

A G8 “Counter Movement” Emerges in Hokkaido

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The 2008 G8 Summit held in July in Hokkaido Prefecture was met by a “counter movement” comprising demonstrations, symposia, workshops and other activities. The Hokkaido capital, Sapporo, became a hub for Japanese and international groups and individuals, and actions also took place in and around Toyako Lake, the venue for the July 4-6 summit. Although I saw various approaches to the G8 summit from the different people involved, I believe that on the whole the events marked the emergence of a new “counter movement” against the G8 summit in particular and neoliberal globalization in general.

Through more than a week of awareness-raising activities, many Hokkaido people came to believe that the fundamental principle of the G8 — that politicians from a small number of powerful countries should make decisions on the world’s most important matters — is both illegitimate and unjust. This is particularly important for those of us who only began to pay attention to the G8 only after Hokkaido was designated as the summit venue. The process of narrowing a discussion to the summit’s legitimacy itself was a discovery for us.

The voices of the counter movement, informed by the decade-long worldwide movement against G8-driven neoliberal globalization, played an important role in cultivating our view of the G8. At the July 5 Peace Walk pre-event, speakers including Iraklis Tsavdaridis (World Peace Council), Henry Saragih (La Via Campesina) and Minnie Degawan (Indigenous People Network for Change) criticized the G8 leaders and neoliberal economic policies — unjust domination over the world. They stressed the importance of returning decision-making power to the people. In the People’s Summit 2008 opening symposium, Medha Patkar (Save Narmada Movement) and Walden Bello (Focus on the Global South) argued that the G8 has no legitimacy and should be closed down.

The local Hokkaido media also took an uncharacteristically critical view of the summit. The Hokkaido Shimbun ran a front page report on the July 5 Peace Walk, headlined, “Shut Down G8’s Arbitrariness,” and introduced condemning voices on the G8’s neoliberal policies. In a story titled “Sharp Critical Eyes on G8,” Vinod Raina (All India People’s Science Network) related G8 policies to the domination exercised by former colonial powers.

A side-effect the G8 counter movement had on typical Sapporo residents was their first-hand realization that the G8 summit is oppressive. This resulted from the heavy presence of police and security forces from all over Japan being mobilized to Hokkaido from mid-June through the end of the summit.

Who Made the Momentum? — Three Main Networks

The counter movement to the Hokkaido G8 Summit was led by three main Japanese networks: the Hokkaido Peoples' Forum on the G8 Summit, the No G8 Network, and the 2008 Summit NGO Forum.

The Hokkaido Peoples' Forum on the G8 Summit is a network consisting of 80 Hokkaido-based NPOs/NGOs, including peace activists, indigenous Ainu groups, environmentalists, farmers' unions, labor unions and so on. The network was set up in May 2007, with activities focused on local Hokkaido issues — indigenous people's rights, environmental deterioration and local governance — as reflected in global issues. At the summit itself, the group hesitated to denounce the G8 Summit, conducting its activities instead under the slogan "no welcome for the G8 summit." This was due to the differing understandings and approaches among the many member groups in the forum.

The Hokkaido Peoples' Forum hosted study meetings on globalization and the G8 summit from January 2008. From mid-June, it also hosted "peoples' Weeks on the G8," which encompassed events such as the Indigenous People's Summit; the International Symposium on Military Forces, Bases and Women; International Solidarity Days activities and others. The People's Summit, co-hosted with the NGO Forum (more on this later), ran parallel to the G8 summit and was the corpus of the Forum's activities in July.

No G8 Network is a Tokyo-based loose network with 52 group and about 200 individual endorsers. The network includes independent left groups (such as the People's Plan Study Group [PPSG] and ATTAC Japan); Japan Communist Party-affiliated organizations (such as Japan Peace Committee and All Nippon Small Farmers Movement); and religious, anarchist, women's and peace groups. "Shut Down the G8! — A Driving Vehicle of Poverty and Environmental Destruction" in Tokyo on June 28 and 29, and International Solidarity Days (July 4-9) in Sapporo were the main activities initiated by the five action and theme -based working groups in the No G8 Network.

The 2008 Summit NGO Forum was set up in January 2007 and consists of 180 Tokyo-based NGOs. Its three units (environment, human rights and peace, development and poverty), actively presented proposals to the summit. The group hosted the Civil G8 Dialogue in April 2008, where discussions were held between international NGOs and government officials from the G8 countries. The Forum also talked with Japanese Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo in June to push their ideas. Japanese NGOs have been criticized for their political weakness, but the activities of the Summit NGO Forum may have begun to change this.

Preparation Process: Gains and Reflections

These networks tried to work together to visualize the presence of the people who objected to or "did not welcome" the summit. But as always, differences existed between NGOs/NPOs and social movement groups. The divide became visible especially over the issue of co-hosting actions. The three networks had many discussions and finally reached agreement on jointly hosting one "Peace Walk" (a term watered-down from "demonstration"), on July 5.

Overseas groups and movements linked to their Japanese counterparts. In March 2008, the No G8 Network called an International Coordination Meeting on G8 actions, joined by the Hokkaido People's Forum and the NGO Forum. The meeting with representatives from the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, La Via Campesina, Jubilee South, Focus on the Global South, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions and others became a platform for exchanging information

on action plans. The overseas representatives also stressed that the Hokkaido counter-summit actions should be treated as a part of the worldwide anti-globalization movement. Based on this understanding, they made a strong request that the three Japanese networks carry out joint actions in which overseas protesters could also participate. Although the three Japanese networks had agreed to jointly host the July 5 Peace March, they failed to concur on an umbrella slogan that covered people and groups with different focuses and degrees of opposition to the G8. "Challenge the G8 Summit, Building Alternatives," proposed by a Korean participant at the coordination meeting, eventually became the slogan for the Peace Walk. The Domestic Coordination Meeting was also held in Hokkaido, with the Hokkaido People's Forum as host.

When Japanese mass media dramatized "vandalism" by a small number of protesters at the Heiligendamm anti-G8 Summit (July 6 -8, 2007 in Germany), many people from Japanese NGOs/NPOs were shaken and started showing their "allergy" to co-hosting the Peace Walk with social movement organizations. Some Japanese people who had participated in protests at Heiligendamm regarded them as a role model, and failed to evaluate the different characters and tactics of social movement groups in Germany and Japan, especially surrounding so-called "direct action." I argue this was part of the reason that people in Japanese NGOs/NPOs became wary of cooperation with some social movement groups.

After all, it was agreed by all parties that a Hokkaido organizing committee would be set up to convene the Peace Walk with the cooperation of the other parties.

Eventually, the "July 5 Peace Walk: Challenge the G8 Summit, Building Alternatives" attracted 5,000 people and became a highlight of the counter movement. The effort for a joint action nevertheless was a major achievement, because diverse Japanese social movement groups actually sat down to discuss joint activities, looking beyond their differences on politics, issues, activism and strategy to concentrate on working together for the G8 summit.

I argue that this might signal the start of a fledgling anti-globalization movement in Japan, ten years after the WTO Conference triggered the Battle of Seattle. With regard to social movements across Asia, the Asian social movement groups that joined the anti-WTO protest in Hong Kong in 2005 converged on Sapporo and set the tone for the protest. In many senses, the counter movement against the G8 summit in Hokkaido was a significant step and constituted an important experience for the Japanese social movement to re-think its position and its activities against neoliberal globalization.

G8 Counter Movement — Changing Local, and the Status Quo

As early mentioned, the Hokkaido Peoples' Forum focused on local issues as reflected in global issues. In particular, the issue of indigenous people was an important part of our activities. Because Hokkaido, originally called "Ainu mosir" (the land where humans live in serene silence), is the motherland of the Ainu, the People's Forum believed that looking back at the history of the island was crucial to visualizing the future.

Since Ainu mosir was chosen as the G8 host land, not only the Ainu but indigenous peoples all over the world began to pay close attention to the G8 summit. In September 2007, after two decades of wrangling, the U.N. general assembly adopted the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which supports indigenous peoples' long struggle to recover their right to self-determination, autonomy, lands and dignity. Among the G8 countries, the U.S. and Canada opposed the declaration. In Japan, backed by the U.N. declaration, the Hokkaido Ainu Association — an organization working for social welfare programs — demanded the Japanese government recognize

the Ainu as the indigenous people of Hokkaido. Finally, on June 6, 2008, one month before the G8 summit, the Japanese parliament unanimously passed a resolution recognizing the Ainu as such. This was a historic event and new dawn, but it was also only a starting point.

Around the G8 summit, representatives of indigenous peoples around the world gathered at Hokkaido-Ainu mosir and carried out events such as the Indigenous People's Summit (July 1 to 4). In response to the U.N. declaration, one focus of their activities was to demand the U.S. and Canadian governments adopt and implement the declaration. They also demanded the Japanese government develop legislation at the national level for the prompt implementation of the declaration.

It should be noted that the voice of indigenous peoples exposed another aspect of the G8 countries as colonizers. Many decisions made by the Japanese national government have had negative impacts on Hokkaido, whose position has been subordinated to mainland Japan — the subordination rooted in the invasion by the Japanese in the mid-age and the colonization by the Japanese central government in the 18th century. Especially recently, the expansion of free trade through the WTO and Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) has caused the destruction of local agriculture. Under the government's neoliberal policy and Tokyo-centered policy in general, Hokkaido is suffering from the aggravation of working conditions and a rise in unemployment.

When we look at the world today, however, similar things are happening to other people who are colonized, controlled, and marginalized from decision-making processes.

Through a year-long process of counter G8 actions, I reconfirmed my belief that resistance from local communities can break through and change the status quo. For instance, if the Ainu and their supporters succeed in making the Japanese implement the U.N. declaration, that could open alternative channels to tackle the issue of Japan's colonization of other regions and countries. And, this might light the way to identifying and dealing with other forms of discrimination generated from xenophobia, racism, male- and hetero-sex orientation and so on. Challenging the status quo is a long and difficult struggle. But a first, small step from a local struggle might lead to global change in the future — there is hope.

P.S.

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