2008

The US Social Forum: Building from the Bottom Up

Guerrero

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb
Part of the Human Rights Law Commons, and the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/swb/vol3/iss1/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Societies Without Borders by an authorized administrator of Case Western Reserve University School of Law Scholarly Commons.
The US Social Forum: Building from the Bottom Up

Michael Leon Guerrero
Grassroots Global Justice

Keywords
social forum, global justice, social movements, organizing, globalization

Atlanta has never seen anything like this,” commented Jerome Scott of Atlanta-based Project South, this march was the most multinational action I have ever seen.

Rebick (2007)

It may be too early to judge the historical significance of the United States Social Forum (USSF), but ultimately it could mark one of the most important political moments in recent US history. From June 28 through July 2, 2007 over 12,000 people rallied under the banner “Another World is Possible, Another U.S. is Necessary!” They convened in the summer heat of Atlanta, Georgia, and wrote the latest chapter in the history of the World Social Forum (WSF). The USSF signified a turning point in both the emerging social movements within the US, and perhaps the global social forum process as well.

One of the salient characteristics of the USSF was its diversity. A number of writers have commented on the range of ethnicities represented, the large numbers of poor and working-class delegates, the range of sexual identities and more.

Canadian writer Judy Rebick (2007) commented,

… the racial diversity not only of the participants but of the leadership is remarkable. It is no longer just black and white, Indigenous people have a place of pride, there is a rainbow of immigrants, and children of immigrants: Latino, Chinese, Korean, South Asian, East Asian, every place you can think of and always hyphenated with American. There are more people with disabilities than I have ever seen at a movement event and the LGBT presence is visible and proud.
International relations scholar Thomas Ponniah (2007) wrote that the USSF was more diverse than any of the World Social Forums in the last three years. The USSF and the World Social Forum in India in 2004 embodied cultural and economic diversity among the most visible speakers and facilitators, not just among delegates. According to Tammy Bang Luu, Chair of the USSF Outreach Working Group, it was the intentionality of the organizing process that assured the diverse representation.

A fundamental principle for us was to assure the participation of the most marginalized communities in the country. We initiated the USSF based on the belief that working-class people, the poor, indigenous people and people of color must be central to the leadership of creating fundamental social change in the U.S. This meant a massive investment of time, patience and resources in the outreach process.¹

Grassroots Organizing in the US

The driving force behind the organizing of the USSF was a sector of grassroots organizations largely overlooked in national politics. For the past three decades these organizations have been building dynamic community and worker institutions in indigenous nations, working class neighborhoods and communities of color. This grassroots movement represents the potential for new political direction and hope for fundamental change in the US.

A wide array of organizations makes up the grassroots organizing sector. They include anti-racist organizations (Project South, Institute for the Elimination of Racism and Genocide in Atlanta and the Peoples Institute for Survival and Beyond in New Orleans), farm workers organizations (the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in south Florida, the Border Agricultural Workers Union in El Paso, TX, and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee in Toledo, OH) environmental justice organizations (Indigenous Environmental Network, the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, PODER in San Francisco, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network in Oakland, and the Southwest Organizing Project in New Mexico), welfare rights organizations (Community Voices Heard in New York City), groups fighting displacement and gentrification (Miami Workers Center, Tenants and Workers United in Alexandria, VA, and

POWER in San Francisco), labor and community formations (Southwest Workers Union in San Antonio, TX, the Labor/Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles, Domestic Workers United in New York, and the nationwide Jobs with Justice), immigrant rights groups (National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights in Oakland, CA and Padres y Jovenes Unidos in Denver, CO), Queer liberation organizations (FIERCE in New York), youth and student organizations (United Students Against Sweatshops), and cultural organizations (AlternateROOTS in Mississippi and New Orleans).

There is no unifying vision or ideology that brings them together, but there are some commonalities. Many have antecedents in the political struggles of the 1960s and ’70s. The leadership of these organizations generally views their work within a broader global context. They seek social justice and environmental sustainability. They promote human rights and social justice. Many share an anti-imperialist perspective. They emphasize the building of a grassroots, democratic membership base as essential vehicles for fundamental social change. They forge coalitions, networks and alliances locally and internationally. They organize in poor, working-class, people of color and indigenous communities. They are under-resourced and overworked. It was this sector that would land the most important contemporary international process in the US.

The Emergence of the Global Justice Movement

The World Social Forum is a global phenomenon that was conceived through important historical precedents. Among them was the “Battle in Seattle” in 1999. Fifty thousand people launched a monumental assault on the summit of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Mass marches and waves of protestors exercising civil disobedience effectively shut down the proceedings. The Global Justice Movement (GJM), as it came to be known, continued its offensive for the next 5 years, mobilizing tens of thousands to protest the neoliberal institutions that make up the pillars of global capitalism – the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the Summit of the Americas, the G-8, and the United States military. At its peak, estimates as high as 30 million people in 600 cities and 60 countries took part in the largest protest in world history against the impending US invasion of Iraq on February 15, 2003.2

For three decades neoliberal policies of corporate-globalization, militarism and imperialism have dominated world politics, wreaking havoc on workers and communities throughout the world. During that time the rich have become richer. The poor have become poorer. Entire communities have been displaced creating massive global migrations. The planet’s survival hangs in the balance as northern countries and emerging developing nations intensify their industrialization and strip away environmental laws. The GJM offers hope to shift the balance of power from global capitalists to those who live under the weight of their neoliberal policies.

Organizers within the GJM realized, however, that protesting was not enough. The movement had to offer an alternative vision for the global economy and governance. To define that vision, the movement needed its own space for dialogue.

The World Social Forum

In late January of 2001, as it does almost every year at this time, the World Economic Forum convened in Davos, Switzerland. In this Alpine ski resort the political and economic elites from the most powerful countries and corporations meet to shape the global economy.

Meanwhile, half a world away, in the heat and humidity of the industrial harbor of Porto Alegre, Brazil, over 15,000 people gathered for the first ever World Social Forum. Workers, farmers, scholars, artists, and others met in defiance of those at the World Economic Forum and founded a worldwide phenomenon. WSFs have now been held on 3 continents and have hosted as many as 150,000 people. Hundreds of continental, regional, national, local and thematic forums have convened in dozens of countries under the banner “Another World is Possible!” Social forums are huge and dynamic social events that include workshops, theater, debates, concerts, panel presentations and film festivals.

Diversity in the GJM

One of the criticisms of many social forums, however, has been their lack of diversity. The critique carries over into the GJM generally. In the wake of the “Battle in Seattle”, Betita Martinez (2000) explored the question of diversity at the event. She estimated that only 5% of the protagonists were people of color. Personal interviews with participants cited a range of
possible reasons for the disparity. This included the lack of resources, a lack of understanding of the significance of the WTO and how it related to local struggles, and the perception that the WTO protests would be dominated by “white hippies”.

The images of Seattle were in contrast to the campaign against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), just 6 years earlier. People of color were central to this struggle, particularly Latinos and indigenous peoples. Unions, church organizations and grassroots groups like the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ) played a lead role in organizing cross-border actions and political education. “The struggle against NAFTA for us was not about jobs leaving the U.S.,” stated Rubén Solís of the San Antonio, TX based Center for Justice, “it was about finding common-cause with workers, farmers and communities in Mexico.” On January 1, 1994, on the day that NAFTA took effect, the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) launched its first offensive. The struggle of the Zapatistas and their global call to fight the neoliberal agenda inspired the emerging GJM.

The defeat of the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) in 1998 marked a shift in the global justice struggle. French politician Catherine Lalumière (1998), acknowledged the rise of the movement, “For the first time, one is seeing the emergence of a “global civil society” represented by NGOs which are often based in several states and communicate beyond their frontiers. This evolution is doubtlessly irreversible. On the one hand, organisations representing civil society have become aware of the consequences of international economic negotiations. They are determined to leave their mark on them. Furthermore, the development of the Internet has shaken up the environment of the negotiations. It allows the instant diffusion of the texts under discussion, whose confidentiality becomes more and more theoretical. It permits, beyond national boundaries, the sharing of knowledge and expertise.”

The GJM was gaining momentum, but in the US the terrain was dominated by non-governmental organizations such as Public Citizen, the International Forum on Globalization, and Global Exchange. Without the challenges of building organization within affected communities, they had flexibility and nimbleness to engage in global campaigns and policy advocacy. As the GJM evolved, the lack of grassroots US representation in

the movement short-changed opportunities to establish common cause between social movements from the North and South.

In December of 1996, SNEEJ hosted a Working Group Meeting on Trade and Globalization bringing together grassroots organizations involved in global justice organizing. At this gathering they adopted the “Jemez Principles for Democratic Organizing”. Among other things the 6 principles called on global justice activists to be inclusive, emphasize bottom-up organizing, let people speak for themselves and work together in solidarity and mutuality. The Principles provide a blueprint for collaboration between grassroots groups and trade policy advocates.

The growing importance of the Internet referenced by Lalumière had consequences in the US. Martinez (1999) cited the digital divide within the GJM as a potential contributor to the racial imbalance at the Battle in Seattle.

The problem of unfamiliarity with the WTO was aggravated by the fact that black and Latino communities across the U.S. lack Internet access compared to many white communities. A July 1999 federal survey showed that among Americans earning $15,000–$35,000 a year, more than 32 percent of white families owned computers but only 19 percent of black and Latino families. In that same income range, only 9 percent of African American and Latino homes had Internet access compared to 27 percent of white families. So information about WTO and all the plans for Seattle did not reach many people of color.

The resource imbalance within the movement was also a factor. Sustaining relationships at the international level has always been difficult for organizations with few resources and a commitment to organizing locally. The situation sharpened in the late 1990s. The resource base for the once vibrant environmental justice movement, for example, began to diminish. This was due partly to shifting priorities by foundations that supported environmental justice and grassroots organizing in general.

Dependence of the grassroots sector on philanthropic institutions has been flagged as an Achilles heel by several organizers and scholars. But support for social justice movements from other sources, particularly faith-based communities, also began to decline sharply in the ’90s. Institutions


5) INCITE! 2007.

like the National Council of Churches, the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Church of Christ, and the Racial Justice Commission of the United Church of Christ historically played key roles in supporting social justice, such as the civil rights movement in the '50s and '60s, the anti-war movement in the '70s, the sanctuary movement for Central American refugees in the '80s, and environmental justice in the 1990s.

Churches provided resources for grassroots organizations and educated largely white congregations about the struggles of the poor, working class and communities of color. During the 1990s, however, the ultra-conservative evangelical movement was gaining momentum, challenging the established churches for membership and depleting their resources. The Catholic Church was mired in a wave of sexual abuse lawsuits, draining the enormous coffers of the Vatican. What resources remained in the churches were diverted to less transformative efforts like the Industrial Areas Foundation, which promotes an “anti-ideological” approach to organizing and discourages coalition-building with progressive grassroots forces.

Despite these challenges, grassroots organizations continued to establish global connections. The Indigenous Environmental Network was building relationships with networks in Latin America, Asia and Africa. The environmental justice movement was also forging international relationships through the Environmental and Economic Justice Project based at Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education (SCOPE) in Los Angeles.

Jobs with Justice (JwJ) also emerged during the 1990s as a vital formation in the Global Justice Movement. JwJ brings together unions, students, churches, and community organizations in more than 30 cities for mutual support and action. The organization played a key role in the Battle in Seattle and was active in the global mobilizations that followed. JwJ and SCOPE were among the few US grassroots organizations present at the historic first World Social Forum in 2001.

The momentum of the MAI victory carried through to the Battle in Seattle. Global justice activists were beginning to feel that the tide was turning in the struggle against neoliberal capitalism and US imperialism. The political offensive of the movement in the US was stalled however, on September 11, 2001. In the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center, there was a moment of paralysis in organizing efforts. Communities struggled with the question of patriotism and national security. The destruction of the Trade Center set off a chain reaction as fear and uncertainty swept the country. The Bush administration moved quickly to intensify the national and international security apparatus and mobilized for
war. Eventually, however, the invasion of Afghanistan in 2002 and Iraq in 2003 stretched the limits of US military might, and the political credibility of George W. Bush. People all over the world mobilized against the invasion of Iraq, culminating in the historic protests on February 15, 2003.  

**Genesis of the US Social Forum**

Four months after 9/11, roughly 40 organizations participated in a delegation to the second WSF. Sponsored by the French American Charitable Trust and other foundations, the delegation included JwJ, SCOPE, the South-West Organizing Project (SWOP) and others. The event provided an inspiring backdrop to dialogues among the US delegation. It also sparked a critical self-examination as to why the movement was not able to build organizations on a mass scale like those from other countries at the WSF. Several organizations agreed to continue the dialogue in the US. This process led to the eventual formation of the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance (GGJ).

GGJ was created to provide capacity for the grassroots sector to be proactive in its participation internationally and to strengthen national grassroots movement building in the United States. Beginning as a loose affiliation of organizations, GGJ’s primary function was to organize delegations of grassroots leaders to the World Social Forums in Porto Alegre in 2002, 2003 and 2005, Mumbai, India in 2004 and Caracas, Venezuela in 2006. These delegations allowed grassroots organizations to meet and interact with global justice colleagues and gain insights and inspiration from organizing models and strategies of international allies.

During the early years of the WSF, members of the WSF International Council (WSFIC) were calling for a United States Social Forum. US representatives, particularly Jobs with Justice and GGJ, resisted the call. Their caution was based on the fact that there was not broad public awareness about social forums. If convened in the early years of the WSF, a US Social Forum would not represent the broad demographic and political diversity of the United States. In the WSFIC meeting in Miami, FL in June of 2003, GGJ agreed to initiate a process to assess the potential for a USSF.

Later in 2003, mobilizations took place at the Summit of the Americas in Miami, including the Root Cause March. The march was organized by south Florida based grassroots organizations Miami Workers Center, Power

---

U and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. To many it marked the first time that a political pole was defined by the grassroots movement within the US-based Global Justice Movement that was distinct from labor, the environmentalists, and the anarchists.

Fifty grassroots organizations convened in Washington, DC on April 14, 2004. After two days of deliberations, the organizations declared their support for a USSF. By August, twenty-two founding organizations established the USSF National Planning Committee, and in the spring of 2005, the city of Atlanta was selected to host the forum.

Five years after the momentous Battle in Seattle, the Global Justice Movement in the US suffered a major political setback in the same city. In October of 2004 the Northwest Social Forum in Seattle collapsed within two weeks of the event. The Indigenous Programming Committee and subsequently the Youth Programming Committee withdrew from the process stating that Indigenous people were marginalized from the organizing process. A second setback soon followed as George W. Bush assumed the Presidency for a second term.

During 2005 and 2006, significant political events would shape the evolution of the US Social Forum. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina and the breach of the levees in New Orleans created the worst natural and human-made disaster in US history. Negligence and the subsequent abandonment of the population by local, state and federal governments during the fatal crisis created ideal conditions for genocidal manslaughter of the majority Black population. At least 1,500 people died, and up to 1.2 million people were displaced. The progressive movements responded with material support, but not with a coordinated national effort. Politically the response was even weaker. The lack of a mass movement initiative in support of the Gulf Coast allowed the Bush administration to continue to leave the region in ruins, the people displaced and reconstruction in the hands of corporate developers.

In March of 2006 progressive movements demonstrated their collective action. Millions of people, primarily Latino immigrants mobilized in cities

---

9) Testimonies from the International Tribunals in New Orleans on August 29–September 2, made clear that 2 years after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, people remain displaced. Survivors also powerfully described their horrendous experiences and the government response of repression and violence instead of support.
throughout the United States. House Bill 4437 introduced by Rep. James Sensenbrenner of Wisconsin called for massive increases in the militarization of the US-Mexico border including a 700-mile expansion of the border fence, mandatory detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants, and expansion of the authority of police agencies to enforce immigration laws. Passage of the bill in the House set off a massive wave of marches in small towns and major cities throughout the country and motivated other Congressional initiatives. The marches were followed by boycotts and strikes on Workers Rights Day on May 1. These mobilizations halted the momentum of the extreme Right, ultimately stopping passage of Sensenbrenner’s initiative in the Senate and any new immigration legislation.

The Road to Atlanta

In June of 2006, the Southeast Social Forum (SESF) was held in Durham, NC. The event was the first of two regional social forums organized by members of the USSF National Planning Committee. Two years after the setback of the Northwest Social Forum, the SESF signaled new life for the social forum process in the US. Over 700 people attended the forum, primarily African American and Latino. Farm workers from south Florida, workers from the inner cities of Alexandria, VA, and homeless people from Atlanta came by the busload. “It was like a big family reunion,” commented Ms. Paulette Richards, from LIFFT in Miami, “You come to this big gathering and meet all these people that are fighting for justice where they are from… We share the same struggle.”

The SESF set the tone and built momentum towards the USSF. Stephanie Guilloud of Project South characterized the spirit of the event in YES Magazine, “What we saw is that people were ready to engage and confront the edges that have kept us apart.”

The Border Social Forum (BSF) in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua in October 2006 built upon the success of the SESF. The BSF strengthened not only east-west connections between the movements in the southwestern and southeastern United States, but north-south relationships as well.

---

12) van Gelder 2006.
Over 1000 people came from northern Mexico, Cuba and throughout the United States. In Frontera Norte-Sur News, forum organizer Ruben Solis said the event built on years of cross-border movements to “bring together all that’s happened before in a new phase of development.”

The Border Social Forum was key to landing the international process in the US Latin American media, particularly Telesur, covered the proceedings. Social movements in Latin America were winning major political victories, including the stalemate of the WTO in Cancún in 2003, defeat of the FTAA at the Summit of the Americas in Mar de Plata Argentina in November, 2005, and a string of national political victories. Since 2002, newly elected Presidents in Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Paraguay have openly confronted neoliberal policies, issuing a strong challenge to US hegemony in the region.

Latin American social movements have strengthened their coordination through formations like the Convergence of Movements of Peoples of the Americas, the Continental Social Alliance, the Continental Campaign Against the FTAA, and the social forums of the Americas. US-based grassroots organizations like Southwest Workers Union, GGJ and others began to forge new relationships with these movements. This was important to defining the political vision of organizing the USSF.

**The US Social Forum**

After a three-year organizing process, the US Social Forum convened in Atlanta, GA on June 27, 2007. In total more than twelve thousand people came as registered delegates representing more than one thousand organizations and collectives. The USSF reflected a cross-section of the US by geography, race, age, gender and sexual orientation. Every state in the country was represented, as well as 68 countries, several indigenous nations, and US occupied territories Alaska, Puerto Rico, Guam and Hawaii.

The original objectives of the USSF National Planning Committee (NPC) were to 1) be intentional about outreach to grassroots groups rooted in working class communities of color and broaden participation from that foundation, 2) assure that the USSF would not be just an event but a movement building process, and 3) be aware of the NPC’s international

---

13) Patterson 2006.
responsibility, making local and global connections and build an anti-imperialist movement within the US.

The demographics of the NPC helped to ensure the diversity of the overall process. The NPC was composed of roughly 85% people of color, 64% women, 51% under the age of 40 and 15% queer identified. The range of relationships of the NPC members facilitated outreach to communities that are traditionally marginalized from national political efforts. The majority of the roughly 50 NPC members were grassroots organizations including GGJ and several of its member organizations, as well as other sectors, including the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, the Ruckus Society and the American Friends Service Committee.

The choice of Atlanta was also critical. Breaking with social forum custom, the first USSF was not held in a politically friendly region. The state of Georgia is one of the most conservative of the United States. The city of Atlanta, however, has a rich history of civil rights organizing, well known as the home of Dr. Martin Luther and Coretta Scott King. The majority of the population is primarily people of color with 62% of Atlantans identifying as Black or African American. Project South anchored the USSF process in Atlanta.

The participation of youth was incorporated directly into the activities of the forum. The representation of young people in the planning process was vital in assuring their integration and presence. “We exceeded our goal of having 20% youth” stated Monica Córdova of the SWOP in Albuquerque, New Mexico and Chair of the USSF Youth Working Group. “For the majority it was their first experience going to a social forum.”

South by Southwest Connections

One of the highlights was the arrival of the Peoples Freedom Caravan. Organized by groups from the southeastern and southwestern United States such as Southwest Workers Union (SWU), Southern Echo of Mississippi, the Peoples Institute for Survival and Beyond in New Orleans, the Southern Human Rights Organizing Network in Mississippi and SWOP. The caravan passed through seven cities and was a symbol of unity among

---

diverse communities. Organizers sought to connect the struggles and histories of African-Americans, Latinos and Indigenous peoples in the southern US. “This is a different kind of event that will take on the democracy divide that exists between races, classes, cultures and regions,” said Genaro Rendón of SWU.16

Beginning in Albuquerque, New Mexico, the caravan stopped in cities that represent historic social justice struggles: San Antonio and Houston, Texas, Jackson, Mississippi, Selma, Alabama, and New Orleans, Louisiana. At each stop more buses and vehicles joined. More than 800 people representing seventy organizations arrived with the caravan in Atlanta at the moment the US Social Forum opening march began.

The Gulf region was a reference point for the movements at the forum. As Jerome Scott explained, “We did not respond well as a movement to this disaster. It revealed to us a bit about the weakened state of popular movements in the U.S.”

The Levee Call was a document issued by the Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Committee marking the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. It was an indictment of the Bush administration and a call for a unified front to rebuild the Gulf region:

We invite both the massive movement in the Mexican, Latino and Asian communities demanding immigrant rights and the anti-war movement to link with a movement for Reconstruction and the Right of Return to the Gulf Coast. We are all challenging the same system of oppression. And there is a developing recognition that our unity would represent a powerful force for human rights and global justice – a force not seen since the massive mobilizations of the 1960’s.17

To foster this movement convergence, the NPC identified six areas and organized plenaries around each: 1) The Reconstruction of the Gulf Coast in the Post Katrina era: Challenges, Visions and Strategies 2) Imperialism, War, Militarism, and Prisons: Towards a US Based on Peace, Economic and Environmental Justice 3) Voices of the Indigenous Community: From the Heart of Mother Earth. 4) Immigrant Rights 5) Gender and Sexual Liberation: Integrating Gender and Sexuality Throughout the Movements 6) Workers Rights in the Global Economy.

According to Cindy Wiesner of the Miami Workers Center key moments occurred in each of these areas over the previous two years that represented an opportunity or a challenge to catalyze a national movement. For the most part this did not happen. Exploring these issues at the USSF presented an opportunity to understand the state of the social movements in the United States and the potential to develop a convergence among them. She explains:

In the case of the Gulf Coast, we did not mount a political or material response organized at a national level. The immigrant communities mobilized millions to the streets in 2006, but we did not have an infrastructure in place to implement an organizing process afterwards. We also lacked a collective vision of just immigration policies, which is why we continue to respond to reactionary initiatives in Congress rather than promoting our own initiatives. There are millions of people organized against the occupation in Iraq, but we do not have consensus on a plan to withdraw nor have we defined a new relationship between the people of the United States with the Middle East region. The right wing in the U.S. is exploiting the question of same sex marriage to divide communities and consolidate their political base. We don't have an overall strategy to fight the criminalization of people due to their sexual orientation and to strengthen the solidarity movement with the lesbian, gay, queer, transgender and two spirit communities.

The indigenous plenary highlighted the ongoing assaults by the US government and multinational corporations to exploit energy resources on native lands. Tw’a’le Abrahamson described the legal mechanisms imposed by the government to facilitate the exploitation of petroleum in the region. Indigenous communities from Alaska experience the impacts of climate change from two sides: “the destruction of our land by the drilling and mining for oil and coal and the destruction of the ecosystems due to climate change that we depend upon. Polar bears are drowning because there is no ice for them to rest as they swim in the ocean.”

Other Indigenous lands like Hawai’i are occupied to serve as military bases for the US. “25% of the islands in Hawaii are under control of the U.S. armed forces”, said Ikaika Hussey, of the organization DMZ Hawai’i, “the military has become part of the culture of the island.” Hussey made a comparison with the historic trajectory in Cuba, both islands being centers of sugar production, military bases and playgrounds for the rich yet realizing separate fates in 1959 with Cuba gaining its independence and Hawaii being incorporated into the United States.

New Formations

The state of organized labor in the United States is tenuous, with only 7% of the US workforce organized in unions. The American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) split in 2005, with some of the largest unions including Service Employees International Union, UNITE-HERE and the Teamsters seceding to form the new Change to Win federation. Meanwhile other worker formations have emerged, including workers centers and community/labor hybrids. Farm worker organizations like the Coalition of Immokalee Workers have won key victories against two of the largest fast-food corporations: Taco Bell and McDonalds.

Stewart Acuff, the National Organizing Director of the AFL-CIO reflected on the sense of urgency facing the labor movement, “We are divided by racism, sexism, and nationalism. The time has come to dismantle all these barriers amongst workers, that is the responsibility of our times… There’s so much more that unites us than divides us, we need to advance towards one movement, one struggle, and one community.”

A vital new workers formation was founded at the USSF. Various organizations from New York, California and Virginia announced the creation of a national network of domestic workers, including Domestic Workers United, Damayan Migrant Workers Association, CAAAV: Women Workers Project, Andolan: Organizing, South Asian Workers, Haitian Women for Haitian Refugees. Unity Housecleaners Cooperative, Las Señoras de Santa Maria, Mujeres Unidas y Activas, People Organized to Win Employment Rights, San Francisco Day Labor Program, Women’s Collective of la Raza Centro Legal, Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights Los Angeles, Pilipino Workers’ Center of Southern California. CASA: Comite de Mujeres Buscando Justicia.

Carolyn de Leon, organizer and former nanny explained that many years ago in Atlanta, African American domestic workers, who used to be called “washerwomen” went on strike to protest the abusive conditions and low wages, “It seems fitting that the national voice for our movement would be re-born here.”

Hundreds of topics surfaced in the multitude of self-organized activities. One of the most significant was the issue of displacement of poor

---

people from their homes in the inner-cities. During the past two decades gentrification has descended upon urban centers throughout the United States, resulting in a process of development similar to Latin America. Since the fifties, the middle-class of the US moved to suburban areas on the outskirts of cities. The public resources followed these communities supporting their growth, while the city centers were left to deteriorate. This is where the poorest communities and people of color primarily concentrated.

But in recent years the mentality of urban planning has changed, emphasizing the concept of “livable cities”, where middle-class professionals can walk to their offices and easily access the culture and vibrancy of the community. Now the face of the inner-cities is changing as condos and high-priced shopping centers begin to dominate the urban landscape. Meanwhile the city’s poor are forced to the outskirts of the city, often without vital infrastructure like public transportation or accessible workplaces.

The Right to the City (RTC) coalition was founded to fight this trend. Comprised of 30 organizations in 8 cities, RTC brought to the forum hundreds of people from Boston, Miami, New York, Los Angeles, and other municipalities that have been fighting for the right to stay in their communities. “We wanted to utilize the forum space to continue building unity amongst our organizations,” said Jon Liss of Tenants and Workers United en Alexandria, Virginia “and initiate campaigns at a national and regional level.”

Another core issue at the forum was trade policy, particularly related to the question of migration. Over 100 activities were registered on these topics. The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights (NNIRR) and GGJ organized a series of workshops, partnering with other national groups like American Friends Service Committee, the Alliance for Responsible Trade, Korean-Americans against War and Neoliberalism (KAWAN), and Witness for Peace. “Our goal is to re-frame the debate about immigration in the U.S.,” explained Colin Rajah of NNIRR, “Global migration is a concrete result of neoliberal policies that are displacing entire communities throughout the world”. One of the workshops highlighted the severe impacts of “free” trade policies on farmers and farm workers throughout the world. KAWAN organized a “counter-signing” ceremony to the US South Korea Free Trade Agreement at the USSF. According to Hyun Lee
of KAWAN, “The treaty represents a death-sentence for millions of farmers and workers in Korea.”

The USSF culminated with a Peoples Movement Assembly (PMA) on July 1. The PMA was adopted from the Social Movement Assemblies that are convened at each WSF and provide a space for social movements to present and adopt political declarations, positions and campaigns. Over 40 declarations were presented on issues ranging from the reconstruction of the Gulf Coast to trade agreements. The PMA will be an ongoing process that will run parallel to the USSF and will allow movements to continue to communicate, coordinate and mobilize.

Challenges

The USSF was not immune to some of the internal tensions that have divided the Left and the GJM. One well-known peace activist had a pie thrown in her face. Indigenous delegates protested when the microphone was taken from an indigenous person during the closing of the Peoples Movement Assembly. One observer saw these incidences as indicative of “destructive patterns across the Left”.21 Certainly these dynamics exist and played out in a few, isolated cases. Most participants and observers who have written about the USSF, however, saw that these instances did not affect the overall significance, impact and spirit of the event.

…there was a freshness to the USSF, “ wrote Darryl Lorenzo Wellington (2007) in The Nation, “It was a coming together of activists who operate under the radar in the United States, who brought something new to the table: an army of small organizations devoted to their communities, whose efforts rarely make the evening news, acting locally but (potentially) connecting globally.

“It gave us a sense of unity and humanity that I don’t think existed in a long time,” said Rev. Kenneth Glasgow of The Ordinary Peoples Society (TOPS) in the Dothan Eagle. Based in Alabama, TOPS organized one of the most inspiring activities at the USSF – a family reunion of ex-felons throughout the south and their families.

Conclusion

The USSF was testimony to the resiliency of the people who make up the grassroots GJM in the United States – the poor, the marginalized, the unrepresented. It was a clear example that in a deliberate concerted effort to overcome our barriers we can demonstrate peoples’ power on a mass scale. Fundamental political change in the US will largely depend on the potential of this sector to continue to converge and grow through processes like the social forum and the PMA. The USSF also consolidated a crucial missing piece in the worldwide GJM. It creates possibilities for new collaborations among grassroots organizations and other sectors. It has also begun to open political breathing room to allow for more open debate on alternatives to global neoliberal capitalism.

Some may dismiss the glowing assessments of the USSF as idealistic or romanticized. But it has been a long time since the US Left has had an opportunity to speak from a reference point of hope, vision and possibility. Rev. Glasgow’s vision of his organization’s work in the city of Dothan, Alabama applies to the Global Justice Movement as well, “The bottom is what holds up the top. If we could revitalize the bottom, then we revitalize the whole city.”

References


van Gelder, Sarah, Fall 2006, ‘Southern Revival’, *YES Magazine*.
