

**It would be easy** to label the Zapatistas as terrorists: they are armed, wear ski masks and are still officially at war with the Mexican government. But it isn't that simple. Their primary weapons are their words; they refer to their firearms as "weapons which aspire to be useless". Constantly defying fixed definitions, their war is one fought with words and symbols, while being a matter of life and death.

On 24 February 2001, the Zapatistas did the unthinkable. The most wanted men and women in Mexico emerged from the jungle to begin the March for Indigenous Dignity. Twenty-three commanders of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation, and Subcomandante Marcos, travelled 950 miles across Mexico accompanied by a caravan of 50 buses filled with supporters from across Mexico and the world. They slept in town squares, in gyms, in water-world theme parks. They held masked balls, and no less than 77 public rallies on the way to Mexico City, and each visit became a town fiesta.

As they rode into the capital, two million people lined the streets to greet them as they headed for the central square. "No estan solos!" (You are not alone!) the crowd cried. For the first time in Mexican history, indigenous women addressed Congress, demanding constitutional recognition of the rights and autonomy of Mexico's ten million indigenous inhabitants.

The trip was a huge gamble as death threats against the Zapatistas poured in from state governors and paramilitary groups alike. This story illustrates the enormous difficulty coordinating such an epic event using the Zapatista's guiding principle of "leading by obeying" and shows that history can be made not only by confronting power head-on, but also by defying it creatively and adapting it to the needs of the people.

## Civil Emergency: Zapatistas hit the road

by Afra Citlalli

Two days before the Zapatista comandantes descended on the cultural capital of Chiapas, San Cristóbal (in the popular imagination) or climbed their way up to the city (in the geographical reality), an atmosphere of madness invaded the spaces and lives of Mexican civil society. Nationals and internationals ran in all directions, from meeting to meeting, from house to house, from NGO to NGO; in the cafés the rumor spread that with the Red Cross' refusal to accompany the Zapatistas to the capital, the Zapatista Information Center still didn't have enough buses or money to cover the trip; in the grassroots organization Melel they were preparing the indigenous communication promoters to cover the journey; in the School of Social Sciences they were fixing up mattresses for the caravaners-to-be; in Café Museo they were holding a press conference; in Junax they were organizing a rag-tag contingent of independent journalists; in the networking hub of the Los Altos Coordination office they referred everyone directly to the feminist bookshop, Luna Creciente; at Luna Creciente the telephone rang every minute asking if there was space in the buses; just outside of San Cristóbal an informal official registered and assigned a number to the vehicles wishing to participate ... In general, only two things were certain: first, there was no official organizer of the caravan, and second, that everything would turn out fine, as usual.

In the afternoon, a long wait for the *comandantes* in the plaza – apparently because all the Zapatista support bases coming to say goodbye had not yet shown up. Then at night, the final details, the final blankets, the final press releases and suitcases. Nobody slept. In the morning, long lines of Zapatistas, ready from the break of dawn to act as a human barricade, escorted the bussed-up *comandantes* all the way to the gates of San Cristóbal. Behind them, almost 50 vehicles, all in disorder, with god knows how many press cars after that. The now-rolling caravaners cried out heartfelt goodbyes from their buses to the rows and rows of indigenous Zapatistas, who answered by waving their hands and calling out their slogans.

The caravan had left, the support bases got back on their sheep trucks to go up/down to their communities, and San Cristóbal was left all alone once again. For those who weren't leaving, the traffic blocked their path and they sat down on the side of the highway. And without the media, with nobody around and no photos being snapped, they slowly let down their ski masks to cease being the support bases of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, and to

once again become just plain indigenous people.

Tuxtla Gutiérrez, La Ventosa, Juchitán, Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Tahuacán, Orizaba, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Emiliano Zapata, Cd. Sahagún, Pachuca, Actopan, Tepatepec, Ixmiquilpan, el Tephé, Querétaro, Acámbaro, Zinapécuaro, Patzcuaro, Uruapan, Nurio, Morelia, Toluca, Temoaya, La Pila, Cuernavaca, Tepoztlán, Iguala, Cuautla, Emiliano Zapata, Milpa Alta, Xochimilco, Mexico City. On the road, arrival, out onto the street, rally, back into the buses, do it all over again. At night, sometimes on a public square, sometimes on a basketball court, sometimes at a university dorm, sometimes at hot springs, sometimes in a bus, but one thing's for sure: there's always a meeting. Of the San Cristóbal internationals, the independent journalists, the bus coordinators, the security people, the Europeans....

The San Cristóbal internationals named spokespersons who would say nothing except what had been consensually agreed upon. They decided on attitudes and security measures in order not to be caught without a visa and they mistrusted every stranger that came to listen at their round-tables.

The independent journalists told everyone where they

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projected by laser beam onto the nearby mountain where all can see them. Police use water cannons in the driving snow to drive back 500 protesters who somehow have snuck into the fortress-like ski resort. Meanwhile, inside the conference, some of the richest and most powerful business leaders in the world engage in direct action of their own. Having lost patience with the perpetual security sweeps of the building required by

the US security services, the delegates stage a bizarre sit-in which delays President Clinton's speech.

>> **February** >> Members of the grassroots farmworkers' union, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, join with students across the state of Florida, US to launch a campaign for fair wages and improved working conditions. The campaign involves a boycott against Taco Bell, the largest purchaser of tomatoes

picked by union members. The CIW marks among its long term successes the establishment of a food cooperative providing food to members at nearly wholesale costs, weekly radio programs in Spanish and Haitian Creole, and an education and leadership development program focused on skill acquisition and the integration of culture and politics. "When you look at the difference in power between us as farmworkers

had set up their mobile office – their computers, scanners, mini-discs, video-editing material, all of it on loan. Once inside, some took digital portraits and printed out self-authorized accreditations to go through life and history with a press pass; others typed notes, reports, and chronicles about what had happened that day; others scanned photos; others, with their video cameras, loaded images for editing – and so, from one night to the next, more than a dozen webpages went up to say what’s never even mentioned in the mainstream media.

The Europeans, for their part, had discussions about whether it was really worth continuing in their six second-class buses that went too slow and took turns falling apart every day. But from Oaxaca onward they didn’t have anything left to discuss, because their buses abandoned them. The drivers told them they should take out their things so they could clean the buses, because they were full of scorpions. Scared, the Europeans took out their stuff, but at five in the morning when it was time to leave, the buses had disappeared. The *comandantes* sent their spokespeople to say that they were sorry, but they couldn’t delay the departure because they had too many public meetings that day. So the Europeans were left stranded in Oaxaca, making press releases, refusing the offer of the governor of Oaxaca to bring them six first-class buses for free, and putting together money to rent others and join the caravan again some day. The buses’ owner told them that soon after the buses left the group they were fired on, and one of the drivers was wounded. No one ever knew if it was true.

**“Listen well: We are the colour of the earth! Without us, money would not exist, and we know well how to live without the colour of money. But do not be concerned. We have not come to exploit anyone, so we shall not engage in competition with you. A house can always remain a house if it lacks the terrace or the upstairs floor, but a house without foundation is nothing but a pile of rubble. “Lower your voice and listen, because there is now another voice which has not come to steal or to impose, but something more serious: to take your place. This voice is ours. The voice of those who are the colour of the earth.” – EZLN speech upon arriving in Mexico City**

The bus coordinators got together to ask each other, because there was nobody else to ask, why the caravan was sometimes chaotic and sometimes a non-entity. The number that had been assigned with such circumspection in San Cristóbal had been replaced by the speed that each bus could attain. The first night they decided that the two meetings held simultaneously should become one. The second night they agreed that there ought to be a meeting every night. From the third night a series of discussions about civility began. Some argued that the bus numbers ought to be respected, others that it was impossible, given the motor



An enormous crowd welcomes the Zapatistas to the zócalo. Mexico City, Mexico

and Taco Bell as a billion dollar corporation, you may think we are crazy for taking them on. They have all the money and political power, and we have only one weapon. But that weapon – the truth – is the most powerful thing on earth, so we are certain that we will prevail,” says Romeo Ramirez, a member of the Coalition.

>> **February 1-7** >> A coalition of indigenous and

labour union activists occupy the IMF offices in Quito, Ecuador’s capital. The following day the government announces a state of emergency. Undeterred, protesters escalate actions. Hunger strikes begin at the university protest encampment, roadblocks intensify. Protests spread across the country, closely followed by repression, during which four people are killed by troops, 25 others are shot, and hundreds are injured. A week later the

government backs down on price hikes and agrees to dialogue with protest groups. An enormous victory march snakes through Quito. The talks last two months and break down because the government refuses to engage seriously.

>> **February 8** >> Three hundred angry, naked women confront biologists attempting to conduct a census of the endangered Tana River colobus monkey in Kenya – a

capacities of each vehicle, and the drivers argued that if they didn't take advantage of the downhill slopes they'd never get there. Some said that wanting to be near the *comandantes* was glory-hogging, others said it was just making sense out of their visit, because lagging behind meant never arriving in time for the public meetings, and when they got there it was already time to go. Some argued that no-one should take off before everyone was in their buses, others, that the *comandantes* couldn't wait and that everybody was grown up enough to be ready to go when each meeting was over. Some argued that it was part of the Zapatista spirit to give a ride to those left behind, others, that it was very dangerous to bring strangers into the caravan because they could be only pretending to be part of another bus.

In Querétaro, where the Governor had threatened the Zapatistas with death, one of the buses lost its brakes and collided with two highway patrol cars and the bus carrying the *comandantes*. Fear and silence invaded the caravan; it was stranded for more than two hours. Little by little, without uttering a word, the caravaners surrounded the *comandantes'* bus, linked hands, and formed a thick human shield. They began to hum the national anthem – first quietly like a rumour, then loudly with all their strength. When the buses could finally move on, what had been a four-lane caravan became a thin Indian file that crept away from the scene of the accident. From then on, the assembly decided that the numbers would be transformed into letters giving a new order to the buses, and that the caravan would be divided into a fast and a slow one. But the fast caravan would redistribute the

people in the first-class buses so the security section would be with them: the bus carrying the Italian *Tute Bianche* (providing security), and five Mexicans for every other bus.

From then on, the security people also held their assembly every night, but since it was about security, no-one ever knew what was said. What's known is that the *Tute Bianche* gradually came to be hated, first by the media and then by some Mexicans, offended by the rude foreign security. Their defenders argued that there was nothing to complain about: it was not that they were the best organized ones in the caravan, but the only organized ones. But from Nurio onward, the *comandantes* asked them to leave their task in the hands of the National Indigenous Congress, and the *Tute Bianche* sent out a press release to Our Lady of Civil Society explaining only that from then on they would be at the back of the caravan.

And so they continued: the champions of the indigenous, supporting the return to the values of community life, the return to our little bit of a forgotten past. The *Tute Bianche*, the global Indians, who put on their white overalls like ski masks, in order to be seen by a system for which all marginalities are invisible; the counter-globalizers of Seattle, Prague, Nice, Davos, and Cancún, who like the EZLN are for humanity and against this horrid neoliberalism that homogenizes cultures and McDonaldizes the world; the Mexican frontists who stand up without fear as Zapatistas, as their most faithful civilians and their most trusted accomplices in the search for a new politics; the Christians committed to helping the poorest of the poor; the First

Worlders who exchange money for hope; the artists seduced by Marcos, by his irony and poetry, because a movement that laughs and makes poetry is a movement that brings joy; the indignant with their untouchable communications media, soothing spokespeople of truth, because it's one thing to dress up the facts and quite another to fall into lying cynicism, and because the struggle to decide which bit of reality will be socialized is also the good fight; the die-hards of the 1970s, because the wall that fell in Berlin went up again in the Lacandón jungle, because behind the word neoliberalism you'll always find capitalism, and because even though it's a pacifist movement, Zapatismo is also an armed rebellion; the South American Guevarists because Marcos looks so much like Che and because the Conquest, the Spanish, and Zapatismo must unite all of Latin America against our enemies in the North; all different, and all advancing for different reasons behind the Zapatistas.

Because theirs is everyone's struggle, because if they win, we all have a hope of winning, because if a masked man enters Congress, pacifism has meaning, because if indigenous autonomy is approved, the struggle for world

plurality has a reason to exist.

They advanced, they got themselves indebted up to their ears just to be there, to feel it, they ate the rice and beans that the welcoming committees offered at each stop, they stood out in the blazing sun so as not to miss even one rally, they said goodbye through the window to the thousands of people who rose up in euphoria from the mass feasts. They received applause, greetings, oranges through the windows, flowers from the school kids, teasers from the girls in middle school, benedictions from monks who wished them good fortune drawing crosses in the air... and yes, a few insults as well – all that in order to go in hand in hand, forming a great human barrier – less of security than of solidarity – around the *comandantes*, to finally enter the *zócalo* together.

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English translation by Brian Holmes

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project funded by the World Bank. The women strip and charge the biologists in a protest against the Bank's plan to turn the area into a nature reserve for the primates, which would result in the displacement of at least 2,000 families.

>> **February 16 - March 7** >> The struggle against Daewoo in Pupyong, South Korea reaches a peak, as the union responds to an attempted plant closure with a

partial strike. 4,000 riot police seal off the plant and brutally attack the strikers and their families, including children who have come to support the workers. The workers resist the police with their own home-made water cannon, Molotov cocktails, and large sticks. Solidarity demonstrations by students and social movements erupt across the country. Meanwhile the Daewoo Motors Joint Struggle Headquarters Arrest

Squad, set up by activists, travels to Europe to locate and bring to justice Kim Woo-Choong, the corrupt CEO responsible for the company's bankruptcy, who has been in hiding since 1999. They find him hidden in his luxury villa in France, where he remains, as the South Korean government refuses to extradite and prosecute him.

>> **February 20** >> Protests take place outside development meetings between African leaders and