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The centrality of the anti-war struggle

Building on the Success of the London ESF

- Debate - Various, older articles -

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Alex Callinicos argues for the continued primacy of the fight against imperialism in the ESF process.

BUILDING ON THE SUCCESS OF THE LONDON ESF

1. The third European Social Forum in London (14-17 October 2004) provided further evidence - if more were needed - of the vitality of the altermondialiste movement. It also confirmed - after Porto Alegre and Paris, Mumbai and Florence - that the social forum remains an astonishingly dynamic and successful political form. The success of the London ESF can be demonstrated in various dimensions:

• First of all, the figures: approximately 25,000 took part in 500 plenaries, seminars, workshops, and cultural events, which were addressed by over 2,500 speakers: the figures for pre-registered delegates show that the participants came from right across the continent and beyond the boundaries of even the expanded European Union:

Belgium 593

France 1,003

Germany 834

Greece 363

Italy 1,362

Poland 499

Russia 190

Spain 1,271

Sweden 170

• The concentration of the bulk of the ESF at Alexandra Palace recaptured something of the atmosphere of the Fortezza at Florence, producing an intensification of energies by bringing together a large number of different actors and debates in a confined space for two and a half days; London also displayed the same interplay of mobilization and debate that has been the driving force of all the great social forums: the ESF culminated in a demonstration in central London of around 100,000, before which the Assembly of the Social Movements launched a call for international protests against neo-liberalism and war on the weekend of 19-20 March 2005.

These are all measures common to the London ESF and its predecessors. But in certain respects, the ESF marked a significant step forward.

• The mainstream of the trade union movement in Britain was actively involved in both the preparatory process and the Forum itself: feedback from various unions has been overwhelmingly positive, with reports of highly successful seminars involving important networks of activists;

• There was also a marked increase in participation by black, Asian, Muslim, and refugee networks: this is an important achievement given the Europe-wide offensive against civil liberties and the rights of migrants and asylum-seekers;

• There was a very rich and ambitious cultural programme;

• The number of plenaries was sharply reduced, giving more space to self-organized events. Moreover, the efforts to reduce the number of plenary speakers, establish a gender balance among them, and allow more time for discussion from the floor were quite successful;

• My impression - and that of others to whom I have spoken - was of a significant increase in the intellectual quality of the debate: in the seminars that I attended I was very struck by the extent to which both platform speakers

and contributors from the floor avoided the ritual denunciations of neo-liberalism and imperialism for serious analysis and discussion.

All these improvements did not occur randomly. They were among the aims of those centrally involved in organizing the ESF. We are therefore entitled to claim a fair measure of success.

The ESF in London was smaller than its predecessors in Florence and Paris, which each attracted around 50,000 people. This is hardly surprising: the altermondialiste movement first began to take shape in Europe with the formation of ATTAC in France in 1998; since Genoa the movement has been strongest in Italy. In Britain there has been a very strong anti-war movement, but only a widespread, but diffuse anti-globalization consciousness.

The London Forum, which involved the plentiful participation of young people and a broad coverage of all the issues of concern to the movement in the plenaries and seminars, should, together with the mobilization for the G8 summit in Gleneagles next July, help to transform this consciousness into much stronger organized networks in Britain. The corporate media in Britain are notoriously reluctant to provide serious coverage of the altermondialiste movement, but the Guardian (18 October 2004) acknowledged the significance of the Forum, warning that mainstream politicians are out of touch with both the spirit, content and the style of the inclusive non-party politics now emerging under the ESF umbrella.

Any professional politician observing the audiences of 1,000 or more people raptly listening to debates on globalisation, the power of corporations, racism, food or the environment would do well to reflect on the narrowness of their own political agenda and the genuine transnationalism now clearly informing European youth...Out of the connections being made between radically different groups, it is possible to see in years to come the emergence of a genuine new politics of the European left. Of course, there were weaknesses.

No one comes to London for the food, but the food at Alexandra Palace was terrible, and terribly expensive. The experience of the preparatory work on the programme confirms Bernard Cassen's criticism of the first two ESFs that an enormous amount of time and energy is devoted to deciding the subjects of the plenaries and selecting the speakers. It will be interesting to see the experiment at the next World Social Forum at Porto Alegre of dispensing entirely with plenaries and having only self-organized events.

Other problems were more subjective. Some people didn't like the way in which the division of the rooms at Alexandra Palace meant that noise from one seminar or plenary spilled over into others. Personally, I thought the noise was manageable and that it did have the virtue of making audible the diversity of voices that is such a powerful feature of our movement.

2. The London ESF was accompanied by plenty of political noise. To a significant degree this reflected the fact that our very diversity means that there are plenty of political disagreements. For example, many comrades, especially from France, didn't like the fact that the war in Iraq was very prominent in London, as it was in Florence.

In part this disagreement reflects differences in national context. In Britain the war dominates politics and is far and away the biggest mobilizing issue. Without the prominence of the war and the leading involvement in the ESF of the British peace movement, the Forum would have been a far less dynamic affair, and the final demonstration would have been little larger than the participation in the Forum itself. But there is more involved here. The war in Iraq is also the dominant issue in world politics. This is not simply because of the divisions that it has provoked among the major powers. The Bush administration's unilateral assertion of military power, the brutality of the occupation, its accompaniment by the imposition of the full neo-liberal economic programme on Iraq - all of this for many activists sums up what is wrong with corporate globalization.

Others - and they are particularly influential in France - disagree. They believe there is no necessary connection between the Bush war drive and neo-liberal globalization. I think they are mistaken, and that every day that passes underlines the importance of understanding the links between economic and military power that are at the heart of modern imperialism. This is a substantive political disagreement with which we are going to have to learn to live while working together in the same movement.

Often it is more difficult to acknowledge the significance of these disagreements because they are presented as procedural problems. Thus a number of French networks have complained about the fact that the platform at one seminar were all agreed in defending the right of young Muslim women to wear the hejab, even though this does not seem to have prevented a very vigorous debate taking place from the floor. This seems to me like an evasion of the real issue.

The truth is very many activists in the rest of Europe find the support that much of the French left and union movement gave the law banning the hejab in French state schools quite incomprehensible. ATTAC France's recent assessment of the ESF complains about the role of 'confessional organizations' in London. But a secularism that excludes the most oppressed sections of French society is as communalist as any of the Islamist organizations it denounces.

The issue of the hejab is really a symptom of the real problem, which is how to expand our movement to embrace those at the bottom of European society who suffer both economic exploitation and racial oppression and many of whom, for that very reason, strongly attach themselves to their Muslim faith. Once again, this isn't a question on which we will reach rapid or easy agreement. But at least we should recognize the importance of the debate, rather than take refuge in arguments about how one seminar was organized.

3. These disagreements spilled over into several attempts at disruption. Overall these incidents had very little impact on the ESF. The vast bulk of events went on completely unaffected by them, and most participants in the Forum and the final demonstration and concert didn't see them. But both because they received some attention in the media and on the net, and because this is the first time that an ESF has been successfully disrupted (an attempt to attack a Socialist Party representative in Paris was foiled by security guards), these attacks are worth discussing.

Their apologists have offered various excuses. One is the alleged lack of democracy in the organizing process in Britain. One difficulty in this process has certainly been that participants have very different conceptions of democracy and often showed little tolerance of definitions different from their own. But the real problem with the British process lay elsewhere.

At different stages this process embraced a very wide range of forces - stretching from the Trade Union Congress and mainstream NGOs to autonomist groups with a history of intermittent violence such as the Wombles. Holding this coalition together would have been difficult in any circumstances. Of course, the Italian and French comrades also have developed very broad coalitions, but it was probably an advantage that these had been constructed well in advance of actually organizing the ESF, so that people had an experience of working together.

In Britain, by contrast, the altermondialiste networks that had participated in the earlier Forums were relatively weak. A coalition had to be created from scratch to organize the London ESF. This involved bringing together very diverse organizations with no history of working together and huge differences in political culture. Working together would have been hard in any circumstances. Nevertheless, a very heavy responsibility for the difficulties that developed must rest with the autonomist circles. Their attitude towards the ESF varied between outright opposition (theorized by the Wombles in a critique of the Social Forums as inherently reformist) and variable but usually not very constructive participation in the process (often through the agency of various fellow travellers).

Every effort was made to accommodate them: for example, the London ESF provided an Autonomous Space along the lines of those organized in Florence and Paris. As agreed at the European Preparatory Assembly, all meetings of the UK Organizing and Coordinating Committees were open. But many of those associated with the autonomists expressed hostility to the experience of the Social Forums as mass events and therefore to the participation of the unions and the NGOs. To have given way here would have led to an ESF in London dramatically smaller than any of its predecessors and confined to a self-selecting circle of the already converted.

The case of the Iraq plenary illustrates the problem. I think it was a mistake to have invited a representative of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions, which supports the Anglo-American occupation, to have spoken at the ESF. The fact that one did was as a result of very strong support for the IFTU from many British trade unions (the IFTU now has an office in the headquarters of the largest union, UNISON).

The unwelcome presence of the IFTU at the ESF was thus a consequence of building a Forum that reached deep into the mainstream of the labour movement. The foolish decision by a handful of protestors (in this case mainly members of British and Middle Eastern far left sects) to shout down a platform mainly composed of the convenor of the Stop the War Coalition and Iraqis opposed to the occupation was thus a refusal to engage with this mainstream. It represented exactly the kind of sterile sectarian politics from which the rest of us are trying to escape.

4. The attacks made on the anti-fascist plenary and the stage in Trafalgar Square were the work largely of autonomists many of whom are in principle opposed to the Social Forums. In addition to claims of lack of democracy, two other excuses were given for these actions. First of all, the 'Euro-corporate ESF' and the support given by Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London, were denounced. It is hard to take this seriously.

Anyone who has attended the WSF in Porto Alegre will remember the corporate adverts welcoming delegates and the VIP suite at the PUC. The importance of support from local government (and indeed from political parties) is indicated by the proposal that was made to move the forthcoming WSF from Porto Alegre after the PT lost control of the city in November. The pattern has been the same with the ESF. Florence received support from the regional government. In addition to help from the municipalities of Paris, St Denis, Bobigny and Ivry, the Paris ESF received a €1 million from the office of the right-wing Prime Minister, Jean-Pierre Raffarin. No one criticized the French comrades for this, presumably because we all understood that a mass Social Forum needs money and money means compromises. In the case of London this money was provided by a mayor who, despite his mistaken decision to rejoin the Labour Party, has consistently supported the anti-war movement. Why are different standards applied to London than to the other Social Forums?

The other excuse given for the disruptions was the role of the police. It has even been claimed that ESF organizers were responsible for the arrests at the demonstration and in Trafalgar Square. These assertions are entirely false and indeed libellous; but they are also ridiculous - how could a veteran revolutionary socialist like me have any influence over the Metropolitan Police? The comrades who have made such claims should withdraw them at once.

It is, moreover, is puzzling that some arrests rather than others have attracted attention. For example, during the registrations at Conway Hall on Thursday 14 October a very aggressive police squad cleared Red Lion Square of the queues and arrested a Socialist Workers Party organizer. Two Globalise Resistance activists were stopped leaving the final demonstration under the Terrorism Act 2000. One of them was arrested and fined £80. An individual who appears to have been part of the group that tried to storm the stage in Trafalgar Square was also arrested and fined the same amount. But only his case attracted sympathy and attention, for example from some leading French activists. Once again, a double standard seems to be at work. But even if the criticisms that have been made of the British organizers were largely correct, this would not justify the introduction of violence inside the Forum. Violence and debate are antitheses: those who believe that diversity and discussion are among the greatest strengths of our movement cannot tolerate attempts to settle arguments by force. Moreover, those who bring violence into the

movement bring the state in with them: the attacks in Trafalgar Square gave the police the pretext to intervene and arrest people. Those European comrades who have refused to condemn, or condoned, or even colluded in the disruption of the London ESF should reflect on the very dangerous precedent they are creating for the future.

5. It is, in any case, the future about which we need to be thinking. The next ESF will be in Athens in the spring of 2006. What political lessons does the experience of London offer? The most important is that, as the Italian comrades pointed out after Florence, the great strengths of the movement are radicality and diversity. We have managed the near-miracle of developing a movement that embraces an extraordinarily wide social and political range but that has mounted a challenge to capitalist imperialism as a system. This was very evident in London: as at Florence, many of the largest and most dynamic meetings were dominated by the politics of the radical left.

But London also showed that combining radicality and diversity becomes harder, not easier, over time. Important divergences have crystallized over a variety of issues - the war, the European Constitution, the hejab, the role of the radical left. There are also differences over how to build the movement: some networks are much more ambivalent about involving the trade-union mainstream than others. This last difference cuts across others: for example, I suspect I am closer to some French comrades about bringing in the unions than I am to some Italian comrades with whom, however, I agree much more about the war. This makes holding together and expanding the coalitions we are trying to build much more complicated. We must also confront the fact that the process itself is becoming increasingly dysfunctional. ATTAC France rightly points to the fact that attendance at the European Preparatory Assembly has stagnated since Florence and argues that 'the functioning of the EPA must be improved in a logic of democratization, of representativity and of enlargement'. This is easier said than done, particularly given the stress laid in our procedures on meetings being open to all and deciding by consensus, which can give great power to disruptive but unrepresentative minorities. Hence the strains that became visible in London. We need to understand this when we prepare for Athens. The divisions in the British process tended to polarize between a coalition of significant social movements and a disruptive but socially weak autonomist fringe. But there are some four powerful forces that will need to be brought into the ESF - the Greek Social Forum, the Genoa 2001 Campaign, the Greek Communist Party, and the trade unions, whose leadership tend to be linked to PASOK. Only the first two have been involved in the ESF process, and all four have a history of mutual conflict. Bringing them together will be a big challenge for us all.

So things are unlikely to get any easier for us - and not primarily because of our own petty squabbles. After all, George W. Bush has been re-elected with what he regards as a mandate to carry on waging global war and polluting the planet. This is a reminder of the distance we have still to travel before we can imagine having achieved any of the concrete goals adopted in all our seminars and plenaries. But our successes - most recently at the London ESF - leave me confident of our ability to build a movement that can start to win real victories.

Alex Callinicos 26 November 2004