

# Oaxaca

## The Popular Uprising Escalates

Rogelio Cuevas Fuentes & Lindsay Windhager

Oaxaca, Mexico is currently the site of a radical popular uprising aimed at ousting the corrupt, repressive and illegitimate regime of Oaxacan Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. This remarkable movement signifies a profound transformation in Oaxacan politics and political consciousness that could culminate in the emergence of real alternative political models in Oaxaca. Moreover, the Oaxacan struggle will undoubtedly serve as an example for other impoverished states dealing with dictatorial and corrupt governing bodies; particularly on the heels of fraudulent presidential elections that have deepened existing cleavages in the country.

The movement emerged in response to violent and repressive tactics that were utilized to suppress striking teachers affiliated with the National Education Workers Union – Section 22 (SNTE) on June 14, 2006. In Mexico, the SNTE 22 is known for its militancy and its commitment to social change. The teachers had been on strike since May 22, 2006. Their list of demands included legal recognition of Radio Plantón, an unlicensed community radio that serves as an important medium of communication for social activists and movements, improvements to educational infrastructure (construction of classrooms, laboratories and workshops; free student breakfasts; uniforms and more funding for scholarships and staff hiring) and salary increases. Ulises' June 14 police raid was met with outrage and the 3,000 deployed police officers were driven out of the city centre by the teachers. The following day, thousands of people marched through the streets demanding that Governor Ruiz Ortiz step down. The number of deaths, disappeared, injured and detained is still unclear but it is believed that between six and nine people were killed and a woman miscarried. Moreover, installations of the Radio Plantón were destroyed and the SNTE 22 office building was vandalized.

The massive uprising now underway is a result not only of the abhorrent tactics employed on June 14 but in response to years of oppression, exploitation and injustice. Oaxaca is one of the three poorest states in the country and has the highest percentage of

indigenous people of any state in Mexico. Its teachers are among the poorest paid. The state boasts sixteen different indigenous communities speaking a variety of dialects and maintaining distinct traditions and cultures. Over the last several decades, Mexican economic development policies have further entrenched Oaxacan communities in a cycle of bare subsistence and poverty. "Under pressure from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and conditions placed on U.S. bank loans and bailouts, the government has encouraged foreign investment, while cutting expenditures intended to raise rural incomes. Prices have risen dramatically since the government cut subsidies for necessities like gasoline, electricity, bus fares, tortillas, and milk." In recent decades, Oaxaca has also seen a growth in foreign ownership of companies and businesses signifying the dismantling of unions and the further concentration of wealth and property in the hands of a few.

Furthermore, Oaxaca is home to ongoing electoral fraud, by which means Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz was elected. He represents the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), which maintained a dictatorship in Mexico for more than 70 years at the federal level. Although the presidency is now held by the PAN, the PRI maintains a stronghold in Oaxaca and continues its legacy of corruption, neoliberal economic policies and overt political repression. Political leaders silence Oaxacan protest and dissent through violent and repressive tactics, illegal arrests as well as politically motivated disappearances, torture and imprisonment.

The horrific events of June 14th coupled with decades of economic and political injustices provoked the Oaxacan people to respond to the state with demands for an alternative governing structure and the ousting of Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. On June 17th, the People's Popular Assembly of Oaxaca (APPO) was born as a mechanism through which to work towards these ends. The APPO is an association of diverse organizations and individuals including unions, student groups, NGOs, human rights groups



and indigenous communities and groups dedicated to the ousting of Ruiz Ortiz, to community-based action, popular decision making and an alternative economic and political model. “[The APPO] is born in response to authoritarianism, to state terrorism, to fascism, it is born with the hope of a new world and future of equality, without the exploited and exploiters.”

The political actions of the APPO have escalated in numbers and scale. These actions include the occupation of state-owned radio stations and television stations, sit-ins, mega-marches of close to a million people and road blockades. Indeed, people from all over Mexico and abroad have been able to show solidarity with this movement through the utilization of the radio. Most recently, the APPO and its supporters marched from Oaxaca City to Mexico City. On October 9th, they arrived at the Zócalo in Mexico City where they set up an encampment outside the Senate buildings. The large group of marchers was met in many towns and communities with incredible support and solidarity. In Tepetlixpa Cuautla in the state of Morelos, the caravan was hit by a terrible rainstorm. The marchers set up camp but were soaked and cold. This town mobilized itself and organized sleeping arrangements for all of the marchers and provided them with clothes, food and food for the trip ahead. In Nezahualcoyotl, in the state of Mexico, the caravan received an incredibly warm reception. In Neza, the municipal president is Oaxacan as are many of the residents who sympathize with the unacceptable state violence and injustice characteristic of Oaxaca. Supporters such as those encountered by the protesters in Neza and Tepetlixpa Cuautla signify the ways in which other Mexicans now see political struggle as exemplified by Oaxaca as achievable.

However, as the movement becomes more and more powerful, state and business interests are taking measures to implement repressive and violent tactics in order to regain control of the state. Ruiz Ortiz has been accused on several occasions of an inability to govern Oaxaca as the state has been essentially paralyzed by

the political actions of the APPO. Under pressure to resolve this crisis before Calderón, illegitimate winner of the 2006 presidential elections, assumes power in December, Ruiz Ortiz has resorted to clandestine tactics and a systematic violation of human rights in order to dismantle the movement. Since June, numerous disappearances have been reported as well as gunfire and brutal beatings at sit-ins and marches, harassment, destruction of property, illegal detention and torture of participants and the murder of many APPO organizers and supporters including children.

At the beginning of October, both marines and army troops were deployed to the city of Oaxaca and surrounding areas and repression seemed imminent. However, apart from ongoing repressive tactics carried out by plainclothes police and army personnel, a large-scale repression has not yet occurred. In response to accusations that Ruiz Ortiz has lost control of Oaxaca and at the request of the APPO and SNTE 22, the Senate, on October 13th, sent Senators to assess the crisis of Oaxaca and the level of unrest. A decision has not yet been made on this assessment as to whether or not Ulises Ruiz Ortiz will be requested to step down. This decision is expected as early as Tuesday, October 17, 2006.

At the same time, the federal government has engaged in a dialogue with representatives of the SNTE 22 and APPO regarding an end to the strike and a return to work. The government offered a tantalizing economic package to the teachers, who in normal times receive poverty wages and are not suffering special hardship as a result of the suspension of their income since August. This package would provide back pay to all teachers who have been living without any income for several months. The offer expires as of October 16, 2006, at which time all teachers have been requested to return to work. If not, the Secretary of State Carlos Abascal Carranza has threatened that the use of public forces may be the only remaining option. Sub-secretary of Government, Arturo Chavez, has also stated that if an agreement cannot be reached, this will undoubtedly allow for consideration →



of "other kinds of actions." Indeed, federal actors including Chavez and Carranza have confirmed that they feel confident about the steps they have taken in order to resolve the conflict peacefully and that they do not view the use of public forces as a failure of negotiations but rather as a part of politics.

As of October 9, 2006, Oaxacan state forces have been managed by the federal government in a so-called effort to ensure public safety and the re-establishment of security for Oaxacan people. However, on October 12, violence erupted once again in Oaxaca. Plainclothes police officers opened fire on a group of 120 teachers and members of the APPO in downtown Oaxaca. Four participants were injured. Ironically, the Sub-Commission of the Senate set to determine governability in Oaxaca was present in Oaxaca on the 12th. Moreover, on October 14th, military personnel dressed in plainclothes opened fire and killed Alejandro Garcia Hernandez at one of the barricades. Garcia Hernandez was shot twice in the head. Abascal and other government officials claim that such attacks are the work of "violent groups" but it appears rather likely that this explanation is merely an effort to assume impunity as is customary. As a result of this political violence, teachers decided to cancel the State Assembly and consultations that had been scheduled to discuss the proposal of the Secretary of State until after the decision of the Senate or the removal of Ruiz Ortiz.

At the same time, the APPO continues to escalate its political action in response to repression and the unwillingness of Ruiz Ortiz to step down. The APPO has announced the commencement of a hunger strike that will continue until Ruiz Ortiz resigns. Members of the APPO and SNTE 22 have formed and re-enforced new security areas in Mexico City in key strategic locations including President Fox's residency and federal government buildings. The APPO has also stated that they are planning a megamarch and a national protest based out of Mexico City slated for October 21st in solidarity with the Oaxacan struggle. Moreover, student groups, social groups and supporters of the SNTE and APPO are working tirelessly in Mexico City to disseminate information about the struggle and to coordinate solidarity actions on

a national scale. In spite of violent state repression, the Oaxacan movement is transforming into a national struggle with international support and recognition.

As for the disappeared, imprisoned, tortured, murdered and injured members and supporters of the APPO and SNTE 22, there has been little mention of justice and even less recognition of the atrocities that have been committed by the Mexican state. The fight for recognition of these individuals and their sacrifices will be ongoing but it is certain that the Oaxacan people are committed to achieving justice through their struggle. Indeed, this process has already commenced. On October 13th, a group of Oaxacan lawyers presented evidence of state repression that occurred on June 14th to the Superior Tribunal of Justice. The outcome of this exhibition of evidence is not yet known but it signifies the ongoing strength and commitment of Oaxacans to the justice and dignity of those that have been harmed in the struggle for change.

Regardless of how things unfold in the coming weeks, the Oaxacan uprising has been an extraordinary success. In addition to state violence and repression, this movement has overcome and continues to work to overcome many challenges including a lack of resources, dissemination of misinformation at state and national levels by the Mexican government and bourgeoisie and the unification of diverse communities traditionally divided along lines of class, culture, ideology, language, education and geography. The Oaxacan struggle has created momentum for long-term political change in Oaxaca. Moreover, this movement has cultivated a new and strengthened social fabric that is unified in political consciousness and commitment to social change. Oaxaca will undoubtedly serve as an example of popular and democratic resistance in Mexico in spite of extreme efforts to dismember the movement by state force. **R**

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