

U.S. Social Forum: Carnival, Classroom, Family Reunion

By Josh Healey, June 25, 2010

Halfway through the weeklong US Social Forum (USSF), it's clear: I am not at a mere political conference. I am at a cultural carnival, an open-air classroom, and an activist family reunion with 20,000 of my crazy cousins. It's amazing, exhausting, and amazing all over again.

There's so much going on, it's hard to wrap your head around it. Earlier this afternoon, there was over 200 workshops, two concerts, a spontaneous march down the street, a friend of mine almost getting arrested for handing out flyers (the Detroit police haven't been as welcoming as the actual community), and a multigenerational, World Cup-inspired soccer game -- all going on at the same time!

This type of beautiful chaos has its pros and cons. On one hand, the autonomous community and DIY energy creates a safe, welcoming space where people can find their own place (and pace) at the forum. At the same time though, it makes it harder to ensure accountability and concrete steps moving forward after we leave Detroit.



What is the U.S. Left going to do concretely, or even symbolically, after the USSF? My guess is that if you asked the 20,000 people gathered here, you wouldn't get quite that many answers -- but it'd be a lot more than a Ten Point Plan.

One of the sessions I attended today was called Education for Radical Transformation. It wasn't a workshop, but a four-hour People's Movement Assembly (PMA), the forum's term for larger gatherings that make declarations on specific issues or communities. If there are concrete actions to come out of the USSF, the PMA's is where much of that is supposed to happen.

The Education PMA had plenty of power in the room, filled with movement luminaries like Grace Lee Boggs, Bill Ayers, Dave Stovall, and hundreds of teachers, students, and organizers from groups like the Philadelphia Student Union and Teachers for Social Justice. Declarations did emerge, such as demands about federal financing of public education, community control of schools, and challenging the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind (NLCB) that will come up in Congress in the fall. All of this is important, all of it is necessary.

But as I stepped outside the PMA for a quick water break, I saw two other education-focused workshops going on at the same time just down the hall. While the USSF planners might not have

had the desire (or capacity) to bring workshop organizers together, they (meaning we) should have at least created a space before the forum for like-minded workshop presenters to know who was doing what. Perhaps they could have come together, resulting not just in stronger sessions but stronger movements.

Still, the beauty far overwhelms the chaos here at the forum. My first session of the day focused on creating cross-racial alliances between black workers and immigrant workers, especially Latinos. Successful examples were given, like the Black Alliance for Just Immigration in Oakland and the Mississippi Workers Center for Human Rights, but all acknowledged there was far more work to be done -- especially considering, as an African-American organizer from Boston put it, the "elephant in the room, which is the racism we've internalized towards each other." The discussion got heated at times, but the facilitators reminded us that "true solidarity comes from facing the fire together." Someone added, "Especially when you don't have air conditioning in Detroit." A much-needed laugh erupted from the sweaty crowd.

At night was the large plenary session open to the whole forum, although judging by the half-empty room, many participants had already called it a day. Which is a shame, because the plenary was a major highlight of the day. Connecting national and global issues (specifically war, trade, and migration), the session featured a brilliant Iraqi activist who challenged progressives that were originally against the war but are now staying the U.S. can't withdraw because the Iraqis will, the media tells us, "oppress their women more and eat their own babies." To which the activist replied, "We need to stop claiming to rescue people through illegal wars. We need to give people their countries back."

A similar challenge came from the next woman, a ex-solider now with from Iraq Veterans against the War. "Everyone wants to 'support the troops,'" she said, "but no one wants to hear the troops." To the Left, she asked, "How do we support the troops who are resisting? Will we give them a place to stay when they are AWOL? Will we get them jobs?" Tough, honest questions that made me question my own contributions to the people at the core of the anti-war movement.

Other speakers included movement representatives from Haiti, India, and (via Skype) Palestine. The latter was met with much applause, especially after it was announced that the USSF committee responded to the demands from queer Arab groups and cancelled a controversial workshop by "Stand with Us," an apologist front group for Israeli war crimes that pretends to stand for LGBT rights in the Mideast. (Another result of the autonomous nature of the USSF, where apparently every proposed workshop was approved.)

Yet the biggest cheers of the day were directed to a young activist from Arizona, who has been leading the fight against SB1070 and the anti-immigrant hysteria of the Grand Canyon state. "We are not undocumented!" she called out from the stage. "We are not immigrants, and we damn sure aren't illegal. We're migrants. We are human beings." She announced her group's intention for a "Summer of Human Rights" in Arizona and a national day of action on July 29 (www.AltoArizona.com for more info), and asked who would stand with Arizona. Everyone leapt to their feet and began the movement's call: "Sí se puede! Sí se puede!"

Yes, another world is possible. We're still working on the strategy on how to get there, but at least here at the US Social Forum, we're sure not lacking the energy.

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