

US Social Forum, 2007 to 2015: Political Reflections & Where to Go from Here?

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1. Context

The current moment

The whole world is in transition and embodies an irreversible capitalist crisis, intensifying state violence, multiple oppressions, ecocide, war, political polarization and struggle from below. The January 20, 2017 inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States ushers in an inevitable intensification of these deeply dangerous processes. The motion of over 3 million who took to the street in the U.S. to disrupt January 20 and for the Women’s March, and thousands more across the globe, and ongoing protests in the U.S. and globally express a powerful and necessary resistance. How to organize and unify today’s resistance into a political force for system change? What kind of movement leadership is required in this qualitatively new moment? These are burning questions for our movement.

Bigger context

In the opening years of the 21st century, the U.S. state response to 911 created a new environment for social movement organizations and formations. The so-called “war on terror” and the Patriot Act intensified a climate of surveillance, repression, islamophobia, and criminalization of social protest and struggle, even as the social forum process globally and in the U.S. was beginning.

When the social forum process began in 2001, the movement forces that initiated it and participated in it were, in the main, fighting to hold back the neoliberal onslaught. They were resisting the massive destruction, displacement, dispossession, poverty, and war impacting society and ecology across the globe, especially the poorest and most oppressed and exploited classes, genders, and peoples.

The slogan of the social forum, “another world is possible,” and the need for detailing the economic, political, social, and ecological content of this new world and the transformational

strategy of getting there set up a profound contradiction within and outside of the social forum. The contradiction between fighting neoliberal capitalism, trying to hold onto past reforms, on the one hand, and using these struggles to mount an offensive for a world in which capitalism and private property are abolished and society reconstructed, on the other, remained submerged. But this contradiction was clearly present in the struggles among movement forces in the forum process; and has erupted more openly into the political discourse of vision, strategy, and tactics in the current moment.

At the outset, those of us drawn to the social forum agreed that there was a developing social movement in the US that needed to be joined and connected to the global movement. This globalization from below movement challenged neoliberal policies including privatization, deregulation, trade, labor, and environment, racial, genders, and indigenous oppression, the prison industrial complex, deportation, war, and more. Some of the forces within the US Social Forum saw this as an opportunity to gain a seat at the table of the reform struggle set by the trade unions, the large NGOs, and ultimately the Democratic Party. Other forces saw it as an opportunity to organize within the rising movement, to develop movement infrastructure, collective analysis and vision, and to set the basis for movement strategy to go on the offensive. By 2007 and the first US Social Forum, the process represented perhaps the broadest, most diverse and inclusive expression of the developing movement.

Many movement motions have emerged and grown since then – around Occupy and the 99%, Black Lives Matter and state violence, genders justice and reproductive justice, Dreamers and the undocumented, water as a human right, the fight for \$15 and raising the minimum wage, public education and student debt, Moral Mondays, health and healing, climate, food, and environmental justice, housing and ending homelessness, solidarity economy and worker cooperatives, and participatory democracy. Movement forces were largely unable to stem the tide of neoliberalism, state violence, austerity, fascism, and the destruction of the planet for any substantial portion of humanity. This necessitated and opened up the space for more explicit debates and divisions of various types and expressions within the social forum and broader movement process.

Today's movement is taking shape within the political landscape of a weak US left in relation to political practice, theory, and resources. Many left forces aren't rooted in those communities bearing the brunt of police and ideological violence, economic dispossession, and environmental crisis. Further, without political clarity and an understanding of the revolutionary process, the theory and practice of day-to-day work and campaigns is defensive, in the main. The complex connection between organizing for survival, and visioning and strategizing for a political offensive against capitalism lacks articulation. And, the political control and containment of movement forces by the pull of funders and the nonprofit industrial complex, of the Democratic Party, and of trade unions looms large. This pull is exacerbated by a political culture of anti-communism, anti-intellectualism, and a bow to spontaneity and activism.

The US Social Forum must be located in these dynamics.

2. Road to USSF 2015 and the Polycentric Social Forum

Fissures and fractures – organizationally and politically – became evident within the NPC during USSF 2 and deepened post 2010. Jobs with Justice stepped back, as did local unions and the AFL-CIO. As in 2007, most NPC organizations fell away to concentrate on their organizational work – base building, fundraising, and campaigns in their many fronts of struggle

Project South concentrated on the PMA process and stepped back from national NPC organizing work. They wrote and distributed the very useful ***PMA Organizing Kit*** in 2011 and actively continued to support, with *University sin Fronteras*, PMA work. They began organizing the Southern Movement Assembly in the Southeast as an important movement tool which continues to grow and develop, most recently in relation to Gulf South Rising and the Katrina 10 anniversary (see www.southtosouth.org and www.gulfsoutherising.org).

Our inability, as the social forum, to form ongoing relationships and work with new movement forces resisting state violence in all its forms – for example, Occupy early on, Black Lives Matter more recently, and many more – reflects both the nature of these motions and of the social forum. The social forum process lacks a unified political will and understanding of movement forces in relation to the revolutionary process. The forum also lacks a stable infrastructure, and human and money resources. On the other side is the strong and consistent pull on social movement forces toward activism and campaigns, toward the Democratic Party, trade unions, and foundation funders who impose political direction and long term strategy.

November 2012 NPC

In November 2012 we reconvened and regrouped in Chicago, IL as the NPC shrank and forces fell away. Core forces – GGJ, PS, MWRO, EMEAC and other Detroit anchors – were stepping back with specific work they agreed to do or from the process as a whole. While we had important political discussions with local Chicago forces, including the Chicago Teachers Union that was deep in struggle, and with NPC organizations struggling in Detroit and national electoral third party work, it was challenging to translate that into active participation in the forum process. We reviewed where we had been and mapped the immediate next steps on the road to USSF 3. We agreed to review and update the US Social Forum goals and “We Believe” statement. And to draft an “Urgency Statement” about the need for the social forum as a national movement building tool given the intensifying crisis of global capitalism, the destruction of the people and the planet, and the growing danger of fascism and war nationally and globally. We established ACT, the Accountability and Coordination Team, with representatives from active working groups and staff (when hired) as the coordination collective for USSF 3 inside the NPC.

March 2013 NPC

The NPC planned to meet in early 2013 in New Orleans, LA hosted with local NPC organizations. Lack of clarity over the purpose and resources for the NPC meeting led to tensions, and New Orleans organizations pulled out. PPEHRC stepped up and hosted the NPC meeting in Philadelphia in March 2013. We invited Occupy activists we knew to join us in an effort to

develop working relationships; it was interesting but challenging. At this meeting GGJ submitted a letter indicating they were stepping back from the NPC, and lacked the capacity to be fully engaged in their own work and the work of the social forum.

Philadelphia, with PPEHRC as the lead anchor, indicated in Chicago that they wanted to host USSF 3. The Poor Peoples Economic Human Rights, along with Asian Americans United, submitted their formal application for Philadelphia as a site in April 2013, before the NPC agreed to have a polycentric social forum.

August 2013 NPC: A Polycentric USSF 3 and 3-year Plan

In August 2013 the NPC convened in Atlanta, GA, hosted by Project South, and made two important decisions. The first was that the USSF 3 would be a polycentric social forum, happening simultaneously in several sites connected technologically. The second was to have a three year plan for USSF 3, from 2014 to 2016.

We understood USSF 3 as a movement building tool to facilitate our movement going from defensive to offensive, to reorganize society to meet human needs and protect the earth, and to connect with global movement forces. Peoples Movement Assemblies (PMAs) and movement schools across the three years would deepen our systemic analysis, visioning the world we need, developing political program and action agendas, movement strategy and tactics, and building political cohesion, alignment and independence for collective power from below to win it and hold it. The polycentric USSF 3 would be in 2015 and an Assembly of Assemblies was projected for 2016.

USSF 3 Polycentric Site Selection

In December 2013, after the site team visit, the NPC selected Philadelphia as the first site for USSF 3 as part of a polycentric social forum of a new type.

The election of Chokwe Lumumba, long time movement lawyer and activist, as Mayor of Jackson, MS in May 2013 created huge movement energy. Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and the Jackson People's Assembly submitted their application for Jackson, MS as a site for USSF 3 in July 2013. Following the site team visit in early 2014, the NPC selected Jackson as a polycentric site for USSF 3, with major support from the Office of the Mayor. The tragic and untimely death of Mayor Chokwe Lumumba in February 2014 meant a profound loss and crisis for the people of Jackson and movement organizers on many levels – personal, organizational, political, and economic.

Cooperation Jackson, an incubator for cooperative economic projects in Jackson, helped host the January 2015 NPC meeting and movement school, and PMA on cooperative economics. They also organized, with partners, the Summer of our Power Southern People's Movement Assembly on Just Transition in June 2015 as part of the USSF 3 polycentric social forum.

San Jose anchors Hip Hop Congress, The Multimedia Center, CHAM (Christian Homeless Alliance Ministry), Human Agenda Project/MTA, and Silicon Valley De-Bug submitted their site

application for San Jose as a polycentric social forum site in April 2014. The NPC, following the site team visit, selected San Jose as a site for USSF 3 in May 2014.

In early 2015 May First/People Link, which has many Mexican members, brought to the NPC a proposal to have a PMA in Tijuana, Mexico as part of the polycentric USSF 3 in late June. The NPC approved the proposal.

In 2014 ACT made contact with the Montreal Collective organizing the WSF 2016 and participated in the Peoples Social Forum in Ottawa. We began to discuss hemispheric unity and North American unity among social movement forces as a step toward movement internationalism.

A qualitatively New Moment

In 2013 and leading into USSF 3 in 2015, it was clear that the social forum process was in a qualitatively new moment in terms of money and human resources and the political moment. Foundation resources began drying up post-911, but further deteriorated after the financial bubble burst and the “great recession” of 2008. The social forum did receive foundation support late in the 2007 process and in 2010. But the loss of organizations and individuals with foundation ties and expertise following 2010, and the changed funding environment resulted in virtually no foundation support in 2015. USSF 3 got no major foundation money, though some donors, small family funds, and regional foundations made modest contributions. The change of the US Social Forum fiscal sponsor in late 2014 meant many logistical and infrastructural challenges.

Grassroots movement organizations on the NPC had few staff resources to support the forum and fewer money resources – all of which had been critical to the 2007 and 2010 social forums. USSF 3 had the resources to hire one national staff person, Shamako Noble, in late 2013. He was paid for half-time, and continued through the duration. But there were no paid local site staff.

This scarcity of resources while the most oppressed, exploited, and dispossessed and movement forces confront a life and death crisis presents the social forum and, more importantly, the arising social movement in the US with a profound contradiction. How do we carry on under these new conditions? How do we develop a deeper political alignment through collective study and education? And how do we develop the movement infrastructure and organizational forms to cohere a national movement process across our diversity toward political unity and the political offensive?

3. Lessons Learned and Political Reflections

Lessons learned and political reflections begin with our assessment of the polycentric model, and move to the National Planning Committee, movement culture, movement strategy, and movement resources.

Polycentric model

The polycentric model was a multisite forum form. The polycentric model encouraged movement organizations to work regionally to build more enduring relationships, to develop shared political analysis, vision, and praxis. And this required building with virtually no money. It also reduced the cost of travel to the social forum and PMA sites. This provided the opportunity for more people to access the forum process.

At the same time, the polycentric social forum came with many challenges. It did not resolve the longstanding dynamic in forum and movement work of logistical and practical matters dominating the process, and forcing to the margins political education of ourselves and the movement. We intended to have consistent political study and discussion necessary for moving toward political alignment; but fell short in the practice. It also required technical capacity and equipment in all four sites for the simultaneous connectivity and interaction originally envisioned and planned. This did not materialize from the communications and technology working group, from the NPC or from the sites.

At a moment when we were most lacking in human and money resources, the polycentric model tended to dissipate the energy of the social forum, further fragmenting and dispersing any center of gravity in the process.

National Planning Committee – Is this form useful? Who held the work?

The National Planning Committee after 2007 was never a fully engaged and functional organizing body within the social forum, and was even less so after 2010. With the stepping back of many organizations, especially GGJ, Jobs with Justice, and forum anchors from 2007 and 2010, the NPC was increasingly less functional and involved in the forum process.

The social forums would not have been possible without the incredible hard work of the anchor organizations in all three social forums, and the staff of the various forums. The fiscal sponsors, Project South in 2007, The Praxis Project in 2010, and Alliance for Global Justice in 2015, also did essential work in relation to the staff of the respective forums.

The collective bodies that also contributed significantly to making the social forum happen in 2007, 2010, and again in USSF 3 were the active working groups. An example of what worked was the consistent activity of the gender justice working group across forums and its relation to health and healing. On the other hand, the communications and technology working group stopped and started and was never able to get up to capacity for USSF 3 following 2010. Given the critical importance of a robust online and social media presence, this seriously constrained the visibility and outreach of the social forum from 2014 to 2016.

In USSF 3 the ACT (Accountability and Coordination Team) was formed and stepped up to hold the day-to-day work of the forum along with the national coordinator, Shamako Noble, who was only paid half-time. Once the polycentric social forum and PMA sites were selected, the local organizing committees centered around the site anchors (LOCs) became critical to making

the polycentric forum a reality. They held the logistics and programming, outreach and fundraising, and virtually everything.

Movement culture – historic and ongoing challenges

The developing movement and social forum process exist within a dangerous political moment, a profoundly destructive, oppressive, and exploitative stage of global capitalism and move toward fascism. Too often we, as movement actors, reproduce the oppressions of class, race, genders, nationality, age, ability, and more in our interactions within the forum. We are not good at naming and dealing openly with these violations of our movement and forum principles and values. And we need to reclaim in a new moment the practice of constructive criticism and self-criticism, and nurture the skills of political and principled struggle inside our movement formations.

This raises the bigger question of clarifying what we mean by culture and movement culture as an integral expression and practice of social movement work and transformation. The forum has struggled with this since its inception and much more remains to be done going forward.

Movement strategy – moving to the offensive

Given the fragmentation and political division among movement forces, and the lack of resources, the social forum struggled with several questions of movement strategy: How do we move toward political alignment and unity across the rich diversity of our movement? How do we develop organizational forms and political practice as a national movement in this country? How do we collectively vision the world we want? How does our transformational movement create the change necessary for the future of humanity and the Earth? How do we go on the political offensive so we can win it and hold it?

The social forum tried to lift up the need for movement political education and for theoretical study. We offered movement schools as a beginning of a broad political education project within social movement organizations and spaces. And we recognized the need to identify who and how to do theoretical education.

The social forum discussed movement internationalism in the context of hemispheric unity. With a focus on North America, we would concentrate on building deeper relationships between forum and social movement forces in the U.S., Canada, Mexico, and the Caribbean. Follow-up to the Tijuana PMA in 2015 and the upcoming WSF in 2016 is in this context.

US Social Forum 3, with its 3-year plan, offered a different model for social forum work, emphasizing intentional and strategic movement praxis and education through the PMA process, movement schools, and cross-border conversations. Though some advances were made and we are learning from our experience; we barely scratched the surface of political study and movement alignment. Moving forward likely includes ongoing Peoples Movement Assemblies (PMAs), movement schools, and strategic movement conversation(s). But who will hold this work and how?

Movement resources – How does the movement gain financial and political independence?

The social forum today is operating in a qualitatively new political moment. The attack is greater than ever and resources (money and human) are fewer. This forum offered a window into this reality. The intensification of the assault on our communities, new movement motions rising, and the extreme challenge and struggle of how a transformative national movement grows and survives with no foundation, Democratic Party, or trade union money and resources. And many movement forces are taking political direction from these very powerful sources.

Movement forces have to confront this reality – of how do we put forward a politics in our interests and figure out how to fund our transformative movement work through grassroots fundraising – the pass the hat foundation, crowdsourcing, etc. The resource crisis is deeper as the base has less and less financial resources to bring to the table. Yet, the survival of humanity and the planet depends on a powerful bottom-up movement that is strategically anti-capitalist and has the capacity to reconstruct society along cooperative, collective, egalitarian, and democratic lines.

We know of no other movement process that does what the social forum does. What can and should it look like moving forward? What could fill the vacuum of the social forum process in the U.S.? Especially given that the social forum process represented perhaps the broadest, most diverse and inclusive expression of these forces.

As all the polycentric sites summed up, we must extend and develop the human and material resources needed for transformational change. This will be a key challenge in the era of Trump. This raises the question of what's to be done in this period of rightwing populism domestically and globally. What lessons can be garnered from the US Social Forum era 2007-2015? We turn to that discussion below.

Where Do We Go From Here in the Era of Trump and Rightwing Populism?

The Trump administration brings to power a profoundly dangerous corporate military state grounded in rightwing populism in ideology and rhetoric, in policy and practice. It mobilizes its social base through appealing to and acting on historic divisions, fears, oppression, and material privilege rooted in the long duree of white supremacy, nationality, gender, sexuality, and religion. It has no regard for reality or facts.

As we celebrate today's rising resistance, we are compelled to prepare for the strategic struggle for power. This is an organizing moment. It is also a political education moment. If we don't understand the systemic crisis of our world – in the economy, politics, and ecology – we cannot defeat it. Resistance struggles must be organized into an independent political force, at the ballot box and in the streets. Unity must be forged, inclusive of our racialized and gendered diversities and histories, around the survival of humanity and the planet.

These are the complex social forces shaping life in the U.S. today. The need for a re-emergent revolutionary imagination and practice is imperative. There is no after Ferguson (as metaphor for today's political, social and economic devastation) until deeply rooted change happens. This is the profound urgency of the moment.

Now is the time to develop vision and build power for a transformed world.

First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out —

Because I was not a Communist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out —

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out —

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me — and there was no one left to speak for me.

Martin Niemöller (1892-1984)

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