

Oaxaca Uprising

January 21, 2010

"Ulises nos decia: 'ni marchas ni plantones'. Aqui le demostramos que somos mas cabrones."

("Ulises told us: no marches and no protests. Here we'll show him that we're more badass than he is.")

The Oaxaca Uprising began as an annual, peaceful teachers' strike and exploded into an unarmed uprising after Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz refused to dialogue with the teachers, instead sending in 1,000 riot police to violently lift their protest camp in Oaxaca City's town square, or Zòcalo.

THE OAXACA UPRISING IS A REBELLION against, above all else, an offense. Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz's brutal predawn attack on sleeping teachers on June 14 consummated decades of corruption, persecution, and repression from the successive governments of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) into a single act of violent disdain, spurring a civil disobedience uprising.

Since his inauguration — under allegations of electoral fraud — in 2004, Ulises Ruiz has repeatedly broken the rules that allowed the PRI to contain explosions of social discontent and hold on for so long — 77 years — to its monopoly grip on power in Oaxaca. In only a year and a half in office, Ruiz cut ties with people and organizations across the state by making unilateral decisions, brushing off dialogue entreaties, and flat out refusing to listen to the protests that resulted.

"Here we hold assemblies for everything," said Alejandro Cruz, a lawyer with an Oaxaca-based indigenous human rights organization, "but [Ulises Ruiz] doesn't consult with anybody. Others simulate consultation, but this guy doesn't even know how to simulate. He thinks he is a king."

Ruiz's arrogance and the excessive use of force against the teachers deeply offended people in Oaxaca and led to the immediate and massive support for the teachers.

"On June 14, the government decided to repress, sending police to beat people and to fire tear gas from helicopters," one of the teachers present that morning told me. "All the years before, the government arrived and announced over a megaphone: 'We are going to lift the encampment,' and on the third announcement, everyone would grab their stuff and run. This time there was none of that. They even attacked us from the air, as if we were criminals."

An elderly indigenous woman who depends on handouts to survive told me that the governor made a huge mistake by using tear gas: "He shouldn't have used the gas. He could have just grabbed a few teachers and thrown them in jail, like before. But no, he used the gas and insulted them, and that's why we have all this trouble now."

Only hours after the state police attack on the sleeping teachers' protest camp, thousands of local residents took to the streets, joining the teachers' ranks. Together they surrounded the police, pelting them with rocks and bottles and forcing them out of the Zòcalo. This victory at the hands of a spontaneous popular outcry formed the base of what would become the Oaxaca Peoples' Popular Assembly (APPO). The teachers union convoked the first assembly, hoping to organize this spontaneous support into something that could be sustained over time. But soon, the APPO membership passed all expectations, with hundreds of organizations stepping in, and new organizations forming to pull previously unorganized people into the folds of the APPO.

And while the first assembly elected a provisional leadership council — made up mostly of men with many years of experience leading political organizations, and several with less than spotless records — the massive grassroots participation in the APPO surpassed any individual leader's ability to corral the movement. Leaders became spokespeople — those who give press conferences and negotiate with government officials — without powers of unilateral decision making. The movement's power came not from the discourse of figures like Flavio Sosa or Florentino Lopez, but from the huge numbers of people participating daily in protest camps, marches, takeovers of government buildings, public and private media outlets, and building and guarding the hundreds of barricades set up nightly across Oaxaca City.

Background

OAXACA IS THE FIFTH LARGEST of Mexico's 31 states, bordering Chiapas to the east, Guerrero to the west, Puebla and Veracruz to the north and the Pacific Ocean to the south, with a population of 3.4 million inhabitants. There are sixteen different indigenous ethnicities in Oaxaca and over a million people speak an indigenous language. Along with its neighbors in Mexico's marginalized south, Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in the country. Thirty-five percent of all households have dirt floors, and only half the population receives all three basic municipal services: electricity, water, and sewage. Twenty percent of the population is illiterate, and only 40 percent receive education beyond elementary school.

The history of the teachers' struggle in Oaxaca dates back to 1980, when dissident teachers reformed Section 22 of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE) to root out and avoid future union corruption. They passed new union rules to prohibit reelections for union leaders and ensure grassroots participation in decision-making and full liberty of political affiliation to break the PRI's hold on the local. Many teachers from indigenous and rural farm-working communities, with long histories of resistance, austere lifestyles, and disciplined collective work styles (long marches, protest encampments, and assemblies) actively participated in Section 22's mobilizations, heavily influencing the union's organizing culture.

The Arrogance of Ulises Ruiz

ULISES RUIZ ORTIZ was elected governor of Oaxaca under widespread allegations of fraud on August 1, 2004. In his first year and a half in office he carried out an unprecedented series of offensive and mostly botched moves to exert unchecked power over his opposition. He tried unsuccessfully to have his gubernatorial opponent, Gabino Cue, imprisoned on trumped up charges. He attacked the local opposition newspaper, *Noticias*, first trying to kick its newsstands out of town, then canceling all state government advertising, and finally setting up a bogus union to take over the newspaper's offices in a strike that had nothing to do with actual newspaper employees. He then moved both the governor's offices and the state legislature out of their historic buildings in the center of Oaxaca City into new, expensive, fenced-in offices on the outskirts of town. This move was meant to make it impossible for protesters to hold marches and protests in front of government offices. Ruiz turned the old state legislature into a museum, and the governor's offices into a rent-by-the-hour party hall.

Ulises Ruiz then decided to create a "new face for tourism" in Oaxaca, tearing up the historic Zòcalo, ripping up decades-old trees, and destroying several local monuments to build new ones. These moves — largely believed to be money laundering operations to hide state funds spent on the PRI's presidential campaign in Oaxaca — turned much of the middle class against Ruiz, mainly for the brazen manner in which he pushed through his projects without listening to any opposition voices. Meanwhile, in the countryside, the state police beat and shot members of indigenous and farmers' rights organizations, leading to formal human rights complaints, but remaining in complete impunity.

Teachers Go on Strike, Governor Represses

SECTION 22'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE meets every April to look over the union's demands for the upcoming school year. On April 29, 2006, the union released its list of 14 demands, most of which called to increase Oaxaca's state and federal education budgets. The state government, under Ulises Ruiz, did not respond. Teachers then organized a march for May first. After May 1, they again asked the government for a response to their demands. The government did not respond. On May 15, teachers organized another march, and again the state government did not respond to their demands.

On May 17, the Section 22 assembly decided to go on strike and set up a protest encampment in the Zòcalo on May 22, and from there to wait for a response from the government, something the teachers have done for 26 years. Jorge Franco Vargas, then lieutenant governor, delivered a document calling for the end of the strike, but refused to address the teachers' list of demands.

As the government did not address their demands, the teachers did not lift the encampment. On June 14, Ruiz attempted to repress the strike, sending 1,000 state police into the Zòcalo before dawn, beating people, destroying their radio station, and firing tear gas from helicopters hovering above the Zòcalo.

Less than two months after federal and state police brutally repressed a land rights movement in San Salvador Atenco, people feared the worse from the Oaxaca attack and for hours rumors circulated that the police raid had turned into a massacre. But almost the opposite turned out to be the case: thousands of people from surrounding neighborhoods took to the streets and together with the thousands of teachers from the protest camp who escaped the Zòcalo, they counterattacked the police, first surrounding them in the Zòcalo and then forcing them out of the city center. The state police have not been back since.

Enter the APPO

AFTER THE 14TH, WE RECOVERED THE Zòcalo," one teacher told me. "The raid even gave us greater strength. From that moment on the sole demand of the teachers union was the immediate ousting of that man, Ulises Ruiz, for being a repressor. The people from the city began to participate, taking up the single demand of Ruiz's ouster."

Upon retaking the Zòcalo, and forming the APPO, the protesters organized massive marches with half a million people participating and launched a "punishment vote" campaign against the PRI in the July 2 elections, leading to the first ever defeat of the PRI's presidential candidate in Oaxaca.

After the elections the APPO and Section 22 organized more self-named "mega-marches" of hundreds of thousands of people and began to paint Oaxaca City's colonial-era cathedrals and touristy businesses with graffiti denouncing Ulises Ruiz. They blocked the state's largest tourist

festival, the Guelagueta, organizing an alternative and free Guelagueta in its stead. But throughout all these protests, the state government refused to budge on the demand for Ruiz's ouster, and the federal government — troubled itself by Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's claims of electoral fraud and protests in Mexico City — turned a blind eye.

Then in late July the APPO went on the offensive, blocking the office buildings of all three branches of the state government in order to generate "ungovernability" in Oaxaca and thus force the Mexican Senate to "dissolve powers," in the state, the only legal mechanism available in Oaxaca to force a governor out of office.

But as the APPO went on the offensive, the state responded by organizing individual gunmen and later large convoys of paramilitaries to attack the protesters' marches and camps. Gunmen apprehended by members of the APPO and captured in photographs published in national newspapers, have been identified as local and state police and local city officials, all associated with the PRI. From early August through November, such paramilitary gunmen killed 13 people and wounded scores more.

The conflict in Oaxaca finally attracted the attention of the federal government after over 40 cars and trucks filled with paramilitary gunmen firing machine guns at protesters, wounding several and killing one person, drove through Oaxaca City on August 21 and 22. The national television giant, Televisa, filmed this death squad and aired the images on television screens across the country. While this prompted the federal government to call for negotiations with the APPO and Section 22, no one was held responsible for the paramilitary killings. Instead, the killings continued.

After a month of stalled dialogue between the Minister of the Interior, Carlos Abascal, and the APPO, the Senate finally sent a commission to review the situation in Oaxaca, but they declined to "dissolve powers." As pressure mounted, Section 22 voted — after several contested vote counts — to return to classes and continue their struggle for Ruiz's ouster through "other means." This decision threatened to split the union as thousands of teachers vowed to continue the strike.

The day after the teachers' vote, on Friday October 27, plain clothes police officers and local PRI officials opened fire on protesters at over 15 locations across Oaxaca City, killing three people, one of whom was a cameraman for New York City Indymedia, Bradley Will. Will, along with local and national correspondents, was there to cover the attack against the protesters. He stood in the street behind member of the APPO, next to several national newspaper photographers. A shot rang out and Will screamed. He filmed his own assassination. That afternoon, President Vicente Fox ordered the Federal Preventive Police (PFP) into Oaxaca.

Media in the Movement

THE TEACHERS AND THE APPO have used numerous forms of protest and civil disobedience to advance their fight for Ruiz's ouster. They held huge marches and set up protest camps in public plazas and later surrounding state government buildings. They campaigned against Ruiz's PRI party in the presidential elections. They boycotted a major state-sponsored cultural event. They commandeered city buses to drive their "mobile brigades" of graffiti artists around town painting political messages. They led a march of four thousand people over 250 miles from Oaxaca City to Mexico City. They set up a protest camp outside of the federal senate building and held a 21-day hunger strike. But their most surprising tactic — that which has been most celebrated by supporters and most demonized by opponents — has been the takeover and occupation of both public and private news media, and their use of these media to spread political messages and coordinate civil disobedience actions.

During the June 14 raid, state police targeted Section 22's small pirate radio station, Radio Plantòn, destroying their transmission equipment and beating the four volunteers present at the station. In retaliation, university students occupied the Oaxaca state university's small radio station, using the airwaves to call people out to the marches and push for Ruiz's ouster. This radio station, Radio Universidad, became the central communication tool for the movement with people calling information in from the various protest camps and protesters listening day and night on handheld, battery powered radios. Radio Universidad was also the target of the first use of live gunfire against protesters when gunmen shot at the station on July 22, mildly damaging the antenna.

On August 1 several thousand women carried out a high-energy women-only march, with the participants banging on pots and pans, creating an amazing din and thus turning their kitchen tools into symbols of political empowerment. After reaching the march's destination at the Zòcalo, the women called to take over the statewide public television and radio stations, known as CORTV. The women marched out to the station and asked the director for an hour to broadcast their version of the APPO's uprising. The director denied their request, and the women marched by her and occupied the station. Within hours they were broadcasting live.

"We were outraged with the coverage at CORTV; they never told the truth. They said that the alternative Guelaguetza was a failure; that really, deeply hurt," one of the women involved in the takeover told me.

Since the beginning of the APPO's campaign to oust Ulises Ruiz, protesters have pressed the issue of media veracity, verbally attacking television, radio, and newspaper correspondents whom they accuse of being partial to the government and covering up state violence. One of the more common chants at marches became: "Press, if you have any dignity, tell the truth." Protesters constantly hassled reporters at their marches and protest camps, denying access to some and interrogating others for minutes before letting them pass. At one tense moment someone in the crowd called out that a local correspondent for a national newspaper was a police agent. The correspondent, frightened, turned and ran. Protesters hit him with clubs from behind until he fell, whereupon they beat him until others urged restraint. Later that day the APPO's provisional leadership called a press conference issuing a formal apology and calling on its members to respect individual reporters even though they may be critical of the editorial line of their employers. While the tension did drop, the distrust of commercial media has remained constant in the movement, and this distrust has fueled the movement's support for media takeovers.

The APPO's use of the media has been, understandably, both clumsy and energizing. Under APPO control, for the first time on CORTV, one could watch uncensored, independent documentaries showing footage of brutal police repression in San Salvador Atenco and Oaxaca as well as talk shows hosted by protesters analyzing the many offenses of Ulises Ruiz. But after a few days, almost all the programs were reruns and the broadcast would go off the air for hours at a time for lack of material. On the radio one could hear the '70s Chilean protest song "Venceremos," several times an hour, leading some to nickname the station Radio Venceremos. One local resident said: "They are teachers so you think they are going to put on cultural programs, but no, they don't even play much music, it is pure revolution."

The media takeovers have also been the most frequent targets of paramilitary violence. After the July 22 failed attempt to destroy Radio University's antenna with gunfire, on August 8, someone paid two students \$250 to throw acid on the transmission equipment. With Radio Universidad off the air, the movement concentrated their radio broadcasts on CORTV's two radio stations. Then, on August 21 the convoy of civilian-clad police fired on protesters camping out at the base of CORTV's antennas. Several people were injured, but able to escape. The gunmen then destroyed CORTV's transmission equipment, knocking the APPO controlled television and radio programming off the air.

In one of the most impressive moves of the APPO, within hours of the paramilitary attack on CORTV, APPO protesters occupied 12 of the 13 commercial radio stations in Oaxaca City without injuring a single person or breaking a single window. That night the death squad returned, this time attacking the protest camps outside the newly occupied radio stations, killing one protester. The APPO voluntarily turned over 9 of the stations and held onto 3. A few weeks later the signals of the occupied stations began to break up: someone was using high-tech radio transmission equipment to interfere and destroy the APPO-controlled stations. The weaker station was off the air in a matter of days, and the stronger lasted about two weeks, though by the time it went off the air in early October, the protesters had fixed the transmission equipment at Radio Universidad.

The Limits of Civil Disobedience

THE APPO HAS MADE A CONCERTED EFFORT to keep their struggle peaceful, or at least to refrain from using physical violence to achieve their objectives. Many argue that the forced evacuations of government offices, commandeering city buses, and takeovers of media outlets are forms of violence. It is true that the APPO brigades appear rather menacing, with their faces masked, carrying clubs and pipes. They do consistently use the threat of force, but not physical violence. During one attempt to commandeer a city bus, an irate passenger stood the club-wielding APPO members down, refusing to get off the bus. The APPO members urged the passenger off, but she flatly refused. After not more than a minute of heated discussion, the APPO protesters waved the bus on and stopped the next one.

The APPO's fight is not one of principled non-violence; they very much uphold their right to self-defense. Thus protesters say that their rocks, clubs, and Molotov cocktails are merely homemade weapons held at the ready to defend themselves from armed paramilitary attacks. In this context it is important to recall that paramilitary forces killed 13 protesters and one New York City Indymedia journalist in four months of conflict. After the August 21 and 22 paramilitary attacks, the protesters organized the construction of hundreds of makeshift barricades across Oaxaca City. Responding to armed attacks with the mere construction of barricades illustrates their commitment to avoiding the use of arms in their own movement. Also, when the PFP entered Oaxaca, the protesters went to protest at the police lines, but avoided direct clashes, allowing the police to advance toward the Zócalo unchallenged.

When, on November 2, the PFP fired tear gas into the protester-controlled university campus, however, protesters counterattacked with incredible volleys of rocks, bottle rockets, glass bottles and Molotov cocktails. The police fought back with tear gas, riot tanks, clubs, and even military helicopters, from which police lobbed tear gas grenades down at protesters. The protesters battled with the police for four hours straight, finally overwhelming them and forcing them to withdraw from the area.

Herod's Law

IN 1999 LUIS ESTRADA DIRECTED A BRILLIANT political satire of the PRI called Herod's Law. Released just months before the 2000 federal elections, Herod's Law is an artistic vivisection of the PRI's 71-year monopoly control on political power in Mexico. The film chronicles the PRI's attempt to quiet a series of uprisings in the rural indigenous village, San Pedro de los Saguaros. A naïve, new local mayor is sent in after the locals lynched the previous mayor for corruption and repression, and the cycle begins afresh with the new mayor slowly learning that the only way to survive is to follow Herod's law: "Screw or be screwed."

While the film is mostly discussed for its exposition of the PRI's power machine, it also provides an enlightening metaphor for social uprisings in Mexico. In the film, the indigenous locals endure

outrageous institutionalized exclusion, racism, manipulation, corruption, and repression only until the mayor goes so far in his scandalous exercise of power that they promptly rise up, hang him from a pole, and then go back to normal. The problem is this: exploitation is personalized in a particularly offensive official. That official is hanged, but the exploitation continues.

This is the danger of taking as the sole and nonnegotiable demand the ouster of Ulises Ruiz. Once Ruiz's political future is destroyed, will the people go back to their everyday exploitation? This is the challenge of the APPO, and not just its provisional leaders. But while the call for Ulises' head resembles the political tactics of San Pedro de los Saguaros, the experience of the past five months of struggle in Oaxaca will doubtlessly leave a deep impact on future social organizing. This lived experience of risking their lives to defend their dignity, of putting everything on the line, of taking over the media, paralyzing the state government, facing down the federal police, more than the ouster of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, will be the true legacy of the Oaxaca uprising.

Footnotes