

Alternative Economies Build Strong Communities

by Rachel Mehl

Neoliberal economic policies have given unfettered access of US and Canadian-based corporations to Mexican natural resources, land, and labor. Under NAFTA, the market prices of corn and other staple crops have dropped below production cost due to the “dumping” of heavily subsidized US agro-industrial products on the Mexican market. In Mexico, this process has destroyed the livelihoods and displaced over one million campesinos from their lands, forcing them to migrate north to the US for jobs as refugees of the global economy.

In the current global economic order, we must recognize two fundamental human rights to frame our grassroots and global resistance. One is the basic human right to freedom of movement, i.e. migration. The other is the right to remain: the collective right of communities to live free of economic violence, military occupation, and environmental destruction. Violations of this collective right of communities in the global south by the corporate economy—and the military regimes that maintain it—directly cause migration to the US

Mexico is a prime example of these processes and of grassroots resistance and alternatives. When the Zapatistas publicly rose up on January 1, 1994 (the day NAFTA took effect), they listed 13 demands: land, work, education, housing, health, food, peace, communication, culture, independence, democracy, justice, and freedom. Since the uprising, and as a continuation of 500 years of indigenous resistance to genocide, the Zapatista movement has developed community practices to make these demands a reality for and by themselves. Health and education collectives and cooperatives of corn, coffee, honey, and traditional Mayan crafts provide tangible grassroots alternatives to corporate economic control and displacement.

These projects also provide opportunities for multi-directional solidarity among Zapatista communities and other communities in resistance around the world. The Zapatista women’s weaving cooperatives are one example. Zapatista women use weaving cooperatives as part of their organized resistance. Working collectively, women weavers develop autonomous social spaces and economic alternatives. They decide collectively on craft prices and practice democratic, transparent, and horizontal power structures. The cooperatives go beyond the concept of “Fair Trade.” While Fair Trade projects often rely on capitalist markets to find a niche for producers from the global south to make a



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Interns in the US promote the distribution of Zapatista cooperative crafts as part of educational processes that break down commodity fetishism and create alternatives to capitalism.

fair(er) wage, one may use the term Alternative Economy to describe a more radical alternative to capitalism which links producers organizing in resistance to corporate domination to consumers who also organize and resist. This important link dismantles commodity fetishism, in which consumers buy faceless commodities divorced from the truth of their production and underlying political and economic processes. Instead, the cooperatives’ crafts explicitly visibilize the face of resistance and tell the stories of Zapatista construction of autonomy and alternatives to capitalism.

The Alternative Economy Program of the Mexico Solidarity Network links three Zapatista women’s weaving cooperatives—Mujeres por la Dignidad, Xulum Chon, and Nichim Rosas—to a network of grassroots organizers and communities in the US. Current interns organize in New York City; El Paso; Albuquerque; Washington DC; Stonington, Maine; Berkeley; Grand Rapids; Rutland, MA; Chicago; Houston, and other cities. The program links local struggles in both countries through a solidarity network which recognizes that grassroots struggles against corporate domination are interlinked. We have much to learn from one another and many resources to share. Through the Alternative Economy program, interns in the US promote the distribution of Zapatista cooperative crafts as part of educational processes that break down commodity fetishism and create alternatives to capitalism. Interns share lessons of the Zapatista rebellion, foment discussion, and spark communities to action and solidarity, thus linking the Zapatista struggle to their own resistance. For more information on how you or your group can participate in this network of solidarity between communities in the US and in Chiapas, as well as information on the university-accredited study abroad program “Mexican Social Movements,” and other opportunities to get involved with the Mexico Solidarity Network, contact msn@mexicosolidarity.org or visit www.mexicosolidarity.org.

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