

# **International Zapatismo and the Fourth World War**

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## **Introduction**

Over the last few years movements and international networks across the world have been formed and have risen up to fight capitalism. In Europe and North America these movements and their international networks have shut down meetings of the WTO, IMF, World Bank. Across Latin America in recent years some these movements have become massive and have even overthrown a number of neo-liberal governments - from Peru in 2000; to Argentina in 2001; to Ecuador in 2000, 2003 and 2005; and to Bolivia in 2003 and 2005<sup>1</sup>. Some of the most influential of these networks and movements have been inspired by the Zapatistas of Mexico and have become part of international Zapatismo. In this article, I will be looking at the rise of international Zapatismo. Before doing so, it is important to first give some background information on the recent history of neo-liberalism. In the light of this history, the rise of international Zapatismo - and other initiatives - becomes even more remarkable.

## **The History of neo-liberalism**

Starting in 1973 in Chile, the US and European countries used their control over the IMF and World Bank to force countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia to adopt neo-liberal capitalism. This has seen countries across the world opening their economies to imports; allowing multinationals to move money in and out of their borders, selling off public assets to multinational companies; smashing worker's rights; and dismantling environmental laws<sup>2</sup>. Even in the heart of the imperial order, the US and European countries adopted neo-liberalism. The result has been that the world has been turned into a profit making haven for multinational companies. All of this translates into a world of growing inequality: a world where the richest 400 people now have more money than the poorest 3 billion people combined<sup>3</sup>.

It has, however, been the people of the world that have paid the price. Due to privatisation, billions of people have lost all access to social services, such as education, water, sanitation and healthcare. This is because in most countries, these services are now being sold by private companies as commodities: if you can't afford to pay for such services, you don't get them! The macabre result: over 1 billion people have lost access to clean drinking water; 2.6 billion people lack basic sanitation; over 1 billion people are illiterate; 820 million people suffer from malnutrition; over 1 billion people lack access to any form of healthcare<sup>4</sup>; and 30 000 children die every day from poverty<sup>5</sup>. This takes place in a world where the amount of money spent by American and European companies on entertainment each year could give every person in the world access to enough food, proper healthcare, basic education and clean water<sup>6</sup>.

## **The peoples begin to fight neo-liberalism**

Initially the response to the impact of neo-liberalism around the world and even in Latin America was limited. By the late 1980s the Soviet Union was beginning to collapse and many of the traditional authoritarian left parties and nationalist parties across the world were thrown into complete disarray. The Soviet model in Russia had been completely discredited. As a result, many of the older authoritarian left and nationalist parties -

especially in Western Europe, Africa and Eastern Europe - re-invented themselves as supporters of neo-liberalism. This even affected South Africa where the ANC dumped its nationalist clothing to become a neo-liberal party. Many of the trade unions, in countries such as Mexico, Venezuela, and the US had also become bureaucratized and conservative. In essence, such unions became partners in enforcing neo-liberalism on workers. People, therefore, began to look for new ways of organising and mobilising outside of the traditional left parties and conservative trade unions. Slowly, people mostly in Latin America and some parts Europe started to form their own organisations in the 1980s. Most of these organisations were anti-capitalist, but also rejected the type of system that existed in the Soviet Union. Some of the movements that formed during this period included the MST in Brazil and the Zapatistas in Mexico. However, these organisations often differed in the way that they were structured – some like the MST were organised in a more traditional manner; others such as the Zapatistas were non-hierarchical.

Besides these organisations many people spontaneously started fighting neo-liberal capitalism across the world, especially in Latin America, by the late 1980s. In late 1989 parts of Latin America erupted in open revolt. In February that year riots broke out in Caracas, Venezuela. The reason for the riots was that the then Venezuelan government and the IMF had imposed neo-liberal economic policies on the country. These policies led to the price of petrol rising by over 100% overnight. In reaction, hundreds of thousands of people spontaneously came out in protest – without leaders and without any direction from any political party, trade union or NGO. For five days people took over Caracas and other cities in Venezuela. Eventually, the state through violent repression regained control over these cities. In the process as many as 3 000 people were murdered by the military<sup>7</sup>. By the end of the year, however, riots against the IMF and repressive governments had also occurred in Colombia and Argentina. In Argentina, thousands of people blockaded roads and attacked corporations in protest against the IMF and sky rocketing food prices. As in Venezuela, the Argentinean state violently repressed the revolt. The lack of international support and the isolation of these struggles made it relatively easy for the state to repress them. Nonetheless, these revolts were a very clear sign that millions of people across the continent had started to resist neo-liberalism on a massive scale, and that the IMF and the US would no longer be able to force neo-liberal economic policies onto such countries unchallenged.

The 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1994 marked a watershed in the global fight against neo-liberalism. On that day, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect in the US, Canada and Mexico. In reaction, on the very same day, the Zapatistas declared war on the Mexican government. With this, the seeds of international Zapatismo were sown. The Zapatistas had declared war on the Mexican state in order to fight against the neo-liberal economic policies that had been imposed on the people by the Mexican government, the US, the IMF and World Bank. The Zapatistas were hoping that their actions would spark a revolution throughout Mexico. The aim of the revolution, however, was not to take state power, but rather create liberated zones where people could exercise their own power by creating democratic structures and reformulating their economy democratically<sup>8</sup>. In order to do this the Zapatistas' civil arm had organised as a horizontal structure, with direct democracy, and no permanent leaders<sup>9</sup>.

As part of their uprising, the Zapatistas took over large areas of Chiapas province. Zapatista supporters invaded the land of the local elite and multinational companies in the Chiapas and began farming it communally on a democratic basis to meet the needs of the communities involved. To do this, families on these farms organised themselves into

collectives and co-operatives. Excess produce produced by Zapatistas communities has been sold through these co-operatives, via the international support network, in other countries. The income derived from this has then used by the Zapatistas to provide healthcare, housing and education to the people. In this manner, the Zapatistas have attempted to create an economic model based on solidarity<sup>10</sup>.

When the Zapatistas' uprising initially began, the Mexican government sent 70 000 troops into the Chiapas to destroy them. This angered hundreds of thousands of progressive students, workers and activists across the world. In Mexico activists staged a massive demonstration against the state's attempt to smash the Zapatistas. Within a few days, demonstrations against the Mexican government's counter-attack occurred internationally. In New York activists staged hunger strikes in front of the Mexican Consulate and thousands of Italian workers took to the streets of Rome in support of the Zapatistas<sup>11</sup>. This international support played a key role in halting the Mexican state's counter-attack on the Zapatistas. It also helped the Zapatistas to remain in control over large parts of the Chiapas province.

Part of the reason why the Zapatistas have received massive support is that they self consciously attempted to make their struggle inclusive. In doing so, they encouraged diverse range of people to identify with it. A statement in 1994 from Zapatistas declared that a Zapatista is:

“a gay in San Francisco, a black in South Africa, an Asian in Europe, a Chicano in San Isidro, an anarchist in Spain, a Palestinian in Israel, an indigenous person in the streets of San Cristóbal, a gang member in Neza, a rocker on campus, a Jew in Germany, an ombudsman in the Department of Defense, a feminist in a political party, a communist in the post-Cold War period, a prisoner in Cintalapa, a pacifist in Bosnia, a Mapuche in the Andes, a teacher in the National Confederation of Education Workers, an artist without a gallery or a portfolio, a housewife in any neighborhood in any city in any part of Mexico of a Saturday night, a guerrilla in Mexico at the end of the twentieth century, a striker at the CTM, .... an unemployed worker, a doctor with no office, a non-conformist student, a dissident against neoliberalism, a writer without books or readers and a Zapatista in the Mexican southeast.”<sup>12</sup>

In other words, a Zapatista is any human being that is marginalised, oppressed, or exploited. With this statement the Zapatistas were also saying that their struggle was one amongst many, all of which were in one way or another fighting against injustice and neo-liberal capitalism.

One of the most important aspects of the Zapatistas struggle has been their attempt to foster linkages with other struggles in Mexico, Latin America and across the world. Prior to the 1990s, struggles against the impact of neo-liberalism had been relatively isolated from one another. People were fighting neo-liberalism through an array of movements, such as indigenous movements, women's movements, youth movements, workers' movements, and peasant movements. The problem was not that there was an array of movements, but that there was no communication between these different movements. Each one was fighting their struggle in isolation, which made it easy for the state to repress each movement. Linked to this, struggles in different countries had little contact with one another. In response to this, Zapatistas stated at the outset of their struggle that although all of these movements had differences - which should be respected, promoted and cherished - they all faced a common enemy, in the form of neo-liberal capitalism. Thus, the

Zapatistas explicitly promoted the idea that the barriers that existed between different struggles against neo-liberalism should be breached<sup>13</sup>. In a bid to do this, the Zapatistas invited activists from all over the world to a meeting in 1996, which became known as the *First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity Against Neoliberalism*. As many as 5 000 activists from over 50 countries (including some people from Johannesburg) – with various political affiliations including liberation theology, anarchism, strands of progressive Marxism, and progressive forms of nationalism - attended the meeting<sup>14</sup>.

The *First Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity Against Neoliberalism* lasted for just over a week. During the meeting people shared information about their struggles, how they had organised and what their understandings of neo-liberalism globalisation were. Many of the participants felt that neo-liberal globalisation represented a total war, which was being perpetrated by the elite against humanity. The aim of this war was to use economic measures and even the military to spread capitalism into every aspect of people's lives. Everything, including culture, social relations, the environment, water and even air, was being turned into a commodity to be bought and sold. As such, many participants felt that neo-liberal globalisation should be considered a Fourth World War (the Third World War being the Cold War)<sup>15</sup>.

To fight against this onslaught, many of the participants in the *First Encounter* felt that international networks that linked various struggles to one another - without imposing an authoritarian conformity or undermining the independence of the movements involved - should be established. Out of the meeting an Intercontinental Network was formed to act as a medium through which each of the movements could support one another. The network, however, was conceived of as a flat structure, without leaders, without hierarchies, and without central decision makers. The network participants also shunned the idea of vanguards and seizing state power on behalf of people. Rather the idea of the network was to allow for the maximum amount of people to participate fully in the struggle, and to create autonomous zones outside of capitalism where people could define and develop their own power democratically. Indeed, the process around setting up the Network was viewed as being more important than any envisioned outcome.

Part of the Network's philosophy was that the struggle against neo-liberalism does not merely take place on an international level, but locally. Thus, many people in the Network committed themselves to organise locally, on a radical democratic basis, and take the fight to neo-liberal capitalism where they lived<sup>16</sup>. As a result, when the participants returned from the meeting they began organising in their own countries. Many of the North American and European activists that were involved in the meeting went on to help organise the massive protests that have taken place against the WTO, IMF and World Bank in North America and Europe. Indeed, the first massive demonstration was organised in a similar way to how the Network was organised. It was non-hierarchical and without a leadership. This made it exceptionally hard for the police to combat – there simply were no leaders to arrest and the police could not predict what would happen next.

International Encounters have continued to take place in the territory that was and is controlled by the Zapatistas. However, other Intercontinental Encounters for Humanity Against Neo-liberalism have also taken place in Spain and Brazil. Through these meetings, other networks have been formed. One of these networks involved movements and activists from the Zapatistas, KRRS, Canadian postal workers, the Ogoni struggle; Korean trade unions and radical environmentalists, which became known as the People's Global Action (PGA). The PGA is a network of movements that share similar principles

and ideas. These include a rejection of capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, racism, and religious fundamentalism. The movements and activists linked to the PGA also all share a belief that direct action is an important weapon of political struggle; that direct democracy should form the basis on which movements organise; that autonomous economic spaces outside of capitalism should be created; and that movements and networks should be decentralised<sup>17</sup>. The movements involved in the PGA have played big role in the protests against the WTO, IMF, World Bank and G8.

Another movement that arose out of international Zapatismo was the Ya Basta in Spain and Italy. This movement was established in solidarity with the Zapatistas and to also fight neo-liberalism in Europe. Ya Basta itself has created a network, the white overalls, that operated as a bloc at various demonstrations against the G8, IMF and World Bank. At one G8 demonstration in 2001 the white overalls formed a bloc 20 000 people strong. They used products such as foam, plastic water bottles and tire tubes as body armour. At the demonstration they attempted to move through the police towards the conferences centre. The result caused mayhem amongst the police<sup>18</sup>.

### **Other movements and other networks**

A number of movements that are organised in a more traditional manner and that do not necessarily directly identify with International Zapatismo, such as the MST, have also formed international organisations since the late 1990s. The MST, which originated in Brazil, has over 1.5 million members. It has co-ordinated land invasions across Brazil and through this it has settled 350 000 families on land. The MST is involved in an umbrella organisation of rural movements in Latin America called the Latin American Congress of Rural Organisations (CLOC). Through CLOC the movements involved co-ordinate their resistance to free trade at a continental level<sup>19</sup>. All of the movements affiliated to CLOC are also members of La Via Campesina<sup>20</sup>. Over 140 landless and rural movements from the Americas, Asia, Africa and Europe belong to La Via Campesina. This makes La Via Campesina the biggest movement opposed to neo-liberalism in existence.

All indigenous peoples across Latin America have also found their entire way of life and communal values under attack from the individualistic ideology that is part and parcel of neo-liberalism. In fact, indigenous people in Latin America have traditionally been the most marginalised section of the population. In response, hundreds of indigenous organisations have been formed across the region to fight capitalism. These have included CONAIE from Ecuador, the Cocaleros from Bolivia, and ANIP from Mexico. The majority of these movements came together and formed the Continental Commission of Indigenous Nations and Organisations (CONIC). Through CONIC indigenous peoples have been at the forefront of the struggles against neo-liberalism across Latin America<sup>21</sup>. For example, in 1999, when an economic crisis erupted in Ecuador, it was a CONIC member in the form of CONAIE that ousted the corrupt neo-liberal government. As part of this, thousands of CONAIE supporters invaded Ecuador's National Congress and established a new government. The government only lasted for three days before it was defeated<sup>22</sup>. Nonetheless, CONAIE's actions demonstrated to other activists throughout Latin America that it was not impossible for the people to remove neo-liberal regimes from power. The result was that in the years that followed indigenous movements, such as the Cocaleros, have played pivotal roles in overthrowing neo-liberal regimes in countries such as Bolivia.

As a result of the economic crises that have erupted in various Latin American countries over the last two decades, hundreds of factories have been occupied and recovered by

workers in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Venezuela. In these factories, workers have taken direct control over production and have begun to operate them along democratic lines without bosses. In some cases, the workers in these factories have created strong links with the surrounding communities and have used the money that they have generated to build community centres and clinics for the people<sup>23</sup>. In Argentina, recovered factories have even linked up with the unemployed movements, or Piqueteros. Many of the Piqueteros in Argentina have organised themselves in a non-hierarchical manner and have created autonomous economic zones in a number of neighbourhoods, through starting their own urban farming projects, bakeries and community kitchens. These initiatives have often received support from workers from recovered factories.

In 2005, 235 worker controlled factories from Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Venezuela met in Caracas for the *Gathering of Worker-Recovered Factories*. During the meeting the workers from these factories put plans into place to increase trade between one another. They also signed agreements of mutual co-operation including the transfer of technology. At the meeting, the Venezuelan government also committed itself to supporting these factories. For example, ever since the meeting the Venezuelan government has been purchasing the pipes it needs for its oil industry from the Brazilian worker run factory, Cipla<sup>24</sup>.

Another initiative that has emerged has been the World Social Forum. Movements such as the MST and La Via Campesina participate in the World Social Forum (WSF). The WSF was established in 2001 and was meant to be a counter to the World Economic Forum. It was meant to be a space where movements and progressive NGOs could share experiences, discuss issues around globalisation, and share methods of resistance. It was initially created by ATTAC from Europe and the Workers' Party from Brazil. An International Council was formed to co-ordinate future meetings. Any movement, trade union or NGO that wished to join the International Council could.

From the beginning, however, the WSF was associated with controversy. A decision was taken that armed groups, which included the Zapatistas, would be excluded from the WSF. This caused a lot of anger amongst activists that were part of the International Zapatismo networks. Added to this, over the years a problem has arisen in that the International Council functions in a manner that is not answerable to the activists that use the WSF as a platform – which undermines the WSF's claim to democracy. In 2007 a decision was taken somewhere either in the International Council or local organising committee to allow corporate sponsorship of the WSF events. The result was that in 2007 Petrobras had a stand at the event and Cell C was a sponsor. Having corporate sponsors for an event that was meant to counter the World Economic Forum is ludicrous, especially in the light of the fact that both the CEOs of Cell C and Petrobras attend the World Economic Forum.

Without a form of direct accountable democracy, the space that the WSF offers loses any semblance of radicalism. If the WSF is to survive it needs to become movement driven. Even then, there would have to be a form of direct democracy and accountability to activists that use the WSF as a network and forum for their struggles. If not, the WSF will whither away.

### **A network of networks attack neo-liberalism**

Despite the differences that do exist between movements, such as International Zapatismo, the MST, CLOC, La Via Campesina, and CONAIE, these movements still co-

operate with one another. For example, La Via Campesina, the MST and the Zapatistas have come together through Encounters with one another to share ideas around their struggles, autonomous education and autonomous healthcare.

The PGA, the MST, the Zapatistas, CONAIE and La Via Campesina have also regularly come together to collectively resist neo-liberalism. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2002, various movements and networks such as CLOC, the PGA, the MST, and the Zapatistas took collective action to fight the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). On the 12<sup>th</sup> of October 2002 protests and blockades were staged from Canada all the way to Argentina against the FTAA. The result was that commerce across the whole of Latin America ground to a halt on the day as the transportation of goods became impossible<sup>25</sup>. Indeed, the people had sent a clear message that they did not want free trade.

In 2005, the Bush administration was once again attempting to impose the FTAA on Central and South American governments at the Summit of the Americas meeting in Mar del Plata in Argentina. The Summit was attended by the presidents of 34 states. Activists from various movements, including the Piqueteros, MST, and La Via Campesina once again came together to fight the FTAA. Over 50 000 protesters held rallies and marches outside of the Summit meeting. Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales also joined the protesters. With the pressure from the protesters, the talks at the Summit collapsed and Bush's dream of a free trade area stretching from Canada to Argentina was smashed. Indeed, Mar del Plata was the grave of the FTAA<sup>26</sup>.

## Conclusions

The victories that have been scored in Latin America, such as the defeat of the FTAA, have been achieved because the people themselves realised that they could change the world. In many cases, the people involved also realised that they did not need leaders to do so, they individually and collectively have the power to do so themselves. Indeed, the protests against the FTAA, the WTO and G8 have been so massive because people were direct actors in them. I would argue that International Zapatismo with its direct democracy, its non hierarchal nature, and its drive to create anti-capitalist economies based on solidarity, offers real promise for changing the world. It has proved impossible to use the same structures that underpin capitalism, namely organisations based on hierarchies, to defeat capitalism. The end result in the Soviet Union and China proved this. Indeed, there can be no socialism without true democracy. If we are going to change the world, radical democracy needs to be extended so that people themselves can become active participants in changing their lives; rather than passive foot soldiers following orders. Of course, my argument is one amongst many; some people will strongly disagree with it. Far from being unhealthy, these differences of opinion are part of radical democracy, and allowing for different views is what has made International Zapatismo so successful. We should never return to the days when the authoritarian left was dominant, and when people that did not adhere to the line were marginalised, or sent to gulags or massacred.

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<sup>2</sup> Bellamy Foster, J. The Latin American revolt: an introduction. *Monthly Review*. Volume 59 Number 3.

<sup>3</sup> [www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp](http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp)

<sup>4</sup> [www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp](http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts.asp)

<sup>5</sup> [www.unicef.org/pon00/immu1.htm](http://www.unicef.org/pon00/immu1.htm)

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- <sup>6</sup> [www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts](http://www.globalissues.org/TradeRelated/Facts).
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