Mexico's Indigenous Governing Council: Actually Existing Anti-Capitalism for the 21st Century

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The Workshop's own Mara Kaufman describes the significance of the actually existing anti-capitalist movement in Mexico today, represented by the Indigenous Governing Council and its spokeswoman, Marichuy. [Originally published in English on Counterpunch and in Spanish at Rebelión]



In the midst of the multiple hurricanes battering North America and the Caribbean, the fires burning in the US west, two major earthquakes in September, and a flurry of neglect and opportunism around emergency disaster aid and rescue, a rather different storm gathers in Mexico. The anti-capitalist Indigenous Governing Council and its spokeswoman, María de Jesús Patricio Martínez (Marichuy), a Nahuatl woman who will run as an independent candidate in the 2018 Mexican presidential elections, have just begun a national tour of Mexico, starting in the southernmost state of Chiapas in what has become a bastion of self-government and an inspiration for the world—Zapatista territory.

The Indigenous Governing Council (CIG) is an initiative of the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) and the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN), created through a referendum approved by 523 communities in 25 different Mexican states and proposing to collectively govern the country according to the CNI/EZLN's seven principles of "Rule by Obeying."*

The CIG represents 42 indigenous peoples and 39 indigenous language groups—the majority of originary peoples in the country—and proposes to organize the (self)government, healthcare, education, and defense of indigenous and non-indigenous communities across Mexico. The CIG tour and its presidential campaign, as stated repeatedly by the CNI, does not aim to win votes but to harness the electoral limelight to denounce Mexico's entire political class and the capitalist system which it holds responsible for the devastating violence, crumbling institutions, environmental destruction, and thriving organized crime that now dominate Mexico. According to CNI delegate Mario Luna of the Yaqui Tribe of Sonora, this campaign intends to enter the realm of elections—what has otherwise become "an internal negotiation among political parties"—with the explicit aim of promoting the expansion of assembly-based community self-organization across the country. The choice the CNI wants to provide the Mexican people, then, is not among candidates, but among entirely different forms of government.

From October 14-19 of this year, a caravan of dozens of vehicles carrying Marichuy, 156 CIG council members, and several hundred more delegates of Mexico's originary peoples wove through the mountains of Chiapas where they were met by tens of thousands of Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas across all five zones of Zapatista territory. The historic significance of the first indigenous woman presidential candidate was matched only by the stunning series of speeches given by indigenous women at every level of Zapatista authority: women representatives of the Good Government Councils, women regional authorities of the Zapatista Army, and women members of the Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee which commands the army—to name just the most prominent—a broad and powerful base of women's leadership across both military and civilian entities in a place where just a few decades ago both indigenous women and men worked in slave-like conditions of permanent peonage for large landowners across the state.

An Electoral Turn?

The CNI, formed in 1996 as a result of the convergence of indigenous peoples all over the country around the demands of the 1994 Zapatista uprising, is the first nationally organized and representative indigenous body fully independent of state and party forces. The CNI's deep community roots and autonomous organizing process stand in stark contrast to the tokenism and clientelism that characterized the past century of indigenous subjugation to the Mexican state. The CNI's radical political independence make it an extremely inconvenient presence for the Mexican political class and thus a frequent object of total erasure and misrepresentation. This new initiative is no exception.

In fact when the Indigenous Governing Council has been mentioned, it has often been in the context of either condemnations or congratulations directed at the EZLN for having supposedly left behind a politics of autonomy and joined the electoral arena. Many within

the Mexican government have long pushed the account that the EZLN had either fallen apart due to faulty leadership (inevitably attributed to then Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, today SupGaleano) or faded into irrelevance due to isolation in their remote community strongholds. The CIG and the launch of its tour over the past weeks however has illuminated not a tired and outdated EZLN as some sources so desperately hoped for, but a wide range of flourishing community institutions and self-governing bodies that displayed, even at a glance, the breadth of Zapatista organization across multiple generations, multiple language groups, and multiple geographical contexts, articulated together as a large-scale, assembly-run, community-based social order with unparalleled organizational capacity.

More specifically, each stop in Zapatista territory revealed autonomous health clinics staffed with trained health promoters and medical equipment; autonomous school systems which had educated the young people now running their own media teams, governing bodies, and production cooperatives; tens of thousands of hectares of productive land worked collectively to provide sustenance for hundreds of thousands of people across Zapatista territory; independent transportation infrastructure; and thousands of Zapatista civilian army reserves that provided unarmed but formidably disciplined security rings around the CIG and its spokeswoman at every step. Noticeably, it was the Zapatista men who served visitors steaming plates of beef stew and homemade tortillas, organized lodging and distributed blankets, and washed dishes for the next busload of hungry travelers—this as Marichuy, the CIG councilwomen, and women authorities of the EZLN addressed the crowds from the stage.

Unsurprisingly, it seems that the political class doesn't actually believe its own lies about the EZLN. They instead seem to be panicked that this form of collective self-emancipation will gain influence across Mexico. As evidence of this panic, and while the CIG initiative has been met with noticeably scarce media coverage, those who did try to cover the CIG's tour of Chiapas ran up against the obstacle that as the caravan moved through the state, internet service, cellphone signals, and even landline service were cut across entire regions that would normally have robust communications, making timely media coverage nearly impossible. In addition to this communications blockade, the political class has done everything possible to inhibit the collection of the over 860,000 citizen signatures required by law for an independent candidate to appear on the ballot. The cellphone application made available by the National Electoral Institute (INE) for this purpose has proven not to function adequately except on high-end devices with new operating systems that cost well over the monthly earnings of the majority of the Mexican population. In a country lacking adequate internet service over large portions of the national territory, the application itself, as denounced by Marichuy on October 18, takes hours to download and once installed can take up to 16 hours to register a single signature (instead of the 4 minutes and 30 seconds claimed by the INE). There are many more examples, all of which point to an enormous amount of energy expended on subverting the reach of an organization and an anti-capitalist

form of governing which the political class insists doesn't exist.

Mexico's Decomposition and the Urgent Need for an Alternative

In May of this year, the International Institute for Strategic Studies named Mexico the second deadliest country in the world, surpassing the violence in war zones like Yemen and Afghanistan and following only Syria in its death toll. Much of the violence in Mexico is attributed to the drug war launched in 2006 by then-President Felipe Calderón, but the numbers of dead (well over 200,000) and disappeared (30,000 by official estimates) and the utter impunity (around 98%) for these crimes display a more profound problem and the state's complicity—when not direct involvement—in the violence. In addition, some 90% of productive land in Mexico has been ceded to foreign mining or logging companies and the paramilitary violence and state repression that tend to accompany such extractive industries to clear lands of resistant populations has resulted in millions more people subject to forced migration or internal displacement.

It is in this context that indigenous communities across the country have established autonomous self-governments and community self-defense units, expelling both drug cartels and political parties from their towns and cities, including (but not limited to) Cherán (Michoacán), Santa Maria Ostula (Michoacán), an extensive network of community police forces in the state of Guerrero, hundreds more CNI communities that are actively organizing to kick political parties out of their towns, and of course, as of almost a quarter century ago, the Zapatistas in Chiapas whose territory remains impenetrable to narco-control. In fact, practically the only places in the country not overrun by narco-related violence, trafficking, extortion, and joint rule by political party and cartel forces are these small sites of autonomous self-government where an intact or rebuilt social fabric and community self-defense mechanism has prevented such forces from taking hold. Such experiments in self-government constitute not an untouched outside to the otherwise grim reality of narco-state and capitalist mafia that stands in for government in Mexico, but an actual propositional alternative that relies on democratic processes and mass civil participation. It is in the context of a generalized social collapse that we can make sense of the CNI's insistence that the Indigenous Governing Council is for all of Mexico, not just indigenous people, and they have invited non-indigenous people to join this initiative. In the words of Marichuy:

"That's why we the indigenous peoples of the National Indigenous Congress and our brothers and sisters of the Zapatista Army for National Liberation have said that we won't allow this anymore, that we are going to struggle and fight for everyone, not just for the indigenous peoples […] It is time for us to walk this path together with our brothers and sisters from the countryside and the city."

Isn't There Already a Left Presidential Candidate in Mexico?

As is standard across electoralist perspectives where the "least worst" establishment candidate is marketed as the only viable option to stop the reactionary right, that title in this case belongs to MORENA party founder and presidential candidate, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO). As three-time presidential candidate for the PRD (defrauded of a presidential win in 2006 and possibly 2012), AMLO has consistently promised to maintain "macroeconomic stability" and protect the interests of private capital while giving lip service to poverty reduction, a standard recipe for applying neoliberal policy behind a leftist veneer. One might ask, if "the left" has been characterized by its critique of capitalism, how is it that we have come to a point where a project for the attempted stabilization of capitalism can still be touted as on the left? In any case, the EZLN/CNI understand that given the crisis dynamics of contemporary capitalism, accepting a "lesser evil" logic means accepting the continued disintegration of Mexico and the disappearance of their peoples, and they thus recognize that Mexican society and the world have little choice today but to directly confront capitalism and all of its devastating consequences.

An Indigenous Governing Council for the World

As the failures of "progressive" electoralist forces pile up across the world—Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, the PT in Brazil, renascent Peronism in Argentina, to name just a few—it becomes clear that we are not experiencing a battle between a reactionary right set on implementing xenophobic policies and protecting the class structure and a progressive left dedicated to inclusion and redistributive policies. Rather, where we are all going together is deeper into capitalist crisis and the disintegration of the system as a whole, with increasingly unstable global economic conditions, skyrocketing levels of inequality, scapegoating, and an alarming acceleration of environmental destruction. Under these conditions, the problem is not one of the political will of any individual politician or party; all kinds of cartels accompany systemic collapse and any political class under the imploding capitalist system merely becomes another. There are few places in the world where not only is the dissolution of the system clear, but an alternative already in formation with years (centuries!) of practice in collective decision-making and self-government. The insistence of the Indigenous Governing Council that the only alternative is not another political class but the elimination of the political class altogether is what makes this initiative not only the only viable organized possibility for the survival of indigenous communities in Mexico, but the path out of the disaster that is capitalism for all of us.

We must convince ourselves, as the CIG has, that no one will save us from the ruins but ourselves. As the EZLN's Comandanta Miriam explains:

"But let's not think, *compañeras*, that the Indigenous Governing Council or our

spokeswoman are going to save us. We, each of us, has to work to save all of us, because if we don’t do anything our spokeswoman will not be able to save us either. She’s not the one who rules: it is the people who have to give the strength to our spokeswoman; it is the people who rule and our spokeswoman and our Governing Council have to obey the people.”

*The Seven Principles of Rule by Obeying:

To obey, not command
To represent, not supplant
To serve others, not serve oneself
To convince, not defeat
To go below, not above
To propose, not impose
To construct, not destroy