the first stage of the Zapatista uprising, signalling confidence in the PRI's ability to dismantle the social contract. The next stage in the integration of Mexico into the world economy came in January 95. Zedillo didn't exactly stage an economic crisis, but it was no accident. This crisis "forced" him to borrow heavily from the IMF and the USA. Mexico doesn't always dance to the US tune. She has successfully blackmailed the USA into rescheduling debts in the past by pointing out the consequences of a Mexican default on the US financial system. But Zedillo can conveniently cast Uncle Sam as the villain as he introduces austerity, blame repression on conditions imposed by these creditors, and promote the scam of nationalism for the

masses whilst being an internationalist himself, acting with the rest of the world's ruling class. He can always rely on the left to whine about "*national humiliation*" (**Proceso, 30 January 95**) and so on. Five days after offering "*the participation of the indigenous communities in the sustainable development of Chiapas*" and the usual verbiage, "*una paz justa y digna*" (**La Jornada, 5 February 95**), and immediately following the \$20bn. American loan to hold up the peso, he moved thousands of troops into the Zapatista strongholds of the Lacandon rain forest, causing some fatalities and thousands of refugees. But most Zapatista supporters simply hid their weapons and went back to their fields.

Almost everyone sees the crisis as proof that Zedillo's government has failed. The 20 February Proceso talks of industry being "on the point of economic and financial collapse". But it isn't a collapse, just a restructuring. Rather than being a symptom of fundamental bugs in the objective operations of the economic system, crises are intimately connected to the class struggle. Although crisis can be forced on the bosses by workers refusing to work, in times of low class struggle it's the other way round; the crisis is a strategy for implementing austerity. 35% was added to fuel prices, 20% to transportation. VAT

went up to 15%. The price of tortillas was raised 26% in April 1995. The minimum wage rose 10% when inflation is estimated to be 42%. Driving large enterprises like Grupo Sidek to the wall is good for the economy, since the goods will be produced by workers in smaller units, less well organised, for lower wages. The demoralisation produced is an opportunity for austerity, and the falling peso boosts exports and reduces imports. Many of the firms that went out of business during the February 1995 currency crisis couldn't pay off their workers.

The crisis has started to attack its main target: the large sector of workers accustomed to jobs-for-life at a living wage, with health and welfare benefits, without having to work too hard. Federal and state employees number around three million, and related sectors like banking offer similar sinecures to millions more. Mexico is rightly famous for its inefficient and corrupt bureaucrats. This is anachronistic, considering that Mexico and the USA virtually overlap. Perestroika, or making workers work, is overdue. For Mexico to play its role within NAFTA, this sector has to be broken. Other targets of the debt squads include the subsidies on transport, cooking oil, tortillas and beans, and the health and social security programs. This will take years of crisis, which will marginalise recent events in Chiapas. Thirty thousand layoffs have been

announced in Pemex, the national oil company. Redundancies will drive the unemployed into the maquiladoras on the border, and over it.

Poor immigrants are generally prepared to work harder and longer, in worse conditions, for lower wages. The US economy needs its illegals, so the anti-immigrant campaign is not really about repatriating immigrants, but making them more insecure and easier to exploit. In California, Proposition 187 passed by a 2 to 1 majority. This measure cracks down on alleged illegal immigrants, requiring that all the other state agencies cooperated with the INS. Social workers, teachers and nurses are required to deny services to anyone suspected of being an illegal, and to report anyone without proof of legal residency to the immigration pigs. The Personal Responsibility Act, passed by the House of Representatives on March 24, also targets immigrants. This cuts off a wide range of benefits even to those with legal status. The aim is to restore a reign of terror to the underground labour markets, making illegals cheaper to maintain, by denying them benefits, and more insecure, thus easier to exploit. Though it appeals to US-born workers, the campaign aims to make all American workers worse off. The way to oppose it is by explaining

how it harms our interests, rather than by trying to persuade workers it's wrong to be racist.

On April 8, the Mexico City government closed down the capital's state-owned bus company, laying off all of its nearly 13,000 workers, then using the police to run a reduced service. (The police are themselves an over-employed sector, ripe for restructuring). The "alternative" union SUTAUT, its leader Ricardo Barco and the government used classic tactics to undermine the battle against the layoffs. The union leaders urged the workers to cool off, but were beaten up and jailed, making them into martyrs. In fact, SUTAUT, despite its non-affiliation to the Labour Congress, is part of the corporatist state.

Despite the frequent use of the words "volcano" and "earthquake" to describe the Mexican proletariat, there has not been a major outbreak of class struggle. This is not to say there has been none. When the PRIista Trade Union Congress, afraid of riots, cancelled the 1995 May Day parade, 100,000 turned out anyway, and a few windows got broken. In 1994 some anarchists led by Amor y Rabia protested against army repression in Chiapas and elsewhere by hijacking a bus and using it to block the main road outside the army headquarters in Mexico City. Then they poured out of the bus and

starting spraying graffiti all over the walls of the barracks. The two sentries on duty ran away when they saw all these people in balaclavas streaming off the bus, thinking that the Zapatistas had reached the capital. After 20 minutes or so and a few arguments with soldiers they headed off home, trashing a few cop cars on the way. Petty harassment of political opposition has been widespread since the uprising began. Amor y Rabia had their Mexico City box number closed by the government.

The opposition, from the Zapatistas to big business interests, criticise the PRI for its continuous 66-year rule. In fact, sections of the PRI may want to go into opposition. There is certainly a fierce internal debate about reforming the system, evidenced by assassinations. But there is no neutral civil service, ready to serve whichever party wins. From the National Palace to the villages, the PRI is the environment, not the competition. In Mexico City, the PRI is that department of the government which organises winning elections. A couple of examples can illustrate the all-encompassing nature of the party at grass-roots level. In the town of Chamula in Chiapas there have been several expulsions of hundreds of people who have converted to Protestantism. The state says it can't intervene in the affairs of the indigenous people. Given the divisive role of

Prod God Squads in Central America, this sounds fine. But in fact, the expulsions are the work of PRI thugs, and the expulsados those who refused to vote PRI. Chamula, like most indigenous communities, often returns over 100% PRI. Here is a one reason why, from the town of Paste: *"Gomez and his neighbor are Tzoltzil [sic] natives who live in the village's poor section, where residents support an opposition political party. Ruling party supporters, who dole out government work, live in nicer homes and save plum jobs for their own kind"*. (**Oregonian, 27 March 95**). This is supposed to be shocking. The arrogant assumption that everyone in the world would appreciate American-style freedom of expression seems amusing to us, but this is the fuel that flies the B-52. The difficulty of PRIzing Mexico out of the one-party system was illustrated by events in Tabasco in early 1995. The government tried to replace the PRI governor with an opposition one who claimed the election result was fraudulent, but the local PRI organised against this, and threatened secession of the oil-rich state.

There is no movement capable of seriously challenging the PRI. Cárdenas's PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) was only founded because the PRI did not choose Cárdenas as its candidate. He may have won the

1988 election, but the PRI unsportingly manipulated the election computers to ensure the succession for Salinas. This is one of the main reasons the EZLN urged people to risk their lives fighting the "dictatorship". One of the first things the EZLN did was to demand the resignation of the government and the formation of a transitional government to convoke free and democratic elections for August 94. (L'Unita, 4 January 94). In case the PRI once again defied the Democratic Will of the Mexican People, the Zapatistas held a National Democratic Convention in the Lacandon jungle just before the August 94 elections to organise resistance. The futility of opposing the PRI from this perspective was well illustrated by the PRD, which used classic PRIista techniques to control the make-up of the Convention, to ensure it would vote for them. Lots of people could not obtain credentials because they were not members of the PRD. That is the way politics works in Mexico. The idea that people should be free to have whatever opinion they want, so long as they don't do anything about it, is not deeply ingrained. The Convention was a soggy collection of journalists, union delegates, urban and peasant organisations, human and women's rights activists, plus our spy, listening to speeches about Democracy and Justice. To their credit, Amor y Rabia refused to participate, whilst their US counterparts, Love

and Rage, do support the Commission for Democracy in Mexico, (L&R March 95 p17) showing the absurdities of a decentralised approach. The EZLN urged the indigenous people to vote for the PRD, since abstentions are counted for the PRI. As it turned out, the PRI won more or less fair and square, with the PRD coming in third at 17%, learning the hard way one of the problems with democracy; people might vote for the wrong candidate.

The piqued PRD formed an "alternative government". In Tabasco, they got well stitched up by the local PRI, and in Chiapas, the alternative government has been rather accident-prone. At the moment, the EZLN is calling for a united front of all the opponents of the one-party system, whom they refer to collectively as "Civil Society": *"We call on all social and political forces of the country, to all honest Mexicans, to all of those who struggle for the democratisation of the national reality, to form a NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT, including the National Democratic Convention and ALL forces, without distinction by religious creed, race or political ideology, who are against the system of the state party"*. This includes the overtly free-market opposition PAN (National Action Party). Marcos says *"If there is a neoliberal proposal for the country, we shouldn't try to eliminate it but confront it. If there is a Trotskyite*

proposal, a Maoist proposal, an anarchist proposal, or proposals from the Guevaristas, the Castristas, the Existentialists or whatever 'ists' that you may think of, they shouldn't be eliminated...", and goes on to propose a national debate involving everyone except the PRI.

Neoliberal economics is not just an idea, it means starvation and cholera. Most of the "ists" listed above should be eliminated, through the authoritarian imposition of the needs of the working class.

The EZLN tells people what they want to hear. Talking to the Mexican media, they go on about Democracy and National Sovereignty. Talking to anarchists, they diss the left as vanguardist, in contrast to the humble, democratic, libertarian approach. According to Marcos, the EZLN learned from the indigenous people about direct democracy and instant revocability (elected officials can be recalled at any time). *"You have to convince the people that your opinion is correct. This will radically change the concept of revolution..."*. Haven't we heard this before? Rosa Luxemburg's intervention in the German Revolution of 1918/19 was based on just such a false dichotomy. The content of her politics was the same as the "dictatorial" Bolsheviks (or maybe even a little worse). Only the form was different. The counter-revolution was no less severe because the workers had voted for it. More recently, the disastrous events in

Eastern Europe were also launched by direct democrats who convinced the people that their opinions were correct. Ensuring that leaders are required to convince people does not "radically change the concept of revolution".

Don't Worry, Be Happy

The media love the Zapatistas and Marcos has replaced Ché in the iconography of the left. But being sexy and writing bad poetry is no substitute for a coherent revolutionary program. The reason the EZLN is so vague is because its program is open to anything except the current status quo. When they say "*We believe that an authentic respect for freedom and the democratic will of the people are the indispensable prerequisites for the improvement of the economic and social conditions of the dispossessed of our country*" (**Communique, 6 January 94**), have they not heard what these fine sentiments led to in Russia and Yugoslavia? They need not even look beyond Latin America to see that more democracy has corresponded with worse, not better, conditions. If it succeeds, the campaign for democracy in Mexico will have the same results as the one in Eastern Europe. Loosening the PRI's grip on power will make things worse for the majority of Mexicans. It is an

uncomfortable fact for the Zapatistas' supporters that millions of workers and peasants support the PRI. It divides the masses by offering significant sectors a secure existence, while the rest barely scrape by. The only positive result of the current crisis, including the one in Chiapas, will be the possibility of unity based on universal misery. Even that is probably too sanguine, since the privatisation and democratisation of the world has not provoked widespread resistance, but the war of all against all. When the reactionary revolts in Eastern Europe were underway, we tried to see something positive in them. But the crisis cannot trick the working class into taking up a revolutionary perspective.

No doubt some readers will say "it's easy for you to sit there and criticise", and they are quite right. It may seem smug to knock the Zapatistas from the sidelines. But this is a perennial red herring. The fact that the Zapatistas and their supporters live in hardship and risk their lives does not in any way demonstrate that their program is what the Mexican proletariat needs. This article should provide an alternative to the almost universal uncritical laudation which Marcos and co. have received. We would like to have links with class struggle militants in Mexico, but with our limited resources, and hardly knowing anyone else who can be relied on, we have found this impossible. Pessimism can be self-confirming -

would it not be better to keep quiet? Why not go further, and tell lies? This is the road to leftism. We prefer to tell the truth, as far as we can see it.

1. *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*. John Womack, Random House, NY 1970

2. *Distant Neighbors*. Alan Riding, Random House, NY 1986