

To Atlanta, via Seattle, Porto Alegre, Mumbai & Nairobi

The Social Forum comes to the US!

By Suren Moodliar and Kim Foltz

Mooted on the streets of Seattle at century's end, the World Social Forum (WSF) erupted onto the global scene with a defiant declaration: "Another World is Possible!" A response to the meeting of international economic and political elites—at the 1999 World Trade Organization summit in Seattle and at the 2000 meeting of corporate, cultural and political leaders in Davos, Switzerland—the first WSF was held in the Global South in Porto Alegre, Brazil, a city run by progressive working-class leaders. While the first forum was essentially a gathering of left luminaries and others already in-the-know, over a short time, the WSF transformed itself into a productive gathering for grassroots organizations, peoples' movements, trade union leaders, women's networks, environmental activists, and, above all, representatives of the excluded: oppressed nationalities, indigenous people, "outcasts," sexual minorities, the landless and the homeless. In the process, the WSF grew in scale to involve hundreds of thousands of people meeting over the course of a week-long gathering in Brazil, in India in 2004, and Venezuela, Mali and Pakistan in 2006, and finally, Nairobi, Kenya, in January 2007. If the forum has grown in size, it has also grown roots: more than a 150 regional, national and local fora have been held.

Every forum drew large delegations from around the world: vocal, high-profile peace activists from the Korean peninsula; peasant leaders from the Philippines; intellectuals, sex-workers and child advocates from Thailand; and Japanese feminists and anti-nuclear activists all find a place at the forum. So, too, do trade-union and peace-movement organizers from across Europe and African anti-HIV/AIDS campaigners, rural organizers, mineworkers and development thinkers. Indigenous Americans, Latin American socialist revolutionaries and left politicians from Tierra del Fuego to the Rio Grande add their voices to the open space that is the WSF, as do the varied strands of resistance to Empire and occupation in the Middle East.

Grassroots movements from the United States are relatively absent from the global social forum movement, as are those from the People's Republic of China.[*] These are grievous deficits. Surely the promised "other world" of the WSF will not be created if the silent and silenced majorities of the declining superpower of the West and the ascendant economic giant and exporter of capital in the East fail to add their voices. While attendees from the US constitute one of the larger contingents, many represent established, foundation-supported NGOs; only a few speak for the mostly volunteer-based left movements from the US grassroots.

Those who have not attended the WSF often wonder if anything can be accomplished with so many participants especially given the diversity of issue, geography, race and class. The answer is revealed in the actions that arise from the WSF. In 2003, following calls to action from the European and the World Social Forum, an International Day of Action was organized to protest the impending war in Iraq. Fifteen million people around the globe took to the streets, prompting the *New York Times* to label such mass actions, "the other superpower." Subtler efforts receive less notice, yet they are important for generating an alternative to the "winner-take-all capitalism" that subverts our communities. For example, movement campaigns—many of them successful—to combat the privatization of water resources have used the space of the WSF as an organizing platform to strategize against the corporate and government dominated

World Water Forum. Here, activists from the deserts of India's north come together with Bolivian highlanders, community activists from Detroit, and citizen's action groups from New Hampshire.

Last January, a group of migrant workers' rights activists from Boston used the Nairobi WSF to link up with European, Indian and African-based migrant rights activists to strategize about global actions for the upcoming May Day. On a somewhat larger scale, the Boston Organizing Committee for the WSF took a 50+ person delegation – made up largely of women, young people and communities of color – to the Caracas WSF (2006). The delegation linked up with grassroots organizations that are transforming Venezuela's working-class communities by extending educational, health, employment and housing to everyone, regardless of income.

As these connections are being created across great distances, The WSF has encouraged a US Social Forum (USSF) to create space for grassroots groups, communities of color, and working-class people, organizations, and movements to come together within the United States. This challenge was taken up by the Grassroots Global Justice (GGJ) network. In a careful, deliberative process, GGJ established a National Planning Committee that is now organizing a USSF to take place at the end of June. After considering proposals from a number of cities, the Committee chose the "Atlanta" of W.E.B. Du Bois, in part because important themes of American history and contemporary issues intersect there: "race," the "New" South, the liberal model of racial "progress," a "gateway" to Latin America, water privatization, and the Katrina diaspora. Indeed, though written about a hundred years ago, Du Bois' description of Atlanta still rings true in our globalized world: "South of the North, yet north of the South, lies the City of a Hundred Hills."

As a "movement-building" process, the USSF will bring together the grassroots from around the US and will be organized around several axes that bring coherence to our many struggles: race, the environment, the wars at home and abroad, workers' rights, Katrina and immigration. The USSF will take place over three days, with the first day devoted to consciousness raising (or education), the second to visioning, and the third to strategizing and action. Organizers anticipate that 20,000 people will gather and participate in diverse cultural activities, marches and protests, and multiple styles of meetings and events. Organizers in the Northeast hope to turnout 4,000 people concerned with the movement-building priorities of the USSF. The road to Atlanta has been paved by connections created at smaller social fora, one in the Southeast and another on the US-Mexican Border (held in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico). The latter drew more than 1,000 participants from all the Border States and culminated in a dramatic march along the US-Mexico border. A Puerto Rican Social Forum, held last November, drew excited support from PR activists living within the US. The forum grappled with the island's colonial status while affirming its membership in the Latin American and Caribbean communities.

The largest forum held in the US took place in Boston in 2004. The Boston Social Forum (BSF) drew 5,000 registrants to more than 550 different events held over 3 days. At least 1,200 attendees were young people of color who organized the Active Arts Youth Conference track. In addition, many community-based organizations came together in the movement-building track. An international peace conference, a "women's web," an economic alternatives track, and a conference on Haiti were among more than 30 subject areas addressed. The event – covered in French, Latin American and Japanese papers, and by BBC radio – received only modest mainstream coverage within the US—brief mention on NPR, short articles in the major dailies, and an unanticipated hack job in *The Nation*—but it remains an important and

varied legacy for the local left. In the alternative media, Davey D. noted that "hip hop music, culture and activism was definitely respected during the Boston Social Forum." A longtime women-of-color activist observed that this was the "first time in over a decade [that] virtually every single people-of-color organizer in the city came together." As with the BSF, the USSF will depend on organizations that register to propose events and programming. No central organization determines what workshops, performances, events, or panels are proposed. To encourage movement building, the USSF's Program Committee will review proposals, facilitate collaboration between groups, and establish criteria for events. Given the larger scale, the presence of foundation support, the longer time frame, and national grassroots participation, the USSF is likely to surpass the BSF by orders of magnitude, leading to a plethora of diverse activities, encounters and connections, and resulting actions.

As organizations and individuals assess the value of participating in the forum for their own work and agendas, they should think about the forum with clear objectives in mind, such as deepening specific relationships or presenting proposals for joint action and collaboration. There will be incredibly rich opportunities. Those who treat it as if it were a conference with a ready-made agenda and the offer of a captive audience will be disappointed. To elicit and explain the opportunities in greater help, to initiate cross-issue conversations, to develop joint proposals, as well as to bridge the gap between expectations and the USSF's offerings, the last Northeast regional meeting for the USSF took place in Boston (see www.encuentro5.org) while future meetings are planned at the local level.

In downtown Atlanta, participants will meet and talk among historically Black institutions that nurtured resistance through some of the most trying times in American history while forum's main venue is nestled between the corporate towers of CNN and Coca-Cola. Atlanta 2007 will offer activists a chance to connect with a long, powerful tradition of civil rights action while directly confronting the challenges of the present.

* Another region severely underrepresented in the social forum consists of the former Soviet Union's Central Asian Republics.

Online resources:

Boston Organizing Committee for the WSF: www.lfsc.org/wsf

Boston Social Forum: www.bostonsocialforum.org (see the FAQs in particular)

Grassroots Global Justice Network: www.ggjalliance.org

US Social Forum: www.ussf2007.org

World Social Forum: www.worldsocialforum.org

About the writers: Suren Moodliar and Kim Foltz are coordinators of Massachusetts Global Action where they help run projects on workers' rights, water rights, and organizing against the war. They serve as northeast regional coordinators for the USSF and organizers of the encuentro 5 movement-building space (www.encuentro5.org). They thank participants in the USSF Northeast e-mail list—particularly Jason Pramas, Sarah Cross, Thomas Ponniah and Susie Husted—for their comments.