

Fourth WSF

Mumbai World Social Forum : new advances, old problems

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At its fourth annual gathering, held January 16-21, 2004 in India's poverty-ridden financial hub of Mumbai, the World Social Forum (WSF) radicalized its demands and extended its reach and inter-group cooperation. From 130,000 to 200,000 persons attended the colourful, sometimes chaotic gathering. The WSF sessions concluded by calling for a deepening of the fight against capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy And endorsing the march 20 worldwide anti-war Demonstration for the removal Of foreign troops from Iraq. The shared premise is that neoliberal capitalist globalization cannot maintain itself without war and the threat of war.

This radical position grew in part out of the Jakarta Peace Conference against the current total war situation, US imperialism, and the U.S. government's attempt to make the 21st century "the American Century". WSF 2004 condemned not just the Iraq occupation but also Israel's war against Palestine. There was strong support for the closing of all 875 US military bases in the non-U.S. world. People also advocated a "social war" against terror and against state repression of activists, that is, the use of the terrifying "war against terrorism" to criminalize popular movements. In addition, a network to stop buying from US war profiteers (Bechtel, Halliburton, Exxon Mobil, Pepsi and so on) drew support.

Retaining its pluralism as "a world village square", WSF 2004 featured incredible human diversity, partly because of the varied viewpoints and peoples represented but also because of a strong participation from India's many linguistic groups and lower castes, such as the Dalits (those of the lower castes, the "untouchables") and the Adivasis (indigenous peoples known as "tribals"). The Dalits arrived at Mumbai high spirited after a national march.

Women constituted close to 50% or even more of this year's participants, although most panels did not reflect this. Building on earlier meetings like the September 2003 one in Cancún, Mexico, that helped spark the collapse of the World Trade Organization ministerial meeting, women's networks were part of the Indian organizing committee (women always having been a vocal part of WSF organizing committees). Two of Mumbai's 12 major forums were dedicated to women's issues. There were at least two hundred seminars on women's issues scheduled - many by the Indian women's organizations themselves. Women's international networks, such as the World March of Women, Women's Reproductive Rights and so on used WSF 2004 as an occasion to meet together as networks to look at the possibility of joint work and coordination.

This exemplifies the WSF process of advancing toward a collectivist, cooperative, and inclusive model of leadership instead of a reductionist and exclusivist model of a single [often male] leadership. Clearly the World Social Forum's process can and should play a key role in unifying struggles, networking networks and organizations, and moving the social movement process toward a political one capable of changing the world.

WSF 2004 showed that these annual meetings are not just ones involving elite jetsetter citizen activists and progressive NGOs but are anchored in local social movements such as those in India. Porto Alegre (Brazil) is by no means a WSF "headquarters", nor is the WSF Euro-centric - it is

increasingly global.

Holding this year's World Social Forum in Mumbai was only possible due to the involvement of the Indian social movements and political groups who agreed to work together to create the event. This cooperation is one of the important achievements of the WSF - as well as bringing the world's attention to Asia, and the Asian Subcontinent.

WSF 2004 and the events leading up to it, such as the six-day 2003 Asian Social Forum (ASF) in Hyderabad attended by representatives of 840 organizations, 14,426 delegates and 780 foreign delegates, linked up political parties and social movements, especially in India. Together with the gigantic February 15, 2003, global mobilization against the planned US invasion of Iraq, Hyderabad's ASF helped show most of India's and Asia's sizeable lefts the importance of the WSF. Also gaining a hearing at the ASF was the view that the rightwing governments of India and Pakistan are "twin warmongers". Activists from India and Pakistan networked in Mumbai, changing the political culture of both.

Numerous WSF participants came from the rest of Asia (but only a handful from China). There occurred countless Asian rallies, including the Asian People's Rally against free trade agreements, oppression of migrant workers, and war. There also was more participation from the Arab and Islamic world, such as Palestine, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, and Iran.

WSF 2004's organizers included India's two largest communist parties and one representative from each mass organization joining the India WSF process. They proved you could convoke a WSF with minimal government funding, no direct corporate funding, and without a leftist party in power (as in Porto Alegre, where in the 1990s the PT had first introduced its famed "participatory budget"). Using much self-sufficient funding, they reduced by half the budget required for WSF 2003 in Porto Alegre. However, sixty percent of WSF 2004 funding still came from NGOs (reportedly from Netherlands-based Hivos and Novib and UK-based NGO Oxfam).

WSF's process of debates and self-criticisms continued. Sticky funding issues remained - in poor countries you have to get funding from somewhere, and the least tainted sources are often a handful of progressive NGOs. Other old problems and questions persisted about the open forum format and lack of a unified WSF position on alternatives to capitalist globalization. Although WSF 2006 may be held in Africa, is there still not a need to incorporate more of the world's underrepresented peoples (e.g. China, indigenous peoples and migrant workers, and guerrilla resistance armies like those in Nepal, Mexico, and Colombia excluded because of the WSF Charter's commitment to "non-violence")? Is there any usefulness to the large "talking heads" forums or should there be more emphasis on the seminar-level meetings between activists? And innumerable other questions...

True to its initial call, WSF 2004 focused on support for world peace and opposition to imperialist globalization, militarism, India-style "communalism" (exemplified by the 2003 murder of more than 2,000 Muslims in Gujarat), religious fanaticism, sectarian violence, casteism, racism, work/descent based exclusions, discriminations, and patriarchy. Representatives from the world's social movements (but only a few from India) met every night to draft a "Call of the Assembly of Social Movements". Echoing the causes listed in the original WSF call, the social movements' call specified the rights of Dalits and the world's incapacitated, among others. It emphasized the March 20 anti-war mobilization and also called for mobilizing for March 8 (International Women's Day), March 30 (Palestinian Land Day), and April 17 (International Peasant Struggle Day). It endorsed the ongoing campaigns against the WTO, FTAA, WB, IMF, G8, and ASEAN. Expressing solidarity with progressive forces in Cuba, Palestine, Venezuela, and Bolivia, it concluded: "Globalize the Struggle, Globalize Hope!"

Other major developments at WSF 2004 included intensified global campaigns:

- For cancelling the huge, unjust, unpayable "odious" Third World debt

- For an end to violence against women, including honour killings and dowry deaths
- For treatment and action against HIV/AIDS
- For reforming in-depth, or abolishing and replacing, international institutions like the World Bank, IMF, WTO, and UN
- For boycotting Coca-Cola (for its complicity in the murder of trade unionists in Colombia and destruction of indigenous peoples' water and land resources in Kerala state, India)
- For dealing with mass poverty, child labour, and sex trade
- For human dignity through struggle, including sexual orientation and gender identity
- For WSF's historic emphasis on both labour and ecological issues
- For spreading regional social forums, such as the 2003 ASF and European Social Forum, and the Social Forum of the Americas in Quito, Ecuador, July 2004
- Against privatization of water and other human necessities
- Against destruction of other nations' agriculture and the world's farmers through the use of transgenic seed varieties by corporations like Monsanto and Cargill
- Against using intellectual property rights to strip people of their knowledge and sources of survival/resistance
- Against neoliberalism's conversion of life forms into commodities for sale
- For alternative media and internet software sources (22 of the 700 workshops)

A small coalition opposed to the WSF, the Mumbai Resistance (MR), conducted meetings across the street from the WSF that drew up to 5,000. Although the well-known farmers' organization Via Campesina brought to the WSF more than 180 representatives from outside India, its affiliate from India joined the MR. Other MR sponsors included the CPI(ML)PW, a combination of two of India's Maoist splinter groups known to have murdered rivals in the past. MR objected to WSF's NGO funding and exclusion of guerrilla movements and political parties (even though parties do play a role in the WSF).

Since India's left has traditionally been largely self-funding and based on "self-reliance", its more radical elements have criticized the rise of the NGOs as a combination of co-option and reformism - a kind of "Trojan horse" of imperialism. While it is true that most NGOs seek to control social movements or give capitalism a human face, many also help marshal forces opposed to neoliberalism, imperialist war and capitalism's ongoing destruction of ecosystems. MR backers turned down an invitation to address the huge and diverse audiences of the WSF, thereby isolating themselves from larger ongoing struggles.

Whatever its problems, the WSF, sometimes called "the other superpower", remains an unprecedented process of cross-cultural social activism and international movement building. Overcoming obstacles and networking networks, it keeps advancing in its call for "another possible world" of justice, equity, and peace.

P.S.

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