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World Social Forum

After the success, the same dilemmas

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There's no doubt about it. The winds have changed and the horizon is clearing. Only a few years ago, when the neo-liberal counterrevolution was at the height of its arrogance, a World Social Forum of such a magnitude and impact would have been unthinkable.

In this sense, the enormous popular mobilization at Porto Alegre witnesses to the breadth and radical diversity of the resistance to capitalist-imperialist globalisation, as well as the impasse in which the conservative hegemony finds itself.

The scenario of struggle is changing favourably, developing a renewed internationalism, solidarity-based and combative. Social antagonisms are accelerating at the same rhythm as political instability, above all in the so-called Third World. On the other hand, a new and decisive relationship of forces has not yet been shaped.

The dilemmas continue. How do we translate struggles and civil disobedience into a movement of refoundation? How do we pass from an alliance against "neo-liberal globalisation" to an anti-capitalist alternative? How do we combine the breadth of a heterogeneous social and political composition with the necessary programmatic rigour?

In this sense, any illusion that we are going through a similar experience to that of Marx and Engels in relation to the First International does not fit in with the reality of the WSF. Among other things, because we are separated by more than a century's distance.

Various forums took place simultaneously. One in the camps of the peasants, the indigenous peoples and youth. Here the mood was one of rebellion and barricades. The talk was of "all methods of struggle" and "moving on to action", with a utopian air. It was different in the workshops, where discussion centred on concrete and immediate demands. Social activists, trades unionists and rank and file militants monopolized the discourse. The desire and concern to sketch out possible alternatives supplanted the grand narratives. At the same time, there was an absence (or criticism) of the party political elements - the same was true in the camps.

In the conference hall, it was different again. The key themes were announced on the agenda: a new organization of production, a more equitable trade, regulation of the circulation of finance capital, the agrarian question.

Attendance was massive. Theoretically solid expositions, with debates, consensus and disagreements between the panellists and many questions raised from the body of the hall. Here the political-programmatic issues and the nature of the "alternative project" are central. The question of democracy occupied a privileged place - understandably, since the Forum took place in the cradle of the democratic-popular experience of the "Participatory Budget".

Richness and tensions

Obviously, then, there were distinct sensibilities, which brought both richness and tension to the Forum. The demands that would alter the dominant economic order - and that have the greatest impact on mobilisations - were the total cancellation of the foreign debt of the countries of the Third World and the imposition of the Tobin tax as a levy on international financial transactions (which amount today to two billion dollars a day). Less defined demands, like "fair trade" and the "ecological debt" that the rich countries should pay to "reduce inequality" were also put

forward.

The arguments in favour of these "measures of global impact" are based on shared and dramatic analyses. The countries of the South now owe four times what they owed in 1980 and six times its initial value. On this theme, Eric Toussaint, president of the Committee for the Cancellation of the Third World Debt (COCAD), did not spare his criticisms of Lula and left leaders and economists who support an "audit" rather than a cancellation of the debt.

One of the broadest consensus was around opposition to genetically modified products, as much through concern for the environmental risks as with the defence of the health of consumers and the peasants who struggle against the monopolization of seeds by a few trans-national companies. Also free trade and privatisation drew general disapproval, as factors leading to unemployment, greater inequality and less access to the public services. Other proposals contemplated stretched from opening the frontiers to workers to considering water and seeds as the common heritage of humanity; thus their privatisation including though the purchase of patents, is inadmissible.

Divergences

However, divergent roads and ideas were also expressed. There was a growing clamour against the agricultural subsidies which block off the markets of the rich countries and depress the prices of the main exporting countries of the South. On the other hand, the poor farmers, represented by the international organization Via Campesina, decided to act against the importing of food, which is detrimental to their activity. "Agriculture is not a business" and food should not be treated as a commodity, but as a human right, argued the leaders of the movement, like the Brazilian Egidio Brunetto, the Honduran Rafael Alegre and the Frenchman José Bové.

The division between radicals and moderates was evident, for example, in relation to the difference between those who proposed the abolition of the IMF, the World Bank and the WTO, like the Filipino Walden Bello, and the "realists" who advocate its reform, like the Brazilian economist Luciano Coutinho.

An example of the first group are the defenders of the Universal Minimum Income, as a lifelong right for everybody, breaking with the dominant culture that considers that only work legitimates a remuneration.

Behind many questions lay the difference between the partisans of a strategy of anti or extra-institutional resistance, of accumulation of forces and radical civil disobedience in a perspective of "popular power", and those who believe in gradual changes for the deepening of democracy and participation, as well as a pragmatic and realistic strategy of "culture of governance".

The question of the social subjects also was absent from the agenda. Many referred to "civil society", though, as François Houtart notes, society continues to be divided into classes.

There was no shortage of polemic either. In particular, when government ministers from the French Socialist Party were present at some of the conferences and debates. Jean-Pierre Chevenement had to listen to the reading of a card signed by activists and militants - led by the MEP and leader of the LCR (French section of the Fourth International), Alain Krivine- which accused him of being responsible for an anti-immigrant law. Francois Huwart also received his just desserts, for being the "representative of a country which subsidizes its agricultural products against the Third World" and which "bombs African countries".

The utopian viewpoint of some, with medium term goals, contrasted with the urgency of others, like the movements

against Plan Colombia, or the acceleration of the project of the Free Trade Area of the Americas, or anti-imperialist solidarity with the Cuban revolution.

The presence of a delegation from the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP) drew the attention and enthusiasm of hundreds of participants, particularly youth and political activists. Javier Cifuentes, member of the International Commission of the insurgent organization, stressed the importance of the WSF: "We agree with its ideal. We believe that a better world is possible. This is the struggle of the FARC in Colombia. We are present also to denounce Plan Colombia and call attention to the question of Amazonia. The Brazilians must not allow the United States to appropriate Amazonia for itself".

Meanwhile, trade unions and social networks insisted on the necessity of raising a barrier to the USA's project of re-colonisation. The Continental Social Alliance called for participation in the Second Summit of the Peoples which will take place in Quebec City in the Canadian state from April 16-21, and for the continuation of debate on the strategies of resistance to FTAA, adding that "a first step in this direction will be the mobilizations which will take place in Buenos Aires at the beginning of April, parallel to the meeting of the FTAA trade ministers".

Statements

There was no "final declaration", a decision that appears reasonable. The plurality of the political and social composition of the WSF would have complicated its drawing up and a single document would not have adequately reflected the hundreds of debates, reflections and proposals. On the contrary, there were several statements: by the social movements [\[1\]](#) the Parliamentary Forum, the workshop of the World March of Women, and so on.

In all these statements there is a challenge to the elites and the hegemony of capital. The necessity of building a broad alliance against "neo-liberal globalisation", the intention of continuing and strengthening resistance and organized mobilization.

This change in the situation is expressed in the declaration of the parliamentarians which not only denounced the "re-colonisation of the world", but associated itself with campaigns "against the mechanisms of the immoral debt and for the abolition of the debt of the poor countries; for the establishment of taxes on speculative movements of capital with the installation of a Tobin type tax; for the elimination of tax havens". It does, for sure, maintain the illusion of "a profound reform of the WTO and the international financial institutions", but the statement is nonetheless favourable in general terms.

Clearly, we will have to see whether the majority of these senators and deputies who, in the case of Latin America and the Caribbean, largely belong to parties of the Sao Paulo Forum - and who have come to adopt the road of an institutional pragmatism- will finally take up the cudgels in their respective parliaments for what was agreed in Porto Alegre.

The statement from the women's workshop reaffirmed: "No to the current neo-liberal capitalist globalisation ... Yes to the alternatives of solidarity" and denounced a "sexist globalisation" that "accentuates the massive and growing feminisation of poverty and exacerbates the multiple acts of violence against women". Overall, there was little integration of the question of women in the central axes of the Forum, although the interventions of Buenaventura de Souza and Frei Betto related the emancipatory political project to a multicultural and feminist dimension.

Another world is possible, but which?

Bernard Cassen, director of Le Monde Diplomatique and one of the main organizers of the WSF said: "We are here to discuss ideas. Then we have to seek forms of translating them into struggles. In some years we will be ready to propose measures". (Zero Hora, Porto Alegre, January 24, 2001). He added that he was "more interested in concrete actions of organized movements than in polarizations between right and left", which in his view "have lost meaning".

Ignacio Ramonet in his article "Porto Alegre" (Le Monde Diplomatique, January 2001) put forward a similar view. The purpose of the WSF is not to protest "as in Seattle, Washington or Prague ... but to try, this time with a constructive spirit, to propose a theoretical framework and practice that allows us to advocate a new globalisation and affirm that a new world is possible, less inhuman and more solidarity-based".

Nonetheless, there were protests and proposals for mobilisation in Porto Alegre, not to mention the beginning of a theoretical and programmatic reflection that refers to the class dimension, the labour-capital antagonism and the social appropriation of the means of production. In other words, the premises to establish a theoretical framework that can establish political frontiers and clarify in what manner "another world is possible".

If the "anti-globalisation" movement is reduced solely to opposition to the more undesirable effects of commercial interchange, the horrors of the payment of the foreign debt and the conditions imposed by institutions like the WTO, World Bank and IMF, it will remain hostage to some problems relating to disequilibria in the "functioning of the market". The critique of commodity fetishism and the commodification of all human and social relations would lose a great deal of its force.

The breadth and radical nature of today's struggles do not merely confront the adjustment plans of the "neo-liberal model" and their consequences. They place the relations of power and property on the agenda of daily combat: when to take over a factory, invade a latifundio (plantation), occupy a housing block or set up a "pirate" radio. That is, when those at the bottom take back their rights which have been expropriated by capital. Each struggle, in its own manner, places the question of power on the agenda, albeit sometimes only tendentially. This makes it necessary (and urgent) to develop instruments of organization and political strategy. The resistance to capitalist-imperialist globalisation amounts to a formidable laboratory of experiences of struggle, political, theoretical and programmatic reflections for an international movement like the WSF that aims to create an alternative to the globalisation of capital.

The "Rebel International"

In August 1997, the First Meeting For Humanity and Against Neo-Liberalism took place. Called by the EZLN, it sought to build, according to Subcomandante Marcos, a movement where there would be a place for "all the worlds". Thousands of activists and sympathizers of Zapatismo gathered in Chiapas, in the majority social movements and NGOs. There was talk of an "International of Hope". A seed was planted, although the attempt did not prosper, mainly because it was a movement of solidarity with a localized struggle.

The international context was at its most unfavourable, and the breach between the social and the political had reached its apogee.

Seattle changed the framework. In particular because of the profile given to the social resistances, and because it had been preceded by a significant victory: the defeat of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment.

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The itinerary of protests and "anti-globalisation" revolts assumed a greater continuity from Seattle onwards and the failure of the "Millennium Round" in November-December 1999. A little later came Ginebra and Colonia, then London, Bangkok, Davos, Washington, Geneva, Prague, and Nice. The chronology is impressive and creates difficulties for those who had succumbed to "ebb", "defeats" and "ideological regression" - in some cases, to justify demoralization and systematic adaptation, in others, to conceal impotence and a political incapacity to grasp the changes in reality and in the dynamic of the class struggle. In both cases, the fall of the Berlin wall weighed heavily on their shoulders.

Latin America has not been absent from this process of resistance and counteroffensive, including before Seattle. Strikes, uprisings and popular mobilizations have followed, one after the other. Governmental instability was (and is) the distinctive characteristic of the region.

The breach between social polarization and political expression has been closed. This is shown in an unequivocal manner by the political advance of the left in Uruguay, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, or the struggle for human rights and against impunity, the recent and formidable victory of the indigenous movement in Ecuador or the continental mobilization against Plan Colombia. The Zapatistas, meanwhile, have retaken the initiative and have marched to Mexico City.

In all cases, it is obvious that the conditions for the recomposition of the radical left and an anti-capitalist programmatic reconstruction are increasingly present today, on condition that political objectives and theoretical definitions are clarified.

The WSF was defined by some participants and journalists as a new "Rebel International". Its organizing principles and instigators are not persuaded on this point. The next meeting (Porto Alegre 2002) will indicate whether things will advance in this direction or whether, on the contrary, the Forum becomes the "anti-globalising" interlocutor of "neo-liberal globalisation".

[1] See "[Social Movements call for mobilisation](#)" in this issue.