

Porto Alegre Principles

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The World Social Forum Charter of Principles is a document clearly written by the intellectuals of the movement 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 at the European Social Forum 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.

The bigwigs of large political organisations can easily hide behind the scenes as the organisers and in any case are specifically allowed to participate in a personal capacity. It merely disguises their influence and shields parties like the French Socialist Party, Labour and the Brazilian Workers Party (PT) from criticism from below (including from their own membership) and any form of accountability to the movement.

What are the military organisations which the World Social Forum wishes to ban? Hardly the US marines or the British paras. No, what is meant is clearly the FARC or even the Zapatistas guerrilla movements 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 Chevènement, 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 Europe.

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.

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.?

We need to shake off the shackles of the Porto Alegre principles. They were never democratically agreed by any representative body of the movement, though they are presented as a precondition of participation in the ESF. They forbid the open participation of political parties in the ESF. They forbid any decision-making, any public representation of the views of the ESF/WSF. On parties of course there should be no privileges for them but no undemocratic bans or enforced dishonest disguises either. Masks off! Only in this way can people drawn for the first time to the ESF know who is who, and what they really stand for. Only thus can they judge their proposals and their capacity for carrying them out.

We need to shake off the ban on taking decisions by a democratic majority, providing there has been a full and open debate. Why should a minority ? maybe even a tiny minority ? prevent us from taking action or adopting common goals in our various struggles. Insistence in consensus or unanimity ties us to the lowest conceivable common denominator and often to no action at all. If we stick to this the ESF will exhaust itself as a huge and expensive talking shop. It will not survive OR it will fall into the hands of the union, municipal, (disguised) party and NGO officials and publishers who pay for it and control the key decisions from behind the scenes.

Naomi Klein has characterised the structure of the first World Social Forum as ?so opaque that it was nearly impossible to figure out how decisions were made?. In fact, WSF decisions are made by a tiny number of organisations, but with considerable financial resources. The WSF gatherings are focussed on a few celebrities of the NGO world ? Susan George, Walden Bello, Bernard Cassen ? who propagate the NGO worldview. While they talk passionately about ?another world being possible? the alternatives they propagate are policies for implementation by reformed bodies of the existing system, rather than the overthrow of the system itself.

How decisions are made

Formal decision-making power was originally in the hands of the Organising Committee (OC), consisting of the Central Trade Union Confederation (Central Única dos Trabalhadores ? CUT), the MST and six smaller Brazilian civil society organisations.

The other main body of the WSF, the International Council (IC), was founded in Sao Paulo in June 2001. The OC decided whom to invite to the founding meeting. In April 2002, the OC was transformed into the WSF Secretariat. As of June 2003 the International Council consists of 113 organisations, though in practice many of them have not participated.

The IC was assigned only an advisory role but it has grown in importance. The decision-making mechanism at IC meetings ? as throughout the WSF- is the famed ?consensus?. However, the power of initiative lies with the Secretariat. It submits a proposal and the IC debates it. If no clear consensus emerges, the Secretariat will have a separate meeting and reconsider its original proposal. In some cases, it will then (typically on the second day of the two-day meeting) present a new proposal taking earlier discussions into account. Normally, the new proposal will carry the day with everyone agreeing, more or less.

The precondition of this method is that the World Social Forum is not a deliberative body aimed at deciding common action, that it will not take political positions and that it therefore needs no decision-making procedures. The parallels between this form of decision-making with the oppressive chicanery of the WTO in Geneva are so stark that it can only be a unique form of doublethink that prevents the great crusaders against globalisation from drawing it.

This all suits the Brazilian reformist organisations, Le Monde Diplomatique, the unelected bigwigs of Attac and the NGOs down to the ground. The WSF in their view must remain a ?space?, a ?forum?, an ?event? and not a movement or political actor. But by no means all the participants agree with this.

At the Bangkok meeting in August 2002, Walden Bello argued that the International Council should produce a public statement calling on movements around the world to take part in protests in Cancún in 2003. In the Porto Alegre meeting of the council in January 2003, some delegates argued in favour of making a public statement against the imminent war in Iraq. In both cases, consensual decision-making was used to ?decide? not to issue any such statements. This shows the absolute impotence of the WSF if it remains within the framework of the Porto Alegre Principles and under its present leadership.

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