

Snubbing Davos: The Presidents at the World Social Forum

By Marc Becker

FIVE OF LATIN AMERICA'S PRESIDENTS SKIPPED this year's World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, instead making appearances at the World Social Forum in Belém, Brazil. Signaling a deepening disengagement from neoliberal institutions, the presence of Rafael Correa (Ecuador), Hugo Chávez (Venezuela), Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazil), Fernando Lugo (Paraguay), and Evo Morales (Bolivia) generated excitement among social forum participants, but also tension. The forum, after all, was originally conceptualized in 2001 as an anti-militarist, anti-neoliberal strategy session for civil society; armed groups and political parties were explicitly excluded. Inspired by ideas of horizontality, participants commonly regarded state representatives with suspicion.

Almost a decade later, many Latin American governments have swung to the left, and anti-neoliberalism has quickly become a dominant discourse in the region. Moreover, most of South America's leaders broadly present themselves as in line with the social forum's ideas and agenda, and the event represents an opportunity for the presidents to shore up their social movement support. The presidents held two public meetings, both of them away from the main site of the forum, allowing for the impression that they were events parallel to the forum, but not formally a part of it.

The first meeting brought together representatives of La Vía Campesina, an international network of rural movements, with Chávez, Morales, Correa, and Lugo. Significantly, Lula did not attend this event, presumably because of his fraught relations with Brazil's militant Landless Workers Movement (MST), the local affiliate

and international backbone of La Vía Campesina. The small, invitation-only meeting began with a performance of *nueva canción* songs, ending with Aleida Guevara joining the four presidents onstage in a rendition of "Hasta Siempre" in tribute to her famous father, Che Guevara.

Each of the presidents was given 20 minutes to speak. Chávez, notoriously long-winded, joked that this was socialist equality and then proceeded to speak for almost an hour. MST leader João Pedro Stedile closed the session. "Class struggle depends on the strength that people accumulate, not on speeches," he said. "We have not yet achieved the rebuilding of a mass movement capable of changing the power relations in the hemisphere." Although the meeting was presented as an encounter between presidents and social movements, it was in fact a highly choreographed and staged affair. Despite the presence of leaders like Stedile on the stage, there was no time or space for a true dialogue with grassroots activists.

In contrast, the second gathering, held in an airport hangar converted into a performing arts center, made no pretensions of dialogue. It quickly became a huge pep rally for Lula's ruling Workers Party (PT), with the party faithful shouting down a small group of dissidents who showed up to denounce Lula's failure to break with capitalism. Onstage, the four visiting presidents built on their afternoon comments, again using rhetoric tailored to echo the forum's dominant discourse, emphasizing the importance of grassroots movements in creating "a new world." While all gave energetic, engaging speeches, it was Lula who now joined the visiting presidents who really worked the crowd. He returned to

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his trademark style that earned him such a strong reputation as a labor leader. "Protectionism aggravates the financial crisis," he declared. "May the rich countries not forget: They came up with this free trade talk."

This was not the first time that elected presidents attended the forum. Lula was marginally involved in organizing the first two. In 2003, as the newly elected president, supporters wildly cheered him at a massive rally similarly held parallel to the main event at Porto Alegre. He announced that he was leaving for Davos to present the people's concerns to the economic and political elites gathered at the World Economic Forum, while participants begged him to stay at the people's forum. Lula said he was going to build bridges, but he also assured investors that Brazil would not default on its debt. Davos organizers praised him for creating globalization with a human face.

That same year, Chávez, trying to reestablish himself in power after a failed coup attempt and debilitating business-led strike, also visited the forum. Organizers declared his presence inappropriate and shunted him off to a small venue at a hotel in downtown Porto Alegre, away from the main forum activities.

Two years later, Lula and Chávez shared the stage at the forum's largest event, once again held just off the forum grounds. Similar to this year, a shouting match erupted between PT diehards sporting "100% Lula" T-shirts and those to his left who strongly criticized him for failing to deliver on his social and economic promises. Meanwhile Chávez, the rising star of the Latin American left,

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was cheered much as Lula had been two years earlier.

In 2006, when the forum moved to Caracas, Chávez lent strong governmental support and massive funding to the forum, including providing

free transportation from the airport and within the city for participants. Without that logistical support, the forum would have been much less successful. The forum consistently struggles with whether it can move forward without governmental or corporate sponsorship, given its size and complexity. Some activists resented the Venezuelan leader for pressing the forum to take explicit political positions, thereby inserting himself into one

of the key debates whether the forum was only a space for social movements to discuss their concerns or whether the forum should mobilize actions.

At this year's forum, it was the former bishop Lugo, like Lula in 2003, who came as a recently elected president whose career began outside electoral politics. Strongly influenced by liberation theology, Lugo, the "bishop of the poor," had gained national stature in Paraguay through his support for peasant demands for land. Morales also has a long trajectory as a labor organizer with strong social movement credentials. Although Morales has often traveled to international gatherings against neoliberalism, this was his first World Social Forum. At Belém, he was greeted warmly with chants of "Evo, friend, the people are with you!" Morales responded: "If we are now presidents, we owe it to you. The people here are my teachers in the social struggle."

Correa, who comes out of academia rather than social movements,

was the president with the weakest links to civil society. Indeed, Correa has increasingly tense relations with social movements, particularly because of his determination to build Ecuador's economy on resource extraction. Petroleum exploration in the Amazon and gold mining in the highlands has had harsh ramifications for rural indigenous communities who bear the brunt of the undertakings but reap little of their benefits. Correa has not responded well to criticism, condemning some indigenous activists and environmentalists as "infantile."

The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) had asked social forum organizers to declare Correa persona non grata, which may explain why he seemed the most eager to employ populist discourse to identify himself with "the people." At the closing of the forum's main indigenous gathering three days after the presidential presentations, Kichwa leader Blanca Chancoso denounced the "nightmare" that rural communities were living with Correa undertaking resource extraction "at all costs." Perhaps the only current Latin American president broadly identified with the left who would have received more vigorous denunciations at the forum is Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega, who is often met with protests by women's movements during international visits in the region.

Despite the tensions between different trends on the left and between elected leaders and social movement activists, it is deeply significant that these five leaders chose to participate in the World Social Forum rather than the forum in Davos. The Washington Consensus continues to lose its standing in Latin America, a process that the social forum has been key to advancing. ■