

Lessons of Success - 2002 Florence European Social Forum

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No one really knew what to expect. For the Italians particularly there was the stress created by the scare campaign co-ordinated between the state and the media. Everyone else was probably uneasy about how Berlusconi would respond and worried that his strategy of tension might work. But there were other fears. Some worried that the heavyweight speakers and subject matter would turn off the new generation of activists, others that activists were tired of travelling. A number of commentators felt the movement was losing direction and focus, that because we hadn't decided what we are for, people might start losing their nerve to be against.

Any dark thoughts vanished in the Florence sunshine. On the opening day huge queues developed at registration. The raw figures speak for themselves, but they don't tell the whole story. The 60,000 mainly young people who flooded into the Forum created something extraordinary.

For the first time in decades years, huge numbers of trades unionists, peace campaigners, socialists, environmentalists, anti racists and many more were coming together to discuss and debate. Though it was very hard to get an overview of such a massive event it seemed like most of these people regarded themselves as participants, not spectators. Its true some of the platforms were too big too old too white and too male, but there was real discussion in every plenary and every seminar I went to.

The forum wasn't just a physical meeting point of different strands of resistance. People had the political confidence to recognise the connections between the different issues that motivated them to come.

Again and again the speakers who got the most applause were the ones who made the links between globalisation and war, between the struggle in Palestine and the US attack on Iraq, between neo-liberalism and racist policies on migration and so on. It was as if the intellectual baggage of years of defeat and stagnation had finally been left behind, and people felt free to declare themselves against a system, a capitalist system.

The result was a serious dialogue between the traditional left and the new, network based movements. The idea that there is a clear break or even hostility between the broadly marxist left and the post-Seattle movement didn't stand the test of Florence. That is not to say there is an ideological consensus in the movement. All sorts of approaches got a good hearing from the Catholic radicalism of Rosi Bindi to the autonomism of the Disobediente and the radical reformism of attac. But against the background of environmental destruction, the commodification of every area of life and the drive to war, radical solutions made sense. Revolution was in the air.

Success needs to be analysed just as carefully as failure. Partly Florence was one more proof of the growing radicalisation of European society. And of course we had the head start that came from

being in Italy where the left has had not just Genoa but two general strikes and a series of mass anti war demonstrations.

But as some of the Italian organisers liked to repeat, no political event is simply spontaneous. It is worth considering how the Florence forum was organised because it worked so well and also because it took us all beyond some of the received assumptions of the movement.

The Italians insisted from the start that the Forum should be an open space that would welcome all sections of the movement. Crucially they applied this principle from the start of the organising process. All organising meetings were open to anyone involved in the movements. The meetings were deliberately rotated around Europe to help draw in participants from all corners of the continent.

The organisers consistently took this active approach to broadening the Forum. They understood that a space has to be won and filled. In the face of media scapegoating they had to win the trust of the people of Florence, to make it hard for the local authorities to obstruct them or the police to harass them. At the last preparatory meeting a truly impressive activist from the ARCI network reported on local preparations. She told how the movement in Florence had organised meetings in schools and factories in colleges and hospitals to explain what the ESF was about and how its concerns were connected to those of the general population. She said they had had a brilliant reception almost everywhere.

The ESF itself didn't hide behind the walls of the conference centre in the Fortessa Dal Basso, a fortress built in the sixteenth century to subjugate the city rather than to defend it. Proceedings opened with a big ceremony in Piazza Sante Croce near the centre of town. During the event different networks organised marquees in most of the cities main squares with music, food and politics. By the end of 3 days peaceful protest and discussion the owners of the expensive shops that had closed and boarded up their windows were the laughing stock of Florence. More importantly, Berlusconi had been humiliated.

In the first place all this had depended on persuading the swelling social movements in Italy and beyond to take part. An impressively wide spread of organisations were brought on board, from the European Trade Union Confederation and all the Italian unions through the NGO's and Catholic groups to the main radical parties.

Creating this kind of unity required a systematic strategy. It meant guaranteeing that every serious part of the movement could participate, but it also meant putting an argument to the various groups about the importance of a united movement. So for example it was important to have a dialogue with the autonomist groups to try and persuade them to be part of the forum and then to defend their decision to have "one foot in and one out" of the process.

But unity of the organisations is only valuable if its based round principles people from the grassroots of the movements can recognise. The Social Forum wouldn't have worked as a purely neutral space. Florence didn't just show that it is possible to be radical and united, it showed that radical politics are essential to building a genuinely broad movement.

From the start the ESF was clearly and proudly against neo-liberalism, racism and war. As the event approached it became clear however that the threat of war was the big concern of most people opposed to the neo-liberal agenda. Partly this was because a war on Iraq was likely to cause a catastrophe in the Middle East and beyond. Partly it was clear the prospect of the war was creating outrage in very wide layers of society. But also it was because an attack on Iraq was the priority for those at the headquarters of neo-liberalism in Washington and by a simple law of symmetry it had to

be ours. At the last preparatory meeting in Barcelona we agreed that the main slogan of the demonstration in Florence would be "Don't Attack Iraq" and that the meeting would issue a call for cross-continent anti war action.

These were controversial decisions. They risked putting the forum on collision course with governments and social democratic organisations across Europe. But they were decisively correct. When word got out that the demonstration at Florence would focus on stopping the war the ESF became a magnet to activists. 1,300 people signed up to come from Barcelona alone in the three weeks before the forum. People were deeply relieved that such a mainstream project conceived on such a grand a scale was prepared to take a principled stand on the big issue. It was a stand that had eluded most politicians, and it showed that the ESF really was going to be something different, something honest, something that would make a difference.

This radical agenda had to be fought for within the movement. There were some quite sharp arguments at the preparatory meetings. Many people were worried that making opposition to war central might alienate sections of the movement, that it might antagonise the authorities. Others opposed it because they were worried where it would take the movement.

If there were debates during the process of organisation, they continued into the forum. Its right there should be more spaces for in depth discussion next time and that we need to work on ways of encouraging more participation in the big meetings. But there was plenty of controversy and argument in Florence. There were debates about the nature of women's oppression, about strategies for sustainable development, and about the role of Islam. Interestingly some of the biggest meetings were debates about strategy - how to build a movement against the war, the role of parties inside the movement.

These debates didn't weaken the sense of the unity of the event. The demonstration on the Saturday was an awesome display of resistance united round three central slogans. But they did make people think hard about how to go forward. We have big challenges in the next year. We have to find ways to connect the inspirational politics of Florence to wider and wider layers of society and particularly to relate anti capitalist ideas to growing working class militancy. At the same time both the war and the repression of the Italian movement since Florence show the lengths the opposition will go to maintain global control.

In this situation it is an illusion to believe we can build a non ideological movement. We need to be radical, and we need to work to stay united. But to do that we need to have a movement that openly and seriously discusses its own political strategy. That is one reason why it is essential to let the radical parties take their place inside the forum movement. We need clear and open debate because the stakes are so high.

More than anything else Saturday in Florence showed what is possible. The closing demonstration was extraordinary. Florentines lined the route clapping and in some blocks of flats in working class areas it seemed like the majority of families were waving and cheering. An amazing number of households had prepared banners saluting the demo. There were a million on the march in a city of 400,000 odd. It was as if the movement was merging with the working class of Florence. All of a sudden we who were chanting against war, against neo liberalism and against racism felt like the majority.

Chris Nineham 17 December 2002

P.S.

* <http://www.resist.org.uk/global/social-forums/esf-florence-2002/lessons-of-success/>