

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

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Five days in the Motor City

Times are rough for a lot of people. Jobs are hard to come by and people must deal with mounting cuts in social services (e.g., over a thousand jobs lost in the Chicago public transportation sector alone) and spiraling food costs (e.g., onions were going for nearly \$3 a pound just a few weeks back). Understandably, many people are frustrated and despair is hard to avoid. Some are not content just "letting things happen" though. The folks I met in Detroit last week constitute some of the most active organizers for and demanders of change.

From June 22nd-26th, approximately 20,000 people converged on Detroit, a city undergoing major depopulation and economic hardship, to partake in the United States Social Forum (USSF), the second edition of an event that was first held in 2007. Over five days, these activists (all wearing orange wrist bands which they received upon registering) participated in over one thousand workshops focused on the following fourteen tracks: Capitalism in Crisis; Climate Justice; Democracy and Governance; Detroit and the Rust Belt; Displacement, Migration & Immigration; Endless War; Indigenous Sovereignty; International Solidarity and Responsibility; Media Justice; Organizing a Labor Movement; Strategies for Building Power and Ensuring Community Needs; To the Left: Building a Movement for Social Justice; To the Right: Internationally and Domestically; and, Transformative Justice, Healing, and Organizing. Held at several of Detroit's key facilities (including, Cobo Hall, Wayne State University, and the Woodward Academy), these two to four hour workshops or people's assemblies represented each day's core activities. In addition, participants shared energy, stories and contact information at social gatherings and several demonstrations held during the week.

Most attendees came to share their challenges and successes and to find out what others were doing to make the world a more just and humane place. Fundamentally, most felt that necessary economic, political and social change will not come without a mass movement demanding such change. History should clarify this for anyone. All of the important victories we, the people, have won (including, the right to vote, social security, anti-discrimination laws, worker's rights and protection, etc.) happened after considerable struggle and not as a result of merely electing a "progressive" president.

Able to attend only three workshops a day, I did what I could to connect with issues closely related to my own activism (namely, climate change and food sovereignty). Additionally, I broke out a few times into other arenas in order to expand my horizons further.

In the area of climate, I participated in several workshops which explored the concept of climate justice. Based on the positions articulated by the people and groups involved, the climate solutions now being offered by the powerful nations of the world, most which include an elaborate "cap & trade with offsets" program driven by financial markets and overseen by government bureaucrats, are terribly misguided and will not only not work (to reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide levels) but will exacerbate existing inequalities

among nations/peoples—thereby, only aggravating tensions and resulting in continued violence.

Motivated to move quickly towards real energy solutions, participants articulated several basic premises. Coal can never be "clean" (just ask yourself how to get it out of the ground without destroying ecosystems and displacing residents), oil is too dangerous (it fuels wars and pollutes oceans and land), and nuclear products never stop poisoning. And since our world now relies so heavily on these three forms of energy, changing our ways will require major effort. One this is for sure, we cannot continue to do what we have over the past few centuries. We must begin talking about the true cost (including human and ecological) of our energy system. Central to this discussion is a demand for people's sovereignty. This means that we cannot continue to invade countries and take their resources, nor can we support dictators who willfully engage in violent acts of aggression in order to acquire/steal the natural resources from beneath indigenous lands. Representatives of several Native American communities in the United States and Canada made this point very clear during the USSF.

The first thing we need to do is keep as much fossil fuel in the ground as we can. This can be done by greatly ramping up our efficiency and at the same time dramatically reducing our consumption by living more responsibly. Another true solution revolves around expanding public transportation because individual vehicles are inherently too polluting and costly to be sustainable. The "Mass Transportation for the Masses" workshop clarified that expanding bus service to working people around the world is a central feature of any just climate solution. Trains may be preferred by many suburbanites but building new train lines (for short distance commuters) is very expensive due to high infrastructure costs. Buses provide the best option for getting the most people (particularly those of low income) to their destinations. Currently, federal dollars apportioned for transportation are overwhelmingly (>80 percent) in the pockets of the highway grid, rather than in trains or buses. Hybrid or electric cars might appear like "green" solutions but they aren't when one considers that we need to build a sustainable system for several billion people rather than just the wealthy. The effort in Los Angeles by the Bus Riders Union to demand fair fares and maintain service routes serves as a model for how we might move in the right direction; more information at: <www.thestrategycenter.org/project/bus-riders-union>.

In the end, five days of intense thought and activity rejuvenated my energy and focused my resolve. Our planet and its people are suffering. It is imperative that we begin to heal. It is going to take a mass movement to accomplish this and based on what I saw in Detroit, there are ample leaders throughout this country ready to move us in the direction of peace, justice, community, and sustainability. Watch out for these orange-banded individuals. They believe, as did the conference's mantra, that "Another World is Possible. Another U.S. is necessary." For more information go to: <www.ussf2010.org>.