

NAFTA- "A Death Sentence for the Indigenous People of Mexico."



The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed into legislation on Jan. 1, 1994 was to have ignited Mexico's ascent into a modern, First-World State.

But in the southern state of Chiapas on this New Years Day, an "armed uprising of indigenous peoples stole the media

spotlight, exposing Mexico's massive social inequalities and the exclusion of the countries indigenous population from it's economic development," (Latin American Press, Jan. 20,1994). These insurgents calling themselves the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), claimed that they were fighting for the rights of indigenous Mexicans as they captured four towns in Chiapas, (where Mayan descendants are concentrated). The Mexican government had been denying the existence of a guerilla movement as an attempt to present itself as stable and prosperous during the NAFTA negotiations. Since the media attention was on Mexico due to NAFTA, the EZLN strategically chose this time to rise up and tell the world that NAFTA was a death certificate for the ethnic people of Mexico. As Zapatista Comandante Ramona was quoted "We were not taken into consideration when NAFTA was negotiated, never again will there be a Mexico without us!"



The problems with NAFTA and the Mexican Underclass

In order for NAFTA to be initiated, Mexico must comply with Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). SAPs allow countries to be eligible for loans from the World Bank. The problem with SAPs in relation to the Zapatistas are that it calls for the privatization of all land (oil, mining, telephone service, etc.), deep cuts in social

spending, (health, education, housing), and an emphasis on export production (eliminates nearly all loans for those in the sectors producing goods for internal consumption).

The privatization of all land will have a dramatic effect on the Zapatistas. Previously the Mexican constitution protected the communal lands (ejidos) held by the indigenous population. In the state of Chiapas (70% indigenous population) this will lead to the expulsion of 1.5 million people from their land. Not only will these people lose their land, but it will suffer irresponsible rates of deforestation. The EZLN feels that the theft of their land is an attempt to destroy the culture of the Mayans (assimilation).



Deep cuts in social spending is yet another detriment to Mexico's indigenous people. It will close schools and minimize the availability of medical attention. As it stands now 46.6% of Chiapas' population suffers from malnutrition compared to 5.5% for the rest of the country.



The shift to an emphasis on export goods will greatly effect middle and low class farmers in Mexico. Since it is mainly middle and low class farmers who specialize in the production of internal goods, the drastic cuts in

loans available to them will lead to wide spread bankruptcy and loss of traditional jobs. Free Trade also eliminates subsidies from the government in areas of financial and technological aid. Perhaps the clearest example of the effects of export concentration would be the situation of corn farmers. Corn has traditionally been a symbol associated with the ancient Aztecs and Mayans. But now it is being imported to Mexico to compete with corn produced internally. This imported corn from the North is cheaply priced which causes the price of corn to be driven down, thus limiting a major source of cash income for the indigenous farmers. One solution for this problem has been proposed by the Indigenous People's Alliance (IPP). The IPP is seeking to created their own Indigenous Free Trade Agreement which will allow Mayans from Mexico to trade with Mohawks, Pueblo Indians, Chicanos, and others in North and South America. This concept emphasizes cooperation not competition and will seek to reestablish the ways in which Indians used to trade.



All of these situations will inevitably cause illegal immigration to the U.S.. On the day that President Clinton signed NAFTA the US Army Corps of Engineers were putting the finishing touches on 10 feet high fences to

prevent illegal border crossings from Mexico to the U.S. along the 3000 kilometer border. NAFTA is very vague along the lines of immigration. It allows for the entry of 5,500 professionals each year and free transit of business executives, but no mention is made of service workers. As mentioned above there is already a danger of 1.5 million people being displaced from their land and as well as danger of major job loss. This will create an increase in the of the amount of people seeking work in the U.S. As it stands now the US Immigration Service (INS) estimates between 1 and 2.5 million illegal border crossings a year.