



London ESF: L5I gives revolutionary lead to the Istanbul preparatory meeting

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The European Social Forum 2004 Preparatory Assembly gathered on 16-18 April in Istanbul. A programme workgroup held on the afternoon of Friday 15 April was effectively an assembly session too. Of the several hundred activists present, naturally a far larger proportion came from Turkey, Greece, Hungary and the Balkans.

This fact alone justified the decision to go to Istanbul, despite complaints from some Western European delegates about the distance and expense. Moreover these participants injected a greater degree of enthusiasm for action, solidarity with those struggling against imperialism, support for the rights of stateless nations and the need for recognition of the role of youth in the movement.

However, most of the dialogue and networking with the East European activists was took place in the corridors and refreshments area. This not only reflected the relative newness of the ESF's arcane procedures for these militants, but also the sheer impenetrability of a process which rarely presents clear written proposals, circulated in advance, and which resolutely refuses to structure debates between their proponents and opponents. This disguises the privileges the larger Western-Europe based organisations (French and Italian union federations, Attac, the IST wearing its GR hat and the Fourth International).

Despite this continuing democratic deficit, some real progress was made in Istanbul.

On the Friday and Saturday morning, the assembly agreed to focus the ESF agenda on five axes or themes:

- ? War and peace
- ? Citizenship and democracy
- ? Neoliberal policies and the struggle against them
- ? The environment and sustainable society
- ? Racism, discrimination and identity.

In addition, a proposal for a number of cross-cutting themes (transversalities) was introduced, Eastern Europe, gender and Europe's Mediterranean neighbours, stateless nationalities; though no final agreement was reached here.

This, at last, gives the ESF a rough political direction. All meetings, from the large plenary sessions down to the self-organised seminars and workshops; will be grouped under these major "axes", in an attempt to encourage networking and collaboration for action. A large number of delegates also agreed with the L5I proposal that it would be useful if all the ad hoc meetings and assemblies which the Porto Alegre Principles promise to facilitate, plus the seminars and workshops too, can submit proposals for action and policy into the final declaration of the Assembly of the Social Movements (more of which later).

On the Saturday afternoon, the procedure for registering and merging proposals for seminars was agreed. This process is necessary because an estimated 1,000-plus proposals will have to be reduced to around 200 actual meetings. Successful proposals will need at least two organisations from different countries to initiate it; clearly, the more backers there are, the more chance such a proposal will see the light of day, come October. Organisations can start making their proposals for meetings now.

The timetable for the ESF was agreed. An opening ceremony-come-rally will greet participants on the Thursday evening, and the ESF proper will commence on the morning of the Friday. A demonstration on Sunday afternoon in London will close the event. The 2004 ESF will be focused at one major venue: Alexandra Palace in North London but with a supplementary cluster of sites in central London in the facilities of London University. Progress was reported on finding both cheap and free accommodation for the 20,000 or so visitors from across Europe and the world who are expected. Representatives of the Mayor of London were also hopeful of securing subsidised travel cards from Transport for London.

The Assembly of the Social Movements will take place on the Sunday morning, though some delegates, like Chris Nineham of the SWP suggested that other meetings should run concurrently with it, while others, including the L5I, thought this would distract from the only part of the ESF - the Assembly; which can make decisions on action and policy. There was no consensus for Nineham's proposal. A demonstration is planned for the Sunday afternoon.

Proposals supported by REVOLUTION and supported by 14 other youth organisations (including Scottish Socialist Youth and SEGI (from the Basque country) also struck a chord with young Turkish and Kurdish delegates who wanted to deepen the political work of the movement, and encourage the self-organisation of its most radical component, the youth. A REVOLUTION spokesperson proposed the need for a Youth Space and Assembly. They were subjected to the usual treatment - silence and later on the "no consensus! Veto".

No wonder that with the exception of the Turks and Eastern Europeans this Assembly was overwhelmingly made up of older militants - i.e it was completely unrepresentative of the anticapitalist movement. REVOLUTION and the L5I is determined to ensure that this conservative gerontocracy is challenged and defeated in the months ahead and at the ESF itself. Indeed a large number of new contacts were established on just these issues, from the Free Mario campaign to the Youth Assembly.

Sunday morning was given over, almost in its entirety, to discussing the Assembly of the Social Movements. The artificial divide between the Social Forum and the Assembly is maintained in order to keep within the World Social Forum's Charter, which explicitly outlaws any declarations of policy or calls to action (thesis 6). But fortunately these very same principles pledge the organisers to make time and space available for those who wish to collaborate, draw up and publicise such decisions (thesis 7).

However, the right wing liberal journalists, academics, NGO-ers and labour movement bureaucrats who originally installed, and still police, these restrictions failed (with one or two exceptions) to turn up, and most activists were keen to integrate the two aspects of the movements. However these bureaucrats exert their influence largely through the agency of the leading figures of the Fourth International, the International Socialist Tendency and Socialist Action. It was these forces which rendered the Paris Assembly of the Social Movements weak and ineffective, compared to Florence 2003, which called for the worldwide demonstration on February 15th

This became clear when Hermann Dworzak and Hugo Braun from the Austrian and German Social Forums both pointed out that the days of action called against the social cuts (2nd -3rd April) had not been seriously taken up outside of Germany, and proposed that we set up a special working group to prepare for the ASM. The working group should also review and encourage progress made on the calls of last year's declaration, in particular on the question of the EU constitution.

L5I delegates warmly welcomed these proposals and agreed to collaborate inside the new working group, by email, in our home countries and at the next European assembly in Berlin, June. We made the specific proposal that we should start work on the final declaration of the ASM, and even presented our own draft declaration.

Others could either amend our draft or produce their own alternatives, but, by making the declaration part of a democratic process rather than a hurriedly cobbled together and inadequate document read out to a rally, the declaration could be better informed, more radical and a living programme of action for the movement.

Predictably, trade union officials from the CGIL (Italy) and CGT (France) complained about the more radical parts of the movement 'setting the agenda?' (surely their prerogative!) Socialist Action, the shadowy group which dominates the officialdom around London Mayor Ken Livingstone, also spoke against the idea of preparing the work of the ASM. One even claimed that the declaration should not be drawn up, let alone published until the eve of the ASM itself, because a rally of 30,000 activists was more representative than a working group.

The IST also denounced any attempt to prepare the Assembly on the grounds that we will not know what the key issue for action is until October. Clearly they do not want the ASM to go beyond being a sounding board for a call for a single action. This is pure demagoguery, designed to keep the most radical anticapitalist forces in the ESF under wraps so as not to offend the British TUC. SA supporters suggested they had been kept away by the 'antics?' of the Assembly meetings and the Paris declaration. Rubbish! The reasons the TUC has not, and as yet does not, participate in the ESF are political - its support for Blairite neoliberal policies and its failure to actively oppose imperialist war. To demand self-censorship from the movement, its effective gutting as an anticapitalist movement - is too high a price to pay for a big annual jamboree. The revolutionary wing of the movement must make it clear we have struck no deal and will not observe one.

A working group to prepare the Assembly must be open and transparent. It can and should publish all its deliberations and working proposals on the net and even email organisations (like the unions) to ask for their input. In fact, if the draft declaration is published in the programme of the ESF, then participants will be far more likely to feed in information, ideas and proposals to the final declaration. A daily-meeting co-ordination during the ESF can then sift through these and ensure that the uncontroversial proposals are collated and spoken to en bloc, leaving as much time as possible for debate and - yes - vote on disputed policies. There is nothing in the Porto Alegre Principles which establish consensus (i.e. the right to veto by a minority) in how the Assembly works.

The L5I is greatly encouraged by the emergence of a wing within the ESF, which wants to transform the ESF into something more than a mere talking shop, an international organisation which decides on joint policy and initiates real action: in other words, a takes real steps to building a new International. Yes, we say plainly that we want the end-result to be the foundation of a world anti-capitalist party of social revolution, the Fifth International.

Others clearly do not have such a perspective but do want the movement to become much more effective. So long as we are all committed to democratic procedures, however, this should not impede our working together in the coming months.

The Berlin ESF Preparatory Assembly starts on 17 June with a European program working group meeting and meets until 19 June.

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