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The US Social Forum: The Anti-Tea Party Experience The African World By Bill Fletcher, Jr.

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It was unlike any political experience I have had. The extent of the racial/ethnic diversity; the preponderance of people under 35; the gender balance; the international guests; the broad range of progressive social and political organizations; this and much more were in evidence for all to see at the phenomenal US Social Forum (USSF). The gathering, from June 22 - 26 in Detroit was the second such gathering in the USA, inspired by the World Social Forum movement that commenced in Brazil in 2001 (the first US Social Forum was held in Atlanta in June 2007). I forgot to mention, there were somewhere between 15,000 - 20,000 attendees!

The US Social Forum was the product of an immense amount of work on the part of a planning committee that drew from a variety of organizations and movements, with one particular network, Grassroots Global Justice, playing a very central role in moving the process. One of the striking features of the USSF was that the political diversity did not result in sectarian behavior. People who, outside of the USSF context, are often at odds, found a safe meeting place, and actually more than that: a place where fruitful exchanges could take place.

Yet in walking through the conference - which in many ways was multiple conferences, given the hundreds of workshops and plenaries - what struck me the most was that this was the antithesis of the Tea Party movement. Instead of the fear, ignorance and hatred emanating from the Tea Party crowd, there was a sense of optimism - yes, optimism - from the gathering, mixed with an urgency to defend and change planet Earth before it is too late. This was remarkable given that the gathering was, as mentioned, so diverse and there was no consensus as to what is the specific, progressive alternative to the madness of global capitalism. That said, the slogan of the conference, "Another World is Possible," truly defined the nature of this assembly. It did so in some very fundamental ways, most especially, the recognition that actually existing capitalism is in the process of destroying the planet, what with environmental degradation and the exploitation of working people in order to achieve grand profits. It was also an accurate slogan in that there are social movements and some countries around the world that are taking the lead in experimenting with everything from alternative economies to revolutionary approaches toward the environment. Actually existing capitalism, then, is not the only possible reality; it is the reality to which most of us have become accustomed.

The diversity of the USSF, at the same time, presents certain challenges. Though the USSF, and its multiple constituencies, represent a clear alternative to the evil represented by the Tea Party movement, what it does not contain is a coherent direction in order to contest for power. This is where the Tea Party movement has an

advantage. More than anything else, the core of the Tea Party movement appreciates the necessity to gain the reins of power. Though they are themselves quite diverse, they have a set of principles, myths and fears that unite them, along with an unquenchable thirst to gain political power in order to implement their twisted dreams.

The USSF represents a wonderful safe space for exchanges. It was something of an oasis in a political desert. But as with many an oasis, the caravans arriving and sharing the space are not necessarily going in the same direction when they depart. In that sense, the USSF does not replace the need for an alternative political project that can advance many of the visions that were proposed in Detroit, but advance them with the intent that they become the guiding views of a truly civilized, post-capitalist society.

The organizers of the USSF are to be congratulated for their work and the thousands of participants are to be applauded for their constructive interactions. Let us hope that the USSF becomes more than a gathering transpiring every 3+ years. Let us hope that it becomes a process through which new and progressive ideas can be generated and that those who wish to move in the same direction join the same caravan as they depart the oasis.

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