US Social Forum in Atlanta: Identity politics and appeals to the Democrats

Kate Randall
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The first United States Social Forum was held June 27 through July 1 in Atlanta, Georgia under the slogan "Another World Is Possible—Another US Is Necessary." The political perspective that dominated the event, which attracted an estimated 10,000 people from across the US, was one of protest politics heavily laden with various forms of identity politics.

The five-day conference demonstrated the organic connection between such ostensibly "left" politics and an orientation to the Democratic Party.

Many in the predominantly young crowd were motivated to attend by concern over such issues as the war in Iraq, the Hurricane Katrina disaster, social inequality, attacks on immigrants, racial injustice and the brutality of the prison system.

However, under the guise of offering a "grassroots" approach, the organizers offered no serious analysis of the roots of the Iraq war or the social crisis in the US and sought to channel opposition to the Bush administration behind the Democrats.

The reformist political outlook of those who organized the US Social Forum was indicated by the list of 35 organizations on its National Planning Committee, which included such groups as the American Friends Services Committee (Quaker) and the liberal Center for Social Justice.

The unions and the labor bureaucracy were also well represented on the forum's organizing and planning committees, which included the Service Employees International Union, the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) of the AFL-CIO, the Atlanta Labor Council and the Communications Workers of America.

The forum's financial sponsors included the National Organization for Women, Amnesty International, the AFL-CIO, the UNITE HERE union, and more than twenty mostly private charitable foundations, many with millions of grant dollars at their disposal.

The US Social Forum is an offshoot of the World Social Forum, which was launched in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil under the auspices of the Brazilian Workers Party, led by the current president of Brazil, Luiz Lula da Silva. The World Social Forum was heavily influenced by the French Attac movement in the wake of the anti-globalization protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, Washington in 1999.

Since 2001, a series of regional events, including the European Social Forum, the Asian Social Forum, and the Mediterranean Social Forum, as well as local and national forums, has been held. All of these events have promoted a type of "social activism" that purports to stand "above politics," while in fact encouraging a reformist agenda that does not challenge the capitalist system.

The Atlanta event followed in this tradition. Every variety of identity politics—from black, Latino and indigenous peoples' nationalism, to feminism and gay, lesbian and transgender rights—was promoted. These were hashed out in a dizzying array of workshops, in which proposals for protest and "organizing" efforts were formulated.

The central political line of the forum, however, was most clearly expressed at the plenary sessions held in the evenings. Plenaries were held on Hurricane Katrina, US imperialism and war, indigenous rights, gender and sexuality, and workers' rights.

The first night of plenary sessions provided the political framework for the plenaries and workshops that followed. At the plenary on "Gulf Coast Reconstruction in the Post-Katrina Era: Challenges, Visions and Strategies," the promotion of racial politics, in opposition to a class and socialist perspective, was overt.

The perspective advanced at the Katrina plenary was indicated in an extract from the program description of the session handed out to attendees, which stated, "The destruction of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita exposes the historic forces of genocide, slavery, and militarism, as well as widespread exploitation, white supremacy, and sexism."

This representation of the disaster obscures the fundamental class issues that underlay the disaster and the response of the Bush administration. Katrina exposed above all the class divisions that dominate American society. The incompetence and indifference displayed by the government summed up the outlook of a ruling elite that has plundered society for decades in order to further enrich a financial aristocracy. The shocking lack of adequate preparation and protection against a major hurricane in a region known to be highly vulnerable was itself the product of the misallocation of social wealth to the detriment of basic infrastructure and social needs, in order to vastly expand the personal wealth of the most privileged layers.

At the same time, under the auspices of the Gulf Opportunity Zone, the disaster was exploited to open up the region for corporate profiteering.

A number of Gulf Coast residents spoke from the floor at the Katrina plenary, expressing tremendous anger towards the Bush administration and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management

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Agency). Katrina victims spoke emotionally on the struggle to return to New Orleans, to rebuild their homes, find jobs and provide for their families in the devastated economy.

Speakers described how residents were barred from returning to their homes, how prisoners were left to drown, and how housing, transportation and basic infrastructure were in shambles nearly two years after the catastrophe. Latinos described how they were brought into the area as virtual slave laborers to work on the reconstruction.

The experiences related by those who experienced the hurricane and its aftermath firsthand pointed to the central truth of the Katrina disaster: that it exposed the vast class divide in America. Those speaking from the platform, however, insisted that Katrina was entirely about race, not class.

Viola Francois Washington of the Peoples Hurricane Relief Fund argued most directly against a class analysis. She cited the horrific treatment residents in a poor black neighborhood had received—contrasting that to the better treatment of residents in a more well-off white area—to declare, "It's not about class, it's about racism."

This essential function of this type of racial politics is to block the development of socialist consciousness in the working class. It thereby serves to reinforce bourgeois ideology and, in objective political terms, prop up the capitalist order.

The second plenary session on the same evening, intitled "US Imperialism, War, Militarism and Prisons: Towards a United States Based in Peace, Economic and Environmental Justice," illustrated the political implications of the promotion of racial and identity politics, namely, an orientation to the Democratic Party.

Judith LeBlanc of the United for Peace and Justice (UFPJ) antiwar coalition gave what amounted to the political keynote speech. LeBlanc, a member of the Communist Party, also spoke at the UFPJ's National Assembly held June 22-24 in Chicago.

In her remarks in Atlanta, LeBlanc noted, "We have lots to do to bring the nearly 70 percent who agree with us on the war, to bring that 70 percent into action against the right-wing lies about the war on terror. What's necessary for today's antiwar movement is to become a strategic movement to end the right-wing policies of endless, preemptive, first-strike war."

She asked, "How can we engage, mobilize and organize that 70 percent? This dilemma is as old as dirt. Over the decades we've faced the dilemma of how to organize the people's righteous reaction to oppression into a political movement to compel dramatic, and yes, fundamental change."

LeBlanc then laid out her proposal to resolve this dilemma. "Our challenge is to work with folks we may not agree with on anything but this war," she said. She then proceeded to elaborate who these "folks" are: Democrats in Congress and those "left" groups that operate within and around the Democratic Party.

She pointed out that the US Conference of Mayors and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) had advanced resolutions calling for the withdrawal US troops from Iraq. "Labor and community pressure is being organized," she argued.

But her greatest praise was reserved for sections of the Democratic Party. "We have far to go in Congress to have the final showdown with Bush," she said. "It makes a big difference who represents our communities and who sits in the White House."

She then held up the Democratic "Out of Iraq Caucus" in the House of Representatives as the champion of the antiwar, anti-Bush cause: "Who has been the first of the strongest voices opposing the war in Congress? It's women and women of color—Lynn Woolsey, Barbara Lee, Maxine Waters. They're fighting for us now, so we have to fight for every candidate, from dogcatcher to the White House, to take a stand. They may not do it because they believe in their hearts it's right, but because we're in their face, because we're doing some big-time strategizing."

The obvious implication was that all efforts and resources must be mobilized to oust the Republicans in the 2008 presidential elections and elect a Democrat.

In fact, the Out of Iraq Caucus has played a key role in facilitating the Bush administration's war agenda. Some of its leading members voted to pass the supplemental war-funding bill in May that abandoned any timelines for withdrawing US troops from Iraq. Their opposition to the war has at all times been combined with calls to "support our troops" and assertions that the continued Iraq occupation has weakened and drained funds from the "war on terror," which they support. At various times they have suggested that a reduction of US troops in Iraq could open the way for the deployment of more troops to Afghanistan.

The message put forward by LeBlanc could not be more clear: the fight to end the war in Iraq must be directed to the Democratic Party, a party of American imperialism that is thoroughly complicit in the US military aggression in Iraq and elsewhere.

At the final plenary of the Social Forum, on "Workers Rights in the Global Economy," which addressed "the impact of neoliberal globalization," it was proposed that US workers could win justice through "new worker organizing methods and new forms of organization, both within and outside of the trade union movement." The implication was that this could be achieved without challenging the profit system.

As at a number of the other plenary sessions and workshops, union officials promoted a nationalist agenda. Stewart Acuff, organizing director of the AFL-CIO, was on the platform for "Workers' Rights" along with Laphonza Butler of the SEIU's "Stand for Security" campaign, representing security guards.

Although the Democratic Party was not openly represented at the US Social Forum, the trade union bureaucracy and the Communist Party were on hand to promote the notion that electing a Democrat in 2008 was the most important question facing working and young people.

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