

A Spark of Hope:

Reflections on the 25th Anniversary of the Zapatista Movement

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January 1, 2019, marked a quarter-century since the Zapatistas captured the world's imagination with their brief but audacious uprising to demand justice and democracy for indigenous peasants in southern Mexico. Since its 1994 uprising, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) has become better known for its peaceful mobilizations; dialogue with civil society; and structures of political, economic, and cultural autonomy. With the Cold War drawing to a close, the EZLN provided an important example of what a new wave of popular movements might look like, and the Zapatista movement influenced grassroots activists and social movements like few others of the late 20th century.

NAFTA AND GLOBAL CAPITALISM THREATEN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The legacy of colonialism — centuries of racism and exploitation — was the historical backdrop of the Zapatista uprising. The EZLN was founded in 1983 as a small guerrilla cell named after Emiliano Zapata, a hero of the Mexican Revolution. After 10 years of clandestine organizing, the Zapatistas decided to risk dying from a bullet rather than continue watching their children die from preventable diseases. They chose a symbolic date for their uprising: Jan. 1, 1994, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect. The EZLN was one of the first popular movements to recognize neoliberalism as a dangerous new stage of global capitalism, calling NAFTA a death sentence for the indigenous peasants of Mexico.¹

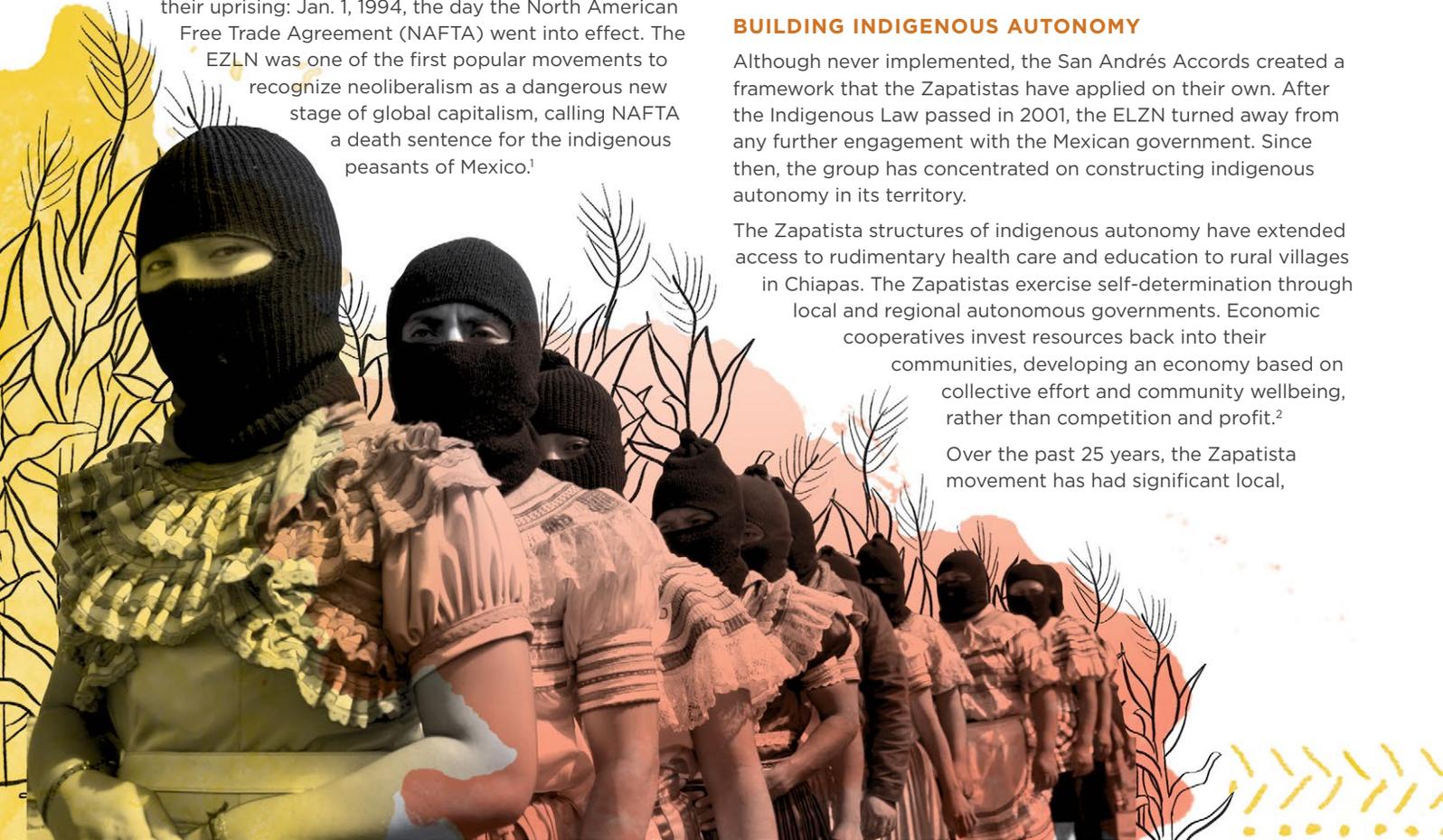
As dawn broke on New Year's Day, Zapatista troops occupied seven towns throughout eastern Chiapas, including San Cristóbal de las Casas, a quaint colonial city and major tourist destination nestled in the misty highlands. The uprising lasted less than two weeks, but transformed the EZLN into one of the most well-known social movements in the world. Soon after the 1994 uprising, the EZLN and the Mexican government began peace negotiations. Simultaneously, however, the Mexican government was waging low-intensity warfare against the EZLN's civilian support base. In 1996, the EZLN and the Mexican government signed the San Andrés Peace Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture. The Mexican government, however, never implemented the San Andrés Accords. In 2001, the Mexican Congress passed the Indigenous Law instead — a watered down version of the San Andrés Accords that the EZLN rejected out of hand. The center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) voted for the law, which the EZLN considered a deep betrayal. Current Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador was mayor of Mexico City at the time and a key leader of the PRD. The Zapatistas have been critical of López Obrador ever since, and this conflict could shape their relationship with Mexico's first left-leaning president in decades.

BUILDING INDIGENOUS AUTONOMY

Although never implemented, the San Andrés Accords created a framework that the Zapatistas have applied on their own. After the Indigenous Law passed in 2001, the EZLN turned away from any further engagement with the Mexican government. Since then, the group has concentrated on constructing indigenous autonomy in its territory.

The Zapatista structures of indigenous autonomy have extended access to rudimentary health care and education to rural villages in Chiapas. The Zapatistas exercise self-determination through local and regional autonomous governments. Economic cooperatives invest resources back into their communities, developing an economy based on collective effort and community wellbeing, rather than competition and profit.²

Over the past 25 years, the Zapatista movement has had significant local,



national, and international impacts. In Zapatista territory, in addition to its project of indigenous autonomy, the EZLN carried out a series of land takeovers, occupying large ranches and redistributing the land to peasants. This distribution of wealth continues to shape living conditions for Zapatista villages farming on reclaimed land today.

For many people throughout Mexico, the Zapatistas represented the voice of the voiceless. By empowering civil society and challenging the status quo, the EZLN arguably contributed to ending decades of one-party rule in Mexico when the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) lost the presidential elections in 2000.

Since 1994, the EZLN has also engaged in dialogue with international civil society, inspiring a generation of young activists to organize for social justice in their own contexts. The First Intercontinental Gathering for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism in 1996 and other international gatherings organized by the EZLN helped jumpstart a worldwide anti-globalization movement.

RADICALLY REDEFINING GENDER ROLES IN THE ZAPATISTA MOVEMENT

People around the world have been inspired by images of Zapatista women: Major Ana María wearing a black ski mask and brown uniform, leading indigenous troops during the uprising; Comandanta Ramona standing next to Subcomandante Marcos during peace negotiations with the Mexican government, the top of her head barely reaching his shoulder; and Comandanta Ester, draped in a white shawl with embroidered flowers, addressing the Mexican Congress to demand respect for indigenous rights and culture. The dignity with which these women carried themselves embodied what the Zapatista movement has come to represent: the resistance of the marginalized and forgotten against the powerful.

When the EZLN began organizing in rural Chiapas, women there were experiencing an extraordinary level of violence and discrimination. They were often married against their will, and commonly had a dozen or more children. Domestic violence was generally considered normal and acceptable, and a woman could not leave the house without her husband or father's permission. Women's confinement

to the private sphere translated into very limited participation in public life.

But gender roles were radically redefined in the context of the Zapatista movement, as women became guerrilla insurgents and political leaders, healers and educators, and members of economic cooperatives. A handful of Zapatista women in key leadership roles, combined with a broad push from women in the Zapatista base, succeeded in passing the Women's Revolutionary Law and achieving some remarkable transformations around women's rights. Women's organizing also led to the banning of alcohol in Zapatista territory, which women credit with a significant reduction in domestic violence.

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THE ZAPATISTA MOVEMENT INSPIRES A SHARED VISION FOR A JUST SOCIETY

Although the EZLN no longer occupies the place it once did in the popular imagination, the Zapatista movement continues to offer lessons for social justice advocates that are more relevant than ever. In 1994, the Zapatistas had the chutzpah to declare war on the Mexican government, and to take on global capitalism and patriarchy. But they also had the humility to know that none of us have all the answers — that we make the road by walking. The Zapatista movement also continues to offer a viable model for local alternatives to global capitalism, albeit on a small scale.

In this moment of heightened polarization in the United States and around the world, it is worth looking back on the Zapatistas' legacy to remind us of what we have in common. The Zapatistas were fighting for land reform and indigenous



autonomy in rural Mexico, but they succeeded in communicating a vision of a just society so universal that people all over the world felt included in their struggle. A quarter-century after their uprising, perhaps the most meaningful, lasting lesson from the Zapatista movement is a spark of hope and a sense of what is possible, even in dark and uncertain times.

Sources available at FairWorldProject.org.

PHOTO: Zapatista woman making candles. CREDIT: Mariana Mora.

