



1237 Ralph David Abernathy Blvd. SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30310-1731
Tel: 404.756.2680
Fax: 404.756.2684
Email: info@SisterSong.net
Website: www.SisterSong.net

U.S. Social Forum: Another America is Possible
© Titilayo Ihesinachi, SisterSong Administrative Coordinator
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Atlanta will be the site of the U.S. Social Forum June 27-July 1, 2007 hosted by Project South and supported by SisterSong. A Southeast Regional Forum was held June 16-17, 2006 in Durham, N.C. which drew more than 550 activists from across the South. More than 20,000 people are expected at the 2007 U.S. Social Forum. SisterSong is working to ensure that many women of color participate in the U.S. Social Forum and that gender issues will be fully integrated in the event. For more information, go to www.ussf2007.org/.

The World Social Forum (WSF), held annually since 2001, was created by members of the alternative globalization and anti-imperialist movements to coordinate campaigns, share and refine organizing strategies and inform each other about other movements and issues around the world. Attendees to the annual event consist of social movements, networks, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other civil society organizations opposed to neo-liberalism and a world dominated by capital or any form of imperialism. Since the first world forum in 2001, the WSF has become a permanent course of action, intentional about its international dimension, which seeks and builds alternatives to neo-liberal policies. The Charter of Principles, the WSF's guiding document, defines it as an "open meeting place" that is "plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-party." It proposes to facilitate decentralized coordination and networking among organizations engaged in tangible action towards building another world, at any level from the local to the international, without intending to be the body representing world civil society. The WSF is a global, multi-issue movement; it is not a group or an organization.

The World Social Forum has a tendency to meet in January when its "greatest capitalist rival," the World Economic Forum is meeting in Davos, Switzerland. The World Economic Forum is an alliance of business and political elites who mainly support and promote financial capital and the interest of transnational corporations. The WSF is intentional about its meeting date because of the logistical difficulty of organizing a mass protest in Davos and it seeks to overshadow the worldwide media coverage of the World Economic Forum. The WSF emerged from the alternative globalization and anti-imperialist movements against the Multilateral Agreement of Investments (MAI), which was signed by the richest countries of the world in 1998. This agreement was first discussed secretly by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), presently comprised of 30 developed nation-states, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Spain, Germany, France, and Canada. The first critique of the MAI was made in the United States by the Public Citizens Movement, led by Ralph Nader and Lory Wallach, and was published by the French newspaper, *Le Monde Diplomatique*. The article sparked intense debates, which led to France's withdrawal from signing the agreement. These alternative movements, composed of activists, economists, environmentalists, sociologists, workers, peasants, and human rights activists, work against the neo-liberal paradigm and the foundation

of Davos, including drawing international attention to effective movement building that counters this paradigm.

The first World Social Forum was held from January 25- 30, 2001, in Porto Alegre, Brazil, organized by many groups involved in the alternative globalization movement. The WSF was sponsored, in part, by the Porto Alegre government, led by Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), the Worker's Party. The town of Porto Alegre was experimenting with an innovative model for the local government that combined traditional representative institutions with the active participation of open assemblies of the people. Also at that time, Brazil was in a moment of transformation that would later lead to the electoral victory of the PT candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. More than 15,000 delegates came from 131 countries, representing 4,909 organizations. They attended more than 24 plenary meetings, 100 seminars and 700 workshops. Furthermore, there were 3,000 journalists from 48 countries and between 50,000 and 60,000 people came without delegates' credentials. Among the delegates were 2,300 campesinos (peasant farmers) and 2,600 trade unionists. The WSF website was visited by half a million people daily during forum.

The 2002 World Social Forum, also held in Porto Alegre from January 31 to February 5, had over 12,000 official delegates representing people from 123 countries, with more than 60,000 attendees and 652 workshops. The third WSF was again held in Porto Alegre, January 23-28, 2003, with more than 100,000 attendees. There were many fascinating workshops, including, for example, the *Life after Capitalism* workshop, which proposed focused discussion on non-communist, non-capitalist, participative possibilities for different aspects of social, political, economic, and communication structures. The 2004 WSF was held in Mumbai, India, from January 16 to 21. The attendance was expected to be 75,000, but according to the organizers in Mumbai, an estimated 120,000 people took part in WSF activities from 130 countries around the globe. The fifth WSF in 2005 was held in Porto Alegre, January 26 to 31, with more than 150,000 participants.

In 2006, the sixth World Social Forum was polycentric, where decentralized, simultaneous meetings occurred in different places around the world in January and March. The decision to hold a polycentric WSF in 2006 was made during the 2005 WSF International Council (IC) meeting. The three cities that held the WSF were Bamako, Mali (January 19 to 23); Caracas, Venezuela (January 24 to 29); and Karachi, Pakistan (March 24 to 29). In addition, there was a social forum event held in the United States: the Boston Social Forum, July 23-25, 2004, with 5,000 participants and 575 workshops. Additionally, there is an increasing demand to have more of these forums in the United States, with movement building towards a WSF type social forum held in the U.S. in 2007. Why would we need a social forum in the United States?

The **U.S. Social Forum (USSF)** comes at a significant time in American history. The conservative political Right dominates the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches of government. The military is consumed by the questionable occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan as public support for these invasions erodes. The Hurricane Katrina disaster and the inexcusable failure of the federal government to respond to the people's needs illuminated the race and class divisions in the U.S. These interrelated events provide the impetus for the USSF to provide a process for movement building in this country based on the organized voices and experiences of those on the grassroots most affected by the U.S. and global injustices.

The U.S. Social Forum enables progressive forces to mount an effective national response to issues such as the Gulf Coast tragedies; corporate scandals; government corruption; privatization of public resources; a deteriorating education system; a widening gap between the rich and the poor; deregulation; corporate welfare; government corruption; monopolization of the media; a ballooning federal deficit and attacks on our civil liberties. Despite these challenges, the progressive movement remains disconnected and fractured along geography, gender, race, class, and issues. The fragmentation of the largest labor federation, the scandals within the Catholic church and mega-churches, and the backlash against several

politicians of color clearly demonstrates the lack of political strength. There is a rising need for greater convergence among progressive activists and an intention to create a space for alternative movement building in the United States for these activists to articulate a conceivable vision for “another world.” At its conclusion, the USSF will communicate effectively and confidently the values and strategies of progressive civil society in the United States. Those who participate in the USSF are no longer interested in stating what social justice movements oppose; rather we are part of movements that transcend national boundaries, practice democracy on all levels, and convey the world we want.

Now that we understand the need for the U.S. Social Forum, how do we decide on where it will be held? The USSF will be more than a conference, a networking event, or a “strong” anti-war response; the USSF is the next most important step in our struggle. Movement building for social justice demands disruption and transformation of the status quo. To revolutionize the nation, we must revolutionize the South. The southern site of the USSF marks a new movement in the United States for social and economic justice. Oppression, injustice, exploitation, and social control have deep, entangled roots in Southern soil. The South has also cultivated significant battles for indigenous self-determination, black freedom, working class emancipation, and human liberation. Hosting the USSF in the South builds political potency for a powerful movement to challenge white supremacy, imperial domination, worldwide genocide, ecocide, and all other manifestations of global capitalism.

After gathering 150,000 people in Porte Alegre, Brazil earlier this year, it was decided there would be regional social forums to culminate for a World Social Forum in 2007. The WSF committee delegated Grassroots Global Justice (GGJ) to coordinate a U.S. Social Forum that represents those most adversely affected by the ravages of globalization and neo-liberal policies. GGJ is an alliance that grew out of people-of-color-led grassroots groups and organizations who participated in the first WSF. These grassroots leaders initiated a process to create a U.S. Social Forum Planning Committee, and Atlanta, Georgia, was selected as the host city for the 2007 USSF.

How relevant is the U.S. Social Forum to your work or activism? If you fight against social injustice and challenge the consequences of neo-liberalism, capitalism or any form of imperialism, you should come to the 2007 USSF. We call on you to reflect on the potential of our positions and the power of our connections. Although movement leaders have built organizations that embark on integrated, multi-issue, multi-racial strategies, we have yet to build our movement on a scale relative to our brothers and sisters in the global South. The first USSF offers a historic opportunity to advance our collective work to build grassroots leadership, develop collective vision, and formulate strategies to grow a strong movement in the United States that mirrors and works collectively with the alternative globalization and anti-imperialist movements of the global South.

For more information about the 2007 U.S. Social Forum, please contact Project South at (404) 622-0602. For more information about the World Social Forum, you may visit the following websites:

<http://www.worldsocialforum.org>

<http://www.wsf2006karachi.org>,

<http://www.mstbrazil.org>

<http://www.ussf2007.org>,

<http://ggjalliance.org>

<http://www.projectsouth.org>.