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Uniting our movements



Piero Bernocchi is a representative of the leftwing Italian trade union, Cobas, at the ESF

For three years representatives of left groups, trade unions and movements from across Europe have been meeting up almost once a month to prepare for our European Social Forums. It is always stressed that the ESF is "a process, not an event". Do you think we have made progress?

I can see a big risk that the ESF is simply repeating itself and not really moving forward. We are spending a lot of time organising an event every year, but we have not spent enough energy on developing our networks and linking our struggles across Europe. I really hope that in London we will make a qualitative leap and in October we will set up functioning networks on the issues that most concern our movements: war, work, migration, etc.

However, if this does not happen, if we have not moved forward by October, then we will seriously need to analyse why. I think the main responsibility will lie with the movements themselves. There is a real problem of the heart of it: it is very easy for the movements to come together to protest against the war, but it is far more difficult to unite around social issues like the welfare state or labour rights. There are a lot of different opinions on these questions, as well as on the overarching issue of neoliberalism and how we should fight it.

Neoliberal parties are not just to be found on the European right: they are also on the left, amongst our movements. They might want to change this or that aspect of society, but not the whole system. One part of the ESF is connected to those parties: the Communist Party in France, the GLA in London, certain trade unions in Italy. In fact, there are of course very many movements and groups in Italy and Europe that are not getting involved in the social forums, just because those neoliberal forces are involved.

This is why it is very difficult - maybe even impossible - to really move forward any further with the organisations involved.

That begs the question as to why the anti-neoliberal forces across Europe do not unite on a qualitatively higher level.

These are exactly the questions we should really discuss. How can we work together? How can we move forward? But because of the difficulties of the ESF in Britain, we are spending a lot of time sorting out the enlargement of the participation and repairing problems, and do not have time to focus on the bigger questions of how we can work together.

Our experiences of neoliberalism are very similar in most countries. For example, all over Europe, education is being privatised and commodified and our national struggles against those developments are pretty similar. However, our first two ESFs have not succeeded in setting up effective networks on these questions. Likewise on the questions of health, migration, etc., the issues that affect our movements are very similar indeed. But it is simply

In my opinion, the biggest responsibility for this lack of coordination and the absence of united struggle lies with some of the participating trade unions, particularly the European TUC. There is a big resistance on its part to building united and effective action alongside movements. That's why I fear we won't be moving ahead in London.

What other problems do you see?

In Italy and France we were simply given the financial and administrative support from the various government bodies, without any strings attached. We were told, 'Here is the money, see you next month.' In Britain, it looks as if the main political group behind the bid is trying too hard to get a good relationship with the unions and the GLA in order to get some money from them. A number of big concessions on the question of democracy and participation have been made. In Italy or France it would have been impossible for somebody from the government to come to our meetings and demand this or that as a condition for hosting the ESF. The mayor of Paris, for example, wanted to speak at the opening ceremony and that was all.

So, although these concessions are being made, we have still not seen any money from the GLA. We are also getting the feeling that there is a distinct coolness on the part of the British trade unions. They seem to be in the background somewhere, but not really involved or interested.

Because of this situation, there seems to be a lot of hostility from the British grassroots movement and resistance against getting involved in the process. Myself and others are trying very hard at our European assemblies to explain to the British comrades that you cannot organise the ESF only top-down. In the end, you might just get enough money together to organise the event, but what good would it be if you alienate everybody in the process and nobody turns up?

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