

Oaxaca in Los Angeles, Los Angeles in Oaxaca: Transborder Organizing in California

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In June 2006 the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO), a coalition of over 300 organizations, was formed in the Mexican state of Oaxaca to support striking teachers and to construct a more inclusive and participatory political vision for the state. During the summer and fall of that year, what had begun as a peaceful occupation of Oaxaca City's historic colonial square by teachers demanding higher salaries and better educational benefits for students was transformed into a widespread, militant social movement. The transformation, and the creation of the APPO, took place as state police violently attempted to evict the teachers from the square (see Stephen 2009). The teachers belonged to Section 22 of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE), a famously independent local of about 60,000 teachers and education workers within the larger national union. Its members come from all over the state of Oaxaca and many have relatives who have migrated to other parts of Mexico or to the United States. In particular, many members of Section 22 have relatives—and retired former colleagues—in the Los Angeles, California area. It came as no surprise, then, that after its inception, the movement began to develop links with family members and organizations in Los Angeles.

Soon after its formation, the APPO held “mega-marches” of thousands of supporters, occupied state and federal buildings and offices, took over the state's television and radio stations, constructed barricades in many neighborhoods, and developed neighborhood and community councils that elected representatives to a statewide provisional council of the APPO in the fall of 2006. The coalition questioned the legitimacy of the state government of then-governor Ulises Ruiz and the Institutional Revolutionary Party

(PRI), which had ruled in Oaxaca for eighty years (see Stephen 2011).

Transborder Activism: APPO Los Angeles

The Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB)¹, which includes significant numbers of teachers and indigenous leaders, was one of the Los Angeles organizations most directly connected to Section 22 and to the APPO.² As Oaxacans in Los Angeles became concerned about repression against the teachers and saw live reports of the militant demonstrations taking place in Oaxaca City, they began to talk with FIOB leaders to find out what they could do to support the movement.

A group of FIOB members from Los Angeles and Fresno made a trip to Oaxaca in August 2006 and met directly with APPO leaders, leaders of Section 22, and others in Oaxaca City, Juchitahuaca, and in Huajuapán de León. Rufino Domínguez, who was the general coordinator of the FIOB at the time, met with Enrique Rueda Pacheco who was the head of the teacher's union. Odilia Romero, who served as coordinator of women's affairs of the FIOB, also went on the trip and visited the women who had occupied the public television and radio stations and went on to occupy several commercial radio stations in Oaxaca as well.

One of the decisions the FIOB leadership had to make was to distinguish between the indigenous and migrant rights struggles that were front and center on the FIOB agenda and other broader issues. Since not all FIOB members were in agreement with the other organizations that wanted to support the APPO and Section 22 in Oaxaca, it was decided to form a separate APPO in which FIOB members could

participate. The new group was called APPO Los Angeles.

Members of the newly formed APPO Los Angeles decided to engage in a series of local public mobilizations to call attention to the repression faced by the movement of Oaxaca. These continued through the fall of 2006 and into 2007 and included actions such as those on the Day of the Dead with coffins to represent those who had died in the Oaxaca conflict, and an APPOsada in December that combined the traditional posada marking the search of Mary and Joseph for shelter before Christ's birth with support for the APPO.

This series of marches, protest actions, rallies, and meetings at the Mexican Consulate intensified the network of relations not only between different parts of the Oaxacan community, but also between Oaxacans and other Mexicans and Latinos in Los Angeles. In addition, the ways in which the marches were organized suggested the power of simple telecommunications and electronic information sharing in binational organizing and mobilization.

Cell phone communication not only played an important role in helping APPO leaders from different regions of Oaxaca to communicate with one another, it also facilitated some of the most emotionally intense and dramatic moments of transborder organizing between APPO Oaxaca and APPO Los Angeles. During the Los Angeles marches, APPO leaders in Los Angeles began to establish direct connections with APPO leaders in Oaxaca, frequently calling them on their cell phones and then holding the phones up to microphones so that they could be broadcast throughout the park for everyone to hear. FIOB activist Gaspar Rivera-Salgado describes this:

It was very interesting to hear these reports from Oaxaca at night in MacArthur Park. When the leaders from Oaxaca were speaking, a great silence would go over the crowd because people were paying such careful attention. They were absorbing every word that was said, listening very carefully to the description of the movement in Oaxaca. This really united people here who were mobilizing. This would happen in the park in front of the Mexican Consulate here. And of course they would say, "Thank you so much for your solidarity in Los Angeles."

Odilia Romero remembers these moments of broadcast phone-calls as having a great emotional impact on her and others.

I think that for me, the moment that caused me the greatest personal impact was when we would hear the *compañeros* crying over the phone when we had our connections with them. I remember another time when a band from the community of Solaga played the Canción Mixteca for them on the other end of the telephone and Ezequiel Rosales Carreno said, "This really moves me."

The transborder ties that were strengthened through APPO Los Angeles went on to play an important role in the electoral organizing and campaigning for the Oaxaca governorship in 2010. The election of Gabino Cué, the state's first non-PRI governor in modern times, who ran as a candidate of the opposition alliance (PRD-PAN-Convergencia) in 2006, was helped by the strong ties forged through the FIOB with Section 22, APPO, and other Oaxacan organizations. Cué invited one of FIOB's founders, Rufino Domínguez Santos, to serve in his administration as director of the Oaxacan Institute for Attention to Migrants. Domínguez Santos accepted, signaling a

new era in the FIOB's relationship with the Oaxaca state government. This new relationship was manifested at the binational assembly held in 2011.

The Seventh General Assembly of the FIOB in Oaxaca

In October 2011, the FIOB elected new leaders and developed binational policy and strategy through a series of discussions and a plenary assembly. Delegates included seasoned leaders who had been at many prior assemblies as well as a significant number who were coming to their first general assembly. What was most notable at the opening ceremonies of the assembly was the open embrace of the FIOB by representatives of the progressive wing of the Oaxacan state government. While prior congresses and FIOB participation in the APPO were received with veiled hostility at best and attempts at repression at worst, the seventh assembly signaled the open support of Gabino Cué's government for the FIOB. It also suggested the maturity and political clout of the FIOB as an organization in having people from the governor's cabinet present. This change in relationship was most strongly marked by the presence of Domínguez Santos and Gerardo Albino, Secretary of Social Development in the Cué government (Cano 2011). Another notable aspect of the assembly was that of six newly elected leaders, two are young women from California (FIOB 2011).

Discussion and debate took place in four working groups where delegates debated intensely for five hours the recommendations they would take to the plenary to be voted on. Broad themes included for discussion were development, migration and the right *not* to migrate; binational migration policy; and binational

organizational strategy. I attended the working group on binational organizational strategies. There, about twenty-five people focused on themes including gender equity, housing, cultural revitalization through indigenous languages, traditional medicine, the participation of the elderly in education, and strategies to recruit and retain women and young people in the leadership of the FIOB. There were also discussions on sustainable economic development and how to promote locally produced products such as food and crafts, as well as the need for indigenous interpreters, doctors and health workers. Delegates also proposed adoption of local measures that could be taken to preserve water sources, forests, and to promote recycling.

The general assembly also bared some of the cultural differences that frequently emerge in the various local and national contexts in which the FIOB operates. One of the most interesting exchanges took place during the plenary discussion. The first set of proposals to be discussed included amendments to the statutes of the FIOB. A delegate from California raised his hand and proposed, "that we add to the statutes that decisions be made by means of a secret ballot." The proposal sparked a lively debate, primarily critical of the suggestion. "With all due respect to the *compañero*," replied another delegate, "we do not want a secret vote. We want to keep following our *usos y costumbres* (customary law and governance practices) to vote. We are indigenous and our form of governance is to vote openly in our assemblies." A discussion ensued about the importance of continuing the assembly form of governance found in many indigenous communities in Oaxaca. Some delegates, however, also raised the problems associated with open voting. One of them stated, "People might not

feel free to vote if they had to vote against someone who was a relative or someone who had more power than them in the organization.” In conventional elections the secret ballot is a defense mechanism against political party manipulation, but here, the proposal was defeated in a vote by delegates who raised their hands with their credential cards waving to be counted, for and against. This moment captured the hybrid nature of experience and ideas that are found within the FIOB.

The past six years have seen the FIOB move from a position of direct conflict with the state government of Oaxaca to one of coalition and cooperation in areas that make sense for its agenda. With more women and youth in its leadership, the FIOB continues to broaden its appeal through a transborder discourse of indigeneity, along with economic, human, political, and labor rights for migrants. Its broad reach and claim on the region known as Oaxacalifornia (the states of Oaxaca, Baja California del Norte, and California) offers innovative strategies for building regional political power and presence through sustained and coordinated transborder organizing at local, regional, and national levels.

Endnotes

- ¹ The FIOB was founded in Los Angeles California in 1991 with the name Frente Mixteco Zapoteco Binacional (FMZB). Three years later the organization changed its name to the Frente Indígena Oaxaqueño Binacional (FIOB) to reflect the presence of Triquis, Chatinos, and Mixes. In 2005, at its Fifth General Binational Assembly in Oaxaca, Mexico the organization changed its name again keeping the same acronym. It became Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales to include Purépecha members from Michoacán and Mixtecos from Guerrero.
- ² Ed Kissam (2012) estimates that there are approximately 1.4 million residents in Los Angeles county born in Mexico based on the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) data and approximately 52,000 Oaxacan indigenous migrants in Los Angeles county. This is calculated using ACS data and correcting for an undercount and racial misclassification. In addition there are likely another approximately 17,000 U.S.-born children of Oaxacan indigenous migrants. This makes a total of approximately 69,000 indigenous Oaxacans in Los Angeles County.

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