



Mixtecs and Zapotecs Organizing in Oaxaca and California

Interview with Arturo Pimentel:

In September of 1992 Arturo Pimentel became General Coordinator of the Binational Mixtec and Zapotec Front, which is based in California and Mexico. This organization is made up of agricultural workers of Mixtec and Zapotec origin who work in the United States.

The Front is made up of the Civic and Popular Mixtec Committee, Comité Tlacolulense of Los Angeles, the Benito Juárez Civic Association, the Regional Organization of Oaxaca, Yajsachi El Bajo Association, Yajsachi El Alto Association, Tlacochauaya Association, San Miguel Cuevas Oppressed Peoples, and OPAN.

Arturo Pimentel represented the Civic and Popular Mixtec Front of California at the First International Meeting on Migration and Human Rights that took place in Huejapan, Oaxaca in July 1992.

SAIIC: Please tell us about the First International Meeting on Migration and Human Rights.

AP: The meeting was organized by two main organizations: the Civic and Popular Mixtec Front, which is part of the Binational Mixtec and Zapotec Front and the Technological University of La Mixteca. The objective was to appraise human rights and migration issues related to the Mixtec people.

SAIIC: How was this meeting received by the participants?

AP: There was a lot of interest. There were Indigenous organizations, academics, governmental organizations and Indigenous peoples.

SAIIC: What have been the results?

AP: The Meeting established a communication system so that we would be considered part of a larger organization which is the Indigenous peoples of South and Meso America. Another result was to channel our Mixtec and Zapotec demands: these demands have been designed to press the Mexican

government to respond to our needs: drinking water, water for irrigation, electricity, schools and roads. We also ask that the government respect our political will, which has been subject to official governmental interference.

So, we agreed on a set of demands brought by the different Zapotec and Mixtec communities. But we also agreed to press for them, so that all these demands be met. We also agreed to organize an inter-ethnic conference, inviting all Indigenous organizations of our Oaxaca State.

SAIIC: I understand that officials of the local government tried to take over this Zapotec/Mixtec meeting. Is this true?

AP: Yes. Our Indigenous organization and the University's Chancellor, who answers to the interests of the state, agreed on a policy of non-intervention. There were no invitations made to any public official because we wanted a meeting free of state control. We wanted to have an independent meeting. But without previous announcement, the governor of Oaxaca Mr. Eladio Ramírez López showed up at the opening ceremony.

This moment was important for the official party. Oaxaca was about to elect political authorities. We did not want our conference to be used politically. The political situation at the time made Eladio's presence at the conference even less appropriate. The majority of the organizations rejected the presence of the governor. There was an exchange of words with the Chancellor, but we insisted on our autonomy. All organizations remained firm, rejecting manipulations, and we were able to defend our position of autonomy.

SAIIC: Are other Indigenous organizations in Oaxaca, besides those representing Zapotec and Mixtec living in California, thinking about autonomy?

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MÉXICO

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AP: When we talk about autonomy we are talking about a movement that has to be built and that has to move beyond political parties or the control of state. Autonomy is a fundamental issue. As an Indigenous movement we have our own demands which arise from our circumstances and needs.

I think that we have to reject the rhetoric of Mexico's Indigenist policy which prescribes for us, in a paternalistic manner, everything that we as Indigenous peoples have to do. We believe that autonomy should exist and that it must be respected by the state.

SAIC: Your statement about autonomy is clear. Do the grassroots understand this position. Do you think that Indigenous communities are ready to work on autonomy?

AP: Unfortunately there are different levels of understanding. The state's control has been so pervasive through programs such as COPLAMAR, PRONASOL, and even the Indigenist Institute. The government's policies have made people so dependent and manipulated that there are sectors that are not clear about themselves, or about the issue of autonomy.

However, there are other sectors in Oaxaca — the Trique, Zapotec and Mixtec organizations — that are thinking about autonomy. There is a clear vision and we are moving toward it. We are trying to define our vision of autonomy, but also we are reacting to the state. So, we are in that struggle.

Autonomy will also consider ideological and political issues. We know that government programs have addressed some needs, but those are patches. We need to address the issue from the base. We think that if we retrieve our own cultural roots and fight to retrieve our culture, this is autonomy too.

We want Mexico to recognize our autonomy, but it is not only a political autonomy. It is also a struggle that searches for political alternatives, such as promoting Indigenous cultures. Autonomy will not be total if it remains only political. Autonomy is also recognition, real recognition, of our existence as Indigenous peoples.

As you know Oaxaca has two main Indigenous peoples. There are also sixteen Indigenous languages and fifty-six dialectics. Traditionally historians thought that Zapotec and Mixtecs could not get along. But here we are working together. That is important. We can do it. We have to continue building our strength.

SAIC: How are women participating in the organization?

AP: Their participation is important. They have always been important. We have to recognize, as a movement, that changes have not been made. We still notice their oppression. We are conscious of the need to break away from past behaviors that discriminated against women. Oppression and subordination is serious. We really have to work on this. They definitely participate, but not with the force that they should have in the movement.

SAIC: Would you like to add something to this interview?

AP: I would like to call, not only the Indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, but also others who are migrant workers in the U.S. I would like to propose to these Indigenous brothers and sisters the creation of a larger entity, an independent Indigenous organization. Because we are in constant communication with our own communities, we can be part of their solutions, not only in a material way but also politically and economically. This is a call to organize and to continue working through the Binational Mixtec and Zapotec Front.

