

“Rebellion from the Roots-I”

Stephen Lendman

John Ross is a Latin American correspondent and activist who's been living in and writing about Mexico for nearly four decades turning out some of the most important and incisive analysis of events there of anyone covering the country, its history, politics and people. Few writers anywhere make the country come alive like he can. He lives among the people and knows them well including Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos who may have given Ross his first ever interview.

Ross has written eight books of fiction and non-fiction and is one of the few surviving Beat poets with nine chapbooks of poetry in and out of print, the latest of which is due out soon called *Bomba*. He's also been called a new John Reed (who wrote the classic '10 Days that Shook the World' on the Russian Revolution) covering a new Mexican revolution playing out around the country from its most indigenous, impoverished South in Chiapas and Oaxaca to the streets of its capital in Mexico City.

Ross' books include the *Annexation of Mexico, From the Aztecs to the IMF* and his eyewitness frontline trilogy on the Zapatista rebellion beginning with *Rebellion From the Roots, Indian Uprising in Chiapas in 1995* for which he received the American Book award; *The War Against Oblivion, The Zapatista Chronicles*; and his latest work and subject of this review—*Zapatistas, Making Another World Possible, Chronicles of Resistance 2000-2006* just published. It's subtitle is taken from the misnamed anti-globalization citizens' movement for global justice from Seattle to Doha, Genoa, Washington, Prague, Quebec, Miami, Cancun, Hong Kong and dozens of other locations everywhere where ordinary people are struggling for a better world against the dark neoliberal forces pitted against them.

The book's theme is the heroic ongoing Zapatista struggle for autonomy and liberation as "a dramatic and inspiring effort to make this possibility a reality" matched off against a made-in-Washington world of permanent wars for conquest and domination from the sands and streets of Iraq and desolate rubble of Afghanistan to the Israeli genocidal terror war against the Palestinians to the streets of Mexico City and Oaxaca and the mountains and jungles of Chiapas.

This book comes after Ross' *Murdered by Capitalism, A Memoir of 150 Years of Life & Death on the American Left in 2004* for which he received the Upton Sinclair award. Ross is a gifted writer whose prose is passionate and poetic. From its beginning, he documented the Zapatista "rebellion from the roots," and in his latest book covers it from the July, 2000 election of corporatist Vicente Fox through the mid-2006 stolen presidential election, unresolved when the book went to press. He notes like all other elections in the country, it was orchestrated "before, during, and after the ballots (were) cast" just like they are in the belly of the bestial empire in el norte whose current high office incumbent Ross calls "an electoral pickpocket (twice over)."

He also reminds people of past events that may foretell Mexico's future: "The metabolism of revolution in Mexico is precisely timed. It seems to burst from the subterranean chambers every hundred years or so - 1810, 1910, 2010? To be continued." And he notes the theft of the 1910 election from Francisco Madero triggered the Mexican

Revolution led by Emiliano Zapata Salazar with readers left to wonder if Subcomandante Marcos is his modern incarnation. Stay tuned. As in Venezuela, the Mexican revolution will not be televised, but John Ross will chronicle it.

THE ZAPATISTAS'

CHRONICLES OF RESISTANCE

Ross begins his book with a Preamble of the Zapatistas' own words saying: "We are the Zapatistas of the EZLN (who) rose up in January 1994 because we were tired of all the evil the powerful did to us, that they only humiliated us, robbed us, killed us, and no one ever said or did anything. For all that we said 'Basta' (enough) we weren't going to permit that they treat us worse than animals anymore." The Zapatista commentary continues saying they want democracy, liberty and justice for all Mexicans, and to get it they organized to defend themselves and fight for it. And so they have. Their spirit of resistance continues in their ongoing struggle for autonomy and freedom.

Ross begins volume three of his trilogy in year 2000, but let's go back to where it all began to understand its roots. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) was founded in 1983 taking its name from the Liberation Army of the South led by Emiliano Zapata Salazar, the incorruptible Mexican Indian peasant rebel leader who supported agrarian reform and land redistribution in the battles of the Mexican Revolution. It began in 1910, went on till 1921, and saw Zapata betrayed and executed by government troops in 1919. It wasn't before he got new agrarian land laws passed that for a time returned to the people what President Porfirio Diaz confiscated to sell off to foreign investors the way things work today where everything is for sale under market-based rules. It's the reason for indigenous Mexican impoverishment today the way it is everywhere and why modern-day Zapatistas began their campaign to end centuries of imperial repression to liberate their people.

They planned quietly for years learning from successes and failures of earlier peasant struggles. They were all crushed or co-opted by the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) showing real change in Chiapas could only come through struggle from outside the political process that time and again proved those in power can't be trusted even though the Zapatistas gave the system a chance to prove otherwise knowing it would let them down which it did. It's the way it is in all developing states and most elsewhere as well. Mexico is no exception, and it may be one of the worst under repressive oligarch rule for the privileged and the people be damned, especially the indigenous Indian ones Mexico has plenty of.

Ross chronicled the Zapatistas' struggle in two previous books beginning January 1, 1994 when 2,000 from the EZLN marched into San Cristobal de las Casas and five other municipal seats in Mexico's Chiapas state. They seized control stunning the nation's leaders who knew something was up but kept it under wraps so as not to affect passage of the NAFTA that brought it on. The EZLN declared war on the Mexican state and its long-standing contempt for ordinary peoples' rights and needs now with new harsh neoliberal trade policies in place that could cost them their lives. Their struggle would highlight the plight of Mexico's 70 million poor and 20 million indigenous people including in the most indigenous city in the world plagued by poverty—Mexico City.

Rebellion for change erupted in the open the first day NAFTA went into effect. Zapatistas in Chiapas called it a "death sentence." It would threaten their agriculture and

way of life creating even more hardship than Indian campesinos already face. Chiapas is the poorest of Mexico's 31 states where most people live off the land earning a meager living in the best of times growing crops, the staple of which is corn, "maiz." The state is predominantly rural with 70% of its 4.3 million people living in 20,000 localities in 111 municipalities mostly in the countryside. The state capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez is its one major city with a population of 250,000 while several others have populations half that size or less, one of which is San Cristobal de las Casas in the mountainous central highlands that was one of the six municipal seats the EZLN took in its 1994 rebellion from the roots against the Mexican government.

Their action stunned the nation and world, and President Carlos Salinas de Gortari responded ferociously against Chiapans cutting short his planned celebration. The Zapatistas weren't to be denied as they stated in their manifesto that "We are a product of 500 years of struggle...against slavery....against Spain (and then) to avoid being absorbed by North American imperialism... later the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (so people rebelled and leaders like Villa and Zapata emerged, poor men just like us (so we continue the struggle for our) inalienable right (under the Mexican constitution) to alter or modify their form of government (and set up) liberated areas (in which the people will have) the right to freely and democratically elect their own administrative authorities."

They weren't alone as hundreds of thousands of supporters flooded Mexico City's vast Zocalo plaza near the country's Palacio Nacional seat of power. They sent a strong message of solidarity to the "People the Color of the Earth" in the South forcing Salinas to abort his effort after 12 days without subduing the first major Global South blow against the neoliberal new world order that prevailed triumphantly unchallenged in Mexico following the dissolution of the former Soviet Union - until the New Year's day rebellion from the roots changed things.

A single event may have inspired the EZLN's shot heard round the world launching their armed rebellion for autonomy. It was the Salinas government's 1992 decision to repeal Article 27 in the country's constitution that came out of the 1917 Revolution. It gave only natural born or naturalized Mexicans the right to own land and water, stipulated all land is originally the nation's property that can grant control of it to private citizens with restrictions, and that only the state may control, extract and process oil and its derivatives. It also returned stolen peasant lands to their owners and generally protected Mexican peoples' land ownership rights from foreign exploitation.

Repealing Article 27 changed everything for what the Revolution had "giveth," Carlos Salinas had "taketh" away by ending land distribution to the landless. His action drove a "final nail in the revolution's coffin" polarizing indigenous peoples and igniting the uprising beginning the day NAFTA became law. Rewriting the Article was a key condition of NAFTA that would henceforth deny indigenous peoples' right to the land so the state could sell or lease it to private investors (aka corporate predators), mostly from el norte.

Mexico's poor, including its rural indigenous population, suffered terribly in the last generation from the disastrous effects of global restructuring, tight monetary and fiscal policies, unfair "neoliberalized trade laws, privatizations of state enterprises, and abandonment of earlier economic and industrial development strategies". The result was regional growth collapsed throughout Latin America. From 1960-1980, regional per capita GDP grew 82% falling to 9% from 1980-2000 and 4% from 2000-2005.

It meant trouble always affecting the most vulnerable poor the most. It hit Mexico with falling oil prices, high interest rates, rising inflation, an overvalued currency, and a deteriorating balance of payments causing capital flight that by 1982 saw the peso collapse and economy hit hard. IMF and World Bank-imposed mafia-style loan arrangements followed imposing their special kind of austerity to people least able to tolerate it. It included structural adjustments with large-scale privatizations of state-owned industries, economic deregulation, and mandated wage restraint allowing inflation to grow faster than personal income with the poor feeling it most again.

As predicted, things got much worse under NAFTA-imposed trade rules. They hit the rural poor the hardest especially the country's farmers crushed under the weight of heavily subsidized Northern agribusiness they can't compete against including for corn, "maiz," the sacred crop, the struggle for which went to the root of the Zapatista rebellion also against made-in-the-USA neoliberal new world order rules of the game rigged against them.

They include Washington Consensus that led to Mexico's growing dependency on capital inflows with lots of "hot money" free to enter and leave the country under its deregulated financial markets. Again it caused an unsustainable current account deficit and peso collapse in early 1995 resulting in the country's worst economic depression in 60 years after experiencing the same type of collapse 14 years earlier.

The Zapatistas got hammered by it with no relief when economic conditions improved. It caused mass discontent and anger making the country ripe for rebellion as an elite few grew rich at the expense of the great majority sinking deeper into poverty and nowhere more than in indigenous rural areas like Chiapas.

The Oakland Institute think tank specializing in social, economic and environmental issues documented the harm done. Their researchers reported heavily subsidized US corn exports to Mexico tripled after NAFTA and in 2003 topped 8 million tons. It came at the expense of Mexico's farmers where corn is the country's staple. It drove over two million of them off the land that was predicted in advance and allowed to happen anyway. It ruined lives and led to suicides but not like in India where WTO-imposed trade rules caused 100,000 deaths because of farm foreclosures from indebtedness.

The worst is still to come in Mexico if UCLA professor and Research Director of the North American Integration and Development Center Raul Hinojosa's worse case prediction comes true. He believes NAFTA will eventually force 10 million poor farmers off the land with Ross saying it's already over 6 million people in a country where farm families average five members and they're all counted in the bloodletting.

- Ross laid out the other ugly damage from NAFTA's first 10 years through 2003 :
- All Mexican banks controlled by foreign corporate giants, mainly from the US.
 - All the railroads sold off to Union Pacific with former President Ernesto Zedillo now on its board as his reward.
 - The country's mines and airlines in private hands.
 - Two million hectares of tropical forest destroyed for private development with junk tree plantations sprouting up throughout Southern Mexico controlled by corporate behemoths like International Paper and Temple-Inland.

- Homegrown industries, especially in textiles and plastics, shut down unable to compete with US giants.
- Even the "Maquiladora Miracle" once creating 2 million jobs on the US border losing out to China and other lower wage countries in the inevitable race to the bottom WTO one-way trade deals always cause to countries from North and South.
- Real wages down 20% over 10 years with the disparity of wealth far greater than in 1994 when the Zapatista struggle began.
- 600 Wal-Mart megastores crushing small homegrown retailers and Mexican chains. Wal-Mart de Mexico SAB is the country's largest private employer and biggest retailer in Latin America far and away. This predatory colossus dominates Mexican retailing (like it does up North) with forecasted 2007 sales of \$21 billion and soaring profits gotten at the expense of its workers even more than in the US because in Mexico Wal-Mex can get away with anything.
- The Mexican landscape littered with thousands of McDonald's, Burger King's, Wendy's, and other US retail chains destroying local culture and homogenizing markets to sell the same stuff in Mexico as in Milwaukee, Missouri and Maine.
- The importation and consumption of genetically modified (GMO) corn presenting a clear danger to "the People of the Corn" by displacing and contaminating locally-grown varieties cultivated for thousands of years as dietary and cultural staples. The GMO poison from el norte is now spreading like an uncontrollable infestation from indigenous cornfield to cornfield.

Add to the above, former President Vicente Fox's Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP) that so far flopped but isn't dead. He proposed it early in his term as a multi-billion dollar development scheme to turn Southern Mexico (including Chiapas) and Central America all the way to Panama into a colossal free trade paradise displacing indigenous people, destroying their culture and sacred corn, and harming the environment for profit. He wanted to induce private investment by handing over to them the region's natural resources including its oil, water, minerals, timber and ecological biodiversity. Fox wanted to rip into the area with new ports, airports, bullet trains, bridges, superhighways, 25 hydroelectric dams, new tele-communication facilities, electrical grids, and a new Panama Canal—for starters, with more development to follow. He also wanted to open the country's wildlife reserves for bioprospecting in a give-away to giant seed, chemical and drug companies and connect everything with new highways linking Mexico to Central America facilitating business throughout the region - meaning indigenous people had to make way for it.

The area planned for development is enormous and so far stalled. It covers 102 million hectares with 64 million inhabitants in eight countries few of whom would benefit from a scheme to exploit masquerading as infrastructure and private development and more without consent of the people the way it's always done. It's the reason the plan went nowhere - so far. It's irrelevant to the poor, rural South gaining nothing except picking up the tab so corporate predators can take their land for private gain selling back to the people what's already theirs like Chiapas' fresh water that's 40% of the country's total Coca-Cola is dying to get its hands on. It would also destroy the last significant tropical rain forest in Chiapas' Montes Azules Integral Biosphere in the Lacandon jungle where the government wants to remove native Mayans from lands belonging to them. □□□

[To be concluded]