

## **The US Social Forum: Another U.S. is Necessary & It's Happening Building our movement from the bottom-up**

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### **From the inside out**

Our perspective and our work on the US Social Forum process is from the inside out – as movement builders, as Project South (an anchor organization in Atlanta), as part of Grassroots Global Justice Alliance of 60 grassroots groups across the U.S. involved in this process since 2002, and as members of the USSF National Planning Committee from the beginning of the process. We share a brief analysis of the US Social Forum and a reflection on the essential unity of theory and practice in our political struggle to transform U.S. and global society.

The USSF is the story of the growing power of the grassroots, of the working class in the U.S. in all our diversity – organizing our movement from the bottom-up, putting the voices and leadership of those most adversely affected at the center, developing a shared vision of the world we are fighting for, a collective plan and process to get there, and doing grassroots fundraising to make it happen.

As the US Social Forum unfolded in Atlanta, June 27-July 1, 2007, the energy, the excitement, the spirit of a movement rising was palpable. We were 1,000 organizations and 12,000 participants registered and credentialed, and about another 3,000 who just came. We were grassroots, Indigenous, African American, Latina/o, Asian and Pacific Islander, Arab, Palestinian, working class, immigrants, women, queer, youth, elders, differently abled, Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and atheist. We came from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Guam; and from 68 countries. The USSF officially began with a wreath-laying at the tomb of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Coretta Scott King to lift up the U.S. South as the place where the most intense exploitation and repression, and resistance has been fought out in the U.S. We organized a festive and political opening march of over 5,000; more than 950 self-organized workshops – many overflowing – scheduled on “consciousness” day, “vision” day, or “strategy” day; 6 dynamic plenary dialogues with the voices and visions of the people, opening with “Gulf Coast Reconstruction in the Post-Katrina Era: Challenges, Visions and Strategies”; a film festival; 100s of cultural performances and presentations, and concerts. 14 solidarity tents offered spaces to gather informally. We networked, formed new alliances, deepened relationships, and dialogued.

The movement registration process worked; the written program was out on time and user-friendly. The peoples media justice center brought the USSF to our communities and the media to the social forum. The children’s social forum engaged our children in working for another U.S. and another world. Medics on bicycles and first-aid stations were there for our health and well being; as was movement security; movement translation and interpretation; and movement logistics. The tech team created a website, handled servers, communications and more. 1,000s of volunteers filled 2,000 volunteer slots of 4-hours. The People’s Freedom Caravan from the Southwest to the Southeast brought buses with 1,000 participants to the USSF from New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama; and buses from Durham, Miami, Detroit, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Minneapolis, Milwaukee, Madison, Chicago, and San

Francisco brought 1,000s more. We put in place a grassroots resource mobilization and fundraising process, including the “pass the hat foundation.” The Peoples Movement Assembly urged us to bring forward resolutions, declarations, and actions for affirmation, including the January 26, 2008 global days of action. We committed to continue the movement building process. The next US Social Forum will be in 2010; and we have much organizing, educating, relationship building, and movement work to do between now and then.

The USSF process was a powerful moment in building today’s movement for justice and equality. We gathered in Atlanta to celebrate our diversity, our identities, our histories and struggles. We also came to deepen relationships, to dialogue about our political and economic analysis and the path forward to resolve the multitude of problems confronting our communities locally, nationally, and globally.

Our communities have known and continue to experience the violence of genocide, slavery, colonialism, imperialism, war, rape, militarism, police terror, and incarceration. We suffer the poverty and exploitation of global capitalism. White supremacy is a daily reality as are patriarchy, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, anti-immigrant oppression, and ecological destruction.

The USSF and the movement we are building is about our struggles to challenge power, privilege, exploitation and all these forms of oppression and destruction as we work toward unity across our differences; to develop a U.S.-based movement that is internationalist and in solidarity with the global movement, with our sisters and brothers in the Global South; to converge our many fronts of struggle – the many communities and issues we represent into a broad and inclusive movement; to lift up the people’s radical history of the U.S. South as a base for our movement building; and to link theory and political practice in our vision and strategy to transform society.

The USSF is, for us, a victory on many levels. As we were planning and organizing we heard from many people and places great skepticism and doubt.

They said we couldn’t do it because:

- The South is too backward.
- We are too working class and low-income.
- We are too many people of color.
- We are the grassroots speaking for ourselves.
- We are women.
- We are queer, transgender, two-spirit.
- We are youth.
- We are from the disabilities community.
- We don’t have enough money.

What they meant was not lost in translation. They were saying:

- *Where are the superstars?*
- *Where are the experts?*
- *Where are the big NGOs (non-governmental organizations)?*
- *Where are the white folks, especially the white men?*

We responded:

***If a movement is possible in this country, in the U.S. – the heart of imperialism, global capitalism, white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy, we have to do it, we are the only ones who can do it. And we did!***

### **On the organic unity of theory and practice – praxis**

Much has been written and said around the debate about the social forum as an “open space” and as a space to make declarations, manifestos, to plan campaigns, and days of action. It is about both these processes and much more.

The social forum process for us, as grassroots organizers and movement builders, has been a multi-years process and is, at its core, about building a movement from the bottom up that will transform the U.S. South, the U.S., and be part of a global movement for another world. This movement building process embodies and embraces both open space for dialogue, reflection, analysis, vision, and a space for developing infrastructure, for planning our political program and action – long-term strategy and day-to-day activities and tactics.

What is not really talked and written about, but is implied and is central, is the deep dialectical integration of theorizing the social realities and economic and political structures that oppress and exploit us, visioning the society and the world we are fighting for, and strategizing the movement building work we need to do over the long haul. At the heart of the USSF process for some of us is precisely this organic unity of theory and political practice.

A struggle without theory is reactive – it can only reflect on its past without an analysis of root systemic causes, of how change happens, and where we are going. It lacks the vision and power of a transformative movement.

We would never have undertaken this task, have brought the USSF to the South, and have organized it as we did without a theory and strategy of movement building and the social change process. The USSF was not – for many of us – a spontaneous process or event; and that is key to next steps and where do we go from here.

So for us the USSF was a great success – it expressed our theorizing and strategy about what the task was before us to build a base for today’s transformative movement rooted in the working class, inclusive of communities racially and nationally oppressed; marginalized because of poverty, gender, sexuality, age, ability; and internationalist in outlook. Only this base offers the solid foundation to build a movement on.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century post-World War II era of McCarthyism and anti-communism, of economic expansion and social reforms created a disconnect between theorizing and political struggle, between academic and working class intellectuals across race/nationality/ethnicity and gender/sexuality. Many in all walks of life became disoriented because of the rising standard of living, government welfare programs for the poor, and civil rights to end racial apartheid, religious and gender discrimination. They declared: “we won.” But the structures of global capitalism, imperialism, colonialism and militarism, white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy

remained intact; and the ruling classes never gave up ownership and power. There were no “good old days” for the most marginalized communities in the U.S.

Today, in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are living the crisis of global capitalism and neoliberal policies in the electronic age. Globalization and automation mean working people are increasingly superfluous in production and distribution of goods and services. Global capital searches the world for the cheapest labor; and labor migrates around the world in search of vanishing and low wage jobs. Public services and property are privatized to create new markets and sources of profit for capital in crisis. The bubble of speculative capital fueled by the orgy of credit and debt is about to burst. War and militarism, growing fascism, and all forms of oppression are daily realities, as are social and ecological destruction – at home and abroad.

The intentional government and elite destruction of infrastructure (levees, etc.), public services, and community in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast before and in the aftermath of Katrina and Rita is perhaps the most visible expression of today’s realities and struggles. It pulled the covers off of all the evil things that exist in the U.S. For those of us organizing the USSF, we know New Orleans and the Gulf Coast is all of us. We moved the USSF from summer 2006 to 2007 so the survivors and fighters from New Orleans and the Gulf Coast could fully participate; and so we could begin to build a movement that in the future could respond quickly to the massive attack on our communities – African American, poor, working class, immigrant, Indigenous, women, children, elders, disabled, incarcerated. Our first plenary lifted up their voices, demands and visions for a reconstructed Gulf Coast. Now, with the bridge collapse in Minneapolis, those living at the headwaters of the Mississippi River also know practically the crisis of the destruction of infrastructure and what it means for life and community. The system is broken and cannot be fixed – only a peoples’ movement from the bottom-up can offer a resolution to the collapse and destruction of society and the planet.

### **Next steps: Make it happen!**

Our consciousness is raised. We are beginning the process of visioning the society and the world we are fighting for. When a critical mass of us shares a vision of a cooperative and egalitarian society, we can develop a long-term political strategy and grow our organizational forms to make it happen. Popular education as part of building a broad and deep mass movement infuses consciousness-raising, visioning and strategizing into the process from the bottom-up. Through revisiting praxis – theory and practice unity – in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can gain greater clarity about historical necessity, today’s objective forces of technology and their relationship to society and economy, the state, human agency, political organization, and the revolutionary process.

We are evaluating and summing up our multi-year USSF process and drawing lessons for going forward. We accomplished much – the huge success of the USSF itself, demonstrating that with a largely volunteer and grassroots movement base we can plan, organize, and implement an event and movement building strategy as big as the USSF. We struggled internally over many things – large and small – and resolved most differences and reached practical unity on others. We strived to walk our talk – to challenge individualism, subjectivity, and various forms of relative privilege; and to create collective and horizontal processes and infrastructure for our movement with principle and integrity. We made mistakes; and were able to correct many of them in the moment and not have things spit apart. That’s all good. But how do we get better? How do we deepen and broaden our movement? How do we collectively create a vision that is

compelling and transformative, that is rooted in 21<sup>st</sup> century realities? Our challenge is building on this movement process to make another United States and another world happen.

Through the social forum process in Atlanta and beyond, we affirm:

- *We are the grassroots firmly grounded in our communities and struggles; and we are internationalists in solidarity with struggles around the world.*
- *We are organizers; and we are movement builders.*
- *We are popular educators; and we study theory.*
- *We understand our problems are systemic; and we are creating a vision for our future.*
- *We are tacticians; and we are strategic – converging our many fronts of struggle into an overarching movement.*
- *We are progressives; and we are revolutionaries.*
- *We are the people; and we are making our own history.*

Movement building for systemic social transformation is a long haul process. It's happening. Be part of it!

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### **Theory-praxis questions for further dialogue**

Our study and analysis of these questions informs our political practice and movement building strategy. What's yours?

1. How have fundamental changes in the forces of production – for example, the technological revolution, electronics, automation, digitization, etc. – transformed the relations of production (class relations, inclusive of all forms of oppression; ownership and distribution of the social product)? What does this mean for value (i.e., the labor theory of value), the rate of profit, the relationship between wage labor and capital, capitalist markets and the distribution of the necessities of life (food, water, housing, clothes, health, education, transportation, etc.)?
2. Is global capital/global corporations and their functionaries in the state/government and various political apparatuses that reproduce poverty, exploitation, white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy, and social and ecological destruction on a daily basis still the systemic enemy? If so, what does this mean for our struggles and movement?
3. What is the new face – form and content – of class struggle (poverty, race/nationality/religion, gender/sexuality, age, ability) in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and our bottom-up movement?
4. What is our vision for the movement and the society and world we are fighting for?
5. What is our long-term political strategy (and day-to-day tactics) to eliminate global capital, fascism, war, poverty, genocide, ecocide, and all our oppressions and create the world we vision?
6. How does change happen? What is the relationship between changes in the objective forces of production and changes in the economy and society, in politics, the ecology?
7. How is the spontaneous mass movement developing in this historical moment?
8. How does the revolutionary process within the mass struggle grow and develop?