

Oaxacan Women Democratize Media *Radio Cacerola* and the *Appo* Movement

by LYNN STEPHEN | University of Oregon | stephenl@uoregon.edu

A large group of men and women from the town of Telixlahuaca was assembled in front of the COR TV and radio station on the western edge of Oaxaca City, reading a petition signed by large numbers of people. They had a list of grievances against the state governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. In addition, they declared themselves to be in solidarity with the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO) which formed in Oaxaca on June 17, 2006 after a violent attempt to evict thousands of teachers who were camping out in the *zócalo* in the city's historic center. While the teachers have sat in every year for the past 26 years as part of their annual negotiating strategy, this year their demands for school lunches, books, improvements to buildings, better science curricula, and higher salaries merged with what has become a much larger popular movement. A political miscalculation by Ruiz Ortiz to evict teachers from the *zócalo* and restore his control had the opposite outcome.

The violent eviction attempt involving more than 3000 riot police, tear gas bombs, hundreds of wounded, and the burning of the teacher's belongings, converted many in Oaxaca to active sympathizers. While much has been made of the role of the Internet in organizing anti-globalization protests, *Radio Cacerola* ("Saucepan Radio," named for the pots and pans the women marched with when they took over the station) at 96.9 FM in Oaxaca has been at the heart of ongoing mobilizations, actions, deliberations, and debates in Oaxaca City that have permanently changed the nature of public culture and politics in this southern Mexican state. The importance of control of the media for organizing and coordinating the ever-growing social movement became more apparent in the weeks that followed the public TV and radio station takeover. For several weeks, *Radio Cacerola* was the lifeline of the social movement of APPO.

As we stood outside the station after 12 noon on August 5th, there were shouts of "*Se cayó, se cayó, Ulises ya cayó.*" In an impromptu rally and welcome, several women from inside the station come out to speak to the delegation before admitting them. Marina, a young 25-year old who has dedicated herself to the radio station, declares, "We are all together in this fight. We have taken these spaces here to be the voice of all the people. That is why it is of great importance that all of you come here to help us to protect this space that gives us a voice and is providing us with ideas for how to continue our struggle. We recognize the importance of our struggle at the level of the county and throughout the state. Long live the Asamblea Popular de Oaxaca. Long Live the Oaxacan People. Long Live the Women Against the Bad Government! Long Live our Unity! The People United Will Never Be Defeated. ¡Viva! "

From early in the morning until late at night, *Radio Cacerola* became the chief means for people to voice their opinions and have debates. Everyone, from the motor-taxi association of six neighborhoods denouncing a corrupt licensing official to Zapotec vegetable farmers fed up with a corrupt local mayor, used the station to air their opinions. When local municipal police refused to leave their barracks and the Oaxacan head of Security and Transportation, Aristeo López Martínez, put together an improvised police force of undercover "municipal" police rumored to include paramilitaries from outside the state, *Radio Cacerola* announced where they were seen. When leaders of the APPO were detained without a warrant, *Radio Cacerola* relayed the kind of vehicle the police used and encouraged people in the neighborhood where the leaders were last seen to search out the car. When APPO needed to gather supporters to reinforce groups of people holding more than twenty state government buildings, the call went out

over *Radio Cacerola*. When fifty-year old José Jiménez Colmenares was shot dead in the middle of a peaceful protest march on the way to the TV station, *Radio Cacerola* broadcast the news.

Fidelia Vásquez is a sixty-year-old teacher who lives just a few blocks from *Radio Cacerola*. She became a full-time worker at the station, participating in twenty-four hour security shifts that require participants to alternate, keeping watch and sleeping every two hours. She was one of hundreds of women who took over the radio and TV station on August 1st after a group of women representing an APPO and teacher's march of almost ten thousand were denied a space on the air. Fidelia sat us down in the shade on a few chairs and began to explain how and why she got involved in *Radio Cacerola*.

"I am a woman born in Oaxaca of Zapotec and Mixtec blood. Our mission as women is to create, educate, communicate and participate. That is why we are here occupying the state radio and TV station. We want to communicate the anguish that we feel, the difficulties we experience as women in caring for our families. Our daily struggles are very difficult. We are here because we are the ones in charge of the well being of our families. We are like a lot of the humble, sincere, working people of my state. From the countryside to the city, we Oaxacan women are tired of bearing this burden alone of the repression we are experiencing from a long line of people who have governed us, and from our current governor, Ulises Ruiz.... We went out into the streets on the first of August to tell Ulises Ruiz that he had to leave Oaxaca. We don't want people like him governing us. We are members of the APPO and we are peaceful women. We are women who don't usually have a voice because we are brown, we are short, we are fat, and they think that we

STEPHEN continued...

don't represent the people, but we do. WE are the face of Oaxaca.... We are here because we want a free Mexico, a democratic Mexico and we have had enough.... They will have to take us out of here dead, but we are going to defend the TV station and radio."

Nine days later, I returned to the radio station to film a daily radio show hosted by Concepción "Conchita" Núñez, a sociologist, teacher, women's organizer and core member of the group of women working in the radio station. She was hosting Pilar Monterrubio who was discussing the violent murders of women in Oaxaca, as well as the experience of women in the June 14th attempt to forcibly evict the teachers. Conchita and Pilar discussed the women's march in great detail. Pilar commented, "This is a very female space here at the radio station. Women are running everything." The conversation then turned to the experience of June 14th when the state police attempted to forcibly evict the teachers.

While the radio show was going on, a large march was making its way towards the radio and TV station, where it was going to conclude. At one point during the show, organizers at the front of the march called in on a cell phone to report the progress of the march and to give estimates of the number of people. Another announcement was made in connection to the march, asking listeners to help locate three teachers who had been disappeared earlier that day.

"We are putting out a call to demand that Ramiro Aragón Pérez, Elionai Santiago Sánchez and Juan Gabriel Ríos be returned alive. They all disappeared today at dawn. Ramiro's wife spoke with him at one in the morning, but, after that, no one has heard from him. He was supposed to come home at seven in the morning to take care of his

kids so his wife can go to work. He didn't come home and he didn't communicate.... Family members of the three have begun to look for them, but until this moment have not been able to find them. We implore that they be returned alive, and we hold the government, the ex-governor Ulises Ortiz Ruiz, responsible for anything that happens to these *compañeros*." This was broadcast together with calls for the freedom of several leaders of the APPO and of those teachers who had been arrested without warrants and sent to prison. The broadcast was echoed by those in the march. Ramiro Aragón later appeared alive, but with signs of severe torture.

The radio show ended. Conchita and Pilar left the station to talk and have coffee. Twenty minutes later, the march approached the station, winding its way around the block. While I was waiting for the march to approach, I chatted with Domingo Sánchez, a Zapotec bilingual school teacher from a small town south of Oaxaca City near Sola de Vega. He commented on the women in the radio station: "Here in Mexico there is a lot of *machismo*.... But it is really the women who work the hardest. They are the ones who permit us to be here in the first place. Here at the radio station you can really see how much women can do. They are the ones who are participating more here than the men. They are in charge."

About midway through the march, shots were fired into the crowd from a house adjoining a medical clinic. José Jiménez Colmenares died almost instantly. His widow, teacher Florina Jiménez Lucas relayed to me what happened after the march: "We joined the march at about five o'clock in the afternoon. It was peaceful; we walked past the ADO bus station, the Llano Park, the center. We were going along shouting our slogans against the governor like, "Fuera Ulises."... In Division Oriente

Street, we heard shots.... I was walking with my husband. Then someone said, 'men move forward,' to protect the women. My husband moved up some steps and I heard a burst of very rapid shots. There were bullets fired very quickly. I heard them and I turned around. I saw my husband. He fell.... Then some other people approached to help him, to carry him. We walked a few steps. I pleaded with him to resist dying, to hold on. Then someone said, 'Here is a hospital. Bring him in.' We brought him into the clinic. They wouldn't let me into the operating room. After a few minutes, they let me in. When I went in they said, "He is already dead.' They didn't even try to help him.

Following the death of José Colmenares, a large silent march was called to commemorate his sacrifice, and for the freeing of additional political prisoners. Three days later a "National Forum on Building Democracy and Governability in Oaxaca" drew almost 1800 participants from across Mexico as well as from Oaxaca. Two days of debate and discussion focused on writing a new state constitution, constructing a transitional government and political program, and on gender, ethnic, sexual orientation and other forms of diversity. Participants voted on a wide range of accords and strategies that included indigenous rights, women's rights, gay, lesbian, and transsexual rights, and plans for building local and regional assemblies to discuss and disseminate the results of the forum. At the closing ceremony of the forum on August 18th, August 1st was declared "Day of the Oaxacan Woman" in honor of the courageous takeover of Channel 9 by APPO women. Throughout the forum, women from *Radio Cacerola* were amply represented and did not hesitate to speak out.

On Monday, August 21st, a group of civilian-clothed “police” drove up the mountain to the Cerro Fortín and opened fire on the transmission towers for Channel 9 and *Radio Cacerola* 96.9 FM. This offensive against APPO, and their control of the state media, opened a further round of confrontations. That same day, APPO members took over twelve commercial radio stations and began broadcasting across the state. They retained five of them. In the first hours of Tuesday, a “clean-up operation” of 400 Ministerial State Police and Municipal Police of Oaxaca City opened fire on APPO members who were guarding one of the newly-taken radio stations. Lorenzo San Pablo Cervantes, chief of the Department of Educational Spaces of the Ministry of Public Works of the State of Oaxaca was shot to death in the attack. In early September, the APPO declared governor Ruiz Ortiz to be “exiled” from Oaxaca and took steps to set up a parallel “good government” for the city with plans for organizing popular assemblies throughout the state.

The women of *Radio Cacerola* as well as many of the other Oaxacans who joined in supporting APPO and the teachers have been forever changed by their experiences during August of 2006. The opening up of spaces like *Radio Cacerola* and the inclusions of thousands in a new public discourse of democracy and inclusion has left many with a new-found sense of respect, of “having rights” and of being “someone” who has the right to speak and be listened to. ■

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