

SUPPORT AUTONOMOUS EDUCATION IN ZAPATISTA COMMUNITIES

Since January 1, 1994, Maya indigenous people in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas have been in rebellion. Like the U.S. civil rights movement, the Zapatistas are challenging a corrupt and repressive system of government that denies basic rights to millions of marginalized people. Their list of 13 demands is straightforward: work, housing, land, education, food, health, independence, democracy, justice, freedom, culture, the right to information and peace.

The Mexican government, backed by its NAFTA partner to the north, responded with a combination of military occupation (in a counterinsurgency strategy designed by a general trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas), more free rein for transnational corporations that are bleeding Mexico, and an aggressive “divide and conquer” strategy aimed at disintegrating indigenous communities.

Undeterred, the Zapatistas declared autonomous communities, municipalities (counties), and regions, and are proceeding to implement their own participatory self-government which has captured the imagination of other movements that believe “another world is possible.” The autonomous communities refuse government programs with all the strings attached, relying instead on their own collective efforts and on international solidarity.

Among many innovative programs, the Zapatistas are replacing government-controlled schools with their own autonomous education. In the Lacandón Jungle region, they have established a teacher training school for “education promoters,” teenage indigenous volunteers who alternate between a month of teacher training and two months teaching back in their villages. Instruction is in indigenous languages in addition to Spanish classes, with emphasis on recovering community history and traditions.

European solidarity groups have supported some school construction, including a regional library (see photo). But school supplies are scarce, and it is all these subsistence



communities can do to pitch in labor to collectively tend the cornfields of the volunteer teachers when they are off receiving training. The Zapatistas make this sacrifice because they are “in resistance” against 500 years of abuse and neglect of indigenous communities, against an undemocratic government and an unjust global economic model.

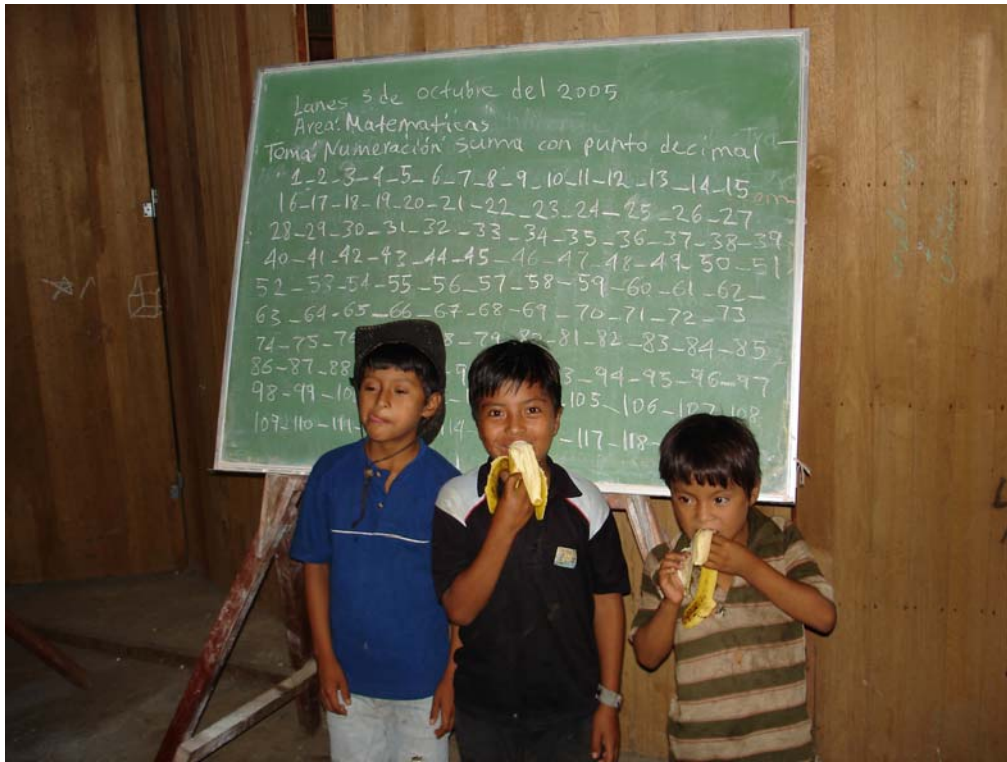
You can join the resistance and support Zapatista autonomous schools! Tax-deductible donations will be used 100% for school supplies, purchased in Chiapas and brought directly to the autonomous jungle region. **Make checks out to ICPJ** (write “**Chiapas Education**” in the memo line) and send to:

Interfaith Council for Peace and Justice

730 Tappan St.

Ann Arbor, MI 48104

For more information, contact Rich Stahler-Sholk, rsholk@gmail.com



Children in Zapatista autonomous school

What the indigenous education promoters (teachers) say about the autonomous schools:

“Autonomous education is so the children will have equal opportunities. It’s so they can prepare themselves in order to help their people, not like the government schools that only prepare them to work in maquilas [sweatshops] for the benefit of those who exploit us. This is for the good of the community.”

-member of Autonomous Education Commission

“Children in the official education lose the wisdom of our grandparents...The bad governments say a school is a building, a classroom, but no, we want a school that is the community...The official teachers want to destroy our languages, customs, traditions...We don’t just want to learn to read and write, we also want to learn tools to organize, to work in collective, not individualism.”

-Silvia, age 16, community educator

WHAT DIFFERENCE CAN A TRUE EDUCATION MAKE?

Zapatista autonomous education focuses on topics relevant to empowering indigenous communities, unlike the official government schools. Four subjects are taught:

- ❖ **Languages** - the autonomous education promoters teach in the indigenous languages, with Spanish taught as a second language.
- ❖ **Math** lessons include practical skills, such as calculating your land area so as not to get cheated by agrarian reform officials.
- ❖ **Life sciences** emphasize agronomy, uses of local plants, and protection of natural resources and environment (as opposed to commercial “development”).
- ❖ **History** lessons emphasize revolutionary heroes, popular struggles, community history (including the recent past of exploitation and abuse at the hands of landowners on the fincas), and the Zapatista demands for liberty, justice, and democracy.



The autonomous schools are creating a community-based model of what they call “true education,” in contrast to the government schools where teachers hit the children, prohibit them from speaking their languages, denigrate their indigenous cultures, and often don’t show up for class because the villages are far from the cities where the government teachers live.

The Zapatista schools don’t have resources for books, and in any case they reject the curricular content in the official government textbooks. Instead they photocopy some materials that they have put together in a collective/participatory fashion, and also rely on community knowledge and history passed down by elders: “The people are our books,” as they put it.

The autonomous education promoters are all volunteers, mostly teenagers, from the same villages where they teach. As one young man explained, *“We call ourselves ‘promoters’ instead of teachers because we feel we don’t have all the knowledge, that’s in the community; we just facilitate the dialogue.”* Typically their home communities pitch in to help tend their cornfields when they are away receiving teacher training. A solidarity collective from Greece has supported construction of a teacher training school in the jungle, currently attended by education promoters from 44 villages serving 1,787 children. Danish solidarity has helped build some of the community schools. The autonomous municipality is committed to providing room and board for the teachers when they are receiving classes, but funds are low and resources are very tight in a region where people live on the edge of subsistence. The communities in resistance function largely outside the cash economy, so **there is urgent need for the most basic school supplies.**