

The World Social Forum and the Tale Of Two Presidents: Chavez of Venezuela and Lula of Brazil

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Criticized by some for being little more than a debating society and a “one stop shopping center for the left,” this year’s fifth annual World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil marked a major break through for the Forum. It served as a pivotal venue for the discussion and critique of progressive political, social and economic strategies to make “another world possible.”

Three hundred and fifty two proposals and calls for action came out of the more than 2000 panels and workshops held at the forum. At the end of the Forum, a group of 19 comprised of key founders of the WSF and its International Committee issued a manifesto called the Consensus of Porto Alegre, urging the 120,000 who registered at the WSF to sign on to the Manifesto if it reflected their work, ideas and programs for the future.

Perhaps just as importantly political leaders including government ministers and presidents came to the forum to subject their ideas and plans to discussion and debate. President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, more than any other political leader, reflected the growing importance of the forum in global politics. Speaking at the Gigantinho a stadium in Porto Alegre, he called the forum “the most important political act in the world ” and proceeded to lay out for the first time the “socialist” trajectory he envisions for the Bolivarian revolution.

At the third World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2003 President Luis Ignacio “Lula” da Silva spoke to the forum in Porto Alegre, just weeks after assuming the presidential sash. Hopes ran high that Lula and the Workers Party he founded would carry out deep seated reforms and challenge Washington’s neo-liberal strangle hold on Brazil’s economy. The crowd cheered wildly as he announced that his number one priority would be the end of hunger in Brazil

At this years Social Form the crowd still seemed fond of Lula, repeatedly chanting an adapted soccer ball chant, “ole, ole, ole, Lula, Lula.” But there was a palpable sense of disillusionment with Lula in the stadium. While he endorsed progressive international policies such as standing up to Bush on the war in Iraq, his government’s economic policies in the main have followed the neo-liberal policies of his predecessors, appeasing foreign capital and the big banks.

Even the anti-hunger program is in trouble, providing little other than meager welfare handouts while agrarian reform, the real key to ending malnutrition in Brazil, is languishing. His old allies, the Landless Workers Movement, are at odds with Lula pressuring him to keep his old promises. To up the pressure, 200,000 landless members have camped out on high ways to make the public aware of their desperate plight. When Lula announced that he was

flying off to Davos, Switzerland for the World Economic Forum the next day, the gathering of the rich and the powerful, Lula proclaimed he wanted to be “a bridge” between the two forums. The word “traitor” rippled through the stadium as some people booed. Outside the pavilion where Lula spoke a scuffle broke out between former members of the Workers Party who were protesting. Twenty people were arrested.

Three days later the crowd at Gigantinho was on its feet as Hugo Chavez gave a militant speech denouncing US “hegemony” and proclaiming “socialism” the goal of his political movement. “Only with socialism can we transcend capitalism.” Elected to the presidency in 1998 as a populist ex-military officer, Chavez ran up against a corrupt political party system and the local oligarchy backed by the United States. He increased social spending and moved to exert state control over oil industry revenues. Chavez was briefly ousted by a civilian-military coup in 2002 backed by the Bush administration. But he was restored to power two days later by loyal sectors of the military and a popular uprising.

In the early part of his speech, cries of “Chavez Si, Lula No” permeated the audience. But Chavez signaled them to stop, calling for a broad “anti-imperialist front.” Chavez alluding to conditions in Venezuela, declared that “now is the moment” for an assault on neo-liberalism and that socialism is on the agenda. The crowd roared its approval.

Some may argue that those who sing Chavez’s praises today will be quickly disillusioned just as those who chanted for Lula two years before. However the concrete measures taken up by the Bolivarian revolution since the coup d’etat in 2002 indicate that a profound social revolution may be in the making.

Chavez noted that he has already diverted \$4 billion from oil revenues to social programs and that more would be forth coming. (Note that the US only gave \$350 million for the Tsunami in Asia.) Public health and medical programs, educational training for workers, agrarian reform, literacy programs, low incoming housing; these and many others programs are advancing in Venezuela. In a meeting with the MST in the countryside at one of their cooperatives in the morning before the Gigantinho speech, Chavez proclaimed that “while capitalism exists it is impossible to eliminate poverty.”

Lula in his presentation on the first day at Gigantinho called for the “institutionalization” of the forum in Brazil. The forum’s International Committee ignored his proposal, preferring a more internationalist bent for the WSF. In 2006 the forum will be decentralized, with regional forums taking place around the world. The site chosen for the regional “Forum of the Americas” is Caracas, Venezuela.

With the conflict between Chavez and Bush becoming more confrontational and the occupation of Iraq continuing, the forum in Caracas promises to mark an advance for the World Social Forum as it takes on the world’s critical issues and becomes a platform for the leaders who are shaking the world with new and profound alternatives to neo-liberalism and the US empire.

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