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## **Porto Alegre: Counteroffensive against globalization**

by Walden Bello\*

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Porto Alegre is not exactly a Third World city. Located in one of Brazil's more prosperous states, Rio Grande do Sul, and populated by people mainly of European stock, this city of 1.2 million people is First World when it comes to infrastructure and social services. In fact, it ranks near the very top in terms of the country's "quality of life" index.

### **"Another world is possible"**

Yet Porto Alegre, site of the World Social Forum (WSF) last year and again this year, has become the byword for the spirit of the burgeoning movement against corporate-driven globalization. Galvanized by the slogan "Another world is possible," some 70,000 people are expected to flock to this coastal city from January 30 to February 4. This figure is nearly six times that for last year. Fisherfolk from India, farmers from East Africa, trade unionists from Thailand, indigenous people from Central America will be among those making their way to Porto Alegre. But there will also be a sizable contingent of people from the Northern countries. And the place will be graced by personalities who have come to exemplify the diversity of the movement against corporate-driven globalization—among others, activist-thinker Noam Chomsky, Indian physicist-feminist Vandana Shiva, Canadian people's advocate Maude Barlow, and Egyptian intellectual Samir Amin.

### **Counterpoint to Davos**

The World Social Forum emerged as a counterpoint to the World Economic Forum, the annual gathering of the global corporate crowd in Davos, Switzerland. Proposed by a coalition of Brazilian civil society organizations and the Workers Party that controls both Porto Alegre and the state of Rio Grande do Sul, the idea triggered strong international support from organization such as the French monthly *Le Monde Diplomatique* and Attac, an influential Europe-wide organization supporting a tax on global financial transactions, and received financial support from progressive donors like Novib, the Netherlands Organization for International Development Cooperation. Driven by this energy, the first WSF was put together in a record time of eight months.

A televised trans-Atlantic debate between representatives of the WSF and some luminaries attending the WEF was billed by the *Financial Times* as a collision between two planets, that of the global superrich and that of the vast marginalized masses. The most memorable

moment of that confrontation came when Hebe de Bonafini, a representative of the Argentine human rights organization Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, shouted at financier George Soros across the Atlantic divide: "Mr. Soros, you are a hypocrite. How many children's deaths are you responsible for?"

Since its first meeting the stock of the WSF has risen while that of the WEF has fallen. "Already put on the defensive as a gathering to discuss how to maintain hegemony over the rest of us," as one of the debaters on the WSF side put it, the WEF received a further blow when it was forced to hold its 2002 meeting away from Davos since the Swiss government could no longer guarantee the security of its corporate participants. Providing protection for WEF 2001 had necessitated the country's largest security operation since the Second World War, and this provoked cries of protest from within Switzerland.

Thus, the WEF has moved to New York for 2002, and it is not clear when and if it will return to Davos. But as observers point out, a great part of the attraction of the WEF is the 'ambience' of Davos as a retreat high up in the Swiss Alps. Without this, it is headed for oblivion.

The centerpiece of this year's gathering in Porto Alegre are 26 plenary sessions over four days structured around four themes: "the production of wealth and social reproduction," "access to wealth and sustainable development," "civil society and the public arena," and "political power and ethics in the new society." Around this core will unfold scores of seminars, a people's tribunal on debt sponsored by Jubilee South, and about 5,000 workshops. Marches and demonstrations of workers and peasants are also expected, led by the Brazilian mass organizations CUT (Central Union of Workers) and MST (the Movement of the Landless) that are among the key organizers of the WSF.

### **Tumultuous year**

The anti-establishment forces gather in Porto Alegre after a tumultuous year. Perhaps the apogee of the anti-globalization movement came during the Group of Eight Meeting in Genoa in the third week of July, when some 300,000 people marched in the face of police tear-gas attacks. Shortly after the Genoa clashes, in which one protester was killed by police, there was speculation in the world press that elite gatherings in non-authoritarian countries might no longer be possible in the future. And indeed, Canada's offer to hold the next G-8 meeting in a resort high up in the Canadian Rockies in the province of Alberta seemed to confirm the fact that the global elite was on the run from the democracy of the streets.

Then came September 11, which stopped a surging movement dead in its tracks. The next big confrontation between the establishment and its opponents was supposed to take place in late September in Washington, DC, during the annual fall meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Unnerved by the prospect of a week of massive protest that was expected to draw some 50,000 people, the Bretton Woods twins took advantage of the September 11 shock to cancel their meeting. Without a target and sensitive to the sea change in the national mood in the US, organizers cancelled the protest and held a march for peace instead.

The establishment followed up on the unexpected opportunity to reverse the crisis of

legitimacy that had been wracking it prior to September 11 by pressing the developing countries to approve a declaration launching a limited set of trade negotiations during the Fourth Ministerial of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Doha, Qatar, in mid-November. Third World governments were told that unless they agreed to talks leading to greater liberalization, they would have to take responsibility for worsening a global recession that had been accelerated by the World Trade Center attack.

Taking no chances, the WTO secretariat and the Qatar monarchy had worked to limit the number of legitimate NGO's attending the meeting to about sixty. This ensured that the massive demonstrations on the street that characterized Seattle, which had served as a context for the famous developing country revolt at the Sheraton Convention Center, were not present in Doha, and under thesea circumstances, developing country opposition collapsed.

### **Reversal of fortune**

Had the WSF meeting been held in late November or December, the mood of people coming would have been different. The Bush administration would have been riding high after its devastating triumph in Afghanistan. However, in the last few weeks, history, cunning as usual, has dealt Washington two massive body blows: the Enron debacle and Argentina's economic collapse.

Enron has become the sordid symbol of the volatile mixture of deregulation and corruption that drove the US' "New Economy" in the 1990's and helped lead it to what is possibly the worst global recession since the 1930's.

Burdened with an unpayable \$140 billion foreign debt, its industry in chaos, and 2,000 of its citizens falling under the poverty line daily, Argentina serves as a cautionary tale of the disaster that awaits those countries that take seriously the neoliberal advice to liberalize and globalize their economies.

As the WSF opens, these twin disasters have brought back with a vengeance the crisis of legitimacy that the global elite and its project of corporate-driven globalization were experiencing prior to September 11. Porto Alegre provides the perfect site and the perfect moment for the counter-offensive on the part of the movements that believe that "another world is possible."

\* Dr. Walden Bello is the executive director of the Bangkok-based policy and advocacy institute Focus on the Global South ([www.focusweb.org](http://www.focusweb.org)) and professor of sociology and public administration at the University of the Philippines.

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