



Where Do We Go From Here? Notes on the Anti-Capitalist Movement After Evian

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abstract

At the end of May this year, the G8 leaders of the world met in Evian, France, and the European anti-capitalist movement met at the same time to protest against their world of war, imperialism, third world debt and famine. The protestors gathered in Geneva and Annemasse, as the 30km red zone around Evian made entrance into the town impossible for all but the delegates of the richest nations on earth. After joining the protests and some of the debates in Geneva, I would like to take the opportunity of this note to report back on some developments from the Evian protests, and introduce some of the questions and issues of organisation faced by the anti-capitalist movement. The Evian anti-G8 protests were an opportunity to bring together the European social movements, the anti-capitalist movement, and the anti-war movements. The coming together of the European Social Forums in Florence last year made the anti-war movement truly international. What exactly is the relationship between the anti-war movements and the social forums? How are they to develop, locally and nationally, in the UK? What need is there for such organisation? And on what level are the social forums actually creating alternative democratic assemblies to the G8 World leaders of imperialism?

Introduction

The Evian protests against the G8 summit from 30th May to 3rd June were an impressive display of unity and strength. There were mass debates, protests and demonstrations over nearly a week of activity (the 100,000 or so who marched were taking part in Switzerland's largest demo in history). But the event was at times badly organised, and the protests themselves were often marred by the media's obsession with the violence of the 'Black Block' anarchists. The organisers of the protest were quick to condemn the violence. The arguments about the use of non-violence, direct action, and the tactics of the global anti-capitalist movement do need to be had out openly. But there is a deeper, more fundamental question for the anti-capitalist movement; this debate is about the nature of and indeed the need for its organisation.

There is clearly a need for some kind of organisation, which can in some way represent the growing 'anti-globalisation' movement. The World Social Forum (WSF) in Brazil, 2001 was applauded by most as at least an opportunity to build an alternative democratic forum on a world scale. This event inspired the establishment of locally

based social forums across the world. In Italy they were instrumental in organising the massive Genoa protests, in the summer of 2001, and have since become an influential and important dynamic in the resistance to the government of Berlusconi. The Geneva Social Forum was the main organising body of the protests around Evian. In Spain, as in Italy, they were central to building the anti-war movement. Indeed it was the European Social Forum (ESF) gathering in Florence last November, which called for the 15th February day of global action against the war in Iraq. The social forums are soon becoming the main international organisations behind the anti-capitalist and anti-war movements. So how should they develop in Europe, and what will they look like in the UK, where they are still being born?

The International Anti-War Movement

The ESF was the driving force behind the largest ever mobilisation against war in history. The 15th of February 2003 will be recorded as the first co-ordinated day of global political protest; the results of which are immeasurable. It was the coming together of the ESF in Florence last November, and its links with counterparts right across the world, which made this momentous event possible.

From the outset the anti-war movement was internationalist. It soon began to forge and build stronger ties in the western world – throughout Europe and the USA. The Cairo declaration marked a further step in the direction of a globally organised anti-war movement. Those Egyptian activists celebrated the anti-war demonstrations in Cairo, which were heavily attacked, as ‘our Hyde Park’. Activists in the US looked to the UK, and we in the UK kept an eye on our counterparts in Spain, Italy, Germany and France. A truly international movement had been born which became known as the world’s only other superpower.

After the most successful political mobilisation of an anti-war movement, the G8 protests and counter-summit in Evian was an opportunity to see how we could build on that international unity, diversity and strength. They had mobilised forces far bigger than their own, and now the NGO’s, peace groups, political parties, trade unions, campaign groups and representatives from the ESF came together in a counter summit against the G8 leaders of imperialism.

There was clearly a mood for building on that internationalism. George Galloway, among others, spoke to a huge, three hour long meeting on the anti-war movement. In a rousing speech, he called for a forging of links with peace movements in the Middle East. As the resistance to the occupation of Iraq gathers momentum, he promised of an ongoing ‘Intifada’ against the US and UK in Iraq. The parallels with the historic struggle of the Palestinian people against Israeli occupation are obvious. And an importance was stressed on the need to cement the solidarity networks with those in the Middle East fighting against their own, harshly repressive governments. Quoting Lenin, Galloway called the UN a ‘thieves kitchen’, and went on to pose the choice for the world which Rosa Luxemburg had posed at the beginning of the last century of war: ‘Socialism, or Barbarism’?

Others spoke against the need for further blood shed in Iraq, which is precisely what an Intifada would mean. Here, the debate around pacifism bubbles to the surface of the 'peace' movement. Somebody spoke in favour of the resistance of Hamas in Palestine. The important point here is that these differences were voiced.

Another global day of action against war was called for the 27th September this year. And there was an important call, from an Iraqi opposition representative, for a global conference against war and occupation to be held in Baghdad. This could be a fantastic opportunity for the global anti-war movement – this meeting displayed a movement that had grown in confidence.

The next meeting in the university, which had been booked by the organisers for the 'counter-summit', was on the social forums in Europe. New interesting debates were introduced. A Spanish delegate, for example, highlighted the fragility of the social forums. He pointed out that there was no necessary correlation between the anti-war movement and the politics of a nation: Despite consistently huge demonstrations against the war, and around 80-90% of the population against the war, the Aznar government still managed to gain 30% in local elections in Spain. Important global questions were raised which the European social forums clearly need to address.

Peace Movement & Social Forums: 'One and the same thing'?

The ESF had called for the 15th of February as a global day of action against the war on Iraq, and the local social forums had strengthened many European anti-war movements. But where are their equivalents in the UK? We had one of the strongest anti-war movements in Europe, yet one notable omission from the debate on social forums in Geneva was the lack of any real UK social forums at all. There was one speaker from the group that is helping to found a London Social Forum. There are launch meetings in the North of England as well, but there is no such thing yet as a coalition of social forums in the UK, despite the strength of the UK anti-war movement, and the continuing visibility of the anti-capitalist youth.

At the counter-summit in Geneva, John Rees of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) disclosed an interesting point of view on this question. He said that it had become clear that the social forums and the anti-war movement had 'already become one and the same thing'. What exactly does this mean? The biggest achievement of the ESF was the call for a global day of action against the war on Iraq, giving birth to an internationally co-ordinated global peace movement, and proving that the social forums are more than simple 'talking shops'. However, because one movement ('the movement of movements') gave life to another, this does not make them 'one and the same thing'.

How could it be so? The Stop the War Coalition (STWC) in the UK (and indeed Globalise Resistance) has repeatedly opposed the setting up of social forums. Where they are being established they are being done without the assistance of the SWP. In London, where a large gathering has been organised to discuss the social forums of the European model, the STWC has called for a national 'activists conference' on the same

day (21st June). We would be correct to assume, then, that in fact the social forums and the anti-war movement are two distinctly different things.

A Social Forum, according to the London Social Forum (LSF) website, “is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and inter-linking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and to domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among Humankind and between it and the Earth”.¹ This is somewhat more than a large ‘anti-war’ meeting space. It is something much bigger than that.

At its peak of activity, the Stop the War Coalition led the call for a People’s Assembly for Peace. Following in the footsteps of the Chartists and the Suffragettes, the anti-war movement had called for an alternative representation of the people, who opposed the war. The Peoples Assembly was committed to peace, and called for a campaign of civil disobedience, to prevent the UK government from going to war with Iraq. It also voted to reconvene itself, at an unspecified date in the future. There was a call for building local ‘peoples assemblies’ in the meantime, which built links with other campaigning groups, religious groups, trade unions, and college and school students. In other words, there was a call for the Peoples Assembly to launch local social forums, build them, and then re-meet on a national level at a later date to discuss further action against the war.

This was the opportunity the UK stop the war movement missed. The organisers opposed this move, and whilst the conference hall was completely divided, the chair took it upon himself to speak against the motion. And he then counted the vote ‘against’. Not only was this a wasted opportunity for the peace movement to become something much bigger, but it made a mockery of the whole notion of a *more* democratic ‘Peoples assembly’. The ‘Peoples assembly’ has not met again in London (though Manchester has just had its first ‘Manchester People’s Assembly’, and by all accounts a success).

Another World is Possible – Representing the ‘Leaderless’

With all this in mind, it is clear that the future social forums in the UK will come into being, as they are beginning already, without the aid of either the SWP nor its ‘front’ organisations (perhaps Manchester is an exception?). This follows the development of the anti-capitalist movement in general. In the UK the 18th of June 1999 saw the dramatic birth of a movement, which seemed to come from nowhere. Reclaim The Streets parties, which focused on urban traffic and pollution – decisively environmental in its political character – along with Critical Mass, another radical environmental grassroots activist network, had drawn radical youth towards it as an alternative to the traditional socialist left. These were the developments of the anti-Criminal Justice Act movement, as well as the anti-road protests of the early to mid 1990’s. The many other

1 www.londonsocialforum.org

networks of activists who were building grassroots campaigns took a decidedly bold move by setting a date to declare war with capitalism. They revived the 1980's anarchist slogan 'Stop the City'. With little more than 'capitalism sucks' as a uniting slogan, and actively using the Internet on a wide scale for the first time, the anti-capitalist movement was decidedly new, and importantly 'leaderless'. (Many activists were arrested after 'J18' and accused of being 'organisers' – the establishment was fuming that there was simply no real organisation to target).

Globalise Resistance (GR) emerged in the UK after the Seattle protests rocked the world in late 1999, only 6 months after June 18th, which the bourgeois commentators had hoped was simply a one-off riot. The setting up of GR symbolised the recognition of a new anti-capitalist movement (not calling itself 'socialist' by any means) that the SWP needed to orientate towards and to become part of (and then to become resented by many already involved, and soon to be dubbed 'Monopolise Resistance'). After the EU summit demonstrations in Gothenburg, where the police shot a protester, and then in Genoa, where Carlo Giuliani was killed, the stakes had been raised. The WSF in Porto Alegre, 2001, was another turning point. The self-proclaimed leaders of the 'movement' were suddenly radical NGO's, trade union leaders, Lula of the Brazilian Workers Party, and European groups like Attac in France.

The worldwide anti-globalisation movement has witnessed its own 'leadership struggle' of the 'leaderless' anti-capitalist youth. Who keeps these 'leaders' to account? How democratic are the social forums anyway? The World Social Forum has been criticised by large sections of those networks involved in the anti-capitalist movement. A number of problems arise; they do not allow political resolutions to be passed; and they have a ban of 'political parties' in place. They stand accused of being organised behind 'closed doors' by bureaucrats of large NGOs and trade unions. The method of 'consensus building', rather than 'majority vote' deciding, has also been criticised for a lack of democracy. These are all decisive issues for the legitimacy of these self-proclaimed 'leaders'.

Furthermore, the WSF 'leaders' have been condemned by the more radical of the 'anti-capitalists' for being 'neo-reformist': not radical enough to represent the genuinely revolutionary, youthful anti-capitalist movement who have lead and inspired the movement from the outset themselves. A statement was issued at the World Social Forum representing this sentiment: "the NGOs, the union bureaucracies, and the directors of the institutionalised political parties are changing the content of the struggle of the young anti-capitalists into the reactionary policy of 'humanising capital'. Humanising capital is utopian and reactionary... We say the World Social Forum is a ruse for those who wish to divert the anti-capitalist fight towards the policy of class collaboration and elections, continuing to apply the poverty of capitalism."²

This is right; the anti-capitalist youth who took to the streets of London, Seattle, Gothenburg, Melbourne, Genoa and Geneva did not choose their 'leaders'. Nor do they choose a reform of the World Bank and IMF – they want them overthrown, and the debt of the poor nations cancelled. They want an entirely new world. There are many 'yesses'

2 'Anti-capitalism: from resistance to revolution', www.workerspower.com, p.12.

in the ‘movement of movements’, and the WSF needs to be able to hear and represent the revolutionary demands of the young and determined anti-capitalists. Those revolutionaries should be active, keen builders of local social forums, delegating radical representatives to regional and global gatherings; not turn away from them and denounce their reformism.

George Monbiot talks of the need for a new kind of organisation – in order to ‘reclaim governance from its crisis of legitimacy’. He envisages a body ‘such as the WSF’ becoming a ‘World Parliament’, which would have “a moral power which no other body at the global level has”.³ Could the WSF, and all the local, regional and national social forums be an alternative form of governance in embryo? The WSF and the local social forums, uniting around the idea that ‘Another world is possible’, are apparently building the political foundations of that alternative world as we speak. If this is the case, then those activists who gave that movement life should be well represented and listened to inside these ‘open meeting spaces’.

In his newly released *The Age of Consent*, Monbiot calls for the establishment of a ‘Fair Trade Organisation’ to overlook the problem of third world debt. To force the US to comply with an overhaul of the WTO and IMF, he also proposes a “democratised UN General Assembly where votes are weighted by size of population and in accordance with a global democracy index, to incentivise high standards of governance. This restructured assembly would also take over the functions of the UN Security Council which... has already largely been sidelined by US actions over Iraq.”⁴ Democratising the UN? This is a clear case of a utopian ideologue harbouring illusions in the world governments we already have. It is these kinds of dangerous concessions to the status quo, which we need to guard our movement against.

So what is our model to be? There is clearly a need for democratic space to debate these issues, and many more besides. The fact that the European Social Forum called the date of the 15th of February against the war has proved it has become more than just a ‘talking shop’. But the ‘movement of movements’ must not be scared of engaging politically with each other in open debate. The reformists, NGOs, union leaders and radical campaign groups must be open to criticism. So too should the more radical, left, revolutionaries, and those who are afraid of ‘hierarchical structures’. They must learn to work together to build a new movement, in a new kind of organisation. The leaderless youth must be given a voice – a space to express their dreams – in the social forums. They must be open, democratic, and the ‘leaders’ (such as Monbiot) held to account. And at the same time, these ‘leaders’ of our movement need to be defended when under attack (e.g. George Galloway who is being ‘witch-hunted’ for his stance against the war, and José Bové, who was dramatically arrested in his home by 80 armed police in France on Sunday, June 22nd – a campaign for his release has already begun).

And the social forums must be much more than ‘democratic’ debating societies. Where social forums are developing in the UK, they must ensure that they are not merely

3 George Monbiot (2002) ‘Strategies of Resistance’, *ephemera: critical dialogues on organization*, 2(2): 153-154.

4 Michael Meacher (2003) ‘The Age of Consent’ (Review), *The Guardian*, Saturday, 21 June.

intellectual discussion groups, afraid of actually initiating any activity themselves – they should follow the lead of the European social forums in this. In Italy, the Genoa Social Forum mobilised against the police brutality of the G8 protests, and brought the country to a standstill. They have since built stronger links with larger trade unionists and fought together against the policies of the semi-fascist government of Italy. This should be the model for France, where the anti-capitalist movement is tentatively building stronger links with the public sector unions who are striking against the privatisation of their pension funds.

This is the way forward for the ‘movement of movements’. The social forums must become central to the linking of the social movements and resistance campaigns which already exist, so that they encompass a cross pollination of ideas, traditions, and methods of struggle. A support network of activists against the effects of neo-liberalism, imperialism and war. They must be international councils of action for the exploited, oppressed, and for those who resist, before they can become alternative ‘World Parliaments’. These are exciting and challenging times for our ‘new’ movement. We must not be afraid to live up to that challenge.

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