Fifth World Social Forum in Brazil

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The fifth World Social Forum (WSF), a giant gathering of civil-society leaders and organizers, held Jan. 26-31 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, brought in a record number of participants and members of the media, and received an unprecedented level of attention. Participants sought to make the venue more of a proposal-oriented forum rather than a mere protest against globalization-oriented policies that governments of the world's wealthier nations advocate. The presence of two of the region's highest-profile presidents, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva of Brazil, also signaled the growing influence of the WSF.

The meeting, which took place last year in Mumbai, India, and every other year in Brazil (see NotiSur, 2003-02-07), will not be held again in Porto Alegre, a city of about 1.5 million in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The next global gathering will be held in 2007 in Africa when the WSF will stop meeting yearly and go to a biannual schedule. Next year, the WSF will be "decentralized," and meetings will be held in a number of different and still undetermined venues around the globe.

The forum has inspired spinoffs like the America's Social Forum (ASF), held last July in Quito, Ecuador (see NotiSur, 2004-08-13), and it was preceded by the fourth annual Pan-Amazonian forum in Manaus, Brazil, on Jan. 18-21. Record attendance, recognition WSF organizers said some 155,000 participants were at this year's civil-society meet, a new high.

On the eve of the forum, the number of accredited journalists reached 5,421, well exceeding the 3,200 who covered last year's WSF in Mumbai. The forum vied for attention with the World Economic Forum (WEF), held at the same time on the other side of the world in Davos, Switzerland. WSF participants like to point out that WEF attendees, a smattering of the world's most powerful leaders in business, government, and media, were influenced heavily by the WSF.

Mark Engler, a commentator for Foreign Policy in Focus, said, "Its influence on Davos, where elites are now photographed pondering problems of poverty and AIDS, has been undeniable." Many participants like Engler emphasized the need for a positive and more proposal-oriented forum. "As a positive space, not founded as a mass protest outside a World Trade Organization (WTO) or International Monetary Fund (IMF) meeting, the forum still provides a unique opportunity for setting an alternative agenda for globalization."

Organizer Salete Valesan of Brazil said a new methodology was agreed upon at this year's WSF, which, as in past years, drew experts and civil-society activists from varying fields and from around the globe. "We conducted a broad public study of entities and individuals from around the world, using the Internet and also forms that we sent out to those who don't have this technology, to arrive at 11 thematic spaces in which to hold the 2,000 activities proposed by 5,700 organizations from more than 100 countries," Valesan said. Valesan ran down the list of thematic spaces at this year's WSF:
Defending Earth and people's common goods as an alternative to mercantilism and control by transnational corporations.

Arts and creation: building a resistance culture of the people.

Communication: anti-hegemonic practices, rights, and alternatives.

Defending diversity, plurality, and identities.

Human rights and dignity for a fair and egalitarian world.

Sovereign economies for and of the people, and against neoliberal capitalism.

Ethics, cosmovisions, and spiritualities resistance and challenges for a new world.

Social struggles and democratic alternatives against neoliberal domination.

Peace, demilitarization, and struggle against war, free trade, and debt.

Autonomous thought, reappropriation and socialization of knowledge and technologies.

Toward construction of international democratic order and integration of peoples.

Two presidents, thousands of reporters attend Media and participants flocked to hear Lula and Chavez, two presidents who share a friendship and similar ideologies, but who received different receptions. Chavez emerged as a crowd favorite, while a small group of activists angered by Lula's alleged failure to implement social reforms booed the ex-union leader.

Lula and eight of his ministers participated in the WSF. To the activists upset with the pace of social reform, Lula insisted that he had not betrayed his pledge to eradicate poverty in Brazil. Police hauled away a man who threw an egg at Lula that fell short. Outside the stadium, protesters chanted "Lula! Come back to reality!" Some broke down a fence and tried to rush into the stadium as the president spoke, but fellow demonstrators held them back.

Lula downplayed the disruptions, saying they were a "democratic gesture coming from the mouths of those who don't have the patience to hear the truth." Then he mounted a defense of his first two years in office, saying Brazil is creating millions of jobs through a stabilized economy, strengthening ties throughout South America, and becoming a strong political voice for the elimination of poverty in countries as far away as Africa. During his speech, Lula drew strong support from members of his Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT).

Wearing trademark bright red shirts, his backers cheered as he said he has not lost the beliefs that got him elected in a landslide in 2002. "For now I'm president of this country, but my roots are in
social movements. I'm a political militant," Lula said. Critics expressed disappointment that the PT president would be flying off to Davos to rub elbows with the planet's elites. So far, he has stuck to orthodox economic policies, focusing more on paying down foreign debt than funding social programs amid mounting criticism that he has fallen short in efforts to distribute land to poor campesinos and feed the hungry.

Some activists said his moves are more in line with the conventional wisdom at the event the social forum was founded to counter the WEF. "There's some frustration out there because Lula is the first leftist president for Brazil, and so far he's only given profits to banks, and we haven't gotten anything," said Ertha Buys, a member of a Brazilian group lobbying for cheap housing for the poor.

Chavez, by contrast, earned unanimous crowd approval as he railed against the US and said that "socialism hasn't died." Sporting a red shirt embossed with a picture of the revolutionary Che Guevara, Chavez received a hero's welcome on Jan. 23, where activists greeted him with cries of "Here comes the boss!" "The imperialist forces are starting to strike against the people of Latin America and the world," Chavez said in a 90-minute speech in which he denounced US President George W. Bush for conducting foreign policy with bombs and the US for attempting to dominate the global economy. At one point he switched from Spanish to mostly English, denouncing the 34-nation Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) proposal, called ALCA in Spanish and Portuguese. "Where is the ALCA, mister? The ALCA is dead," Chavez said to roars from the crowd.

Chavez came to Lula's defense as he finished speaking against globalization, corporate greed, and US foreign policy. "I love Lula!" he yelled. "I respect him. Lula is a good guy with a big heart. He's a brother and a comrade." Brazilian activist Gledson Oliveira, who lives in the country's impoverished northeast, called Chavez "an icon of the struggling classes right now from a socialist perspective." He added, "I think the Brazilian public was expecting from Lula something like Chavez is providing in Venezuela."

**Efforts to build proposals and consensus**

"It's not possible to continue to say 'another world is possible' if we do not make some proposals about how to reach this other world," said presenter Ricardo Petrella at a press conference, referring to the motto of the WSF since its inception in 2001. He was part of a group seeking to build a "Porto Alegre Consensus," or set of concrete proposals that the forum could present as part of its alternative agenda.

The points include debt cancellation, adopting the Tobin tax on international financial transfers, dismantling tax havens, promoting equitable forms of trade, guaranteeing the sovereignty of a country's right to not only be able to produce affordable food for its citizens, but also to police its food supply, implementing anti-discrimination polices for minorities and women, and democratizing international organizations, which would include moving the UN headquarters far south of its current New York location.

Journalists were told that despite what it might look like, there was no change in the methodology of the WSF. Those who formulated the document "were only trying to help." "We are only trying to
open the debate, to stimulate the establishment of international cooperative alliances," said Petrella. Nineteen high-profile WSF activists spent a day and a half hammering out the document.

On the international labor front, the Brussels-based International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), which represents some 145 million workers in more than 150 countries, said it would address the "social dimension" of globalization. ICFTU representatives held three days of conferences to build international labor strength.

"The ICFTU wants to make globalization more favorable to workers' interests and lessen the greater inequality and insecurity that it is currently generating," ICFTU spokesperson Barbara Kwateng said Jan. 25. "Trade unions and civil-society organizations are poised to support a more coherent international institutional structure in monitoring the social impact of today's global economy."

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