

# The international call of **social movements**

*The World Social Forum (WSF) is probably best identified with the recent international wave of protest known as the 'anti-globalisation movement'. While intimately interrelated with the latter, the WSF is just one form of this much more general phenomenon and process.*

*Peter Waterman explains the relationships between the various global movements.*

**B**ehind the WSF is an informal event, known as the 'Call of social movements', which has been attended, and its regular declarations signed, by many WSF participant bodies. The Call formalised itself between WSF2-3 with a Social Movements International Secretariat. But this body, is a matter of discomfort for those within the WSF who want to see the Forum as a platform rather than a movement. (Social Movements World Network website; Vargas, 2003; Whitaker, 2003; World Social Forum website)

The Call in turn proposes the 'Global Justice and Solidarity Movement' (GJ&SM), as a name for the general wave of protest against corporate-dominated globalisation, against US-sponsored neo-liberalism/neo-

conservatism and war. This 'movement of movements' is marked by its good network and communication ability; a fact recognised by friends and enemies alike. (Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 2001; Cleaver, 1998; Escobar, 2003; Klein 2001) But still 'it' seems to change size, shape, reach, scale, target and aims according to events. So, at one moment it might be focused against neo-liberal economic globalisation, at another against the US-led war on Iraq. This makes it harder to analyse than to name.

The GJ&SM, if the name sticks, is easier to characterise by what it is not than by what it is:

- It is not an international labour or socialist movement, though unions and socialists are prominently involved.

- It is not a 'transnational advocacy network' (Keck and Sikkink, 1998) though it is much marked by the presence of international and national NGOs.
- It is not a reincarnation of the international protest wave following 1968, though Che Guevara icons are still popular, and it includes other clear echoes of the 1960s-70s.
- It is not an anarchist movement, though anarchists, autonomists and libertarians are highly active within it.
- It is not a nationalist or thirdworldist movement, though nationalist, thirdworldist, and anti-imperialist forces and notes can be clearly identified within it.

It is, on the other hand, not too difficult to identify a rising number of processes



which have provoked this movement. These include:

- the increasing predominance, in the international sphere, of multinational corporations, and international financial institutions, along with the neo-liberal policies that have been imposed on both North and the South;
- the shrinking of the public sphere and reduction of state social programmes and subsidies;
- the feminisation of poverty, the commodification of women (the sex trade), the simultaneous formal endorsement and political denial of women's and sexual rights;
- de-industrialisation, unemployment and the informalisation of employment;
- the ideology of competitiveness as the court of first and last appeal;
- the undermining of market protection (primarily of weaker national economies);
- the simultaneous preaching and practical undermining of traditional structures and notions of national sovereignty;
- the simultaneous creation of new

- international institutions and regulations, alongside the marginalisation of the United Nations and such agencies as the International Labour Organisation;
- increasing talk of, and the continuing undermining of, ecological sustainability; corporate attempts to copyright genetic resources, to genetically modify foodstuffs, to commercialise them and then coerce people into buying them; the continuation and even increase of militarism, militarisation and warfare despite hopes raised by the end of the Cold War;
- the increase in globalised epidemics and threats to the climate;
- the demonisation of immigrants, asylum-seekers, and of Islam and other 'others'.

All these have dramatically raised social tensions, particularly in the South, but also in the East (the ex-Communist world) and even in such model core capitalist welfare states such as Canada and Sweden. The pressures have also provoked major conservative, reactionary, religious and ethnic backlashes, of a violent and repressive

nature, sometimes internationally co-ordinated.

The movement can even be traced to the 'food riots', provoked by the IMF in the South in the 1980s, when there were urban uprisings against the externally-imposed end of food subsidies. Other protests have included those against giant and ecologically-damaging dam projects in the 1980s, and earlier, and the demonstrations and riots against the poll tax in Britain in 1990. Through the 1990s, there were myriad protests across the South against the euphemistically-named Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) in particular.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) provoked widespread protest in both Canada and Mexico. NAFTA was the catalyst that launched the Zapatista movement in the south of Mexico – initially as guerrillas then as sophisticated users of the mass media and alternative electronic communications. An international left, battered, bruised and disoriented by the downscaling of the welfare state; the downsizing of the working class; by the halting of the forward march of labour;

by the collapse of Eastern Communist and Southern Populist states; by the crisis of the international movements, was inspired by Zapatista.

Other major contributors to the new movement were:

- The rising wave of protest against unemployment, privatisation and cuts in social services, gathering steam throughout the 1990s, markedly in Europe.
- The increasing development of

stalemate in the growing movement in North America. Yet, with the US-led wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, a movement often considered primarily 'anti-corporate,' became the biggest international anti-war protest in history. As a *New York Times* columnist put it: 'There may still be in our planet, two super-powers – the United States and world public opinion'.

The language of the new radical-democratic protest movements is

is shaping up is much more than a Northern, or even a Western-hemispheric, internationalism.

The new local and international movements are inspired by the explicit or implicit recognition that 'the nation-state... is at once too large and too small for the range of real social purposes'. (Williams, 1983:197). What holds these levels, spaces, foci together, in a possibly conflictive but unavoidable tension, is the more-recent recognition, by the Zapatistas, of the necessity for 'a world where many worlds fit'. (EZLN, 1997)

**Yet another name – the 'anti-capitalist movement' – is as much an aspiration as an actuality. But it has passed one major test. When the terrorist attack on New York and Washington occurred on September 11 2001, there was a stalemate in the growing movement in North America. Yet, with the US-led wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, a movement often considered primarily 'anti-corporate,' became the biggest international anti-war protest in history. As a *New York Times* columnist put it: 'There may still be in our planet, two super-powers – the United States and world public opinion'.**

'counter-expertise', concentrated in international and national NGOs which had been honed at a series of UN conferences and summits through the 1990s.

- The rise of irreverent, often anarchist-tinted, direct action movements, of international appeal, such as Reclaim the Streets in the UK.
- The 1970s-80s movements which served as forerunners to the rise of the so-called New Social Movements both in the North and South.

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increasingly infecting some of the aging international trade union organisations, such as the recently-renamed Global Union Federations (GUFs) while trade unions, which have 150-200 million members worldwide, are increasingly attracted to the WSF (Aguiton, 2003; Buckley, 2003; International Transportworkers Federation, 2002)

The WSF has been held in Porto Alegre, Brazil since 2001 and is scheduled for Mumbai, India in 2004. If the earlier-mentioned protest events were frequently marked more by opposition than proposition, the Forums have not only been devoted to counter-proposition over a remarkably wide range of social issues (with a wide range of significant collective actors), they have also demonstrated that what

Conclusion: A fifth international?

A new internationalism is taking shape, though it might be more realistic to put this in the plural, or to distinguish it as 'the new global solidarity'. There will be argument about whether it surpasses the First-to-Fourth Internationals or provides a basis for some kind of Fifth one. However, it is also quite possible that it will reproduce the errors, and failures, of previous internationals. The GJ&SM has not, so far, proven to be a movement much aware of that history, which is also part of its own history – or at least of its inheritance. Those involved in such debates are, however, likely to agree that a movement that is not aware of its history is in danger of repeating it. (Löwy, 2003; Waterman, 1992, 2001a)

*This is an edited version of an article in the World Social Forum. Waterman has been a supporter of and occasional contributor to the SALB since its foundation. Since 1984 he has been working on labour and other new internationalisms. He is co-editor of Sen, Jai et al (eds). Forthcoming. World Social Forum: Challenging Empires. Delhi.*