

# The WSF at Mumbai

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**The fourth World Social Forum took place in Mumbai, India this January and its success was widely acclaimed. The previous three forums had taken place in Porto Alegre, in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, at annual intervals since January 2001. Mumbai was celebrated as more diverse, less dominated by celebrities and with greater participation by poor people than its predecessors. Terry Conway reflects on the event and some of the lessons that can be learnt from it.**

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The World Social Forums in Brazil, inaugurated as alternatives to the capitalist world organisations like the WTO and the IMF, allowed social and community movements to come together, exchange ideas and debate ways forward in a unique and empowering way. The focus of each meeting shifted to reflect events in the outside world, with the first focusing on neo-liberalism while the later meetings took up issues of war and imperialism as well.

From the start, national sections of the Fourth International have helped to organise the meetings of the World Social Forum and its regional offshoots, and members of the International Socialist Group are helping to build the forthcoming European Social Forum in London in October. This is partly because we think it is important to build significant unitary campaigns against aspects of neo-liberalism and imperialism in order to best defend the interests of working people.

As revolutionaries, we want to win other people to the ideas that we believe can best take forward the struggles for the rights of workers and the oppressed – women, lesbians and gay men, black people and ethnic minorities, the disabled. These ideas have been learnt both from our own and other organisations' direct involvement in struggle and also from the history of the workers' movement. In this context, these international gatherings offer important opportunities as they bring together many activists eager to debate strategies and ideas, including many who may not have previously come into contact with revolutionary Marxism.

Despite the strengths of Porto Alegre and the traditions of struggle in Brazil, a world event held in only one geographical location has obvious limitations. Of necessity, a high proportion of those attending come from Latin America, with sizeable delegations from parts of North America and Europe. Despite some resistance to moving the forum, it was agreed to alternate them, with one year in Brazil, one year elsewhere. This was a positive decision, together with plans on how to strengthen the process of organising regional forums.

By holding such a successful event in another continent, the social movements have been able to assert their strength more forcibly. This has been even more the case in the wake of the magnificent

worldwide mobilisation against the war on February 15, 2003, partly organised through decisions at the European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002. The call to support the March 20 international action against the occupation of Iraq was followed through particularly effectively in Asia.

### **The challenge for the Indian left**

The decision to hold the fourth WSF in India posed a significant challenge for the left in that country. This because of the diverse political forces involved. Firstly, there were the political parties, with the largest and most influential coming from the Stalinist tradition and from Maoism, most of which also have their own trade unions, women's and youth organisations and an instrumentalist approach to social movements.

Secondly, since the 1970s there has been an explosion of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) taking up a whole gamut of issues from women's' liberation to homelessness, from opposition to communalism to the defence of the environment. These movements grew in conscious opposition to the electoralism and unfulfilled promises of the political groups. But this sector, while generally hostile to the traditional political parties, is also deeply divided. Parts of the NGO sector have become increasingly dependent on funding from international institutions and as a result have become less radical in their demands and activities.

The left as a whole in India, partly because of the size of the country and its huge population, partly because of the problems it faces, is rather insular, with few links to groups elsewhere. This, together with its own fragmentation, meant that taking on the organisation of the World Social Forum was not an easy job. The process of beginning to work together and to break down some of the divisions began in the preparation of the Asian Social Forum, which took place in Hyderabad in 2002 and was attended by 20,000 people. Without this successful regional initiative Mumbai would not have been achieved.

But this did not resolve all the problems. In the run up to Mumbai, a split developed in the organising committee resulting in a rival event being held only minutes away from the main forum, under the banner of 'Mumbai Resistance' (MR). This was a much smaller event, attended by around 5000, mostly Indian people, though a couple of organisations from the Philippines also participated. It was mainly initiated by those Maoist groups that still support guerrilla activity, but did have broader support including from some Trotskyists.

Some of the criticisms from organisers of MR seem at first glance to have some validity. It is legitimate to get impatient with speakers who argue for reforms of capitalism, or with those who complain from the podium about the effect of neo-liberalism while implementing it back home. But these debates need to take place within the large tent of social forums. If parts of the left go off and organise only with those who agree with their critique of the roots of neo-liberalism and imperialism and the tools necessary to fight, the main arenas will be left freer for those who only want to tinker with the system, and new activists will not hear the radical alternatives.

### **The success of Mumbai**

Mumbai brought together huge delegations from Asia as well as seeing a strengthened presence from Africa. Land distribution is central to politics both in Latin America and Asia, but other new questions, such as caste and communalism, were given new prominence, not only through various

meetings, but demonstrations and cultural presentations as well. One group of dalits (untouchables) for example held a hunger strike for 48 hours during the forum. Two seminars were organised on the question of Kashmir, which has often been a taboo subject even amongst the left in the sub-continent. Other actions were more familiar such as the protests by disabled activists about the lack of accessible facilities.

Another seminar looked at the developing links between the governments of India, the United States and Israel. Nuclear disarmament was given a higher profile in anti-war activities than has been the case in Europe recently. The attendance of a substantial delegation from Pakistan had both symbolic and practical significance. The social movements in both countries, especially the peace movements, have worked to develop co-ordination between the two countries, especially important in a region where building nuclear weapons has been an element of the disputes between India and Pakistan.

While these direct links involved only a small number of activists, there is overwhelming support from civil society for an end to the military standoff, which saps resources that could be spent instead on public services. Ironically the attendance from Pakistan was made easier because Bush had been leaning on both governments to come to some accommodation, and India's Prime Minister Atal Vajpayee, effectively launching his election campaign at the time the WSF took place, was keen to comply. Despite this, of around two thousand activists from Pakistan only around seven hundred were finally granted visas - a fact the mainstream media in both countries failed to report.

Women made up more than fifty per cent of the participants, although this was not reflected in the composition of the platforms. In India both political parties and some of the social movements have separate women's organisations, and perhaps this positively affected the numbers of women who attended. Certainly it had an effect on visibility with a large number of the many spontaneous demonstrations around the site being by women's organisations behind their various banners.

Cultural activities, including music, dance and street theatre were integral to the event. Even at the massive opening and closing plenaries, held in the open air, the atmosphere felt more like that of a pop festival than a meeting. There was as much political significance in opening the event with a set from Pakistani band Junoon, as having Pakistani speakers on the platform.

The World Social Forum in Mumbai was inspiring at many different levels. I learnt from the struggles of many of the individuals and groups I met, whether in formal sessions or over food or entertainment. I was energised by the diversity of activity, by others' sense of discovery of the links between struggles in different parts of the world.

One aspect of the event that I found more satisfying than the parallel experience of the European Social Forums in Florence and Paris is that it seemed the organising committee, perhaps from a sense of its own fragility, had not tried to centralise everything. In the European settings, I attended a number of events where different groups had come together under one seminar title, but with very different things to say about the same subject. This made for quite unsatisfactory meetings - they weren't set up as polemics, which certainly have their place, especially in the main plenaries, but instead ended up being somewhat incoherent and not terribly enlightening. In Mumbai, I did not have that feeling. Maybe this was just luck, but I got the impression that it was precisely because more autonomy was given to seminar organisers to find their own partners. Perhaps this way of organising, which some call horizontal, is something that should be taken on board at the forthcoming European Social Forum in London.

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