

The Oaxaca Crisis: Progressive Perspectives on the Crisis of the State and Civil Disobedient Turmoil in Contemporary Mexico

By Carla Agatiello

On November 14, 2006, the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLAC) hosted a panel discussion on the current political crisis in Oaxaca, Mexico. The talk was led by Dr. Richard Roman, CERLAC Associate Fellow and Sociology Professor Emeritus from the University of Toronto, Dr. Luisa Ortiz Perez of the NGO Nova in Mexico City, and Rogelio Cuevas Fuentes, a political refugee from Oaxaca.



The current crisis in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca began in June 2006, when a group of teachers from the state went on strike in protest of low wages. As Dr. Ortiz explained, rural teachers in Oaxaca receive the second-lowest salaries within the profession throughout Mexico.

That, by itself, however, does not explain the growth of the conflict there. As two of the panelists pointed out, the teacher's union is a powerful electoral force in Mexico – seen by some as an authoritarian and often conservative. This is one the reasons why in its early stages, the Oaxaca struggle did not attract more support from other resistance movements in the region.

The tension in the region has been heightened by the unprecedented levels of impoverishment faced by

the general population amidst a deteriorating local economy.

The panelists asserted that it was this combination of experiences that led the teacher's strike to evolve into a state-wide social movement, organized under the rubric of the Oaxacan People's Popular Assembly (APPO).

This umbrella organization is comprised of over 260 popular organizations, NGOs and civil society groups in Oaxaca who demand policy reforms to address the debilitating poverty faced by the community's citizens. Ortiz explained to the audience that the central demand of the movement is the removal of Oaxaca's corrupt state governor, Ulises Ruiz, while asserting that the rampant poverty and consequent uprising in Oaxaca and other parts of southern Mexico "show the true colors of Fox's administration and of its legacy."

Rogelio Cuevas Fuentes, a political refugee from Oaxaca, shared with the audience his experience as a social activist. Demonstrating his concern for the current situation, having talked to friends and family in the area, Mr. Fuentes remarked that the "level of repression and unhappiness is getting totally out of control."

He explained that while confrontations between police and communities within the region have

been taking place for decades, there has been a considerable expansion in the variety and number of dissident voices since the 1970s and the forced implementation of neoliberal reforms.

Of particular importance amongst these reforms was the 1992 privatization of the ejido system. This system—previously entrenched within the Mexican Constitution of 1917—had guaranteed indigenous communities access and use of land necessary for their subsistence.

Cuevas Fuentes argued that with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the rapid flow of Foreign Direct Investment into regions like Oaxaca, land is being sold to multinational corporations (MNCs) "practically for free, for peanuts." He explained that Oaxaca is also home to many natural resources, fisheries, lumber, and archaeological sites that all form part of a way of living for the local population, 80% of which is indigenous. These resources have been gradually privatized and exploited, depriving many Oaxacans of what has traditionally provided a means of subsistence.

One of the means used by the government to facilitate this extraction of resources is through the Plan Puebla-Panama, implemented nearly six years ago. This regional "development

project,” funded in large part by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), has as its main objectives improvements in infrastructure, telecommunications and the creation of free trade zones to help exploit the resources of South/Southeastern states such as Oaxaca. These states are home to 80% of Mexico's oil resources and 55% of its hydroelectric energy. Today, the Oaxacan economy, based principally on tourism, has suffered greatly amidst the ongoing social struggle.

Ortiz and Cuevas Fuentes described how the APPO movement is expanding, receiving support from many sectors of society, including small businesses. On the national level, while it supports Manuel Lopez Obrador in solidarity, the APPO has stood as an autonomous movement.

Currently, the Mexican government is approaching the resistance in Oaxaca in two ways: 1) minimizing the struggle in national and international circles, hoping it will somehow fade out of existence, and 2) simultaneously employing repressive force to quash protesters. Since last June, 11 civilians have been killed in Oaxaca.

Dr. Ortiz' presentation began with a video of one such confrontation on November 2, between members of APPO and the *Policia Federal Preventiva* (federal police).¹ A barricade was set up in front of a university campus in Todos Santos that houses Radio Universidad, which has provided a popular voice on current events in Mexico.

¹ Film titled “Victoria en Todos Santos.” Online: <http://video.indymedia.org/en/2006/11/555.shtml>

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The film began with a woman walking up to a line of armed officers, whose faces are indistinguishable behind black masks. She taps on one of the officer's shield and pleads: "we are brothers! You are the same as us." The film also includes a group of men who identify themselves as professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, all claiming that the movement is falsely described as being composed simply of vandals and delinquents.

In the video the streets of Oaxaca appear desolate, save for the sporadic confrontations between police and protesters, a confrontation that left at least 70 injured but ultimately resulted in victory, as APPO was able to keep the police at bay.

Ortiz argued that what separates these events from others that have been common in this region for the past 100 years is that the resistance seen is becoming increasingly radicalized and better organized. She argued that, in the past, Oaxacans did not believe they could actually influence the decisions of governments or that they could decide their own fate. Now they feel empowered to resist their corrupt governor and public policies that harm them.

CERLAC Associate Fellow Richard Roman provided the national context for current events, arguing that the Mexican state is undergoing a 'deep organic crisis' - a crisis of legitimacy - while becoming deeply integrated into the US economy. Dr. Roman noted that while Mexico has always been dependent on the US, the depth of integration since the 1970s has been unprecedented, with natural resources (such as oil) playing an important role.

Dr. Roman also noted that in the past 30 years, there have been two very different processes taking place. The first has been a neo-liberal restructuring of the economy, accompanied by cutbacks in the social safety net, the weakening of unions, and a gradual dismantling of the corporatist state structure. The second major process taking place alongside these neoliberal reforms has been an effort to relegitimize the country's political order.

Roman described how, on the surface, a sort of pseudo-legitimacy was achieved with the election of the PAN's Vicente Fox and the conclusion of over 70 years of authoritarian PRI rule in 2000. However the promises of democracy and respect for human rights that this transition was to bring contrast sharply with the coercive reality.

The rhetoric of democracy, however, has become mainstream, and the majority of Mexicans are growing irritated with a government that will not “deliver.” This disillusionment has been further aggravated by increasing levels of inequality that are evident throughout the country.

As opposed to targeting a specific political party as has traditionally been the case, Roman argued that the resistance today in Mexico has a different message: the rich do not respect the democratic rights of the poor.

Dr. Roman commented that the Oaxacan movement was a movement of the working people, and that resistance on the whole in Mexico has a new class character. The repression of civil society groups within Oaxaca (state forces detained 150 people on November 27) and throughout Mexico as a whole - coupled with the suspicion of fraudulent elections this past fall -

are increasingly calling into question the legitimacy of the Calderon administration.



While some in the audience expressed surprise that the Mexican government had not cracked down harder and sooner on dissent in Oaxaca, the three panelists commented that one of the reasons why APPO as a movement was “tolerated” for so long is that Mexico’s conservative political parties did not want to endure negative publicity throughout or shortly after the presidential elections. However this “tolerance” has, in the past two months, begun to fade. Acts of violence by the police toward civilian populations are becoming more frequent. In this context, it is difficult to predict the future of this movement.

During the question and answer period, some expressed hope for the emergence of a national APPO organization, or hinted at a deeper integration of civil society groups under the rubric of the National Democratic Convention, led by Lopez Obrador. For his part, in discussing the role of exiles and international solidarity efforts, Mr. Fuentes emphasized the importance of international support groups in supporting the Oaxaca struggle, some of which are based in Montreal, Vancouver and Toronto.

While it remains to be seen how the government will confront the further radicalization of marginalized groups, it seems clear that for many Mexicans the status quo of a hollow democracy, at both the state and national levels, is unacceptable. Without major changes to the country’s development model, social peace will remain an impossible goal- for the rich and the poor.

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