

MOVIMIENTO DE CAMBIO: Uprising in Oaxaca

An Account and Call for Support

Unasirena

Last summer, my visit to Oaxaca City opened my eyes to the popular uprising led by local residents, many of whom are women. It also alerted me to the violent repression occurring there. Different political orientations kept my family from discussing the social movement, so I arranged for a friend to show me around the city. Late one night I heard the whistle, our secret code for me to hurry downstairs and slip out without being seen by some of my family members. The streets were very quiet. We walked a few blocks from the house. A black car with tinted windows passed by, and I felt a sudden chill. We kept walking through dark streets until we came to a group of people putting wood, old chairs, and tires into a bonfire in the middle of the street. At first they were wary, but when my cousin greeted us, they turned warm and welcoming. I did not expect to see my cousin in the streets. She is a thin, small woman devoted to her family and the church. I was also surprised to see her dressed in a heavy jacket and boots, with a walkie-talkie in her hands. As I looked around the group, I started to see familiar faces—the sixty-something-year-old woman who sells ice cream at the market, the neighborhood carpenter and his wife, the shoeshine boy and his brothers, the guy from the liquor store with his wife and kid. Farther down the street, I saw a group of five or six women walking toward us. As they came closer, I recognized my aunt and her daughters, a couple of them teachers, the others homemakers. They brought coffee and sweetbread to share with everyone. It was cold and drizzling. A radio was playing revolutionary songs, and people were calling in from the different

neighborhoods, reporting on the status of their barricades. The evening was not uneventful. A group of young men from an adjacent neighborhood were nearly mistaken for the government-sponsored death convoys. It was in that moment that I realized that Oaxaca was, and still is, in the midst of a popular social movement, fueled by common people, many of them women, not guerrillas. This brief testimony is part of an ongoing attempt to witness and record the uprising and the government's brutal response in Oaxaca.

There are many reasons for the uprising that erupted in 2006. Foremost, Oaxaca is one of the Mexican states with a majority of indigenous people, who are largely marginalized and living in poverty. Ironically, Oaxaca is rich in natural resources. These conditions have propitiated *el caciquismo*, a kind of feudalism that has prevailed in Mexico since colonial times. Its existence has been the impetus for various revolutionary processes in the state throughout the years. In this century alone, three governors have been forced to resign due to the pressures of the popular movements. Poverty, marginalization, and NAFTA have also forced thousands of Oaxaqueños to migrate out of the state.

Another reason for the uprising was the need to respond to the oppressive and corrupted political party, the PRI, which has been in power for more than seventy years in Oaxaca. With the fraudulent usurpation of the governor's office in 2004 by Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, known as URO, people became increasingly discontent. From the beginning of his rule, URO went after his political adversaries and members of various popular and social organizations. Despite opposition to his governorship, he embarked on a frantic and costly remodeling of public spaces, including many of cultural significance to Oaxaqueños. The expenses were used as a cover-up for monies being disbursed for the PRI's presidential campaign (URO's political party). In addition, URO began favoring transnational developments such as the Plan Puebla-Panamá, which will not

only displace many people from their lands to create a commercial corridor in the Isthmus of México, but will benefit primarily foreign investors and national industrial developers, while exploiting the natural resources of the region. In this and other matters, URO has disregarded the economic and labor requests of unions and democratic social organizations in Oaxaca.

The Oaxacan uprising began to take shape in late May 2006. The Teachers' Union Section 22 elected to strike and held a sit-in at the main square, or *zócalo*. For more than twenty years, the teachers' union has been striking each year for better salaries, facilities, and materials, as well as for school lunches—among other things. What made the difference this time was URO's intolerance for any political uprising. Through an intense media attack, which accused the teachers of abandoning their jobs and disrupting the tourist industry at the height of the season, URO ordered a violent eviction and repression against the teachers' encampment on 14 June 2006. At dawn, hundreds of police with batons, backed by a helicopter, indiscriminately sprayed tear gas on the teachers, their families, and supporters. The attack lasted four hours. Aided by people who were enraged by the actions of the governor and the police, the teachers managed to reorganize and take back the *zócalo*. This space would become the site for regular confrontations.

What URO didn't expect was the teachers' resistance to the brutal assault and the reaction of a large section of the population. As a result of the discontent generated by URO, 365 social organizations of students, farmers, indigenous people, women, NGOs, and others joined those members of the teachers' union who were not intimidated by the repression. Many joined the encampment in the main square. On 20 June 2006, the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO) was formed and began setting goals, writing proposals, and creating initiatives. The immediate demands were for state

reform and for URO to step down as governor of Oaxaca. Since then, the organized movement has held several marches, the largest ones known as Mega Marches, each numbered to signify the history and growth of the movement. In addition, APPO has facilitated the creation of spaces and events in which the discontent, needs, and ideas of many people and civil organizations can be heard. From that time on, government repression became stronger.

From the beginning, women have been active participants in Oaxaca's social movement. Female teachers, who constitute 65 percent of the union and who have been participating in the strikes, sit-ins, and marches throughout the years, were present on June 14, the day of the failed eviction. That day, many of the teachers, along with peasants and homemakers, were persecuted, beaten, and bombed with tear gas. Later, throughout June and July, women participated in the Third and Fourth Mega Marches and in APPO's call for a shutdown of the three branches of the state government (the governor's house, the state treasury, and the state legislature and the courts). Many women set up tents outside the state treasury and, while there, began to plan a women's march.

On the first day of August, thousands of women and children joined a "pots and pans" march, "La Marcha de las cacerolas," chanting slogans for the empowerment of women: "Hombre aguanta; tu mujer se levanta" (Hang in there men; women are rising). They were to end the march at the main square, but instead they ended up at the state-owned TV and radio station, CORTV. The women demanded a few on-air minutes to inform the population about the situation in Oaxaca, but the people in charge of the station laughed at their request. After a brief meeting, the women took over the station and, without previous knowledge of how to use radio broadcasting equipment, went on the air, providing a space for many long-unheard voices. Support for the women, in the form of food, money, and solidarity,

was immediate. Every night during the following months, supporters erected thousands of barricades throughout the city to protect the residents from death squads, “convoys de la muerte.” After an attack by a group of mercenaries, who injured some of the women and destroyed radio and TV equipment and antennas, APPO took over the twelve radio stations in the city. Within the next few days, most of them were returned, except for one “La Ley,” which had the capability to transmit to the entire state. “La Ley del pueblo,” along with Radio Universidad, which was taken by students on July 14, continued to spread information about the uprising.

By the end of August, Coordinadora de Mujeres Oaxaqueñas (Coordination of Organized Oaxacan Women), or COMO, was formed as a collective within APPO to acknowledge the equal participation of women in the movement and to oversee the social, economic, political, and cultural needs of women throughout the state. Their demands included an end to the abuse of and discrimination against women, assistance for women in the development of a sustainable economy, and improved women’s health care and educational opportunities. In early September, a caravan of people marched from Oaxaca to the senate in Mexico City to demand the resignation of URO. Among the marchers were hundreds of women from COMO.

By the end of October, people were disappearing, others were incarcerated, and some had been murdered. The confrontations with mercenary groups were taking a toll. The death of Brad Will, an independent journalist from New York, brought the attention of the international media, but this has not stopped URO. On the contrary, the PRI government construed the Oaxaca uprising as a threat to the country’s “stability,” and URO blamed APPO for the economic depression.

Before the end of his presidential term, President Fox sent a hundred agents from AFI, the Federal Investigation Agency, as well as thousands of federal police (PFP) to Oaxaca. These forces confronted marchers who were trying to stop their entry into the city. In the front lines of the group were women of all ages, from little girls to elderly women, offering white flowers and carrying flags and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The PFP made their way into the city and took over the zócalo. More than sixty people were detained, and about twenty people disappeared, including some women.

November began with the Days of the Dead, and the people of Oaxaca were ready to honor their ancestors and those who had died in the conflict. However, the federal police, wearing riot gear and carrying long-range weapons, deployed tank trucks to spray water and tear gas at the barricades. On November 2, about four thousand PFP surrounded the autonomous university and tried to break through the barricades to stop the transmissions of Radio Universidad, which had become the most powerful means of communication and method of organizing residents.

From inside the station, several students, both men and women who were supporters of APPO, were transmitting almost around the clock. Regularly, people called in from different neighborhoods to report suspicious movements on the streets. The station also received calls of solidarity from other regions of the state as well as from around the world, where people were following the events via the Internet. The police were unsuccessful in their attempts to take back the station due to the strength of the movement, voiced in large part by “la Doctora Escopeta” (Doctor Shotgun). Dr. Bertha Elena Muñoz is a fifty-eight-year-old professor and mother of three. In her deep, calm voice, she told people how to wash off tear gas, how to organize their neighborhoods, and how to remain calm in a confrontation.

Consistent harassment and intimidation by the PFP led to another march in November. It was sparked by a sexual assault against a forty-eight-year-old woman. On November 19, four thousand women, along with the families of people who were in prison, demanded that the PFP leave the zócalo and restore the freedom of people who had been arbitrarily arrested. Carrying mirrors so the policemen could see themselves, the women shouted, “Look at yourselves, rapists, you are people just like us.” Symbolic acts such as this would increasingly become part of the social uprising.

At the Eighth Mega March on November 25, infiltrators disguised as marchers provoked an attack by the police in full riot gear. Police then began arresting hundreds of people—many of whom were just passing by—beating them and stacking them in trucks. At least 170 people were reported arrested on that day. Of those, 142 were shaved, some raped, and all taken out of the state to jails, far away from their families. Thirty-four were women. The distance made it difficult for human rights reporters, activists, and lawyers to defend the people within the legal time frame and state jurisdictions. In addition, all were treated as high-risk prisoners. That night, my cousin opened the gate to her garden and let in more than thirty people who were fleeing, putting herself at risk. No one moved for the rest of the night, and many people went into hiding. The terror and repression had intensified.

A few days later, the police surrounded the university radio station and forced Dr. Berta and the students to surrender the station. Police invaded homes, arresting, sequestering, and disappearing people. By December, the number of arrests was close to five hundred. Although the population was intimidated, the relatives of detainees and many supporters turned their fear into courage and marched several times in December. Many NGOs demanded that the arrest warrants against women activists, defenders of human rights, students,

indigenous people, and teachers be revoked. They also acknowledged the invaluable, intense, conscientious, and combative participation of women. In addition, APPO and COMO facilitated the takeover of public spaces and created alternative events that drew on the tradition and culture of Oaxaca. As part of the January celebration for the Day of the Three Kings, some two hundred children with white balloons marched in front of rows of police in riot gear. They arrived at a park where thousands of children gathered to receive free toys and food, which the women of COMO had collected.

Throughout the uprising, the abuses were documented and denounced by the international community of activists and women such as Sara Mendez of RODH (Human Rights Oaxaca) and Yessica Sanchez Maya of LIMEDDH (Human Rights Mexico), whose lives and freedom have been targeted in some instances. Several international human rights commissions have gone to Oaxaca to hear the testimony of those in jail and those who have been liberated. While the response of the Mexican government has been one of denial, the involvement of the international community has been of great importance. Thousands of eyes from around the world have been watching and following the events in Oaxaca, and this solidarity is important. Although the commercial media has not shown the real situation, the independent media, particularly radio and the Internet, have allowed the information to spread as events happen. Some of the discontent is recorded in graffiti and street art, which the government has tried to erase, but this important means of communication occurs almost daily.

Along with many international observers, supporters, and curious onlookers, I was in Oaxaca in December and January 2006. Of course, the government filled the main square with poinsettias instead of policemen, and the beautiful Oaxaca skies were covered with *papel picado*, colorful paper banners, to erase

the memory of the helicopters that had bombarded the marchers with tear gas. Marching along with the brave and combative people of Oaxaca gave me courage and energy to continue supporting their cause.

Certainly, the Mexican government is unhappy with any form of social protest that might jeopardize transnational capitalist interests. For the present U.S. administration, it is not convenient to have another Latin American country shifting to the left, particularly its neighbor to the south. Using the war against the drug trade as an excuse, the U.S. government is establishing operatives, similar to the Plan-Colombia, which are really designed to stop and control any insurrection.

For me, as well as for others, this movement has returned our sense of purpose. Many of us around the world wish to fight the same fight that the people of Oaxaca are fighting; we admire their resistance, strength, decisiveness, and combative spirit because their struggle is that of many who have been oppressed for too long. For women in Oaxaca, there are still many doors to open, but women are voicing their concerns and are creating opportunities not only for other women, but also for others whose voices have not been heard.

The people and organizations in the movement of change in Oaxaca have many needs. Just to release people who were arbitrarily imprisoned has been a costly task. In June 2007, after one year of struggle, thirty-three people were still in prison from the repression in November 2006, and some others have been falsely accused and incarcerated since then. For those who were liberated, their lives have been shattered, and they will have to start from scratch, some now with a criminal record. After a year of resistance, the dirty war continues in Oaxaca, and the repression against the movement of change goes on, but the people continue to protest, march, and search for justice.

As this report went to press, violence erupted in Oaxaca again. In late July 2007, the police attacked hundreds of people who were trying to celebrate a community-based cultural festival, *guelaguetza popular*, and to boycott the official *guelaguetza*. As my family stood watching the parade from a balcony, they could see the police shooting tear gas. My youngest child had a mild asthma attack, and my oldest complained of burning eyes. There were at least 60 new arrests, many wounded and disappeared. Two people died.

Support from the international community is crucial. We must continue to observe, denounce the status quo, and support the cause if we truly believe in social justice. LONG LIVE OAXACAN WOMEN! LONG LIVE THE PEOPLE OF OAXACA!

The following is a list of collectives and Web sites that are providing services and information about the movement for change in Oaxaca:

- Oaxaca Libre, <http://www.oaxacalibre.org/>
- APPO CODEP Regeneración Magisterial, <http://codepappo.wordpress.com/>
- Oaxaca en pie de la lucha, <http://www.oaxacaenpiedelucha.blogspot.com/>