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World Social Forum

Unanswered questions

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ONE source of friction at the II WSF in Porto Alegre was the decision taken by the organisers to exclude the political parties of the Sao Paulo Forum, on the grounds that the gathering was one of social movements and not political parties. For over a decade the Sao Paulo Forum has brought together a broad range of left and centre-left parties from across Latin America. Its centre of gravity has shifted to the right in recent years, reflecting similar shifts among key members of the Working Group which leads it, especially the majority leadership of the Brazilian PT. But it still includes smaller organizations clearly identified with revolutionary Marxism, including the Colombian group Presentes por el Socialismo. In the end a compromise was reached in Porto Alegre. Fermin Gonzalez describes the meeting that came out of that compromise, and the political questions it left unanswered.

A Polemic with Social Democracy

ONE item on the WSF schedule was a workshop on the relation between social and political matters entitled "Another Means of Conducting Politics Is Possible". The session was called by the Working Group coordinating body for the Sao Paulo Forum, an organization that brings together the leading parties of the broad left throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Some 1,000 delegates attended as individuals or representatives of political and social organizations.

The keynote speaker was the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) representative for international relations and Executive Secretary of the Working Group, Aloisio Mercadante, who offered his view of the Sao Paulo Forum and the proposal of the PT's majority current for sponsoring a global meeting of parties and heads of state outside the neo-liberal camp to take place in conjunction with the III WSF.

This idea emerged out of joint work among members of Latin American parties affiliated to the Socialist International that view themselves as a local incarnation of the Social Europe, a group of left currents within European social-democratic parties looking to offer an alternative to the Third Way policies that the current led by Tony Blair puts forward as a sort of neo-liberalism with a human face. We should note that social democrats across the board, including those of the Social Republic grouping, have voted in support of all of the military and anti-popular initiatives demanded by US imperialism and leading multi-lateral bodies.

The proposal for a meeting of parties evolved out of World Parliamentary Forum that met during WSF II in an event in which French and other European parliamentarians identified with the Social Republic came under heated criticism from leftwing European communists, especially the massive Italian delegation, and other legislators from around the world for having voted in the European Parliament in favour of the war against Afghanistan. While the meeting led to a statement on the vote on Afghanistan, it was clear the debate was only beginning.

Reviving the Role of Parties and Other Political Organizations

On behalf of the Working Group, the delegate from Presentes por el Socialismo of Colombia explained the evolution of the Sao Paulo Forum and its many efforts to bring together social movements from the vantage point of political

parties. The emphasis manifest in this presentation helped to explain the outlook of the revolutionary left current within the Sao Paulo Forum, extending from the old Communist parties to a wide array of revolutionary left organizations with quite varied origins and forms of struggle.

In the face of the anti-party and centrist positions active within the WSF, and the debates and tensions that preceded this event, it was of fundamental importance to begin by defending the strategic role of political parties and organizations while recognizing criticisms of specific aspects of their practices especially in relation to social movements. The aforementioned presentation and the interventions of those participating in the discussion reflected two poles of thought: those who from a social and political standpoint sought to reaffirm the necessary, revolutionary role of parties - a position that within the bureaucracies of the WSF is rejected or reduced to its most institutionalised expressions including positions of elected office within the capitalist state - as well as those who also from social and political vantage points seek to convert the WSF into a sort of United Nations or as the caboose of their own "realistic" politics.

We believe it is essential to recall the ideological debate that began eleven and a half years ago at the first Sao Paulo Forum affirming its anti-imperialist and anti-neo-liberal character, something that has yet to be achieved among such broad and diverse forces in any other corner of the globe, and a position so far removed from the thinking of the European Social Republic. While ideas tend to gain strength in the Forum when they are put forward by the most representative national parties such as the Cuban CP, the Brazil PT, or the Frente Amplio of Uruguay, political consensus emerges out of plenary sessions in which no organization, regardless of how large or small, or its methods of struggle, is excluded from the discussion or decision making, an idea that is very far from being embraced by the European Social Democrats.

It is important to note that the debate that took place years ago in the Sao Paulo Forum on the validity or lack thereof of varied forms of struggle has begun to emerge in the WSF. The debate that has emerged over the exclusion of armed organizations should be conducted not with a focus on the insurgent organizations that are clearly active on the level of political organizations but rather from the framework of social organizations that are being forced by the aggression of the system to take up forms of armed self defence when their right to mobilize as an expression of popular power is being denied in many countries such as the Philippines, Palestine, Bolivia, Ecuador and even in Argentina with the flying pickets of the unemployed.

This is a question that this WSF failed to take up thanks to the big international NGOs that want to sustain a WSF in which social issues are segregated from class, much less revolutionary, economic and political concerns.

Future Challenges

While this was just one of many seminars held in the context of the WSF, the debate that began there will mark the future of the WSF. The distinct ideological viewpoints were much more clearly expressed this time within the forum alongside a heavy dose of centrism and efforts to avoid debate.

There were significant contributions from participating social organizations, academicians, intellectuals and leaders of popular struggles. Four parallel workshops took place with the most combative and consistent those of the campesinos of the Movimiento Sin Tierra and Via Campesina that tend to be increasingly displaced within the WSF: that of the 15,000 young people who pitched our tents and engaged in thoroughgoing and combative debates and exchanges of experiences especially focusing on Argentina; that of the NGOs and social organizations which took up the questions of difference and that of the intellectuals and political militants who tried to concretise the current debates taking place around the world.

Unanswered questions

There appears to be a growing trend within the WSF that seeks to prioritise an idealized sense of harmony as opposed to a clash of ideas, pressures toward mediation and harmonization versus mobilization; a tendency in which the ingenuousness of a newborn movement combines with the ancestral malice of those who seek to condemn it to a political purgatory beyond the scope of class struggle and conflict.

The debate is still pending on the world meeting of parties and the proposal that heads of state attend so as to put their stamp of approval on the WSF's demands.

While such hypocritical gestures may be seen as the tribute that vice pays to virtue, as companero Livio Maitan, a leader of the Fourth International and Rifondazione Comunista, pointed out at the time, it would be equally naive to fail to recognize that behind the praise of vice stands the threat of corrupting virtue.

The fight goes on to stay the hand of repression against movements opposing globalisation and popular struggles, a fight that more than ever is linked to avoiding their co-option and institutionalisation.