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European Social Forum

European social movement faces challenges

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The 5th European Social Forum (ESF) which has just ended in Malmö (Sweden) is a good occasion to reflect on the trajectory and challenges of an initiative that has allowed activists and movements from across the continent to meet.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/esf1.jpg>]

Handing out the ESF issue of *Internationales* with its beautiful cover.

From its first meeting in November 2002 in Florence to today, the ESF has simultaneously achieved a lot and very little. The social forums are not an aim in themselves, but an instrument to serve discussion and joint campaigns and mobilizations. They only have meaning if they help us to advance in this direction. The forums have not themselves created lasting convergences or the development of concrete struggles, but they have had a general positive influence in this direction. The great merit of the ESF process has been to affirm a space of convergence in the struggles against neoliberal policies on a European scale. Although weak and without firm roots, they have been a reference point for most of the social forces opposed to these policies. Something that has not been the case, for example, with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), caught up in its policy of “critical support” to the neoliberal logic of the European Union (EU).

The international context in which the ESF has been developed has changed from its beginnings, during the growth of the global justice movement. The latter grew rapidly until the mobilizations against the G8 in Genoa in July 2001 and the attacks of September 11 in New York. After some initial hesitations, in which the movement seemed to lose ground, the new stage was characterized by the centrality acquired by the fight against “permanent global war”, whose zenith was the protests of 2003 against the invasion of Iraq. This was the scene in which the first ESF in November 2002 in Florence took place.

Starting from its second meeting in Paris in November 2003, the ESF developed in a phase characterized by the loss of centrality of the international mobilizations for global justice and of its unifying capacity, in a context of sharpening and multiplication of concrete struggles against neoliberalism and of greater sectional dispersion and “nationalization” of these struggles. A scene, really, marked by a crisis of perspective on the part of the global justice movement and the World Social Forum in which the ESF is framed. Later meetings in London in 2004 and Athens in 2006 showed the continuity of the process and its rooting in new countries, but also its difficulties in continuing to develop and move forward. After the novelty effect and the initial impulse, in recent years the dynamic of the ESF shows symptoms of decline, routinism and loss of concrete usefulness.

Today, the great challenge of the European social movements is to be able to articulate an answer on a continental scale to the neoliberal logic of European integration and to measures like the “Returns Directive” [harmonizing EU procedures for the expulsion of “illegally staying” immigrants] or the as yet unapproved Working Time Directive raising the limit of the working week to 65 hours. The success of the first ESF generated enormous expectations on its potential on this terrain. In fact too many. After the international day against the war in Iraq, February 15, 2003, called by this first meeting of the forum, which brought millions of people on the streets, the great challenge was to take a real step forward in the continental articulation of the struggles. The propagandistic formula used at the time was “to make February 15 social”. But the subsequent advances in this area have been limited, generating a certain sensation of frustration and stagnation. The Iraq war had a centralizing effect that does not exist in other areas.

The logic of governmental policies is the same across the EU and obeys the agreements taken in this framework. But the rate and dynamics of application of the reforms are different in each country. In recent years, the social resistance to neoliberalism has been considerable. It is nevertheless still very defensive (with some precise exceptions), and often ends in defeats or precarious victories and are developed in an unfavourable context. All this

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makes the initiation of coordinated initiatives on European scale difficult. Nevertheless, there has been important progress in some areas, some linked to the dynamic of the ESF and others not, like the harmonization of European networks and campaigns on specific subjects like days (many still symbolic and limited) of simultaneous mobilization in several countries, for example that impelled by the student movement against the European Higher Education Area or determined “Euro strikes” in some companies.

We need to advance then in this “Europeanization” of the resistance. In fact, the European social movements have the double challenge of deepening their local roots and fortifying themselves “from below” and, in parallel, creating forms of national and international articulation, that avoid the isolation of social resistance through spaces like forums, concrete campaigns and networks. Florence was a spectacular and promising start on a road that has been difficult and complex, with advances and backward movements, winding and not very linear: the road to the construction of a Europe of the peoples opposed to the logic of the capital.

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