

The Atenco, Oaxaca and Zapatista Rebels Unite in Public for the First Time

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At the Scene of the Atenco Massacre of May 3 - 4, the Mexican Left Shows its Willingness to Forge Alliances and Defy the State.

October 22, 2006 Only six short months ago, the town of Texcoco, in Mexico State, was made infamous throughout Mexico and the world as the place where one of the worst police massacres in recent Mexican history began. Today the town of Texcoco is making history yet again, but this time as the site of an historic encounter of representatives from three of the Mexican left's most significant political movements: The Other Campaign of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), the Peoples' Front in Defense of the Land (FPDT) from San Salvador Atenco, and the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO), comprised of teachers and social movements from Oaxaca. On Friday, the three organizations pledged mutual support to fight for the liberation of political prisoners and to create a united front against municipal, state and federal authorities.

With less than a month and a half to go before the controversial inauguration of rightwing President-Elect Felipe Calderon, today's encounter in Texcoco underscores the strength and willingness of the Mexican left to forge alliances and to defy the political establishment in the battle for Mexico's social and political destiny in years to come.

As has been reported extensively in these pages, on May 3, a holy day in Mexico, flower vendors selling their goods attempted to set up shop outside of Texcoco's municipal market. After police tried to prevent them from setting up shop, they were joined by the People's Front in Defense of the Land (FPDT) from nearby San Salvador Atenco. Farmers from Atenco gained international recognition in 2002 when they successfully stopped construction of an international airport that would have been built over more than half of the town's land. Since that time they have provided tactical and moral support to dozens of social movements throughout the country.

Local, state, and federal police were dispatched to arrest the flower vendors and their companeros from the FPDT. Not content with the arrest of the FPDT's leaders, the following day authorities sent thousands of police to the town of Atenco itself to systematically raid houses, beating and arresting hundreds of people as they went. By the end of May 4th, two young men were fatally shot by police, 209 people were arrested, and 47 women detainees were raped or sexually assaulted by their captors. The Atenco massacre has been widely seen by observers as an attempt by government forces to settle scores with the Atenco rebels, whose successful defiance of the airport project humiliated President Vicente Fox in the world arena. It is also likely that the Atenco attack was meant to discourage communities from supporting the EZLN's Other Campaign (the FPDT from Atenco are ardent supporters of the Other Campaign and served as Subcomandante Marcos' bodyguards during a May 1 march in Mexico City) and also to bolster the "fear vote" against center-left candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in favor of the rightwing Felipe Calderon. In September, Felipe Calderon was named victor of the July 2 Presidential Elections, despite widespread evidence of fraud and a refusal by electoral authorities to recount ballots.

But despite these developments, today's events in Texcoco clearly demonstrate that the Mexican left, far from defeated, is today better poised than ever to organize, collaborate, and forge effective alliances. At approximately 2 p.m. today at the entrance to the University of Chapingo, farmers from Atenco and other members of the FPDT greeted a contingent from the APPO's Mexico City encampment. After 145 days, the APPO continues its civil occupation of the city center of Oaxaca to demand the resignation of corrupt governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. The Ruiz administration has become notorious for widespread human rights abuses throughout the state. And in what appeared to many to be an attempt by Oaxacan authorities to replicate the Atenco attacks, Oaxacan state police attempted to dislodge the teachers' strike from the center of the state's capital city on June 14.

However, striking teachers repelled police and in the days following indigenous communities and social movements joined with the teachers to form the APPO. The APPO has taken control of the center of Oaxaca's capital city and is now maintaining a permanent encampment outside of the Senate building in Mexico City where 21 people are in the midst of a hunger strike. Like the FPDT, many members of the APPO remain imprisoned. At least nine APPO members have been murdered in recent months. Today in Texcoco, members of the two organizations appeared at a public demonstration for the first time.

Soon after the historic encounter, the two contingents along with nearly a thousand supporters began a march from the entrance of the University of Chapingo to the center of the town of Texcoco. Armed with their trademark machetes, the FPDT chanted slogans demanding not only the release of their own political prisoners, but also the release of the APPO's jailed companeros, and demanding that the disgraced Oaxaca Governor resign. Members of the APPO reciprocated, chanting "Atenco, amigo! Oaxaca estaÂi contigo!" (Atenco, friend! Oaxaca is with you!) The march came to a halt in front of the Texcoco town hall, where demonstrators blocked the street for 30 minutes and reminded Mayor Nazario Gutierrez Martinez that the fight for the release of Atenco's political prisoners is far from over.

Members of the APPO spray-painted "Oaxaca and Atenco: united against bad government" on the sidewalk in front of the mayor's office. Members from the APPO then addressed the crowd to deliver an official message to the people of Atenco and Texcoco:

"Today, the APPO declares its solidarity with our brothers from Atenco and together we denounce the criminal policies of Vicente Fox." said the official message. "The APPO will continue onward and here we want to tell all the murderers in the government that you will have to build thousands and thousands of jails to house all of the people of Oaxaca, because you aren't going to be able to shut us up. You are not going to be able to stop this movement because we are filled with new life thanks to the people of Atenco."

As the march prepared to continue towards Texcoco's town square, they were joined by indigenous EZLN comandantes Grabiela, Zebedeo, and Miriam. The three rebel commanders from Chiapas arrived in central Mexico earlier this month and have vowed to stay in Mexico City until all of the political prisoners from Atenco are released. Following in the footsteps of Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos - who is now known as Delegate Zero as he tours through Mexico to organize the Other Campaign - Grabiela, Zebedeo, and Miriam now go by the names Delegate One, Two and Three, respectively. They will soon be followed by other Zapatista comandantes-turned-delegates who will be dispatched throughout the nation.

Upon arrival in the Texcoco town square, the Zapatista delegates addressed their companeros from Atenco, the APPO and to the rest of the crowd.

Grabiela, Delegate One, began. "We are going to struggle together with you all. Together we will

support each other and exchange our ways of organizing and our direction, so that we can all struggle together here. The same things happened in our towns as with you. They arrested our companeros and mistreated them. But look, I am here with you and we are going to struggle together with you all.”

Miriam, the comandanta now known as Delegate Three, then made reference to Javier Cortes and Alexis Benhumea. Javier Cortes was shot on May 3 as police attempted to enter the town of Atenco. Although state officials initially claimed that he was killed by a firecracker shot by members of the FPDT, it was later proven that the bullet which pierced Javier’s body was consistent with the type of bullet used by police on the scene. Alexis Benhumea, an adherent to the Zapatista Other Campaign, was in Atenco on May 3 to show solidarity with the town of Atenco. He was mortally wounded when police shot him in the head with a tear gas canister. Had police allowed free entrance and exit to and from the town of Atenco on May 3 and 4, he would have been brought to a hospital where his life may have been saved. Instead he languished for hours in a house in Atenco until he was smuggled out to a hospital the next day. He died after spending nearly a month in a hospital bed.

“We ask for justice for our murdered companeros,” declared Delegate Three, “Alexis and Javier may be dead, but they aren’t dead to us because their blood will always remain a part of our history. We also demand the release of our companeros and companeras prisoners from San Salvador Atenco. And also the release of all the political prisoners in our country.”

Following the demonstration, members of the FPDT showed a video to the crowd - shot on May 2, one day before the Atenco massacre - of negotiations between the Texcoco flower vendors, farmers from Atenco, and Texcoco authorities. In the video, town government representatives clearly state that until a settlement is reached, police force will not be used to evict the flower vendors. According to FPDT members, the video helps prove that the May 3 eviction was part of a deliberate plot to provoke and ambush the FPDT and the town of Atenco.

Meanwhile, the APPO will hold an assembly in Oaxaca on Sunday to determine its next steps. Delegate Zero continues to organize the Other Campaign in Mexico’s border states as Delegates One, Two and Three remain in Mexico City. The FPDT is planning new actions for the following week which have yet to be revealed to the general public. Meanwhile, the transition team of President-Elect Felipe Calderon is pressuring the Fox administration to squash these social movements before Calderon takes office.

Nothing would indicate that there is any real or remote possibility of this happening. All signs indicate, in fact, that these movements are getting stronger and increasingly relying on mutual support and unified action.

P.S.

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