

Schools for Chiapas presents:

Teach Chiapas video series

Who are the Zapatistas?

The Zapatistas are a movement. The Zapatistas are a revolution. The Zapatistas are men and women and children and elders, and even a chicken and a horse or two. The Zapatistas are farmers. The Zapatistas call the earth their Mother, and they call themselves the people of corn. The Zapatistas are indigenous Mayan people. They speak many languages and they come from many cultures.

Oh yeah, and they wear masks in public. Why do they do that? Are they super heroes? Are they pirates? Are they shy? No! We'll find out why they cover their faces in a few minutes.

The Zapatistas were born in the jungles and mountains of southeastern Mexico in a state called Chiapas, where for over 500 years their families and communities have been struggling to survive, resisting. Indigenous people in Mexico have a long history of resisting. They resisted the Spanish invasion in the 1500s. Then they resisted slavery and oppression on the plantations until the Mexican Revolution in 1910, when they joined the fight for land and freedom, crying out: "The land belongs to those who work it!"

Because land is not just land: Land gives life: that's why they call it Mother Earth and work to defend her. Land gives freedom, because when you have land you can grow food, and play, and sleep, and work, without asking anyone else for permission, you just do it yourself with your family and community.

But wait, we were talking about the Zapatistas!

Like I was saying, they were born in the jungle, in Chiapas, and in 1983 they began preparing secretly to take back the land they needed to survive, land that was taken from their ancestors, land that was being stolen by the rich while poor people died of hunger and curable diseases. Can you imagine losing a family member from a cold, or from diarrhea? And no one even noticed, no one cared. Indigenous people were forgotten by everyone.

But the Zapatistas were tired of dying without anyone caring. They wanted the world to see that they existed, to hear what they thought. They wanted the whole world to hear their demands for: Peace! And justice! Democracy! Freedom! Independence! Culture! Information! Food! Health care! Housing! Work! Land! And education! So after ten years of secret preparation, they were ready to act.

On the morning of January 1st, 1994, they started a revolution. And they covered their faces to tell the world who they were: ¡Zapatistas! They cried out, “¡Ya Basta!” which means, “Enough is Enough!” They said: Enough dying of curable diseases! Enough hunger! Enough oppression! Enough of being forgotten! They declared war on the Mexican government and took back land that had been stolen from them. They knew another world was possible.

But the Mexican army attacked the Zapatistas with troops, tanks, planes, and bombs. Fighting lasted for 12 days. The Mexican people heard the words of the Zapatistas and agreed with their demands. Throughout Mexico, people demonstrated for peace and justice. So many people supported the Zapatistas that the Mexican congress passed a law recognizing their movement and establishing a ceasefire. To this day, the Zapatistas have respected the call for peace by the Mexican people and avoided combat. However, the Mexican government and its military continue to attack the Zapatistas even though a peace agreement called the Peace Accords of San Andres was signed between the Zapatistas and the Mexican government.

The Zapatistas figured out that the government was not going to end the war against them, so they chose to work for peace on their own together with other Mexicans and people from around the world who cared about them. They began building the new world they had dreamed about for so long. They planted their own food, they built their own houses, and they built their own hospitals, and then they built their own schools, and they even created their own government. They call it, “The Good Government,” because the people make their own decisions and work together: there’s no bosses, no one telling them what to do.

And life got better! They began meeting other people (thousands and thousands of them!), people from other parts of Mexico and other parts of the world. They held

big meetings and celebrations to learn from one another, to share ideas about how to build a world where many worlds fit.

The Zapatistas are still resisting. They don't have much money, but they have a rare treasure that no one can ever take away: "Autonomy." What's that? Autonomy. Autonomy is freedom and independence. It's being able to do things yourself. It's supporting one another. It's building a whole new world according to what you need, what you can create yourself, and what you imagine.

The Zapatistas say, "We are creating our own autonomy, we are creating a new and better world." So, what about you? What can you imagine? Do you ever see injustice where you live? Can you imagine a better world? What can you do to begin building a new and better world?