

## **“ZINDABAD! ZINDABAD!”\*\***

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Report Back from 2004 World Social Forum in Mumbai, India

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*\*\*Long Live! Long Live!* -- the chant most often heard at the WSF and during the visits to the tribal people's organizations in India, as in "Inklab, Zindabad!" (Long Live the Revolution!)

### **INTRODUCTION**

Thanks to the support from the Building Movement In(to) the Nonprofit Sector project, I was able to attend the 4<sup>th</sup> World Social Forum in India in January 2004. It was an inspiring experience – the signs of progress toward building a bottom-up global movement for social justice was clearly visible. I hope this report back will give you, the Building Movement project peers and colleagues, a taste of what I experienced, and convey the vibrant spirit of the forum. This reflection is organized in the following way: 1) Introduction to the WSF; 2) Grassroots Global Justice delegation; 3) On Mumbai and India; 4) Learning about local struggles; 5) The Forum overview; 6) Highlights of the Forum; 7) Mumbai Resistance; 8) Conclusion; and 9) Appendix – Highlights of interviews with activists.

### **ABOUT THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM**

The WSF began in 2001 as a people's response to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, an annual event where world state leaders meet with Fortune 500 corporations to map out how to advance the corporate-driven globalization. Initiated mostly by Brazilian activists, the past three WSF have been held at Porto Alegre, Brazil. The plan is to move the forum to various continents of the Global South, with India hosting this time. Under the slogan of "Another World Is Possible," WSF is opposed to neo-liberalism and imperialism. It is meant to be an open space for discussion and strategizing by people and groups of social movements and civil society, particularly of the Global South. The first WSF drew 20,000, second 60,000, and third 100,000. In addition to WSF, regional social forums have been taking place in different continents. The first Americas Social Forum will happen in Quito, Ecuador on July 25-30. There is talk about having a U.S. social forum as well.

### **GRASSROOTS GLOBAL JUSTICE DELEGATION**

I went to India as a part of the Grassroots Global Justice delegation. There were over 100 people in this delegation from many grassroots organizations, including environmental justice, immigrant rights, labor and anti-WTO/IMF/World Bank groups. Most of us were from the U.S. but there were several people from Canada, Mexico, Bolivia, Guatemala, and South Africa. People of color, immigrants, indigenous peoples, women and youth were represented in this delegation. Some of the organizations represented were: Southwest Organizing Project, Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, Just Transition, Asian Pacific Environmental Network, Jobs with Justice, Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence, Indigenous Environmental Network, Black Workers for Justice, Community Voices Heard, Direct Action for Rights and Equality, Desis Rising Up & Moving, Strategic Concepts in Organizing and Policy Education, United Electric, United Auto Workers, Coalition of African, Asian, European, and Latino Immigrants of Illinois, Project South, Miami Workers Center, Incite! Women of Color Against Violence and 50 Years Is Enough. It was good to see some familiar faces, as well as to

meet many new people in the delegation. WSF participants from other countries seemed impressed by GGJ's size, grassroots orientation, and racial and ethnic diversity. Before the WSF began, we had a 2 ½-day orientation together, during which we met with local activists and visited various organizations. This was a great introduction to understanding the history and issues of India.

### **ON MUMBAI AND INDIA**

Formerly known as Bombay, Mumbai is the financial center of India. Located on the west coast, Mumbai is a huge and vibrant city of 16 million people. The British had a firm colonial grip here, with the massive Gateway of India to show for it. It is a city of stark contrasts: enormous wealth and utter poverty (almost half of Mumbai live in slums); severe traffic jams, pollution, and people on bicycles and auto rickshaws on streets with no dividing lanes and rare pedestrian crossing lights – “run for your life” took on a new meaning; and a historically diverse population but now with a growing hold of Hindu fundamentalism (referred to as “communalism” in India – somewhat like religious sectarianism). It is also the film industry capital second only to Hollywood – “Bollywood” churns out some 900 films every year. India is a huge country and has a population of more than a billion people – an estimated 1/6 of the world's workforce live in India. Caste is the defining force in Indian society. At the WSF, the issue of caste discrimination was one of the focal points both inside the workshop tents and on the “streets.”

In many ways, Mumbai, India was the perfect site for the WSF. Mumbai is the capital city of the state of Maharashtra, one of the most populous states where many displaced people/migrants and Adivasi (indigenous & tribal) people live. The head of the state is a Dalit (untouchable/lowest caste) and belongs to the opposition Congress Party. India is facing general elections in April, with the currently ruling Hindu fundamentalist party BJP trying to expand its power base (Update: the Congress Party won the election, to the surprise of many). Mumbai used to be the center of manufacturing industry, especially the garment industry. However, corporate globalization has created a huge job flight. In fact, the venue for the WSF was the now abandoned industrial park that was once the site of thriving textile industry.

### **LEARNING ABOUT LOCAL ISSUES AND STRUGGLES**

As mentioned above, we began with 2 ½ days of orientation to learn about local and national issues and struggles, through meetings with activists and visits to slum organizing projects and a network of indigenous peoples. A Dalit (“untouchables”) leader Martin Macwan talked about how India is de facto ruled by the caste system. 78% of Dalits are landless farmers or temporary workers and 45% of Dalits live below poverty line. A long-time woman labor and community activist Ilina Sen highlighted the leadership of indigenous women in their fight against mega dam projects such as in Narmada Valley. She also warned that the IMF and the World Bank help create non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that conduct environmental studies, which undermine the struggles of the local people. Ashim Roy, a labor leader with the New Trade Union Initiative, talked about organizing construction workers, one of the fastest growing but unorganized industry. He also explained that the labor and social movements in India are working together to reverse the decline of the progressive movement of the past decade.

We visited slum communities in Mumbai and saw first-hand how, despite oppressive poverty, the people are working together to live in dignity. Many have formed women's committees and

youth groups, and have won access to basic services such as water and electricity. We also visited Shoshit Jan Andolan, a network of tribal and indigenous peoples (Adivasi) in a rural area. People there talked about how the rise of Hindu fundamentalism has unraveled several decades of cooperative relationships between people of different religions in the region. They criticized the ruling BJP's strategy of using lower caste and tribal people to incite violence and/or instigate more divisions among people.

Because English is used as the official language (there are some 18 different principal languages and 1,000 dialects used in India. Hindi is also a common language but around Mumbai, which is in the state of Maharashtra, Marathi is spoken), I was able to see the evening news on one of the English channels and read the *Times of India*. The WSF was covered consistently, but one of the main focus was the news of Pakistan-India peace talks. In 1947, the British presided over the partition of India, creating Pakistan and causing a massive migration of more than one million people. Some people from Pakistan were able to visit Mumbai, their hometown, for the first time since the partition. Other news included the election maneuverings by the ruling BJP party, a book controversy about Shivasi (one of the demi gods of Hinduism), slipping domestic stock market and cricket, the national sport.

### **THE FORUM OVERVIEW**

This year's WSF drew 130,000 people from 150 countries. The forum opened on January 16<sup>th</sup> evening and closed with a march and a ceremony on the 21<sup>st</sup>. The focus of this year's forum was organized around five themes: 1) Neo-liberal globalization; 2) War and militarism; 3) Caste oppression; 4) Patriarchy, and; 5) Religious fundamentalism. During the four full days of the forum, over 1,200 workshops and meetings, not to mention constant marches, street theater and cultural events took place. There were countless banners and posters and flyers everywhere, in many languages. One of the prominent banners said, "The North owes the South historical, social and ecological debt!" Many of the marches were anti-war. "Bush" in unflattering words, masks, and street theater were most often sighted. Many also knew about the March 20 global anti-war rally to mark the anniversary of the bombing of Iraq.

There were also many exhibition halls and vendors on site. Unlike at the Women's Forum in Beijing in 1995, no multinational brands like Esprit, Coke, McDonalds, etc. were present (In fact, the People's Forum Against Coca Cola was highly visible). The venue was an old industrial site north of Mumbai with make-shift stages and meeting rooms, in huge warehouses and canvas-walled "rooms." Luckily the temperature did not rise above upper 80s, and the weather was dry and very very dusty – every night, I came back to my hotel room completely grimy and brown with dust.

### **HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FORUM**

The opening ceremony was a grand sight. Packed into a huge field and sitting on mats, people brought banners and flags, entertained with street theater (often about Bush). The opening performance was by a Pakistani rock band. As we were leaving for India, news broke out that Pakistan and India were willing to engage in peace talks. Some Mumbai natives who live in Pakistan were able to visit Mumbai for the first time since the partition. These were extraordinary times for everyone, and the heavily Indian crowd went wild over this Pakistani

band. I could not help thinking about the situation in Korea, where the division of the peninsula has lasted over 50 years.

There were also many speakers, including Arundhati Roy and Iranian Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi. One thing Roy said stood out: “It is not enough to support the Iraqi resistance against the occupation. We must *become* the global resistance to the occupation...we must consider ourselves at war.” She suggested organizing an international campaign against some of the profiteering U.S. companies in Iraq (you can find her speech in *The Nation* or on *AlterNet*). The 1,200-some scheduled workshops were spread across the forum grounds from smaller groups of 30 to 100 to massive plenaries with over 3,000 people in giant warehouses and tents. Several outdoor stages held evening cultural celebrations, while numerous make-shift stages throughout the forum venue served as both scheduled and impromptu street theater and cultural performance by many, including the indigenous peoples, political dissidents, migrant workers, and children’s groups. I attended several workshops on the impact of globalization as well as resistance and movement building strategies in Africa and Asia. Religious fundamentalism was the topic of many workshops. Sonia Correa of Brazil and Gita Sen of India’s Development Alternatives with Women in the New Era (DAWN) compared the impact of religious fundamentalism on women’s rights and emphasized the importance of setting out strategies by the progressives to re-capture the hearts and minds of the people as well as reclaim the electoral process that the fundamentalists have taken over.

Separate from the WSF venue, the International Youth Camp convened concurrently to give more visibility to the youth voices and issues. As in the past years, there were some criticisms including that some of the workshops at the Youth Camp were dominated by adults. But many youth came to the WSF site to participate in marches and workshops. I saw a number of youth and children’s marches, with some pickets saying “Adults, why do you fear children’s participation?” and “You don’t have to be old to be wise.” Trafficking of children and women were highlighted in many of the workshops.

The closing day began in the afternoon with a march through the downtown of Mumbai. Masses of people with signs and banners in English and Marathi and many other languages. People took turns chanting in different languages as well. One Indian man came over to us to direct. He chanted, “Another world is possible!” and we followed with “Come with us, come with us!” The closing ceremony was in another open field near downtown. Unfortunately, I had to catch a plane that evening and had to return to the hotel before the ceremony began.

#### **MUMBAI RESISTANCE 2004**

There have been some critiques of the WSF, that it is mostly just talk and too vague in action, and that it is controlled by big NGOs and foundations (the India Coordinating Committee has made a conscious decision not to accept money from large U.S. foundations but there were many large international NGOs and other foundations who participated in the WSF). Mumbai Resistance 2004 (MR) was a counter-forum to WSF that took place literally across the street from the WSF site at the same time. While officially MR is not opposed to WSF, I got plenty of flyers stating otherwise (“wolves in sheep’s clothing...”). I spent half a day there – a much much smaller gathering but friendly people, mostly from India. The organizers and presenters at MR viewed that socialism, not capitalism was the framework that is needed to build “another world.”

I attended a great workshop on the impact of globalization on women, co-sponsored by Gabriella Network from the Philippines and punctuated by revolutionary songs by young girls.

## **CONCLUSION**

Under the slogan of “Another World Is Possible,” a movement toward building a global movement for social justice was seen and felt widely at the fourth World Social Forum in Mumbai, India. 130,000 people from 150 countries around the world came together and discussed issues and strategies around neo-liberal globalization, militarism/imperialism, caste oppression, patriarchy, and religious fundamentalism. People, organizations, and movements made connections for the first time or reaffirmed their solidarity. People of diverse generations, culture, and languages marched together for justice and peace, celebrated each other’s culture of resistance, and drew strength to take back to their constituency. For those of us from the U.S., the Mumbai WSF offered inspiring opportunities to learn from activists from India and around the world. It was also an opportunity to share with them the stories of resistance and successful strategies by various communities in the U.S. In our common struggle for human dignity in the face of devastating neo-liberal policies of the international monetary agencies, multinational corporations, the U.S. and other collaborating governments, there is a tremendous need for the U.S. activists to learn and share with activists from all over. I returned from the WSF with a sense of hope, but also a sense of urgency in finding better ways to communicate and link our struggles nationally and internationally.

## **APPENDIX - INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS**

I conducted a number of very informal interviews with activists from all over. It was somewhat challenging because of the chaotic atmosphere of the forum. But most people were happy to oblige, albeit briefly. Mostly, I wanted to know what they had to say in terms of critique, advice, and suggestions to the U.S. social justice activists. Below are some highlights:

### **Need Better Communication from U.S. Activists**

- U.S. activists need to better communicate what they are doing (via internet, AlterNet and videos of issues and campaigns) as a way to build solidarity networks with activists in other countries. (France and many others)
- U.S. has very efficient NGOs but they are marginalized. U.S. activists are voiceless in the U.S. media but can have more willing public outside the U.S. Would like to hear more about the U.S. civil society. (France)

### **Building Solidarity Across Issues and Countries**

- U.S. social movement seems isolated and focus only on the U.S. Should build relationships with organizations doing similar work in Latin America, where there are many networks. (Bolivia)
- Activists in the U.S. are not integrated in the workers movement and with third world people within the U.S. Make the link between immigrants and third world movements. U.S. activists are also too dependent on foundations. (Haiti)
- Many people believe there is no social movement in the U.S. and that many activists have been held hostage after 9/11. Need to change the U.S. government and show common citizens what is really going on. (Ethiopia)

- Get linked to European network of activists and journalists. Have regular reporting of the U.S. movement activists. (Spain)

#### On Media

- Break the monopolization of the traditional media. Use popular education tools and theater. Need better information about what is going on in the U.S. (Haiti)
- U.S. media must change. U.S. activists need to have more strategic relationships with others. When people are against imperialist intentions but the government does something else, it's not democracy. It affects all people. (Egypt)
- Corporate media is a problem. Communicate through trade union newspapers or other alternative media to inform people better. U.S. needs better schools and build a bigger social movement. (Switzerland)

#### U.S. Image

- We like the U.S. people but are against Bush. U.S. activists need to communicate more with other activists. (France)
- When others criticize the U.S., don't take it personally and get defensive. We're on the same side fighting corporate-driven global capitalism and much of it stems from the U.S. (Canada)
- "American dream" and the "burden" of spreading democracy can become like a fundamentalist religion. Was amazed that some Americans equate their national flag with "freedom," not just their country. (Canada)
- The image of U.S. is bad. Stop dropping bombs. U.S. people's movement must do more against its imperialist government. Must build international solidarity for peace. (Nepal)
- U.S. is hypocritical – it destroys first then "rebuilds." People must take up its own government and change its policies. Start with schools – educate and spread peace and stop thinking that you are the most powerful. (India)

#### Bush and Militarism

- Do something against your government to stop the U.S. policy of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. (Bangladesh)
- U.S. activists are very forward looking and strong. They are courageous to fight under Bush. (Argentina)
- U.S. activists should work on getting the U.S. to stop helping Israel because without the U.S., Israel cannot do what it is doing. Do see the difference between Bush and the people but the people need to have a better understanding of Palestine politics and policies. (Palestine)
- Get rid of Bush. As the only superpower, U.S. presidential elections affect everyone. Can we send in international election monitors? Can we vote? (Switzerland)
- Do not know what the U.S. activists are doing. We get some information from websites such as ANSWER but don't know about other activities and struggles. Fight against increasing U.S. military budget. (South Korea)

#### Other Comments

- U.S. government should hear the NGO voices and make concrete changes accordingly. If the U.S. activists work on the issues of the most marginalized in terms of race, class, and sexuality, other things will also be taken care of. (Sri Lanka)
- Need to have clear motivation and avoid corruption that comes with money. Need to understand the interdependency of all people and issues. Need more face-to-face solidarity. (Tibet)
- American capitalism needs to be stopped. We consider U.S. activists as fellow human rights activists who are mobilizing against war but they need to show that they can be more effective. (South Korea)
- U.S. activists are not doing enough. Teach people to think critically and raise issues in small groups, even in science classes. Want to learn more about the U.S. situation, especially institutional racism. (India)