

New World From Below

Anarchists & Antiauthoritarians at the USSF

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Detroit—Some see a battered, blighted city here. Others see fertile ground for alternatives to capitalism and state structures by building our/their own infrastructures and networks as natural responses to a broken system.

Against this backdrop came the 2010 U.S. Social Forum (USSF), a self-described “movement building process,” that brought 15,000 non-party leftists and people from community projects to Detroit between June 22 through 26. But, among the throng that held a huge march on Woodward Ave., the city’s main street, attended workshops in the downtown convention center, and presented numerous cultural events, the North American anarchist movement also had a strong presence.

Discussion started scant months before the Forum about organizing an autonomous space on the model of the Alternative Social Forum that Venezuela’s *El Libertario* group and other Latin American anarchists and anti-authoritarians organized during the 2006 Caracas, World Social Forum (WSF).

They created an open networking space parallel to the WSF for autonomous social movements to debate movement agendas, “not those imposed from the top.” The Caracas organizers critiqued the WSF as having become a bureaucratic spectacle and platform for leftist governments and big NGOs, the Venezuelan government’s hyper-exploitation of natural resources, and the resulting impact on indigenous communities.

In Detroit, the New World From Below organizing collective (as we came to call ourselves) was a collaboration locally of Solidarity and Defense, (unofficially) Food Not Bombs, ronin locals, and was supported by the Trumbullplex Theater Collective. National collaboration came from City From Below, the Institute for Anarchist Studies, Manifesta Musician’s Collective, Team Colors Collective, Midnight Special Law Collective, AK Press, and Red Emma’s.

We recognized the value of an autonomous space outside of the convention centers and corporate chain hotels of the Detroit Forum. The political and racial differences between Venezuela and the U.S., coupled with the importance of a large people of color-led process within this country, the political moment, and the fact that this was only the second U.S. Social Forum, led us to work both inside and outside the official program.

A track of over 35 anarchist workshops occurred during the daytime inside the Forum and in the evenings a convergence space at a local church was opened with food, events and discussion groups.

We printed 7,500 broadsheets (available at www.anarchistussf.wordpress.com) detailing the anarchist workshop track and alternative events that were distributed both inside the Forum venues and at the convergence space. FNB and the IWW Solidarity Kitchen served possibly the only free meals provided during the USSF in the church basement using its kitchen and dining room. With the support of FNBER’s from all over the country and donations from diners grateful for the quality vegetarian meals, upwards of 600 people a day were fed.

As capitalism crumbles, we have the opportunity, if not the responsibility, to develop fresh ways of thinking and new models for relating to each other and the world. The resurgence of powerful social movements in North America seem possible and anarchists and anti-authoritarians have much to contribute.

Some successes included:

- Our workshops, broadsheet, and convergence space introduced thousands to the ideas and practice of a visionary, organized anarchism.
- Many people who weren't anarchists came to the workshops, building connections and relationships as they did at the convergence space, especially over meals and the SFA benefit.
- Beyond finding and meeting each other, it allowed anarchists interested in coalition work, building a social movement, developing a community and organizationally minded anarchists that do political work to find each other and begin strategizing in a relaxed setting, outside protests and repression.
- Encouraged more anarchists to attend and interact with the USSF than if there hadn't been a visible anarchist presence.
- Creating a different type of convergence space where we focused on creating a friendly, inviting, inclusive, and warm atmosphere including a welcoming tent.
- Laying the groundwork for (hopefully) a continental anarchist convergence next summer to do strategy work for a few days or a week. Some of our challenges were:
- Starting late on organizing, and thus not getting more things done in advance and/or doing more during the USSF.
- Not thinking through the hectic and overwhelming character of the USSF, and what that would mean for our own on-the-ground ability to fulfill everything we wanted to do.
- Not using our workshops in the USSF to structure more participation among USSF grassroots organizers, us and others.
- Creating effective discussions around the relationship of white organizers/organizations to a process that seeks to cultivate people of color leadership.

Sarah Coffey was a co-organizer of the Anarchist Convergence

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