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Conversation series | Pursuing Tenant International:

Learning from struggles for home in Abya-Yala

Edited by Ana Vilenica

This house belongs to everyone:

Otomí community occupation of the National Indigenous Peoples' Institute (INPI) in Mexico City as a struggle for dignified housing and the right to the city

Otomí community

occupying the offices of the INPI in Mexico City

in conversation with

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Abstract

The Otomí community, that migrated to Mexico City due to dire living conditions from their place of origin, has been demanding the right to housing, education, health, and work for over twenty years. However, they have continuously been denied dignified living conditions. On October 12, more than 150 people from the community took over the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (INPI), a government institution that has implemented development projects aimed at purportedly enhancing the lives of indigenous communities and moved in making the offices their new home. They used the occupation to voice their demands for improved living conditions of the Otomí people in the capital as well as pueblos originarios across Mexico and to put an end to harmful mega projects and war against EZLIN. Otomí women have played a crucial role in occupying the INPI premises, engaging with government representatives, and acting as key intermediaries. In this conversation compañeras shared about the struggles of pueblos originarios that have led to their occupation. They discussed the reasons behind choosing this specific building for occupation, their approach to organizing inspired by the Zapatistas, and how they manage everyday life in the ex-office building they now occupy.

Keywords

Indigenous struggles, evictions, occupation, organising, autonomy

In 2020, **Otomí Indigenous Community** residing in Mexico City peacefully occupied the premises of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (INPI), a symbol of betrayal to Indigenous Peoples and Communities. **Ana Vilenica** is a member of the Beyond Inhabitation Lab, the Radical Housing Journal editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research). **Felipe Guerra Arjona** is a member of coopia — a cooperative experiment for transformation of territory. **Contact:** ana.vilenica@polito.it felipeguerra.guerra@gmail.com

The Otomí community, that migrated to Mexico City due to dire living conditions from their place of origin, has been demanding the right to housing, education, health, and work for over twenty years. However, they have continuously been denied dignified living conditions. On October 12, more than 150 people from the community took over the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (INPI), a government institution that has implemented development projects aimed at purportedly enhancing the lives of Indigenous communities and moved in making the offices their new home. They used the occupation to voice their demands for improved living conditions of the Otomí people in the capital as well as *pueblos originarios* across Mexico and to put an end to harmful mega projects and war against EZLIN. In a public ceremony marking the first anniversary of the building occupation, they renamed the building of the INPI to the House of Peoples and Indigenous Communities: *Samir Flores Soberanes*. It is named in honour of Samir Flores Soberanes, an Indigenous activist and defender of land and water rights who was assassinated in 2019. I have met the members of the Otomí community in occupation eight days prior to this conversation. I was invited to attend the commemoration of Comandante Ramona's death, an officer of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLIN), which took place in their new residence the Casa de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indigenas. Our conversation occurred on the fourth floor of the occupied building, where they have been organizing educational activities and public events. I talked with three *compañeras*, facilitated by Felipe, who provided translation between Spanish and English and took an active part in our exchange. Otomí women have played a crucial role in occupying the INPI premises, engaging with government representatives, and acting as key intermediaries. *Compañeras*¹ shared about the struggles of *pueblos originarios* that have led to their occupation. They discussed the reasons behind choosing this specific building for occupation, their approach to organizing inspired by the Zapatistas, and how they manage everyday life in the ex-office building they now occupy.

Ana: Thank you for the opportunity to learn from you. I truly appreciate the time you've taken to share your experience of the struggle for home and dignified life. To begin our conversation, I would like to ask you about the reasons that led you to come to Mexico City and the conditions that existed here when you and your families arrived.

Compañera(s): More than 50 years ago, it was my grandparents who emigrated to this city. They made this decision due to the unfavourable living conditions in our previous place of residence. For instance, there was a lack of hospitals, schools, and universities near our small town. Our origins trace back to a town called Santiago Mexquititlan in the state of Querétaro. Employment opportunities were scarce there as well. Therefore, our parents made the choice to migrate to the city in search of better living conditions.

Initially, they believed that their transition would be smooth. However, upon arrival, they faced discrimination. People accused us of invading the city and demanded that we return

¹ We will be referring to them as 'Compañera(s),' for the purpose of anonymity.



Figure 1

The front entrance of the Casa de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas, former headquarters of the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples in Mexico City.

Image: Ana Vilenica

to our villages. We endured derogatory remarks, being labelled as ignorant and Indians, among other things.

Compañera(s): My parents came here for the same reason: there was no work in our town. It happened over 30 years ago. I was actually born in the village, but my parents came to the city in search of better opportunities to support our family. However, we didn't feel welcomed here. Whenever we spoke our native language on the subway, people would assume we were talking about them or they would label us as Indians. They would question our presence, saying things like, "What are you doing here? Why don't you go back to your village? What are you looking for here?" We encountered these remarks and attitudes quite frequently.

Compañera(s): When we first arrived here, I was just a little girl, and my siblings were even younger. We didn't have a place to sleep. Sometimes we had to sleep in the subway or at the central station upstairs because we didn't have a house. I vividly remember my mother wearing her traditional clothes. People would label her as an Indian simply because of her attire. Additionally, when my mother arrived here, she didn't speak Spanish, and neither did we because she always spoke Otomi. People would say things like, "Why do you speak like that? Go back to where you came from!" When I heard them speak like that, I couldn't understand why they were so mean. It made me feel upset, and I could see that my mother felt the same way.

Ana: When your families arrived, was the Otomi community already organized?

Compañera(s): They did know each other. Everyone slept wherever they could, but they still managed to maintain connections. Although there was no designated place for them

to arrive and stay, they would often reunite and support one another. Some of them left one of their children behind initially, coming alone to pave the way, and later returning to bring the rest of their family. Despite arriving separately, they were able to establish a sense of community. When they reached their destination, those who were acquainted would greet and welcome each other. Others found temporary shelter in parks, bus stations, and outside the subway.

Ana: Could you tell us a bit more about the history of this occupation? How did the organizing process to occupy this place begin?

Compañera(s): Initially, there were no available accommodations. After the earthquake in 1985, numerous houses and buildings collapsed. People noticed that there were abandoned houses in the aftermath of the earthquake. Some people lost their lives, and there were no others coming forward to claim ownership of those properties. People began clearing the debris, creating small rooms made of wood or cardboard within these abandoned buildings to have a place to live. This is how they started constructing their own little dwellings on properties they didn't legally own. They invited fellow community members to join them. Each person or family built their own small rooms, and these separate units eventually formed a collective living space. They invited their relatives and people they knew, encouraging them to occupy other unclaimed houses or buildings in a similar manner.

Compañera(s): I have four uncles here. When they saw that the houses were empty, they decided to clean the rubble. Using cardboard, they made little rooms. During the pandemic, more people came and asked for permission to build their home in Zacatecas. During that time, there were almost 30 people living together.

Ana: Do they still live there?

Compañera(s): They still live there. Since we came here a number of us are here and others stayed there.

Figure 2

Gate at Casa de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas. Image: Ana Vilenica



Ana: Thank you, compañera. You also tried to make demands to the government. How did that play out?

Compañera(s): We quickly realized that the government's words were often contradictory to their actions. While government representatives spoke about supporting the Indigenous communities and made promises during their campaigns, they often failed to fulfill those promises. It became evident that these pledges were primarily made to secure votes. They would approach us with a friendly demeanor, offering food and other incentives. It was at this point that we collectively decided that we had reached a breaking point and could no longer accept such empty gestures. We decided to raise our voices and gradually organize ourselves, one step at the time.

We were soon invited to other organizations, and it was when, they talked to us about Zapatismo. We came to understand that the Zapatistas operate independently from the government. Being rooted in the people, they express the sentiments and voices of the community, which the government listens to. We thought that it would be good if we could do the same. “Let’s do the same, following the steps of the Zapatistas.” We didn’t want to be left behind by a government that didn't fulfill its promises. We learn to proclaim: “*¡Ya Basta!* Enough is enough!”

Ana: How would you describe your experience of organizing collectively and politically?

Compañera(s): We came to realize the importance of uniting all the Indigenous peoples to ensure that we wouldn’t be left behind by the government. At about that time the National Indigenous Congress (CNI) was formed. The CNI called upon all the peoples to come together and elect their representatives. As members of our community, we also felt the need to participate and not be overlooked by the government. Therefore, we selected two individuals from our community to serve as councilman and councilwoman, and thus began our engagement in organized struggle.

Throughout this journey, we have faced significant persecution from the government, as they are opposed to our organizing efforts. They understand that when people unite, they



Figure 3

Kitchen at Casa de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas. *Image: Ana Vilenica*

win. Prior to our involvement in organized struggle, we did participate in marches and similar activities, but at that time we lacked the level of organization we have now.

Ana: What were the reaction of the State and the police to your organizing efforts?

Compañera(s): The state and the police have responded to our organizing efforts by arresting our comrades to prevent them from participating in demonstrations. They have also deployed police forces, commonly known as *grenadiers*, on numerous occasions. We experienced their presence first-hand during the eviction in Roma 18.

Felipe: In which year did the eviction take place? Did the arrival of the councilwomen coincide with that event?

Compañera(s): I believe the eviction took place in the morning of either 2016, when the occupation had been established for just under a month, or it occurred in 2017.

Felipe: Was it during the earthquake?

Compañera(s): Yes, on that same day, there was another earthquake. Both the eviction and the earthquake happened simultaneously. It was in 2018 in the matter of fact.

Felipe: They were evicted in 2018, coinciding with the earthquake that occurred in 2017. It is a common occurrence in Mexico for earthquakes to happen on the same day. In fact, a similar situation took place in 1985, when an earthquake also occurred on the same day.

Ana: Did you know that you are going to be evicted?

Compañera(s): No, nobody was aware of it. I had already relocated and was no longer living there at that time.

Figure 4

Mural in the corridor at Casa de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas. Image: Ana Vilenica



Compañera(s): I will tell you how it happened. They arrived very early on that day. The majority of the people were small vendors who go out to sell candies or the handicrafts we make, such as the Lele dolls made here. Sometimes they work late at night and wake up late in the morning. On that day, the *grenadiers* arrived in the early hours. Prior to their arrival, another group showed up. They didn't engage in any conversation with us. They simply arrived and began assaulting people and causing chaos. We weren't given an opportunity to retrieve our belongings, collect our meager savings, or anything else. They didn't care if there were children, pregnant women, disabled individuals, or elderly people present. They barged in and started physically assaulting people. Numerous individuals sustained injuries while attempting to protect their hard-earned possessions.

People tried to intervene and prevent them from harming others, especially children, but they were armed with weapons, knives, and sticks while we were unarmed. Soon after, the *grenadiers* arrived on the scene. Many people were injured, and one of our compañeras was even burned due to the use of gas. Fortunately, he [the compañero] swiftly removed his pants, preventing severe burns. The shock group stole money and cell phones from people, taking whatever they could find.

Felipe: And as for the shock groups, did they not wear uniforms?

Compañera(s): No, they were wearing civilian clothes.

Felipe: And when you say "early," do you mean in the early morning?

Compañera(s): I believe it was around six o'clock in the morning when the civilians, not wearing uniforms, began the violent eviction of everyone.

Ana: How did the community organize itself following the eviction? Where did they find shelter after being displaced?

Compañera(s): Many people remained outdoors and established a camp in front of the building.

Felipe: How many years had they occupied that building?

Compañera(s): Approximately 30 years. Initially, the eviction was justified based on the claim that there was an owner of the building. However, upon conducting our research, we discovered that this was not true. The developer was attempting to exploit the situation by falsely asserting ownership of the land, which is a substantial plot, although it was not documented. After the eviction, the displaced individuals remained outside as their belongings were still inside the building. The presence of police prevented them from re-entering. They resorted to camping on the streets, which posed significant risks for the children, as there was no access to water, sanitation, or any basic amenities. Moreover, the neighboring community was hostile towards them, accusing them of theft, drug addiction, and obstructing the area.

Ana: How did people organize within the camp?

Compañera(s): There were individuals with skills in bureaucracy, legal matters, and day-to-day tasks. For instance, some worked on setting up a drainage system and constructing a

Figure 5

Detail of the mural in the kitchen of Casa de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas.
Image: Ana Vilenica



small bathroom. Since there was no running water, others had to fetch water from the park. The challenge was that the police would become enraged and try to prevent it. That's how it unfolded. We also had comrades who provided support, including law students with valuable knowledge. They have remained by our side to this day. Research and bureaucratic work were carried out by individuals proficient in the Spanish language.

Ana: What were the demands of the Otomi people at that time in relation to the city or the state?

Compañera(s): During that time, our main demand as the Otomi people was for dignified housing. The houses we had made from cardboard were no longer suitable after the neighboring buildings collapsed during the earthquakes. We also had other demands such as access to good healthcare, the right to work, and proper education. Our children faced discrimination in schools, and we wanted that to change. In terms of healthcare, pregnant women often faced discrimination due to language barriers, and there were instances where they were questioned about their ability to support their children due to the number of offspring they had.

Ana: How did you go about occupying this building?

Compañera(s): We were demanding decent housing, but the government never paid attention to our pleas. They would suggest that we go to Roma, Guanajuato, or Zacatecas, but they ignored our needs. The government shows no concern for whether we have a place to sleep or not. We discussed these issues in our assembly, and we have endured a great deal of suffering. When it rained, water would enter our homes, and we had to place buckets to catch the leaks.

Felipe: Zacatecas 74 and Guanajuato 200, Colonia Roma; Avenida Zaragoza 1434, Pantitlán, and Roma 18, in Colonia Juárez are streets in Mexico City where the government was

promoting to expropriate buildings to build homes for them, which never happened and still hasn't happened.

Compañera(s): In the assembly, we collectively decided to occupy the IMPI. We planned and discussed everything together. We made the decision to take over this space one month prior to actually doing it. On the day of the occupation, we gathered all our belongings and when we arrived here, we found the space unexpectedly open, not closed as we had anticipated. It was also the same day when the pandemic began. I must admit that I was really afraid during that time.

Compañera(s): Yes, as the compañera mentioned, it was during an assembly that the decision was made to occupy on October 12. We specifically chose this date as it signifies the Indigenous Peoples' Day in America. We expressed that we had no reason to celebrate because the government was not paying attention to our demands and our voices were not being heard. It was on this day, while they were celebrating, that we decided to occupy this building, which at that time was the INPI (National Institute of Indigenous Peoples). The reason for choosing this building was because it was supposedly meant for the Indigenous people. As the compañera mentioned, these were challenging times due to the ongoing pandemic. We were told to wash our hands, stay at home, and take care of ourselves. We questioned how we could wash our hands without access to water. We were living in a camp. How could we take care of ourselves and protect ourselves when we lacked the necessary resources? And how could we go home when we didn't have one? These were the reasons behind our decision to occupy the building.

Compañera(s): At six o'clock, we entered the premises.

Compañera(s): When we arrived, there weren't many workers present due to the pandemic. We informed them that the Otomí community was taking over the building and requested them to leave. We didn't shout or push them. They left voluntarily. We were concerned that they might call the police, especially since we had our children with us. Nevertheless, we all came prepared with our suitcases, ready to stay. Initially, we thought we would only remain here for a month or a few days until our demands were met. However, it has been over two years now since that happened in 2020, and we are still here.

Ana: Now that the community is residing here, how do you organize your daily lives in this building not originally intended for housing, but rather as office space? What challenges are you facing in this living arrangement?

Compañera(s): We have various commissions to handle different tasks and responsibilities. For example, there is a cleaning commission, a kitchen commission in charge of food preparation, a tortilla commission, a security commission, and so on. Those serving on these commissions rotate periodically.

Compañera(s): When we first arrived here, it was not easy. To live together, we had to organize ourselves. As mentioned by the compañera, we established a guard to keep an eye out for the police. Many people who used to work in this building would come to retrieve their documents or cars that they had left behind. Government officials would

also come demanding entry. Initially, it was mostly men taking shifts to be on duty 24 hours a day, rotating every two or three hours depending on the situation.

Within the cleaning group, different individuals were assigned tasks such as cleaning the stairs or mopping the floors. During the first year, we stayed inside the building, sheltering in place. We did not go to work and relied on support from other organizations. We designated a communication team responsible for uploading videos and managing our Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. Through social media, we requested supplies and food from supporters.

We then decided to create the Lele doll to generate more resources for the community. Our version of the Lele doll was different from the traditional one. We designed the Otomi rebel doll, dressed in black and red colours, inspired by the Zapatistas.



Figure 6

Poster at Casa de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas. *Image: Ana Vilenica*

Ana: How did they adapt this space for living? Did they need to carry out any construction work?

Compañera(s): The second floor is designated for sleeping arrangements. Initially, the other floors were closed off. This particular floor is used for hosting large events and accommodating visitors. Initially, the men stayed on the ground floor, which was previously a parking lot, but we transformed it into a dining area with sinks, an oven for baking bread, and a space for making tortillas. As some *campaneros* arrived with their partners and children, it was decided to convert the offices on the second floor into small rooms. The fifth floor remains closed. There is a meeting room on the sixth floor that was previously used by the institution's director and is now occasionally used for meetings.

Ana: Are you cooking together or does each person prepare their own food?

Compañera(s): Well, initially it was all done collectively for almost a year. However, now people cook separately for their own meals. We still come together to cook for special events or occasions.

Figure 7

Showcase with lele dolls at Casa de los Pueblos y Comunidades Indígenas.
Image: Ana Vilenica



Ana: I know that you also organize an *eskuelita* for children on this floor. How does it work? Who is working with the children?

Compañera(s): Escuela initially started on Saturdays. Several compañeros who were studying at the university or some of them teachers started giving classes to the children during the pandemic. Now it operates as a regular school, providing a full preschool and middle school education. Some families have enrolled their children here, while others attend government schools. Edgar conducts daily classes for the enrolled students, and on Saturdays, all the children gather at the school. Additionally, adults can also study here. For example, the compañera is studying here alongside her daughter. Sometimes, we also provide classes for the Otomí children. Since the teacher doesn't speak Otomí, we have designated a day where each mother teaches Otomí for half an hour.

Ana: Has the State finally started paying attention since you occupied the building?

Compañera(s): When we arrived here, our main demand expanded beyond just housing to encompass the right to the city, which includes healthcare, work, education, and housing. However, the only expropriation that has taken place so far was on Zacatecas Street after June 2021. This was not because the government willingly initiated it, but rather because we demanded it. If we had not pressed for it, we would have had to start from scratch once again. Imagine waiting another 30 years for them to consider another case of expropriation. That's when we decided to block the avenue outside this building. We remained there for approximately seven days, and it was this action that compelled them to carry out the expropriation. However, since the expropriation, no construction work has been undertaken. They had promised to do so last year, but nothing has been

accomplished. The deputy secretary of government, whom I believe at the time was Martín Vázquez, pledged to hand over the expropriated building at Roma 18, but until this day, it has not been delivered.

Ana: You mentioned that you are currently fighting for the right to the city. Could you explain your understanding of this concept? What does the right to the city entail?

Compañera(s): The right to the city means living without discrimination. It is the right to not be told, “You are indigenous, go back to your town.” We did not come here to invade, so we say no! We don’t want housing in the State of Mexico because it is not our ancestral land. This city also belongs to us. Yes, we come from a native town, but we also have the right to the city. We have the right to live here. We were here before anyone else arrived on this land.

Ana: On the posters displayed in front of the building, I noticed that you are also involved in the struggle for the right to water. Can you tell me more about your connection to this cause?

Compañera(s): Yes, we have comrades who are still residing in our town, and they are also members of the National Indigenous Congress. They informed us about the issue of water theft happening in our town. The thieves would come at night, while the people were asleep, and divert our water supply through pipes to other towns, leaving little to none for our community.

Through our participation in various struggles, such as the one in Puebla, we learned that water theft is not limited to our town but is a global issue. In Querétaro, where many of our fellow community members have migrated to, there are large companies seeking to exploit and privatize the water resources. The privatization of water in the state of Querétaro prompted us to join forces. If our water is stolen, we would have to buy it back. How can we buy water that rightfully belongs to us? This is why we are now united in the fight for water. We have established the Caravan for Water and Life, which travels to different parts of the country to raise awareness and address this issue.

Ana: Who do those pipes belonged to?

Compañera(s): We were told that those pipes belonged to the Coca-Cola company.

Ana: You mentioned that you support and participate in other struggles in Mexico. Do you also have connections with Indigenous struggles outside of Mexico?

Compañera(s): We are aware that many people have faced similar struggles and have not been able to raise their voices. We have extended an invitation to all Indigenous peoples to seek support when they encounter issues such as water theft or land encroachments. We have made it clear that this building belongs to everyone, as it represents the house of the people. Many have responded to our invitation and expressed their gratitude, as our struggle serves as an example for them.

In addition to the support from various organizations within Mexico, we have also received significant support from international sources, including the United States, Europe, and other parts of the world. Although they may not be physically present, they have offered their assistance through social media and raising awareness about our cause. Likewise, we have reciprocated and provided support to other struggles outside of Mexico.

Ana: Thank you very much for sharing your wisdom with us. I also wanted to mention that on the day of the rosca, I was fortunate to win a little doll. As part of the tradition, I have made a promise to deliver tamales on February 2nd.

Felipe: Thank you, and I wish you the best of luck in your struggle. You are an inspiration of dignity.

About this Conversation's participants

The House of Peoples and Indigenous Communities *Samir Flores Soberanes*, formerly the National Institute of Indigenous Peoples (INPI), is the result of the Otomí community's long-standing struggle for housing, education, health, and work rights in Mexico City. On October 12, 2020, the **Otomí Indigenous Community** residing in Mexico City peacefully occupied the premises of the INPI, a symbol of betrayal to Indigenous Peoples and Communities. The House serves as a living, resting, and organizing space where they fight against capitalism and patriarchy.

Felipe Guerra Arjona is an idea thief residing in Mexico City. He is a member of *coopia* — a cooperative experiment committed to the socio-environmental transformation of territory.

Ana Vilenica is a feminist, no border and urban activist and organiser from Serbia currently living in Italy. She is a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow with the ERC project *Inhabiting Radical Housing* at the Polytechnic of Turin's Inter-university Department of Regional & Urban Studies and Planning (DIST) and a core member of Beyond Inhabitation Lab. Ana is a member of the Radical Housing Journal Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research).

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