

London: lessons of the European Social Forum

Chris Marsden
26 October 2004

The Third Annual European Social Forum (ESF) meeting in London, October 15-17, concluded with a demonstration in opposition to the occupation of Iraq. It was an event that underscored the impotence of a movement that had been hailed as the wave of the future and a new model for progressive politics.

Despite widespread antiwar sentiment and opposition to Britain's participation in the US-led occupation of Iraq, the demonstration was made up almost exclusively of delegates that had attended the ESF over the weekend. On this occasion at least, police estimates of 20,000 participants were far closer to the mark than the 50-70,000 claimed by the organisers.

Speeches given at the rally showed why such a popular appeal was made impossible. Not one advanced a perspective on which to mobilise the working class in a political struggle against the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair. Instead, those who advocate limited forms of protest against Blair's pro-war stance shared a platform with Labour MPs and trade union bureaucrats, whose misgivings over the war are entirely subordinate to their loyalty to government and party.

The most radical calls from the Labourites on the platform centred on demands for Blair's resignation. As for a political alternative to Labour, this fell into one of two camps—either support for the impeachment campaign being led by the nationalist parties Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party or for the Respect-Unity Coalition led by George Galloway, which largely bases itself on an opportunist orientation to Muslim voters.

That the protest offered no viable challenge to the Blair government is made clear by the source of most of its funding, which was provided by London Mayor Ken Livingstone. Recently readmitted to the Labour Party and singled out for praise by Blair at the party conference last month, Livingstone is happy to allow noises of protest against the prime minister's pro-US stance on Iraq but understands that the ESF does not challenge the political domination of the Labour and trade union bureaucracy over the working class.

This year's ESF was in many ways a turning point in its fortunes. Even if one were to accept the figures on participation claimed by the organisers, it attracted half the number of delegates that took part in Paris last year. There were widespread complaints, as well as protests by a few hundred anarchists, at how Livingstone had "co-opted" the ESF and how the £400,000-plus funding provided by the Greater London Authority and monies from various trade unions came at the cost of the autonomy and

independence of the ESF.

Despite its claims to diversity and the 500 or so seminars and meetings held over the three days, everything from the political agenda to the platform speakers at the major meetings had been decided beforehand in discussions between Livingstone, his supporters and the continental representatives of the ESF. But this only brought to new depths practices that have existed within the ESF since its formation.

The London ESF was "co-opted" by Livingstone, but last year in France it was similarly "co-opted" by the Socialist Party, the Communist Party and even by President Jacques Chirac's personal office. And when the event was held in Florence the previous year funding and control rested in large part with the two Italian Stalinist parties.

Just how this sponsorship process dictates the agenda of the ESF was most dramatically revealed on its opening night at a rally ostensibly dedicated to opposing the occupation of Iraq and setting the tone for Sunday's demonstration. Included on the platform was Subji al Mashadani, leader of the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU).

Mashadani's presence had been insisted on by the trade union backers of the ESF. He is a member of the Iraqi Communist Party, which participates in the puppet administration set up by the US. The IFTU is the officially recognised trade union body of the stooge regime. Just weeks earlier, at the Labour Party conference, its London-based representative had backed Blair's insistence that British troops must remain in Iraq. Mashadani was also to argue against opposing the occupation.

Vocal protests at his involvement in the debate by Iraqis and others led to it being abandoned. This forced cancellation of the opening rally was only the first fiasco of the weekend. The next night a major scheduled debate on racism was aborted due to protests directed against Livingstone who was an advertised speaker but did not turn up.

What do such incidents reveal about the political character of the ESF?

The official media backer of the ESF this year was the pro-Blair *Guardian* newspaper. It editorialised on October 18 on the possibility of the ESF representing the "emergence of a genuine new politics of the European left".

It was more honest when it supposed that, "It is possible that the event will disappear from the calendar and be remembered only as a European trade fair for political ideas.

“But it is equally possible that mayors of major European cities will now compete with each other to host the event as a kind of political Olympics”.

As well as this overall financial control, large numbers of delegates are sponsored by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that are, in turn, heavily funded by the governments of the major capitalist powers.

What the anarchist protestors and others were really bemoaning is the collapse in the illusion of independence and democracy that had been so carefully cultivated by the political tendencies in the leadership of the ESF.

The ESF is an off-shoot of the World Social Forum (WSF), which was set up in 2000 under the auspices of the Workers Party in Brazil led by President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the French Attac movement and others. In founding the WSF, Lula was anxious to provide himself with anti-imperialist credentials behind which to conceal his efforts to impose IMF-dictated austerity measures. For its part Attac functions as a semi-official adviser to the French Socialist Party and advances minimal reforms and checks on international speculators as a means of defending France’s national interests and ensuring social peace. The WSF project has subsequently proven to be attractive to similar political forces all over the world.

The unelected leaders of the WSF and ESF portray themselves as a largely spontaneous manifestation of the anti-capitalist protests that began in Seattle in 1999 and, latterly, as the political expression of the mass antiwar sentiment that exploded in 2003 in opposition to the US-led attack on Iraq. The opposite is the case. By combining various discredited political tendencies under one umbrella and giving the illusion of “newness”, the ESF and WSF is an attempt on the part of the petty-bourgeois representatives of capital to prevent the development of a genuinely independent movement against imperialism and war. Its central aim is to oppose the adoption of a socialist perspective by all those forces now being radicalised by the depredations imposed on the world’s people by international capital.

The Stalinists, social democrats and former radicals that head the ESF, by virtue of their political history, are most aware of the danger to the bourgeoisie and to their own privileged existence posed by the explosive class tensions that constitute contemporary social life. To avert this danger, the founding principles of the ESF prohibit the participation of party representations and proclaim opposition to all “reductionist views of economy, development and history”—an ignorant and hostile reference to Marxism.

The supposed ban on parties seeks to utilise the confusion created by the betrayals of the old workers organisations. But it prevents no one from participating in the ESF who accepts its essentially pro-capitalist agenda and ensures that there is no political challenge to the social democratic and Stalinist governments, parties and trade union federations to which the ESF/WSF are oriented. Their voice is guaranteed a hearing by the constitutional proviso: “Government leaders and members of legislatures who accept the commitments of this charter may be invited to participate in a personal capacity”.

No genuinely independent movement could ever develop on such a basis. And over the past three years this has become clear to

many of those initially attracted to the ESF’s promise of holding out an alternative to the global corporations—hence its declining numbers.

The fundamental character of the ESF/WSF is expressed in its programme. What unites the disparate organisations within its ranks is their defence of the nation state and efforts to portray it as the means to defend the world’s oppressed. Their hope is to persuade sections of the bourgeoisie that the machinery of the state should be used to implement a diluted form of old-style Keynesian regulatory mechanisms, coupled with limited social concessions, in order to prevent the development of a political movement against capitalism.

It is worthwhile recalling the standpoint advocated by the *World Socialist Web Site* at the time of the first Seattle protest in 1999. It stands today as a basic refutation of the disastrous course that has been advanced by the ESF and its apologists.

The statement, “Political first principles for a movement against global capitalism” published on November 30, explained:

“The record of previous protest movements, including the struggle against the Vietnam War, proves that activism and even the willingness to make great sacrifices are not sufficient. The most complicated task facing human beings is the organisation of a movement against the existing system...”

“The great question today is not how to roll back development to some largely mythical age of isolated national economic life—it is this: who is going to control the global economy, whose interests are going to determine how its immense technical and cultural capacities are utilised? The only social force capable of organising the global economy in a progressive fashion is the international working class...”

“Bound up with the perspective of internationalism is a no less fundamental question: the independent political organisation of the working class. The issues raised this week in Seattle cannot be solved by protest. No application of pressure on the WTO or any other capitalist institution will in any serious way change the situation facing the world’s working and oppressed masses.

“Those opposed to the existing state of things are obliged to go to the root of the problem, the system of production for profit. This means a struggle for fundamental change, to reorganise society on a new social principle. This is a political struggle for which the working class needs its own instrument, its own political party.”

It is on the struggle to build such a party that the fate of humanity rests.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact