

World Social Forum Retrospective

By Martha Honey

Porto Alegre, Brazil — The second annual World Social Forum (WSF) is now over, and the intention is to make it an annual event. But the questions being discussed among participants as they exchange hugs and business cards and board planes to various parts of the globe is, what shape should this gathering take in the future?

Overwhelmingly, participants agree the World Social Forum was a success.

First, it showed clearly that the Spirit of Seattle (and Washington, Prague, Quebec City, et al.) was not killed by September 11. The global justice movement is alive and well. It's estimated that some 60,000 people took part in Porto Alegre II, three to four times more than last year.

Second, the theme—"Another world is possible"—and the setting, the socially progressive city of Porto Alegre, were uplifting. The nearest thing to a riot was when several thousand delegates couldn't get in to hear Noam Chomsky. While in the final communiqué delegates pledged to be "fighting for" global social and economic justice, democracy, abolition of external debt, and a host of other ideals, there is a strong philosophical and tactical commitment to nonviolence.

Third, it has been both unusual and instructive to be in an international gathering where Americans (that is, holders of U.S. passports) and English do not dominate. In the swirl of languages, English was a distant third to Portuguese and Spanish. And the official tally of registrants puts those from the U.S. at 421, a weak fifth behind those from Brazil, Italy, Argentina, and France. While the role of the U.S. is always the elephant at the table of any discussion, most discussions were not driven by American voices or views. While 9-11 was

referred to often, it was not the obsessive determinant of all analysis.

Conceived as the people's alternative to the Davos/New York World Economic Summit—the annual gathering of leaders of the richest corporations and countries—the World Social Forum, intentionally held in the Global South, now seems to taking on a life and character of its own. But it faces some tough challenges and choices.

While Davos/New York represents, as Jeff Faux, president of the Economic Policy Institute, put it, the political party and the agenda for the world's elite, Porto Alegre should be viewed as the party and the agenda for the rest of us. But while "they" seem to have their act together, ours is still a very mixed bag. While the WSF focused on economic globalization, the clearest and strongest organizing appears to be taking place around a handful of issues, including the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), external debt cancellation, and the Tobin Tax.

Far too many of the Forum's 700-odd workshops were rambling, repetitious, off-the-cuff presentations with little audience participation. There is a growing assessment that, next time, workshops should be more closely linked to major papers and presentations given at plenary sessions and that workshop discussions should be fed back into plenaries in order to hammer out a common WSF platform.

In addition, there was not enough attention paid to the ties between U.S. military reach, national armed forces, and globalization. The WSF, for instance, offered surprisingly little discussion (only 3 or 4 workshops) of the role of the U.S. military—even though Brazil borders on Colombia, where the U.S. is deeply involved in the hemisphere's hottest war. Any holistic understanding of corporate-led globalization needs to incorporate an analysis of the role of

military power, as well as of institutions and mechanisms for conflict prevention and peacekeeping.

While deeper analysis is called for in terms of content, more breadth is needed in terms of composition. Women were prominent (though still not equal as panelists and organizers), but people of color were a tiny minority. The Institute for Policy Studies and some other organizations helped bring African-American and Latino organizers from the U.S., and there were a handful of delegates from Africa, Asia, and indigenous

and Afro-Caribbean communities in Latin America. But this peoples' gathering hardly looked like the globe. Even the venue, the state of Rio Grande do Sul, is the "whitest" part of Brazil, populated largely by descendants of German and Italian immigrants who wiped out the indigenous population.

As plans begin to be laid for the World Social Forum's next round, many are asking if it will become a serious political platform or merely a street party. No one is better qualified than Brazilians to teach us the

importance of living and enjoying life to the fullest. The solution is not to cut out the fun, the sun, the music, dancing, jugglers, puppeteers, and capoeira. Rather it is to use our serious time more seriously to educate ourselves about the tasks at hand, to lay plans for the struggles ahead, and to map out and reach consensus on the alternative agendas.

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Who's Who in the Bush Administration

<http://www.fpif.org/republicanrule/index.html>

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