

Hope in the Horizontal

By B. Jesse Clarke

Ten years after the death of Paolo Freire on May 2, 1997, his influence still imbues the practice of popular education. His groundbreaking work in teaching literacy continues to have an enormous impact across the world, spreading outward from his birthplace in Brazil. It's fitting then, that the largest convening of popular education practice in the United States took place this summer at the U.S. Social Forum (USSF) in Atlanta, Georgia. Inspired by the World Social Forum, which originated in Puerto Alegre, Brazil, the USSF's workshop extravaganza marks a successful step in bringing Freirian ideas into the political work of grassroots organizing in the United States.

The USSF brought together over 12,000 activists from organizations across the United States, in an experiment in movement-building and popular education unlike any in recent memory. Picking up where the anti-globalization coalitions of the 1990s left off, the assembled forces had the sort of momentum that was building just before the Seattle WTO protests in 1999. But today, the political agenda is far broader and the isolation by issue is less extreme. While still lacking in crucial elements of a successful social change movement, (including participation from organized workers and practicing people of faith) the forum drew participation from grassroots groups, the non-profit sector, and the remnant organizations of the 20th century Left.

The people participating were mostly under 40, many in their 20s. A substantial number of people were of color and the conference had a visible and audible presence from the queer and trans communities. In the only serious political setback at the forum, due to logistical and political limitations, poor people and the marginalized of Atlanta had no easy entrance point and were at times specifically excluded.

Despite some flaws, all in all, it was a successful expression of hope and resilience organized around the slogan, "Another World is Possible; Another U.S. is Necessary." Given appropriate nurturance and continued perseverance, this assemblage may yet hold the seeds for the development of a radical movement in the United States—but not any time soon.

Workshop Extravaganza

The forum process was centered on the workshop exchange. Over 1000 workshops were presented, almost all by forum registrants who also attended other folks' workshops. Every major theme in today's social movements was represented, from immigrant rights to gender liberation. Trainings in media making, messaging, organizing basics, economic analysis, undoing racism, healthcare access, reparations—the list is exhaustive. Were this massive



Photo: Forum participants stage march through downtown Atlanta.

Courtesy of USSF Yes Magazine Pool, 2007



horizontal exchange of information, strategy, and skills training to have been conducted on a fee-driven basis it would have had an economic value of millions of dollars.

I went as part of a delegation from the Social Equity Caucus of the Bay Area, a networking group of non-profit organizations. Fellow delegates found that the workshops they attended were worthwhile. Fredricka Bryant, a young activist from Richmond, California, says that “Overall, the USSF youth workshops clearly prove that the youth movement is growing stronger because of the passionate youth activist fight for social justice, environmental justice, reproductive rights, and criminal justice issues.”

Delegate Diana Abellera, coordinator of Urban Habitat’s leadership institute, describes a successful workshop on Black relationships, in which “emotions flooded the room from both, the participants and the audience members. Anger, apologies, tears, and promises to change emerged. We could have processed what had just occurred, for days.”

While most workshops weren’t centered on such an emotional catharsis, all of the eight workshops I attended were worthwhile. From a theater image workshop from a New York City “Theater of the Oppressed” group, to a rocking session criticizing foundation funding of non-profits, to a Project South exercise in reconstructing the social order, my impression from talking with many delegates was that the presentations and dialogues were more often than not hitting the mark and making the connections. The logistical success of this workshop extravaganza was noted by many people and particularly appreciated by those who had gone to previous World Social Forums where disorganization reigned.

Nonetheless, logistical and political missteps were clearly visible: The community-based media justice center was turned down in their request to locate in a publicly accessible homeless shelter, and instead, crammed into backstage dressing rooms behind a labyrinth of halls and stairways made inaccessible to even the alternative media, much less the masses; Security screeners kept many poor folks and Atlanta residents from coming into the civic center; Swank hotels held the meetings hostage to erratic elevator service and minimal technical support; Community venues were often so far offsite that only someone with an automobile and a local guide could have made it to any two workshops in a row. But overall, one result was clear—**People learned from one another.**

That’s significant. If they learned anything close to what the presenters alleged to have been teaching, these thousands of young people are in an excellent position to return home to their own communities with the confidence that in hundreds of cities, towns, and counties across this country, other people like them are struggling to solve the challenges of winning economic and social justice for all. And they should have a fistful of business cards, scribbled contact names, email addresses, and cell phone numbers tapped into their mobiles to be able to talk to those allies when they are ready to launch their own national tour.

Small Steps Forward

Small groups with regional agendas seeking national allies, visibility, and connections, staged mini-demonstrations, often just through their uniform visual presence in printed t-shirts featuring



their group's demands. Domestic workers managed to pull together a national network. Immigrant rights groups staged some national press conferences and built on their already nascent national networks. Climate change organizers strengthened their training and outreach capacities. Other national networks took advantage of the occasion to hold training or decision-making meetings of their own.

Yet, it did seem a sign of our weakness that there was no attempt made to unify around even the most simple action steps to end the United States wars, challenge privatization, or defend immigrant rights.

Connie Galambos, the SEC delegation coordinator felt acutely the lack of a central organizing thread. For her, the missing piece was the war. "Our issues all converge in war, yet I was disappointed to note very few folks in Atlanta telling that story. [Some] white folks struggled to narrow the frame of war to strictly an environmental issue, simplifying their work by not collaborating with the communities of color on the front lines abroad and at home; simultaneously, shades of brown were split up into issue-based sessions on how to address the multiple crises we face—war not included."

Plenary Television

The attempts to "build a movement" through the plenary sessions, which were promoted as dialogues, fell quickly into a rhetorical abyss. An audience of thousands, shivering in the concert-style, over air-conditioned hall of the Atlanta Civic Center, watched small figures, seated in the style of television talk show heads perched in front of a huge red backdrop, trade speeches and sound bites to thunderous and repeated applause. The pep rally fervor, followed by

semi-scripted two minute soundbites from the floor, hardly called for much heavy mental lifting and left no real room for dialogue. It felt to me as satisfying as watching a giant "red" television. On the last day of the conference, this theatrical part of the operation fell through into bickering over time limits, disrespecting elders, and laments about access. The final act pulled back the red curtain to reveal a movement that still lacks the essential capacity to work together against the common opponent and oppressor, global capital.

Do it Yourself

It seems, as the radical minority within the United States that feels the necessity to build another world, we are going to have to think small. It's abundantly clear that skin-deep united fronts controlled by white liberals that are afraid to say the word "capitalism" are not going to challenge the dominant social order. In order to survive and transform the fragmented, alienating, and harsh conditions of capitalism in the Americas, we are going to need to look in our own wallets, in our own psychic closets, in our own close-knit networks, to build enough energy to connect to close-knit networks not our own. We are going to need friends who can keep our backs as the struggles intensify and the stakes are raised. And we are going to need allies that arise from places, cultures, and spiritualities not our own.

SEC delegate Boona Cheema, executive director of Building Opportunites for Self-Sufficiency, reflecting on unity between immigrant and indigenous communities, puts it this way, "This wall must be penetrated, torn down, stripped of its hypocrisy, its lies, its broken treaties, its ongoing behaviors and actions,



which create suffering, death, and eventual disappearance of all that we hold sacred.”

Working together across the chasms of identity, sexuality, class, race, and region, we are going to have to identify the leverage points where we can disrupt business as usual, win political and social space for experiments in equality, and practice a warrior form of peace. It seemed at this conference that I felt the stirring of such ideas.

But this is a young movement that will have to find a new path through battlegrounds littered with the shards of sectarian politics, infiltrations, and co-optations of the past.

SEC delegate, Jaime Alvarado, director of Somos Mayfair, an immigrant services and advocacy group in San Jose, concludes that “Most of all, the biggest missing piece is an overarching strategic framework for a progressive movement that dares to expand beyond the predictable pockets of sanctuary, in which most of us live. The biggest promise of the USSF is in the creation of such a framework. This work remains to be done.”

Educating for Equity

The organizers of the USSF centered the forum’s work on education, likewise with this issue of *Race Poverty and the Environment*, we frame the challenges of building effective social movements in terms of the challenge of educating for change inside and outside of formal educational environments.

We start by acknowledging that the struggle for equal education organized by the civil rights movement is a vivid example of successful social change. From the initial trainings at the Highlander Center, (described by John Hurst) to the curriculum of the Freedom Schools (by Kathy Emery), there is much to be learned by today’s organizers about the foundations of widespread civil disobedience and mass action.

In the wake of the Supreme Court’s decisions on

voluntary desegregation Maya Harris from the American Civil Liberties Union reviews the current state of legal strategies to address equity in education at the federal level. Michelle N. Rodriguez and Angelica K. Jongco from Public Advocates detail a successful lawsuit by parents in California fighting for

equity on the state level. Jacob Rosette describes a similar effort in Maryland where a court decision to remedy inequality is going unenforced.

Eric Mar, past president of the San Francisco School Board, and Kathy Emery evaluate the prognosis for change at the school district level. Kenneth Saltman and Margot Pepper look at some of the national and global causes that are turning our schools into a two-track system: one track leading into college and managerial positions and the other into dead end, Wal Mart type jobs, the military or the criminal justice system.

In all of these analyses, the critical importance of integration with an independent social movement shines through as the best avenue for winning change, whether at the local, state, or national level.

This issue is rife with examples from California, Florida, Texas, Portland, and Oaxaca, Mexico that highlight the complex ways that movement advocates are attempting to use education to bring equality, not only to our schools, but across the board on social justice issues, such as immigration, employment, and urban planning.

It seems that many of us came away from the USSF with a common sense of incompleteness. In a way, that is the deepest success of the Forum. While folks may have gotten charged up on specific elements of the struggle, many developed an ever clearer realization that something deeply practical and deeply dangerous needs to be done. ■

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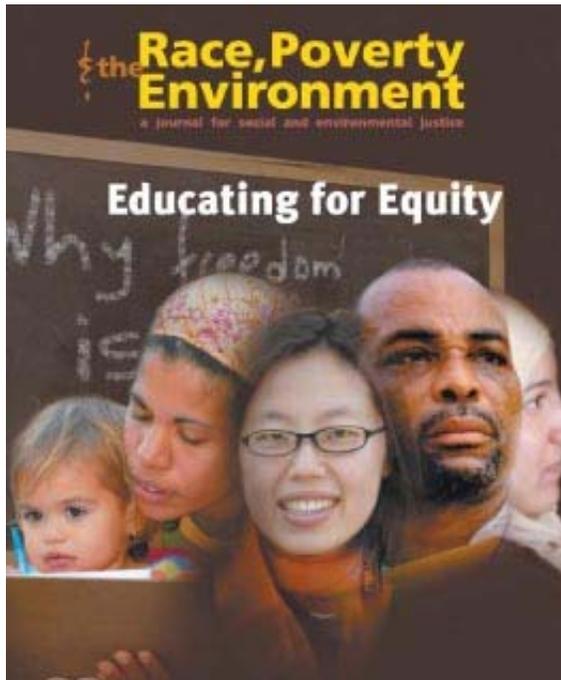
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