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ESF

Europe: ESF 2003

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After the immense success of the first European Social Forum (ESF) in Florence last year, the 2003 ESF in Paris-St-Denis-Ivry-Bobigny represented an unprecedented advance in the construction of a European social movement at two levels.

First in terms of numbers: more than 50,000 people registered for attendance and there were more than 100,000 at the demonstration; certainly a lot less than in Florence, but very much more than organizations could usually turn out today in France, outside of periods of struggles like that in the Spring over pensions. That shows that the global justice movement is still exerting a broad appeal in the struggle against neoliberal capitalism; that it is an unavoidable social and political force in Europe, which has to be dealt with. That has had the effect of a breath of fresh air in an epoch when times are hard for the unemployed and their organizations.

Also, "European questions" were at the centre of numerous debates. From this point of view, there was a qualitative leap forward. A "European" Social Forum cannot be a simple reflection of all the different Social Forums in Europe. Building on the achievements of these latter, it should be able to clarify the continental situation so as to allow activists and the social movements to draw practical consequences. The resolution of the "Assembly of Social Movements" bears witness to this in its evaluation of the draft European Constitution. Certainly this Assembly should not be confused with the ESF itself but it is the most significant concrete product of it.

To understand this phenomenon we need to look at the heritage of the last century. The fall of the Berlin wall is the symbol of the ruined landscape left by the forces identified with Communism or social democracy on a planetary scale and particularly in Europe. The fall of Stalinism and the passivity of social democracy allowed an unprecedented neoliberal capitalist offensive. This was concretized in the European Union by an offensive on every front against the social rights that had been won over a century of struggle. What some called the "European social model" is collapsing under the blows of globalized capitalism.

How to rebuild on the ruins, first to reestablish the relationship of forces and blunt the offensive, but also reverse the tendency? That is the problem that a number of organizations have faced in recent years.

The example of mass long-term unemployment typifies this situation. Two decades after the post war boom ended, nearly 20 million unemployed and their organizations are in a quasi-total impasse. What is to be done? Pragmatically, a handful of activists from different political backgrounds met in Florence in 1996 with the idea of taking an initiative at the European level, an initiative open to all the social, trade union or political forces who wanted to join in and unite their forces in the struggle against unemployment. Thus the European Marches were born; in 1997, after two months of marches throughout Europe at their initiative, 50,000 demonstrators assembled in Amsterdam. They were the first to be surprised at their success. Sections of the German DGB alongside the anarchist CGT from the Spanish state, the unemployed of the Irish INOU, AC! from France or ALI-Thüringen from Erfurt. This was the first experience of a convergence going beyond national political divisions and operating on a European scale; a coming together not as a result of organizational agreements at the top but of a joint march.

This tendency has been confirmed from Seattle to today through the mobilizations at key summits of the IMF, G8, EU and so on. These mobilizations reached a crescendo despite the lack of medium or long-term perspectives.

And there also came a time for reflection and debate: Porto Alegre is the symbol of it!

The founders of the WSF defined the place of debate that they set up at Porto Alegre as a "world village square". And it was a good definition even if the current world does not really resemble a peaceful village. From this viewpoint, the success of the Social Forums that occur today at every level, world, continental and local is impressive. As nobody has a magic solution to the current situation, we meet to exchange views. The ESF 2003 involved more than 1,500 European associative, trade union and also political (although it could not be stated openly!) structures converging on the same "square". All this will leave a legacy for building what is an increasingly necessary European social movement.

Because this is not just about "organizations". The Forum also involved countries from the whole continent, well beyond the European Union. Although insufficient, there were large delegations from Poland, Hungary and Russia. There was a more limited enlargement of the social base of the Forum that needs to be built on.

The Euromarches look to meetings like this for analysis and debate but also to find partners, create links, work out alternatives and common demands and initiate campaigns to change the living conditions of tens of millions of unemployed and casualized workers living below the poverty level on the richest continent of the planet. The "Women's Assembly" at the beginning of the ESF was part of this dynamic. It was also the function of the "Assembly of social movements and activists" at the end.

This takes time. The method of "majority consensus" which allows the broadest organization of such events is more complicated to implement when it comes to acting together. The ESF as such took no decisions on this front but the synergies it has generated will initiate campaigns and mobilizations that can take on a global dimension, as was the case in the past year in the movement against the war.

We thought that it would be possible this year to come together around the generalized attack on social rights in the European Union. The principle of a day of action at the European level has been kept but remains dependent on the involvement of the ETUC. This is nonetheless urgent. As we have seen on the pensions question, every country has experienced big mobilizations but nothing has been coordinated at the European level and we have lost everywhere. It is increasingly necessary to work out common European demands, notably concerning the right to work and incomes (wages, social minima, unemployment benefits, pensions), to avoid social dumping in the context of enlargement.

However, there was a broad consensus on the question of the draft European Constitution. The position that a bad draft is better than nothing at all was very much in the minority in most of the plenaries and seminars. May 9, 2004 the day of the proclamation of this constitution will be the focus for initiatives for another, democratic Europe, based on citizenship, rights, peace and equality.

The other Europe is already there. Contrary to what the neoliberals say, alternatives already exist and a number of seminars made very concrete proposals in every area. The Europe that we want is on the march. This "European consciousness" has found a first expression at this Forum 2003. Some tens of thousands of activists think and act today at the European level. That will change things in the associative, trade union and political worlds. The European level allows us to transcend national blockages in the process of recomposition that is underway.

It is also the responsibility of the political parties to draw the lessons of what happens in these forums to develop political strategies and forms of organization necessary to the emergence of this other Europe, inspired in particular by the method of "broad majority consensus" around common initiatives. That has little to do with the heritage of the so-called democratic centralism of the past century, of the "alternation" between neoliberals of left and right, but it will be the only way to do politics differently and to win the current generations to unifying political projects at the European level and for another world.

And good luck to our friends from Britain in making a new leap forward for the movement in London in 2004!