

## **Mexico City's Political Gridlock**

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**Counterpunch** - John Ross - Car ownership is one of the great divides between Lopez Obrador's base, "los de abajo"--those from down below--and his right-wing rival Felipe Calderon to whom the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) has awarded a much-questioned 243,000 vote "victory" in the July 2 balloting. While Lopez Obrador summons millions to the great central Zocalo plaza on foot, Calderon's PAN party's most emblematic mode of mobilization is the motorcade in which the right-wingers climb into their gleaming chariots and drive around, mindlessly beating on their horns in syncopation.

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### **Fumes of a Fraudulent Election**

#### **[Class War Amid Mexico City's Gridlock](#)**

#### **JOHN ROSS**

Counterpunch  
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Mexico City traffic is legendary. At peak hours, 5,000,000 vehicles clog this mountain capital's narrow streets and broad avenues, vomiting tons of noxious fumes that atrophy the lungs of the metropolitan area's 23 million chilangos (denizens of "Make Sicko" City - dixit Carlos Fuentes) and shriveling up the capital's few green spaces. Sitting stuck in traffic jam-ups for hours can be dangerous to one's personal well being--carjackers and "express" kidnappers prowl the freeways for well-heeled victims.

The car wars here are a codeword for class war. Poor people scrape by on public transportation: tens of thousands of effluvia-spewing tin can minibuses complimented by a clean, low-priced and over-saturated subway system, the Metro. But the first car is often the first step up the class ladder and lower middle class Mexicans spend a lot of time in their vehicles. In an effort to curb the killer smogs that such an egregious fetish for the internal combustion engine generates, the city has long enforced a one (sometimes two) day don't drive ordinance but the middle class and the uppers just buy second and third cars to drive on the off days.

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Indeed, when leftist presidential contender Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador who insists he has been cheated out of victory in the July 2 elections here, was mayor of Mexico City he catered to the motorist class by putting a second deck on the Periferico ring road freeway that encouraged even more citizens to congeal the capital's thoroughfares.

But despite AMLO's zeal for internal combustion, when on Sunday July 30, before 2.4 million followers, Lopez Obrador encouraged his disenchanting supporters to establish 47 camps, many of them strung along one of the city's most elegant boulevards in a move to impress upon a seven-judge panel the historical importance of ruling in favor of a vote by vote recount, Mexico City's motorist class and the media that panders to it, rose up as one fist in mass indignation.

On a good day, the Paseo de la Reforma is choked with ten lanes of traffic--pedestrians take their life in hand to cross it. Originally designed by dictator Porfirio Diaz (1876-1910) to be a replica of the Champs Elysee, it is lined with skyscrapers that shelter transnational corporations and luxury chain hotels, the Mexican stock market, and the fortress U.S. Embassy. For the most part, those who toil in the towers soaring above the Paseo de la Reforma do not take public transportation to work.

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AMLO's orders to close down major city streets to traffic has driven off some high gloss supporters--Carlos Monsivais, perhaps the nation's most distinguished social critic, broke ranks with Lopez Obrador over what he considered a trampling of the rights of the motoring class. Moreover, environmentalists who have been trying to get the cars off the streets for years grew apoplectic because the traffic pile-ups the blockade creates, is making it harder to breath.

CAMPING OUT

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The encampments stretch from the Periferico out in the ritzy Polanco district nine kilometers east to the Zocalo in the crumbling old quarter of the city. The great square has been sectioned off into 31 state camps where AMLO's people live under enormous tents, the origin of which is uncertain. Some of the encampments function better than others. The Oaxaca delegation, veterans of such camp outs (striking teachers back home have been occupying the state capital's main plazas for three months) are said to have the best "cocina". Oaxacan cuisine is internationally celebrated. Meanwhile the folks from Campeche have run out of money and will soon be heading back to that far-off southern state.

AMLO sleeps with the delegates from the states--albeit in a fenced-off enclave under a private tent. It is not the first time that Lopez Obrador has encamped in the Zocalo. In 1995, after big-time electoral fraud in his home state of Tabasco, the leftist led hundreds of ragtag campesinos in a 1300-kilometer odyssey, "the Exodus for Democracy", which bedded down on these rain-soaked stones for weeks. Later, he would govern the capital from City Hall on one corner of the Tienemens-sized Square and if he does ever ascend to the presidency, he has promised to move into the National Palace on another corner.

Extending west from the Zocalo, AMLO's people in the 16 delegations or boroughs of the capital have set up their own encampments. The Cuauhtemoc and Carranza delegations occupy Madero Street on a strip of the Centro Historico refurbished by Lopez Obrador in collusion with the third richest tycoon in the known universe, Carlos Slim. The contours of the old quarter or Centro Historico roughly correspond to the island of Tenochtitlan, the heart of the Aztec empire.

AMLO's encampments here bear more than a passing resemblance to those set up on these same streets by the "damnificados" (refugees) from the killer 1985 earthquake that may have taken as many as 30,000 lives--the damnificado movement was the "caldo" (soup) in which Mexico's resilient civil society was brewed. In fact, some of those living on the streets now, lived on them back then. At a meeting in one of the tents on Madero and Motelinia to hash out food supply problems, Tona Lechuga from nearby Regina Street recalls how food stores were organized after the 1985 cataclysm. "We need to do this right" she insists, "We have an army to feed."

The encampment in the Centro under a contiguous awning to fend off the incessant rain is kind of a carnival tunnel of love. Folk dancers from the Yucatan step smartly on a makeshift stage, a raucous ska band tootles on another. The booths are staffed by petitioners and political cartoons festoon the pup tents. Notes to AMLO scrawled in magic marker on rain-curled colored paper are hung on clotheslines: "Gracias Senor for existing--the Carrasco Family" and "Ya No Nos Dejan a Chingar!" (Now we are not going to let them screw us over!) Pedestrians line up for

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free popcorn distributed by the banda from Tepito, a tough inner city neighborhood. There are puppetry classes, chess players. "The sexual rights workshop will follow the domino tournament," someone on a bullhorn advises.

The encampments continue down Juarez Avenue, individual cubicles of plastic, structures fashioned from cardboard and scraps of wood fished out of the dumpsters under which to huddle when the deluge falls hard. It is the height of the rainy season in this mile-high megalopolis and on the third night of the encampments, hardball-sized hail pelted down from the heavens, flattening the tents under slabs of ice. Drains flooded out and the water rose to the campers' knees. It was that way in the damnificado camps too, reminisces one soggy AMLO supporter, Josue, a member of the still-militant Assembly of Neighborhoods whose peoples' superhero SuperBarrio is said to be lurking under one of the tents.

The encampments strung along the Paseo de Reforma, the ones that so annoy Calderon and the right-wingers (one inflamed PANista drove his monster SUV through 12 tents and injured three campers on Saturday night) are more sparsely populated. Protestors play soccer in the wide roadbed, do Tai Chi, and practice their steps for the big "Bailongo Against The Fraud" dance contest. Masked wrestlers tumble about an impromptu ring.

Together, the 47 encampments have constituted themselves as another city inside the belly of this urban beast, a corridor of resistance and a seam of solidarity sewn by a civil society that continues to be Mexico's most vital resource.

## SMOKING VOLCANO

AMLO speaks to the masses every evening at seven. I often go early and stand with the old-timers to wax nostalgic about past electoral frauds. 73 year-old Ponciano Aguirre, a tiny farmer from Izucar de Matamoros Puebla, recalls how Cuauhtemoc Cardenas met secretly twice with Carlos Salinas after Salinas has stolen the 1988 election from him. Lopez Obrador is not like Cardenas, Ponciano insists, "AMLO will never go behind our backs or sell us out."

On the eve of the decision of the seven-judge electoral tribunal (TRIFE) in re AMLO's demands for a total recount of the 42,000,000 ballots cast July 2, the wily leftist pumps up the crowd,

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exhorting the justices to rule for once in the name of the people. Mexican judicial history is not studded with many decisions that have favored los de abajo. Lopez Obrador ransacks back through the annals and finds a Supreme Court headed by Benito Juarez that stood up to the PANistas of his day in the middle of the 19th century and a single judge who ruled in favor of Lazaro Cardenas's expropriation and nationalization of Mexico's petroleum reserves in 1938. Outside of that the record is bleak, the courts coming down again and again against indigenous rights, workers' rights, individual guarantees, in favor of the fat cats and the oligarchs. "We hope that tomorrow will be a different story," he tells the damp assembly but his hope does not sound robust.

The morning dawns in drenching rain. The Centro Historico is made out of stone and the damp digs in deep. Thunder rumbles all morning, jagged bolts of lightning zigzag from the frowning sky. AMLO's supporters squinch down under plastic, gathered around hand-held radios listening to the TRIFE session carried live from the tribunal's bunker in the way south of the city outside of whose gates hundreds more had assembled. Others watched on the big screen hung in the Zocalo.

The reasoning of the judges is convoluted, delivered in a jargon few of AMLO's people understand. But the gist is clear: Lopez Obrador's demand to open all 130,000 ballot boxes had been denied. Little Ponciano Aguirre shakes his brown fist at the big screen and chants the magical slogan: "if there is no solution, there will be a revolution."

Everywhere, the peoples' mood is as dark as the glowering heavens. Grown men weep in frustration and grandmothers beat furiously on the bars of the tribunal's formidable fortifications with their umbrellas. "Voto por Voto" has been the battle cry of the amazing civil resistance los de abajo has mounted in these last weeks and now their dreams had been shipwrecked upon the shoals of an immovable justice system. The TRIFE was the court of last resort and there was no appeal.

But the judges had softened the deathblow, ordering the vote-by-vote recount of nearly 12,000 "casillas" (electoral precincts), a little less than 10% of the total, almost 4,000,000 votes. Moreover, the vast majority of those ballot boxes to be reopened came from districts in which Calderon had piled up a suspiciously large majority. If AMLO could take ten votes from Calderon in each casilla, he would in fact be in a flat-footed tie with the right-winger. The recount was set to begin Wednesday, August 9 and last five days. What is wrong with this picture? The same district IFE officials who had presided over the July 2 debacle would do the counting.

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Lopez Obrador could not, of course, accept the TRIFE's "10% Solution"--"We want 100% democracy!" he shouts to his sopping followers on the night of the decision, "the TRIFE's refusal to open all the ballot boxes is proof that we have won this election!" "If there is no solution, there will be a revolution" his people holler back.

The judicial twists and turns confuse and frustrate the leftist's bases and they are tuning out on the legal niceties. As AMLO repeatedly has pointed out, the courts have never been a venue where los de abajo might find justice. "Airport! Airport!" they keep chanting at a massive Zocalo rally the morning after, urging the masses to shut down Mexico City's bustling International Airport which has been ringed for days by hundreds of federal preventative police to prevent rumored disruptions. Last week, thousands shut down the Mexican stock market for the morning. Other institutions protestors have in their sights include the National Palace, the Congress of the country, and the nation's oil drilling platforms. Some have called for a general strike. AMLO's people should just all get naked, a favored form of political protest here, an angry market woman shouts at Lopez Obrador during Sunday's broiling assembly.

AMLO walks a tightrope between his own defiance and trying to keep a lid on his steamed-up supporters. He often quotes Gandhi at his rallies and the film of the same name is being shown in the encampments. He counsels his people to keep "a hot heart but a cold head" and non-violence training is in the works. Hundreds of volunteer musicians have been enlisted to soothe the savage breast of the people but after the TRIFE's decision came down and a group of musicos launched into a "rola", the angry mob just told them to shut up and go home.

How long Lopez Obrador's inflamed supporters can be contained is really the subtext of this on-going high stakes drama that may not be resolved until September 5 when the TRIFE must confirm Calderon's victory or else annul the whole election.

On the dark morning that the court refused to open the ballot boxes and count them out "voto por voto", as if to mirror the black mood of AMLO's people, Popocateptl, the smoking volcano south of the city whose eruptions always presage bad news, gasped violently seven times, exhaling molten rock and great gulps of scalding steam, the first time the old mountain has expressed its anger in several years. Those who seek to impose Felipe Calderon as president of Mexico ought to consider the omens. They may indeed be successful in screwing the people but you don't really want to mess with the Gods.

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**John Ross's** "ZAPATISTAS! Making Another World Possible ?\_" Chronicles of Resistance 2000-2006" will be published by Nation Books in October. Ross is now tracking down venues for presentations. All suggestions will be cheerfully accepted at: [johnross@igc.or](mailto:johnross@igc.or)

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