

Report: Mumbai Resistance 2004/World Social Forum Mumbai

With a population of over 13 million people Mumbai is India's second largest city and its financial, commercial and media centre. Anyone travelling to this city for the first time is struck by its size and its incredibly crowded conditions. Every morning a seemingly endless flood of humanity pours into the streets. Vast expanses of slums extend for kilometres in all directions. At the same time there are cybercafes just about anywhere one goes and the sound of cell phones ringing is just as present as in any city in Europe. Modern office towers rise above sidewalks where in many places there is hardly a square meter that is not also someone's bedroom. The contradictions of 21st century imperialist globalisation could hardly take a more concentrated – and massive – expression. Thus Mumbai was quite an appropriate venue for what took place in the week of January 16th to the 22nd: an outpouring of anti-imperialist resistance that was felt not only throughout this city, but will no doubt reverberate around the entire region and even the whole planet. Tens of thousands of people from all over India, South Asia and around the world people descended on this metropolis to participate in Mumbai Resistance 2004 – Against Imperialist Globalisation and War and the World Social Forum. These two conferences took place concurrently in a section of the city called Goregaon some 35 kilometres north the historic centre of the city built during the nearly 200 years of British colonial rule.

Mumbai Resistance 2004 – Against Imperialist Globalisation and War

The initial call for MR 2004 was made at the Internationalist Camp which was held at Thessaloniki, Greece in June 2003. Many of the forces who initiated this call realized that the World Social Forum, which was scheduled for January 2004 in Mumbai, would be a major event attracting tens of thousands of people. They felt that the political sentiment summarized in the WSF's main slogan "Another World is Possible" needs to have a conscious and systematic anti-imperialist direction and focus. Thus MR2004 set for itself the task of showing people why imperialist war and globalisation are expressions of the fact that imperialism is a global system of economic and social relations and that active resistance to it needs to be organised based on this understanding.

In the weeks before MR2004 was scheduled to take place activists of the organisations supporting the event launched a major graffiti campaign in the Mumbai area to popularise MR2004 and its political message. According to reports in the major Mumbai press, this campaign was without precedent in its size and scope. There was almost no area of the city where the calls to attend MR2004 and slogans against imperialist globalisation and war could not be seen on painted on the walls. Over 310 anti-imperialist organisations from India and internationally took up the call for MR2004. This included among others the International League of Peoples' Struggles, and the groups that make it up, as well as the World People's Resistance Movement (South Asia) and the organisations affiliated with it. To tackle these issues, exchange experience and provide a forum for expressing this point of view MR2004 included two days of seminars and workshops on the weekend of January 17th and 18th. This was to be followed by an all-day cultural program on Monday called Waves of Cultural Resistance and on Tuesday a demonstration to the American Consulate in Mumbai to close the events with a mass display of anti-imperialist resistance.

Over one thousand delegates took part in the opening plenary session. The overwhelming majority were from the countries of South Asia and other oppressed countries in Asia (especially the Philippines), the Middle East and other regions. Among their ranks were well-known anti-imperialist leaders and intellectuals from all over the region and beyond. During the entire conference great efforts were made to translate the proceeding into Hindi the second most common language among the delegates. The program began on Saturday with a speech by Badruddin Umar a well-known writer from Bangladesh and the Secretary of Bangladesh Lekhak Shibir Umar (Anti-Imperialist Movement). Among other things he made the point that: "Undoubtedly imperialist globalisation can only be resisted with an organised, principled and programme-based struggle of the people."

The plenary session was followed in the afternoon by 5 parallel workshops: 1. The Global Peasant Forum: WTO, Agriculture and Imperialism, 2. Imperialist Globalisation and its Impact on Women, 3. Attack on Democratic Rights in the so-called “war against terrorism”, 4. Role of the Working Class in the Fight against Imperialist Globalisation and Imperialist War, and 5. Imperialism and the National Question. At each of these workshops presentations were made by delegates from different organisations and countries followed by discussion.

On Sunday morning 6 more workshops were held: 1. Occupation of Iraq: Imperialist War on Nations and People, 2. Intensified Marginalisation of Tribals (indigenous peoples) under Imperialist Globalisation, 3. Impact of Imperialist Globalisation on Dalits (so-called untouchables), 4. Global Fascism, Hindutava and Experience of Gujarat Genocide, 5. Impact of Globalisation on Students and Youth, and 6. Alternatives to Imperialism: Issues and Challenges.

The highlight of Sunday’s workshops was the one on the occupation of Iraq and imperialist war. Over 250 delegates attended and heard the world famous Indian writer and political activist Arundhati Roy give the opening address. At this workshop the delegates representing WPRM (Europe) gave a presentation on the origins, importance and effect of the anti-war movements which have arisen in the imperialist metropolises to oppose the imperialist invasion and on-going occupation of Iraq.

Their presentation stressed how the emergence of these movements took the ruling classes completely off-guard and played a major role in shaping the political landscape in the period leading up to the war and through to today. They pointed out that although the war could not be stopped, these movements played a central role in politically exposing the imperialist interests that really lie behind this war and the overall US-led offensive of which it is a part and thereby played a crucial role in building further opposition to the occupation and the offensive overall. They emphasized that these movements, the speed with which they spread and the breath they achieved really helped put the rulers on the political defensive leading up to the war and showed the potential power the masses of people have when they are aroused to rise up in their own interests. The fact that the imperialists launched this war although it was clear that the vast majority of the world’s people were against it, helped many people to understand for the first time how empty the rulers talk of “democracy” really is. This newly won understanding will no doubt play an important part in the political events that will be unfolding in the period ahead.

Other important aspects of these movements were also highlighted including their international and internationalist character, the participation of immigrant youth and sections of the working classes, etc. Some of the short-comings of these movements were pointed out as well: how they were influenced by reformist illusions as well as by the actions and positions taken by the ruling classes in the various countries and the on-going efforts to channel them into the arena of electoral politics. It was pointed out how it is both important to understand why these movements have ebbed since the major fighting in Iraq has ended, as well as to understand how the basis has been laid for an even greater upsurge in the future. Our delegates made a special effort to point out how in all the work the WPRM carried out against the invasion and occupation we have tried to make the political objective of uniting all who can be united to oppose the real enemy, – which is expressed in our motto: North, South, East and West: Unite the People’s Struggles – a guiding principle and goal of our efforts.

A highlight of our presentation involved the description by one of our delegates who is also an activist of the Stop the War Brigade (an anti-imperialist organisation affiliated with the WPRM which is working among soldiers and their families from the US and other countries). He pointed out how opposition and even active resistance to the war and occupation had even developed among the military forces of the US, UK and other countries and the important role that veterans of previous imperialist wars have played in fostering this resistance. In addition he talked about the

efforts of the STWB to link up protest actions at US bases around Europe with resistance inside the military and the fact that the STWB had distributed thousands of its Call to Resistance (signed by over 100 veterans from a half-dozen countries) and the Call of Conscious [issued by Vietnam Veterans Against the War (Anti-Imperialist)] to members of the US and UK armies and their families. Copies of these calls were distributed to people attending the workshop.

Their presentation was greeted with very warm applause and quite a few people told our delegates afterward how much they enjoyed their contribution. Among them was Arundhati Roy herself who commented that the WPRM (Europe) presentation was one of the most interesting and informative talks she had heard during the entire weekend.

Later on Sunday one of our delegates gave a presentation on behalf of WPRM (SA) and WPRM (Europe) entitled “People’s Liberation is Not Terrorism: Imperialists and Reactionaries – Hands Off Nepal/Free Comrade Gaurav!” This talk was based on the presentation with the same title that was given at the programmes that we organised around Europe.

On Monday the cultural program – “Waves of Cultural Resistance” – brought together artists, musicians, writers and actors who are active in the struggle against imperialism and who consciously use their art to aid this struggle. Starting early in the morning and lasting well into the evening over 3000 people heard the music and poetry, saw the painting and films and other forms of expression representing the cultures of over a dozen countries and nationalities.

On Tuesday the Mumbai authorities refused to allow the planned demonstration to the US consulate to take place. However this act of political repression in the “world’s biggest democracy” did not prevent over 5000 people from rallying in a park near the centre of Mumbai to protest the US-led aggression against and occupation of Iraq and against imperialist war and globalisation in general. Just about everyone attending MR2004, including our delegates, felt that the conference had been a success and had played an important role in raising the overall level of political understanding among activists in the anti-globalisation and anti-war movements and in building unity among anti-imperialist forces. In particular MR2004 took up the cases of the political prisoners Comrade Gaurav and Mumia Abu-Jamal and issued a call for people everywhere to participate in the Global Day of Actions against the US-led occupation of Iraq that is being organised for March 20th.

World Social Forum (Mumbai)

The World Social Forum took place at the Mumbai Exhibition Grounds which is located just across the road from the Veterinary College where MR2004 was held. This is a massive venue with dozens of exhibition and meetings halls to accommodate groups from 30 to 30,000. This corresponds to the fact that the WSF itself is a massive undertaking. Over 60,000 delegates from countries all around the world participated. Of course when compared to the conscious anti-imperialist programme of MR2004, the WSF has a much more contradictory character.

The World Social Forum grew out of a conference first held in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 2001. Although no political parties were openly involved in the organisation of the WSF, in fact the Workers Party of Brazil, which controlled the regional government of Porto Alegre, was heavily involved in supporting the forum. It also involved a wide variety of social movements and NGOs in Brazil, some of which have been involved in various forms of militant struggle. Outside of Brazil the WSF was initially promoted by a section of the European left, for example those grouped around the influential journal *Le Monde Diplomatique* and organisations such as ATTAC. In particular, the organisers of the WSF have tried to identify with and attract those forces that have emerged to oppose “globalisation”.

At the first Porto Alegre meeting and since then a wide section of organised and unorganised forces have attended. The format of the WSF has been to have large numbers of panel discussions and seminars as well as one or more large demonstrations during their programs.

After the large response to the Porto Alegre forum, the organisers decided to turn the WSF into a yearly event and two other programs were subsequently held in the Brazilian city. In addition, regional “social forums” have come forward in affiliation with the WSF. In Europe, in particular, the European Social Forum has drawn tens of thousands of activists and others to participate in the debates and discussions as well as in large demonstrations. Recently the ESF was held in France. Last year, the ESF held in Italy immediately before the Iraq war again attracted large numbers and used it as an occasion to express their opposition to US war plans.

As the WSF grew in size and scope from year to year, the involvement, direct and indirect, of major reactionary political forces has also grown step by step. The Brazilian Workers Party itself has come to nation-wide power with the election of Lula da Silva as president of the country. Lula’s victory was a result of agreeing to “play by the rules” established by the World Bank and other imperialist institutions. Lula has agreed to make sure that Brazil meets its debt payments, that private property of the imperialists and the reactionary classes are respected, and that land seizures are stopped.

Similarly in Europe the ESF has involved not only groups such as Attac but also a wide variety of major political parties and a whole host of left-social democratic and similar forces. The Paris Forum was reportedly largely funded, for example, by different levels of the French government. This has led to contradictions of different degrees of intensity between the ESF organisers and consistently anti-imperialist and revolutionary elements who have been participating in the programme.

Thus the WSF and its related regional “social forums” have a very contradictory character. On the one hand, the leadership and organisational control of the WSF is in the hands of forces who are not fundamentally opposed to the world system of imperialism and reaction. While many of these forces do oppose particular outrages of the imperialists and their world institutions, they are promoting the illusion that through the pressure of the people and dialogue a just international economic and social system can be brought about without doing away with imperialism as a whole.

While these forces oppose the current US imperialist drive for unquestioned world hegemony they do not oppose the imperialist system itself. Their organisational principles, for example, exclude “those who would take human life for political ends”, a position which does not prevent them from accepting direct or indirect support of certain reactionary states such as France or Brazil whose police and army have shown in countless ways that they can and do “take human life” to maintain and preserve the rule of the exploiting classes.

On the other hand, it is also clear that the slogans and activity of the WSF and its affiliates have attracted large numbers of activists and progressive-minded people, mainly from the middle classes, who are outraged by the growing inequalities and injustice in the world, who are furious at US imperialism and want to oppose it in an effective way. Most of these forces are young and have little or no exposure to a consistent and thoroughly grounded anti-imperialist point of view. These individuals and forces are eagerly looking for a more comprehensive explanation and solution to the problems of the world. It is very important that we reach as many as possible of them with our understanding of the source of the problems in the imperialist system. Also, many of them want to act. Although many of these forces have different degrees of contradiction and opposition to the main leaders of the WSF, it is also clear that these forces still consider the WSF an important arena in which they can learn and interact with others from different countries and express a united and international opposition to the policies of imperialism.

This contradictory character was more than evident right on the first night of the WSF. On Friday evening (Jan. 16th) over 30,000 people gathered at the open-air venue on the Exhibition Grounds for the opening programme. Scheduled to speak were among other both Arundhati Roy and Shirin Ebadi. As mentioned above, Roy also took part in MR2004 and is known for her uncompromising stance toward many forms imperialist domination and oppression. Speaking to the gathered thousands at the WSF opening programme she said that “imperialism is like rape, there is no polite way to describe it”.

Ebadi on the other hand is the Iranian lawyer who was just awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. An open letter from the March 8th Women’s Organisation (Iran-Afghanistan) to the WSF titled “Shirin Ebadi Does Not Want ‘Another World!’” stated: “We have been informed that Shirin Ebadi from Iran would speak in this Forum. Therefore, we decided to inform you of her wrong views and politics, which, we believe, are very harmful for the cause of emancipation of Iranian women from the oppression under the Islamic Republic of Iran... Our starting point in criticizing her is this great motto: ‘ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE, LETS FIGHT FOR IT’... Shirin Ebadi simply doesn’t believe in this. She is a person of status quo. She represents a political trend in Iran which believes in rectifying the dying, corrupt, absolutely oppressive and woman hating Islamic regime, from within... She defends this so-called reform wing not because it is really working for "reforming" the Islamic Republic of Iran. No! This faction of the regime is just a different interest group within the absolutely reactionary Islamic Republic regime. Shirin Ebadi and her kind have been supporting this wing of the regime because they believe the people of Iran do not have any choice but to choose ‘the bad over the worse’.”

Delegates from WPRM (SA) and WPRM (Europe) distributed 1500 copies of this open letter during the opening programme at which Ebadi spoke. As soon as people became aware of the subject of this open letter they lined up to get copies, all of which were distributed within just a short time. In the following days another 3000 copies of this letter were printed and distributed at the WSF.

The main slogan of the WSF “Another World is Possible” appeals to many people exactly because they feel it opens up the perspective of a world without imperialism. At the same time the main WSF-organiser like to emphasize that they are not really fundamentally opposed to imperialism, but rather are seeking to “put a human face” on globalisation. Just as in the opening programme, throughout the WSF as a whole representatives of both sides of this debate are present in practically all aspects of the event. Some of the basic features of the WSF, the fact that it is held in the oppressed countries and that the vast majority of people attending come from the oppressed countries, mean that you cannot talk about addressing globalisation and war, without also allowing at least some people talk about imperialism. This is because in these countries the *fact* of imperialist domination and exploitation is so starkly evident in so many peoples’ daily lives, that if no one was allowed to talk about imperialism being the key source of the world’s ills an event like the WSF would quickly loose all credibility.

During the 4 days of the WSF over 1200 programmes, meetings, seminars and workshops were listed on the official schedule. Most of these did not focus the role of imperialism in the different forms of injustice, poverty and oppression that people face. Instead they tended to be centred around specific issues and practical ways to address them – sometimes this means grassroots and/or political action, and sometimes its about various kinds of reforms, electoral/legislative pressure or even things like alternative kinds of teaching methods (which itself is of course a very political issue). A group called the National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers organised a seminar called “Global Environmental Politics: Impact on Indian Forest Communities. The Human Rights Forum for Dalit Liberation had one titled a “Seminar on Encountering Casteism and Communalism”, the Peoples Movement Against Nuclear Energy held a workshop on “Nuclear Power Dangers”, the National Alliance of Peoples Movements had one called “Indigenous Peoples Identity and their Rights” and Revista Marxismo Vivo had one with the title “Latin America:

Revolution or Colony?”. Of course some open representatives of imperialism were also present. For example the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, which is run by the Social Democratic Party of Germany – the party currently running the government in Germany – had a workshop called “Limits to Privatisation”.

The local press criticised the WSF saying that it was more like a “street festival” than a “serious” political event. Actually it was a mixture of both! Most of the people attending the WSF did not mainly attend the smaller workshops. Instead they tended to attend one or two smaller events related to the issue or question they are active around and go to the major programs in the evenings which were attended by thousands. The rest of the time people visited the hundreds and hundreds of information stands and book tables set up all over the grounds. Many groups formed-up ranks, raised their banners and marched around the grounds (very often accompanied by drums and other instruments) distributing their leaflets and generally trying to draw attention to their cause or issue. This often made getting from one point on the grounds to another more than a little problematic. Despite its massive size the main pathways of the Exhibition Grounds were often jammed packed with marching groups of people, individuals going from one seminar or workshop to another or people just trying to take it all in. There was an incredible amount of energy in the air. But it was not an apolitical carnival scene. It was much more like a feeling of solidarity, of common purpose and destiny: a festival of the oppressed.

While English might have been the single most spoken language at the WSF it is very likely that the majority of people attending did not speak it (or any other European based language for that matter). At the major events there was an effort to provide translation into Hindi, Spanish, French and Portuguese. Unfortunately most of the smaller events had little or no translation. Even then, a large percentage of the people could speak none of the languages mentioned above. They more likely spoke one of the dozens of other local native languages spoken by peasants and common working people in the various regions of India, Nepal and Bangladesh. This was especially true since one of the main issues being addressed at this WSF was the “Dalit question” – the question of the underclass people in South Asia who are often referred to as “untouchables” or “tribals”. These are the people at the very bottom of caste society in South Asia with few rights and little or no access to education, jobs, health care, etc. Dalit organisations from all over India and the region had organised to attend the WSF in Mumbai and their large presence put its stamp on the whole event.

On Sunday evening the main program was titled “Wars Against Women, Women Against Wars”. Around 6,000 people attended this event. When Arundhati Roy, who was one of the speakers at this programme as well, asked the people in the crowd who could understand English to raise their hands, less than half the people did so. In a part of her remarks, which were translated into Hindi, she talked about the government inspired anti-Islamic pogroms that had taken place in the Indian state of Gujarat just a few weeks before. After recalling how hundreds of Muslims had been brutally murdered and raped while the police stood by and watched she declared that these events showed that the current government of India – headed by Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his Hindu BJP party – was in fact a “fascist government”. With national elections expected in India within the next few months and Vajpayee currently expected to win re-election, she went on to state that “the only thing worse than a fascist dictatorship, is an *elected* fascist dictatorship!”

Also speaking at this program was the internationally known Egyptian writer Nawal el Saddawi. She took up the question of the legacy of colonialism and its relevance in the former colonies today. Taking up the claim that colonialism ended decades ago and that therefore this can no longer be considered to have any role in the extreme poverty and depravation common in the former colonies she said: “They are right, colonialism ended long ago. But that does not mean that the countries of the so-called third world – and I strenuously object to that term since there is only one world and I am just as much a part of it as anyone from the USA, the UK or France – that does not mean that we are no longer being dominated by the former colonial powers. We are, but not by means of colonialism. They are right about that. Now they have a more clever way of doing it – neo-

colonialism!” This boldly delivered statement by an author published in dozens of languages around the world brought a loud cry of approval from the audience.

Although mainly concentrating on the activities at MR2004 the WPRM delegates from South Asia and Europe made great efforts to play a role in the great swirl of opinions, programmes and debate taking place at the WSF. In addition to the open letter from the March 8th organisation mentioned above, a total of over 20,000 leaflets jointly issued by WPRM (SA) and WPRM (Europe) were distributed among those attending the WSF. The two leaflets, “For a World Without Imperialism!” and “Imperialists and Reactionaries: Hands Off Nepal/Free Comrade Gaurav!” were widely read. The STWB had an information stand and over the entire 4 days hundreds of people came by wanting to talk, taking STWB and WPRM leaflets as well as reprints of some recent AWTW News Service that were also available.

One of our delegates participated in a workshop attended by over 150 people to talk about the Global Day of Action being planned for March 20th. When people found out which organisation he was representing a number of them gave up their places in the line to speak so that he could address the gathering. Some of those running the meeting had been talking about the need to use the movement against the war and occupation in Iraq to get Bush out of office because, according to them, there really is a difference between the Democrats and the Republicans. In his remarks our delegate stressed the fact that we are up against imperialism and that means among other things that we cannot rely on elections and politicians to stop the occupation and the US-led offensive as a whole. In this, as in every other battle against this system, we can only rely on our own unity and struggle. He brought up the example of the Vietnam war and how it was the Democratic presidents Kennedy and Johnson who sent the US-troops in there in the first place and then escalated that genocidal war to the whole of Indochina. And then it was Nixon, a Republican, who was forced to pull them out as they were militarily defeated on the battle fields of Vietnam and politically defeated in the streets of countries all over the world, including within the US itself. He ended his remarks by calling on people from all countries to not allow themselves to be diverted into political dead-ends, but to base themselves on their own efforts and strength and to unite in this battle and aim the struggle at the common enemy. This brought the loudest round of applause that was heard the entire afternoon and people eagerly took and read the WPRM and STWB leaflets.

The WSF came to a close on Wednesday Jan. 21st with a demonstration in downtown Mumbai protesting globalisation and war. In total over 10,000 people took part. Here again several thousand WPRM leaflets were distributed as the action lasted late into the evening.