

Chiapas, Mexico

Amy's Entry

Dear Participants -

Here are some visuals and a selection of words to go with them. My mother always said "Haste makes waste" but all I seem to have is haste at this moment... so enjoy and learn but please be flexible. Good Day.

Your Comrade

A.Ray

My first trip to down to the southern state of Chiapas, Mexico was almost a year ago. I attended an international conference on the effects of neo-liberalism hosted by the Zapatistas. I could never quite sink my teeth into the term neo-liberalism but it seemed to be reflected in policies such as NAFTA - basically a globalization that creates the disenfranchisement of women, gays, people of color, indigenous peoples or anybody else that doesn't fit into a homogenized culture or an economy motivated and run by transnational corporations. The trip was crazy with hundreds of people from all over the world crammed into buses trucking into the rainforest through military checkpoints, spot searches and as much hassling as possible by the Mexican government. It took 20 hours to finally arrive at one destination that was actually only 200 miles away. I slept that same night on the porch of an abandoned Mexican government hospital before being allowed onto the meeting area for reasons of security.

At the conference, we met in small focus groups split up among the five centers of resistance set up by the Zapatistas. The centers were impressive; they were complete with stage facilities, latrines, a clinic, a library and makeshift shelters. I began my conference at an area called Oventic, focusing on women's issues. I ended up at La Realidad for the final gathering where all the resolutions of the separate focus groups were read. I left the conference transformed by the dignity and gentle discipline of the Mayan peoples I encountered. I was honored to interview four women commandantes from the Zapatista army. Honor the Earth had granted the women in the Oventic community money to help with their artist co-op. Although I could only see their eyes, there was a certain sparkle and life to them.



Sara Lee does Yoga with the local kids. This was the highlight of the trip. Sara Lee is the ambassador of goodwill.



The evidence - Mexican Military presence in La Realidad. They came through once a day.

to embrace. They espouse equality between the sexes, self-discipline, a strong work ethic, tolerance for differences and a high morality. The Zapatistas want the people of Mexico to turn their own country around. The Mexican government is corrupt with no regard for the voice of the common person, no respect for the environment and no recognition of its own indigenous populations. Along with the jobs NAFTA has created in Mexico, it has also brought devastation to the environment and to indigenous communities. NAFTA has created a boomtown

My most vivid and constant memory comes from the morning I left Oventic to travel to La Realidad. After assembling the night before, the Mayan people slept in their seats at the meeting grounds. They got up at the crack of dawn and lined the path that led out of the center of Resistance. After gathering my tent and pack, I walked to the buses with the whole community clapping in rhythm as I walked, sending me on my way.

The way of the Zapatista movement is a way that is easy



Interviewing 4 women commandantes at Oventic A.R

effect with no long term vision. To secure our own corporate interests, the USA. sends tax dollars down to the Mexican military. The money supposedly used to fight the "drug war" is mostly used to secure valuable resources for American corporations and some of these tax dollars fuel the constant war fought against the Mayan peoples. The Mayan villages are constantly surrounded by the military, women are harassed and raped daily, and movement between the villages is almost impossible at times.



The final day of the conference at La. Realidad. - A.R.

The Mayan peoples who make up the Zapatista movement want a voice - that is all. They want access to education and health care and they want their land to remain their own - not in the hands of wealthy ranchers or transnational corporations. They want training in new farming techniques so they can compete in today's markets. Their needs are very realistic and modest. The Zapatistas call their reform movement " the revolution before the revolution." I go down to Chiapas to protest the U.S. government's involvement and to learn more about grassroots organizing. The lessons learned in Chiapas can be applied generally to

almost any movement.

My most recent adventure in Chiapas was with a group of 20 or so friends including Emily, Sara Lee, Michelle Malone and a Native North American contingent. We played music and interviewed many people including Commandante Tacho and our hostess Cecilia Rodriguez. After returning from the trip each person is now using their own resources and communities to initiate projects to help the Zapatista's communities. There are documentaries being made; doctors, dentists and vets volunteering time; articles written and stacks of photos to remind us of our intense weekend.



A meeting house at Oventic - A.R.

The trip also is a source of inspiration for activism within our own communities, whether it be gay rights issues, indigenous issues, or other social causes. This is the essence of grassroots organizing - passing the torch - movements grow outward and from the bottom up. We must all empower each other.



Amy Ray, Emily Saliers, Sara Lee and Michelle Malone.

The most interesting aspect of the most recent visit was the dialogue between Lori Pourier (from the Indigenous Women's Network) and Commandante Tacho. The difference and similarities between the North American indigenous movements and the Mexican indigenous movements are complex and fascinating. While the North American Indian communities struggle for sovereignty and a separateness from the system, the Zapatistas want to cause change in the system and then to be a part of a new reformed system. Of course colonization has done a disastrous turn on both countries, and both are reacting at

their own pace to their own specific situations.

All of the interviews sparked new questions and at the time of departure we all spoke of how soon we could return. This ability to stimulate interest and create dialogue will bring success to the Mayan peoples. It is important to recognize the connections between racism, sexism, religious intolerance, homophobia and environmental destruction. The Zapatistas have helped strengthen my resolve to create hope and change within my own community and in return I will do what I can to support their efforts.

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