

# Reflections on the 2007 U.S. Social Forum

Laura Carlsen and Katie Kohlstedt | July 23, 2007



### Laura Carlsen

Attending the U.S. Social Forum held in Atlanta, Georgia June 27-July 1 was an adventure. The first social forum for the United States, it was also one of the first in a series of regional events aimed at decentralizing the mega-World Social Forum that started in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

Short on preparation and organization but long on enthusiasm, the event stirred the interest of activists all over the world. Many wondered what kind of grassroots energy could be mustered to seriously confront the many threats posed by Bush administration policies—including unilateral force, preventive strikes, climate change denial, homophobia, and rollback of women's rights.

It was a strange sort of homecoming for me. After many years of living and working in Mexico, I was curious to see how movements for social change in the United States had evolved over the years. I had heard the sweeping generalizations: the egotism and materialism of the eighties “me generation,” the identity politics and cultural expressions of the nineties, the horror and frustration of the war in the new Bush-dominated millennium. During the years of living abroad, I had followed citizen efforts for social change but been far from the frontlines of organizing.

The 20-year hiatus proved an interesting lens with which to view the movements represented at the forum. Many of our movements in the past were based on solving problems in faraway places. The abuses wrought by our government overseas made them morally our issues. The Central American solidarity movement during the dirty wars and the anti-apartheid movement helped us better understand the world and make connections albeit in a somewhat removed way.

Not so today. In many ways, globalization has domesticated the abuses long felt overseas. Although the war in Iraq continues to be the defining feature of the current administration, U.S. communities are now also under

attack. Through climate change, the planet itself has shrunk to a single, ominously threatened ecosystem.

The slogan—“Another World is Possible. Another U.S. is Necessary”—captures this reality. The issues discussed at the first U.S. Social Forum did not revolve around utopian visions of a better society. Rather, they expressed the urgency of people fighting for survival—to survive as who they are in the face of intolerance, to preserve communities threatened by hate, to maintain basic freedoms, and assure basic needs.

The forum proved a crash course in the state of U.S. organizing. I saw apparent advances and reverses. There was little explicitly feminist organizing. The critiques of power, patriarchy, and sexism that once seemed central to understanding social change have not been forgotten, but they have yet to gain a central place in our organizing and analysis. The response to major government offensives against reproductive rights, repeal of affirmative action programs, and attacks on Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Transsexual people have been slow and piecemeal. As women have devoted their energies to other causes, the profoundly transforming perspective of gender justice has sometimes taken on a secondary or supplementary role in organizing work (and as a foreign policy analyst, I count myself as guilty).

Strong and vocal women were prominent at the forum. They brought with them an integrating vision—of heart and mind, of daily life and public policy, of family and community—to their struggles and imprint them with a



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feminism that may not say its name but makes its presence felt.

## Strength in Diversity

Far and above the greatest change and the greatest strength of U.S. movements today is their diversity. The forum demonstrated diversity in ages, sexuality, colors, nationalities, and politics.

The many cultural expressions also showed a welcome diversity in our way of “doing politics.” Gone are the days when political events were synonymous with men making speeches. In the esplanade of Atlanta’s Civic Center, the drums of Mexican *danzantes* competed with the drums of traditional Korean music—and both decry free trade. Hip-hop connected the desperation of life in Indian reservations and city ghettos with the joy of youth and a deep new current of resistance.

Workshops on storytelling drew hundreds of young people who know that it’s not enough to analyze oppression, that what’s happening today is found in a million real-life stories, that tears are an essential part of the dynamic, and that a fundamental task for organizers is to learn to tell these stories artfully.

Stories abounded in the forum. A path of abandoned shoes with names pinned to the tongues led to a kiosk hung with the biographies of young and old Iraqis killed in the war. A young woman cried as the hope of living without the fear of deportation receded once again into the murky depths of Washington politics.

A plethora of issues compete for our attention but there is no question of the validity and need for work on all of them. Forum participants reflected a great respect for the efforts of everyone. As someone who works on Latin American issues, I was told by one participant almost apologetically: “It’s so important what you do. When we get this damn war out of the way ...” “This damn war” was a dark presence in every corner of the Forum—not as a sign of our failure but a call to renewed action.

The U.S. Social Forum revealed the heroic acts of community defense and organizing that regularly occur throughout the country. Although still lacking the coherence to construct another world, the determination and values found in these movements offered much hope.

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## Katie Kohlstedt

Usually on long flights, I am the person snoring in the seat next to you. But on the trip from Mexico City to Atlanta for the U.S. Social Forum, my head was spinning not nodding off. Anticipation of going to my first social forum kept me wide awake as I reflected on what I would be seeing and hearing.



Psyched by inspiring tales from Brazilian friends about the world social forums, I was also concerned about the critiques I had heard about the loose structure and direction of the forums and their lack of concrete accomplishments.

Although I wasn’t able to attend all the sessions I had highlighted in my inch-thick program, I was impressed and inspired by encountering so many other like-minded individuals and organizations. I left Atlanta with more questions than I came with—the most pressing one being: Although we certainly have more in common than we have differences, *how will all these people work together?*

## Unity of Purpose or a Pageant of Issues?

On the forum’s last day, I was standing outside the hotel elevator, and out flooded a troop of young girls who were competing in a beauty pageant and were made up like future Miss Americas. After recovering from the haze of hairspray and shock of children aspiring to become a warped stereotype of modern women, I realized that I myself had been attending a type of pageant. I was about to head home after having attended an array of workshops, visited scores of tables and tents, collected a bundle of flyers and pins, and signed innumerable petitions. Now, I’m sure how I’ll never have time to keep all the commitments and promises I made.

All the participants in the forum—with the exception of the “independents” who came to learn or to decide which issue is most pressing for them to take on—paraded “our issues.” We led workshops and participated with others in our “tracks”—the trade, labor, immigration, or other track—or worked the corridors of the conference and set out displays on tables and handed out our flyers, articles, brochures, business cards, in hope of winning

more people over. We found a sympathetic but overburdened audience. And what do we really want them to do? To subscribe? To sign? To march? To vote?

Making alliances was one way sought to strengthen movements and reduce the frantic fragmentation we often feel. The plenary panels encouraged the various tracks to view themselves in a common framework, and thanks to organizers' combining of workshop proposals participants found themselves on panels with people they had never sat next to before. One workshop brought together African-American groups and immigrants' rights organizations to discuss their common interest in fair immigration policies in their communities.

Was this proof that we could consolidate our pageant into a collective movement? At least they were steps in the right direction.

## Targeting Transnationals—"Diet, Cherry and Vanilla, Coca Cola is a Killer"



This chant rang in the ears of hundreds of kids and their parents as they waited in line to be among the first to visit Atlanta's new "World of Coke" museum. During the June 30 march, I joined protesters at the gates of Coca Cola's world headquarters holding signs reading "Coke Kills" and "Unthinkable, Undrinkable."

"We came here to offer this art to Coke's new 'fantasy museum' because the reality of Coca Cola is women in India protesting the destruction of lives and livelihoods that Coke has produced in their communities," announced Amit Srivastava, Director of Global Resistance.

Coca Cola didn't acknowledge our protests, but in India popular anger at Coca Cola's depletion and contamination of local water supplies has led to the closure of a plant in Kerala and movements to close the other 52 bottling plants throughout the country. Participating in a direct action was refreshing after hours in sessions of talk, albeit very inspiring talk.

Bush, Cheney, and assorted conservative forces were regarded by all as roadblocks to our own social justice goals, and impeachment was mentioned more than once. However, a bigger elephant in our midst was present—Corporate America. Session after session, countless issues related corporate pressure and violations of everything from human and workers' rights to the environment, the prison system, war-profiteering, and oil paid for by the blood of Americans in Iraq.

Corporations were named as profiteers of the skyrocketing budgets for prison construction, the dysfunctional health care system, mining damage and destruction, the insufficient minimum wage—the list goes on. The funding for militarization in Colombia and for border security goes to Lockheed Martin and Boeing. Responsibility for manipulation of global food supplies and agricultural systems lies with Cargill, Monsanto, Nestle, and Tyson (the targets of Via Campesina's newest effort).



## A Social Justice Smorgasbord

The categories in the "workshop index" of the U.S. Social Forum program (there they were presented in English and Spanish):

- *Agriculture/Food/Land*
- *Community*
- *Culture/Media/Communication*
- *Economy*
- *Education/Popular Education*
- *Environmental Justice*
- *Globalization/International Trade*
- *Health*
- *Immigration/Migration*
- *Imperialism/International Solidarity*
- *Indigenous*
- *Labor/Workers Rights*
- *LGBTQQI*
- *Militarization/War & Peace*
- *Movement Building*
- *Politics/Democracy*
- *Poverty*
- *Prisons, Police & Courts/Transformative Justice*
- *Race & Class*
- *Religion/Spirituality*
- *Rights, Human & Other*
- *Social & Public Services*
- *Urban Issues*
- *Women/Gender*
- *Youth/Family/Age*

## Sustaining our Resistance

As groups distributed glossy materials, free books and DVDs, buttons, t-shirts, and stickers, I wondered about the sustainability of this large-scale event. Efforts were clearly made—water was distributed in large barrels and bottled water discouraged—but food came in styrofoam packaging and disposable everything. A challenge for any gathering of nearly 12,000 people, keeping the impact to a minimum was a weak point of a forum largely held in overly air-conditioned hotel conference rooms. Although the “presence” given to the meetings by formal settings can have advantages, we could have managed with more modest facilities, as I understand they have done at the World Social Forum.

“Stop Runaway Consumerism,” “No More Drug War,” and all the other buttons and stickers I plastered myself with were incomplete descriptions of the problems we face. There were socialists, the environmentalists, the anti-free-traders, along with a slew of new listservs I subscribed to, but not one would help me decide how to prioritize my own efforts to help make another world possible. Inspired, but also overwhelmed by options, many young attendees like myself seemed a little less certain of exactly what to do than when we landed in Atlanta. But we left knowing better the urgency of our various struggles, the multitude of incredible individuals dedicating themselves to making the United States a place that represents us, and I hope, the need to work together.

Time will tell, but USSF 2007 certainly helped me see more clearly the identity of the elephant—corporations that are trampling us all.

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