

## The Freedom Fighters of Tomorrow Young and Old Converge for the Opening of the Other Campaign

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**SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS, CHIAPAS, MEXICO:** Walking to Zócalo, the central park in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, in the early afternoon of New Years Day, we passed this house (left), with a timely reminder of the sort of social organisation the Zapatistas are fighting to overcome.

On arriving at Zócalo, the square was a hive of activity, although the delegates were not expected until several hours later. Various political and social groups were setting up information stalls, portable toilets were in place, and food vendors were preparing for what was sure to be a busy night.

The members of the press was setting up their vantage point beneath a black cross commemorating [Amado Avendaño Figueroa](#) and other journalists killed in the struggle. As the afternoon wore on, musicians and poets entertained the growing crowd — everyone was here, from a bent old woman begging, to family groups spanning several generations, tourists, teenagers, nuns.

“Servant Wanted”

*Photo: D.R. 2005 Julie Webb-Pullman*

This was no rabid revolutionary rabble, but a gathering of very determined and very ordinary people – families, workers, *campesinos* and *campesinas*, artisans, babes in arms, all collecting to see their delegates, to hear the words that would resonate with their shared experience of marginalization in their own country, that would give voice to their ceaseless determination to fight for a better world for all.

Five o’clock came and went, and as night fell, reports came in that the delegation had been delayed, but the crowd did not lose patience or focus – it was like a five-hour speech by Fidel, but without his presence! After a progress report indicating there was still a considerable wait, various members of the public took turns onstage singing, playing the guitar, reciting a poem.

Suddenly there was action, security personnel clearing a path through the middle of the multitude, and like a choreographed whirlwind the delegates and their security cordon swirled past like some inspired martial dance, the delegates securely in the centre of an ever-moving mass of black masks and backpacks circling, puffs of smoke from the ever-present pipe the only indicator of the presence of Delegate Zero. He paused, turned to face the journalists screaming for a shot, then was gone, onstage.

Even little kids were in on the action, stealing the limelight.



*Photo: D.R. 2005 Julie Webb-Pullman*



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Several of the twenty or thirty delegates onstage spoke about various aspects of their campaign, the women receiving particularly rousing receptions. Finally it was the turn of Delegate Zero, who paid tribute to those who fell in combat 12 years ago in the armed uprising, and called for a minute's silence. Then it was down to business, with greetings of hope, dignity, and mutual respect in the autonomous but common struggle to build their own regulatory, political, economic, social and cultural systems. "Brothers and sisters, we have nothing else to give you other than our seeds of hope, other than our rebel and indigenous dignified hearts. Take them in order to continue scattering more seeds among your different

peoples of the world," were his parting words and they were off, leaving in the same flurry of whirling masks and scarves as their arrival. This time the press surged forward in a last desperate attempt to get "the shot," and I was swept off my feet and propelled along by the sheer force of burly corporate press boys and the surging crowd, like being caught in the front row of a scrum, crushed against the last line of masked Zapatistas as they retreated, my camera clutched in one hand, finger pressing the shutter randomly in the hope that just maybe, it would catch a shot of Marcos if he by some miracle heeded the hundreds of voices of crowd and press alike calling him to turn, look their way for one last glimpse before he disappeared into the night, and I was finally spat out by the crowd into an island of stillness.

I wandered back through the crowd, many now sitting or lying on the ground, settling in for the night, chatting to a group of women here, a bunch of boys there.

Young boys, 13 or 14 years old, boys whose masks gave them the courage to josh and jive with me, puffing cigarette smoke through their masks like Marcos, getting me to take pictures of them, then teasing each other when they saw the shots.

Teenagers like anywhere, sneaking a cigarette, playing the fool, flirting – but with the added and certain knowledge that they are the freedom fighters of tomorrow.



*Photo: D.R. 2005 Julie Webb-Pullman*