

Florence ESF: Attac pulls the movement to the right

Tue, 04/11/2003 - 23:00

The European Social Forum, gathers in Florence this week. From 6-9 November a series of debates and forums will take place, followed by the assembly of the European Social Movements on Sunday 10 November.

The ESF will be an incredible assembly of activists from right across the continent. This is proof that corporate globalisation has given birth to its opposite- a movement of many movements determined not to retreat into national or even continental isolation but to combine their efforts against the common enemy.

In Florence there will be thousands of trade unionists, NGO activists, ecologists, socialists communists and anarchists, anti-racist, human rights, feminists and antiwar campaigners- in short many of those who have built up the movement against global capitalism over the past five years. This ?movement of the movements? helped overcome the single-issue fragmentation, the ?post-modern? abandonment of the big picture, which marked the early 1990s.

From the outset this movement involved the struggles of the landless in Brazil, the indigenous peoples of Chiapas in Mexico, against the landlords and the capitalists, the working class and the radical youth in huge numbers. In each of these arenas people came to realise that they had one enemy-whether they named it globalisation, corporate capitalism or imperialism. But even more they realised that they were not alone. In the words of the Seattle demonstrators- ?the whole world is watching.? Not only watching but willing and able, to take action in to solidarity with them.

The dozens of militant mass demonstrations from Seattle to Genoa targeted the arrogant gatherings of the bankers and politicians who were exploiting, starving, and polluting our world. Militants in Cochabamba and Buenos Aires were gunned down for defying the IMF and its austerity programmes and privatisations. Not only in South America but also in Gothenburg and then in Genoa, where Carlo Giuliani was killed, the word?s rulers made a futile effort to crush this movement.

But this movement was not simply a matter of action- or for ?celebrating diversity?. Of course it is vital that every particular struggle has a wealth of experience to contribute but it is not true that a unity of purpose and direction cannot arise out of this diversity. Certain common lessons need to be learned and applied. Within the movement there are conflicting answers to the questions how can we get rid of the system of exploitation and war and what shall we replace it with. ?Diversity?, ?many worlds? is not a sufficient answer.

That is why there has been a drive to hold international gatherings for discussion and debate over answers and solutions. The idea for the European Social Forum, one of several such continental forums, was initiated at Porto Alegre at the second World Social Forum.

The prime movers were the French-based ATTAC, the Brazilian PT and various Italian parties and unions.

These organisations represent the powerful political and material base for the strongly reformist character of programme of the ESF. In Italy the Democratici di Sinistra (DS) and Rifondazione comunista (Rc) as well as unions like Fiom-Cgil will be central to its organisation and funding. Also supporting it will be the CGT and SUD unions of France. Even the European TUC has come on board.

The presence of these unions will encourage and facilitate thousands of union and party members to attend and participate. It is even better if these leaders are willing to debate openly and democratically, to be put on the spot. For example we want to know what the CGT, SUD, the Cgil, the RMT-even the ETUC itself - propose to do about the war against Iraq, about the persecution and expulsion of asylum seekers and immigrants, about privatisation, factory closures (Fiat) and rising unemployment.

The rank and file members can also use Florence to forge links with their fellow workers across the continent. If unionists go away from Florence with the realisation that they must not leave it to the ?leaders? to take action on all these questions, if they are empowered to act for themselves, to act together, this will be a huge step forward.

But anti-capitalist activists should be under no illusions about the far greater strength of reformism at the ESF than on the streets battles of Seville, Prague Gothenburg and Genoa. They will certainly attempt to marginalise the more radical and revolutionary elements. Marginalise, but not completely exclude them because the intellectuals, journalists NGO executives and the lightly disguised politicians form the parliamentary parties desperately need a new mass base. That is why they will be there.

Their aim is to conquer this new movement for a renewed reformist, gradualist, programme. Their ideas are nothing to be afraid of. We can debate them openly. But what must be resisted is the methods of organisation and the procedures which originated at the first meeting of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre.

Who really takes the decisions in the WSF-ESF? The process is hidden behind a cloak of constant discussion and ?consensus? seeking. Everyone participates all right- if you can afford to fly to Brussels, Vienna, Thessaloniki, Rome and Barcelona. Large-ish meetings there have discussed the main topics and the programme of speakers.

But it is clear at these meetings that there are a few ?big hitters?-representatives of ATTAC, the International Socialist Tendency (whose status has risen because of their role in the British anti-war movement as well as the European anticapitalist mobilisations).

ATTAC is the right-wing of the movement. It seeks at all costs placate the leaders of the sponsoring unions and social democratic parties. They tried hard to keep Palestine well down the agenda for the really big sessions. They showed a consistent desire to avoid giving too much prominence to exposure of state racism, immigrants rights and explicit references to fascism and Islamophobia.

At the Rome organising meeting they even wanted to exclude Iraq and Afghanistan from discussions on the war question. In Barcelona they showed a powerful resistance to the main demonstration centring on the war threat-claiming that the French trade unions would not come if this was the case and that the war was not a big issue in France.

Though ATTAC has mobilised forces for demonstrations like Millau and Nice in June and December 2000 its main home is not on the streets. It is a think tank seeking to revive the popularity of a neo-Keynesian programme of state regulation, old-style import substitution ?development? for the ?global south? and the

defence of the 'rights of citizens.'

Central to the work of ATTAC is the question of the taxation of capital movements, (the Tobin Tax, control of tax havens), the re-imposition of nation-state controls on financial markets, reducing the 'Third World' debt, fighting the WTO and its free trade agenda including NAFTA or MAI, GATS, exposing unfair North-South trade. It does not develop militant tactics to achieve these goals but rather relies on lobbying supposedly sympathetic governments.

ATTAC's failure to develop any plan of mass struggle, or to say what sort of political power (i.e. state) is needed to implement its goals can be seen most clearly with its biggest fetish, the Tobin Tax. ATTAC estimates that a tax levied on each financial transaction at a rate of about 0.1 per cent, would raise a sum of around a hundred billion dollars a year. The proceeds would go to developing the 'global south'.

Leaving aside the small sum raised compared to the needs which exist, leaving aside ATTAC's obvious fear of threatening the property and incomes of the super rich and the mega-corporations, even with direct taxation, let alone with expropriation- how will it be executed?

No one country could impose the tax without making financial institutions relocate their dealings somewhere where the tax was not levied. To wait to apply it everywhere simultaneously is to wait till the end of the world. Who can organise this? The United Nations? Laughable! Who would enforce it? There is no international law for the simple reason that there is no world state to enforce it. Who would pay a tax unless it was enforced?

In fact ATTAC concentrates on trying to get the European Union, the United States and Japan to adopt it, to become in effect a G7 'Tobin zone.' This is asking the chief neoliberal poachers to turn gamekeepers.

ATTAC sees no other solution but to mobilise the collective hot air of 'civil society' to gently blow the governments, bankers, and giant corporations towards this scheme.

This whole approach is what Marxists call a 'reactionary utopia'. Reactionary because it seeks a return to a world economy of national capitalist states, of post-1945 style Keynesian state regulation. Utopian because it is presented as a good idea - 'another world is possible'- but without tackling the question of power and classes.

Which class has the power today and which other class could take it away from them, to build this 'other' world? ATTAC will not say. This means in the end that it really wants to pressurise and persuade the unenlightened, reactionary bourgeoisie (the really existing one) to hand over to an enlightened one (dreamed about by the social democratic intellectuals). But above all the rough hands of workers and peasants must not reach out for state power, even to realise ATTAC's insipid utopia.

If ATTAC is not so important on the streets- despite Millau- its influence is very great behind the scenes, at the WSF meetings in Porto Alegre in 2001 and 2002 and in setting the framework of rules for the ESF.

The World Social Forum Charter of Principles is a document clearly written by the intellectuals of ATTAC for representatives of reformist parties and capitalist funded NGOs. It asserts the right 'to guide the continued pursuit of that initiative' and demands 'to be respected by all those who wish to take part in the process'.

Buried amongst rhetorical denunciations of neoliberalism and global capitalism the principles slip in some truly reactionary rules- ones which are operating in Florence too and must be exposed and combated.

?The World Social Forum brings together and interlinks only organisations and movements of civil society?. To this it adds- ?neither party representations nor military organisations shall participate in the Forum?. What is this supposed to mean?

Simply that organisations that are formed around a programme to change society, that struggle to do so by various means, (political parties) are excluded or, what is nearly as bad, obliged to disguise themselves as single issue campaigns or ?social? bodies.

It is totally reactionary to exclude parties and their representatives, especially those that are fighting global capitalism and war, as though they were not part of civil society or the body of citizens.

It privileges NGOs, crippled by their funding systems, hog-tied by legal status as charities, and reduces organisations that are not so bound (trades unions and parties) to impotence. In fact it condemns the Social Forums to the status of mere talking shops. What is wrong with voting after a democratic discussion? Only those in a minority can seek to prevent the majority expressing their will. Consensus is a recipe for the minority always imposing its will on the majority or blocking action altogether.

Militant anarchist and populist comrades should recognise that a ban on politics or on taking a vote- which they often collude with because of their anti-politicism- is undemocratic and plays into the hands of reformist parties, trade union bureaucrats and the managers of charities.

These bigwigs can easily hide behind the scenes as ?the organisers? and in any case are specifically allowed to participate ?in a personal capacity?. As if Lula was present at Porto Alegre, or Fausto Bertinotti in Florence will be present as just another individual.

What are the ?military organisations which the World Social Forum wishes to ban too? Hardly the US marines or the British paras? No, what is meant is clearly the FARC or even the Zapatistas- guerrilla movement struggling against imperialism and repression. However ?government leaders and members of legislatures who accept the commitments of this Charter may be invited to participate in a personal capacity.?

If we really have to debate with French imperialist ?minister-socialists? like Chevennement, then we do not see why guerrilla fighters against imperialism should be excluded. Only people who are socialists or anti-capitalists in words but imperialists in deeds could have imposed this arch-reactionary clause.

Similarly reactionary is the bar on the social forums taking any decisions.

Again the principles lay down:

?The participants in the Forum shall not be called on to take decisions as a body, whether by vote or acclamation, on declarations or proposals for action that would commit all, or the majority, of them and that propose to be taken as establishing positions of the Forum as a body. It thus does not constitute a locus of power to be disputed by the participants in its meetings.?

Not only does this prevent broad democratic mass assemblies taking any decisions it leaves the ?locus of power? as the organisers who, for example, drafted this wretched document, did not have to put it to any democratic body and who have imposed it on the thousands of people gathered in Porto Alegre and in Florence.

The aim of these organisers is to assert hegemony over the ?social movements? or the ?movement for global citizenship? as Susan George likes to call it. The idea of paralleling the global business forums like

the WEF (Davos) expresses the NGO's desire to become partners with the global business and political leaders. The more conservative of them undoubtedly yearn for some sort of global corporatism. As a Peoples Global Alliance discussion paper on the ESF very aptly puts it, 'a Greenpeace-Shell World Government.'

Assemblies on the scale of Porto Alegre or Florence do present enormous opportunities for networking, for bringing together militants from the semi-colonial countries and the imperialist heartlands, for discussions on tactics and overall strategy.

But they will be of use only if they are bold enough to issue calls to fight on the key issues of the day. Then they could play a progressive role in moving the organisations of the working class, the peasants, the myriad of parties and campaigns towards the realisation that an even higher form of international organisation is needed.

But this will be ultimately fruitless unless an organised and militant revolutionary alternative is mounted to 'official' forums whether in Florence or Porto Alegre. To do this means also fighting the 'revolutionary' apologists for this undemocratic, talking shop system. Militant class struggle forces, trade unionists, the organisers of strikes, mass direct action, road blockades, rather than academic seminars will be what is needed if there is to be a true 'rebel international'.

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