Building alliances in pandemic times:
the Zapatista journey through Europe

After a month and a half of navigation through the Atlantic Ocean, the seven members of the Zapatista Army of Liberation (EZLN) arrived to Spain on June 21 and crossed the border to France the second week of July. In their journey they’ll visit different groups and communities that resist territorial dispossession and the destruction of nature in over 30 European countries. In the context of a civilizatory crisis that has generated the pandemic of Covid-19, the Zapatistas intend to strengthen ties of international solidarity that allow us to imagine other possible worlds.

By R. Aída Hernández Castillo - August 1st 2021

After a journey of 47 days, the sailboat “La Montaña” (The Mountain) arrived on June 21th to the port of Vigo, in the Northern coast of Spain. The Zapatista journey in the territory under the Spanish State included Madrid, Merida, Valencia and Barcelona, then they crossed the border with France. On July 16th, the Zapatista delegation was welcomed to Paris by several anti-capitalist movements in a community center in Aubervilliers, a municipality on the outskirts of Paris, were the local people had organized to defend its gardens and orchards from the destruction brought by real estate development. In a welcoming ceremony, the Zapatistas listened to migrant organizations (Les Sans Papiers) share their experiences of racism and learned about other anti-systemic struggles of French organizations.
This journey aims to reach the five continents, coordinating resistance in defense of life and the environment. This first maritime delegation is comprised of four women, two men and a non-binary person referred to as “otroa” (Spanish nouns have grammatical gender. The suffix “-o” conventionally designates masculine nouns, while “-a” is used for feminine ones. Thus, “otroa” conveys the word “other” with both masculine and feminine suffixes). Due to this arrangement (4-2-1), the group was christened as the “421st Squadron”.

Taking into account the Zapatistas’ penchant for irony and historical reference, it is likely that the name alludes to the 201st Fighter Squadron, a Mexican air combat unit that participated in the Liberation of the Philippines during World War II, in the summer of 1945. The Squadron became a symbol of Mexican internationalism standing against imperialism, epitomized by the Axis powers of Germany, Japan and Italy. By referencing the 201st Fighter Squadron, the Zapatistas could be reminding us about the long-standing tradition of Mexican internationalism. Doing so, they anticipate the criticisms spouted from a stubbornly nationalistic perspective, which fails to recognize the reasons for joining other struggles when “there are already enough problems in Mexico”.

An anti-patriarchal squad

This time around, the Squadron is not comprised of soldiers, nor is it a combat unit: it is formed by Zapatistas whose purpose is to forge alliances in the struggle for life and to sow the seeds of resistance, as mentioned in one of their statements: “Not only to embrace those that engage in rebellion and resistance in Europe, but to listen and learn about their histories, geographies, calendars and ways of life”.

This first delegation —which is to be followed by a second one that will travel by plane and will arrive in the next weeks— is comprised of four indigenous women: Lupita (19 years old, Tsotsil), Carolina (26 years old, also Tsotsil, but currently residing in a Tzeltal autonomous community), Ximena (25 years old, Cho’ol) and Yuli (47 years old, Tojolabal and a fluent speaker of Tzeltal); as well as Marijose (39 years old, Tojolabal, identified as “otroa”, neither masculine nor feminine) and two men, Bernal (57 years old, Tojolabal) and
Darío (47 years old, Cho’ol). All of them quarantined for fifteen days in one of the Zapatista autonomous communities, the “Semillero Comandante Ramona”, in order to guarantee that there would be no COVID-19 infections.

The delegation’s very composition, with a female majority that includes a trans woman, reflects the transformations that have taken place inside the indigenous Zapatista communities. The “Women’s Revolutionary Law” (Ley Revolucionaria de Mujeres), published on January 1st, 1994, has become part of the community norms that reject any form of exclusion or violence towards women.

As the first revolutionary movement in Latin America to place the demands of women at the center of its political agenda, Zapatismo has dealt with the challenge of overcoming what indigenous women have called “bad customs” (malas costumbres): the legacy of 500 years of colonialism, in which women were deprived of the freedom to choose their spouse, excluded from positions of political power and stripped of land inheritance, among other forms of patriarchal violence. The presence of Marijose also reflects a change in the homophobic and transphobic culture imposed by various forms of Christianism on indigenous territories. This distances Zapatismo from other Latin American indigenous movements that denounce colonialism while replicating its homophobic and patriarchal values.

**Covid-19 and the crisis of the civilizing project**

When the Zapatista delegation left the Coast of Mexico (May 2021), international organizations have reported that Covid-19 have led to 3.18 million deaths around the world. Meanwhile, rich countries hoard two thirds of the total vaccine supply. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, general director of the World Health Organization (WHO), has denounced the “grotesque inequality in the distribution of vaccines (…) Countries that are now vaccinating younger, healthy people at low risk of disease are doing so at the cost of the lives of health workers, older people and other at-risk groups in other countries”. Paradoxically, the same countries that hoard the vaccines —showing, yet again, their
disdain towards the poor all around the world—are the ones that have inflicted the most damage on nature, creating the conditions for the appearance of zoonotic diseases (that is, transmitted by animals).

The origins of this global pandemic have to be placed in the context of a civilizing project that has destroyed nature in the name of “development”, commodifying life and natural resources. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has presented scientific data regarding Covid-19, which shows that this disease is linked to human activity, just like ebola, the avian flu, the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), the Nipah virus and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS).

The destruction of forests brought about by capitalism has led to closer contact between wildlife and human settlements. This, along aviculture and industrialized pig-farming, has created an adequate context for the transmission of viruses from animals to humans. Environmental damage, along advances in mass media, has created a global world in which diseases travel between countries at an astounding speed, never seen before in the history of humanity. The intensification of air traffic not only enables the rapid spread of diseases, it also represents a significative contribution to climate change, due to the emission of carbon dioxide.

We are facing a global crisis that evidences the need to thoroughly transform the relationships between human beings and nature. These transformations are only feasible through the organization of worldwide efforts. Zapatistas understood this long ago. For the last 27 years, they have created spaces for political coordination between their local autonomous projects and anticapitalist resistance movements from different regions. This journey is yet another effort to bind movements and exchange experiences in order to defend life in its manifold forms, all around the globe.
A Zone to be Defended (ZAD) in France

This last week of July the Zapatista delegation is visiting the agricultural region of Notre-Dame-es-Landes, located in western France, where activists and other defenders of the territory managed to stop the construction of an airport back in 2018.

Giving a new meaning to the acronym ZAD —from Zone d’Aménagement Différé (Urban Development Zone) to Zone à Défendre (Zone to be Defended)— the residents of this region have defended their lands since the 1970’s. They stood against the expropriation of 2,965 acres of land for the construction of France’s third largest airport, which entailed the urbanization of their agricultural territory. This successful fight implied the creation of assemblies in which ecologists, peasants, citizens, housewives and students participate, strengthening the social fabric.

For several years, this organized form of resistance occupied the territory with tents and developed the so-called “Assemblies of practices”, in which community problems were discussed and solved. On January 18, 2018, the French Government finally cancelled the airport project, forcefully displacing those that occupied the territory and sowing division among the organization’s participants.

Nevertheless, the ZAD has become an organization for the collective management of this territory, using the years of political learning they acquired in the fight against the airport to strengthen communal forms of decision-taking and the democratization of social life. The ZAD activists have visited Mexico on several occasions, exchanging their experiences with the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra (People’s Front in Defense of Land), in Atenco, who were fighting against the construction of the Texcoco airport.

In 2014, a ZAD delegation participated in the World Festival of Resistance and Rebellion organized by the EZLN and the CNI (National Indigenous Congress), which allowed them to share experiences with Mexico’s indigenous peoples. Now, they are hosting the Zapatista delegation and showing them the challenges and achievements they have encountered.
during their decades-long resistance against the dispossession and destruction of their lands.

The Sami People and its fight against the Artic Railway

One of the Zapatistas’ programmed visits is with the communities that oppose the construction of a high-speed railway (around 125 mph) that will connect Rovaniemi, the capital of Lapland, with Kirkenes, Norway. As in the case of the “Tren Maya” (Mayan Train) being constructed by the present Mexican government, this project is not limited to the installation of railroad infrastructure, it also implies a whole territorial re-ordering. It is part of the “Artic Corridor” that will link Helsinki, Beijing and Brussels, along other projects, such as an undersea tunnel that will connect Helsinki with Tallinn (Estonia).

The Artic Railway would split the Sami territory in two, compromising their survival. The main economic activities of the Sami people — comprised of approximately 100 thousand people spread along communities in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia — are fishing and reindeer herding, both of which would be severely affected by this project. The Artic Railway will impede the reindeer’s natural, year-long migration.

Sami representatives have denounced the negative impact that extractive industries have had in their territories, allowed by both the Norwegian Minerals Act and the Swedish Minerals Act. The destruction of the habitat, conjoined with the consequences of climate change, is a threat to the survival of the Sami. The layers of ice that have started to cover the hills in their territories complicate the recollection of lichens, which are used to feed the reindeers. Thus, many Sami shepherds have had no option but to migrate to cities, where they become underpaid, temporary workers.

The problems faced by the Sami people do not pertain exclusively to their small and isolated communities. Ecologist organizations have documented the way in which the Artic works as a sort of global air conditioner that regulates the weather around the world. During the last 30 years, extractivist mega-projects and climate change have caused the
loss of three quarters of the glaciers in that region, obliterating the local flora and fauna. The Sami people, by defending their habitat, are fighting for humanity as a whole.

The resistance movements against the Trans Adriatic Pipeline

Another organization that will meet the Zapatista delegation is the NoTap Collective, comprised of communities in southern Italy that are opposed to the construction of an energy mega-project known as the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). It is a pipeline that transports natural gas throughout 545 miles: 342 correspond to Greek territory, 133 to Albanian territory, 65 to the Adriatic Sea and 5 to Italian territory. The project’s cost amounts to 4,500 million euros, out of which, 3,900 million were provided by the European Investment Bank. This means that the European Union’s taxpayers are financing a project that contravenes the climate pacts signed by their governments.

An affection that big, both to nature and regional economic activities has had several protests in return. Many of the NoTap participants have been criminalized. They have had to pay exorbitant fines for using their bodies to stop the advance of heavy machinery used by multinational companies to build the pipeline. We could ask ourselves: how are these struggles related to the local problems of Mexicans? Why are the Zapatistas visiting these criminalized peasants?

If we parse the NoTap movement’s documents and manifestos, we realize that their fight is also against fossil fuels, which are causing an environmental collapse that affects us all. At a moment when it is urgent to reduce carbon dioxide emissions and put an end to investments on fossil-based energy, the construction of a gas pipeline is an attack against the entire planet. It is the very same extractivist model that ransacks local communities to enrich multinational companies, the one that Mayan peoples in Mexico and Guatemala, as well as indigenous peoples in the many areas of the world fight against.
Internationalism open to solidarity

We could continue describing the spaces of resistance that the 421st Squadron will visit, however, the journalistic limits of my collaboration do not allow this. The Zapatistas, in their commitment to internationalism, will then go to the United Kingdom, where they will meet Extinction Rebellion and Stop HS2, an organization that is opposed to the construction of the High Speed 2 (HS2) railway and other mega-projects that entail the dispossession of lands in that territory. Afterwards, they will go to Spain, where they will interact with organizations that fight against the degradation of living conditions, such as the Mareas Blancas y Verdes (White and Green Tides) that defend public education and healthcare; the “Manteros” Union that defends the rights of immigrant street vendors; the Kellys, an organization comprised of tourism industry workers that fight for decent salaries and social security; as well as immigrant defense organizations, among many others. In Greece, the Zapatistas will meet Okupa (squatter) organizations that have accommodated Asian and African refugees in their spaces, promoting a culture of solidarity. These experiences have much to teach us, as xenophobia against Central American immigrants has greatly increased in Mexico during the last years.

Beside the generation of new tools that would help the confrontation to the growing xenophobia against the Central American Migrants in Mexico, the Zapatista Journey will be an experience that will bring the voices and feelings of the collectives that fight for the defense of live in different specific contexts. The zapatistas internationalist initiative is an example of the cross-border political strategies as well as the global alliances that in this times result urgent. If we do not save ourselves together, the possibilities of continuing to exist and of caring for the world we inhabit will be rare.

As expected the journey has awaken several critics between the tradicional detractors of the zapatista movement. In Social Media, the racism that indicates that "these Indians should get to work instead of doing political tourism" is mixed with the old conspiracy theories that denounce that the British Crown finances the trip to destabilize the
Government of López Obrador. Another critique often found is the need of focusing on national problems in this times of crisis, instead of distracting with other problemas that seem to be far away from the mexican reality.

Given this perspective, it is important to remember that the health and socioeconomic crisis caused by the pandemic is a global crisis that has revealed the interconnections of the world as well as the limits of a civilizational model characterized by the mercantilization of life and nature. While chauvinist approaches fail to see beyond borders, it is necessary to understand the deep roots of the crisis we are facing and to articulate the resistance experiences to achieve the transformations needed to save our planet.

I would like to conclude by pointing out that the journey that the Zapatistas are starting in Vigo, Spain, is an experience that will bring Mexicans the voices and feelings of collectives that lead local fights in defense of life. The EZLN’s internationalism is an example of the transborder politics and global alliances that are necessary at this moment of global crisis. If we do not join forces to save ourselves, the probability of a sustained existence, of preserving and taking care of the planet we inhabit, is very low.

Translated by Luis Muñoz Martínez. A different previous version of this article was published in Spanish in a digital independent media in Mexico.

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