

Report from the World Social Forum VI

Civil Society Meets Chavez's State

BY MARC BECKER

Every year in late January, the world's corporate and government elites gather under tight police security in the Swiss resort town of Davos to plot the future of corporate-led globalization. In 2000, community organizers, trade unionists, young people, academics, and others began to meet to rethink and recreate globalization so that it would benefit ordinary people. This alternative annual meeting is called the World Social Forum (WSF), a take-off on World Economic Forum, as the Davos meeting is known. In six years, the WSF has grown into the world's largest meeting of "civil society"—the sphere of activity separate from both government and the capitalist market. With the slogan "Another World Is Possible," the forum provides an open platform for activists to discuss strategies for resisting corporate-led globalization and to present constructive alternatives. Although little known in the United States, the WSF has quickly grown into the most dynamic and important political event in the world.

After meeting four of the last five years in Porto Alegre, Brazil, the forum moved this year to a new "polycentric" model, with meetings in Mali, Venezuela, and Pakistan. The Venezuela WSF (also known as the "Americas Social Forum II" after a similar hemispheric meeting in Quito, Ecuador, in 2004) began on January 24th with a massive rally through the streets of the capital city, Caracas. Over the next five days, delegates gathered in about 2,000 workshops, panels, and sessions to discuss and debate a wide variety of social, economic, and political issues.

About 80,000 people representing 2,500 organizations from around the

world attended the Caracas meeting. The largest delegation came from Brazil; the United States fielded the fourth-largest delegation this time, after Venezuela and Columbia. U.S. participation in the WSF, always small, has grown steadily; this was the first year that activists from the United States had a noticeable presence.

Compared to the earlier meetings in Porto Alegre, the dominant discourse at the WSF has radicalized: its focus has

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shifted from war and globalization to anti-imperialism and anti-capitalism. Reflecting the shift in tone, volunteers greeting delegates at the airport sported shirts reading, "A better world is possible if it is socialist."

Holding the forum in Venezuela was controversial, reflecting long debates among WSF participants and organizers (and longtime debates on the political left more generally) over the relationship between civil society and party politics. On one hand, Hugo Chávez's government is engaging in a process of social change in line with many of the goals of the WSF. As such, Caracas was a logical venue for a debate on how to construct a better world. On the other hand, from the beginning the WSF was designed to be an expression of civil society that explicitly rejected the participation of political parties, armed groups, and statist solutions.

For Venezuela, hosting the forum

was an excellent opportunity both to exchange experiences with others and to build international understanding of and solidarity with the Bolivarian Revolution, as the movement associated with Chávez is called. Venezuela does not historically have a strong civil society, but the Chávez government appears to have provided political space for significant growth. A fourth of the 2,000 panels in Caracas were organized by Venezuelan civil-society organizations.

Some people feared that in Venezuela the WSF would turn into a Chávez forum. In reality, Chávez was present everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Few Chavista banners or chants made their way into the opening march. Although several panels focused on building solidarity with the Bolivarian Revolution, overall the discussions retained their broad ideological and thematic diversity, with Chávez a minor and relatively insignificant footnote.

The one exception, however, was Chávez's personal presence at the forum. As in 2005 at Porto Alegre, Chávez headlined the largest event, although this time, as leader of the host government, WSF regulations permitted and sanctioned his presence. His speech reflected the consolidation and radicalization of the Bolivarian Revolution. Employing religious language, Chávez declared that "we are realizing the utopian dream that Christ did not see during his lifetime." He proclaimed that "this century we will bury United States imperialism." Capitalism is destroying the planet, Chávez claimed, leaving only two alternatives: socialism or death.

Chávez argued that the WSF should take advantage of its momentum to engage in the political arena, and that it is important to support left-leaning governments like that of recently elected Evo Morales in Bolivia. He noted that the concrete advances in Venezuela would not have been possible without taking political power. Chávez argued that even if he were not president he would still be present advancing these ideas. Nonetheless, some participants resented Chávez injecting himself into one of the forum's

key debates. Some argued that the WSF should return to its original focus on non-governmental alternatives, while others maintained that government is neither good nor evil in itself, and that Venezuela under Chávez demonstrates how state structures can be used to advance goals of social justice.

Vendors lining nearby streets sold all sorts of Chávez memorabilia—hats, T-shirts, watches, and even dolls. His omnipresent image on the edges of the WSF probably reflected both the informal-economy opportunities the forum offered and the decision of gung-ho Chávez supporters to use the forum to advance their political agenda. In any case, by their purchases many participants demonstrated their interest in, and support for, the Chávez agenda.

More significant, however, was the logistical and institutional support that the Chávez government provided to the WSF. For instance, the state oil company, PdVSA, provided free and safe shuttle service between the airport and the city. In the capital, the government provided free transportation on the metro system, tents for the meetings, and even bottled water for participants; it also waived visa requirements and airport taxes, facilitating the participation of as many people as possible. Chávez seemed to recognize this balancing act. “We have helped with the forum and are willing to do so in future,” he stated, “but its work is completely autonomous.”

Although an expression of civil society, the WSF could not succeed on its own. Without logistical support from governments, the forum would need to be scaled down significantly. And perhaps this would not be a bad idea. The WSF has grown so large that it has become a logistical nightmare. In Caracas, forum events were spread across a congested city; it was difficult to get from one to the next. Adding 80,000 people to the metro system turned all hours into peak hours; riders often had to wait for several trains before finally squeezing

onto one. The organization of the forum was often loose and chaotic, with events starting late or getting canceled. A bridge on the freeway between the airport and Caracas had to be closed the week before the forum after showing signs of imminent collapse; likewise, the WSF seemed on the verge of collapsing under its own weight. Larger is not necessarily better and cannot be used as a measure of success.

To be fair, some found encouragement in the chaos as people joined together in good spirits to overcome adversities. It reflects a certain amount of flexibility, both on the part of the government and the WSF, to adapt to changing circumstances. It is this creativity that brings a good deal of strength and power to the WSF.

During the tenure of the WSF, South America has taken a significant swing to the left. Civil society has become empowered and revitalized with new ideas. Local and thematic forums are popping up all over the world. Even in the United States, the fundamentally subversive notion of organizing a social forum has taken hold and led activists to rethink fundamentally how to organize civil society. The goals of social justice expressed at the WSF are

well on their way to being the dominant discourse in the world, and those who advocate putting capital before people will soon be seen as the dissidents. But at this point, the most important and interesting initiatives are emerging not at the annual global meetings of the WSF, but in the local, regional, and national actions inspired by these meetings.

After a good five-year run that significantly advanced the agendas of social movements around the world, perhaps the WSF has served its purpose. The forum has been a wonderful place to break out of the isolation of solitary local organizing efforts, connect with others around the world working on similar issues, and regain energy to continue the struggle. It has realized the goals of the slogan “Globalize the struggle, globalize hope.” No matter what shape it takes in the future, the WSF has been a historic experience with a lasting impact on social movements around the world. ■

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This article appeared in the March/April 2006 special issue of *Dollars & Sense* magazine on Hurricane Katrina and Gulf Coast reconstruction. *Dollars & Sense* explains the workings of the U.S. and international economies and provides left perspectives on current economic affairs. It is edited and produced by a collective of economists, journalists, and activists who are committed to social justice and economic democracy. To order copies of the special issue or to subscribe, visit www.dollarsandsense.org or call 617-447-2177.