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DO THE RIGHT THING

When Profits and Conscience Align

BILL GATES
On Philanthropy 2.0:
Microsoft's
New Way of Giving
PAGE 34

GUANTANAMO
Time to Shut it Down?
PAGE 20

RICHARD FEINBERG
Can Corporations
Fill the Gap
Left by the State?
PAGE 41

PLUS
OAXACA
The Teachers' Strike
One Year Later
PAGE 89

DISPATCHES FROM THE FIELD

OAXACA: ONE YEAR LATER

Oaxacan authorities crushed the protesters in November 2006. Today, solidarity with the teachers has turned to resentment.

By Stephen Kurczy and Nathan Paluck

In November 2006, days after 4,000 Mexican *federales* reclaimed Oaxaca's capital from a six-month takeover, Paula Prieto, a local resident, visited protestors stationed outside the city's sixteenth-century Santo Domingo Church. A giant "666" was scrawled on the front door. Prieto wasn't looking for God: she was seeking Flavio Sosa, the longhaired, bearish activist who led the campaign for the resignation of Governor Ulises Ruiz of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). Within minutes, Sosa convinced her to support the movement.

"You talk to him and you fall in love," was Prieto's simple explanation.

But protests built on passion alone can come to unfortunate ends. Even as Sosa was picking up late adherents to his cause, Oaxaca was plunging further into economic and social disarray. The continuing turmoil has persuaded the U.S. State Department to issue advisories (the latest one was extended to April 2008) against travel to one of Mexico's most fascinating regions, which in turn has helped depress tourism, the state's principal industry. While global supporters continue to show solidarity with Oaxaca's teachers—last October, about 200 events around the world raised awareness of the movement—for many Oaxacans, such solidarity seems misplaced. The protests resulted in 23 deaths, cost some $30 million in property damage, and created tensions between teachers and the public that last to this day.

REACTION

The protest was born in places like Secondary Technical School 108, at the end of a manure-dotted dirt road that cuts through a cornfield one hour outside Oaxaca City. Its backyard is an open range of pastures and hills framed by gray mountains. The school principal, Perfecto Pérez, oversees its six rooms and 102 students, all fluent in Zapoteco, Oaxaca's most widely spoken indigenous language.

When teachers from the 70,000-member Section 22 of the National Education Workers Union, responsible for educating 1.2 million students in Oaxaca, gathered in the capital on June 2, 2006, for their 25th annual strike, Pérez was there. A 21-year veteran of the school system and union leader, Pérez said it seemed at first like any other year, with the union again requesting to be bumped up to Level Three in the national classification of teachers' salaries, which would allow for increased wages.

Two weeks later, Governor Ruiz sent 770 police to remove the teachers from the city center with tear gas and rubber bullets, leaving more than 100 hospitalized in the ensuing violence. It was a tipping point in public resentment against Ruiz, who was accused of diverting public funds and rigging the 2004 election that put him into the six-year governorship. Section 22 called for his resignation.

"Little by little," Pérez said, "the general population realized that what the teachers were doing was just." What began as a teachers' strike became a social movement. By July 2006, more than 200 political organizations and indigenous groups from around the state joined the teachers to form the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (known as A.P.P.O.). Led by Flavio Sosa—who is a political leader but not a teacher—A.P.P.O was aligned with the left-wing *Partido Revolucionario Democrático* (PRD). As the protest intensified, the A.P.P.O. forced the shutdown of all government offices, seized nine commercial radio

CHOCOLATE ALMENDRADO $30.00 Kg
CHOCOLATE ALA CANELA $25.00 Kg

Bitter aftertaste: Since the protests Hilda Reyes—pictured here with her daughter—has lost many customers.

STEPHEN KURCZY

stations, and blocked streets with wire and bonfires to stall police.

To fund what most expected would be a long campaign, A.P.P.O drew on an unorthodox source. It opened a Mexico City-based bank account and encouraged Oaxacans and other Mexicans abroad to donate funds. It was a shrewd financial maneuver. Remittances make up 9 percent of Oaxaca's GDP. (On a national level they are second only to oil revenue.)

At the beginning, many Oaxacans supported the protests even if they sometimes became unwitting casualties of the rising tensions. Freelance accountant Abel Iraizos recalls being forced out of his car and interrogated by A.P.P.O. members, who also broke one of his car windows. But he still considered it an "honest conflict" at first. "But as the days kept passing you saw a lot of [the movement's] different shades," he said.

Late night shootings dominated the quaint, colonial city. Then something strange happened.

With the temporary overthrow of the government, and a corresponding loss of police protection in many neighborhoods, residents of the capital began taking charge of their own safety. In many parts of Oaxaca, an old-fashioned volunteer watchdog system emerged. The sound of a loud whistle called neighbors into the streets to apprehend would-be troublemakers. Old women chased criminals with broomsticks.

Incredibly—with tens of thousands camping in streets closed off by barbed wire and barricades, with the paramilitary cruising the city in trucks called "caravans of death"—Oaxacans adapted to anarchy.

RECOVERY

During the protest, *La Central de Abastos*, Oaxaca's central market, was forced to close for two days. According to market administrators, their refusal to take sides in the movement led to A.P.P.O takeover threats. Today, vendors once again crowd the cement floors, selling everything from pottery to pig heads, but memories of Oaxaca's days of political passion are still sharp.

Hilda Reyes, who has sold spicy mole sauce in the market since 2002, is now trying to regain the customers who largely disappeared during the conflict and climb back from near-financial ruin. Like many other entrepreneurs, she paid her employees from her own savings even as she rented out her bean grinders. A few stalls away, Luz María Rodríguez was back at the spot she had occupied for 12 years, before a spread of de-feathered chickens and a bucket of innards. Before the turmoil began, she was selling 40 to 50 chickens daily. Today, she is happy if she can sell 10. Her own family finances are in shreds. Her husband, a taxi driver, worked only one month during the conflict and, like many of his colleagues, reports that business is still at half its pre-conflict level.

Karim Ricardez, who works in the Secretary of Finance and oversees the capital's entire tax role, predicts that it will take four years for the economy to return to its previous level.

Hotel occupancy during the conflict months fell 57 percent, according to the Secretary of Tourism. Visits to state tourist sites, including museums and archeological ruins, dropped 65 percent. An arcade owner, whose business was shored up by visits from out-of-school kids, was one of the few who reported any increase in profits.

Things are slow to pick up. In the first half of 2007, tourist visits were down 39 percent compared to the same period in 2005. From June 2007 to August 2007, a time usually bolstered by the two-week Guelaguetza cultural festival, tourism was down 36 percent from 2005.

REMORSE

The conflict also corked the tourist flow to pueblos like Juchatengo, midway between the Pacific coast and Oaxaca City, a layover for thousands on their annual pilgrimage to see the Virgin of Juquila. In the villages that previously supported Governor Ruiz and even in those that opposed him, the protests have provoked a backlash against the movement leaders.

Alberto Reyes and Jorge Angulo are two of Juchatengo's 11 council members, all affiliated with Ruiz's PRI. When asked if any locals had supported the teachers' strike, Angulo answered, "If they had, we would have hung them!"

Like many of Oaxaca's smaller communities, Juchatengo's population of 1,700 supports Ruiz. In October's mayoral elections, his party took 90 percent of all towns statewide and 38.7 percent of the vote in Oaxaca City, compared to the 5.8 percent garnered by the PRD, the left-wing party that had aligned itself with the A.P.P.O. In August's legislative elections, Ruiz's party took all 25 seats up for election, despite the A.P.P.O. calling for a "punishment vote" against the PRI.

"If there was a punishment vote, it was not against the PRI, but against the PRD for aligning itself with the A.P.P.O.," says nationally syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento.

BACKGROUND

Oaxaca, one of the poorest states in Mexico, faced a six-month protest in 2006 that crushed the state's commerce and tourism even as it failed to achieve the changes demanded by protesters. What began as a teachers' strike for higher wages was transformed into a political movement to bring down the governor, Ulises Ruiz, of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). Although the PRI went down to national defeat in 2000 after governing Mexico for seven decades, it never lost power in Oaxaca. The opposition claimed that Ruiz's election in 2004, by a margin of 2 percent, was fraudulent.

Oaxaca State Governor Ulises Ruiz listens to questions during a news conference on October 30, 2006. Below: Members of the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca look on as a car burns.

GUILLERMO ARIAS/AP; EDUARDO VERDUGO/AP

Sazón oaxaqueño
MOLE ROJO

Luz María Rodíguez has seen chicken sales plummet four fold and her family is struggling

Everyone in Oaxaca seems to have an anecdote about the corruption of Ruiz and the PRI, be it government-funded mansions or tabs used to charge tequila and $3,000 necklaces. Yet in his war with Flavio Sosa, the governor won. Billboards depicting Ruiz opening hospitals and schools under the slogan, "Oaxaca feels great. We need to keep moving forward," line roads throughout the state.

For a brief moment, the A.P.P.O. seemed to have seized an unprecedented chance for real change. But in trying to be all things to everyone, the movement in the end could not deliver to anyone. Undermined by poor leadership and scheming power brokers, today's teachers are less respected and civilians are more apathetic. One force which could have made a difference was notably missing in action from the conflict. Oaxaca's academics, says a report from the Latin American Studies Association from August of 2007, stayed above the fray. They neither supported or opposed the government. The reason? According to the association, they either feared reprisals or believed nothing would change whatever happened.

Paula Prieto's seven-year-old son, Juan Pablo, goes by the nickname of "Juanpa." During the conflict he started playing "A.P.P.O.!" with his friends, echoing protest chants and staging battles. "Why don't they just put me in power?" Juanpa asked his mother one day. By the next, he'd changed his mind. "You know, Mom," he said, "I've been thinking about this, and if the people don't like anyone, then a few days after I'm in charge they'll just be saying 'Out with Juanpa! Out with Juanpa!'"

Soon after Paula Prieto met Flavio Sosa at Santo Domingo Church in November, the protest leader was arrested along with 148 other members of the movement. "We were detained and beaten," a former prisoner charged in *A Little Bit of So Much Truth*, a documentary on the conflict released last July. "They gave us electric shocks in the feet and chest, they strangled us with nylon cords, and they forced things under our finger nails."

Principal Pérez said that the teachers will strike for Sosa's release in May 2008. Even as Oaxaca is struggling back to normalcy, the battle may not be over.

URO
ASESINO

The failure of the protests strengthened the electoral power of the PRI's Gov. Ruiz, one year after most thought his days were numbered

STEPHEN KURCZY

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