

# Summer 2002: Art and Community

## Another World Is Possible

by Walden Bello



Porto Alegre, site of the World Social Forum (WSF) last year and again this year, has become the byword for the spirit of the burgeoning movement against corporate-driven globalization.

Galvanized by the slogan "Another world is possible," some 50,000 people flocked to this coastal city from January 30 to February 4. This figure was nearly five times as many as attended last year. Fisherfolk from India, farmers from East Africa, trade unionists from Thailand, and indigenous people from Central America were among those who made their way to Porto Alegre to challenge the notion, made popular in some circles by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, that there is no alternative. Brazilians, of course, made up the majority, but quite a number of Argentines crossed the River Plate to share their feelings about their country's recent economic tragedy (see story on page 7). There was also a sizeable contingent from the North, with Italy alone contributing over 2,000 delegates.

The Porto Alegre crowd was distinctly anti-elitist, but this did not prevent it from receiving with great warmth the personalities that have come to exemplify the diversity of the movement against corporate-driven globalization—among others, activist-thinker Noam Chomsky, Indian physicist-feminist Vandana Shiva, Nobel prizewinner and indigenous peoples' advocate Rigoberta Menchu, Canadian peoples' advocate Maude Barlow, and Egyptian intellectual Samir Amin.

While Seattle was the site of the first major victory of the struggle against corporate-driven globalization, Porto Alegre represents the transfer to the South of the center of gravity of this surging global movement. Porto Alegre also symbolizes the creation of a space for the movement to discuss and forge alternatives to the prevailing global economic and political institutions and structures, and to the values that sustain them.

### Counterpoint to Davos

The World Social Forum began as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum (WEF), the annual gathering of the global corporate crowd in Davos, Switzerland. Proposed in mid-2000 by a coalition of Brazilian civil society organizations and the Workers' Party that controls both Porto Alegre and the state of Rio Grande do Sul, the idea triggered strong international support. The French monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique* and Attac, an influential Europe-wide organization supporting reform of global economic institutions, were among those involved from the beginning, and financial support came in from a number of progressive donors. Driven by this energy, the first WSF was put together in just eight months.

A televised trans-Atlantic debate between representatives of the first WSF and some luminaries attending the WEF was billed by the *Financial Times* as a collision between two planets, that of the global super-rich and that of the vast marginalized masses. The most memorable moment of that confrontation came when Hebe de Bonafini, a representative of the Argentine human rights organization *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*, shouted at financier George Soros across the Atlantic divide: "Mr. Soros, you are a hypocrite. How many children's deaths are you responsible for?"

Since its first meeting, the stock of the WSF has risen while that of the WEF has fallen. Already put on the defensive as a gathering to "discuss how to maintain hegemony over the rest of us," as one of the debaters on the WSF side put it, the WEF was apparently told by the Swiss government after September 11 that it could no longer guarantee the security of its corporate participants. Sealing off Davos from demonstrators in 2001 had already necessitated the biggest Swiss security operation since World War II, and the authorities anticipated a security and logistical nightmare in the wake of the September 11 events. As a result, the WEF moved its 2002 sessions to New York, ostensibly as a gesture of post-September 11 solidarity.

The centerpiece of this year's gathering in Porto Alegre was 26 plenary sessions over four days structured around four themes: the production of wealth and social reproduction, access to wealth and sustainable development, civil society and the public arena, and political power and ethics in the new society. Around this core unfolded scores of seminars, a people's tribunal on debt sponsored by Jubilee South, a convention of progressive parliamentarians, and about 500

workshops. The Brazilian mass organizations CUT (Central Union of Workers) and MST (the Movement of the Landless) were among those who led marches and demonstrations; both are among the key organizers of the WSF.

Though there was no televised debate with the WEF this time, comparison with the Davos/New York affair was on the minds of the media and participants at both locales. In fact the thousands of protesters outside the WEF events at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York saw themselves as part of the Porto Alegre process.

While discussion of alternatives to corporate-driven globalization was the centerpiece of Porto Alegre 2002, the theme of continuing resistance was prominent. Indeed, if Hebe de Bonafini's combative words provided the most memorable soundbite from Porto Alegre 2001, this year the most striking line also struck the theme of struggle. This came from Naomi Klein, author of *No Logo*, who brought a packed plenary to its feet with her assertion that what was needed was "less civil society and more civil disobedience."

### **Tumultuous year**

The Porto Alegre gathering came at the end of a tumultuous year. Perhaps the high water mark of the anti-corporate globalization movement prior to September 11 came during the Group of Eight (G8) meeting in Genoa in July, when some 300,000 people marched in the face of police tear gas attacks. Shortly after the Genoa clashes, in which one protester was killed by police, there was speculation in the world press that elite gatherings in non-authoritarian countries might no longer be possible. And indeed, Canada's offer to hold the next G8 meeting in a resort high in the Canadian Rockies seemed to confirm the fact that the global elite was on the run from the democracy of the streets.

Then came September 11, which stopped a surging movement in its tracks. The next big confrontation between the establishment and its opponents was supposed to take place in late September in Washington, DC, during the annual fall meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Unnerved by the prospect of a week of massive protest that was expected to draw some 50,000 people, the World Bank and IMF took advantage of the September 11 shock to cancel their meeting. Without a target and sensitive to the sea change in the national mood in the US, organizers cancelled the protest and held a march for peace instead.

The partisans of globalization and liberalization followed up on the unexpected opportunity to reverse the crisis of legitimacy that had been wracking it prior to September 11 by pressing for a limited set of trade negotiations during the Fourth Ministerial of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Doha, Qatar, in mid-November. Third World governments were told that unless they agreed to talks leading to greater liberalization, they would have to take responsibility for worsening a global recession that had been accelerated by the World Trade Center attack.

Taking no chances, the WTO secretariat and the Qatar monarchy admitted to the meetings only about 60 genuine representatives of civil society—that is, those who are not fronts for corporate interests. This ensured that the massive demonstrations on the street that characterized Seattle—which had served as a context for the famous developing country revolt—were not present in Doha, and under these circumstances, developing country opposition collapsed.

### **The corporate-globalization agenda's setback**

Had the WSF meeting been held in late November or December, the mood of people coming would have been different. The Bush administration would have been riding high after its devastating triumph in Afghanistan. However, in the weeks leading up to Porto Alegre, history, cunning as usual, dealt two massive body blows: the Enron debacle and Argentina's economic collapse.

Enron has become the sordid symbol of the volatile mixture of deregulation and corruption that drove the "New Economy" in the 1990s and helped lead to global recession.

Argentina, burdened with a \$140 billion foreign debt, its industry in chaos, and 2,000 of its citizens falling under the poverty line daily, serves as a cautionary tale of the disaster that awaits those countries that take the neoliberal advice to globalize their economies. Argentina took most seriously the neoliberal road of radical liberalization, deregulation, and privatization, including eliminating any significant buffer between the domestic economy and a volatile international economy by pegging the peso to the dollar.

When the WSF took place, the disasters of Enron and Argentina had renewed the crisis of legitimacy that plagues the project of corporate-driven globalization. Porto Alegre provided the perfect site and the perfect moment for a counteroffensive by the movements that believe "another world is possible."

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