

Whose World? Whose Forum?

The World Social Forum and the Anti-Globalisation Movement

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In February 2000, the opposition Workers Party (PT) in Brazil co-hosted a World Social Forum in the PT-run city of Porto Alegre, Brazil. The Forum was meant to develop a common platform for anti-globalisation activists, showing that “A New World is Possible.” But is this sort of world possible under capitalism? Far too many on the left seem to think so.

SOCIAL FORUMS

Since the Porto Alegre summit, both the PT and the summit have gained a great deal of credibility within the left, not least within South Africa. During the Genoa G8 meeting in Italy in July, a Genoa Social Forum was established, and, more recently a Durban Social Forum was established to co-ordinate protests against the United Nations’ (UN) World Conference Against Racism (WCAR). And a follow-up to the World Social Forum is being planned for 2002.

HUMANISING CAPITALISM?

Nonetheless, we must recognise that these popular forums also provide a space for manipulation by the pro-capitalist agendas of the right-wing of the anti-globalisation movement. This right-wing includes conservative union leaders, politicians, academics, and mainstream NGOs as well as other reformists whose only aim in life is to give capitalism a “human face.”

For this right-wing, who want to save capitalism from itself, the problem with globalisation is that it is “unfair” and “undemocratic” and “weakens the state.”

What the reformists do not understand is that capitalism is always unfair and undemocratic, depriving working and poor people of any fair reward for their labour and any democratic control over production and distribution.

And they fail to realise the basic truth that the capitalists always control the state: this means that globalisation does not “weaken” the state, but, on the contrary, capitalists use the state to implement globalisation.

For us anarchists, we are against capitalism and the state on principle: these are the centralised power systems that exploit and impoverish the working class: we aim to tear the democratic facade off these instruments of oppression, and crush them, not make them “human.”

RIGHTWING HIJACKS PORTO ALLEGRE

The World Social Forum in Porto Alegre had the potential to be an important event for the emerging anti-globalisation movement. An estimated 12,000 people attended the event, representing groups ranging from anarchists to liberal Christians. It involved 16 plenary sessions and over 400 workshops.

However, the Forum was hijacked by right-wing anti-globalisation figures.

The original idea for the Forum came from Oded Grajew, a Brazilian businessman-turned-activist, and he chose Porto Alegre as the venue. The reason was simple: the PT governs Porto Alegre, and so the city provides a showcase for the reformist programme of “humane capitalism” championed by this so-called workers’ party.

Further support came from ATTAC France, a moderate anti-globalisation outfit standing for “Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens.” ATTAC aims at implementing the so-called “Tobin Tax” which would penalise “bad” capitalists who move their money around the world too quickly by charging them a special tax (which would be used to “help” the poor).

THE PT: A CAPITALIST PARTY

The PT itself was founded in Brazil in the 1980s. A conservative party, the PT does not oppose capitalism, but aims to use the Brazilian state to improve workers’ conditions. In the era of globalisation, this sort of programme is a pipedream. Under globalisation, capital is on the offensive against workers’ living and working conditions, and has no interest in the PT’s programme and lacks the very ability – given the global economic crisis – to make significant reforms for workers.

The other component of the PT’s programme is its Brazilian nationalism: for the PT, all Brazilians – regardless of class – should unite against “imperialism.” In practice, this means that the PT aims to win support from “patriotic” capitalists in Brazil (despite the fact that capitalists are always anti-worker).

So while the PT was opposed to big business adverts at the Forum, it was happy to make space for the national bank of Brazil, which clams “It’s better because it’s ours.” This was despite the fact that this bank is controlled by the rich and exploits workers and small farmers. So long as it was “Brazilian” the PT was happy!

The PT’s nationalism also makes it almost impossible for the party to link to the struggle of workers outside Brazil, as these are outside of the “Brazilian nation.”

But even within Brazil, the PT is happy to crack the whip against the poor in the areas where it is represented in the State. It helped suppress the academics’ strike at Rio Grande do Sul, the occupation of a federal building in Porto Alegre, and drove hawkers and homeless people from squatted land.

THE “PEOPLES’ BUDGET”

One innovation introduced by the PT-controlled Porto Alegre municipality is the so-called “people’s budget” process, according to which the working class is invited to help shape local government spending. However, the municipal budget is set within the parameters of the overall neo-liberal budget of the national level government, and so, is anti-worker from the start because the municipality simply lacks the money to redress workers’ needs.

So the effect of the “peoples’ budget” is to get workers to buy-in to cuts in social spending: when workers complain that there is insufficient housing, schooling etc. the PT municipality can turn around and say “you workers designed the budget. So why are you complaining?” Workers do participate, but only have an opportunity to divide up a few crumbs.

CUBA?

In addition to the PT, a host of similar parties claiming to “represent the working class” were present. The Forum assumed the character of an attempt by mainstream parties to regain the credibility they have lost by lagging behind (and repressing) the anti-globalisation movement.

A delegation from the Cuban government also came. Yet Cuba does not allow free speech or free trade unionism or even free elections within its own borders (Castro has been in power without an open election for more than 40 years). This invitation reflects a double-standard on the right-wing of the anti-globalisation movement: happy to protest against similar abuses of freedom in other poor countries, the right-wing lets Cuba off the hook just because the regime claims to be “socialist.”

SPLITS

Yet many who attended the conference were not fooled by the aims of the organisers, whose attempt to seize control of the international anti-globalisation movement by using the Forum to catapult their programme of “capitalism with a human face” to centre-stage failed. The Forum broke down when it became clear that delegates could not agree on a common statement of aims. Many people were also disgruntled by the presence of politicians from the Brazilian and French governments – both anti-worker and neo-liberal in character – and by the fact that “VIPs” got a special invitation-only room, an enclave of invitation-only calm and luxury, made of glass. By the third day the conference broke down, and the “Anti-Capitalist Youth,” made up of anarchists and radical socialists, walked out, arguing, “Another World is Possible... Only By Destroying Capitalism!”

Further, they pointed out the politicians were using the occasion to win votes, and argued that the “World Social Forum is a ruse of those who wish to detour the anti-capitalist fight towards the policy of collaboration of classes and elections, continuing to apply the misery of capitalism. Thus we continue our efforts in the construction of an international anti-capitalist network ... Capitalism kills, we will kill capitalism. It is up to the youth, the workers, and the poor anti-capitalists, loyal to the spirit of Seattle, Nice, Prague and Davos to impede the distortion of the anti-capitalist intervention and its use by its enemies.”

We could not agree more.

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