

Report:



World Social Forum Belem, Brazil

January 24 – February 2, 2009

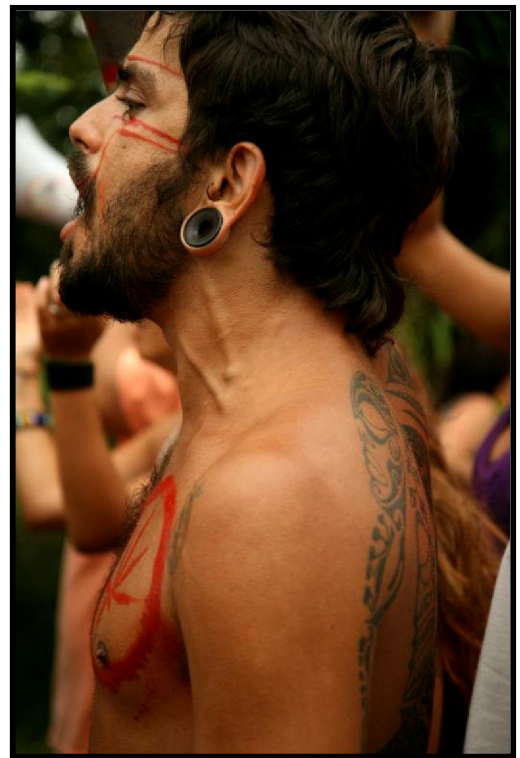
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I arrived in Brazil on January 23rd, having left Canada on January 22nd. From the 24th to the 26th, I took part in a training undertaken by SONIA and Tebtebba, the former being a women's rights group based out of Italy, the latter an Indigenous organization from the Philippines very active internationally. The World Social Forum (WSF) was not to start until the 27th, and this training was deliberately set up to attract a number of international Indigenous youth participants who could attend before the actual WSF. There were a total of 7 international participants, from Thailand, Kenya, Chad, Peru, Belize and Canada, and another 8 from the Brazilian Amazon, in addition to 4 trainers throughout, from Italy, Brazil, and the Philippines. The training was conducted in a hotel in downtown Belem, the port city chosen as host of the 2009 WSF.

The first day tackled the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), explaining first the history of Indigenous engagement at the international level. Then some relevant international cases were brought up that had made reference to the UNDRIP in domestic rulings, with the link being made that this was a relevant piece of international law for young people to understand and bring back and use in their daily work and lives. There were discussions about how it could be relevant in the case of Brazil. In the afternoon, two further discussions were held, the first being about the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) of which a number of Indigenous Peoples had participated for the past number of years.



The talk here focused on how climate change was especially relevant to Indigenous Peoples, and how it threatened their cultures, rights, resources and livelihoods. Reference was made to the UNDRIP and the political processes that Indigenous Peoples had attempted to be involved with at an international level. It was made clear that Indigenous

Peoples had limited success with international lobbying efforts, and faced opposition to some of their concerns from many of the state parties to the UNFCCC. More clarification was given to some of the proposed solutions to climate change, including the scheme called Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, or REDD, which sought



to protect forests through the application of market forces. This was highlighted as a particular threat for Indigenous Peoples, who had already seen many of their territories threatened and degraded under other proposed solutions to climate change, such as biofuels. There was still a certain level of difficulty in understanding the concepts and policies introduced by many of the young people.

The other discussion in the afternoon focused on the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), another United Nations treaty body that worked on issues surrounding biodiversity. Indigenous Peoples had a special role within the CBD, special funding, and a relevant working group, and there was an effort to explain how all of this functioned. There were many questions about how to actually make this Convention useful, for example, to protect a species that Indigenous groups felt was threatened, and how to use it as a political force.



Part of the morning session was spent discussing Indigenous women's rights, for which I was partially absent. The rest of the morning, and much of the afternoon was spent registering and getting accredited for the Forum itself. In the afternoon, a number of new participants joined from the Amazon, and there

were some discussions about how the World Social Forum functioned, and how it could

be utilized to the most efficiency by those participating. Many of these talks focused on the political economy of the international system, a bit about how Indigenous Peoples fit into the picture, and what the position of the World Social Forum was.



The final day of the Indigenous youth trainings was spent trying to identify a number of issues that some of the representatives attending could work on together. It was identified that much of this information needed to be transmitted back to the communities, and translated into local languages. This was especially true of the UNDRIP, seen as a vital document for local Indigenous groups. It was also noted that much more information about climate change and biodiversity, again, in local languages, would be of great service to Indigenous communities and young people.

The rest of the final day was spent in some closing statements, some presentations by a number of the representatives, gift sharing, and a session to try and identify which workshops would be relevant to the participants. Since there were almost 2,000 workshops organized for the WSF, I had been asked to go through the list of them and pull out ones that were relevant for Indigenous groups, in all of the languages. At this final session, this list was presented, and made available for all to see the dozens of workshops that were most relevant. This list was also distributed separately to a number



of other Indigenous colleagues and colleagues from environmental organizations. This completed the Indigenous youth training.

The next morning signalled the opening of the WSF. Initially, the different constituencies represented at the WSF (organized by tents, such as the Indigenous Peoples' tent, labour tent, Afro-Brazilian tent, etc) were to hold opening assemblies to come together and meet each other and begin to discuss the issues. Instead, many of the Indigenous Amazonian groups performed their welcoming protocols, while thirty minutes was given to allow statements from other Indigenous participants from around the world. Afterwards, Indigenous Peoples began to march towards a large field, where more statements were made, many groups talked for a while, and eventually groups were assembled for an aerial photo. They had agreed to spell out "Save the Amazon" in Portuguese (the national language of Brazil).



After this was done, groups faded away to participate in the larger march that evening. The large march ended up gathering an estimated 50,000 people for a few hours through the streets of downtown Belem. Despite a torrential downpour that left many streets flooded, the march continued on, apparently led by some of the Indigenous groups, but the parade of people was too long

for me to determine. After winding through town a few hours, more speeches were made, and the World Social Forum was officially opened. I had a meeting with a number of environmental, civil society and a few Indigenous organizations aboard a docked boat that night to discuss plans for the forum, and how each group planned to use the forum.



The next morning was supposed to open with a number of high-profile panels on three different themes. Instead, at one location, some Indigenous ceremonies and cultural

presentations were held instead, though few people seemed disappointed. In the afternoon, I was able to participate in one discussion around some of the proposed plans to deal with climate change, and how they were expected to impact negatively on the environment and on Indigenous Peoples, whose lands and livelihoods could be negatively impacted by such policies.



The second day, I took part in a session in the morning which critically assessed the direction of the WSF in general. I missed much of the session due to the time necessary to traverse the university campus, and then owing to the fact that the location had been switched in the end. After this session, however, I was asked to take part on a panel that was a continuation of the first discussion, this talk focused on critically assessing the role of Indigenous Peoples within the WSF. I will attempt to list some of these criticisms and concerns below. I was also asked to translate for two of the panellists who only spoke Spanish for this session. This also provided a good connection to two of these representatives from the Andes afterwards.

In the afternoon, I was asked to present at a discussion on the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The session was attended by many of the youth from the training, some representatives from the Brazilian Amazon, some other Indigenous Peoples and general participants. I gave a brief discussion on the indigenous rights violations that are resulting and will result from climate change, as well as the concerns around a number of plans to deal with climate change that do not take Indigenous rights into account. The session went very well.



On day three, I took part in two panels put on by the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), which formed a continuous discussion on Climate Justice and Indigenous Peoples. The first panel tackled a number of issues, with presenters from Brazil, a chief from the Amazon, a group talking about carbon trading, a Nigerian leader talking about oil in their lands, the director weaving all of the issues together and talking about climate justice as a framework, and myself giving a presentation about the Tar Sands in Alberta, talking about the ecological devastation and the devastation of Indigenous lives and livelihoods concurrently. This session was very well attended and generated many enquiries from the crowd, some of whom stayed for the whole 5 hours of presentations. This was a great opportunity to share about what was going on in Canada, and many participants seemed challenged to believe that these kinds of things were going on in Canada, which is typically regarded as such a beneficial country internationally.



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Day four, the last day of meetings, had one main session of interest. This was my only day at the other university campus, and it took over half an hour to get between the sessions here, but I arrived at the session entitled 'Dialogue between Indigenous Peoples and Environmentalists.' This

was perhaps one of the most useful sessions of the conference for our purposes, garnering the participation of perhaps two dozen Indigenous participants from all around the world, and even more 'environmentalists.' The dialogue focused around common points of working together, broad principles to be followed, and a few issues in particular that were of acute concern, including especially climate change, extractive industries, and forestry

and plans to tackle deforestation, including Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) programs. A few key events and dates were identified. After the session I was able to stop at the Indigenous Peoples' tent for the first time to hear a bit of a panel that was similar in nature, but more of presentations than discussions.



The final day, February 1st, started off with another intense rainstorm. I was trapped in my house, but eventually made it to the university site a good deal late, having missed the Indigenous assembly, but still in time for the main presentations of the final positions adopted by the individual assemblies (Indigenous, immigrants, Palestine, etc.). The Indigenous declaration was presented, and seemed to give a pretty good idea of many Indigenous concerns and issues that had been discussed. There was a bit of a problematic element to the declaration, however, in terms of how it emerged and how it was adopted as a statement of Indigenous Peoples. It had apparently been drafted by one group from the Andes and presented to the Indigenous Assembly that was

held that morning for a vote. Despite there only being representation from Latin America, it was adopted by vote, even though many group thought that the process was flawed and would have liked to discuss the declaration further and come to a consensus. In the end, it was not a bad declaration, but could have been strengthened and made more internationally relevant. Thus ended the World Social Forum for 2009.



The next day I had the opportunity to attend the International Committee meetings to review the WSF and plan for the next session. I had prepared a number of recommendations and concerns over the WSF, which I will outline here. First, there was an issue of appropriation and tokenization stemming from the use of Indigenous imagery and stories as if it were the main focus of the WSF, when in reality many Indigenous groups felt as if they were marginalized within the forum and not part of centrally

designing and participating in the forum. This is because of the approximately 1000 Indigenous Peoples brought out of the Amazon, many didn't speak much Portuguese, and there were no provisions to make sure they had adequate translation capacity. Otherwise there were a number of violations of Indigenous protocol by the organizers and staff, and many actions that were considered offensive to these Indigenous leaders.

Indigenous Amazonians were more likely to be approached to take a picture than asked their opinion, continuing their marginalization within the forum – they were not taken seriously. Indigenous movements were also peripheral to the 'mainstream' NGO-led movements present at the forum, owing to the different forms of organizing that go unrecognized from Indigenous communities. Some other Indigenous participants noted that Indigenous communities were leading the anti-globalization for many years (some say since 1492), but most recently with the Zapatistas in Mexico, the election of Evo Morales, and continuing struggles in Ecuador especially. These movements should have been central, but were barely broached. Indigenous Peoples also faced a general inability to attend, besides the groups from the Amazon, owing to lack of organization representation and financial capacity, a symptom that could be addressed with serious intention by the organizers if they desired.



At the International Council meeting, however, the floor was only open to elected delegates, of which there was only one Indigenous delegate. As a result, we were not able



to share many of these concerns, some of them only addressed tangentially by a colleague who agreed to mention some in his capacity as council member. In the end, however, these concerns were lost in the self-congratulation over Indigenous representation that was achieved. The council meeting later

degraded in the afternoon discussions over where the next forum was to be held, as this decision had seemingly been made before, but was now being broached for discussion again, to the dismay of some council members. The day ended with a number of members yelling at each other, at which point I figured it would be a better use of my time not to return on the second day, where I wouldn't have any more chance to contribute. Instead, I went to a few botanical and zoological gardens within the city.



Two other pieces of writing that I wrote about my time in Belem:

<http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/ben-powless/belem-world-social-forum-perspectives>

<http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/ben-powless/world-social-forum-%E2%80%93-another-world-still-needs-refining>

Collection of photos taken:

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/powless/sets/72157613219715414/>