

Repression in Oaxaca : One Year Anniversary of State's Bloody Attack on Popular Movements

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There's an Aztec legend of a warrior who was in love with a princess. When he left to go into battle, the lovers promised each other eternal love. The warrior died in battle, but to fulfill his promise to the princess, he came back as a brilliant orange flower. That flower now graces Flamboyant trees throughout Latin America . Another Flamboyant legend speaks of the struggle of the Puerto Rican people against colonial domination.

On Sunday, June, 10, 2007, under a Flamboyant tree, the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO) held a press conference to announce the liberation of one of the leaders of the year-long popular struggle for social and economic justice in Oaxaca . Marcelino Coache Verano, secretary general of the free union of Oaxaca municipal workers, had been arrested, severely beaten, and held for six months in prison before he was released on May 31, with all charges against him dismissed

The press conference kicked off a week of actions to commemorate the brutal June 14, 2006 attack by 1,000 armed police against people peacefully demonstrating in support of the demands of some 70,000 teachers for higher wages, improvement of school buildings, and better resources for children. A teacher typically earns the equivalent of \$220 every two weeks, and must purchase school supplies herself. Although the Mexican constitution guarantees free education, mothers have to pay registration fees.

State governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz sent in state police, accompanied by dogs, who viciously attacked the sleeping teachers and supporters. They tear-gassed everyone in the vicinity, including pregnant women and children; one woman miscarried as a result. Ninety-two people were wounded. Members of the community reacted with outrage, fighting back with anything they could find. They chased the police from the square, and re-established the camp.

On June 17, several hundred local organizations came together to form the APPO, comprising almost 350 different civil organizations working in areas of indigenous issues, sustainable community development, human rights, and social justice. APPO demanded that Governor Ulises Ruiz step down. Meanwhile, the movement continued to grow, with large but peaceful demonstrations. On August 1, hundreds of women marched, and when denied air time by the government radio station, occupied the station and broadcast their position themselves.

Throughout this period, police raids, beatings, and shooting continued. On October 28, four people were killed, including indymedia journalist and U.S. citizen Brad Will and a Mexican teacher, Emilio Alonso Fabian.

The Mexican government sent in the Federal Preventive Police. On November 25, they appeared in full riot gear and encircled the entire area, firing tear gas. As people fled, many were arrested and beaten. Among the prisoners were some simply on their way to work or to the market place that morning. One hundred seventy people were arrested that day, and most were taken to the far away prison of Nayarit. Thirty four were women, and five were minors.

At various times during the seven month period, nearly 1,500,000 teachers, workers, professors and artists, many of them Indigenous people, occupied Oaxaca 's main plaza. Although the movement crystallized to support the striking teachers, the frustration of the people resulted from deep economic and social problems the government has aggravated and allowed to fester. These problems that have harmed workers were exacerbated by NAFTA and the Bush administration's neoliberal policies. The majority of the population of Oaxaca is Indigenous, most of whom live in extreme poverty.

Last week, I participated in a human rights delegation of lawyers from the National Lawyers Guild, the International Association of Democratic Lawyers, and the National Association of Democratic Lawyers in Mexico to investigate alleged violations of international law by police against the people of Oaxaca during the past year. We met with lawyers, workers and prisoners.

Coache Verano related how he and three other activists had been arrested in Mexico City , on their way to meet with government officials to negotiate an end to the strife. They were stripped naked, beaten, and guards walked on their backs. Coache Verano's finger was broken. One of the other men was released with Coache Verano. The other two, including APPO leader Flavio Sosa Villavicencio, remain in custody. Coache Verano's wife and young children told us how they were terrorized for months with death threats and shots fired at their home.

The two prisoners we interviewed at the Tlacolula prison, about 20 miles outside of Oaxaca , also described how they were beaten by police. Flabiano Juárez Hernández was not part of the demonstration. He was working in the market near the plaza when he was arrested on November 20 and charged with auto theft, a crime considered so serious, there is no possibility of bail. The blows to his head required several stitches and left a scar. Juárez Hernández is indigenous and doesn't speak fluent Spanish; yet he was denied the services of an interpreter.

Wilbert Ramon Aquino Aragón is a worker who participated in the demonstrations on November 20 and 25. On January 10, he was arrested for the attempted murder of a taxi driver he never met. He was told he would be released if he identified people in police photographs. Since he refused, he continues to be held at Tlacolula. The police beat Aquino Aragón so badly he is scheduled for surgery next week. His head bears scars from the blows the police dealt.

Twenty year-old Pedro Garibo Pérez was not involved in the demonstration. Yet on November 20, he was arrested and kept face down for 6 hours with his leg on a hot muffler. The 20 centimeter burn on his leg was left unattended for more than two and a half months. When lawyers finally were able to visit him, they saw a large areas of exposed raw flesh on his leg. As a result of their demands, he finally received medical attention. Garibo Pérez spent 10 days in the hospital, where he was diagnosed with a hematoma and received

a skin graft.

A 50-year-old widow named Aurelia was working as a maid inside a house on November 25, and didn't know what was happening outside. She had just left work when they arrested her a half a block away. She was walking down the street and saw people running all over the place. The police started firing tear gas at everyone. She said, "I felt myself asphyxiating and my eyes filled with tears. I couldn't move. I was so scared."

The police grabbed Aurelia by the hair, cursed at her and kicked her. They forced her and several other women to kneel for two hours on the cobblestone. Then they were thrown into a truck in a pile, "like animals, with their hands and feet tied." Many were crying out that they could not feel their legs. The police officers responded, "You may as well die you old hags."

Aurelia had to sleep on a cement block in a cold room with no blanket. "Later that night," Aurelia said, "you could hear the men screaming nearby. I thought about my family members who were there yelling, beaten." Many of the women were beaten; some had head injuries.

They were flown to Nayarit and held there for 21 days. During that time, the women heard nothing about the men or the rest of their families.

The treatment to which these people were subjected violates the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which I explain in my book, *Cowboy Republic: Six Ways the Bush Gang Has Defied the Law*. Three of the techniques used by the police in Oaxaca apparently originated in the United States. They include terrorizing people with ferocious dogs, threats to throw prisoners from helicopters into the sea, and a humiliation technique of denying toilet privileges, leaving people to defecate in their pants.

Nine men remain in custody. There are only 13 lawyers representing the 350 people who still have charges pending against them. Many of the lawyers have suffered some form of harassment, including threats, beatings, and sexual harassment. Five inmates were made to sign statements denouncing lawyer Yésica Sánchez Maya, president of the Mexican League for Defense of Human Rights (LIMEDDH), in exchange for their release from prison. The 29-year-old Sánchez Maya, a passionate and effective leader of the movement, told us she knows she might be arrested at any moment. She remains unbowed.

The International Civil Commission for the Observation of Human Rights concluded that 20 people have been illegally executed in the past few months. APPO has documented 29 who have been assassinated and 100 tortured throughout this struggle. The murders have been carried out by paramilitary or parapolice groups presumably linked to the state government.

On March 14, 2007 Mexico's National Human Rights Commission reported that 12 people had been killed and documented 1,600 rights violations. The Commission demanded that the Senate punish the killings and other human rights abuses in Oaxaca. APPO criticized the report for overlooking killings and failing to implicate Ruiz.

Mexican Supreme Court Justice minister Juan Silva Meza said on May 28 that federal, state and municipal authorities committed grave civil rights violations during the Oaxaca conflict. Silva Meza recommended that the Court create a committee to investigate the responsible

public officials.

Lawyers for LIMEDDH and APPO have filed *deununcias* against Ruiz, the president of Mexico, and the attorney general, seeking to remove Ruiz and hold them criminally accountable. The charges include assassination, torture, forced disappearance, and denial of justice. These requests have not been acted upon although a special prosecutor was named, (who is not independent) and the Supreme Court has indicated its intention to form a committee to investigate.

Marcelino Coache Verano has his freedom for now. But, he told the reporters, "there is no freedom for us if there isn't freedom for our comrades. There is no justice until those responsible for the assassinations and torture are brought to justice."

The government has criminalized the social movement. And the problems underlying the struggle remain unsolved. But like the Flamboyant tree, the movement in Oaxaca will continue to flower. "I never went to the marches before," Aurelia said, "but now after what the government has done to me, I'll be there to show my support. I don't know what the APPO is because I've never been to anything that has to do with APPO, but now I'm going to support them. I've heard of the teachers and I'll support them too, now, because it hurt so much what the government did to me."

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