

Forging Unity, Zapatistas Call for Indigenous Forum

With more than 300 delegates, 250 guests, and international observers and reporters, the National Indigenous Forum took place on January 3-9, 1996, in San Cristóbal de las Casas, in an area called the Valley of Jovel. The event was called by the EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation), the Commission for Pacification (COCOPA), and the Plural Indigenous Assembly for Autonomous Regions (ANIPA). Twenty four Zapatista commanders, four of them women, participated in the Forum by chairing the Working Commissions.

The organizational frame of the Forum revolved around the objectives of the controversial "Peace with Dignity and Justice" negotiations between the government of President Ernesto Zedillo and the EZLN occurring in San Andrés Larráinzar, Chiapas. There the parties reached agreements on the first theme of Indigenous Culture and Rights on January 18.

Previous to the Forum, the EZLN consulted with its more than one hundred advisers out of which 40 are Indigenous people. The Forum was divided into six Working Commissions:

1. Community and Autonomy, Indigenous Rights
2. Indigenous Culture
3. Indigenous Education
4. Condition, Rights, and Culture of Indigenous Women
5. Indigenous Peoples and Mediums of Communication
6. Political Representation and Participation of Indigenous Peoples

It was the first time that the Zapatistas met with Indigenous representatives from most of the 57 Indigenous nations in Mexico, numbering today approximately 14 million. In the Resolutions, most of the delegates expressed strong support for Autonomous Indigenous Regions as well as the need to have a permanent forum to discuss Indigenous issues.

Another resolution that came out of the Forum was to demand that the government and congress reinstate article 27 of the Constitution in order to ensure that communal lands won't be sold to outsiders. Also, the Forum proposed to change several other articles of the Constitution with aim to create a plurinational state adapted to the many pueblos that live in Mexico today.

Margarita Gutiérrez, Nānahu from the state of Hidalgo and one of the coordinators of ANIPA, spoke positively of the event. "This is a great Forum because it has united grassroots Indigenous Representatives, and engaging in dialogue with the EZLN commanders helps to have an understanding of the cultures and problems we are facing. Also, the fact that in the EZLN women have full participation is very positive. We have to make an internal revolution first which is to allow women to participate fully in all decision-making processes." ❖

Peace Accord Signed by EZLN and Mexican Government

The EZLN and the Mexican state agreed on a preliminary peace agreement on February 16th in the Chiapas town of San Andrés Larráinzar. It was agreed that Indigenous rights must be stated in the constitution; that Indigenous political participation and representation be widely broadened; that justice be guaranteed to Indigenous peoples; that Indigenous cultural expression be supported; and that Indigenous peoples receive support for the creation of their own educational systems.

The peace agreement comes after the roundtable of negotiation from January 10-18 in San Andrés Sacamch'en de los Pobres, where the two factions agreed to re-define the relationship between the state and Indigenous peoples, or establish principles and components for the construction of a "new social contract," in which Indigenous peoples participate as full members of society, all within the context of a "profound reform of the state."

By far the most significant advance of the negotiations are the modifications to the Mexican constitution, namely the recognition of Indigenous peoples' right to self-determination and autonomy. This comes after an initial stance of complete rejection of the even the mention of the word "self-determination." However, due to political pressures, the need to re-establish Mexico's image of stability as seen from abroad, and a negotiated definition of the nature of autonomy, the government conceded.

What is the nature of the "Autonomy" granted to Indigenous peoples after this initial round of agreements? Autonomy was declared at the "communal" level, which is a far cry from the Indigenous vision of distinct and proper territorial, juridical, and political entities. This point will no-doubt be contested in negotiating sessions to come.