

and we sang ‘Hasta Siempre Comandante Che’¹

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For most of us, Brazil invokes images of the Samba as seemingly carefree, happy-go-lucky Brazilians united across class and colour lines in their millions spill out onto the streets after the final whistle of another World Cup victory. Then, of course, there is the Rio Carnival with its street parades, glistening bodies, pulsating African drums and Latin music – a street carnival that lasts for days. So while we know we go to the World Social Forum proclaiming ‘*Another World Is Possible!*’ and we are all Left, militant and radical, we are just as much aware of these media images of Brazil. But Brazil is also the land of the MST (Landless Workers’ Movement), the CUT (Brazilian Confederation of Trade Unions), PT (Workers Party) and Lula – the shoe-shine boy, shop steward, labour leader, PT leader, hope for the Brazilian poor and now President of Brazil. Landless masses in many parts of the world today hope to model themselves on the MST or at least strive to emulate their achievements of successful land occupations. Others viewed the birth of the PT – out of a serious initiative from the trade union movement and its ability to accommodate various left currents into a single united workers party – as a possibility for the often weak, crisis-ridden and disparate left in other parts of the world to become more effective political forces. Many of us in all parts of the world closely followed the Brazilian 2002 presidential elections and, even amongst those of us who had reservations about the rightward shifts in Lula’s politics in this his third attempt to win the elections, few on the left wished another defeat for Lula.

So off I was to the 2003 WSF, with my ‘Diccionario Ingles/Portugues’ for tourists in my pocket and my extensive knowledge of the Brazilian national soccer team dating back to 1958 – the time of Pele, some will argue the world’s greatest soccer player, though I lean towards Diego Maradona. After all, Pele became a Minister in the neo-liberal Cardoso government while Maradona proudly sported a Che tattoo and adopted Cuba for his place of rehabilitation. I also had a clumsy old tape recorder hanging over one shoulder, to interview whoever was willing to speak into the unsophisticated instrument weighing me down, with a microphone virtually forced down their throats for better quality recording. On my other shoulder I had my camera with only a 300mm zoom lens, quite cumbersome for taking quick photos.

I spent one day in Sao Paolo walking the streets, searching out markets, trying to communicate with street vendors, taxi drivers and street kids supposedly ‘notorious’ for pick-pocketing and their association with violent organised drug-dealing gangs – not showing my camera or tape recorder

¹ This piece is based on recollections two years after the event and is likely to suffer from the weaknesses memory plays on such ventures (the interviews referred to in the text have not been transcribed or translated and were not used for this piece). Comments can be sent to the author at emjay@union.org.za.

around here. Well, the locals who knew of the WSF saw it as an opportunity for making money, caring much less about what it means for the world and our struggle against neo-liberal corporate globalisation. In fact, you could see how the usual prices of wares sold on the streets were crudely scratched out to be replaced with a 'special WSF international solidarity price', (for the revolutionary tourists, the thought crosses my mind) which, according to one local, can be as much as a fifty percentage mark-up. At times some locals showed real irritation with this invasion as they now had to struggle with these 'bearers of the seeds of a new world' for space on buses and trains at the end of a hard working day.

So while I made little progress in Sao Paulo on discussing the WSF and the state of resistance to corporate globalisation with locals, I did have interesting conversations – limited as they were, guided by my dictionary, 'the tourist tool to engaging the local native'. I had an opportunity to test my knowledge of Brazilian soccer, reciting the names of soccer greats of the past fifty years. Some of the locals were impressed – I would like to believe this might be the reason I was not pick-pocketed. More likely, though, it was because I looked just as poor as many locals, right up to bumming cigarettes from passers-by.

At one point I tried introducing politics by asking who wears the number thirteen in the current national team (also Lula's number on the ballot), but there was no match. What was very clear is that virtually everybody on the streets who could be considered as part of the poor, marginalized, and working class voted for Lula with great expectation and lots of space for accommodation if things might not immediately go the way of the poor. This I found not unlike many ordinary South Africans who are more likely to make allowances for the ANC government than respond to the call to arms by sections of the left. The 2003 WSF took place less than two months after the Lula victory and ordinary people were already saying, perhaps in anticipation of shifts in Lula's politics and impending left criticism, that Lula should be given a chance and not be judged too harshly. They will tell you of the rule of the generals, the electoral struggle of Lula to eventually win and the long history that Lula has to undo, not to be expected in one term. Yes, there was a sense of expectation as well as a sense of patience, almost like realising that at some point they might even have to confront Lula, their President. But not yet, why should they fight Lula when they were not as robust against his predecessor Cardoso an unapologetic neo-liberal? Lula, the shoe-shine boy, the worker, is one of them. On asking a local to translate the PT election slogan, 'Agora e Lula', it was translated as: 'It is Lula's time'. Lula is one of them, Cardoso is not. And so, conversation swayed between soccer and politics – and sometimes a convergence of the two, as one of the locals pointed out that Romario, a former Brazilian star striker, was openly canvassing for Cardoso, lifting up his soccer jersey whenever he scored a goal to display another t-shirt underneath with a picture of Cardoso. Zico and Socrates on the other hand, greater stars from an earlier era, publicly declared their support for Lula. Truth or urban-legend, this I don't know, nor will I bother to find out. Why taint such pleasant memories of standing in the rain on street corners, at markets, and at taxi ranks in a city of such scale, with its steep cobblestone streets and its colourful people eking out a living in the

shadow of the high rises and so much wealth and surrounded by so much violence with a healthy and often insightful scepticism of our left credentials and apparent optimism of the struggle against corporate globalisation. Here on the streets of Sao Paulo we talked about soccer, Mandela, Lula, and lions and elephants roaming the streets of Africa.

Then it was off to Porto Alegre, the first few days spent at the Jubilee South meeting deliberating on SAPS, HIPC and strategies to strengthen the global campaign for debt cancellation. The experience was great not so much in its content, this I maintain one can read any day, but in the camaraderie. We debated and grappled with our campaign, looked at lessons from different parts of the world, and tried carving out a path for the way forward. Of course, as was the case throughout the WSF, Africa was scantily represented, perhaps an indication of the state of the campaign on the continent. The discussions were lively, with inputs from all parts of the global south Jubilee South campaign being held together by a group of dedicated women activists from the Philippines and Argentina. Preparations for the day often took place in the early hours of the morning after most of us had been out for some drinks at a local pub/tavern. Here we would eat, drink and sing until late, conversation took a bit longer to come because of the many language barriers separating French-speaking from Creole-speaking, from Spanish variations, from English-speaking and Portuguese-speaking.

After the Jubilee South meeting it was the WSF for the rest of the time. Oh yes, there was one day to spare between the Jubilee South meeting and the WSF, so off I went into the city centre with fora for Africa (as we would say here). There were fora for magistrates, for parliamentarians, for local government, for educators, for virtually everything as I trudged my way through the city, sometimes getting lost. But the locals know us, 'The People of the Forum', as I was referred to at one point when I ended up on the wrong bus and asked for directions.

In another space I came across the Indy media comrades occupying a partly vacant, looking like a condemned building, busily setting up a centre to cyberspatially beam to the connected world what they see and think of the WSF developments. The place is bursting at the seams with a sense of camaraderie, though not without its subtleties and hints of fault lines and disagreements as debates rage about impressions or reports of developments around the WSF. Computer workstations and sleeping bags merge into one as more 'stranded' comrades are offered a place to sleep. Food, drink and sometimes dope are liberally shared on the balcony in the evenings while stories are knocked-out on the computer without pause to be posted on the Indy website. Here you already hear stories of victimisation by the local state for the taking over of the building; plans are discussed to refuse to vacate the building, making it another site of struggle. The attitude of the local state and the future of Lula are considered in the context of the PT having lost elections in the state and city. Soon another group of comrades arrive; they are planning a tour of the homeless on the outskirts of the town, and discuss setting up a homeless town with schools and health care – the works – for the duration of the Forum. And a debate ensues about why it can't be permanent

if we can manage it for the duration of the Forum, why can't this be a model, why don't we occupy one of the venues at the university, the official venue of the Forum. And so the debate goes to and fro. It seems there is as much posturing here as in many other political discussions, exaggeration of radicalism, embellishment of experiences and struggles at home. Photographs are shared and stories are told of struggles often much less heroic than what the narrator makes them out to be. There appears to be an awareness of these embellishments and a sense of tolerance of it as admiration are expressed for one or other struggle. These comrades also seem to speak to what they believe some of the Indy media comrades want to hear. Some greetings to comrades I know and introductions to those I don't know, and finally some quick directions to where I really want to be – the Inter-continental Youth Forum and Camp.

Then it is off to the Youth Camp, a space with its own pulse, different from the rest of the WSF, where nobody seems to sleep. Here a group of youth are busy doing their graffiti thing in broad daylight, there a group of skateboarders showing off their stunts, further up the road another group on bicycles, a group of tents huddled together blares out Reggae while the Rasta sit in deep philosophical conversation passing the herb around, next to them some new-agers are busy meditating in a circle, in another part you can here hip-hop drifting over to you, the hard-rockers are also there, while in some open spaces you might see a group busy with Capoeira and all over the place young couples are cuddling and smooching against trees, in hammocks, on the grass and in tents. Then suddenly a group emerges from a huddle of tents, banging their drums, marching through the camp, singing and chanting slogans, while all over the place comrades are busy putting up political banners from all shades of the political left. In the meantime over PA John Lennon is singing *'Imagine there's no countries'* interrupted by announcements of registration, food selling points, first aid centres, internet centres, community radio centres, changes in the program and everything else that will contribute to a smooth running of the youth forum. And slowly endless numbers of newcomers rock up with tents, shouting and singing while on their way to registration – as Lennon continue, *'Imagine all the people, living life in peace'*. Throughout all this, the presence of police on horseback is visible, but they seem not to bother much with the youth, 'smoke your dope, if you do not notice us its fine, but don't try and be defiant' seems to be the unspoken rule. Here organisers and some of the activists are also a bit worried since the PT has lost the area and are expecting a hard-line attitude from the police, but nothing happened, at least until the last night.

The previous year there was 15 000 registered to live in the camp, but according to the organisers, you can add another 5 000 or so who just join those already in the camp without registering. This year organisers expect at least 22 000 to register, and I say to myself, 'add another 8 000 or so'. Quite a few of them I learn are University students who hire buses and treat this as a last part of their holidays before returning to school in early February. But I have come across many serious activists from all over Latin America inspired by Lula's victory and Chavez's defiance in the face US imperialism, hoping

to draw strength from this gathering. In one instance I came across a group of women from Guatemala who travelled by bus for days to be there, as did a group of working class youth from Colombia whose trek included a breakdown on their way here. And as newcomers arrive – WSF novices, that is – they eagerly introduce themselves to whomever passes them, have discussions and exchange addresses. And as the camp grows fuller you see more and more political banners going up as organised groups colonise different spaces in the camp to facilitate planning and co-ordinating political interventions.

‘What a logistical nightmare’, I thought at the beginning, but quickly realised things were unbelievably well organised as I met and talked to more of the organisers. Here, organisers meet under trees amongst the tents pitched up all around them, considering whether the recycling centre has enough staff, the computer centre is up and running, the arrival of delegations from other parts of the continent and the world, who is allowed to sell wares in the camp, and how to keep ‘capitalist’ vendors out of the camp. Above all there are intense discussions amongst veteran youth participants on the program of the Youth Forum and their attitude towards the WSF. Here in the youth camp there is a mix of active organising, caucusing, partying and lazing around in hammocks and excited greetings between veterans from different parts of the world who had not seen each other since the previous WSF. But these young militants were developing a serious left critique of the WSF; at the time I left them, the debate about whether the Youth Forum should pass a resolution opening the discussion about the form and future of the WSF should be forced onto the WSF agenda was still unresolved, though the view of strengthening youth participation in the Gathering of Social Movements held sway, with the discussion of a World Youth Network still to be discussed. To the outsider, these discussions appear to be taking place haphazardly, but they are driven by a serious conviction of young activists to change the world.

On the day of the opening of the Youth Forum the organisers realised that there was still nobody from the African continent registered in the camp, and a delegation is dispatched to find me. I’m busy interviewing Argentinean youth from the north west about the Piqueteros and their occupation of the freeways sometime the previous year for more than a week, bringing traffic and the movement of goods to and from Chile to a standstill, driving their point home and winning some key demands. Further appointments are hastily made to continue the interview that unfortunately never took place. I was now roped into a discussion with a group of comrades, some from the organising committee, about the program and strategy for political outcomes of the Youth Forum. After some serious debates about the WSF and the need to strengthen the gathering of social movements and about changes to the Youth Forum program, the opening session is discussed and I’m approached to speak as a representative from Africa. After a long debate about notions of representation, who speaks for African youth, and the state of politics on the continent, no conclusions are reached, for these comrades are intent on reflecting the world, especially the voices from the global South at the opening.

In the end I found myself on the opening panel insisting that I do not speak as a representative of the African continent or its youth, but rather as an activist from the African continent in the absence of African delegations at the youth camp at the time of the opening. I was reluctant, and cursed my fellow continental comrades for not getting their act together. But once again I realised that this, to some extent, is a reflection of the state of movements in Africa whose delegations at the WSF I later observed are saturated with NGO types. This just reinforced by cynicism of NGOs and how donors and northern partners shape African representation and voices. I used the opportunity at the opening to raise some of these concerns which found an echo in the experience of many activists from the south. I then went on to talk about my assessment of the state of movements on the continent, of dictatorships, of civil wars, HIV/Aids, of recent struggles on the continent in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, South Africa and elsewhere, as well as a critique of the neo-liberal course of the ANC government and of the continental plan NEPAD. Of course, amongst sections of the youth Mandela was celebrated no less than Lula. In fact, as part of the opening a cultural group of Brazilians from African descent sang 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika' just shortly before I spoke. I had some discussion with them afterwards and was made acutely aware of their sense of marginalisation in the politics of resistance in Brazil and their forms of organisation. Afterwards I was told by a comrade from Argentina who understands English quite well that most of my talk was so badly translated into Portuguese by the Canadian translator that more than half of what I said was missed. I just smiled and thought, 'so much for Canada speaking for me, or Africa for that matter' and added, 'well, who do I speak for anyway?'

In this interchange about the incident of the translation it also became clear that the youth from the south had concerns with the disproportionate dominance of northern youth. That evening I got an informal report from some of the organisers of the composition of those registered; continentally we had Latin America followed by North America and then Europe. I did not have an opportunity to get a country break down, but my impression was that USA and Canadians were more than the Argentinean delegations as the second biggest delegations after the youth from Brazil. In the end I got the Argentinian comrade to translate for me whenever she was available when I interviewed youth in the camp. But, as most arrangements of such nature, this only lasted for three interviews and I settled on interviewing whoever understood rudimentary English or enlisting the help of any willing bystander who could translate from Spanish or Portuguese into English.

As a result of my interaction at the youth camp I was later invited to participate in a panel discussing alternatives for media. The bulk of this panel focussed on cyberspatial communication using Indy media as a yardstick of effective communication. On this panel I provocatively challenged the Indy comrades on its impact as a tool for mobilising, focusing on communication in a broader sense, talking of hip-hop, choral groups, graffiti, theatre, poetry, the arts, fables, folklore, and even rumour and gossip as under-utilised and perhaps more effective forms of communication to reach the youth. I then concluded that radio and the print media are still much more effective forms

of reaching young people and the marginalized in general than Internet-based communication. Lively debate followed about the necessity for international networking, while local youth argued for other ways of effective mobilisation of young people. My stance was more triggered by the arrogance of the Indy comrades on the panel and a tendency by some of them to distort the actual social weight of movements they write about, even at times creating a false sense of strength amongst actors of these movements as well as the urban and particularly northern-based domination of Internet based communication.

Throughout my stay in Brazil, I spent every evening in the youth camp after sessions, interviewing, discussing, taking photos and socialising. This I still find potentially the richest part of the WSF, and believe, if anything, we should plan a year in advance to send strong representations of youth from this continent to the youth forum.

Still, the organisers of the youth forum did tend to, like so many at the WSF, follow the anti-corporate globalisation celeb activists like Chomsky, Roy, Shiva and others. My take: 'Whatever they might say they already said or will appear in print the next day, but how will we hear the voices and experiences in struggle of youth, women and other grassroots activists?'

In fact, except for the four times when I was on a panel and when I attended a gathering of social movements discussions, I spent most of my time outside of the sessions talking to youth, women of the global march, single mothers from Boston, trade unionists from the USA, NGO employees from the UK, street kids from Brazil, Cuban doctors, Brazilian landless, Anarchists from Europe, Nicaraguans with Sandino's anti-imperialist tradition, Nigerian NGO employees, Colombian teachers, Venezuelan Bolivarians, Zimbabwean democrats, Haitian and Dominican debt activists, Guatemalan environmentalist campaigners, Filipino social-democrats, Ugandans, Indian small farmers, Kenyan human rights activists, Nepalese, Chileans, Indonesians, Russians, and many others. Sometimes this happened over a beer, sometimes over a sandwich, other times in between sessions, often on some or other protest march. But in this milieu I learned more about the global movement and how some of its actors see themselves. This was tangible, in these conversations I felt the energies, challenges, debates and sheer sacrifice that make up these movements struggling in all parts of the world, so much richer than in analyses, reports, theses and literature that I have seen for some time.

So, in the evenings, I would get together with some comrades I'd met earlier or would just join a group randomly to share and learn, when conversation often came easier after a few pints of cerveja.

For some the highlight might have been the address by Lula with his deep sonorous voice or the visit firebrand Chavez, for others perhaps a talk by Chomsky or Arundathi Roy. For me it was not even the massive march on the first day of the forum – an incredible festival celebrating our endeavours for a better world – or that of the last day, born out of the deliberations of social movements, protesting the impending US invasion of Iraq. For me it

was spending an evening with a few hundred Cubans and many others celebrating Cuba where we sang *Hasta Siempre Comandante Che* and other Cuban songs. It was the interview with a 70 something year-old mother from Argentina, one of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* wearing the Argentinean flag as a long cape and a white head-scarf neatly embroidered in blue with the name of her son who disappeared during the rule of the generals in the 1970s, one of thousands who disappeared yet all still present as Argentinean comrades will remind one. An interview that lasted three hours starting off with the life of a lower middle-class mother who lost husband and son to the brutality of capitalist repression in the face of the demands from ordinary people, an interview that told the story of the bravery of mothers at a time when all voices of dissent were silenced. An interview that showed the growth of this mother into an international voice of the mothers, of the debt movement, and of the new social movements. It was the interview of the young housewives who took to the streets in the face of the crises in Argentina that saw a succession of finance ministers resigning in a matter of weeks that inspired me. Of women who organized themselves into gatherings at local plazas outside of the traditional left organisations to raise their own voices in the struggle against neo-liberalism. Of women who with pain describe how all sorts of left groups have, through their sectarian interventions, slowly destroyed these initiatives where the numbers of ordinary people gathering weekly in the plazas have shrunk from hundreds to tens. It was the discussion with former Sandinista guerrillas who once occupied leading positions in the civil service and even government who have turned their back on the FSLN while not on Sandinismo, the voice of anti-imperialism. For me it was the interview with some local school kids between nine and fourteen years old, who rushed to the Forum after school to compete with street kids to collect as much recyclable material as possible to supplement the family income, going home at one o' clock in the morning to do homework, to rest and prepare for another day of schooling supplemented by scavenging (or is it the other way round?) while their mothers work ten hour shifts for a pittance. For me a great moment was talking to a comrade from Haiti, speaking in Creole, about the struggles of that island, that more than two hundred years ago freed itself from the yoke of slavery yet remains until this day a society deliberately marginalized by the North. It was that moment in the youth camp when I sat with some comrades from Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, Canada and Mexico at the lake next to the youth camp, watching the sunset while sharing our thoughts about the Zapatistas.

And the saddest and loneliest moments were watching revolutionaries discussing the future while throwing their beer cans onto the grass, stepping over street-kids hanging around like vultures waiting for the left to finish the beers so that they could collect another can.

And as I bought a daily newspaper on the final day while sitting at the airport, exhausted and reflecting, internalising my experience and making some mental notes, I once again paged through the local paper as I had everyday, trying to decipher local coverage of the Forum. There on the front page was a photo of hoards of naked young people marching with clenched fists. With the help of my dictionary I understood that it was a protest at the

youth camp the night before. A young female activist was arrested for taking a shower in the nude at the open-air communal showers in the camp. The youth in the camp responded en masse, took off their clothes and marched to the local police station, successfully demanding the immediate release of the arrested comrade, capturing the spirit of much I saw in the camp.

As I travelled back I scribbled notes about the need for social movements. I contemplated some of the views among the young activists and their disdain for the talk-shop format of the WSF. I wondered about strengthening the voices of social movement and leaving those who thrive on talking, researching, commenting, and reflecting on inequality and deprivations of the majority to their talking. I wondered how we could do more wherever we found ourselves as a conscious act to strengthen this global movement against corporate globalisation and neo-liberalism. I wondered about how we should organise the local youth to become part of the youth forum and draw inspiration from the youth from all over the world. I wondered about how to break the NGO grip that so many movements find themselves in. I wondered about a single mother from Boston who must go back to struggle for a roof over her head, of the youth from Argentina, the Brazilians of African descent, about the brave Filipino women, and honest Indonesian social-democrat. I admired the spirit of Sandinismo still prevailing with comrades from Nicaragua; I had the image of the young gay man standing in the middle of the youth camp with a rainbow flag four metres high handing out condoms. I once again saw in my mind's eye the fifteen-year-old Colombian young woman leading a large contingent of Latin American youth in chants against neo-liberalism and for socialism through the streets of Porto Alegre. My head was swimming in the tens of thousands of marchers with more red flags fluttering in the wind than one could imagine. And for a moment my thoughts froze on a Palestinian flag ten by five metres, carried by Brazilian youth, and I concluded with joy and a heavy sadness; everywhere in the world there are people young as fourteen and old as eighty, ordinary men and women, who dare to struggle, even if the road is still so long. They are the future!