

Resolution to Support Human Rights Work in Oaxaca, Mexico

WHEREAS, Oaxaca is one of the largest states in Southern Mexico, with an ancient and very rich culture, and together with Chiapas, is one of the states with the highest indigenous population (Oaxaca is home to sixteen indigenous peoples as well as to African groups on the coast);

WHEREAS, Oaxaca is the second poorest state in Mexico, with 76% of its people living in poverty or extreme poverty, with approximately 150,000 people migrating each year to the North or to the United States (Large Oaxacan communities can now be found in California, Oregon, Washington, Arizona, Texas, Florida, New York and New Jersey, and while many of the earlier migrants were men, today the migration of women has grown to 45%);

WHEREAS, Oaxaca has long been a stronghold of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had governed Mexico for 71 years, until defeated in the federal elections of 2000 (While the PAN and PRD had made significant inroads elsewhere, until the 2006 election the PRI had maintained absolute control in Oaxaca through a system of local caciques and pervasive corruption);

WHEREAS, After a highly contested gubernatorial election in Oaxaca in 2004, the electoral tribunal eventually ruled in favor of Ulises Ruiz. The widespread belief in the illegitimacy of his election as governor remains an underlying source of political instability, a situation which has been exacerbated by the failure of his administration to resolve the demands of civil society through negotiation and instead to pursue a path of repression.

WHEREAS, Oaxaca is also home to a very different sort of political organization - a democratic tradition which was practiced in its many indigenous communities, is rooted in communal organization, has been replicated both in new communities in urban areas of Mexico and in the United States, and is reflected in broader forms of organization, such as the APPO: the Asamblea Popular del Pueblo de Oaxaca;

WHEREAS, matters came to a head in May, 2006 when Local 22 of the SNTE, comprised of some 70,000 teachers, went on strike. (Their demands included raising the wages of teachers working in the state to a level commensurate with a higher cost of living, as well as assistance to students from impoverished regions. When their demands were not met, the teachers set up a makeshift encampment in the historical zócalo, or town-square, and there they stayed. At first the state government responded with a media attack. When that did not work, on June 14, at 4:00 a.m. armed police, accompanied by dogs, attacked the teachers who were sleeping with their family members and other supporters in the encampment and assaulted them with tear gas. At the same time, they took over the offices and the hotel of the union, detaining a dozen people including those who had been operating the unions radio station known as radio plantón. The police were subsequently supported by two helicopters, throwing grenades of pepper smoke and tear gas which affected not only the strikers, but neighbors and guests in nearby hotels. The tents were destroyed and burned by police in large bonfires. This also resulted in various detentions and disappearances as well as one spontaneous abortion due to exposure to tear gas. 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 and on June 17, several hundred local organizations came together to form the APPO, or Asamblea Popular del Pueblo de Oaxaca, demanding that Governor Ulises Ruiz step down);

WHEREAS, the movement continued to grow, with large but peaceful demonstrations, but throughout this period police raids, beatings, and shooting continued, and on November 25 the Federal Preventive Police appeared in full riot gear and encircled the entire area, firing tear gas, and as people fled, many were arrested and beaten (Among the prisoners were many people who were simply on their way to work or to the market place that morning; 170 people were arrested that day, and most were taken to the far away prison of Nayarit. A new wave of repression resulted in new arrests in July, 2007. Since June 2006 to the present over 500 people were arrested, and 350 currently have pending charges. Many were severely beaten by the police, 100 have been tortured, and approximately 30 people were killed);

WHEREAS, the treatment to which these people were subjected violates the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (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);

WHEREAS, from June 7 to 11, 2007, NLG President Marjorie Cohn, IADL Secretary General Jeanne Mirer and Oscar Alzaga, President of the Association of Democratic Lawyers of Mexico, went to Oaxaca to discuss ways our organizations could provide concrete support to the lawyers who are defending the victims of government repression in Oaxaca (They learned that nine men remain in custody. There are only 13 lawyers representing the 350 people who stand charged. Many of the lawyers have suffered some form of harassment, including threats, beatings, and sexual harassment. Five inmates were made to sign statements denouncing the president of the Mexican League for Defense of Human Rights (LIMEDDH), in exchange for their release from prison. The lawyers have filed "amparos" in Mexico's federal courts which are similar to habeas petitions to get the charges dismissed. Most people are facing charges of sedition, criminal association, and possession of fire bombs. They have been somewhat successful in attacking the constitutionality of the criminal association charge, but the matter has been sent back to the prosecutor to try to find an alternative charge which does not violate Mexico's constitution);

WHEREAS, the lawyers have also filed "deununcias" against Governor Ruiz, the president of Mexico, and the attorney general, seeking to remove Ruiz and hold them criminally accountable. The denuncias charge assassination, torture, forced disappearance, and denial of justice.

THEREFORE, here be it resolved that the Guild's International Committee shall support the legal work in Oaxaca in the following ways:

1. By recruiting interns who are fluent in Spanish to travel to Oaxaca to assist the LIMEDDH and RODH, the two main human rights organizations in Oaxaca.
2. By recruiting Guild lawyers to write amicus briefs or provide other legal support as requested.

This resolution shall be implemented by the International Committee.

Submitted by: Robin Alexander, international@ranknfile-ue.org
Endorsed by the International Committee.