

World Social Forum 2006

A polycentric forum for a convergent social movement

Defining priorities and common axes

Interview with Eric Toussaint
by Sergio Ferrari*

The next World Social Forum is to be polycentric. It will take place in 2006, in a « decentralised » fashion, in Caracas (Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela), Bamako (Mali) and Karachi (Pakistan).

To grasp the potential of the World Social Forum (WSF) you first need to evaluate the present state of the social movement on a global scale, given the close relationship between the forums and mobilisation. « *In that respect, I am very optimistic, if the increase in mobilisation in 2005 is anything to go by* », asserts Eric Toussaint, a Belgian historian and activist and president of the Belgium-based Committee for the Abolition of the Third World Debt (CADTM). Eric Toussaint – who is also a member of the WSF's International Council (i.e. the coordinators) considers that this next step « *needs a clear definition of the priorities of the citizens' agenda on a global level* ». The process is already under way ... or at least, it has begun.

Sergio Ferrari (S.F.) : A year after the 5th World Social Forum at Porto Alegre (in Brazil, in January 2005), in what frame of mind is the international social movement?

Eric Toussaint (E.T.) : In 2005, there was a significant revival of mass mobilisation after a slump between mid-2003 and late 2004. In fact, the next WSF will take its place in a two-sided world picture. One side is very gloomy: the barbarity in Iraq, the continuing brutal repression of the Palestinians, the determined attacks on the mechanisms of collective solidarity throughout the world by businesses and governments, mass redundancies, the undermining of economic, social and cultural rights. In a word, the neo-liberal offensive is forging ahead, despite the fact that its ideological foundations have lost all credibility in the eyes of the world's populations.

On the other side is a glimmer of hope : a significant revival and spread of social and citizens' struggles, with an increased ability to foil specific political projects, such as the European Constitutional Treaty, or economic ones, such as the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA). Without a doubt, 2005 is ending on more positive and interesting perspectives for the social movements than did 2004 (see box).

S.F. : Given the context, then, what are the main aims of the coming polycentric session of the WSF, in January 2006?

E.T. : First of all, it's important to remember the success of the 5th WSF at Porto Alegre, at the beginning of this year, with its 150,000 participants. And the 1st Mediterranean Social Forum in Barcelona, in June 2005, where over 1000 delegates from the Arab world and numerous Europeans took part.

The 6th WSF presents us with a challenge that was not planned for. In 2004, the frenetic rhythm of the « World Social Forum process » was opened up to debate within the International Council. A number of national and continental forums, as well as various campaigns and movements (including the CADTM), considered that the frequency of WSFs was far too high and that it would be preferable to organise them on a biennial basis. Finally, it was

agreed to carry on holding an annual session throughout 2005, 2006 and 2007, but to decentralise it to several venues in 2006.

From Porto Alegre to the three continents

S.F. : So the new polycentric forum, will also be held in Caracas and in Bamako, at the end of January 2006, then in Karachi a few months later...

E.T. : That's right. But again, instead of avoiding overload, all the WSF actors will be coming under intense pressure at an even faster pace all through the first half of 2006. In January, there will be a North-African pre-forum to prepare the forum at Bamako (capital of Mali), due to take place from 19 to 23 January. From 24 to 29 January, the Caracas meeting will attract particular attention due to the Bolivarian revolutionary process in that country.

The third decentralised session will be held several months later in Karachi (Pakistan), preceded in January by a national preparatory meeting in Lahore. The Pakistani organisers of the WSF have had to delay their session by a few months after the recent earthquake in Kashmir. Other activities are also planned in South-East Asia. Then in late April or early May, the 4th European Social Forum will take place in Athens (Greece). In other words, we have a very busy programme ahead...

S.F. : What are the biggest challenges of the polycentric process?

E.T. : The main aim is to develop regional dynamism while avoiding fragmentation. There is a definite risk of this in 2006, since by not having a single venue, there will not be the opportunity for campaigns and movements to exchange views and to discuss and define their priorities of action, just when the need to progress in defining collective action is felt to be most pressing.

Decentralized unification

S.F. : Should we expect to see certain contradictions arise between the clarification of options and a decentralised process?

E.T. : That is certainly happening, but I am convinced that the dynamics of the social movement will prevail and that priority will be given to unifying the process. I came out of a recent international meeting in Geneva in October feeling very optimistic. A number of active networks and movements from all four corners of the world were present, including Via Campesina, the CADTM, Focus on the Global South, the CUT of Brazil (the Unified Workers Confederation), several groups of ATTAC and European trade unions. We took stock of the last few years' actions and we made headway in clarifying certain future priorities. Everything points towards a process of broad consultation to draw up these essential axes.

S.F. : With such an unusual procedure, can the International Council, as the coordinating instance of the WSFs, really manage to keep up with the entire process?

E.T. : The next meeting of the International Council is in March 2006, when we will see how the first three forums went. There is a risk that we might find it hard to keep abreast of events, even though we are well aware of the efforts required to respond to the new challenges.

Convergence of contents

S.F. : What will these decentralised forums be about? Will each session have its own programme, or will there be an identical agenda for all?

E.T. : If we analyse the central themes of these three big meetings, we see a clear convergence. In this sense, I don't think there is any risk of political fragmentation. For example, an important axis from the Porto Alegre forum of 2005 was « Political power and struggles for social emancipation » will be present in all three meetings. Still, the biggest and most crucial challenge is to identify priorities for common action. It's nothing new : the same need was emphasized both in the « Porto Alegre Manifesto », presented by a group of well-known intellectuals at the 5th session of the WSF and by the Assembly of Social Movements at the same gathering. At Porto Alegre, in 2005, we agreed on an agenda of common activities. Now we absolutely must decide on our priorities. We can have 2 or 3, but not 15 or 20... I get the impression that most of the constituent members of the WSF, in all their diversity, agree that this is necessary, so I am very optimistic about it.

Consultation on priorities

S.F. : What will these priorities be?

E.T. : Opposition to war, for example. That could be put into effect by a big international mobilisation on the anniversary of the attack on Iraq. Solidarity with the Palestinian people could be added to it as another shared preoccupation; and so could opposition to the occupation of Afghanistan and other war-mongering projects, like Plan Colombia. We're trying to find a single date for all these mobilisations, probably in March 2006.

Anti-debt campaigns are another essential axis, broadly debated at the Havana meeting, in September 2005. It would be highly symbolic if we could organise the occupation of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) premises in several countries on the same day.

Furthermore, if – as all indications seem to suggest – the ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), to be held in Hong Kong in December 2005, ends once more in failure, mobilisation against the continuation of the negotiations which this institution orchestrates will become a rallying point for the social movements.

For the time being, I must insist, these are only proposals. Which is why we need a far-reaching process of consultation to define the two, three or four priorities that will be shared by the entire World Social Movement.

** in collaboration with UNITE (Platform of Swiss NGOs for cooperation and solidarity)*

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Social Movements : a dynamic upswing

For Eric Toussaint, 2005 saw a dynamic upswing in the social movement on a global scale. *"Mass mobilisation against the international institutions has taken off again... In early July 2005, 250,000 people took part in the demonstration against the G8 in Scotland – as many as in Genoa, in 2001. At the end of September in Washington, there was a large mobilisation against the World Bank and the IMF. At the same time, in the United States, thousands were demonstrating against the war in Iraq, which had not happened the previous year. Then there were the anti-WTO demonstrations in Geneva in July and October, and the big demonstration against the FTAA at the Peoples' Summit in Mar del Plata (Argentina) in early November. And so on."*

Parallel to these movements, the Belgian historian reports, *"in recent months, certain events have shown that the neoliberal project is undergoing a deep crisis of legitimacy. There have been George Bush's failures in the United States, over his handling of the hurricane disaster which particularly affected Louisiana; his total military failure in Iraq; the fact that the US president cannot travel abroad without provoking huge demonstrations of opposition; the failure of the concept of « Blairism », in Britain and in Germany, and even of " Lula's way" in Brazil. All these elements are part of the neo-liberal crisis"*.

As for Latin America, Eric Toussaint emphasises certain positive points, which bring hope: *" The Zapatistas' new initiative, "The Other Campaign"; the possibility that Evo Morales might win the Bolivian elections in December – and the discussions underway in that country about recovering their natural resources; the mobilisation in Ecuador to overthrow President Lucio Gutierrez; and of course the ongoing Bolivarian process in Venezuela, with its massive popular support"*.

In Europe, he goes on, *" three things seem to me to be important: firstly, the multiplication of 'classic' social struggles waged by workers (in France, Belgium, Italy, etc.). Secondly, the riots that have erupted in the proletarian suburbs of several French towns, which are perfectly legitimate and which will force the various social movements and political parties to reconsider their positions and to take action – not just to talk more about it. That also concerns the World Social Forum. Finally, the resounding failure of the draft project for the European Constitutional Treaty, enacted by the French and Dutch referenda. Not forgetting the critical struggle against the " Bolkestein Directive" – fought with the participation of the European Confederation of Trade Unions (ECTU). The Directive aims to increase competition in the labour market between workers within the European Union"*.

Eric Toussaint concludes that it has been a year of citizens' struggles, a year of renewed social mobilisation which also affects, in one way or another, and with their own characteristics, several Asian and African countries.

(Sergio Ferrari)