

A Light Within (the Heart of Empire): The 2007 US Social Forum

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What happens when hundreds or even thousands of small and not-so-small organizations come together to meet, dialogue, and present their ideas over the course of a long weekend? The World Social Forum (WSF), an annual gathering of tens of thousands of people from over 100 countries, has provided this space for those able to travel to Brazil, Kenya, Venezuela, and India in recent years. This summer, from June 27 to July 1, those of us who have never traveled to a WSF will have the opportunity to experience first hand what such a gathering looks like, when the US Social Forum (USSF) takes place in Atlanta, Georgia.

While the WSF has come under heavy criticism over recent years, due in part to the increasingly dominant role that the political parties and large multinational NGOs play in the shaping and framing of the event, the USSF got off to an encouraging start when it was announced last year that it would take place in the southern state of Georgia, and that Project South would be one of the groups initially bottom-lining the organizing. According to their mission statement:

Project South is a leadership development organization based in the US south creating spaces for movement building. We build relationships with organizations and networks across the US and Global South to inform our local work and to engage in bottom-up movement building for social and economic justice. As the South Goes. . .

As W.E.B. Du Bois once remarked: "As the south goes, so goes the nation." Grassroots organizations across the southern US, having to deal with so much in the

aftermath of Katrina, are still struggling almost two years later. In "A Letter from the People of New Orleans to Our Friends and Allies," printed in the last issue of *Left Turn*, we read:

While we remain in crisis, under-staffed, underfunded, and in many cases, in desperate need of help, we have seen many promises unfulfilled. From the perspective of the poorest and least powerful, it appears that the work of national allies on our behalf has either not happened or, if it has happened, it has been a failure.

New Orleans today illustrates the intense crisis that many are dealing with, not just in the South but in cities across the country. It is a test case — an example of what is happening in urban centers all across the US, only sped up in hyperdrive. Here we see the reasons why, even in the richest of the overdeveloped countries, we have to keep finding ways of coming together to press for justice and equality.

New Orleans highlights the intersections of de-industrialization and corporate globalization — symbolized by the moves towards privatization and intense gentrification. It predicts what future effects the global climate crisis will have on our most vulnerable communities. It shows the government's increasing reliance on militarism as a means to solve humanitarian disasters, with many noting the similarities with Iraq, such as the combination of private mercenary forces with reconstruction contracts awarded to companies like Halliburton. And finally, it has shown the inadequacy of the response to all of this put forward by the so-called "non-profit industrial complex" in the wake of the vacuum left by the state.

Still, two years later, grassroots resistance in New Orleans continues, as it has always has. New community formations, organizations, and networks have emerged and are organizing effectively against such great odds. Many of them are planning on traveling to Atlanta this summer. Robert Goodman, a formerly incarcerated activist who works with the New Orleans-based organization Safe Streets, Strong Communities, says that although "New Orleans is still in crisis, we are clear that the only folks who will help are others working for justice. We see the Social Forum as a place to share our stories and connect our struggles so together we can demand some fundamental changes in the treatment of New Orleans and all its displaced people." USSF organizers in turn have worked hard to highlight many of these organizations and their struggles during

the nearly week-long program.

Gettin' on the bus

Atlanta is expecting huge numbers not only from New Orleans but all across the southern states. In a recent outreach email, the USSF national organizing committee highlighted some of the folks traveling to Atlanta:

* The South by Southwest Freedom Caravan — spanning more than 5 states — will bring nearly 1,000 people from New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia.

* Several community organizations in Mississippi, including the Mississippi Workers Center and Mississippi Immigrant Rights Alliance (MIRA), are organizing more than four buses from across the state.

* Southern Rural Black Women's Initiative is bringing more than 200 members in their Delegation from Mississippi and Alabama!

Although the left and progressive movement here in the US is still very fractured and factionalized, many are realizing that these kinds of gatherings are few and far between, and are finding ways to use their trip to Atlanta to strengthen their local work, as well as to build relationships and connect with friends and allies who will be coming from across the country.

Larger Questions

Eric Tang, in an editorial featured in *Left Turn* #23 (Mexico on the Brink), wrote: "The USSF offers no guarantees. It will be what we make of it. So arrive in Atlanta not only with the intention of being convinced and inspired, but with the desire to convince and inspire others." This leads to an important question. Are we coming to the table with some sort of vision that aims to "convince and inspire" or do we see this as more of an extended networking session, an opportunity to build with individuals and organizations whom we rarely get to see or communicate with outside of email lists and conference calls?

Some of the past critiques of the WSF process have centered around similar questions. They argue that perhaps what gets lost in the sea of workshops and opening plenaries, the dinners and car rides, the

meetings and caucuses, is the question — to what end? Those of us who are not interested in starting a political party, and have even shied away from cadre organizing of any kind, have found it hard to articulate what exactly it is we would want to see on the local, regional, or even national level, much less how we might organize towards such a goal. Perhaps we are not interested or do not have the energy right now to grapple with the concept of building a larger, more coordinated movement here in the US that could operate on a national scale?

We know we are critical of the non-profit world — increasingly integrated into the corporate model — as a major vehicle for structural social change. We are critical of the centralized political party structure, whether it be the neoliberal Democrats or the small leftist “revolutionary sects” that continue to operate in near anonymity around the country. On the other side of the spectrum, the frustrating anti-organizational and sectarian tendencies within many of the contemporary anarchist movements, coupled with the predominantly white subcultures surrounding them, have left much to be desired. The alternative for many of us has been to continue to identify with a broad-based, but still rather vague, political tendency — sometimes described as the “anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, non-sectarian left.” This tendency has been much more clearly articulated among social movements in Latin America, where, during the 2005 WSF, Joao Pedro Stedile, coordinator of Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement (MST), stated, “The question of power is not resolved by taking the government palace, which is easy and has been done many times, but rather by the building of new social relations.”

Another Politics Is Possible

Building on this theme, and following a series of public events and report-backs analyzing social movements in Latin America (see *Left Turn* #20 editorial “Rethinking Solidarity”), a group of 20 organizers and community activists, coming from a wide range of backgrounds, organized a 5-part monthly political study group in a modest effort to continue a more focused dialogue. Part of the group’s initial goals was to figure out a way to present some of these questions and ideas in Atlanta.

One component of this is organizing a large plenary

session called "Another Politics Is Possible: Living the Vision from Below and to the Left." This session is being co-sponsored by a wide range of organizations on both the local and the national level including; LA Garment Workers' Center, Sista II Sista, Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Student Farmworker Alliance, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, Regeneracion and Pachamama Childcare collectives, Left Turn, Catalyst Project, and the Center for Immigrant Families. This plenary hopes to serve as a meeting point for many groups and individuals who are thinking about this concept of building "new social relations" alongside their everyday base-building and political education work.

Besides the panel discussion, there is a large delegation being organized from New York, made up of several buses, under the same theme of "Another Politics Is Possible." Tying the transportation organizing to the larger vision, the delegation's fundraising appeal states:

Many times, individual paid professionals and "token" community members represent community organizations in larger strategic conversations, gatherings, and conferences. The USSF provides an important opportunity to change this dynamic. Instead of choosing a few individuals to travel by plane and rent out hotel rooms, we will use a comparable budget to enable a large group of mothers, children, youth, and childcare volunteers to attend the USSF. Ground transportation will enable more participants to attend, particularly immigrants and families with children. The journey itself will embody our politics, fostering an intergenerational space of connection, sharing, and caring for people from different communities in NYC. At the USSF, we hope to both learn from others and to share our own work.

Emerging out of our study group, and preparing for the long bus rides ahead, we still have many questions. While we do not pretend to know the answers, we know that the USSF will provide a rare and important space to keep pushing forward the question of political vision. We will be missing out if we treat this moment merely as a glorified networking opportunity, ceding the platform to the NGOs and political parties who have become accustomed — over the course of the WSF process — to sitting at the head of the table.

It might be time to grab the mic. Max Uhlenbeck is a member of the Left Turn editorial collective, and a

national organizer with Students for a Democratic Society (www.newsds.org), who works and lives in New York City.

P.S.

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