

USSF: A Festival of Radical Energy

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THE CULMINATION OF years of discussion and thousands of hours of planning, the 1st United States Social Forum brought together over 12,000 activists to sweltering Atlanta June 27-31 for a week of conferencing, networking and marching. With lead organizing initiated by nonprofits, especially Project South, with ties to the Grassroots Global Justice network, the USSF resulted from two years' work by a National Planning Committee (NPC) composed of several dozen nonprofits, left "thinktanks" and social movement organizations.

Logistically, the USSF proceeded very well despite the wonderfully humid June heat of Atlanta. One problem often plagues efforts of this kind: Local turnout unfortunately suffered from the enormous additional organizing demand on already overloaded social movement activists, some of whom felt excluded from the real decision making. The event didn't make much impact on local communities and struggles, although there was one important exception — dozens of volunteers organized by Jobs with Justice and the Atlanta Labor Council.

The USSF was kicked off by a spirited march through downtown Atlanta on Wednesday afternoon. Prayers from indigenous communities, remembrances of the courageous history of civil rights struggle in the city, and the awesome sounds from the New Orleans second-line band The Hot 8 inspired the thousands who braved the heat. The march wound through important sites of political struggle, including Grady Hospital, where activists from AFSCME Local 1644, fighting a scheme to privatize the hospital, encouraged us on.

Hundreds of workshops, meetings and cultural events were convened each day of the Forum at sites around the city. The most striking element of the Forum, in general, were the participants — overwhelmingly young, many people of color, LGBTQ and most from grassroots organizations. The Forum intentionally based itself in this milieu — community organizations, workers centers, radical collectives — rather than on "celebrity" activists (who were not featured speakers) and the big NGOs or thinktanks that have been at the center of the World or Regional Social Forums.

The two largest labor contingents were probably the UE and Jobs with Justice. Besides to 30 or so of its own members, UE brought a representative from the Mexican independent union federation FAT. Additionally, a sizable sector of the crowd represented some of the most inspiring community organizations and workers' centers — not just organizers, but their base as well. Many of these groups have initiated a new network, the Right to the City Alliance (www.righttothecity.org) and used the USSF for the debut of the project.

Faleh Abood Umara, from the Iraqi Federation of Oil Workers' Union, was enthusiastically received at the plenary where he spoke against the U.S.-backed plans to privatize and pillage Iraq's national oil industry.

Coming Together

Solidarity was part of organizing a number of workshops. By far the largest of these was a dynamic four-hour session on revolutionary strategy and organization, which was pulled together with Freedom Road Socialist Organization as the lead organization, the League of Revolutionaries for a New America, the Labor Community Strategy Center, Bring the Ruckus, and Marxist study groups from the Bay Area and NYC. Here, over 200 mostly young activists demonstrated their search for a radical — if not revolutionary — political alternative and their appreciation for open, non-sectarian exploration of strategies for revolutionary organization.

Solidarity played the lead role in an ambitious workshop “Feminism: Gender, Race and Class” with nearly 15 co-sponsors including NOW, Black Radical Congress, Highlander and SisterSong. Coming out of this workshop, a continuations network is forming to continue the dialogue. We also built a session on “Youth Building a Stronger Labor Movement on Campus and in the Workplace” with United Students Against Sweatshops, Student Labor Action Project, Student Farmworker Alliance and AFSCME Local 3299; a workshop on military counter-recruitment; and a panel of speakers from Against the Current, International Socialist Review and Democratic Left on “The U.S. Working Class and Socialist Perspectives.” (The presentations from that panel appear in this issue of *ATC* — ed.)

Throughout the event, the politics were refreshing and radical. Of course the big NGOs and more bureaucratic progressive networks were there. But the “voice” of the USSF was decidedly grassroots and radical, and many of the discussions challenged the role played by big NGOs and 501c3s and their effects on building mass movements.

Suzanne Pharr, facilitating the gender plenary, announced that the book edited by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, had sold out, to big cheers from the audience. “I don’t need a 501c3 to organize my people,” said a veteran from the Black liberation movement during the Katrina plenary.

Other plenaries, organized to close each day, dealt with War/Prisons/Security, Indigenous Sovereignty, Immigrant Rights, and Labor. The plenaries functioned more as spaces to declare the USSF’s overriding areas of political priority than as forums for strategic questioning or charting the way forward. The Katrina plenary was particularly moving, especially the stories, anger, and cries of appeal from the floor. If the government’s response openly displayed its racism and contempt for the poor, the response of the movements revealed our own weaknesses and crippling divisions. Many are wondering if things may have been different — a broader, more militant struggle for justice in the Gulf Coast — had there been Forums to bring the movements together.

The USSF was also an opportunity for groups to found new organizations or announce recent initiatives; the idea and actual occurrence of the Forums actively compel the building of such alliances. A national network of domestic workers was founded, as well as the above-mentioned Right to the City Alliance, bringing together radical community-based organizations in struggles against gentrification and the neoliberal abandonment/takeover of U.S. cities.

Looking Forward

There were some obvious limitations and drawbacks. Many workshop sites were a good distance away from the Civic Center and downtown hotels — this affected attendance at workshops scheduled in the distant venues. While organized labor, especially the Change to Win unions, put up a lot of funding and logistical support, there was little evidence that their memberships were

engaged with the Forum beyond a few contingents (par for the course for the progressive labor bureaucracy).

The most defining global political reality - the war on Iraq and broader “war on terror” — were addressed, but not foregrounded or strategically discussed; no united anti-war action or strategy was proposed or endorsed by the Forum, which seems like a missed opportunity.

The notion and structure of the Social Forum themselves do not allow for this deeper level of strategic discussion. The Forums are intentionally non-programmatic. This can be frustrating. We came away from the USSF with some new connections, cherished inspiration and new ideas for work to be done, but with the same unanswered question after attending the World Social Forum in 2005 — “Well, we’ve gathered all these forces and movements together. But what are we going to do?”

The USSF did issue a call for a January 26, 2008 international day of action, linking up with actions coming out of the World Social Forum.

The Forums are political fairs — fairs where you can learn a lot, showcase your political work, make a few valuable connections, maybe bring together some united action or network. They are sorely needed spaces for broader discussion and exchange within the Left. We should all participate in building the next USSF — planned for 2010 — and the WSFs, with an understanding of they can and cannot accomplish.

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P.S.

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