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Porto Alegre Thematic Social Forum

Is another world still possible?

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV445 - February 2012 -

Publication date: Wednesday 1 February 2012

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The central capitalist powers are using the economic crisis to introduce a new and catastrophic assault on the very processes of nature. This threat is on the table – or rather, underneath it – for the UN Summit on Sustainable Development, known as Rio+20, to be held in Rio de Janeiro next 20-22 June. So the world's social movements need to build a massive, international campaign against this “green economy” as their main shared priority – a campaign that should find expression in a multitude of local and national mobilizations in the week from 5 June (World Environment Day) to 10 June, then come together at the World People's Summit, which plans to organise debates and street actions in Rio de Janeiro from the 15 June through until the 21st. But the campaign is more than just a mobilization for an event. It needs to build durable structures and develop momentum for a long and hard battle against the green capitalist project, lasting well beyond Rio+20.

This is the core message coming out from the Thematic (World) Social Forum, which began in Porto Alegre, southern Brazil, on 23 January and has just finished. The Forum was devoted to preparing for the people's summit in June.

We need a massive international campaign

One of the most vocal proponents of this campaign against green capitalism has been Pablo Solón. He was Bolivia's ambassador to the UN until the middle of last year and his country's lead negotiator at the COP climate talks in Copenhagen and Cancun. As such he played a key part in the stand taken by the ALBA countries (mainly Bolivia, Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua) to block the attempt by Obama, along with Brazil, China, India, South Africa and the EU, to impose the stitched-up Copenhagen Accord on the rest of the world in December 2009. When Venezuela and Cuba backed off from this stance at Cancun a year later, Bolivia, represented by Solón, was left as a lone voice standing out against the refusal of the rich countries to make clear and binding commitments to reduce their emissions. This week he again stood up against the growth agenda of the Brazilian government.

During a session of so-called “dialogue with civil society”, he told President Dilma Rousseff, plainly but politely, that capitalism could not solve the climate crisis and that all the market mechanisms beloved of Brazil, like REDD that turns forest protection into a source of speculation, had to be defeated by a massive campaign. It seems, however, that Solón and the rest of the movement present in Porto Alegre can no longer count on clear support from even the Bolivian government. Although the ALBA countries returned to a more critical stance at the Durban COP summit last December, Solón told IVP that there is no possibility of Evo Morales' administration, in the near future, calling another Peoples Summit on Climate Change like the one it hosted in Cochabamba in April 2010.

Last year's dramatic conflict with Amazonian indigenous communities over the TIPNIS road project, showed clearly the contradictions between ecosocialist aspirations and a developmentalist, extractivist, economic logic, that in different degrees and forms cut through the middle of the political processes in all the ALBA countries. It is clear that any mass campaign now against the green capitalist project will have to be built and sustained by the social movements themselves. Solón draws a parallel with the campaign a decade ago against Washington's plans for a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Launched by varying coalitions of social movements around the region, this campaign eventually drew in support from Venezuela and some other governments, contributing to the final defeat of the FTAA project at the Mar del Plata summit in 2005. Defeating green capitalism will require a similar, but much greater, effort.

At Rio+20, capitalism is coming back for the rest

One of the Forum's central plenaries heard eloquent accounts of the extraordinary imperial hubris that underpins this project to turn nature into finance capital's substitute for sub-primes. It heard how the original Rio Earth Summit in 1992 opened the door to privatization of 23.8% of the periodic table, through the patenting of a range of natural products. Rio+20 is coming back for the remaining 76.2%. But the focus is no longer on turning natural products into commodities ("the wood"), but rather the underlying natural processes ("the forests"), re-branded as 'environmental services'. There were chilling accounts of the shift underway from bio-piracy to geo-piracy: discussions already happening in the US Congress, the Bundestag and British parliamentary committees on how to refashion the world's ocean surface to absorb more CO₂, or to change the stratosphere by building artificial volcanoes, a hundred pipes 25 kms high blowing sulphate into the stratosphere in an attempt to 'block' the sun's rays. The British government, it was reported, is to make a second attempt to build a pilot 'volcano' this April, regardless of the likely side-effects of such a project, like displacing the Asian monsoon and aggravating drought across South Asia.

It was again Pablo Solón, echoing many at the Forum, who told President Dilma Rousseff that what was needed was not to submit nature to the laws of the market, to try to force it into the circuits of financial capital; rather we need to understand and respect nature's own laws, of which we are a part.

Challenges for the World Social Forums

The make-up of this Thematic Social Forum reflects the contradictory state of the World Social Forum process on an international level, eleven years after its first edition here in Porto Alegre. It also reflects the peculiar situation of the social movements in Brazil. To begin with it was much smaller. The number taking part in the opening march on the Tuesday was in the thousands, rather than the tens of thousands. Partly this was because it was not a full-blown 'world' social forum. But it also reflects a certain loss of credibility of the WSFs internationally, and the considerable demobilization of Brazil's powerful social movements, which has been one of the most significant and damaging consequences of three consecutive Workers' Party (PT)-led coalition governments.

Nonetheless, the importance and intensity of the debates does not seem to have diminished. This in turn reflects the urgency of the moment, with the intersection of multiple crises – economic, environmental, etc. - and 2011's extraordinary explosion of struggles from the Arab Spring and Syntagma Square to the Indignad@s and the Occupy movements. Although few in number, the presence in Porto Alegre of voices from all of these struggles contributed greatly to the Forum's radical edge. Whether or not the WSF process can succeed in becoming a forum for convergence, discussion and shared propositions among this new cycle of struggles is perhaps the most important, but unanswered, question facing it.

The presence of radical Brazilian youth in Porto Alegre suggests it might.. Again the numbers were not huge, but the level of discussion and engagement was impressive. This in turn reflects the fact that in spite of the demobilization and political disorientation, Brazil remains one of the countries with the densest networks of social movement organization and awareness in the world. This enduring fabric can be felt in student organizations, the women's movement, environmental campaigns, black and indigenous movements, as well as in tens of thousands of poor communities in urban and rural areas across the country, and even in the divided and debilitated trade unions. In all of these areas there continue to be sharp, sometimes violent struggles, for example those of shanty-town or squatter communities against evictions motivated by land speculation or coming mega-events like the World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. But these tend to be isolated struggles, single issue campaigns, or purely economic, industrial action. Whether it is possible to turn all this into the driving force of a mass, international campaign against green capitalism in the four months leading up to Rio+20, and then beyond, is far from clear.

The extremely weak and unfocussed declaration coming out of the final Assembly of Social Movements on Saturday does not augur well. Its abstract denunciations of imperialism and ambiguous or factually inaccurate formulations on the Arab revolutions, indicate that at least a part of the social movement leaderships in Latin America do not grasp the centrality of the environmental struggle, and are unwilling to confront the developmentalist, extractivist (and indeed, campist) priorities that characterize much of government policy not only in Brazil, but also in Bolivia, Venezuela, and so on. Curiously, in this respect, the NGOs that dominate in the planning of the Rio+20 People's Summit, are well to the left of some of the big social movements. Nonetheless, building the campaign against green capitalism is a challenge many of the Brazilian organizations seem willing to take on.

Revolutionary convergences in Porto Alegre

These five days have also been an important moment for developing exchanges and convergences – among revolutionaries and between these and many of the new movements that have arisen internationally over the last year. These processes too, for all their modest dimensions, could play a vital role in building and sustaining the kinds of campaign envisaged for Rio+20 and beyond.

Militants of Enlace, the current that organizes Fourth International supporters in Brazil's main radical left party, the Party of Socialism and Liberty (PSOL), were centrally involved in organising and coordinating the Forum, alongside the usual array of movements and institutions that work together in the WSF, many of them far from revolutionary, and some of them closely tied to Brazil's PT-led coalition government.

Levante, the youth organization linked to Enlace, brought almost 200 young people to the Forum's youth camp, making it the largest single delegation in the camp. There they organised a series of debates, including one with guests from Tunisia, Greece's Syntagma Square, Indignados from Catalonia, Chilean students, Occupy Wall Street and Occupy London SX. One of the most enthusiastic sessions was a presentation of the Fourth International today, organised jointly by Levante and Barricadas, the youth organisation linked to CSOL. CSOL is another current in the PSOL, with its origins in the Morenoite tradition of trotskyism, which has recently taken up permanent observer status in the International Committee of the FI. The meeting heard moving appeals for a renewal of internationalism – an internationalism that is open to new movements and new debates, that puts eco-socialism, feminism and opposition to all forms of oppression at the centre of its struggle against capitalism in crisis – from Enlace leaders Renato Roseno and Tarzia Medeiros, as well as from FI militants from the Spanish state, France and the Philippines.

The Forum also saw another important convergence underway, between FI supporters and the biggest of the international currents coming from the Morenoist tradition. This has its centre of gravity in the Argentinean MST (Socialist Workers' Movement), and includes the MES, one of the two biggest currents in the Brazilian PSOL, as well as Marea Socialista in Venezuela. The MST put at the centre of its intervention in the Forum its aim to work for unification between its international current and that of the FI (known to many other revolutionaries around the world as the United Secretariat or USEC).

This will not be a simple process. Enlace and the MES have had and still have profound differences over tactics in Brazil, and over their approaches to working in the PSOL. The small number of FI supporters in Argentina have had profound differences with the MST over its attitude to the Kirchner-Fernandez governments and over its electoral tactics. But both currents also have a history of working together in support of Marea Socialista in Venezuela. This Forum saw that in spite of the differences it was possible to organise a number of joint activities in an open and comradely spirit – two days of a joint seminar prior to the Forum on perspectives in Latin America and internationally, a series of sessions held throughout the Forum in the name of the PSOL's educational foundation, including a discussion organised by women from Enlace, other FI groups, the MST and MES, on women and the impact of mega-events.

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The discussion on how this relationship can develop is now open and needs to be develop not only through frank debate, but also in the thick of the struggles to come, including those around Rio+20 and the offensive of green capitalism.

Iain Bruce was invited to show some of his films on participatory democracy and the impact of climate change in Latin America at the "Democracine" sessions of the Thematic Social Forum in Porto Alegre.

29th January 2012