

Marcos before the National Democratic Convention

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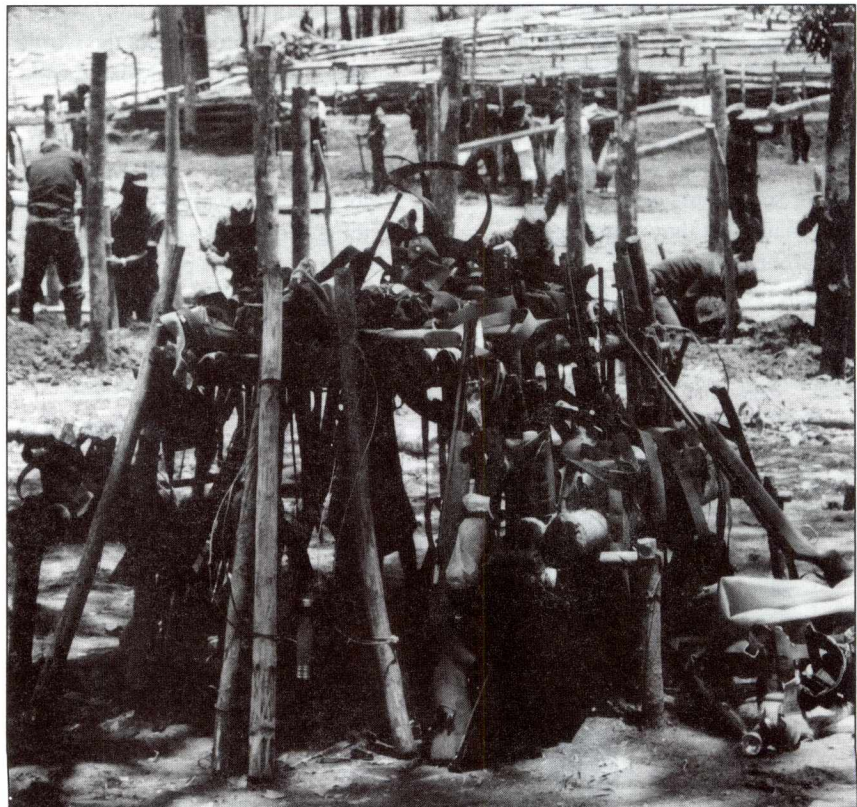
The following interview with *subcomandante* Marcos of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was carried out on July 29 in Aguascalientes, Chiapas, during preparations for the National Democratic Convention. Under the command of *subcomandante* Tacho, around 800 men —both active insurgents and members of Zapatista rearguard “militias”— used axes to cut tree trunks into lamp posts, benches and the platform for the convention. Others built the cabins that would be used to house participants in the gathering. The “ship”¹ looked quite lavish as we looked about excitedly; we had never imagined such an amphitheater stuck into the belly of a hill, made of a large number of tree trunks and loving hearts filled with one hope: to make weapons useless.

This interview was originally conducted in English. We have made as few corrections as possible, in order to conserve the feeling and style of the original. The National Democratic Convention was a gathering of a broad range of opposition forces, convoked by the Zapatistas in an isolated part of Chiapas that they dubbed “Aguascalientes” after the site of the 1917 Constituent Assembly. (Editor’s note.)

¹ Marcos repeatedly compared the convention to a ship navigating stormy seas. (Editor’s note.)

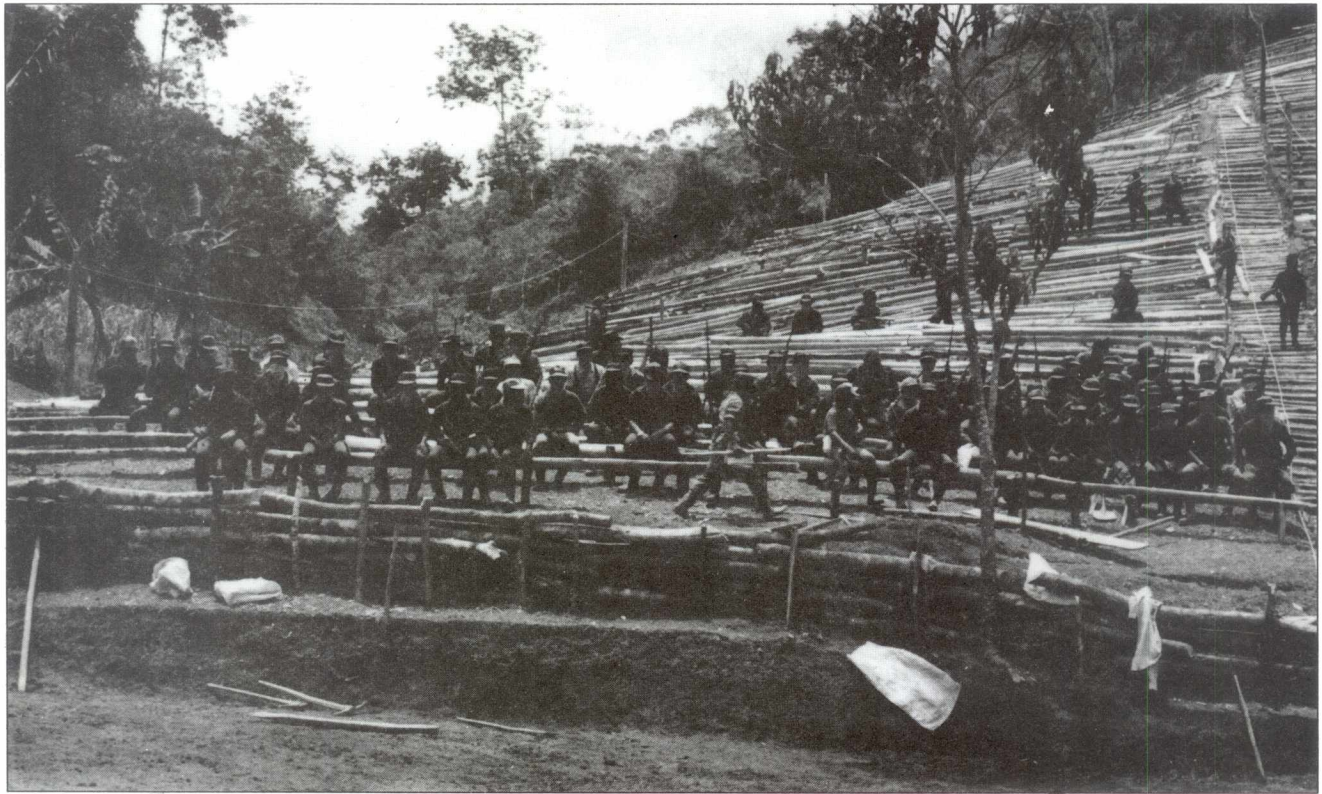
- Is Marcos a myth, a politician or just a soldier?
- Neither a myth, nor a politician, nor just a soldier. Some people want to look at Marcos in the way these people look at him. Some people want to raise this part of Marcos that the media

constructed. I mean the poet, the person without a face, without a name; who is he, where does he come from? ...And they want to forget the reasons that made Marcos possible: I mean this country with this injustice, with this dictatorship... and these poor



The National Democratic Convention, to make weapons useless.

* Producer, Radio UNAM.



"Our specialty is waiting"—subcomandante Marcos.

conditions for the Indian people. Then, the people that look at Marcos like a myth want to forget these conditions, because the Marcos that is a myth is merchandise. You can sell him or sell his image or even the image that they constructed around Marcos. On the other hand, the man who is behind Marcos began to talk

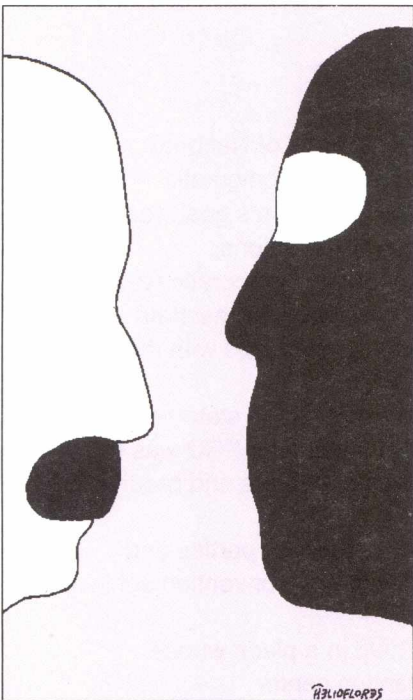
about political ways in Mexico and these words reflect the words that many people in Mexico want to say. When Marcos says something against one politician or part of the political system, a lot of people want to say the same thing. So it looks like Marcos wants to make a political career or he wants to make some arrangements for himself, to get

himself a good position in the government. And the Marcos who is like "just a soldier" is the truer Marcos. The soldier named "Marcos" is more near to reality than the other two. In a real way Marcos is just a soldier, who some accident put in front of the media. Then the media began to construct, around this soldier, the Marcos myth or



The Zapatista look on Seventh Avenue

The August issue of *GQ* (the magazine for the modern man) notes that the bandannas used by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation have ceased to be an exclusively Mexican symbol. "You've doubtless heard that much of fashion these days gets its inspiration from the street. But given this getup from Jean Paul Gaultier, it seems the jungle provides plenty of influence, too. Specifically, the lushly forested Chiapas state of southern Mexico, where *subcomandante* Marcos and other Zapatista revolutionaries have adopted the disguise," the magazine reports.



"If change doesn't come, we will begin to fight again"—subcomandante Marcos. The change he hoped for did not occur. So what's next?

the politician Marcos, and even the poet Marcos.

- Why Marcos and not another name?
- Marcos was the name of a man who died more than ten years ago. He was a person that taught me a lot of things and died fighting the enemy: the government. Then he was killed and I took his name and put it over my name so he would not die yet.
- You've been living in the mountains for ten years and have learned a lot of things in that time, but what is the real meaning of these last seven months of war?
- Well, the principal meaning is that maybe it is possible to make another fight without guns. I mean that the door of democracy in this country can be opened, not only with guns but with other, pacific ways, like the ways of civil society. And the meaning of these seven months is that this

change put [forward] one person or group that never appeared before in the history of this nation. In one way, civil society, people without a party, without organization, even without a specific [social] class; and in another way, persons without culture, without education, without a presence in economic or political terms, like the Indian people. So these two elements, these two parts of the nation put themselves in front of the nation and began to act in an important form or way in the destiny of this nation.

- What's the feeling of the Zapatista Army right now, after these seven months?
- We feel more strong, not in military terms, but about our trust—in other elements that are not Zapatistas, I mean, not Zapatistas in organic terms, not part of the Zapatista National Liberation



Now, under the command of the civilian population, the Zapatistas will respond to the decisions of the CND.

The National Democratic Convention

After saying “no” to the government’s proposals, the next step for the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was to call on the civilian population to participate in the National Democratic Convention (CND). Held from August 6th to 9th in the Lacandon Jungle, the convention’s goal was to reach agreement among the various forces represented, in light of the August 21 elections.

Fears were expressed that the Convention would come out for the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), especially after a highway accident injured the PRD’s gubernatorial candidate for the state of Chiapas, Amado Avendaño Figueroa, who openly supported the CND and sympathizes with the Zapatista movement.

But this speculation was refuted by several of the convention’s organizers, who also stated that they sought to provide a forum for Mexico’s millions of unorganized people. Nonetheless, the PRD was the only party that sent delegates to the convention. These delegates attended as observers and brought a message to the gathering.

Despite opposition to the event from some quarters -including a number of political parties and business groups which are pressuring the government to disarm the Zapatistas -the convention achieved its objective of uniting the six thousand people invited to participate.

A tremendous organizing job was required for the meeting, which was held in a place whose geographical characteristics made it seem quite unlike a comfortable convention center.

Preparatory work was carried out by five thousand peasants and guerrilla fighters, who worked a total of 15,000 hours in order to construct a “stadium” which was covered by a 1000-square-foot, rubber-lined canvas cloth, as well as 32 dugouts to be used as stoves, latrines, dormitories and so on. Electricity was also installed and a library was even constructed.

In just two months the Zapatistas cleared an entire hillside, leaving it completely razed. They cut 400 tree trunks, each of which was propped up by a pair of strong, V-shaped branches; the hillside was thereby covered with benches made without using a single nail. The total cost was 55,000 new pesos (about 16,500 dollars).

While construction was being completed, hundreds of invitations were being written to reporters, intellectuals, international figures and others —people like South African president Nelson Mandela, Italian writer Rossana Rossanda, Argentine novelist Ernesto Sábato and many others— as well as a statement calling on everyone who shared the Zapatistas’ ideas to attend.

According to one of *subcomandante* Marcos’ communiqués, those not invited included the ultra-left and partisans of continuing the status quo. The objectives of the CND were: to create a place for the coming together of democratic forces, to define a political program that could be adopted by the winning presidential candidate, and to promote a transitional government which could call a Constituent Assembly which would provide the country with a new legality.

Some of the invited intellectuals decided not to attend. While recognizing and agreeing with the causes of the Zapatista movement, they differed with the violence which the EZLN used in order to gain recognition. This was the case, for example, with Carlos Fuentes and Enrique Krauze. Nevertheless, there were others who did accept: Carlos Monsiváis, Elena Poniatowska, Juan Villoro and Jesusa Rodríguez were among them, traveling more than 20 hours from San Cristóbal de las Casas to the meeting site in the jungle, dubbed Aguascalientes.

The CND succeeded in bringing together more than 60 organizations from all states —including some antagonistic groups such as the State Council of Peasant and Indian Organizations and the Coalition of Citizens’ Organizations of the State of Chiapas— with delegates coming from 20 domestic organizations, as well as representatives of Indian and peasant groups, the PRD and members of the University Student Council at the National University of Mexico (*UNAM*).

To reach Aguascalientes, the 6,000 attendees—including 700 journalists representing 400 domestic and international media—travelled more than 120 miles from San Cristóbal de las Casas, in a long caravan of 200 automobiles, over dirt roads flooded by the rain and blocked by various checkpoints. The government of Chiapas lent its support through the Mexican Army, which was deployed along the road.

At 7 p.m. sharp, with a 24-hour delay due to the wait for all participants to arrive, the CND was formally inaugurated. *Subcomandante* Marcos gave the welcoming speech and announced the names of the 100 members of the presidium. This was followed with a speech by *subcomandante* Tacho.

To everyone's surprise, there was a parade of men, women and children, marching awkwardly. They carried sticks as if they were weapons, and few had *huaraches* (traditional sandals) or shoes; their faces were covered by bandannas. After the civilians, there was a military march: 350 masked Zapatistas, displaying the best of their arsenal, uniformed in green and brown, each rifle with a piece of cloth tied to the barrel as a sign of peace.

Many speeches were heard, but those of Marcos and former *UNAM* Rector Pablo González Casanova were the key ones. Some described the discourse at the CND as "the typical disaster of the partisan left which feels the vocation to carry out assemblies, where giving a speech is the most important thing in life."

Some days previously, Marcos had defined the CND as: "A peaceful convention, called by the violent. A convention which insists on legality, called by illegals. A convention of men and women with names and faces, called by unnameable beings whose faces are denied. A paradoxical convention, consistent with our past and future history. A convention which raises banners that already wave in foreign lands and are denied on our own soil, the banners of liberty, democracy and justice."

The gathering produced very important results. The first was to demonstrate that the EZLN is not alone, and that the goals they seek are disseminated throughout the country. The second was the EZLN's turn from war to peace; their desire not to begin armed struggle anew, but rather to find other, peaceful alternatives. Now, under the command of the civilian population, the Zapatistas have decided that "the orders we follow are no longer given by ourselves," and they will respond to the decisions of the CND.

The National Democratic Convention is undoubtedly an unprecedented event in the history of Mexico. It had nothing to do with a conspiracy against the government, nor a witches' coven. Instead it was a rebellious dream in opposition to centuries of injustice.

Mónica Ching
Assistant Editor.

Army, but other elements that made the same efforts for the same flags but without guns. We met these people that also want democracy, liberty and justice. They don't have guns but they have a lot of courage. So we feel more strong. We are not afraid about the government or about its "hard line." We know that line and we're looking with hope at the civil line of civil society.

- What's the feeling of people in the communities? What's in the air inside this territory?
- We are waiting to see if there is a change, in a peaceful way, and if there is not a change, the war will

continue. Our people are very trained in waiting. Our specialty is waiting. We are not desperate, we are not angry about it. We have patience and we will continue waiting for the change; and if [it doesn't come], we will begin to fight again. That is the feeling of the people in our territory.

- What does this theater (Aguascalientes) mean to everyone here?
- For us, it means the hope that our blood from January is enough for change, and the hope that more blood won't be necessary to make this country free. If this theater looks full, not only of people but

full of this feeling of seeing it as a good effort, a peaceful form to make change without more blood, then that is the hope we are looking for with this job. I mean, this theater has the capacity for 8,000 people and our people constructed it in five days!

- What proposals do you think will come out of the convention?
- First, to go to the elections to make a vote against the PRI; second, make a good government program to fight that includes democracy, liberty and justice; the eleven points of struggle of the Zapatista Army, and to make a program of actions for the defense of the people's will ✕