

Global Justice Movement

World Social Forum, ten years on

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Since the World Social Forum was launched in June 2000, at the Alternative Social Summit in Geneva, coinciding with the United Nations Assembly on Social Development, ten years have passed. In this decade, the world has changed and the context in which the World Social Forum (WSF) emerged is different to that of today.

The WSF was born with the desire to be a meeting point of social movements opposed to neoliberal globalization and express an alternative to the guidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos, which brought together annually businessmen and political leaders.

Objective achieved

The WSF achieved its goal. Event after event attracted ever more participants, culminating in 130,000 at the latest meeting in January 2009 in Belem, Brazil, although it is true that the political and media impact of the early years has waned. Then, the criticisms and proposals of the Forum had the same echo as the pronouncements in Davos. Today, this has changed.

Another achievement of the WSF has been its ability to decentralize the event, currently held every two years in a different continent in the South, and link it to more local experiences rooted on the ground through the continental (European Social Forum, Social Forum of the Americas, African Social Forum), regional (Mediterranean Social Forum, Amazon Social Forum) or local (World Social Forum in Madrid, Catalan Social Forum) forums, among others.

Many social movements have recognized its role as reference point and have participated actively therein, endorsing the so-called appeals arising from these meetings, the most significant of which was the global day of action against the war on February 15, 2003.

But the WSF is not without its dangers such as routinization, "ngo-ization", co-option, lack of participation of real social movements and so on, as we saw in the 7th event held in Nairobi (Kenya) in 2007. Even so, the Forum has potential, as was revealed in the latest event in Belem, which was the first example of a collective response to the systemic crisis of capitalism, pointing out the need for a break with the latter. Also the thesis that the WSF must be first and foremost a useful space for social movements and an impulse for action has been more accepted in recent times.

Some dilemmas

From the end of the 1990s, these movements have been confronted with new challenges and dilemmas and the WSF has not been left out of this.

An example: the global war on terrorism waged by George W. Bush following the attacks of 11 September 2001 served as an excuse for criminalizing and prosecuting dissident movements. At that time, sections of the media, such as the "Financial Times", foresaw the end of the "anti-globalisation" movement, but it made the fight against the war in Iraq an axis of protest bringing millions of people onto the street to protest against the war in Iraq on February 15, 2003, marking

one of the milestones of the movement.

But other developments in the political arena, like the economic collapse in Argentina, the subsequent rise of the piqueteros social movements, neighbourhood assemblies and so on and the return to power of “more of the same”, raised new questions. So did the emergence in the Chávez government in Venezuela and its policies of partial rupture with imperialism and neoliberalism, which later found alliances with the governments of Morales in Bolivia and Correa in Ecuador.

If initially the “anti-globalization” movement was dominated by the theses of “Changing the world without taking power” of Toni Negri and John Holloway, with the development of these events the scenario of political and strategic debate changed substantially.

All these elements have influenced the debate on the future of the World Social Forum and raise issues such as: what relationship between anti-capitalist political parties and social movements? What links with governments such as those of Chávez, Correa and Morales? What strategy in response to Chávez’s call for a Fifth International?

Faced with the systemic crisis of capitalism, with an unprecedented climatic, political, social and alimentary crisis, these challenges arise as more urgent than ever. Maybe it is high time, as the Indian writer Arundhaty Roy said at the Fourth World Social Forum in Mumbai (India), “to wage real battles and inflict real damage”. When?

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P.S.

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