

Diana Denham and the C.A.S.A. Collective (eds), *Teaching Rebellion: Stories from the Grassroots Mobilization in Oaxaca*

Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2008

In the south of Mexico lies the state of Oaxaca, poor, exploited and seemingly unremarkable. Then, in 2006, state government forces brutally attacked striking teachers. This outraged the populace and triggered an uprising that shows the capacity of communities for self-organisation in the most difficult circumstances.

In Oaxaca, the government had long been both corrupt and repressive. The people's uprising challenged both the corruption and the repression. The initial response was defending the teachers; support for them increased dramatically after they were attacked. This soon evolved into challenges to government functions and setting up people's alternatives.

Most local government officials were pawns of the corrupt state governor. The people set up their own organisation, a people's assembly. The police neglected their normal duties; many of them joined plain-clothed paramilitaries who threatened, beat and shot at people at the barricades. So the people set up a de facto police force, to defend protesters and deal with common criminals.

The book *Teaching Rebellion* tells the story of the Oaxaca people's movement in a highly engaging and informative fashion. The bulk of the book is two dozen personal stories told by participants.

The editors have done a wonderful job in grouping and editing these stories so that each individual voice is distinctive, yet the collective picture of events comes through very clearly. The stories are grouped chronologically and thematically, with perspectives from different sectors of the community successively presented, for example artists, technicians, journalists and priests.

To take an example, one of the perspectives presented in the book is that of women, who had long been oppressed in Oaxaca. The popular mobilisation empowered women to oppose both state government repression and local patriarchy. On one occasion, women were called on to join a march and bring along pots and pans for making noise. The women spontaneously decided to take over the radio station, which was a propaganda tool of the government. For three weeks, they occupied the station and learned how to do broadcasting. They were assisted by many others – women and men – who provided food, child care and other needs.

The story of the radio station occupation is told initially by Tonia, in a simple

and moving fashion. The editors give a one-paragraph introduction, and then it is Tonia's story. A few excerpts:

At first I didn't sympathise with the striking teachers. On the contrary, I was annoyed with the sit-in in the center and felt like the teachers just repeated the same thing every year. But everything changed after the brutal repression that the government unleashed against them. It made me put myself in their shoes ... For a lot of people, the violence of June 14th was the straw that broke the camel's back. The situation in Oaxaca is unbearable. Rural communities live in extreme poverty ... Yet Oaxaca is rich, full of natural resources. If it wasn't for all the money the governors are stealing, we'd be better off than the countries in the North ... What really impressed me was when they started to announce the March of Pots and Pans of August 1st. 'How is this possible?' I asked myself. I come from a village, and in a village, a woman is worth nothing. In a village a man drinks milk, a woman doesn't. She doesn't have that right. The man washes himself with soap. The woman doesn't, because she is a woman ... The August 1st march was organized by a group of women who were participating in a sit-in at the Finance Department ... when I heard on *Radio Universidad* that they were inviting women to a march, telling them to bring pots and pans and whatever they could use to make noise, I was the first in line (pp131-133).

The text is supplemented by numerous photos of people and events. Appealing in both content and appearance, *Teaching Rebellion* is a model for presenting an in-depth treatment of a people's movement through the eyes of participants.

The overall story is both inspiring and distressing: inspiring in showing the people's capacity to run their own communities without rulers and distressing in the measures taken by rulers – including arrests, frame-ups, beatings and shootings – to repress the movement. Repression was the trigger for mobilisation but also the key force restraining it, raising the question of how to promote self-rule without repression to ignite outrage.

Given the importance of the struggle and the need to take the message to wider audiences, I could not help reflecting on the limitations of the traditional printed book for communication. This sort of high-quality material needs to be available on the web as well.

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