

Globalisation

What Happened to the Global Justice Movement?

Fighting Neoliberalism - The view from Scotland

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A few weeks ago during an interview with the *Sunday Herald* Naomi Klein author of *No Logo* and prominent spokesperson for the anti globalisation movement was asked about the high point of the movement at Seattle in 1999 when tens of thousands of activists and trade unionists closed down the World Trade Organisation (WTO) talks in protest at the neo liberal, unfair global trade arrangements.

She replied that she doesn't believe the anti-globalisation movement is finished but states that the moment has passed, (*Sunday Herald* 22.09.07). So what has happened to the anti-globalisation movement, more recently referred to as the global justice movement?

The policies of neo-liberalism which introduced unfettered market forces, privatisation of public services and an imposition of unfair trade using international institutions, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have provoked massive struggles of opposition and resistance. Neo-liberalism is not just an economic system; it affects every aspect of society - economic, political, social, cultural and ideological.

What the global justice movement has done is to recognise that the system is global and therefore the opposition has to be global, it has created an international consciousness amongst activists across the world and has tried to bring together those from very diverse campaigns through action. Millions have taken part in protests against the institutions of neo liberalism, mass protests and blockades of the WTO, the IMF, the World bank, the EU, the G8, the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) have United protestors under the slogan of Seattle, The World is Not For Sale.

International Solidarity

This active international solidarity has broken down barriers and has assisted in the creation of international networks, which puts Indian peasant communities resisting Coca Cola stealing their water supply in touch with students in Europe and the US who act in solidarity by campaigning for a boycott of Coca Cola on University Campuses, who in turn are linked with Columbian trade unionists fighting against Coca Colas attack on trade union organisation. It connects womens organisations

fighting sex trafficking with Euro MPs drafting legislation on the issue. It was the initiator and co-ordinator of the biggest anti war demonstration the world has ever seen when on 15 February 2003, 12 million people simultaneously took part in protests against the invasion of Iraq.

Following the global capitalist circus around from continent to continent to protest outside fortified doors raises the international profile of the movement and keeps the global solidarity banner flying but it has its limitations, not everyone can get on a plane to a G8 summit or a WTO meeting to protest and is it effective in resisting the policies of neo liberalism? Certainly global news pictures of the G8 leaders being forced into smaller and more isolated spots to hold talks because of the opposition to their policies is a success of the strength of the movement, but the talks still take place.

There was recognition amongst some sections of the movement that mobilisations of this sort although important are not enough. There is a need not just to develop action but to develop ideas, an alternative global model to that of neo liberalism. Under the slogan Another World is Possible, the first World Social Forum (WSF) took place in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 2001. It is no accident that the left of the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) were in power in Porto Alegre and that the movement was offered facilities from the local council. Everyone and anyone fighting neo liberal globalisation was invited.

The enormous strength of the WSF is its openness and diversity, also the emphasis on democracy and creating an inclusive space. Drawing on past experiences there is a culture of suspicion against those who attempt to gain hegemony over the movement. From the outset political parties have not been allowed to be formal participants in the gatherings and structures of the WSF the reason being the fear of the domination of the space by those parties. However members of parties and leaders of parties have taken part and have spoken at events and rallies of the WSF, in particular Hugo Chavez the Venezuelan President. The emphasis has been and still is on networking . The WSF movement has travelled through various phases and is also on the move in terms of its political analysis and alternative programme. The political spectrum gathered under the WSF umbrella is broad to say the least, from the Christian organisations, through development NGOs and leadership bodies of international trade unions to socialists and revolutionaries.

There are wide political differences within the International Council of the WSF which involves about 100 organisations. Views range from those who believe that you can negotiate fair trade and debt cancellation with the institutions of capitalism to those who present a critique of the entire capitalist system and who want to develop alternatives to capitalism.

Co-opting The Movement

We have had our own front row view of these tensions during the protests against the G8 summit at Gleneagles in 2005. The Make Poverty History demonstration saw 250,000 take part, and the follow up Live Aid concert announced by Bob Geldof were often portrayed in the press and by politicians as the acceptable face of the global justice movement. We saw the attempt by Blair and Brown to co-opt the movement, to bring it in to the negotiating table, to tame and paralyse it. In contrast the G8 Alternatives demonstration which grouped the more radical wing of the movement was initially banned. Bob Geldof declined the direct invitation to publicly support the G8 Alternatives demonstration on the opening day of the summit at Gleneagles. The G8 Alternatives Summit in Edinburgh had speaking on its platforms and at its workshops some of the leading figures of the anti globalisation movement but was very much ignored by the mainstream media.

Since the first WSF in 2004 there has been an annual WSF, the biggest of which were Mumbai

(India) in 2004 (140,000) and Porto Alegre (Brazil) in 2005 (150,000). There have also been European Social Forums, Polycentric World Social Forums, emphasising the geographical spread of the movement, these took place in Bamako (Mali), Karachi (Pakistan) and Caracas (Venezuela), and Regional Social Forums in Asia.

The grass roots of the WSF are strengthening and renewing not just in organisational terms but also in political and programmatic developments and it is a very progressive and inclusive process. The latest WSF was held in Nairobi in Kenya, the first one held in Africa. Although smaller than some of the others (40,000) it brought together grass roots organisations fighting the neo liberal agenda that had never before shared a space. Allowing experiences to be exchanged, solidarity links strengthened and ideas clarified.

The Charter of Principles of the WSF adopted at Sao Paulo in on 9 April 2001 states that it is, An open meeting place where groups and movements of civil society opposed to neo liberalism and a world dominated by capital or any form of imperialism, but engaged in building a society centred on the human person.....to debate ideas democratically, formulate proposals, share their experiences freely and network for effective action.

The movement is reclaiming the ground of international solidarity and an international consciousness which had been lost for a period. The Nairobi WSF in January of this year placed on the agenda, - social justice, international solidarity, gender equality, peace and defence of the environment. The big question facing the movement is how will these aims be achieved?

Despite the 12 million who took to the streets in a global movement to prevent war in Iraq, US and British Imperialism invaded. We did not stop the war. This has definitely had an effect on the consciousness and the retreat of the anti war movement. The analysis put forward by the anti war movement has been borne out, the Bush administration and US foreign policy is in a quagmire. The lasting legacy will be instability in Iraq which will destabilise other regimes in the Middle East. We could not prevent it from happening.

In our own direct experience we saw the biggest demonstration ever in Edinburgh, a quarter of a million people protesting at the policies of the G8 and demanding that action be taken on cancellation of debt, fair trade and aid to support the countries of the South. Despite Blair and Browns slick PR and sound bite promises nothing has happened to change the neo liberal policies of the G8, WTO, IMF or World Bank in Africa or anywhere else. Numerous attempts have been made by varying governments to co-opt the movement into government and offer access to neo liberal institutions. In particular leaders of the big NGOs have been offered policy making roles. Attempts have been made to hi-jack the space created such as Brown attempting to speak at the Make Poverty History Demonstration. Politicians who are carrying out neo- liberal policies have gained access to platforms and have attempted to speak for the movement. Sponsorship for WSF events has been offered by the Ford Foundation amongst others.

Independence of the Movement

So far the movement has maintained its independence, the openness and emphasis on democracy as well as autonomous organisation at a grass roots level has been a factor in this. It has neither been co-opted nor institutionalised.

So what is it going to take both in terms of action and political programme to halt the neo liberal agenda and reverse the economic, social and ecological impact of these policies? More importantly what conclusions are being drawn by the millions of people worldwide, including the hundreds of

thousands in Scotland who participated in action during the anti war and G8 protests demanding change, only to be failed by those in the seats of political power. What has happened to that consciousness?

There are voices within the movement who are pushing the debate further. Remy Herrera a leading public figure, academic and prominent campaigner for cancellation of third world debt in addressing The WSF in Mali said he came to defend two positions, the necessity of passing from consciousness to anti imperialist action and [to go]beyond the anti neo liberal critique to the more fundamental critique of capitalism.

There are many voices who are contributing to the global debate from this position, the very experience of the movement is posing new questions and developing a deeper anti capitalist consciousness. Socialists have much to contribute to this debate and the process of understanding the nature of power in the capitalist society we live in, the power of ideas, the power of effective action and the power of organisation including political and trade union organisation.

As Naomi Klein said the movement is in no way finished, but it needs to negotiate the steps to go forward. There is a danger of fragmentation but there is the greater possibility of a strengthened and more united movement capable of co-ordinating effective action.

A New Model

You may even get a big section of the grassroots organisations, many of them mass organisations, who make up the WSF agreeing with a critique of capitalism and supporting an alternative. The big problem for all of us is what does that alternative look like? Socialists have to find ways of bridging the gap between this consciousness and presenting a credible, global political and economic alternative. There is no model and we are still carrying on our backs, although less so, the totalitarian nature of Stalinism and the lack of democratic rights.

Thats why the events in Latin America , Venezuela in particular, are important. In a concrete way the Bolivarian Revolution the policies of the Chavez government and the forms of organisation and participatory democracy at a grass roots level are redefining and contributing to the programme for Socialism in the 21st Century.

Hugo Chavez closed the Social Forum in Caracas in 2006 by stating, It is impossible, within the framework of the capitalist system to solve the grave problems of poverty of the majority of the worlds population. We must transcend capitalism. But we cannot resort to state capitalism, which would be the same perversion of the Soviet Union. We must reclaim socialism as a thesis, a project and a path, but a new type of socialism, a humanist one, which puts humans and not machines or the state ahead of everything. Thats the debate we must promote around the world, and the WSF is a good place to do it.

During the last election campaign I was at a hustings hosted by Energy Watch Scotland, not surprisingly all of the questions were about energy. I was asked to exercise my imagination and assume that the SSP have been elected as a majority government (Ive got a vivid imagination) what is the first thing I would do the next day when I got to Parliament? I replied, phone Hugo Chavez and ask him to fax through the documents relating to how to take into public ownership and run a state owned oil company, and invite the Minister responsible to come to Scotland to address the Scottish Parliament.

There is an article in this Frontline which goes into much more detail about the situation in

Venezuela, I want to just briefly touch on the programmatic issues.

The international capitalist class has for two decades promoted the idea that there is no economic alternative to neo liberalism, only with free market access everywhere, privatization of public services and liberalisation of trade will we create economic growth.

The most recent economic report on the Venezuelan economy from the Centre for Economic and Policy Research released in July this year document that there has been a 76% growth in the economy since 2003, public spending has increased from 34-44%, and investment has grown.

Households living in poverty have dropped from 55% to 30.6% and those in extreme poverty from 25% to 9.1%.

How can this be possible when the Chavez government has done the exact opposite of what neo liberal economists recommend, such as strict currency controls, price controls, nationalisation of key parts of the economy, repeated increases in the minimum wage, policies which strengthen workers rights and trade union organization, increasing taxes on the wealthy and cracking down on corporate tax evasion? This disproves not in theory but in action the argument that national governments can do little and are at the mercy of international neo liberal economic policy, it proves in practice that dissenting from the neo liberal agenda does not mean economic collapse, on the contrary if you seriously want to tackle poverty this is the type of programme you have to implement in government.

Interestingly the movement in Latin America is also trying to challenge the global dominant ideology of capitalism and to provide alternative organisations the existing global institutions of neo liberalism.

The proposal of a Debtors Fund bringing together governments of Latin America and the countries of the South to negotiate with the banks and governments of the North and to co-ordinate effective action around repayment and cancellation of foreign debt. Sure seems more effective than a Live Aid concert and Bob and Bono going for tea at Gleneagles.

There is a proposal to establish a trade agreement across the continent called ALBA (Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas) as an alternative to the US Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. ALBA would be a different model of trade co-operation. It would push for solidarity with the economically weakest countries, setting up a fund to assist their development of infrastructure, prioritizing food sufficiency in every country and protecting internal production from the predatory role of multi nationals. The proposal to challenge the media monopoly of the neo liberal view of the world by setting up a TV station which would go global presenting information, debate, argument and concrete experience of Another World Being Possible. A socialist CNN!

Having this emerging alternative will enormously assist in bridging the consciousness gap between a critique of capitalism and a viable, credible socialist alternative. Of course the programme for socialism would be different in different national countries but the task of redefining it is given much assistance from the living experience of Latin America, including the movement for workers control of industry in Argentina which I haven't touched on here.

An obvious point to make here is that the movement in Venezuela would not be able to advance any of these policies or more importantly implement them if they hadn't had popular social movements linked to political parties standing in elections, who then won a democratic mandate for political power. Networks are not enough. It also emphasizes the importance of the creation of anti capitalist parties like the SSP as part of this process. The lesson for us however is that political parties are not

enough, there is enormous strength in being linked with networks and popular movements who still retain their democratic autonomy.

The WSF and the global justice movement are helping create an international consciousness, links are strengthening between diverse and dispirit campaigns and organisations, and there is a space to exchange ideas and to find solutions to the unanswered question of how to organise effective action on a global scale to stop privatisation and multinational domination of the worlds resources and protect our environment.

The decision has been taken not to hold a World Social Forum in 2008. Instead it will be replaced by two global days of action around 26-27 January 2008, with a plan to hold the 8th WSF in 2009; the location is still to be agreed.

In Scotland we have never really managed to establish a national Social Forum type umbrella. There was the possibility to develop something concrete from the G8 Alternatives initiative, but for reasons which I have written about previously in this magazine it didnt prove possible.

As socialists we should consider how we can link up with other groups in Scotland to prepare for the global days of action next January. The thousands of young people who took part in the Make Poverty History demonstration and those who took their protest to Gleneagles havent gone away and I am sure many of them are still committed to the idea that Another World is Possible. Creating a social forum space in Scotland to discuss our visions of that other world would be a huge step forward.

P.S.

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