

# Organizing from Oaxaca to California

*Interview with*

## Rufino Dominguez

*This October, SAIIC had the opportunity to interview Rufino Dominguez, Secretary General of the Organization of Exploited and Oppressed Peoples and Sub-coordinator of the Oaxacan Indigenous Binational Front at his office in Fresno, California.*

Along with Chiapas, the highland state of Oaxaca is one of Mexico's most Indigenous regions. The Mixteco people are one of the many Indigenous peoples living in Oaxaca; they have also immigrated to the North in larger numbers than any other Indigenous people in Mexico. This exodus has been driven by a number of factors common to many of Mexico's Indian groups.

Although Mixteco communities have secured legal recognition for communal land titles that predate the Mexican revolution, there is still insufficient land to go around. As in Chiapas, local *caciques* have consolidated ownership over the best lands. At the same time, years of deforestation has transformed much of the territory into near desert conditions. With insufficient land, and fewer opportunities for wage employment, a steady stream of Indigenous immigrants have left to look for work elsewhere. Thousands went to work in the fields further North, first in the states of Sinaloa, Veracruz, the Federal District, and Baja California and later in agricultural areas throughout the Western

United States. These migrants have often faced not only the exploitation commonly suffered by migrant farmworkers, but also discrimination for being Indian. The emergence and linking of Indian organizations throughout the path taken by this exodus is one of the most encouraging and intriguing examples of cross-border organizing in the Americas.

Rufino Dominguez grew up in Oaxaca's Mixteco territory, in the town of San Miguel Cuevas or, Nu-Yucu, which means on top of the mountain in his native language. He came to the US for the first time in 1964. Like many Indigenous immigrants, he has conserved much of his community's culture. Indigenous Oaxacan immigrants in the US generally keep contact with their communities at home. This is perhaps best exemplified by formation of the Indigenous Oaxacan Binational Front simultaneously in Oaxaca, Baja California and California (U.S.). SAIIC had the opportunity to interview Dominguez regarding his work with the Front in Oaxaca and the Central Valley of California.

Can you tell us about when the Mixtecos began to immigrate, and then later, to organize?

-The first Mixtecos began to immigrate in small numbers in the 1960s, but it wasn't until the period known as "the braceros" in the 1980s when we started immigrating as entire families, and in large numbers. When we arrived, we worked in the fields in Oregon, Washington and Alaska. We Mixtecos have mostly engaged in field work.

The truth is that we began to organize ourselves back in our communities [in Oaxaca], because there were so many injustices there and the authorities abused many of our people. The authorities then began to kill and threaten our leaders, burned several houses and all that. They also imprisoned many of our people. This was in 1981-83. Thus, we organized ourselves and it took us one year to remove those authorities from office.

So those who came here already had experiences in organizing at home in Oaxaca?

-Yes, but back in our communities, our organization didn't have a name. We were just a community committee. Then, I moved to Sinaloa after having won the battle with those people. My companions in Sinaloa had asked me to help organize an assembly. They thought it necessary to name the organization and continue fighting, and that in this way, our actions could serve the community in at home.

**What did you call the organization?**

-The Organization of Exploited and Oppressed People. That was the majority's choice. They said that we are exploited by the economic situation, and oppressed by the rich.

**What's the relationship between the Organization of Exploited and Oppressed Peoples and the Indigenous Oaxacan Binational Front?**

-Well, the Front is an umbrella group of many organizations.

**What are its objectives?**

-At the organizational level, our objective is to incorporate all the Indigenous organizations that agree with our principles and our program of action. And our objective is to fight for justice for all the Indigenous communities of Oaxaca—because we have learned that if we are organized, the governments have to pay attention to us—and if we are not, they pay no attention to us.

Here in the U.S., the Front is involved in labor organizing, in denouncing racism against Indigenous people—not just of white americans, but of other latinos as well—in denouncing Governor Wilson's anti-immigrant attacks and in uniting with other latino organizations to oppose the racist ballot measures [in California's Nov. elections]. We also work with our members to help them get citizenship and enter the country's political system. We



Photo: Courtesy of OPEO

The Organization of Exploited and Oppressed Peoples: 500 years of Mixteco Resistance.

have 15-20,000 members in California. We also support the Front's activism in Oaxaca by pressuring the Mexican consulates here. There, the Front works for to get land, basic services in the communities; for potable water, clinics, electricity, schools. We have also entered into agreements with the Federal and State governments to promote small businesses in the communities.

**Indigenous peoples throughout the continent have a tendency toward autonomy and self-determination. Do the Mixteco people have aspirations to govern yourselves in this way?**

-Of course. We all need common objectives. It's vital for us to struggle for autonomy—because unfortunately the Mixteco communities are not currently autonomous. It's important to struggle for the autonomy of our community's customs because these are currently threatened at their roots.

**We heard that the Front's organizations met in Tijuana this past month, what happened there?**

-The meeting was for all Indigenous Oaxaqueños in exile. We met to change the organization's name, because new members were entering who speak different languages. Before, we were called the Zapoteco-Mixteco Binational Front, but it turned out that Oaxaca has more than 16 Indigenous peoples. Our brothers, the Triquis, Mexes and others groups who had asked to, joined the Front. We now include five Indigenous peoples, and renamed the organization the Indigenous Oaxacan Binational Front.

We also decided at the meeting to continue the campaign against [Governor] Wilson's racism, reformed our basic articles, named new officers and established committees of coordination for each region.

However, before the meeting, which took place on Sept. 3, the PAN (the right-of-center National Action Party) governor Ernesto Rufo repressed a march or ours which was coming from San Quintin to Mexicali. They were demanding that wages be increased to a just level, dignified housing, rural clinics and the introduction of potable water to San Quintin.

And the government's response?

-Several protestors were imprisoned; more than 32 comrades went to jail.



Rufino Dominguez (center) Signing agreements of mutual respect with the UFW.

Thirty were wounded. This was an awful response from the government; nevertheless, we were not deterred. We returned to regroup and the government accepted negotiations. Two days later, the government met all our demands except that for a higher minimum wage, which, they claimed was under the federal government's jurisdiction. Thanks to the international community's intervention, we also won release of all our prisoners.

[Many thanks to all those who wrote letters in support of the imprisoned protestors, your letters were critical in securing their safe release, eds.]

You have said that the PAN did this in Baja California, but doesn't the PRI do the same in Oaxaca?

-Actually, the Party has never taken that attitude toward the Front.

So, what do you think of the PRI?

- I totally repudiate that party. It has done nothing to bring the Indigenous communities out of their misery. It isn't capable of curing a single Indigenous child. I don't see the PRI as an option for Mexico. Speaking of the last election, I know the PRI's tactics in the rural areas, and they are expert in maintaining power because they have a giant [political] machine. There was lots of manipulation and lots of money exchanged for votes.

The National Solidarity Program paid *campesinos* so that they would vote for the PRI. But, we know that this won't bring us out of the misery. This only happens during the elections. There was also lots of bad information—many attempts to discredit the opposition parties.

Are there any parties whose platforms include Indigenous peoples' rights to a dignified life, to autonomy and self-determination?

-They do it in a very partial, intellectual and *campesino* form. We don't believe it should be this way. Rather, they should

include us, as the Indigenous activists, to give our point of view regarding our autonomy, and what we really want.

Is this *campesino* (or peasant oriented) approach a result of the first Zapatista revolution, the revolution of 1917?

-The [revolutions of] 1910 and 1917 had no effect in the Indigenous communities. I say this because we have seen no changes. To the contrary, there was more racism and discrimination toward the Indigenous people. We are finally seeing change now, with the uprising by the Zapatista National Liberation Army in Chiapas. They have provoked a change at the national level. Now there is talk of autonomy for the Indigenous peoples, there is talk of education, people are talking—but these are demands that I doubt the government will comply with. Definitely, the previous revolutions did not benefit the Indigenous communities.

Do you think that the Zapatista positions go beyond a merely a *campesinista* position?

-Definitely, they are very much in agreement with the Indigenous struggles objectives, because they truly take into account Indigenous people's necessities. No other political party has taken this position. Their platform of armed struggle

includes the necessities of the Indigenous peoples.

What about conditions here in California? Have things gotten any better?

-No there have been no changes. The farmworker continues to be exploited. They are not paid minimum wage. They work many hours without the right to rest 10 minutes. Women are sexually abused. The contractors and landowners rush the workers to do more than than human beings are capable of.

Is the Front affiliated with any union?

We're not affiliated. Just one year ago, we signed an agreement of respect with Cesar Chavez's United Farmworkers of America. This is, however, nothing more than an agreement of respect and cooperation.

How do you see Indigenous unity in Mexico and at the continental level? Has there been progress in these last few years in organization, communication and solidarity?

-At the organizational level, I believe we still have a lot to do in Mexico. There are a great number of Indigenous organizations, and we haven't united. It's the same at the continental level. We need to get better organized, to strengthen the coordination between the Indigenous organizations if that's possible. Even though it's true that we have some organizations that are already very well connected, still we have a lot to do. In relation to communication, only the most important organizations have good communications, and the others have nothing.

With SAIC I have seen that there is more communication, not just at the continental level, but worldwide. And I think that is where we should focus ourselves. Our objective is to strengthen this communication at the continental and global level between all the organizations. 🐾

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