Hijos de Campesinos:
Teachers' Struggles in Chiapas

Monty Neill and Peter Linebaugh of Midnight Notes interviewed Susan Street about the struggles of teachers, campesinos, ejidatarios and urban dwellers (colonos) in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Susan, who has been living in Mexico since 1977, has become active in supporting these struggles. Guillermo Orozco, a Mexican national and resident of Mexico City, but not active in Chiapas, also participated. The first interview took place in Boston on October 27, 1986. A second interview, also in Boston, was done exactly one year later, October 27, 1987, and further discussions occurred in ensuing months. "Hijos de Campesinos" means "children of the campesinos."

Susan (S): Chiapas is located in southern Mexico. It borders the Pacific and shares borders with Guatemala and other Mexican states. The capital is Tuxtla Gutierrez.

Chiapas is a beautiful, tropical state. It has petroleum, coffee, cattle, they are all exported out of the state, stolen. The oil is refined in the north. The state of Tabasco also has petroleum, so the oil center is inland, along the border of Chiapas and Tabasco. Chiapas produces the most coffee in Mexico, but I can't get a decent cup of coffee when I am there.

The teacher's movement started in northern Chiapas in response to inflation based on the influx of oil money, which hit with the world-wide inflation of the mid-'70s. Prices went up tremendously. Teachers' salaries did not go up, while other people's did, like the engineers.

There were also a lot of ecological disasters. Land was both expropriated and destroyed by petroleum industry. There were campesino movements in Tabasco organizing to get repaid for the damage done to their land. These movements also started in the '70s.

Midnight Notes (M): Who are the teachers?

S: It would be fair to say a lot of the teachers in Chiapas are sons and daughters of *campesinos*. In the rural sectors, men teach. In the urban areas, most of the teachers are women. This is true in most of the southern states in Mexico, the campesino states. Chiapas is probably the most "backward" of all, in terms of living conditions, the most "underdeveloped." It has a very high indigenous population and there is a large indigenous section of the teachers. It is the indigenous, bilingual teachers who are the most radical, well organized and active, and these really are the children of the *ejidatarios* and campesinos.

In Chiapas there is a small state school system and a federal system. When the movement began there were almost 15,000 Federal teachers, primary and secondary, and maybe 2,000 state teachers.

In 1979 the teachers organized and united all of them to overthrow their old union leaders. It began when a small group of teachers got together and said: "We can't take this inflation any more. We've got to do something." They spread the word to different school districts in the area and it caught on. They started organizing to demand a salary increase. The special demand of the area was to increase the cost-of-living indices. For years all the regions of Mexico have had extra pay based on the standard of living. In Chiapas the extra pay hadn't changed for something like 50 years.

In six months, they pretty much had an organization and a movement behind this demand. They took it to the state union leaders because the teachers union is a centralized national union and they had to get their union leaders to take it to the national level. The union leaders ignored it. That's when they started the political-type issue. It took off from there. They organized about 100% of the teachers in about a year. In May 1980, once they had everybody behind them, they physically seized the union, going in and kicking out the old leaders. Then they redesigned the whole system. However, they did not then change the curriculum or the pedagogy.

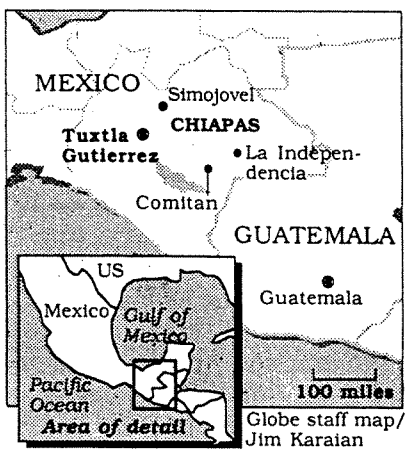
Teachers talk about the movement in economic terms and political terms. By economic they mean salary, by political they mean the union. Over time, the demand has become to democratize the union, throw out all the union leaders who haven't done anything for them and are blocking the demands. It also means throwing out the supervisors and school directors and anybody who gets in the way of the movement.

The movement led teachers to organize to take over the schools and school districts. They demanded that the supervisors listen to and respect the teachers. There's a whole story on what the supervisors had done to teachers' work conditions and professional mobility.

In 2-3 years of struggle, they gained hardly any economic benefits. But they did get control of the union in Chiapas. They designed an entirely new, democratic union. Teachers now make the decisions about who goes to what school or zone, and all administrative and union decisions related to personnel are in their hands. To the teachers, democratization means taking control of the workplace and work-life. The movement became an organization that started to threaten the state.

M: This is after the Sandinista victory. You mention also the new refugees coming from the South. Had the movement in Guatemala or Nicaragua affected the teachers in Chiapas?

S: I don't know. The most direct effect was that about 20,000 Guatemalans crossed the border to live in Chiapas. That's a large number. It affected the entire social structure, especially the communities along the border. The Guatemalans usually settled by the



Globe staff map/ Jim Karaian

southern border, while early on most of the teacher's struggles were in the north in the petroleum area. It would have had a more direct effect on the campesinos' *luchas* (struggles) which were happening at the same time as the teachers' struggles.

Chiapas has a long history of campesino struggles. The struggles for land intensified in the 70s, as did demands against the imposition of government officials. A lot of the indigenous communities oppose the *ladinos* and the government naming officials who go against their people. Ladinos are Spanish-types, white, not indigenous.

M: So in Chiapas this class hierarchy corresponds to the ethnic divisions. Have the refugees from Guatemala been thrown out, heavily repressed? The European parliament voted to condemn the Mexican government for this.

Guillermo (G): There has been some struggle there. The Mexican army is there to stop Guatemalans from coming in, to visit or live. Conditions are better for them in Mexico. Since Mexicans are getting into the US, so Guatemalans should be able to get into Mexico.

There are some specific concentrations of people from Central America living right on the border, on the Mexican side. They are living in the worst conditions you can imagine. They are being exploited by the landowners even more than Mexicans are, so they have been used to displace Mexican workers, who would get higher pay.

M: Has this caused hostility between Mexicans and Guatemalans?

G: I suppose there is some, but there is no general feeling against Central Americans, not from the Mexican people. The Mexicans help hide them and share what they have.

M: What is the land and work structure in Chiapas?

S: There are ejidatarios who work on *ejidos*. An ejido is a piece of government land owned by the nation but worked by farmers in a collective way. There are private landholders, including a large group of rancheros who are the dominant group in terms of power, big farmers, but mostly not mechanized, who have held power since before the revolution. They hire people, but in some places you find peons, people who are not freed workers, who are tied to the land. It is a total mixture of different kinds of production.

Corn is the staple grain, and the corn issue is very important. In January 1986, ejidatarios had been demanding an increase in the price the government pays to buy their corn. They didn't get it and they didn't get it, so they took over the storehouses, and carried out other actions. They took over the highway and federal troops came in and violently apprehended 29 campesinos and teachers, seven of whom are still in jail today. Those are the corn people, and they are ejidatarios.

The corn people are organized only in one area toward central-southern Chiapas. The teachers helped organize this one struggle and are permanently involved in other struggles in Chiapas.

I was at one of the campesinos' congresses about corn. There were about 1000 corn farmers present, representing all the others. The Congress was in part an effort to get the seven leaders out of jail. Teachers are among those jailed leaders. They were talking about how the teachers helped organize in the communities, about how the teachers are always involved in the struggles as organizers, as promoters, communicators, negotiators. In fact, teachers directed this congress. When they were talking about the teachers, they would say the teachers, hijos de campesinos, the sons of the campesinos. That was all that counted.

The leaders of this teachers' movement have had experience in campesino movements. They really are hijos of the campesinos. Manuel Hernandez, who is now in jail along with two other teachers, Jesus Lopez Constantino and Jacobo Nazar, organized campesinos before he did teachers. Someone was going down a list of the teacher leaders and telling about how they were all involved in such and such a struggle at such time and such a place. That was an interview I did. While the teachers' movement was new to the teachers, the struggle itself was not new.

There is also another factor about Chiapas' history. It has traditionally been a very autonomous state. There is a tendency for Chiapas people to be Chiapas people first and then Mexican. It is very strong, you can feel it. There is a resistance to anything outside, especially the central government. They have appropriated their own history as Chiapas. This is general, not only among ejidatarios.

M: Is this an important element in what happened to the teachers?

S: It is in the sense that in different moments, as when it came time to unite with the teachers' national movement, the regional dynamic predominated. Solidarity with national groups was not always forthcoming in the precise moments it was needed most.

M: Does the fact that the teachers have a higher level of education than the rest of the people make a difference to the struggle?

S: It doesn't seem an issue. The educational level of the teachers is very low by US standards. They have to go through *normalista* school (normal school, teacher-training school). Nationally, the rules are after secondary you go to 4 years of normalista, though this has recently been hiked to 7 years.

G: In Mexico, primary school goes to about age 13, then secondary to age 16. Someone who is going to university has to go for three years of *preparatoria* before university. Secondary and preparatoria together would be high school here, maybe one year more. For a teacher, what was necessary was just the first part, secondary school, and then normal school. It is less than junior college in the U.S.

S: The *normalista* system, especially in the southern states, is not known for quality. A few rural normal schools are well known, particularly Mactumatza' in Chiapas, which has a long tradition of producing Marxist leaders. It was supported by two guerrillas from Guerrero state, Lucio Cabañas and Genaro Vazquez.

M: The distinction between the economic and the political that the union makes is a classical left distinction of course. It indicates a certain formal leftism.

S: There is a certain amount of this coming out of some of the normales. But the rural normal schools tend to have, themselves, a whole history of struggle to survive as schools. The government wants to stamp out these rural schools because they have produced troublemakers.

G: In Mexico the national average is 3-5 years of schooling. It is less in Chiapas and with indigenous people.

M: In a sense, someone who has 12 years of schooling and can write is an "intellectual," compared to those who cannot read, in the sense of book and intellect. Someone who has gone to normal school has had enormously more schooling than the average campesino. They certainly have more than their parents and many of their contemporaries. Perhaps we could use a Gramscian label for these teachers and term them "organic intellectuals?"

S: I think so. As far as in the community, most definitely. The teacher automatically, by definition, is a leader. He

or she may be the only one who can read or write. And he or she has links with the center [the central government through the national school system and the national teachers union].

M: Let me take you to Nigeria for a moment in a little piece a *Midnight Notes* contributor sent. She talks about on the coast, in the oil area, you can walk on the beach, and you have the villages and you have the oil refineries, and they are next to each other. In this case they expropriate the best land because that is where the oil is. In the village, there is no electricity, no running water, no use of petroleum products, very little education or medical care. The oil refineries are populated not by Nigerians but Europeans and North Americans, whose food is flown in from Europe, whose only excursions to the local area are to drink some beer and buy some sex. It is a relationship between high-tech capital and not only undeveloped but under-developed regions, precisely that squashing down by ripping off that Walter Rodney discussed. Can you see that same thing in Chiapas?

S: That's pretty extreme, but it is definitely there. Those are the extremes. You see those contrasts all over. You see the large farms, large landowners. The beef is exported. In Chiapas, they brought in the cattle and destroyed a lot of forest. Chiapas is the state with the highest malnutrition in Mexico. Yet it is where the petroleum is.

G: The only Mexican jungle is in Chiapas and it is getting destroyed by pollution, cattle, agriculture.

M: In Nigeria, many women have to scrounge wood for cooking and the oil companies just fire off the natural gas, they don't cap it and use it.

S: That's right. Same thing. There's probably a thousand examples of that.

M: Is there much electrification? And what about running water?

S: Most of Mexico has electricity. Electricity from water is one of the major products in Chiapas. Yet again, Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital city, suffers from periodic water shortages.[1]

M: It seems that though "underdevelopment" in Chiapas is among the most extreme in Mexico, still, compared to Nigeria, it is "ahead." But tell us about the urban dwellers?

S: Many are people who have come in from the rural areas and have taken over land on the outskirts of the city. Over the years they have constructed their own housing. These are the traditional *paracaidistas* (in English, literally, parachutists).

Taking land in the city has become a very politicized issue. Paracaidistas or *colonos* are trying to get the tenancy to live there. For example, Colonia las Granjas in Tuxtla Gutierrez is a settlement that has refused to go through the PRI structures to get tenancy. These people have also been thrown in jail and several members have been killed and the community's base organization destroyed.

When Las Granjas was doing direct action, they were not linked into the PRI or with groups from political parties who have shown up when they organized themselves. It is the same thing with the teachers movement. Left parties tried to get in and were kicked out. Literally thrown out. The communists, I mean the socialists as they now call themselves, tried to get in. The Trotskyists have a base in part of the state and in one level, technical secondary schools, where they have been working. The parties tend to impose the national platform on to the movement.

M: Are the urban dwellers also connected to the teachers?

S: They coordinate actions. The paracaidistas, the teachers, the corn people. Tuxtla is far inland and far from the corn area. But when you do anything, you go to the capital.

Over the issue of the people in jail, they have mobilized in a coordinated way. Every group has somebody in jail or somebody who was killed recently. The urban dwellers, the corn people, other campesino groups, a transport group, the teachers, are all involved in the struggle to free political prisoners. The teachers are asked by all these other groups to accompany them whenever they have to go somewhere, to negotiate or whatever.

M: That's the writing and reading piece, too, perhaps.

S: Yes, and politically the governor will not repress the teachers directly because of their strength.

M: But how do they relate to the national union now?

S: That's a fight that's going on daily. The national union is supposed to send them their budget. Well, the national is still not democratized.

M: Is this struggle around the teachers union national?

S: It was. It's now in the reflujo, it is going slow. More is happening in the southern states. Only in Chiapas and Oaxaca are there legalized state-level organizations. Some union delegations in Mexico City are democratized.

Second Interview:

S: After 1983, in Chiapas the state began to try to drive teachers out of their democratic positions. More recently, the state refuses to even deal with the "dissidents." This has had many important effects.

The teachers started a long strike on February 19, 1987, closing down 90% of the schools. The federal and state

Photo by Sharon Haggins Dunn

governments, including the national union, the education ministry (SEP) and the PRI, have tried to break the Chiapaneco teachers. The old bureaucrats, the "*vanguardistas,*" tried to regain control over the Chiapas teacher union, but they failed. When they could not smash the dissidents from below, they tried it from above. The state recognized a union organization of the old bureaucrats and no longer recognizes the democrats. Some of the dissident teachers have not been paid and are not being paid, and they are not recognized as teachers by the state. But they continue to teach anyway, and they are still united and fighting. Let me quote one of their spokesmen:

"It is not true, as is being said, that this movement is 'finished.' Democracy sustains it and any group cannot just walk in and take over the base. The teachers discuss each point to its roots, at times for hours. This impedes the "vanguardistas" from taking over, even though old supervisors keep trying to return to old times when corruption ruled, when teachers had to serve them at night or when they used to have to pay bribes and sign papers to get paid, and so on."

Earlier in the struggle, a major debate in the union was between concentrating on uniting with the parents and the community or negotiating a deal with the state for representation and reforms. After the repression began, the teachers developed stronger ties within the class. Supportive parents have provided the autonomous teachers with food and also with protection from attacks, as well as support at rallies and so on.

Education itself has become increasingly democratized. Parents and teachers have taken over some schools and partially taken over others, and made the schools part of their autonomous social space. For example, at three technical secondary schools in Tuxtla they won't allow the vanguardistas in. So the state has opened new schools staffed with its paid teachers. Now the state is threatening not to recognize the primary school certificates earned by students in the autonomous schools. The whole situation is incredibly polarized.

The students also have used the struggles for their own demands. When there are two schools, teachers have to compete for students, which has increased the power of the students. They have opposed authoritarian teachers. Sometimes the students have kept vanguardista teachers out of the schools. The more democratic teachers work with student organizations, but the students are very active in defining their own struggles and needs.

Not only have student-teacher relations begun to change, but in the course of the struggle questions of educational content, kinds of textbooks, and so on have been raised. Parents have become more involved with in-school decisions and have begun to reject the passive role of old-style parent-teacher groups and the disconnection between school and community. Sometimes, however, a kind of localism by parents and teachers has been a problem. Union democracy is really part of a much broader counter-hegemony in the making.

There are of course many problems and the relations are very complex. Sometimes you have the parents being more authoritarian and battling with the democratic students and teachers, even at times in cases where the parents support the independent union. There are many kinds of relationships between campesinos and teachers. For example, a coopted campesino movement has ties to some teachers, an autonomous campesino movement has ties to other teachers, and so on. In some places local bosses tied to the vanguardistas exert force by promises of land or other things. But that also continues to reinforce the connections among the teachers and the campesinos and the colonos in the fights over land.

Chiapas suffers from a lot of violent repression. One teacher was killed during the strike. The colonos, campesinos and indigenous groups are taking the worst of it. But despite the repression, the movement of teachers has been going on for nearly 10 years and I think it will continue. So will the other struggles.

Additions:

In the late fall of 1987, numbers of campesinos were shot, some killed, in a variety of locales, as the PRI leadership and the landlords fought to continue their control of land and wealth and repress campesino movements in Chiapas. Reported the *Boston Globe*, "According to ... the Mexican Academy of Human Rights, more than 100 leading government opponents have been killed in Chiapas in the last five years under the administration of a PRI governor and former army general named Absalon Castellanos" (12/27/87). But the struggle continues.

Since February 29, 1988, the state-level teachers have been on a complete strike. On March 9, the federal-level teachers began a sit-down in the central plaza of Tuxtla. At all times, about one-quarter of the 30,000 teachers are camped-out in the plaza, using a rotating system of taking turns at the sit-in while the other three-quarters work. On March 15, the three teachers still imprisoned were released along with other campesino leaders. As of the end of March, the strikes and sit-ins continued.

Footnote:

1) *The Other Side of Mexico* #4 reports that 60% of the population of Chiapas lives in rural communities, of these 90% have a life-expectancy of 46 years, the child mortality rate is 90 per 1000; of dwellings, 67% have dirt floors, 64% lack electricity, 80% lacked a sewage system, and 54% did not have drinking water.

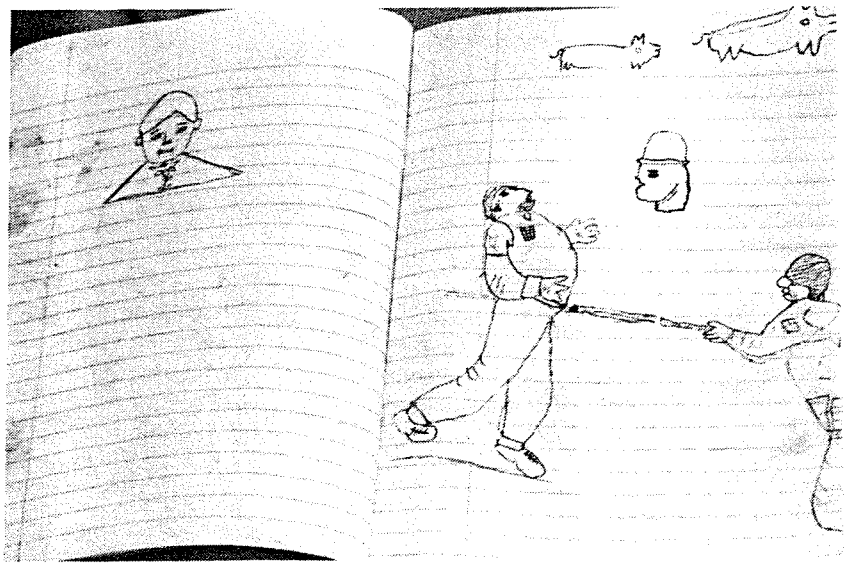


Photo by Sharon Haggins Dunn