

Another World Is Possible

Report from Porto Alegre

by

John L. Hammond

The third World Social Forum met in Porto Alegre, Brazil, from January 23 to January 28, 2003. It was big and diverse. One hundred thousand people came together from 156 countries and a broad array of social movements united in their opposition of neoliberal capitalist globalization. The first such forum, in 2001, was conceived as a response to the annual World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, and as a protest against the dictation of social and economic policy in the south by northern countries and the international institutions whose policies they command. Against Margaret Thatcher's oft-repeated injunction that "there is no alternative" to transnational capitalism, the forum's slogan insists that "another world is possible."

The forum was created by the Brazilian Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores—PT) and Action for the Taxation of International Financial Transactions in Support of Citizens (Association pour la Taxation des Transactions pour l'Aide aux Citoyens—ATTAC), the France-based international movement promoting the Tobin tax—a proposed tax on international capital movements that would make southern countries less vulnerable to capital flight. The PT plays a central role, even though the forum is a declaredly non-partisan event to which parties as such are not invited.

The forum has grown rapidly. Attendance has always exceeded expectations, doubling from each year to the next. The forum has struck a responsive chord in a broad array of movements from around the world. Although its huge size created logistical and organizational problems, the scene was bursting with energy as people from a cross section of the world's social movements—women's, environmental, indigenous, and economic justice organizations, human rights advocates, AIDS and other health activists, educators

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LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 130, Vol. 30 No. 3, May 2003 3-11
DOI: 10.1177/0094582X03253732
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(formal and informal), cooperativists, and many others—compared notes and strategies. Musicians and other artists performed at the plenaries and in the open spaces near the dozens of booths where Brazilian and international organizations promoted their projects and publications.

Porto Alegre also hosted several parallel events—the World Education Forum, the World Trade Union Forum, the World Judges’ Forum, the World Parliamentary Forum, and Via Campesina (a worldwide confederation of national peasants’ organizations fighting for land reform)—that met immediately before or overlapping the main forum. There was a youth camp, a tent city for some 25,000 people (watered by torrential rains on two days). It had its own loosely organized—somewhat anarchic, in fact—program of activities, although the campers also participated in the main events.

This huge and diverse group was united on major global issues. The common demand has remained the same every year—an end to the domination of local economies and cultures by international capitalism. But this year’s overwhelming issue was not originally on the agenda: the looming war in Iraq. Vehement opposition to the war became the theme of featured speakers at the large plenaries, smaller workshops, and a massive protest march. I went to Porto Alegre as a delegate of my union, the Professional Staff Congress (the American Federation of Teachers [AFT]—affiliated union of teaching staff and some administrators at the City University of New York); when I told a World Education Forum panel sponsored by ANDES (Associação Nacional de Docentes do Ensino Superior), the Brazilian university teachers’ union, that my union had presented an antiwar resolution to the AFT convention, I got a big hand.

If the war intruded as a main issue, opposition to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) was more in line with the forum’s original program. The United States seeks to impose the FTAA on the countries of Latin America, forcing them to open their markets to U.S. products while imposing protective tariffs on their potential exports to the United States, such as steel and agricultural products. More than that, many fear that the trade agreement will cement U.S. political control over the region, exacerbating the pressure from international financial institutions and U.S.-based corporations operating transnationally and forcing their governments to adopt antipopular social and fiscal policies.

THE AGENDA

In their opposition to the dictates of the international financial institutions and global corporations, participants in the forum are “antiglobalization,” but

they prefer to think of themselves as the “global justice movement,” and they practice a positive form of globalization: they make connections across national boundaries, and they offer alternatives, more than the protesters at major demonstrations such as the ones in Seattle in 1999 and Genoa in 2002. Different groups have different emphases, but among the most widely voiced projects were defense of the public sector, job creation through small-scale cooperative businesses, and participatory democracy. For some, the main issue is to defend the public sector and protect social benefits against the demand for government downsizing and privatizing. They protest the creeping privatization of higher education in many countries as public university budgets shrink while academically weak but profitable private universities arise to fulfill the growing demand. Capitalist control of water resources is a growing issue in the many countries where governments license private companies to develop water supplies and charge prices that put it out of reach of many poor people.

Many are working to develop a “solidary economy,” small-scale informal-sector businesses organized as cooperatives to provide jobs to the growing ranks of unemployed workers and basic services to local communities. They believe that cooperative self-reliance may save poor working people from being squeezed between a shrinking public sector and growing economic inequality. Small cooperatives also embody a defiant challenge to the giant corporations that dominate underdeveloped economies with no commitment to the well-being of their people.

Participatory ideology and practice cut across most issues. Advocates argue that in a democracy, people should deliberate collectively and determine government decisions, to the extent possible, directly rather than through elected representatives. This means participation at all levels of government and in unofficial civil-society-based structures.

The demand for participatory democracy is central to the PT’s ideology, and Porto Alegre is the party’s showcase city. Four PT mayors since 1990 (the longest continuous PT administration of any Brazilian city) have made it a model for the party’s administrative style: participatory, egalitarian, efficient, and uncorrupt. The participatory budget process is Porto Alegre’s shining example. It has a complicated structure, and it has evolved over time, but (in summary) it works as follows: every year, open community assemblies in 16 regions of the city debate priorities for the investment budget and elect delegates to the citywide budget council. The council, in turn, gathers the results of the local deliberations and harmonizes them in a two-level decision process: first, how the budget should be allocated among major areas of expenditure, including health, education, urban development, and economic development; second, which specific projects will be funded in each area. These

projects must, of course, be allocated to specific regions of the city, and since the investment budget is never enough to meet all needs, some get left out. But many observers have shown that the process of deliberation is also a process of education, through which participants learn to take one another's point of view and recognize the interests of the whole above their own parochial interests. The citywide budget council then presents a budget to the Porto Alegre City Council, itemizing the projects to be adopted and their costs. The budget council has no statutory authority, but it has achieved enough legitimacy that the city council has always accepted its proposals.

The budgeting process has made Porto Alegre famous throughout the world and has been exported to at least 100 Brazilian cities, as well as to other countries. The party and city government spared no effort in showing it off to the forum. It is a highlight of the social forum, representing as it does not only the city's proud accomplishment but a concrete realization, with teeth, of the power of participatory democracy.

If the threat of war changed the agenda originally planned for the forum, so did Brazilian politics: on October 27, 2002, Brazil elected Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party president. Lula (as he is universally known) had addressed the first two forums, but this year he came as head of state. He is a leading founder of the PT, and this was his fourth run for the presidency. The recency of this, the first major electoral victory of the left in the new century and the biggest win in decades, made Lula's appearance the high point of the forum. He spoke at an outdoor rally in the Pôr-do-Sol amphitheater, surrounded by a vast open space crowded with some 80,000 people hanging on his every word. The charismatic former factory worker spoke (as he often does) of his impoverished childhood and his goals for social justice as president of his country, highlighting his "Zero Hunger" program to ensure that every Brazilian eats three meals a day.

But he had a special message for those assembled at the World Social Forum. He had announced some days before that he would also go to the World Economic Forum in Davos, and many criticized him for fraternizing with the enemy. Lula responded head-on to the criticism. While many in the audience shouted "Stay here!" he spoke of his early years as a unionist: "People told me, 'If you go into the union, you'll sell out and won't accomplish anything.' I went into the union, and in three years we changed the history of the Brazilian trade union movement." He had been similarly discouraged, he said, from founding a party, "but we were stubborn and created a party that is today the most important party of the left in Latin America."

He went on, "I want to make a point of going to Davos and saying there exactly what I would say to anybody here: that it is impossible to continue an

economic order where a few can eat five times a day and many go five days without eating.” A few days later, he did just that, calling on the wealthy governments of the world to follow his example and fund a worldwide campaign to eradicate hunger.

PROSPECTS FOR THE NEW GOVERNMENT

It was exciting to return to Brazil just at the moment that the PT had finally won the presidency and taken office. But the new government faces difficult dilemmas. How much can a leftist president do in the face of the global hegemony of the United States and the international financial institutions? Among Brazilians, Lula is enjoying a honeymoon, with high expectations for change among many segments of society. His support in congress falls far short of a majority, however. He has already made major concessions to wealthier and more powerful trading partners, pledging not to repudiate Brazil’s international debt (run sky-high by his predecessor Fernando Henrique Cardoso during his two terms in office). Last August, during the electoral campaign, Lula and the other major presidential candidates endorsed an agreement between the Cardoso government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), committing Brazil to run a budget surplus of 3.75 percent to fight inflation and service the debt. Lula’s economic team—notably Treasury Minister Antônio Palocci, Industry Minister Luiz Fernando Furlan, and Central Bank President Henrique Meirelles—have all embraced the neoliberal package, which essentially rules out growth-stimulating fiscal policies. Lula’s own support base on the left is divided over his gradualist program: some agree that he must move slowly and maintain the broad popular support that won the election while others argue that the PT has already made too many concessions and must return to its historic program of sweeping government intervention in the economy to promote social welfare and limit the influence of foreign capital.

His response to three major issues will define the government’s economic policy in its first year: hunger, pension reform, and the FTAA. All of them illustrate the dilemmas of a relatively dependent country within a globalized world—which Brazil remains, even if it is the ninth-largest industrial economy. The “Zero Hunger” campaign has been announced as his major social policy initiative, but it has gotten off to a rocky start, bringing out differences among his own advisers between those who believe in fighting hunger by doling out food and those who want job creation and economic development. The federal pension system heavily favors public-sector over private-sector

employees and makes generous promises to certain vested interests, some of them strongly unionized. Cardoso, though he made reduction of pension expenses a major goal, failed to overcome the political obstacles. If Lula succeeds, it may be at the cost of alienating the support of the public-employee unions, one of his basic constituencies.

Whether Lula can redirect the FTAA negotiations will determine the preservation of national independence against the North American colossus. His strategy will be fundamentally one of evasion rather than outright repudiation. During the presidential campaign, a coalition of social movements and the Catholic Church organized an unofficial referendum in which more than 10 million people voted and 98 percent rejected the FTAA. Exercising electoral caution, the PT did not support the referendum. Lula hopes to slow down the negotiations and create a Latin American counterweight to U.S. hegemony. He will try to strengthen Mercosul, the common market of the Southern Cone, in order to boost the region's bargaining power and resist the one-sided U.S. program of protective tariffs at home and free trade for its products abroad. He will promote political integration parallel with economic integration rather than accepting free trade as the only issue. Neither of these will be easy, especially since the economic collapse of Mercosul's second-most-important member, Argentina.

Many of his supporters worry that Lula is being co-opted. Still, they—and most Brazilians—are genuinely excited about the prospects for real changes. His charisma and personal popularity inspire confidence and enthusiasm in many sectors of Brazilian society, even many that have voted against him in past years. His traditional supporters, though they are disappointed with the early concessions to the IMF, hope that he will remain true to his working-class roots. They are determined, in any case, to keep up the pressure. “There will [be] no truce by the trade union and social movements because it will be necessary to deepen the struggles in order to guarantee real changes and to build a strong social alliance to support it,” according to Caio Galvão, national organization coordinator for the Central Única de Trabalhadores (CUT), the PT-affiliated trade union federation.

The PT's victory will test the forum's claim that “another world is possible.” The new world that Lula hopes to usher in is admittedly not the new world that the people at the forum aspire to. It remains to be seen whether he and his government will bring that world closer or give in to the dictates of capital. Any leftist government confronting a globalized world must face the same dilemma.

CHALLENGES OF GLOBAL ACTIVISM

The activists at the social forum face different problems. They do not risk co-optation: they will stand opposed to neoliberal globalization and insist on the autonomy of their countries and the political clout of their movements. Still, the forum exposed some of the problems inherent in mobilizing opposition to capitalism on a global scale.

One problem is that it was too big. One hundred thousand people had to move among five widely scattered locations from one plenary, workshop, or rally to the next. The municipal public transportation company created a special bus line, but getting around was not easy. Thousands of small meetings were scheduled. Most panel proposals were accepted, but not all the proposers showed up, and some panels did not occur.

It was not only big, it was bureaucratized—and inefficiently so. No printed program ever appeared—the program came out piecemeal from one day to the next, and even then it was not always complete or accurate. Problems of organization were accentuated because the state government of Rio Grande do Sul (Porto Alegre is its capital) reduced its support after the PT administration, which had backed the forum heavily for the first two years, was voted out of office last year.

A movement that represents the entire planet has to be big, but this year's forum was bursting at the seams. Size not only makes the forum unmanageable but promotes practices that contradict its spirit. When the plenaries are held in a stadium that seats 15,000 people, no real communication is possible. Even the smaller workshops held in classrooms were often impersonal. A few took advantage of the small size and classroom atmosphere to encourage participation with popular education methods, but most followed the hierarchical model: a panel faced an audience, gave prepared talks, and left little time at the end for the audience to respond. Name tags clearly distinguished in bold capital letters between "invitees," "delegates" (those who had registered in the name of an organization), and "participants." For the invitees, there was a VIP lounge, while mere participants were excluded from some sessions. I must also note a striking gender imbalance. Although some stars of the international antiglobalization movement, such as Arundhati Roy, Medea Benjamin, and Susan George, addressed plenary sessions, there were far too many all-male panels, both in plenaries and in smaller workshops.

The dilemma of size reflected a more basic question about the direction of the forum. Many participants representing national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) see it as an opportunity for

international networking and exchange of ideas, and they do not want the forum to go beyond that—it should be a talking shop for civil society and should steer clear of entanglement with the state.

For this reason, some did not even welcome Lula. Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo*, complained about the “hijacking” of the forum by politicians; Lula as head of state was no longer acceptable the way Lula, leader of a grassroots party, had been. As big as the forum was, and as focused on major political figures, Klein said, it could not embody the participatory democracy that had inspired its creation. It now recalled the discredited traditions of the old left that relied on “centralized state solutions to solve almost every problem.” Klein wants to see a movement rooted in decentralized communities, neighborhood councils, and land reform, “networked internationally to resist further assaults from the IMF, the World Bank and World Trade Organization” (“The Hijacking of the WSF,” www.nologo.org, January 30, 2003).

For others, however, the size and energy of the meeting are resources to be taken advantage of in a more coordinated challenge to international capital. Size is a sign of the forum’s success and gives it an organizing potential that will not be realized if the movement sticks to loose networks and local initiatives. *LAP* participating editor Emir Sader, a Brazilian who is a member of the WSF International Council, criticized the NGO-network model: “They talk about thinking globally and acting locally, but the most they can do is resist.” Instead, Sader argues that the forum should frame “global alternatives to the big problems of the world” and present a hegemonic challenge.

This division marks the forum’s leadership structure. It is run by an Organizing Committee of Brazilian organizations: the Landless Farmworkers’ Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra—MST), the CUT, and six major Brazilian NGOs. The committee convoked an International Council of leading activists and intellectuals, mostly European. The NGOs represented on the organizing committee are center-left and reformist in orientation. They have tried to channel the political enthusiasm of the forum in a moderate direction.

In the first WSF in 2001, the MST and José Bové, the French farmer and anti-McDonald’s protest leader, occupied a farm owned by Monsanto near Porto Alegre, where the company was allegedly developing genetically modified seeds. This kind of militancy was too much for the Brazilian NGOs, which closed ranks to moderate the tone of the second forum. This year, Bové returned to Porto Alegre but was not invited to speak at a main session. Even more surprising, Hugo Chávez was not given a platform. With little advance notice, the beleaguered Venezuelan president flew to Porto Alegre hoping to address the forum, but the organizers said that it was not open to heads of state

(a rule that apparently did not apply to Lula). Instead he addressed a hastily arranged outside meeting.

For some on the International Council, restricting the forum to a loose agglomeration of civil-society actors means merely offering the like-minded a chance to talk among themselves, and excluding such figures as Bové and Chávez is tantamount to giving up on confrontational struggle. For many NGO activists, the opposite danger—that rigid, top-down organization will stifle the creativity of the worldwide antiglobalization movement—looms larger.

In the short run, the two views do not necessarily conflict. The World Social Forum (which will move next year to India) can continue to allow the two positions to coexist. In any case, the debates did not affect many participants because they were mostly waged not at the forum itself but in print and on the Internet before and afterward. Most people saw little need to choose but were happy to breathe the exhilarating air of global solidarity and share experiences with others from around the world. They returned home invigorated to carry on the struggle against war (reflected in the worldwide antiwar demonstrations of record size in mid-February) and for social justice and popular sovereignty in their communities and in their countries.