

# The Zapatista Approach to Politics

Interview with Sergio Rodriguez

Friday 23 December 2005, by [RODRIGUEZ LASCANO Sergio](#), [ROMERO BAEZA Miguel](#) (Date first published: December 2005).

**The Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona, published by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in June of this year, has had an enormous impact in Mexico. An original experience has emerged from it, the "Otra Campaña" (Other Campaign), which has radically changed the situation of the Mexican political and social left and is mobilizing and organizing thousands of people, especially youth. Miguel Romero talked to Sergio Rodriguez, director of the Zapatista magazine "Rebeldia" ([www.rebeldia.org](http://www.rebeldia.org)) on these subjects that merit the attention of the left internationally.**

## Contents

- [Introduction by Miguel Romero](#)
- [Interview](#)

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## Introduction by Miguel Romero

In the interview references appear to concrete facts of the Zapatista experience. We will summarize them very succinctly. Ample information on all these subjects can be found on the website of "Rebeldia" and the FZLN [www.fzln.org.mx](http://www.fzln.org.mx), including the Sixth Declaration and the activities of the Otra Campaña.

- The San Andrés Accords were signed between the Mexican government and the EZLN in February 1996 and contained the fundamental demands to provide a democratic solution to the oppression of the indigenous peoples.
- Later the Commission of Reconciliation and Participation of the Mexican Congress, made up of deputies representing the PRI, PAN, PRD and PT [1] drew up the so-called Ley Cocopa or Indigenous Law; the EZLN supported this law to the extent that it embodied the fundamental points of the Agreements of San Andrés. Finally, the government and the Mexican Congress betrayed their commitments.
- The March for Indigenous Dignity was called by the EZLN in December 2000 and traversed Mexico until April 2001.
- In August 2003, the EZLN decreed the creation of the Juntas de Buen Gobierno ("Assemblies of Good Government") in five territories under their control, which came to be called "caracoles". The Assemblies are made up of indigenous civilians elected by their communities. They work in parallel to the official city councils, but with complete autonomy with respect to the government of the State

of Chiapas.

## Interview

**Miguel Romero:** *The objective of this interview is to understand better the experience of the social and political movement that has arisen from the Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona and that is being constituted around the Otra Campaña. Unlike what was the case some years ago, I believe that very little is known on the European left about what is happening here.*

And from what I see and hear, is important to make it known, so that interest in Zapatismo revives if, as I think, it has declined. Let's begin then. It will be clearest if we follow a chronological order. So we begin with the "Red Alert" of June 19 this year, the call of the EZLN, that initially caused alarm, because it seemed the signal of an imminent military attack from the Mexican Army, and, frankly, met with disagreement from some, among whom I count myself.

**Sergio Rodriguez:** In some senses, the Red Alert represented the culmination of three years of debates in the Zapatista communities on the conclusion of the March for Indigenous Dignity of early 2001 and what should be the new initiative. The constitution of the Assemblies of Good Government in August 2003 was a first stage, to consolidate strength in their territory.

But, as always, Zapatismo wants to go further and so the idea has arisen of culminating the process of consultation in the communities. Normally, they [interviewer's note - Sergio habitually talks about the EZLN as "they", probably to avoid any misinterpretation of his opinions as a "spokesperson"; but it is clear that he does not feel in any way exterior to "them"] consulted across the communities; now it is decided that the communities name their representatives who go directly to a meeting, which will debate and vote on the Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona.

Then the Red Alert was proclaimed to guarantee the security of the meeting, the Zapatista Army must stay on alert: that was the meaning of the Red Alert. When the meeting finished, it was lifted.

The Sixth Declaration is not presented as a political turn, but at least subjects are considered that were not previously part of the discourse of the EZLN.

***In your opinion, why did it arise at this moment and what is its fundamental content?***

First it should be said is that it is a political turn. There is a substantial change both in the subject which this declaration is addressed and the subject which justifies it. It is a founding proposal that is no longer directed fundamentally to the indigenous peoples, like the San Andrés Accords, or to a somewhat amorphous civil society, nor is simply for including a series of provisions in the Mexican Constitution, it has another, different, objective.

Once one's own spaces of autonomy are consolidated, with the Assemblies of Good Government, it is important to create a national perspective, to catalyse a process that exists in the country, with a new element, which is the Otra Campaña. It is a political, not an ideological, change.

The Sixth Declaration speaks of an anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal programme, of a new constituent process, in the sense, not so much legal, but of a "new country"... But by the form in which things are being developed, it seems that the main target is the construction of a new social and political movement, the generation of an autonomous movement independent of the policy of the Mexican state and its institutions.

What emerges as a programme will be the result of a long process. A second fundamental point is that the process is directed to foment, to dynamize a space in which people can develop, to construct mechanisms of self-organization. That is not because they did not exist before. Until a few months ago, people said that, outside Chiapas, there were no processes of social self-organization in Mexico. What we have seen in the meetings of the Otra Campaña is that there are very deep processes of self-organization, that were submerged, that had emerged in the uprising of 1994, but that were not visible, and that have now come to light.

***There are two related points of a practical character in the Sixth Declaration that I would like you to expand upon. The first is the survey as method of work: what is set out initially is not a program, not even in its more elementary aspects, but to go and ask the people "from below" what are their concerns, proposals, hopes, and so on.***

The second is how the Otra Campaña, from the first moment, and although is not explicit, sets out to construct a movement. Just now a group of university students came to see you to say they wanted to join the campaign and they asked you to organize a meeting to talk about what they could do; that is no longer a survey, it is the organization of a movement...

These things will certainly emerge in practice. But I believe that the two activities that you have named are different. They say to the people that they are going to listen and they fulfil that commitment, although has given rise to marathon meetings of up to 36 hours listening to the people who came to the forest; but of this we will speak more later.

So the first commitment is that the EZLN listens. In addition, they recommend this as method, listening to what people say. Who does the diagnosis of what is happening in a specific place? In the first place the very people who live there. This has to do with one's own experience: in the origins of the EZLN, when they arrived in the communities, first they wanted to speak, to propose a program, a military-political conception and they hit against a wall, dialogue was not possible.

When they managed to make contact with some people from the communities they said to them: "It is you that have first to listen, and you can act on the basis of what you have heard". They like to speak of "ways", they say for example that it took ten years to understand the "indigenous way", so now it is necessary to understand the "ways" of the different social movements and to create the space for dialogue. But one is not a passive listener. One has to listen and to construct.

Before it was said: "advance while questioning". Now it is "advance while listening".

***Let's return to the order of events. The Sixth Declaration is addressed to the political left, the social communities, movements, NGOs and so on, it proposes they go to Chiapas to listen and to be listened to, and this amazing march is generated to Chiapas of hundreds of people, in some cases travelling thousands of kilometres... Describe how the process has happened.***

After the proclamation of the Sixth Declaration, a kind of work plan was developed, that included the holding of six specific meetings: with political, indigenous, social, collective and non-governmental organizations, individuals and the sixth with what they call "others", that is to say, those for any reason not included in the previous meetings or unable to attend them, Finally there was a plenary.

Altogether 6,500 people went to the meetings and the number does not reveal much of the magnitude of the process, because you have to consider that Chiapas is in a corner of the country; for a student in Chihuahua to arrive at the meeting place meant crossing the whole country in a journey of several days. The first meeting was with the political forces, 34 organizations and about

220 people came.

There are three forms of approach to the problem were expressed. On the one hand, there were those that knew clearly that the Sixth Declaration opened a new political space for them and did not have ideological problems with it, considering that it did not prevent their process of construction, because nobody has been asked to dissolve or limit their political or ideological positions.

Another sector considers that the Otra Campaña requires an electoral definition, not by voting in favour of the PRD but by constructing an electoral alternative. This reflects a broad debate in Mexico; the polls give Marcos between 18 and 21% in terms of electoral support. Peculiarly, these figures were circulated to denigrate the EZ, showing that it has no chance of winning the elections. But they have had a boomerang effect, because many people think that, without any campaign, to have 18-21% is a lot and propose to participate in the elections.

And a third sector says to the EZLN that the Otra Campaña, the mobilizations and so on are good, but that now the important thing is that Lopez Obrador wins and, in addition, to organize an independent social force to force Lopez Obrador to fulfil his commitments in the interests of the people. The comrades of the EZLN made an initial speech and a closing speech...

### ***They only spoke at the beginning and at the end?***

Yes. They were there listening, taking notes...

### ***How long did the meeting last?***

The one with the political organizations lasted from 9 am Saturday morning to 1am Sunday, with a rest to eat. This was the briefest one, because there were only 36 speakers. Let me say an important thing before dealing with the meeting. The place in which the meetings were held had a great meaning. This time it was not a zone of political and cultural interchange, like the Aguascalientes, in which the communities do not live.

This time they decided to hold the meetings in "reclaimed estates" that were in the hands of racist ranches - the worst ones, those that hung the Indians - they were "reclaimed" by the EZLN from January 1, 1994 and they have always stayed under their control, in spite of interventions from the Army.

What they wanted to symbolize with the choice of this place was, I think, three key ideas: first that the Salinas reform that privatised land in the early 1990s had not worked; second that the dynamic of action and struggle finally gained partial victories, as opposed to "ultimatist" visions of the process of social struggle, and three, that nevertheless all that is at risk, because it is not possible that the caracoles and the assemblies of good government coexist in the long term with neoliberal domination.

They wanted to send these three messages to the left organizations. And they concluded by saying: "For this reason we are rendering a tribute to the militant tradition of the Mexican left that is here, because beyond political, programmatic or other errors, you continue insisting on a direction that breaks with neoliberalism". In the presentation of the meeting, Marcos raised a position without ambiguity opposed to any support for the candidacy of Lopez Obrador.

At the end, they requested a time, of one hour more or less to prepare their answer. In this, they indicated, among other points, that nobody is requesting an electoral message from them now, because that is not the sense of the Otra Campaña.

It can have in it people who support Lopez Obrador in the electoral area, but they are asked not to

take up this theme in the activities of the Otra Campaña, exactly to avoid the EZ entering the debate, which would harm the fundamental process of work. Sure, on the following day what the media emphasized was the Marcos-Lopez Obrador confrontation. The newspaper "La Jornada" even attributed to Marcos the expression: "Either they are with me or they are against me". A completely invented phrase.

***One of the organizations which attended the meeting was the Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (FZLN) [2] .What is the present role of this organization? Seen from outside it is a mystery: it appeared with great strength, seemed to be a fundamental political support for the EZLN; but since nothing is known of it, what it does, what it says...***

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Well, I believe that the FZLN has sometimes been judged harshly. Remember the conditions in which it was created, on the eve of the signature of the Agreements of San Andrés, in 1996, the Fourth Declaration of Selva Lacandona was published and there was the approval of the Indigenous Law in the Chamber of Deputies.

Then it was said that the FZLN was going to be the "airport" in which the "airplane" of the EZLN would land later. But once it was clear that the government and the parties were going to betray their word, the EZLN sent a letter to the congress of foundation of the FZLN in which it allowed it freedom to decide its future. It is easy to understand that it is very different for the FZLN to consider itself as airport for the EZLN or as an independent organization.

A process began then which was long, complicated, contradictory, but very interesting. They started from an idea very different from the EZLN: they wanted to have the smallest possible media projection. For that reason, there have been important processes of struggles in which the FZLN has had an outstanding participation, but without appearing publicly.

Today we have an organization which is already consolidated in most of the national territory, where you have about 800 militants who work regularly...

***...more than most of the left organizations who went to Chiapas...***

By far. And more also as far as territorial extension goes. It is an organization of very young people; as 75% are under 30s. People very influenced by the uprising of 1994, that were adolescents then, participated in caravans of peace, aid campaigns, that were promoting health, education and so on, who really had that original experience in politics. The other 25% come from different organizations from the Mexican left.

***Good, let's return to the meetings.***

To take up where we left off, subcomandante Marcos announced that he had asked the magazine "Rebeldia" to be part of the process of organization of the Otra Campaña. Before the beginning of each meeting we wrote to the attending groups and we asked them if they wanted participant or observer status.

Many of them also adhere to the Otra Campaña, or they constitute a collective; unitary platforms and fronts between unions and other organizations were constituted; it is an important subject of debate how the Otra Campaña relates to these type of initiatives that arise independently within it.

In the meetings, everybody has the same speaking rights. The magazine has the obligation to make a kind of record of all the interventions, present it to the comrades who spoke so that they verify if they recognise the fundamentals of their intervention; without their agreement, it is not published

Once we have agreement, the record is sent to all those who until then had signed the Sixth Declaration and we set up the website of the Otra Campaña, so that anyone can have access, whether participating or not in the Otra Campaña.

The second meeting was with the indigenous peoples. It was very touching, because it was the first encounter after the March for Indigenous Dignity of 2001. There were some who said: "we have fought struggles without receiving the support of the EZLN". And the EZLN recognized the error and said that the Otra Campaña tried to respond to those problems and to see how we can defend everyone from all the attacks that we receive from the Mexican State.

There were nearly sixty delegations of indigenous peoples, among them those of greater weight, and even some that are migrants within the country, and have begun to organize, for example in the capital; these by the way have suffered terrible aggression and violence against them from the government of the capital that Lopez Obrador presides over.

The third was with social organizations and representatives came from 120 organizations of the Popular Urban Movement, feminist organizations not linked with the lines of "empowerment", that is that are not in situation of dependency on the regime, lesbian, homosexual organizations... There were many people from unions, metalworkers, electricians, oil, from Secretary Generals or representatives of executives to representatives of union currents and workers' collectives who had come together in a workplace to integrate themselves in the Otra Campaña: it is important to emphasize this because until now the union organizations had hardly participated in the Zapatista meetings. Here there were very diverse debates, from critics of those policies of "empowerment", to proposals of concrete demands...

In this meeting, the EZLN insisted more on the idea of "listening". We can say that each meeting had an outstanding particular meaning. In the first, the political definition with respect to the elections. In the second, the commitment to indigenous autonomy. In the third, it was "we are going to listen".

Because many people saw the Otra Campaña as a similar initiative to the March for Indigenous Dignity, which was a spectacular mass action, which, for example, attracted many more people in the cities than Lopez Obrador is attracting in his electoral campaign now. Now it is clarified that we are not talking about big rallies, big actions, but dialogue from below, speaking with people. It is not going to be then a media initiative, but destined to construct from below the networks of linking, interchange, debates... between diverse sectors, diverse sensibilities

***And in this meeting already there would be many people...***

Yes, 900 people. The arrival of all these people has already been an adventure as you can imagine. The comrades had constructed shelters so that people could sleep under cover, but the calculations were exceeded; at the first 100 people were expected and 220 arrived; at the second they expected 300 and 500 came; at the third, 500 expected and 900 came.

***And beyond the EZLN commanders, the 900 listened to all the debates?***

I won't say 900, but at least 700 listened to the whole meeting. There were no small groups commenting, at the margin of the meeting. And those who spoke, whatever they said, were applauded equally, even if they had said the opposite to the previous speaker.

***It is not strange to me; one of the good, and enviable surprises that I have had here is that the debates are very clear, and sometimes very strong, but people can express themselves without problems, says what they say, and the debate does not jeopardize common action.***

That's the process. The fourth meeting was the most representative of the effect of Zapatismo in Mexican society. Not so much by NGOs, although also they had a role, like the groups. 1,200 people attended and about 200 groups and NGOs. This meeting was very youthful. Of those 1,200, at least 900 were young, from 14 or 15 to early 20s.

Many came from an experience of organization and struggle, against repression, or from alternative culture, rock singers, some very well known, sang... because everyone could intervene in their own way, singing, speaking, dancing, making a play, a performance, or whatever, whenever it had to do with the subject. This was the meeting that lasted longest because it began on Saturday at 9 am and finished on Sunday at 6 pm, with a break to sleep from 4am to 9am on Sunday morning.

All this time was devoted to listening, listening and listening. And the last one was that of the "others". Then there was the plenary in Aguascalientes, on September 16-18. We registered 2,160 people, but there were many more, because the registry queues were enormous and many people did not register. We made a direct transmission by Internet, and received many commentaries on line. The minutes of the meeting occupy more than 200 pages and can be consulted on the Internet.

***We are going to try to emphasize some points. I imagine that at some time you will publish a synthesis document and we do not have space now for an exhaustive summary.***

I agree. One first important question is that it was decided not to vote on anything. The Sixth Declaration, plus all the proposals presented will be debated by groups, organizations, individuals... As a result of debate, we will establish where there is agreement and where there are divergences that will continue to be discussed. Yes, the national tour with the subcomandante was decided on, the dates, mechanisms of coordination... But the political content remains open...

Yes, I believe that there was a consensus that the political content can remain open for a long time and they will be defined within the framework of activity.

***But there is a common basic political content, isn't there? Anti-capitalism, anti-neoliberalism, total autonomy with respect to the Mexican political institutions...***

That's right, that is what is noticeable in the Sixth Declaration.

***And now we pass to another stage centred, if I understand properly, in the national tour of the subcomandante to the communities, popular neighbourhoods, organizations and so on. The idea of this tour continues being "to listen"?***

Yes, but obviously there will be dialogue, and forms of coordination will be sought.

The idea of coordinating this process can be considered something already settled. Everybody that it is in the Otra Campaña thinks that they are participating somehow in the organization of a movement.

Indeed that is a general conviction. The form, the mechanisms can be diverse. Many raised the point that in some states a state coordination could be constructed. It can be, but in others it will not be possible and it will be necessary to have municipal, or sectoral, coordinations.

***Will the tour of Marcos happen before the electoral campaign?***

In parallel, during the first half of the next year, until June 26, one week before the elections. The insurgent lieutenant colonel Moisés said at the end of the plenary: "OK, we give you the subcomandante", symbolizing that the EZLN remains in Chiapas and the subcomandante goes to the Otra Campaña. There is a calendar that includes the 31 states of the country and the capital, five or

six days in each place, mainly in closed meetings, not in public meetings, although we can have them, interchanges of experience.

Then the process of evaluation, discussion and so on will come. We will not accept any economic aid for the campaign. Zapatismo has counted on much aid from national and international networks. But now they have decided said: "we are going to walk on our own feet". The communities can continue receiving aid. But the Otra Campaña, no. If people want Marcos to go somewhere, they should arrange his travel, his accommodation... which also contributes to organizing the campaign.

***We spoke before of how the Otra Campaña could be understood as a "Literacy Campaign" in reverse, in which the people "from below" do not wait to become literate, but which they are going to be in a certain way the "literacy teachers". Marcos would be then like a kind of channel...***

I use the formula of "catalyst": of experiences, of processes, social dynamics that already exist. Marcos and the EZLN have from the beginning said something important: "we are not going to meet just anybody, but with the people who are struggling and want to organize themselves somehow". Marcos is a tool that the EZLN has given the campaign: not a leader, nor a coordinator, but a tool to facilitate so that people can bring their ideas to the process of coordination, their experiences or their form of confrontation with the regime.

***There is a problem that surely that you have considered, but that I have not completely understood. A campaign so extended that it lasts until 2007 will be a campaign conditioned by important events, both in the world and in Mexico, it does not occur in a space autonomous of social and political reality. All these events will affect the campaign and will create a problem of definition. Does the campaign have any mechanism which allows you to respond to this problem?***

First, a fundamental question: the process does not finish in 2006. A second very important phase is already planned which will begin on January 1, 2007. As of that day, the command of the EZLN, many militia members, bases of support, and so on will leave Chiapas, not to make a tour, but to remain in a region, in a state, for at least a year; soon it will be seen if they remain there or they march to another place and are replaced by other comrades.

But there will be time to continue speaking of this. As far as mechanisms for expressing opinions are concerned, on the one hand positions are already being prepared on concrete subjects. For example, Fox has introduced a bill in parliament to privatise energy. So a document is being prepared on this. Or on the privatisation of pensions.

We will seek common declarations on precise aspects in which a clear agreement can be obtained. And each organization or movement, and also the EZLN, has the full right to make their own political declarations. In addition, there is an instrument of interchange, the plenaries, that can become a vehicle of opinion, if we people participate with dynamism, with energy...

But when is the next plenary? When it is necessary, perhaps very soon, perhaps not. But rather than work with fixed plenaries, they will become based on events, but knowing that the plenaries do not solve the problems of decision taking by themselves and it is very complicated to bring together so many people.

There are an enormous amount of opinions on every point, very different, and some have an impact on others, so there are agreements, debates... Everything is very rich, but very complex. And we cannot forget that we are in an electoral year. It is possible that Lopez Obrador will win and the PRD, that is a party that we can consider as leftwing in its origins. And there are people who have



expectations in this possible victory. We have to see how the electoral process goes to analyse what pressure will exist on the Otra Campaña.

As for me, I believe that what is going to be defined on the electoral terrain is very little: I do not see why it is necessary to choose between an imbecile from PAN and the conservative populism which is what Lopez Obrador really represents. I believe that since it has been decided to leave people to vote as they want next July 2, this has opened the pressure valve and this problem will not fundamentally affect the Otra Campaña.

***We have to finish. All that you have just said confirms to me the reasons why I wanted to do this interview, that is, the conviction that your experience is exciting in a world in which it has become almost impossible to get passionate about what passes for politics. What you are doing is very specific and it would be absurd to try to export it. But I believe that you are the only current with a broad political influence that takes the oft-invoked theme of "another way of doing politics" seriously. So we have much of which to speak.***

And much to discuss. It has always seemed me that the good thing about Zapatismo is that it does not give you a model, but that, on the contrary, it forces you to face complicated and necessary problems, that is, you complicate life. And so I want to turn things around towards you: are you influenced or affected by what happens outside Mexico?

What complicates life for you? In the Sixth Declaration there are very fraternal and solidaristic phrases towards the alternative left worldwide, towards Venezuela, Cuba... But I have the sensation that, beyond solidarity, what happens in the world has little influence on the EZLN, be it the crisis of the PT, or the evolution of Rifondazione in Italy, or the experience of the factories expropriated in Argentina, or the next meeting of the WTO and so on. I don't know, I see the EZLN as very much in solidarity, but very distant from what happens in the world.

I don't see it that way. I believe that, in fact, Zapatismo breaks with a utilitarian vision of the European left which has predominated on the Latin American left. Fausto Bertinotti told me that when he went to the Lacandona forest he said to Marcos: "I do not come to make a gesture of solidarity with Zapatismo, I come to discuss politics with Zapatismo". And Marcos replied: "Finally".

Because indeed that political discussion is very important. Zapatismo maintains a close relationship with solidaristic bodies, but it goes beyond simply a solidarity question. The Encounters for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism reflected that will and that vocation.

Beyond the fact that they concretely occurred, they reflected another way to understand international relations with respect to the Latin American left then grouped in the Forum of Sao Paulo, already in crisis. It is necessary to also consider that they say that on many international issues they are very ignorant and that produces prudence.

But for example, the Iraq war has been key for the EZLN. It had a tremendous importance because then it made contact with many people who were in the anti-war movement in Europe and in the USA. It is the only time that the EZLN has signed an international manifesto, the one initiated by Chomsky in the USA. I believe that sometimes the non-participation of Zapatismo in international forums is misinterpreted.

It can give the impression of superiority, but I rather see it as an example of prudence and modesty. In the Sixth Declaration the international content is greater than on other occasions. The possibility of a new international encounter is also spoken of. And in the Otra Campaña the international question is very present. We are going to see how things develop in practice.

***How many people do you think are participating now in the Otra Campaña?***

I calculate that from August to now it's 45,000 people.

Well done! Good health and good luck, brother.

**Notes**

[1] The PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) has dominated Mexico for 70 years, imposing a system of corrupt clientelism; the PAN (National Action Party) is a neoliberal party of the big bourgeoisie, which profited from the crisis of the PRI regime to win the presidency in 2000; the PRD (Democratic Revolutionary Party) emerged from a split from the PRI in the late 1980s, when the PRI regime began its neoliberal turn; the PT (Party of Labour) is a small party which has for a long time oscillated in the orbit of the PRI.

[2] Since this interview, the EZLN has announced the decision to dissolve the FZLN.

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**P.S.**

\* This interview, conducted in Mexico DF on October 6, 2005, was published in "Viento Sur" number 83. English translation published by International Online magazine : IV n° 373 - December 2005.

\* Miguel Romero is the editor of the madrid-based journal 'Viento Sur'.