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From Davos to Belem: A Take of Two Spirits Left Margin

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BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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This years' gathering at Davos appears to have been a complete dud. It's hard for one who wasn't there to say how complete but if President Obama is reading the reports from the celebrated Swiss mountaintop he has to be glad he didn't go and that he didn't send a high powered delegation. And the high-powered U.S. financiers who usually show up at the annual World Economic Forum are probably even happier that they decided to skip this one. Previous celebrity guests such as Angelina Jolie, Sharon Stone and Bono weren't even invited.

You knew the prospects for the 39th gathering of the rich, the powerful - and a few others - weren't good when the organizers announced the theme for this year's deliberations: 'Shaping the Post-Crisis World.' It's as if they thought they could get around to confronting the big question: how to get past the current debacle. They couldn't. And evidently there was a lot of handwringing and recriminations but little new thinking. Obama and Company didn't need to be there; they didn't get the world into this mess and the people who did weren't there. "With so little clarity" on the immediate question, wrote the Financial Times team of reporters on hand, "the business and political leaders who arrived in Switzerland last week in a bleak mood had little to take home to lift their spirits."

"Mired in indecision and uncertainty, the world's foremost gathering of the best and brightest in government and business failed to come up with any new plan to stem, much less reverse, the global financial meltdown," wrote Edith Lederer of the Associated Press. The five-day confab, she went on, ended "in the same atmosphere of doom and gloom that it began, with a realization that the depth of the crisis is still unknown and the solution remains elusive."

When delegates gather at the plush Swiss resort last year, the theme was: "The Power of Collaborative Innovation" and one of the most important – "pillars" of discussion was "Economics and Finance: Addressing Economic Insecurity." Before it opened, Business Week magazine, said, "You can bet that all the heads of the European, Asian, and American central banks will be in Davos doing their own version of collaborative innovation, trying to coordinate interest-rate cuts to stem the recessionary tide rolling in."

They didn't. And what has followed it became the biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression. As the bigwigs arrived in Davos this year, massive demonstrations and riots were erupting in cities and towns stretching from Western Europe to Siberia protesting the deteriorating economic conditions and growing inequities arising from capitalism in crisis. In the U.S. a titanic battle with far reaching implications was shaping up over the new President's plan to rescue the situation.

"Everybody's lost in Davos," Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore, told Lederer. "No one seems to have a clear understanding of how big this crisis is and what we need to do to get out of it. My own view is that you really need to do a fundamental reexamination of the whole global system to see what went wrong, and nobody here is yet ready to ask these kinds of fundamental questions in Davos."

If the mood among the 2,600 participants at the closing of the 2009 WEF was downbeat, that doesn't seem to have been the case among the 115,000 who had gathered at the same time, this one in Belem, Brazil. Represented there were nearly 6,000 organizations from throughout the world. Some are famous but precious few are even remotely rich. Originally conceived as an alternative to Davos and to, to protest the WEF's policies and propose alternatives, the first World Social Forum was convened in Brazil under the slogan "A Better World is Possible."

In 2007 Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was at Davos. This year he came to Belem where he was joined by Bolivian President Evo Morales (Bolivia), Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa and Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo. That in itself was a powerful illustration of how much the world has changed over past few years and how much power and influence has ebbed away from those atop the "commanding heights" of world capitalism.

A special event at this year's Social Forum was a dialogue on regional integration from a peoples' perspective involving delegates and the four Latin American leaders. Morales – as a member himself of the indigenous and rural movements present was reported to have been the most warmly applauded. Referring to his colleagues on the stage, he told the audience: "if we are now presidents, we owe it to you. The people here are my teachers in the social struggle."

"The choice of Belem, in the northeastern gateway to the Amazon jungle region, as this year's WSF venue, indicates emphasis on environmental and climate issues, as well as social concerns, with the participation of poor and ethnically diverse communities living in the world's greatest tropical forest and freshwater reserve," said Inter Press Service. Organizers told IPS. The financial crisis that is causing the world economic slowdown had given a new dimension to this year's WSF. The Forum started in 2001 as an initiative "to counter the globalization that is now in crisis," said Candido Grzybowski, head of the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analyses (IBASE) and one of the original organizers of the WSF.

The forum ended with a "Day of Alliances," devoted to meetings of coalitions and networks to decide on joint actions. This mechanism was designed to promote links between groups and stimulate active partnerships, an area where little progress was made in previous forums.

An Assembly of Social Movements at Belem adopted resolutions and proposals outlining program of mobilizations around the world this year. They include:

A week of demonstrations and awareness raising between Mar. 28 and Apr. 4 to press for drastic change in the world's political balance and urgent measures to stop climate change.

According to IPS, "key target of this initiative is the G-20 summit of industrial countries scheduled for Apr. 2 in London, taking place in the midst of the deepening global economic crisis.

"G-20 members Argentina and Brazil, both led by progressive governments, are expected to voice WSF demands such as the disbanding or deep reform of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization."

March 30, the Palestinian Day of Return to their land, is another important mark in the program, aimed at imposing a trade boycott, international sanctions and disinvestment policies, to force Israel to stop military assaults against Gaza and engage in true peace negotiations.

Included in the demands adopted by WSF's Assembly of Social Movements are:

- Nationalization of banks;
- No reduction of salaries at enterprises hit by the crisis;
- Energy and food sovereignty for the poor;
- Withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan;
- Sovereignty and autonomy for indigenous peoples;
- Right to land, decent work, education and health for all;
- Democratization of media and knowledge

Foreign correspondents and local media have underlined the sharp contrast between the vibrant atmosphere in Belem and the somber faces of corporate bosses and Western leaders in Davos, where Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown went so far as to admit the crisis has no precedent nor any reliable forecast.

The conservative newspaper Folha de São Paulo, in Brazil's financial capital, observed Sunday that while the planet might not become the "extravagant" other world dreamt of in Belem, neither will it remain the current one, "so many times optimistically celebrated by Davos."

"As economic ultra-liberalism and current international decision-making mechanisms are both being questioned. Issues as diverse as environmental imbalances, terrorism, drug-trafficking or ethnic and religious regional conflicts overwhelm the intervention capacity of one single power or the exclusive club of most developed countries," says Folha's editorial.

At the World Social Forum taking place in Belem, Brasil, Latin American social movements held a dialogue on regional integration from a peoples' perspective, with the leaders of four South American progressive governments. Presidents Hugo Chavez (Venezuela), Fernando Lugo (Paraguay), Evo Morales (Bolivia) and Rafael Correa (Ecuador), met with 1500 representatives of social movements to exchange about past and future collaboration around integration initiatives such as the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA) as solutions to the global economic crisis.

Speaking for the social movements congregated, Magdalena Leon and Camille Chalmers presented the progress already made on the road to peoples' integration in Latin America; but they also stressed the need to invent new mechanisms to further stimulate social energy for change and harness it in favor of an accumulation of forces between peoples and progressive governments. They pointed out a series of challenges for confronting the global crisis of the present system.

Leon, a member of the Latin American Network of Women Transforming the Economy, stated that a radical situation such as the present economic crisis of a model that is in clear decay, calls for radical solutions. Otherwise, she said, we run the risk of giving a new lease of life to that model, legitimizing it, saving obsolete institutions and restoring power relations of a neocolonial nature.

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