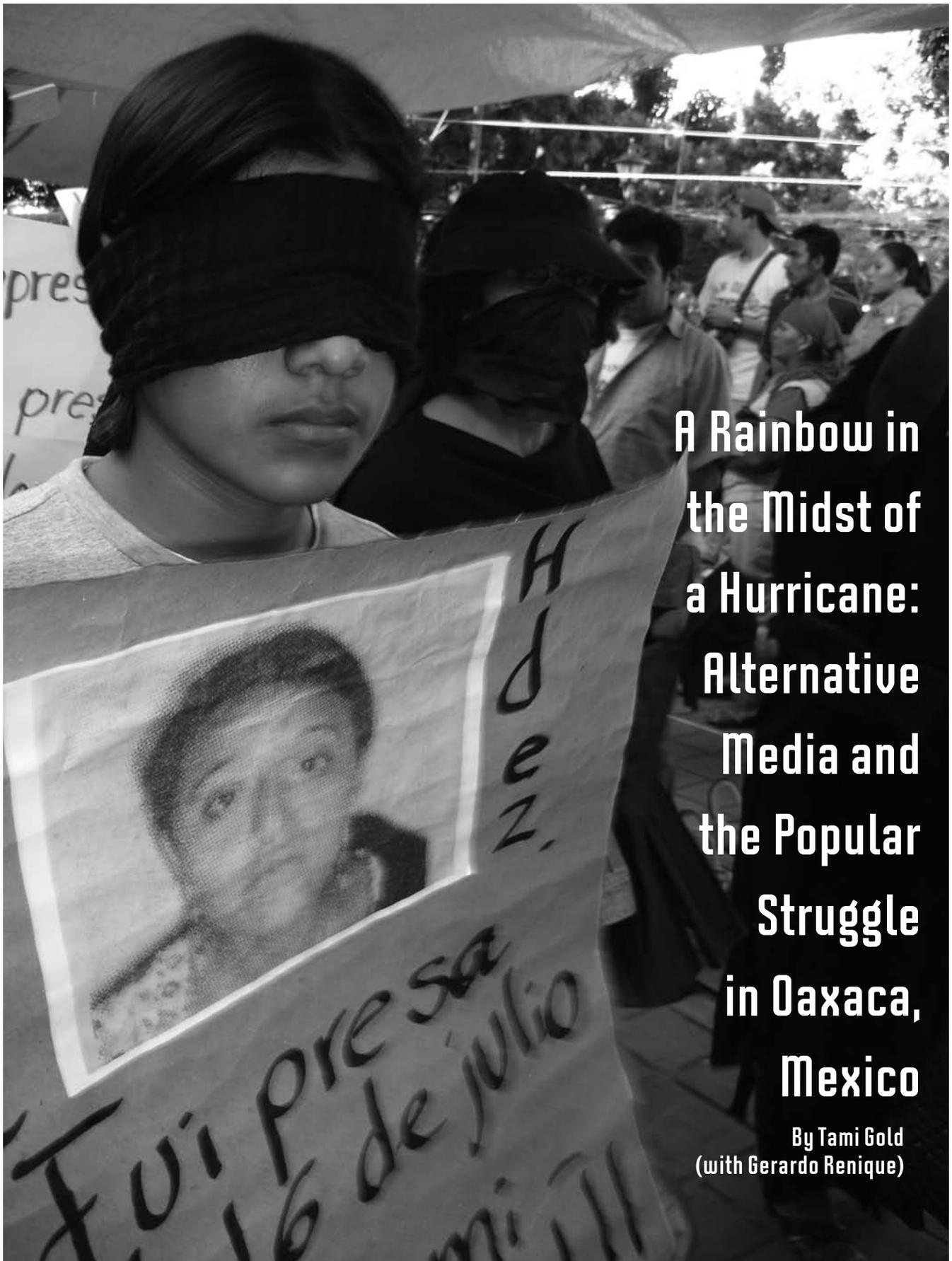




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**A Rainbow in
the Midst of
a Hurricane:
Alternative
Media and
the Popular
Struggle
in Oaxaca,
Mexico**

**By Tami Gold
(with Gerardo Renique)**

JULY 18, 2007. APPO MARCH IN REACTION TO CONTINUED POLICE ATTACKS
(YOUNG APPO MEMBER WITH FACE COVERED TO PROTECT IDENTITY).
PHOTO BY TAMI GOLD

“Alternative Media” has meant different things to me since I was first introduced to it in the New York Newsreel Film Collective of the 1970s. Back in the day it was a way to scream, to vent in opposition to the political policies of my government (the United States) in Guatemala, Vietnam, and Puerto Rico. Then came the birth of public access television where the means of production were turned over to everyday people concerned with community issues. As a result of this development a new generation of media makers, learning how to produce talk shows and activate needed debate, was born. With the evolution of small format video (hi 8, mini DV), alternative media found its mission within grassroots movements, sometimes incorporating a personal voice. Today it has new potential powers with broad visibility through theatrical distribution, web streaming, and You Tube.

Throughout all these stages alternative media has had a dramatic impact on teaching in the classroom. At the same time people were able to see video work with radical content in church basements, living rooms, temples, community centers, town squares, and home computers, expanding the notion of education and taking it beyond the classroom.

During the summer of 2006 in Oaxaca, Mexico, I witnessed alternative media become an integral part of a social justice movement even to the point of taking over the dominant media structures.

* * *

“When the social movement in Oaxaca became more intense I felt compelled to go there. I had been following the news daily. I borrowed money, a video camera and a cell phone, and took my tape recorder to document the actions and give voice to the movement.”

*Benjamin Alonso, Media Activist,
Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico*

The Democratic Uprising of Oaxaca

What began as a teachers’ strike in Oaxaca, Mexico, in May 2006,

erupted into a massive movement for profound social change on June 14, when police made a surprise attack, using bullets and tear gas to evict the strikers and their families from the city’s historic center. The police attack backfired as public anger and outrage over the repression transformed the teachers’ strike into an unprecedented democratic insurgency demanding the resignation of the governor and the creation of a new state constitution.

With sixteen indigenous languages, Oaxaca has the largest Indian population of any Mexican state. Over the past two decades the Zapotecos, Mixtecos, Mixes, Triquis, Huaves, and others have created hundreds of human rights, cultural advocacy, ecological, women’s, and political organizations. The capital city, Oaxaca, is a longtime tourist destination known for its food, art, music, and warmth. At the same time, Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in Mexico.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the privatization of public services like health care have made Oaxaca’s poverty worse. The sale of communal lands and lands permanently deeded for farming (Ejidots), water rights, forests, beaches, and other resources to multinational corporations is now common. NAFTA also required the elimination of programs that small farmers had relied on for low-interest loans and subsidies for seeds, fuel, and fertilizer. Today, after thirteen years of NAFTA, the number of farmers in Oaxaca has decreased by as much as one-third.

Thus, the teachers’ strike—which raised issues of resources for students, teachers’ wages and the threat of privatized education—resonated for most of the people of Oaxaca. Immediately following the attack on the strikers, hundreds of labor unions, community-based associations, women’s groups, indigenous federations, left-wing political formations, student groups, peasant and professional organizations, human rights groups, media and artist collectives came together and created APPO—The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO). APPO coordinated a massive campaign of nonviolent civil disobedience that soon

brought the state government to a standstill.

Closed out of their offices by sit-ins, the governor Ulises Ruiz Ortíz and local legislators were forced to adopt a clandestine existence of furtive meetings in hotels secluded from the everyday mass mobilizations demanding their ousting from power. The governor responded using caravans of police and paramilitary forces, killing at least twenty-five people during the summer and fall of 2006. Neighborhoods constructed barricades with burning tires, buses, and anything they could find to impede the free movement of police vehicles and to defend themselves against the caravans of paramilitary gunmen. At the peak of the struggle there were more than 1,500 barricades throughout the city.

In late October the federal government sent in 4,000 armed federal police, who violently took back the city and destroyed most of the barricades. They detained hundreds of people and imprisoned many of APPO’s leaders. On November 25, when there was only one barricade left in the city, federal police implemented a brutal attack. Over 100 people were injured and 200 arrested, and buildings were set on fire. The detainees were brutally beaten and imprisoned and many reported they had been sexually harassed and raped by the police.

After the last barricade was removed, and the APPO graffiti whitewashed, a campaign of terror was carried out. Paid informants pointed out the homes of APPO leaders and members, which were then ransacked. Facing illegal and arbitrary arrest, many activists fled the city and went underground. Then on December 10, members of the Teachers Union and APPO staged new demonstrations demanding the release of all political detainees related to the strike and an end to the federal police occupation of Oaxaca. By January, the refugees from the government’s terror campaign gradually began to return to the city and the mobilizations demanding the release of the political prisoners continued under the slogan “the fear is over.” Thousands marched to reaffirm that APPO was alive and well.

As of the summer of 2007 the struggles for a people's democracy and for the punishment of the authorities responsible for the deaths continue. During all these dramatic events, alternative media have played a powerful and often unprecedented role.

Challenging Commercial Radio

I remember the first time I came across Radio Planton, the radio station of the Teachers Union, founded in 2004. I was driving on an open road into the center of Oaxaca when I found myself singing along with the famous Latin American liberation song "Venceremos," which was followed by a news report from a local community. Community-based radio has been important in Oaxaca for years, especially among indigenous communities fighting to reclaim and reconstruct their culture and their language. Today there are twelve licensed community radio stations in the entire country and 100 unlicensed ones, forty of which are in Oaxaca.

Radio Planton was established with the mission of creating space for a prounion and proteacher perspective. One of the big issues it took on immediately was the threat throughout Mexico to privatize public education.

When the police attacked the strikers on June 14, 2006, they also destroyed the equipment of Radio Planton, and thus shut it down. Many students responded by taking over the public University of Oaxaca radio station, opening it up to the Radio Planton newscasters, and forging a new alliance between students and workers. Immediately they began denouncing the atrocities that had taken place that morning. Under the name *Radio de la Verdad* (Truth Radio) they became the central pulse of the movement and the best way to find out what was happening minute-by-minute.

APPO women took the use of media for social change one step further. On August 1, 2006, during a women's march in support of the popular movement, many women spontaneously transformed their anger into resistance against another form of oppression: the government (so-called public) radio and television stations

that had waged a campaign of misrepresentation against the teachers' strike and APPO. The women marched to CORTV (Corporacion Oaxaquena de Radio y Television) and requested one hour to voice their demands. After a heated negotiation, officials at the station denied their demands, and the women decided to take over the television and radio stations. As one woman explained, "Well, it *is* public radio."

The women named the station "Radio Cacerola" ("Radio Saucepan," for the pots and pans they carried with them when they took over the station). For twenty days they occupied the station and transmitted programs, learning as they produced and hosted the shows. Before anyone was allowed to enter the station they would be screened by a group of women. The new shows were exciting and surprising: they opened the microphones to working-class and poor people who had never spoken over radio before. It seemed as if there were newly written Corridos (folk songs) about the struggle every day, and the listeners could not get enough. Hundreds came to share their thoughts and experiences on radio. The testimonies were heartfelt and sometimes painful, often addressing government corruption and local fraud. Radio Cacerola had become the chief means for people to voice their opinions and concerns and engage in debates. For several weeks, Radio Cacerola was the lifeline of APPO and its supporters.

Then on August 20, in the early morning, paramilitary forces destroyed the antennas and transmitters of the radio station. Several people were shot and the women were forced off the air. Later the same day, refusing to be silenced, APPO took over twelve commercial radio stations and began broadcasting across the state. They were able to hold onto the stations for a few days. Shortly thereafter, the governor implemented a "clean up operation," and hundreds of state and city police cruised the city in "caravanas de la muerte," shooting randomly against the barricades protecting the occupied radio stations. Lorenzo San Pablo Cervantes, a 51-year-old architect, was shot to death as he manned a

radio station.

Although the media takeover was over, it had had profound implications. Women became a key link in the channels of communication, and to a certain degree they became the voice of the movement. And the movement, mostly headed by men, was forced to recognize the women's militancy. As Margarita Dalton, radio commentator, feminist writer, and outspoken critic of the government, explained:

By taking over the radio stations the women of Oaxaca came forward in one act demanding full human rights, full rights as participants and leaders of the popular struggle and provided a lifeline to APPO in its daily organizing activities as well as literally giving a voice to thousands of Oaxacans. This is not to say that women were not participating before August 1, 2006, but this act demanded attention from everyone in the city, in the state, in all Mexico and in the world.

Radio de la Verdad continued to broadcast from the University of Oaxaca. In early November the federal police attacked the station; the attack was broadcast live over the air. The announcer called the people to defend the station against the heavily armed federal riot police. Hundreds responded, risking bodily harm, and defended the station for seven hours before the police retreated. This became known as the "Battle of the Day of the Dead," and people were elated that they had been able to force the police to retreat, even if it were only a temporary victory. Equally significant was that people had put their lives on the line not for food or for wages, but for a radio station. The movement had come to understand that access to the means of communication was as important as any bread-and-butter issue.

Though the brutal repression of November 25, 2006, put a damper on the movement's ability to continue using radio, this is now beginning to change. In August of 2007, alternative radio activists in Oaxaca joined forces with Radio Bemba, a community radio station from the border state of Sonora, to cover and analyze the August 5, 2007, elections for Oaxaca's state legis-

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NOV 6TH, 2006. MASS MARCH SUPPORTING THE POPULAR MOVEMENT OF OAXACA. PHOTO BY GERARDO RENIQUE.

lature. Among the coordinators of this two-day collective effort were members from a community radio station closed down by paramilitary forces in August of the previous year. This special coverage opened with a discussion on the current political situation in Oaxaca with broadcasters and journalists from local community radio stations—Radio Universidad, Radio Nandia, Radio Planton, and Radio Calenda—all of which were either closed down or brutally harassed by the government during the previous year. The election coverage was broadcast from the center of Oaxaca and transmitted through the airwaves and the Internet by a number of local and national community radio stations, reaching Mexico and even other parts of Latin America.

Videos—Today's Political Murals

In the heat of the Oaxacan struggle a collective of independent video makers, Mal de Ojo TV (Evil Eye TV), formed to provide alternative information from the perspective of APPO in response to the media onslaught carried out by the corporate media TV Azteca and Televisa. Members of what would come to be Mal de Ojo TV were on the scene just minutes after the police began their first attack on June 14 against the strikers, and they videotaped disturbing images and testimonies. The material was immediately converted to DVD and played back on small TV sets in the central plaza the next day. Crowds gathered and although most people knew

what had happened, they watched the images of the police attack in disbelief. New TV sets appeared daily in different parts of the city center, and more and more people gathered. The video footage was streamed over the Internet and made available on DVDs at low cost, and thousands of copies went into circulation. The images of helicopters dropping tear gas, of bullets directed at teachers and children, of crowds of people being pushed over and trampled on as their belongings were set on fire by the police became etched into the collective consciousness of the Oaxacan people.

A broad spectrum of Oaxacan society, including important segments of the middle class, responded to the repression by participating in huge marches, the largest of which drew several hundred thousand people. The marches were captured on video, which was converted to DVD and shown in the plaza alongside DVDs depicting the June 14 repression. At great risk to themselves, Mal de Ojo followed the struggle from burning barricades to funerals to massive demonstrations. Again, all this footage was immediately transferred to DVD and widely circulated. Though there were many efforts on the part of the government to repress independent media, it flourished and had an overwhelming impact, becoming a driving force in the movement itself.

I was with a few teachers who worked in a small village two hours outside Oaxaca City when they showed some of the Mal de Ojo DVDs to a group of

Zapotec parents. All schools in the state had been closed for months due to the strike. The teachers called a parents' meeting to explain why the strike was continuing and to encourage everyone to join them in the upcoming demonstrations. When the teachers played the DVD of the June 14 police repression, the room went silent until the program ended. Then suddenly everyone had questions and a dynamic discussion began. At first many parents wanted to understand why the police felt it necessary to use force and tear gas. But then the discussion shifted to immigration and how this community was suffering with the loss of over half of its male population. The teachers were able to connect the popular struggle in Oaxaca and the teachers' strike with the overall economic devastation of Mexico since NAFTA.

Land Rain and Fire

My colleague, Gerardo Renique, and I decided to interview a few people to be used in a short video about the situation from the perspective of teachers. We felt that a short documentary that contextualized the situation and the current crisis would help build greater support from our union, the PSC CUNY (Professional Staff Congress of the City University of New York), which had already demonstrated in support of the teachers' struggle in Oaxaca. Our union also played a major role in presenting a resolution in support of the Oaxacan struggle that was passed by the AFL-CIO, and indi-

vidual members contributed money to rebuild Radio Planton.

For the video, we interviewed two teachers and one young student, before returning to New York. Within a few weeks we had completed a basic edit that intercut the interviews with images of repression and demonstration footage primarily shot by Mal de Ojo TV. We were a few days from completing the piece when a New York-based IndyMedia journalist, Brad Will, was shot and killed in Oaxaca by paramilitary forces in broad daylight while he was filming from the Santa Lucia barricade. Brad was a well-known alternative media activist with a large reputation throughout the independent media communities in the United States and Latin America. His murder sent shock waves through those of us who had been carrying cameras on the streets of Oaxaca throughout the summer and fall. Other media makers were targeted and subjected to arrest, disappearance, and possibly murder. On October 29, 2006, just two days following the killing of Brad Will, President Fox, using Brad's murder as a pretext for "restoring order," sent in 4000 federal police to occupy and control the state of Oaxaca.

During the early months of the insurgency, it was hard to find any media coverage of the dramatic events unfolding in the mainstream American press. But for a moment this changed. Finally Oaxaca was center stage. *The Village Voice* did a cover story with a dramatic painting of Brad Will as a martyred Jesus Christ. *The New York Times* and others finally found Oaxaca on the map and began reporting. But these reports largely missed the context and underpinnings of the struggle. Our documentary attempted to set a context for its origins. The footage of militant demonstrations in front of the Mexican consulate in New York City was added, and we completed *Land Rain and Fire*.

Use of Video in the Classroom

The first screening of *Land Rain and Fire* was at a Brooklyn community-based gallery filled with friends of Brad Will and many IndyMedia

activists. The overcrowded room was small and hot, with a white sheet in place of a screen. What followed was a groundswell of interest in showing the video as a centerpiece for organizing. We developed a high impact distribution plan involving the simple production of a TAKE ACTION flyer that came with the video and could be easily changed as events shifted. We connected with organizations that streamed the piece on their web sites; we circulated free copies of the DVD to high school teachers and we sent out notices to the Spanish language press. We contacted everyone we knew who could in some way relate to the struggle in Oaxaca, which resulted in many invitations to present the video at high schools, colleges, and universities throughout the Northeast. We were able to get the piece mentioned on key listservs connecting us to folks in the Caribbean, India, Central and South America, and Eastern Europe, and it was cablecast over Free Speech TV. We never turned down an invitation, and found ourselves in gatherings with as many as 300 people and as few as 10. We hosted house parties where we sold the DVD at an extremely discounted price, and helped people plan their own house parties. Food, music, and sometimes artifacts for purchase made the events festive. Church doors opened, and *Land Rain and Fire* was screened to many Spanish speaking religious communities and immigrant groups.

The piece touched a nerve and gave students an opportunity to ask questions about globalization and migration, the use of nonviolence as a strategy, and the role of teachers in social change movements. *Land Rain and Fire* has become a tool in courses about grassroots struggles and democracy. Many educators from countries struggling against the devastation of globalization contacted us. Students began to see the connections between globalization and increased poverty in Mexico.

Land Rain and Fire was invited to film festivals and union halls in Korea and Spain, and presented at a union convention in Canada where it was streamed to participants' hotel

rooms. We were invited to open the International Working Class Film Festival in Istanbul, where we met with union leaders, educators, and university students who began their own solidarity groups. The festival was followed by a conference where one of the featured people in *Land Rain and Fire* was invited to attend and talk about the struggle from the perspective of a teacher to an international audience. The piece was translated into Spanish and cablecast over HITN (an independent Spanish-language cable station in the United States) that reaches most American cities and all Latin American countries except Mexico.

Though no one had time to plan a comprehensive media strategy, one emerged. The speed with which the videos were produced and disseminated with little to no money is living proof of the potential power and significance of alternative media.

The Struggle Continues —One Year Later

August 3, 2007: Members of Mal de Ojo TV were setting up a huge screen outside the Cathedral next to the Zocalo when, after a daylong storm, the sky opened up. Hundreds gathered below blue and yellow tarps. Others huddled under umbrellas, and the rain only encouraged more people to join the enthusiastic crowd. The woman who had just completed the documentary, *Women in Rebellion*, took the microphone to introduce the film and in an act of defiance and determination, APPO was back on the streets—this time to see themselves in a documentary about their struggle and their place in history.

Resources

Since the onset of this struggle, Mal de Ojo TV has produced and circulated over twenty different documentaries, many with English subtitles:

Ya cayó (He has already fallen!); Marcha a favor de Ulises (March of Ulises supporters); Sobre la lucha (About the Struggle); Octubre Negro (Black October); El Pueblo de Oaxaca Expresa el Rechazo a las Fuerzas

Federales (The Oaxacan People Reject the Federal Police); Espera y Coraje (Hope and Anger); Sexta megamarcha contra la PFP (Sixth Mega-March Against the Federal Police); En el Bicentenario de Juárez, así está Oaxaca (Such is Oaxaca in the centennial of Juárez); Viguera, Victoria de Todos Santos (All-Saints Victory); Emisarios de Ulises (Ulises' Envoys); Desde las entrañas (From the Center); En Memoriam (In Memory); Pesadilla Azul (Blue Nightmare); Morena, Mujeres en Rebeldía (Women in Rebellion); Un Tantito de Tanta Verdad (A Little Bit of so Much Truth); Sor Juana y la Guelaguetza, Compromiso Cumplido (True to My Pledge); and Ulises gasifica la Guelaguetza (Ulises gasses the Guelaguetza).

For more information about Mal de Ojo, contact www.maldeojotv.net

- » To listen to Radio Bemba, click on <http://portal.radiobemba.org/>
- » To listen to Radio Planton, click on <http://www.radioplanton.net/index2.html>
- » To learn about Latin America through the news agency Pulsar, click on www.agenciapulsar.org, the press outlet of AMARC, (Asociacion Mundial de Radio Comunitarias) World Association of Community Radios
- » For more information on the situation in Oaxaca, visit Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO), <http://www.asambleapopulardeoaxaca.com/appo/>

- » To learn about the Oaxaca's Teachers' Union — Seccion 22, visit <http://www.seccion22snte.org.mx/quincena/inicio.html>

See also:

- » Oaxaca Libre, http://oaxacalibre.net/oaxlibre/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1
- » EDUCA—Servicios para una Educación Alternativa, <http://www.educaoaxaca.org/>
- » To support the families whose sons, husbands, and fathers have been killed or are imprisoned, contact Universidad de la Tierra (Unitierra web site is in reconstruction), click on <http://www.unitierra.org/>
- » To order *Land Rain and Fire*, contact www.twn.org



JULY 18, 2007, APPO MARCH IN REACTION TO CONTINUED POLICE ATTACKS (WOMEN COVER FACES TO PROTECT IDENTITY), PHOTO BY TAMI GOLD