



WORLD SOCIAL FORUM REPORT

JANUARY 27 TO FEBRUARY 1, 2009

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Participants at the World Social Forum

CUPW sent a delegation of four activists to the World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil. Most of the workshops and events took place at the Federal Rural University of the Amazon and the Federal University of Pará. The delegation was made up of Toni MacAfee, Regional Education and Organization Officer from the Atlantic, Giuliana Fumagalli from the Montreal Local, Ron Rousseau, President of Whitehorse Local and Donald Lafleur, 4th National Vice President. CUPE 1979 also sent Sarah Ryan, Communications Specialist at CUPW's national office.

The Canadian Labour delegation was made up of Sheila Katz (CLC); Linda Silas and Bev Dick (CFNU); Gaétan Ménard and Jason Murphy (CEP); Judith Marshall, Catherine Coumins, Boyd Bussey and Fred Winsor (USW).

Preparatory Work

CUPW got a lot of information that was passed on to the delegation from Sister Sheila Katz of the CLC and Marion Pollack at CUPW. Information about the World Social Forum, hotels, Belém, the Canadian delegation and meeting times that helped us prepare. We also held a conference call with the participants and Brother George Floresco who had participated in Porto Alegre. We also got in touch with Brother Rogério Uribe of FENTECT, the union that represents postal workers in Brazil. Brother Uribe was part of a Brazilian delegation that came to Canada in 2006.

We planned to break up into groups to attend as many workshops as possible. A full report would be made available to all levels of the Union.

What is a World Social Forum?

I believe that answering this question is key if we want to assess our participation in the most recent WSF, in Belém, and talk about our possible participation in the next WSF and in decentralized social forums.

For starters, the WSF is a space. It's not an international conference, nor a summit, a meeting or a Woodstock for alter-globalists. The *World Social Forum* is a space made available to participants. The meetings taking place in that space don't aim, for example, at producing a final declaration to be signed and applied by all participants. On the contrary, the WSF is a space that fosters discussions and the sharing of ideas. All of this turns the *Forum* into a powerful instrument that allows us to unveil a new work method. In addition, the WSF has brought back an idea that had all but disappeared from our now sad landscape of militancy: utopia! The creation of open spaces and the many exchanges have led to the awakening of many people and to a renewed sense of militancy for many disillusioned individuals.

The *WSF* is born out of an intuition that another world was possible. Eight years later, this statement is more accurate and specific: another world is necessary, possible and urgently needed!

The WSF is an ongoing experiment. And we have to defend the WSF experiment to the end. Currently, the WSF as a space is multiplying through the organization of forums throughout the world. The problem is not that the WSF is not relevant, doesn't make enough demands or doesn't take positions, but that the movements are in decline and the activists are running out of steam.

Thus, to fully understand what the WSF is all about, it is important to understand some key principles:

1. Space: A space is there to be occupied;
2. Facilitation: To facilitate implies forming a connection with others and sharing ideas on an equal footing; everyone has the potential to learn and has something to share;
3. Self-organization: Implies collective accountability and collective ownership of the program of activities;



4. Networks: Networks bring people together to create alliances in order to overcome passivity;
5. Horizontal Approach: Implies relations of equality.

This analysis of what the WSF is all about was conveyed by Chico Whitaker, one of the co-founders of the WSF, who I met in Belém and who was with us in March 2009.

Further to this preamble, it is important to conduct a thorough analysis of our participation in the WSF.

- 1- Was our participation active or passive?
- 2- Did we develop ties with other organizations?
- 3- Did we overcome passivity and build alliances outside our natural networks?
- 4- Are we capable of going beyond our structures to move towards a more horizontal approach in our relations?
- 5- Are we ready to fully participate in this ongoing and future experiment that is the WSF?

Introduction to the World Social Forum in Belém

From January 27 to February 1, nearly 100,000 people gathered in Belém, the capital of the state of Pará in Brazil, for the 9th World Social Forum (WSF). The location, as is the case at all World Social Forums, plays a vital role as to the focus of the forum. This WSF took place in the (Pan-) Amazon (area) to shine a light on the region, the river and the indigenous populations of the Amazon River Basin and underline the importance of the protection of the environment.

The importance of the Amazon

The city of Belém is a “gateway” to the Amazon, the gateway to the “lungs of the earth”. The Amazon itself spans the border of nine countries: Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guyana, Peru, Guyana Cooperative Republic



Surinam and Venezuela. It is the world's largest river basin and the source of one-fifth of all free-flowing fresh water on Earth. It is also home to a diversity of plants, insects, birds, fish and animals. The Amazon is a sacred natural resource; it is a vital function to the planet and its sustainability. With all that the Amazon is, it is a symbol for the WSF, because a natural resource of this importance should be respected and protected. But not even the Amazon is safe from the greed of the neo-liberals, capitalists. The Amazon is being threatened at an incredibly frightening pace, but the seriousness of the situation is not a deterrent for the exploiters. The Amazon serves as a blatant symbol to the reality that the current systems cannot continue, it conveys the seriousness of the situation and the fact that if there is not a shift, we will certainly destroy Mother Earth sooner, rather than later.

The Amazon was also a place of importance for the WSF to focus on the rights of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon. There are approximately 350 Indigenous groups along the Amazon; they have been the protectors and nurturers of the Amazon for thousands of years all the while attempting to resist the exploitation of their lands, homes and lives. They have persisted against Goliath but their fight is an unfair one. The forum was an opportunity for the Indigenous peoples to have their voices heard and to have their fight brought to the forefront.

Holding the WSF in the Amazon demonstrates the acknowledgement of the vital importance of the natural resources that still exist in this part of the planet and which are tremendously threatened by the hegemonic model. It also values the incredible capability of Pan-Amazon peoples (Indigenous peoples, riverside dwellers, 'quilomboas' – slave descendents – and workers) to resist the century-old domination, the exploitation and destruction of their natural resources, their cultures and the quality of their lives. Moreover, this is an opportunity to enable alternatives for a higher quality life and proposals for a different way of living, the "good living" for everyone.

WSF 2009 - Facilitators Group

The International World Social Forum Council

Crisis of Capitalism

The timing of the World Social Forum was very appropriate given the overlapping global crises. It allowed participants to concretely identify alternatives to our global economic model as well as putting forward a broader public message that another world is possible and is in fact necessary.

"The WSF is taking place in a context of several world crises: economy, energy, environmental, cultural and political. All this indicates we are facing up a crisis of the

civilization model. The unattended complaints and countless claims, delivered throughout the previous eight WSF meetings and over the time from one to another in many other places around the world, are confirmed.

Carrying on the way it is now renders life on planet Earth unfeasible.

By being more perseverant than in any other moment before, we are being called upon to fight for a different world!

More than ever, it is about time we changed our heading."

WSF 2009 - Facilitators Group

The International World Social Forum Council

Activities

The Belém WSF consisted of 2,300 planned activities under nine themes. As a five-person delegation, it is simply impossible to cover and see everything, even though we split up strategically. We attended the workshops and activities of interest to us and those that seemed to deal with issues that might eventually be useful to the union. Everything was a bit complicated here in that sessions were often cancelled or moved to another location without the information being conveyed to potential participants. We wasted a lot of time searching for a location or trying to find an alternate activity. When travelling from one campus to the next, there was no point being in a rush. These conditions and constraints often led to interesting meetings and to enlightening and beautiful discoveries.

As a delegation our goal was to attend as many workshops as possible. Each day we had numerous options therefore we split into groups and chose a couple of different workshops. Some of the workshops we attended were:

- **World March of Women**—The focus was on women and the need for an alternative system to capitalism driven by a feminist analysis.
- **Opening of the Labour Tent**—The central issues were about how workers should not pay for the economic crisis as well as how there were crises—environmental, food & poverty—before the current economic one.

- **Opening of the Indigenous tent**–The issues of deforestation, indigenous rights, knowledge exploitation, land expropriation, death threats and death were shared by the various leaders. This was a space for the Indigenous groups to mobilize their individual struggles into one fight together.
- **Palestine solidarity strategy meeting**–The most interesting part of this workshop was the presentation about the possible first trade agreement between Palestine and Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay.
- **The complicity of the mining industry in conflict and human rights abuses across the world**–Inco an environmentally destructive Canadian mining company has been bought out by [Companhia Vale do Rio Doce](#) (Vale) a Brazilian corporation that continues to destroy the environment around the world. Stealing land from (Aboriginal) Indigenous people in the Amazon and reeking havoc in Mozambique. The Steelworkers from Canada sponsored a Sister from Mozambique as part of their delegation to the WSF.
- **Organizing a North American World Social Forum** – A meeting organized by UniAlter and the CSN on the relevance of organizing a North American Social Forum. There was an interesting array of people, including the assistant to the mayor of Paris.
- **Assembly of Assemblies** - These statements were read out in the afternoon at an outdoor stadium. Unfortunately there was no translation for this event and thunderstorms drew many people away. However, these statements are available online at:
<http://www.fsm2009amazonia.org.br/programme/alliance-day/results-of-assemblies>

Some members of our group also had the opportunity to participate in workshops as presenters: Ron Rousseau was on a panel for the workshop on the Canadian Aboriginal experience and he briefly spoke on the situation of Canada's First Nations and, more specifically, that of his community near Sudbury, Ontario.

Members of the CUPW delegation also spoke up during questions, answers and sharing sessions at various workshops. For example, Donald Lafleur spoke about CUPW's Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions resolution that was passed and about the Palestine solidarity work undertaken by the union.



We were invited to hear five presidents speak on the evening of January 29th. They preferred coming to speak to local people here than going to Davos, Switzerland. Presidents Lula from Brazil, Morales from Bolivia, Chavez from Venezuela, Correa from Ecuador, and Lugo from Paraguay impressed us with their speeches. Touching on the environment, socialism, poverty, nationalization, human rights, capitalism, imperialism and the list goes on.

Recommendations for Next Time

The WSF is somewhat of a beautiful organized chaos. We were certainly prepared for it prior to our departure which in fact minimized our own confusion. It was also helpful that each of us went there with a complete open-mind to the experience. Still, there are numerous things we can do as a Union to ensure as much richness and participation as possible.

We offer these suggestions out of respect for CUPW and not as a critique of the hard work of the Sisters and Brothers who worked tremendously hard to organize this delegation. As a Union, we need to ensure that our international solidarity work is constantly assessed and analyzed to ensure that we get as much benefit out of these opportunities as possible.

The following are some suggestions from the delegation:

Practical Aspects

We should make sure the following things are taken into consideration

- Bring a cell phone (or buy on site);
- Ensure access to the Internet;
- Consider having a guide-interpreter;
- Ensure delegates are aware of all the expenses that will be reimbursed. We should create a checklist to assist delegates.
- Co-ordinate the travel so that no-one is traveling alone.
- Have lots of CUPW gear to hand-out to contacts and bring a CUPW flag. We may want to mail stuff ahead of time.



Continuity of the Planning Process

A fourth aspect of active and dynamic participation, which is neither material nor human, but essential, is the continuity of the planning process. What does continuity of the planning process mean?

Concretely, it means ensuring continuity from one forum to the next, between two international or national conferences, etc. It also means maintaining our relations with other organizations, following up with contacts to see if future meetings are possible. Are our partners present? Will members of delegations we host be present? This is continuity planning.

From then on, our participation becomes more active.

Ethical Considerations

I do not understand why we don't question where we stay! This may not always be possible for security reasons; but every effort must be made. We are fighting against capitalism and big business, and the first thing we do, is go stay in a hotel owned by a US company. Where is our contribution to the local economy? And on top of that, we had to have breakfast and dinner there because those meals were included in the package. If we had that much money to afford staying in this type of hotel, why not share our good fortune with others and enable them to come?

Using the WSF to Build Contacts with Sister Postal Unions

In this case, our contact at FENTECT said he was going to attend the WSF but then didn't come. In the future, we should make sure to arrange meetings ahead of time and consider leading joint workshops with other international postal unions. We could arrange a day of post office visits, meetings and maybe even a dinner.

CUPW should consider sponsoring postal workers, from the global south, as part of our delegations to future WSFs. This could be tied into workshops that are organized at the forum. Participating in the WSF with our sister unions is a way to build solidarity and connections and inform the broader social justice movements of our struggles.

Building Contacts with Progressive Organizations

As a Union, we have had the opportunity to make many connections with other organizations such as Women's groups, Peace activists, environmentalists, Indigenous groups etc. We need to take advantage of all our contacts and ensure that the delegation has a list of contacts to meet and organize with while at the WSF.

Workshops on Issues of Importance to CUPW

When we attend a future World Social Forum, we should consider holding a workshop. There are any numbers of topics that we could present on with our allies in the labour and social justice movements such as postal liberalization, incorporating equity into unions and organizations, organizing precarious workers. We could encourage one of the union's committees, like the National Women's Committee or the National Human Rights Committee to put together a workshop on an issue they choose.

We can look to the participation of the Steelworkers Union of a good example of organizing workshops. They chose to bring people who had knowledge of Vale, the Brazilian mining company that bought up Inco. The Steelworkers brought some environmental experts and a woman from Mozambique who had done research on Vale's mining operations in communities in Mozambique. While at the WSF, the Steelworkers showed the links and connections of a company exploiting workers and communities across the globe.

Interaction with the CLC

CUPW should consider its dependence on the CLC at the WSF. By relying on the CLC we may limit our own capabilities of making connections and coordinating our own agenda.

Participation in World Social Forums

CUPW and the Québec and Canadian labour movements must encourage participation in the upcoming Québec social forum scheduled for October 9-12, 2009. They should also participate in organizing a North American social forum in Mexico.

The CLC should always send a letter encouraging affiliates to participate in the WSFs. The CLC should make strong recommendations for future participation in WSFs.

We believe the Canadian and Québec labour movements should have a strong presence at COP 15 (follow up to Kyoto climate change conference) in Copenhagen next fall.

Delegations

(Many of the following suggestions were in fact done this time; we just wanted to reiterate their importance.)

- Ensure that equity groups are represented as part of the CUPW delegation. As the WSF this year focused on Indigenous rights, it was vital that we had an Aboriginal member represented on the delegation.
- Ensure the delegation is made up of members who have previous experience with international solidarity and human rights.
- Ensure one member of the delegation has knowledge of the various organizations, unions and groups and could assist with making connections and setting up meetings with various groups.
- Ensure one member can communicate in the local language but this person should not be expected to act as an interpreter the entire time.
- Give the delegation should the report(s) from the previous delegations.
- Examine the possibility of having one person who is the organizer/interpreter for the delegation.



Thank you

As a trade Unionist the WSF is the opportunity of a lifetime. The WSF does in fact show that another world is possible. The WSF and the movements in the South, show us the possibility of a world that is based on equality, human rights, respect for the environment, justice, peace, and a world that puts people before profits. Thanks so much to CUPW for allowing us the opportunity to attend, witness and participate in an event that is ever life changing.



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