
IS IT POSSIBLE TO PUT A HUMAN FACE ON GLOBALISATION AND WAR ?

An Open Letter to the Trade Unionists and Activists Participating in the WSF 2002 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, from the International Liaison Committee for a Workers International (ILC).

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
We, the undersigned Brazilian trade unionists, want to open a dialogue with you. We are living through a terrible situation the world over. The US government, under the cover of the United Nations, is using the heinous terrorist attacks of September 11 to intensify a political agenda of “full-scale, protracted war” — as Bush himself has stated. It is a war that started with the bombing of Afghanistan and is far from over.

In neighboring Argentina, the people — after years of governments that had submitted to the dictates of the IMF and applied the politics of privatisation, destruction of workers’ rights, and bleeding the nation to pay back foreign debt — took to the streets and threw out the ‘centre-left’ government of Fernando De la Rúa. They made it clear they wanted an end to policies that had plunged millions of Argentineans into misery and hunger — all in the name of ‘modernisation’, ‘exigencies of globalisation’, the ‘criteria’ of the Mercosul regional ‘free trade’ pact, and the preparation of the country for the FTAA !

In this new situation, the ‘powers that dominate the world’, that is, the multinationals, the financial speculators, the international financial institutions such as the WTO, World Bank and IMF and all the governments in their service, have declared an economic and political war against the workers, against their organisations, and against the peoples. Their aim is to use the tragic events of September 11 to roll back all the rights and conquests wrested through bitter struggle by working and oppressed peoples. Their aim is to destroy any and all barriers to their plunder of natural resources and their unbridled quest for profit and exploitation. The struggles of resistance against these scorched-earth policies cry out for the unity of working people the world over — from North to South and from East to West. It requires the united struggle of oppressed and exploited peoples to stop this offensive of war and destruction, which is leading the world to the

brink of barbarism. Only through such united struggle in defense of the rights and gains of working people will it be possible to chart a way forward for the future of humanity.

For our part, we are certain that this quest for unity in action to defend and advance the rights of working people is what has prompted thousands of unionists and activists from across the globe to participate in the second WSF in Porto Alegre.

But does the reality of the WSF correspond to this expectation ? Does the WSF offer a way forward for this struggle ? We want to raise some questions here about the WSF and invite you, our brothers and sisters, to draw your own conclusions.

The Trap of Civil Society

The WSF has presented itself, since its inception, as a Forum for 'civil society.' The very concept of 'civil society', which is so popular of late, erases the borders between social classes that exist in society. How, for example, is it possible to include in the same category of 'civil society' both the exploited and the exploiters, the bosses and workers, the oppressors and oppressed — not to mention the churches, NGOs, government and UN representatives ? The organising committee of the WSF in Brazil includes organisations such as the Brazilian Association of Employers for Citizens (CIVES) and the Brazilian Association of NGOs (ABONG). They are joined in the committee by other entities, which, to be sure, are connected to the struggles of the exploited and oppressed — such as the CUT (Unified Workers Federation) and the MST (Movement of Landless Peasants). Is this organising committee itself not an expression of the politics of 'civil society' — that is, of the attempt to group together in the same camp, interests that are in fact *contradictory* and diametrically opposed ?

Let's take the example of the campaign in defense of workers' rights contained in the Brazilian Labor Code which we in the Brazilian trade union movement are now carrying out. The CUT has issued a call to prepare a General Strike in March 2002 to prevent the approval of PL 4583 by Minister Dornelles. It is clear that the CUT is determined to carry forth with this strike call should the situation require it. What do the so-called 'progressive bosses' think of these workers' rights ? What do the NGOs — which both practice and promote 'volunteerism' and other forms of precarious and unregulated labor — think about these workers' rights ? Don't all the jobs 'created' by the NGOs, in fact, *replace* jobs in the public enterprises and services, in line with the policies implemented by (Brazilian President) Fernando Henrique Cardoso at the behest of the IMF ? The politics of 'civil society' are today officially the politics of the World Bank. What is the content of these politics ? Judge for yourself. The World Bank's World Development Report 2000 / 2001 puts it this way :

It is appropriate for financial institutions to use their means...to develop an open and regular dialogue with the organisations of civil society, in particular those that represent the poor. Social fragmentation can be mitigated by bringing groups together in formal and informal forums and channelling their energies into political processes instead of open conflict.

Could it be a coincidence that among the funding sources of the WSF one can find the Ford Foundation or that the World Bank's Website promotes the Porto Alegre Forum ?

What is the Role of NGOs ?

Hundreds, if not thousands of NGOs will be participating in the World Economic Forum of Davos to be held this year in New York as well as in the WSF in Porto Alegre. What is the role that those who control the commanding heights of the global economy attribute to NGOs ?

In the official World Bank document titled The World Bank and Civil Society (September 2000), one reads : “More than 70 per cent of the projects supported by the World Bank that were approved in 1999 involved non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society in some manner”.

There is a popular proverb that states, “He who pays the piper calls the tune.” The World Bank, as we know, is part of the holy trinity of capitalist globalisation, alongside the IMF and the WTO. Could it be that these institutions are ‘neutral’ and that they do not express the interests of global capitalism ? Let us look at this one concrete example : the International Council of the WSF met in Dakar, the capital of Senegal on October 31 and November 1, 2001. ENDA-Third World, which is an NGO that has been actively building the WSF across Africa, hosted and organised this WSF planning meeting. What are the politics of ENDA ?

According to its own documents, ENDA believes that “to prohibit child labour is to deprive children, as well as their families, of an important means of subsistence”. ENDA affirms that “it is necessary to take into account the socio-economic reality and, therefore, to fight for the rights of child labourers”.

This stance by ENDA is in open contradiction to the positions of the CUT and the international labour movement — all of which call for the abolition of child labor and mandatory education till age fifteen of all children. The place for children is in school ! But not only does ENDA advocate child labour, it is participating directly in the privatisation of the public water system, constructing wells and cisterns and charging users a fee for providing the water.¹

And what about the Tobin Tax and ATTAC ? In the name of James Tobin, winner of the Nobel Prize in economics and fervent advocate of corporate ‘free trade’, an Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions and for Assistance to Citizens (ATTAC) was created first in France (1998) and then on an international scale. Among its goals is the establishment of a Tobin Tax, which would create a tax of between 0.05 per cent and 0.1 per cent on international financial transactions. The money collected would serve to create an ‘international fund’ to help ‘development and the struggle against poverty.’

As is widely known, ATTAC is today one of the main founders and organisers of the WSF of Porto Alegre. The Tobin Tax, for its part, has won the support of people as ‘prominent’ as the multi-billionaire speculator George Soros, Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso and others. Now, if a tax existed to finance an international ‘fund’ to aid the poor, one would think that the greater the financial speculation, the better because such a ‘fund’ would have more resources. This rationale is not far-fetched.

Be that as it may, along with the Tobin Tax, ATTAC today is dedicated to other ventures as well. It proposes to “change the world” under the slogan ‘another world is

possible' through "better control over globalisation". But is it possible to change the world without questioning the fundamental relations of production, without challenging the private ownership of the major means of production ? Is another world possible with a minimal Tobin Tax helping to "control globalisation" ?

Bernard Cassen, President of ATTAC-France and Director of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, a newspaper controlled by the enterprise group of the daily *Le Monde*, declared at the founding congress of ATTAC-Germany (October 19–21, 2001) that, "President Bush has taken steps in the direction of ATTAC's proposals since September 11, 2001. It is clear that we still have a long way to go. But it is necessary to note that...Mr. Bush is now against tax shelters. We register this fact. Bush has come closer to our positions concerning the role of the state, investing US \$ 120 billion in the economy...He has embraced our position on the cancellation of the debt, though he is doing this for his own reasons. The US, for example, has just cancelled Pakistan's debt, which proves that it is *possible* to cancel the debt". Bush has just launched one of the largest-scale offensives against working people ever, including the massive bombing of Afghanistan, and yet, according to the President of ATTAC-France, Bush is moving closer to the positions of ATTAC. This is very interesting.

"A World without War is Possible"

Under this title, a special session of the WSF will be devoted to a 'world without war'. According to the proposal from the organisers, this session "seeks to bring social and / or institutional representatives of the regions where wars are taking place together with Nobel Peace Prize recipients in a joint effort to reflect on the nature of wars and to identify the possibilities of elaborating peace plans". The following 'regions' will be discussed : Palestine, Kashmir, the Basque Country, Colombia and Chiapas. Curiously, the bombing of Afghanistan will not be part of the agenda. How is it possible for the "all-out and protracted" war launched by Bush — today in Afghanistan and tomorrow possibly in Iraq or Somalia — not to be part of the discussion under this point !

Palestine — which currently faces a dramatic situation, with the State of Israel attacking on all fronts in open war — will be discussed, with the objective of "elaborating a peace plan". But what is the origin of the current situation in Palestine ? It is the Oslo Accords, *sponsored* by the United States (under Clinton) and then *legitimised* by the UN as a "peace plan". These accords created a pseudo-Palestinian 'state' (the Palestinian Authority, whose headquarters are now being bombed), which was but a conglomeration of miniscule so-called Palestinian territories surrounded by the State of Israel.

Speaking of Nobel Peace Prizes, it was the Oslo Accords that garnered that prize for Yasir Arafat and for the Israeli Chief of State at that time, Shimon Peres. As a matter of fact, the Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan, has also been graced with the Nobel Peace Prize, perhaps in recognition for the role that the UN played in perpetrating the genocide in Rwanda — or was it for the embargo that the UN has imposed on Iraq, or better yet for the cover provided by the UN to the NATO bombers in ex-Yugoslavia ?

'Participatory Democracy' and the 'Participatory Budget'

The World Bank has just created an international department charged with overseeing the implementation of 'participatory democracy' in 26 countries. It has also translated, published and distributed the book The Participatory Budget : The Experience of Porto Alegre, written by Tarso Genro (former Mayor of Porto Alegre) and Ubirata de Souza. Is this simply disinterested propaganda of the World Bank ? Or, on the contrary, do the 'participatory democracy' and 'participatory budget' processes not, in fact, embody the above-cited strategy of 'channeling energies' to avoid 'open conflict' ? All the documents which came out of the first WSF of Porto Alegre discuss the 'model' experiences of participatory democracy that have existed in the capital of Rio Grande do Sul. The Second WSF continues on the same line. Among the list of WSF workshops there is one titled 'World Participatory Budget' (nothing more nor less !), organised by the Governor of Rio Grande do Sul, "in participation with citizens' movements".

But how does the 'participatory budget' function in reality ? In the unsuspecting voice of its co-ordinator in the city of Sao Paulo, it is meant to be a "filter for popular demands" !

Only one small portion of the municipal budgets — in the case of Porto Alegre the sum amounts to 17 per cent — is earmarked for discussion and allocation by the assemblies of representatives of popular organisations (the council of the 'participatory budget'). These assemblies define how the priorities should be set for the disbursement of these limited funds. (The bulk of municipal budget monies are untouchable, as they have been earmarked to pay back the foreign debt and other expenses). As resources are limited, there is constant in-fighting among activist groups over how the priorities should be set. The 'participatory budget' councillors are forced to choose which they prefer — the creation of a school or health clinic, paving of roads or childcare centres, etc. This is how the responsibility for NOT meeting the demands of the population is shifted...onto the backs of the participants in the 'participatory budget' themselves !

Now, who participates in the participatory budgets ? The answer is 'civil society'. In the case of a participatory budget assembly in the municipality of Camacua, a businessperson sent 'his' representatives as delegates and won close to 70 per cent of the votes to prioritise the pavement of a road — to the detriment of all the other demands !

Is this, as its supporter's claim, 'an innovative form of democracy ?' Or, on the contrary, isn't it a trap that seeks to co-opt popular movements and associations into the implementation of the city government's austerity plans, thereby making them responsible for the 'choices' that inevitably do untold harm to other popular movements and associations ?

And what conception of society lies behind this 'participatory budget ?' It is that of a society without conflicts, without contradictions, based on 'consensus among equals'. But is this not the inverse of democracy, which demands the recognition that contradictory interests exist in society, as well as the recognition of the right of the exploited and oppressed to independent organisation in the face of the State and the exploiters ? What would be, for example, the participation of a union of public service

workers in the 'participatory budget ?' There are no lack of voices that say that unions "should learn to function in labor-management co-operation committees" and therefore should enter such "participatory" Forums. It is reasonable to expect that the union delegate would seek improvements in wages and conditions as a priority. But the association of homeowners may want light in their neighborhood. Instead of directing their demands for public power and mobilising to achieve them through collective action, they will be played against each other in the assemblies of the participatory budget. Many of you have participated in such assemblies. Is what we are saying not the complete truth ?

Brothers and Sisters, we, the undersigned unionists, will participate in the Trade Union and Popular Assembly which the CUT has called in Porto Alegre on February 1 to discuss and prepare the General Strike next March. But we will not participate in the panels, workshops and official sessions of the World Social Forum.

We will not be there because we are convinced that the defence of the organisations that workers have created to fight against capitalist exploitation is contradictory with the politics of civil society, which dissolve the borders of social class. It is contradictory, moreover, with the politics of 'giving a human face to globalisation', which, as we know, is not a phenomenon of nature, but rather the product of global capitalism. 'Globalisation' by definition necessitates the destruction of our workplaces, our jobs and our rights. Capitalist globalisation has destroyed nations, democracy, and the sovereignty of the poor. It cannot be 'humanised'. We, who affirm the need to defend the trade unions as instruments of working class struggle, deny any legitimacy or authority to the NGOs to speak in the name of the exploited and oppressed. We do not claim to be the sole possessors of the truth. We simply want to put forward our point of view — which is part of the democratic process. We respectfully submit these views for the consideration of all our brothers and sisters in struggle.

You can count on us as fighters in the struggle against war and exploitation; in defence of social and labor rights, against de-regulation; in defense of trade union independence and democracy ! You can count on us in the struggle against the FTAA, and for the withdrawal of Brazil from the negotiations to implement it ! You can count on us in the struggle against privatisation and in defence of public services ! You can count on us for the preparation of the General Strike to stop the destruction of our labour rights and to impose a defeat on the governments of FHC-IMF !

Militant greetings,

January 2, 2002

Signatories, Unions and Titles :

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International Liaison Committee for a Workers International (ILC)

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International Liaison Committee for a Workers International (ILC) was constituted in Barcelona, Spain, in January 1991 at a conference of working class and socialist delegates from 53 countries. Its objective was to unite the working class, the youth and all the oppressed peoples of the world to fight back. The ILC has grown into a multi-tendency re-groupment of unionists and political activists in 92 countries. It takes as its historical precedent the International Workingmen's Association, the 'First International', founded in 1864 in London.

NOTES

¹ Source : ENDA : Water and Urban Poverty.