

## Reflections on The World Social Forum

By Katheryn Palmateer and Carlos Torres

On February 11, 2003, CERLAC hosted an event with Katheryn Palmateer and Carlos Torres who discussed their impressions of the World Social Forum. In these two pieces the speakers summarize some of their observations.

### “A World Without War is Possible”

by Katheryn Palmateer

“Returning from the World Social Forum (WSF) at Porto Alegre in Brazil, I feel as if I have just emerged from a vast, multicoloured sea that swept all the participants along in a great exuberant wave”. So stated a friend upon his return from Porto Alegre. I concur.

From a forum conceived in 2000, in opposition to the World Economic Forum in Davos, to its realization in 2001 and 2002 in Porto Alegre, the WSF came about in order to solidify and expand the positions of different struggles against neoliberalism. The process was meant to incorporate a spirit of change and renewal, bringing together, each year, people from around the world as a large planetary laboratory of ideas, projects, alternatives and actions.

From 15,000 participants in 2001, to 50,000 participants in 2002, the 2003 participation has more than doubled since just last year, with over 130,000 participating in the forum events, including 20,763 delegates representing over 717 organizations from 156 countries attending 1,286 workshops and other large plenaries. The youth camp was made up of over 30,000 youth from around the globe. In terms of numbers, the process is phenomenal.

Hundreds of issues were being dealt with in Porto Alegre - from reparations to genetically modified organisms to women and development. But a number of the questions that really jumped out at me were a reflection of the international context within which the social forum took place and are the questions that are facing the social forum process - the FTAA, the role of the state/political parties in social change and the question of the war.

#### FTAA

The question of the Free Trade Area of the Americas was injected into one of the loudest and most contagious chants at the WSF - calling on Lula to make good on last year's FTAA

### The III World Social Forum and the Making of Another World

by Carlos Torres

Another world gathering took place in a country where it seems that everything has become possible: Brazil. There, just three weeks before the third World Social Forum took place, a former metalworker was sworn in as President, displacing from that post a renowned intellectual of dependency theory. About 60 million Brazilians voted for the winning Workers' Party (PT) candidate. In the same country, where more than 50 million “citizens” suffer from famine, a social movement has emerged demanding radical land reform. Indeed, the Landless Rural Workers movement (the MST<sup>1</sup>) has converted land reform into a powerful tool to transform the lives of excluded peasants in Brazil. In the settlements of the MST, “Another World” has been under construction for nearly 20 years.<sup>2</sup>

#### *The WSF and Porto Alegre*

By providing a friendly political context for alternative politics, the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre has played an important role in the development of the WSF. In Porto Alegre, which for five days this year again became the “Capital City of Another World,” the implementation of the “Participatory Budget” (OP) has generated an eagerness for greater democracy and more participation. While this experience has underlined the limitations of pursuing significant social change at the Municipal level alone, Porto Alegre's OP process still represents a positive example on at least three levels: it proves that neoliberal politics can be resisted; it shows us how to reinvigorate popular struggle for a better world in spite of the limits imposed on us; and it shows us how to work through diversified political alliances.

It is clear that the WSF and Porto Alegre's Municipal experiment of OP have mutually nourished each other. The reciprocal influence between these two phenomena have made Porto Alegre bigger and the WSF possible. Indeed, this dynamic suggests that any global movement for progressive change would benefit from working hand-in-hand with grassroots social and political developments. Hence, we need to generate alternatives to neoliberalism and corporate-led globalization at both levels; we should provide continuity to our daily political work by forging greater linkages between local and regional

<sup>1</sup> MST membership numbers about one and a half million. In the MST settlements and camps, land reform includes: housing, food production, training, community radio, and schooling and health

<sup>2</sup> “Yesterday I had the rare privilege of seeing some very inspiring work to achieve these goals, at the international gathering of the Via Campesina at a community of the MST, which I think is the most important and exciting popular movement in the world. With constructive local actions such as those of the MST, and international organization of the kind illustrated by the Via Campesina and the WSF, with sympathy and solidarity and mutual aid, there is real hope for a decent future” (Chomsky, Jan/2003 OP).

referendum results. In a plebiscite across the country, 10 million people voted against the FTAA. Millions recognize the impact that the FTAA will have on their lives and communities and want to make sure their voices are heard as the pressure on Lula mounts from various locations surrounding the question.

From some, there was a sense that the slogan “another world is possible” might become “Another FTAA is possible” under the PT government. This was a question that was repeatedly put forward at many workshops and seminars at the WSF. Interestingly enough, the debate was also influenced by the argument from some quarters that making the war the central issue at the forum would take away from the fight against the FTAA and the WTO and other similar struggles. Most recognized the importance of linking the two struggles – making clear that defeating Bush’s war drive would make the fight against the FTAA just that much stronger.

A call was put forward by the World Social Movements outlining the need to link the struggles against the war with the fight against the FTAA and the WTO. It was stated that “The World Trade Organization (WTO), the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and a proliferation of regional and bilateral trade agreements...are used by multinational corporations to promote their interests, to dominate and control our economies and to impose a development model which impoverishes our societies. In the name of trade liberalization, every aspect of life and nature is for sale and people are denied their basic rights...In the coming year our campaigns, against the WTO, the FTAA and trade liberalization, will grow in size and scope. We will campaign to stop and reverse liberalization of agriculture, water, energy, public services and investment, and to reassert peoples sovereignty over their societies, their resources, their cultures and knowledge and their economies”.

The statement goes on to say that at the same time as neo-liberal globalization itself is in crisis, the US is determined to launch a war on Iraq. “This is a dramatic manifestation of the links between militarism and economic domination”. No to the FTAA and no to war.

### THE “BIG MEN”

This debate surrounding the question of whether or not “another FTAA is possible” served to highlight the debates surrounding the role of the state and political parties in the struggle against capitalism and for social justice. Can a progressive leader shape a free trade deal and more specifically, shape capitalism in the name of social justice. Front and centre in this debate the two big men in power – Lula [Ignacio da Silva, President of Brazil] and [Hugo] Chávez [President of Venezuela].

Both participated minimally this year in the social forum process. But the fact that they were so little present physically did little to diminish the fact that their presence is much larger

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(or global) experiences.

To develop a new path we can only persevere and count on the power of our ideas and practices. The WSF, despite its material and ideological constraints, provides us with a sense of hope and with a democratic space for political renewal. As Virginia Vargas asserts, “The democratic orientation [of the WSF] provides a clear direction by which to build, through highly participatory politics, an effective empowering space for a democratic global civil society, from which to confront hegemonic powers at the global level; at the same time, [it can help us] to build and feed a set of networks and interactions capable of impacting on traditional ‘common sense’ and anti-democratic political practices.”

Those who celebrate the WSF do not offer it as a model to imitate, a blueprint to follow, or a pattern to copy; that is perhaps the main beauty of it - in many ways we must begin all over again. This implies the refusal to adopt systems that have failed, and calls upon us to learn from the invigorating examples of thousands of men and women that have already begun to work towards a better world. It would be wrong to affirm that the WSF symbolizes an existing alternative, just as it would be misleading to assert that everyone struggling for another world recognizes the WSF as their space and their process. Nonetheless, the WSF represents the best, if not the only, setting for these alternatives to develop. It remains uncertain, though, whether or not this course will be effectual in terms of building a non-capitalist paradigm.

### *Accomplishments*

Since its beginning, the WSF has provided us with a much needed sense of renewal, hope, and optimism. Moreover, during its limited span of existence, the Forum has yielded some tangible outcomes worthy of note. For instance, it has led to the retraction of the Davos Forum, the rousing of a larger constellation of forces to combat the current process of corporate globalization, the creation of a worldwide space for promoting and drafting alternatives, and the emergence of a political reference that nobody dare discard.

Of course, it might be argued that these outcomes are attributable in part to already existing anti-neoliberal globalization movements. In this regard, the WSF has at least galvanized existing struggles, helping us to better understand the role and the strength of uniting these efforts in a global movement.

The process initiated by the WSF more than two years ago will be hard to derail, since it represents the aspirations, demands, and hope shared by women and men from communities from all over the world. As Samir Amin commented, “the priorities are the strengthening of social movements on a global scale; no change will be real without changes at the bottom of the societies.” This is where the role of the WSF is vital: in forging a democratic convergence for the global movement to surpass resistance and protest and to begin building alternatives.

### *Failures (a few of them)*

As the present world conjuncture becomes more volatile and dangerous, the WSF did not respond strongly to the issue of war. In light of the impending implementation of the FTAA, the WSF did not make a strong connection between its anti-neoliberal stance and

<sup>3</sup> “The good news is that we’re not doing too badly. There have been major victories. Here in Latin America you have had so many - in Bolivia, you have Cochabamba; in Peru, there was the uprising in Arequipa; in Venezuela, President Hugo Chávez is holding on, despite the U.S. government’s best efforts. And the world’s gaze is on the people of Argentina, who are trying to refashion a country from the ashes of the havoc wrought by the IMF” (Arundhati Roy).

than they. There were constant calls for solidarity with both. With Chávez, in his struggle to maintain power and popular support. And with Lula, as he ventures further into the world of compromise and concession.

Naomi Klein asked in a recent article in the *Globe and Mail*: “How on Earth did a gathering that was supposed to be a showcase for new grassroots movements become a celebration of men with a penchant for three-hour speeches about smashing the oligarchy?”

I think the answer to that question lies in the very fact that the majority of the people who attended the forum actually support both Chávez and Lula. That is to say, the majority seemed to recognize the need for leadership. This is of course not to say that support for either leader has been wholly uncritical or unconditional. There is a general recognition that yes, in the coming months, Lula will be facing an incredible amount of pressure. But there is also the sense that he can be pressured from the left as well. And this, for many, is the importance of his presidency – his responsiveness to pressure from the grassroots.

An article recently released out of the Toronto Social Forum argued that the WSF is not about Lula; “rather, its importance is as an autonomous space for the movements and groups of global civil society to rub up against each other.”

It think it is important that we recognize that we cannot separate Lula’s election victory from the proliferation of social movements in Brazil and across the world. Even looking beyond the acknowledged fact that the PT played an incredibly important role in the development of the WSF as a whole, the connections between the PT (and specifically Lula’s election victory) and the WSF run much deeper. The social movements that participate in the social forum process are in many cases the social movements that support Lula. They will also be the social movements that must necessarily be a pressure on Lula to maintain his promises and subsequently push him further left.

In other words, we cannot look at the social forum process in exclusion of the Brazilian situation. Not only because of the origins of the social forum process. But in many ways, Lula’s victory is a victory for the international anti-capitalist movement, the anti-war movement and the social forum process more generally if the links are made. If we recognize that Lula in power is not an end in itself but simply provides social movements in Brazil and around the world with great opportunities – it provides social movements greater space to up the ante, so to speak.

We all recognize that Lula will be under an incredible amount of pressure from various sources, including the IMF, international and national capital etc, but pressure needs to be coming from the ground as well. I attended a workshop entitled “The World Situation, the Lula Government and the Challenges Facing the Left?”. Even the seminar title is an indication of the terrain on which the left is now working. There was a clear sense that the election victory is not one free of challenge. Luciana Genro (state deputy of Rio Grande do Sul) demonstrated that it is incredibly important to support the PT in power in that the situation offers and opens up incredible opportunities. She said that “Lula’s victory has created in-

opposition to the FTAA.

There are other politically and culturally crucial issues with which the WSE has to deal. In *Terra Viva*, the independent daily of the Forum, the following was stated: “The issue of women’s access to justice is another issue that is being ignored, lost, or buried by the thousands of other causes, debates, and struggles. Likewise are themes of race and migration still partially ignored by the Forum organizers.” To an extent, the more democratic distribution of WSF resources, by which to increase the participation of more excluded communities, is another issue that has haunted WSF organizers from the beginning.

Nevertheless, in this short process of ‘confirmation’ the Forum is – albeit slowly – becoming more democratic, more gender-balanced, and more participatory. My view is that the space/process of the WSF is the right one, though we will need to work hard to make it better.

#### *Challenges (at least some of them)*

Although the WSF claims to be a worldwide space for political action, the fact is that this promise has still to be realized. At present, the Forum hosts movements and social organizations mainly from the southern countries. Of course, some important and praiseworthy political rebellions are happening in Latin American countries,<sup>3</sup> so it is not surprising that the Forum should be held in Latin America and that so many of its participants would be from the region.

The rotation of the WSF to India next year will be a major challenge, and will certainly denote a step forward in its process of becoming a truly global process. Nevertheless, this change in venue will also open new challenges to its much-needed development. As Emir Sader stated, “to become a powerful tool the WSF has to internationalize and democratize itself.” The WSF has to confront not only its own brief history but also the political culture rooted in its original inception; that is, the it needs to become more democratic, more international, and more political – otherwise, it could remain wonderful without providing a real alternative to neoliberalism or to capitalism.

Democratizing, internationalizing (or ‘worldizing’), and politicizing the WSF will be a major undertaking. Its ‘worldization’ must entail a new approach to building alliances. These new alliances must bypass the nation state, national governments, official entities and parliaments that are still attached to neoliberal capitalism. The aim should be to connect the people and communities that will eventually change the world. This will require new political instruments.

A true transformation of the world can be realized only by developing a “people oriented process,” one that can make our slogan - “a new world is possible” - a truth sooner than later.

#### *Another World is Possible*

(Yet, is not granted)



**Carlos Torres** has participated in the WSF for the last 2 years, in Porto Alegre, where he organized and moderated the “Utopias and Democracy” panel, as well as the “In Belly of the Beast” seminar. He is a long-time activist for social justice with strong working links to the MST movement and the PT in Brazil, Marta Harnecker’s MEPLA in Cuba, and various Canadian NGOs. Carlos has been active in the anti-globalization movement and worked with the organizing committee of the People’s Summit in Quebec City. He is also a member of the organizing committee of the Toronto Social Forum (TSF - the local counterpart to the WSF). He presently works with the Centre for Social Justice in Toronto.

credibly high expectations and perhaps most importantly, "hope beat fear". The conditions for fighting are improved and now the left must try to push the government left". She went on to say that solidarity with Lula was also intimately connected to the position against war on Iraq. In other words connecting the different struggles against capitalism and war around the world. And so what some called a preoccupation with "discussions on relations between movements and parties and on prospects for a unified global movement", was clearly reflective of the current situation and mood on the ground.

#### NO TO WAR

Mike Gonzalez of the Stop the War Coalition in Scotland pointed out that had the social forum gone on just a few days longer, "it would have been an anti-war conference". The massive anti-war sentiment was just simmering under every aspect of the forum.

The opening march had a massive anti-war contingent – composed of individuals from all over the world. Every session that I attended focused on the importance of fighting against the war on Iraq and how these things were so intimately connected to the other struggles so prominent at the forum – against racism, against poverty, etc.

There were some of course who felt that focusing on the war would divert participants' attention away from "the less sexy issue of poverty", the fight against the WTO and the FTAA. Eveline Hertkens, the UN secretary general's coordinator for the millennium development goals, said "The real price would be the energy of people here being disillusioned and focusing on the war on Iraq, instead of continuing to fight a battle which is less sexy and less easy and really difficult, because it starts at home for all of us, and we have to generate the political will to do something about poverty. That is the war of wars we have to win, and we should not have our attention taken away because of another crisis."

But thankfully this was not the overwhelming sentiment at the forum. The call of the world social movements was one against war, most especially the war on Iraq but also with reference to the conflicts in Colombia, Afghanistan, and Palestine - among other places.

One of the most important things that came out of Porto Alegre this year was the call extended by the world social movements for a day of action against the war on February 15th. This call was initially put out by the European Social Forum in November and was brought to the forefront at the World Social Forum. Following the Stop the War Coalition meeting I attended, large groups of Brazilians, Uru-

guayans, and Argentinians began in the planning of marches and other actions to coincide with the actions taking place across the world on February 15th.

And so - although not a million person march like that following the European Social Forum - tens of thousands marched against war in the closing rally of the World Social Forum. And representatives of hundreds of organizations will take home the call of the social movements and organize in their communities against the war.

For action to come out of the process was for me key. And certainly for others as well. Wendel Vieira speaks for many of his peers in singling out the youth camp aim of this political jamboree: a course of action for the WSF. And to that end many youth will lobby those adult activists steeped in the debates of the day. "Change through concrete plans is what we seek. It is not enough, what they are doing at the WSF, to only talk politics. A new world order has to be built."

#### CONCLUSION

In the words of George Monbiot, "Far from dying away, our movement has grown bigger than most of us could have guessed".

While it is clear that the social forum process is not one that necessarily has a clear sense of what the movement needs to do, and where the movement needs to go, it remains an important process.

It is to me, and I think to many others, the development of a new internationalism. Tens of thousands at the forum, from all over the world, calling no to war and no to capitalism. "The language of rebellion truly took shape under the trees."

At an anti-war meeting with Noam Chomsky, packed to the rafters with 15,000 passionate and radical Latin American youth, Arundathi Roy closed the evening on this note: "Remember this: We be many and they be few. They needs us more than we need them. Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing."



*Katheryn Palmateer participated as a volunteer in the central office last year at the WSF. She is also involved in the TSF and hopes to be involved in the launching of a Quebec-Canada social forum. She is currently doing her Masters research on the relationship between the state, political parties, and social movements, focusing specifically on the WSF and the Brazilian Workers Party (PT). She has also worked and studied in Cuba and El Salvador. Most recently, she has been quite involved in building the anti-war movement in Toronto with NEWS on Iraq at York and Lost Carnival's "War: the Musical".*

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