Five days in the Motor City

Tours 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 cuts to food at 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). Unemployment, predatory police, 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 six thousand workshops and focused on the following fourteen tracks: Capitalism in Crisis; Climate Justice; Democracy and Governance; Detroit and the Great 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: Internationalism 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 of these tracks and covered a vast array of topics. 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 more just and humane. 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.

Ability to attend only three workshops a day (I did what I could to connect with issues closely related to my own focus, 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 position that articulating the impacts and groups involved, the climate solutions now being offered by the powerful nations of the world are most wishful thinking and elaborate “cap & trade with offsets” programs, backed by financial markets and overseen by government bureaucrats, are terrifyingly inadequate 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.

We are moved to move quickly towards real energy solutions. The participants articulated several basic premises. Coal can never be “clean” (just ask yourself how it is to get out of the ground without destroying the land and displacing residents), oil is too dangerous (in 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 done for the past few hundred years. 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 will work with violent acts of aggression in order to acquire/steal the natural resources from the countries they invade (of 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 not at all sustainable. The "Mass Transportation for the Masses" workshop clarified that expanding bus services and creating communities that support living more responsibly.

The third and most crucial step is to build a sustainable system for several billion people rather than just the wealthy. The effort in Los Angeles by the Bus Riders Union 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 future and those of 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 have heard and experienced, there are leadership throughout this country ready to move us in the direction of peace, justice, community, and sustainability. Watch out for us, because we’ve found what we believe, as did the conference’s organizers, that “Another World is Possible.” Another U.S. political system is possible. <www.usf2010.org>.