

U.S. Social Forum Peace Caucus Explores Possibilities for Enhancing Coalitions for Peace and Justice

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The first U.S. Social Forum (USSF) took place June 27-July 1, 2007, in Atlanta Georgia, providing space for diverse movements to come together to discuss the problems they confront and to explore new ways of working together. The USSF is a national gathering that is part of the much broader World Social Forum process, which began in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2001 and which has flourished around the world through hundreds of global, regional, national and local social forums.

My research on the World Social Forum process as well as discussions with my colleague, David Cortright (former director of SANE-Freeze), showed that few U.S. peace activists are well informed about or integrated into the global justice movement. This is despite the fact that the globally coordinated day of action against the Iraq War on February 15, 2003 grew directly from the World Social Forum process. I have long thought that U.S. peace activists tended to frame their struggles in rather parochial terms, often reacting against the unilateralist policies of the U.S. government rather than promoting ideas for making the U.S. a more responsible part of a multilateral polity. Peace activists from other countries have been involved in the global justice movement and the World Social Forums (WSFs), but major U.S. peace and antiwar groups have had limited involvement in the process (United for Peace and Justice leaders did attend the WSF beginning in 2005, partly in response to an initiative of Italian peace groups).

The divide between the peace/ anti-war and global justice movement was dramatized in the fall of 2005 when United for Peace and Justice organized a large anti-war rally during the weekend of the World Bank/IMF annual meetings without joining forces with Mobilization for Global Justice, which was organizing protests for the same weekend and offering important analyses of the connections between the global financial system and the war (<http://dc.indymedia.org/newswire/display/131546/index.php>).

I hoped to encourage more U.S. peace activists to participate in the USSF by organizing a "Peace Caucus" as part of the workshop program. The Peace Caucus was a series of three workshops during which participants discussed the challenges of building coalitions to do peace and justice work, considered ideas being put forward by diverse groups, and developed consensus on strategies for helping renew and strengthen social movements working to end war and its underlying causes. Although I wish I could have devoted more time to doing outreach to get leaders in major peace groups to attend the USSF and the Peace Caucus, I did manage to pull together a strong program of speakers while also gaining a greater appreciation for the tensions every organizer faces between organizing within the World Social Forum process and doing the

day-to-day work within one's own organization (or university!). By engaging the process established by the USSF to organize peace and justice workshops that would help advance key principles of the World Social Forum process, I sought to both apply what I have learned in my research and learn more about the WSF process and its significance.

In this essay I describe what happened in the Peace Caucus sessions and examine some of the lessons I learned from doing this sort of "participant observation" research. I also provide some reflections on the challenge of doing "socially responsible" scholarship.

The Peace Caucus

The Peace Caucus was a series of three workshops held in successive days during the USSF, and each session addressed the daily theme of the USSF, moving from "consciousness" (Thursday) to "vision" (Friday) to "strategy" (Saturday).

While I had hoped the Peace Caucus would draw a diverse array of groups, participants were mostly white, middle class, and working largely within the mainstream of the peace movement. This is not surprising, given that there were over 100 simultaneous workshops to choose from! Nevertheless, several activists of color and people working in low-income communities attended, providing valuable insights into how to transcend these familiar boundaries.

The first session of the Peace Caucus brought together George Martin, national co-director of United for Peace and Justice and Sameer Dossani, Executive Director of 50 Years is Enough & member of Mobilization for Global Justice to present ideas and launch a discussion of the challenges of coalition work in the peace movement. A key theme that emerged from the session is that peace organizers are constantly faced with the urgent need to stop particular wars while also wishing to address the underlying causes of war. When people are dying, it's hard to not act to "put out the fire." And in the context of ongoing wars, those arguing that we need to find better fire prevention methods can look callous if not misguided. Moreover, the structure of the U.S. electoral and policy process makes it more likely that groups will adopt narrow, single-issue frames such as those advocating an end to a particular war or military intervention or against a particular weapons system, rather than advancing more complex proposals to address the structural causes of violence and militarism.

The second peace caucus session presented several "visions" of how those concerned with peace and justice might focus their energies. Representatives of groups organizing campaigns that I thought were putting forward especially innovative and promising initiatives for peace and justice -Nicola Torbett of *Tikkun* and the Network of Spiritual Progressives, Cheryl Tarr of the campaign for a U.S. Department of Peace, and Lois Barber of EarthAction International-spoke about the Global Marshall Plan initiative, the Department of Peace Campaign and the UN Emergency Peace Service and WorldVote initiatives, respectively. United for Peace and Justice co-director Leslie Kagan offered some insightful reactions to the proposals from the perspective of an organizer

who has worked to build a diverse coalition of peace groups. She noted, for instance, that the original Marshall plan was an explicit attempt by the U.S. to secure its own financial interests in a post-WWII Europe, so a plan to enhance international financial assistance should seek to distance itself from the negative implications of this name. She also voiced the concerns of many activists here and in the global South by stressing that any work to strengthen the United Nations through initiatives such as the Emergency Peace Service must be preceded by steps -starting with reform of the Security Council--to make that institution more representative of and accountable to all of its members. Comments from participants identified other limitations of the proposals, including their failure to adequately address inequalities in the distribution of economic and political power.

This second session was instructive, and I believe many participants in the session learned about these initiatives for the first time, but in hindsight I think it may have been better to use the session to generate participants' ideas about their "visions" of what other sort of world they would like to see (and work towards). Nevertheless, ideas about a collective vision began to emerge from these first two Peace Caucus sessions, and as facilitator I sought to keep these common threads at the forefront of our consciousness as we engaged in discussions. For instance, it was clear that for those focusing on the urgency of ending current wars as well as for those concerned with economic justice, the aim of securing human rights and dignity is paramount. Several participants spoke about the need to affect broader cultural change to shift people's thinking and attitudes away from violence and militarism and towards notions of human rights, peace, and solidarity. This gave me hope that we could come to consensus in our third and final meeting of the USSF Peace Caucus around an action statement that we would put forward at the Peoples Movement Assembly, which would meet on the final day of the USSF.

To ensure that we would have a fruitful third session, I invited people to participate in a planning session the following morning. We would meet in one of the "open spaces" provided by USSF organizers to allow groups to engage in coalition-building work during the forum to discuss how to structure the third Peace Caucus. This session for early-risers proved very fruitful, and we agreed upon a set of questions and structure for the session. Volunteers agreed to do the preparatory work for the session, which included revising the draft "Citizen's Peace Plan," which I had put forward as a discussion draft for the group and looking up the United Nations' definition of the "culture of peace." We decided to devote the first hour of the session to reaching consensus on a one-page, 7-point "Citizen's Peace Plan for Iraq," which was developed from consultations among many peace activists and stated in strong but general enough terms to encourage many groups to adopt it. We wanted to make a strong statement from the USSF that could help many groups advance calls to end the ongoing devastation in Iraq and avert even greater escalation of conflicts in the Middle East. The second hour would be used to agree upon specific actions that people present at the Peace Caucus (and hopefully others) agree to take upon their return to their home communities.

Before our last Peace Caucus session, though, three other workshops were scheduled that all addressed different aspects of peace movement coalition building. One focused generally on peace movement strategies, the other on links between environment and peace, and one on the challenge of building ties between peace and social justice movements. At our morning planning session, we assigned volunteers to attend these different sessions and bring the lessons from them into our discussions later in the day. My assignment was to attend the workshop on building links between peace and social justice struggles, and while this was the smallest workshop I attended (6 people), it was among the most productive ones. Three participants were organizers in African American and Latino/a communities, and the rest were white activists in various peace organizations. I was glad for the chance to talk with these organizers, since the majority of people at the Peace Caucuses had been white and largely working in middle-class contexts.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, we heard that "peace" work in communities of color tended to focus on ending gun violence in neighborhoods, fighting the "prison industrial complex," and combating military recruitment. In the context of the USSF, however, we were able to move beyond these observations about the different priorities of diverse communities in this country to discuss ways of forging unified struggles to resist militarism and violence. We discussed openly how the different cultures of organizing and speaking present in middle-class and low-income communities can hinder efforts at effective communication and trust-building between groups. I took these lessons to our third Peace Caucus session, and found that these themes resonated with ideas raised at the other two workshops our Caucus members attended.

The third and final Peace Caucus session required discipline to ensure that we accomplished our work in the time allotted, but participants were cooperative (yet still critically engaged) and the discussion was fruitful. We reached consensus on a final resolution we wanted to put forward to other USSF participants and organizers. Below this essay I reproduce the document we adopted in Atlanta. What was interesting and a bit surprising to me was that the actions we agreed upon did not include any calls to join a campaign or even to work towards a particular policy goal. The call to action -which I think truly emerged from the ideas and discussions of the three days-really emphasize the need to work on relationship-building. Participants agreed to move outside their comfort zones to attend meetings and events sponsored by groups different from their own. They also agreed to support civil society more generally by contributing to the World Social Forum process and by remaining vigilant to the need to support each others' work for peace. Instead of calls for "no war" or for specific institutional changes, the Peace Caucus is calling for effort to foster a "culture of peace, human rights and justice." This requires a shift from the familiar campaigning strategy towards more conscious efforts to link the means we use to promote peace with the ends we hope to achieve.

Lessons Learned

Although I had organized the Peace Caucus with a general idea of the action plans I was hoping to see us agree upon, the result was nothing like what I anticipated. Moreover, I think what we experienced here reflects a general objective of the World Social Forum process, namely to provide spaces where people can start to articulate and develop new ways of doing politics. The WSF process emerged from the widespread realization that representative democracy is failing in most of the world to address the real needs people face. Economic globalization is threatening existing democratic rights and freedoms, and political leaders remain unwilling to confront the challenges of globalization to democracy.

The call to action of the Peace Caucus reflects the WSF aims of nurturing networks and building movement unity in a "horizontal" rather than top-down or "vertical" way. Its emphasis on culture of peace and human rights reflects the need to nurture identities that can more readily transcend the stubborn boundaries structured by racism, classism, patriarchy, and nationalism in the dominant culture. Existing political and economic structures have frustrated effective movement-building in the past, but most movements' efforts to promote social change have sought to work within at least some aspects of these institutional and cultural structures. Thus, we've supported candidates who oppose wars and promoted Congressional bills to limit development of specific weapons systems. We've advocated for an end to violent conflict while neglecting persistent structural violence. We've tried (with limited success) to do "outreach" to bring more people of color into a largely white and middle class peace movement so that we could have more political impact. If we want to achieve successful outcomes, we need to change what we do in dramatic ways. If violence is built into the basic structures of international capitalism and nationhood, we need to be mindful of how these institutions have shaped our own thinking and perceptions. George Martin suggested that we need to abandon the idea of "outreach" in favor of "engagement" with other communities in order to address these challenges.

This latter point was dramatized in the final plenary of the USSF, the People's Movement Assembly, which provided two-minute time slots for groups to present their resolutions to the wider USSF assembly. Indigenous rights organizers were exceeding this allotted time, and the moderator took the microphone from a Bolivian indigenous leader in order to keep the program on schedule. The move was seen as deeply offensive to the large delegation of indigenous organizers, and indigenous leaders negotiated with USSF organizing committee to have time to offer their views on the incident and to conduct a traditional healing ceremony to foster new understanding and trust between indigenous and other groups. While my own western and middle-class background (as well as my need to catch a plane home!) made me sympathetic with the aim of providing equal time for all groups and keeping the program to its published schedule, this action in the space of the USSF helped me realize how much my own sensibilities have been shaped by the structures and institutions I'm seeking to transform. By forcing every group to articulate its statement in two minutes, we were privileging groups with greater familiarity with the English language and with

written (versus oral) traditions, among other biases. Cultural practices themselves help reproduce inequality and oppression. This is something we can recognize very clearly in theory, but we might miss it in practice.

Another lesson I took away from this experience is that the WSF process creates open spaces for people to bring a variety of issues and formats of engagement, but it is used most effectively when leaders emerge to actively implement the WSF aims of building a networked movement. Such leaders organize workshops that bring diverse groups together rather than simply present projects of particular groups. They also help participants learn about the broader WSF process by integrating themes from plenary sessions into workshops and making references to other social forums. I sought to perform such a leadership role, and I witnessed many others doing so as well. In fact, the USSF was the most globally conscious of all the social forums I have attended in this country. This is partly because many members of the national planning committee have attended several World Social Forums and they appreciate the importance of building ties between U.S. and global social movements. The USSF website, program, and plenary sessions were used to help participants understand how our forum fits within the larger global context. The successful communication of this message was clear in the fact that quite a number of the resolutions presented at the People's Movement Assembly noted that groups were planning local social forums and intended to participate in the January 26, 2008 global day of action called by the WSF International Council.

A final reflection I took away from the USSF is that we live in a very diverse country, but we have no structures that enable us to engage in dialogues with people different from ourselves. Our society is highly segregated by race and class, and this prevents inclusive, democratic deliberation about what policies are best for our country as a whole. The WSF process has helped to give birth to a truly democratic space where people long disenfranchised by our electoral process can raise issues of concern to them, learn about the views of others, and consider ways of addressing shared problems. USSF planners were very wise to delay a U.S. Social Forum until there was time to educate and mobilize among the most excluded groups in our society. Holding a forum before grassroots groups of low-income people and people of color could mobilize would have effectively closed these groups out of the process. The success of USSF organizers in mobilizing a diverse array of participants and in bringing in some of the most marginalized groups in our society was evident throughout the spaces of the forum, and a member of the WSF International Council called ours the most diverse of all forums. The U.S. has challenged other social forum organizers to intensify their efforts to be more inclusive.

Reflections on Public Sociology in Social Movements

I close with two points that are on the front of my mind as I regroup after a truly amazing several days. The WSF process both challenges and provides opportunities for public intellectuals. I believe that socially engaged scholars can play important roles in helping support the WSF process, especially by helping people learn about it. But there is certainly an

anti-intellectual streak that is part of a more generalized opposition to hierarchy in this movement. This was reflected in the decision to exclude big names from the plenary sessions and to maintain a focus on the important work of "everyday" people. It was also dramatized in the reaction of a group of Palestinians to the selection of a plenary speaker who was not Palestinian (and who publicly criticized Hamas, to add insult to injury). Nobody wants to have others speak for them-especially if that other is from a group that has oppressed one's own people. Scholars need to be constantly mindful of how power and inequality operate in our interactions with the movements we study and participate in. We must also appreciate that people outside the scholarly community can also produce knowledge, and they have developed theories to make sense of the world as they know it. We can learn as much from them as they can from us.

Finally, my work on the WSF process convinces me that participating in the process is a very useful if not an essential way to gaining a more complete understanding of it. It is difficult to appreciate the nuances of the analyses and tensions articulated in these spaces without long-term and deep engagement with it. By organizing within the WSF, I engaged my own "political imagination," as WSF architects intended with this process. I could test the possibilities and obstacles to building networks across diverse groups within this process, which allows me to offer a more informed analysis of the impacts of the process. Had I remained outside the process, I would not have access to the same insights and information I have as a scholar-practitioner.

Citizen's Peace Plan
Adopted by the Peace Caucus of the United States Social Forum
June 30, 2007, Atlanta Georgia

We, participants in the U.S. Social Forum Peace Caucus
Recognizing the devastating effects of the U.S. occupation on the Iraqi people;
And acknowledging the relevance of the Iraq war and occupation to our struggle
for social justice in our communities and our world;
Emphasize the urgency of a rapid and humane end to the occupation.
We therefore call for the following:

1) Military Withdrawal.

The United States to immediately and completely withdraw all troops and bases from Iraq.

2) Iraqi National Reconciliation.

The United States and the international community to play a supporting role in a national reconciliation process led by legitimate representatives of Iraq's diverse peoples.

3) Regional Stabilization.

The United States to ask international institutions, such as the United Nations, the Arab League, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, to sponsor regional conferences of all neighboring countries, including Iran and Syria, to seek measures to end the civil war and stabilize Iraq's future.

4) Reconstruction and Reparations.

The United States to provide sufficient resources to an internationally administered fund to address the humanitarian crisis in Iraq, repair the physical damage caused by its invasion and occupation of Iraq and to provide reparations to Iraqis.

5) Support for veterans.

The United States to provide sustained and sufficient support for all the veterans and their families who have suffered in this war.

6) Words, not war with Iran.

The United States to cooperate with other countries and the United Nations to support the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and engage Iran in direct diplomatic negotiations-- without preconditions--to end the nuclear standoff and promote the stabilization of Iraq.

7) Change U.S. foreign policy.

The United States to shift its foreign policy to consistently support international law and institutions for a more just global system.

8) Transition to culture of peace.

The United States to support domestic policies and programs that foster the transition from a culture of war to a culture of peace, human rights, and justice.

Final Declaration and Action Plan
Adopted by the Peace Caucus of the United States Social Forum
June 30, 2007, Atlanta Georgia

In order to achieve the citizen's peace plan, to strengthen work for peace and social justice, and to prevent future wars, delegates to the Peace Caucus at the United States Social Forum commit ourselves to taking the following actions to make another world possible. We encourage others in the United States and around the world to join with us to advance the cause of peace with justice.

- 1) We will participate in multiple activities of community groups other than our own, following the motto of "giving before we ask" others to support our campaigns.
- 2) In our work we will remain consistently mindful of the connections between justice, peace, human rights, and human relations on the earth.
- 3) We will constantly strive to facilitate healing as we work to promote a culture of peace and human rights.
- 4) Recognizing the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on 10 December 2008, we commit to building awareness of human rights in our communities.
- 5) We commit to continuing the conversations begun at the United States Social Forum, sharing what we have learned and supporting each other in moving forward. We will work to support social forums in our communities in January 2008 as we look towards the second U.S. Social Forum in 2010.

We hope many groups will take up this call to action and carry forward the work begun at the U.S. Social Forum. Further discussion of this document is invited at www.earthaction.org.