



Detroit: I Do Mind Empire

*by Rebecca Tumposky, Michael Reagan, Lynn Koh, Maryam Roberts,
Christine Ahn and Jen Soriano*

It was an inspiring start to an uplifting week. On the first day of the 2010 U.S. Social Forum, thousands of activists and organizers surged down Woodward Avenue toward the convention center in downtown Detroit. The march was a high-energy start to the largest gathering of left and progressive forces in the U.S. Between ten and twenty thousand people turned out for the Forum, and the array of movements and peoples they represented were all in fighting spirit from the moment we took the street. People of color, immigrant rights, women's, environmental, youth, labor, and antiwar organizations stepped out one after another to create a cornucopia of people's movements. The warm sunshine, diverse faces, youthful energy, and strong sense of purpose meshed this gathering into the rich history of Detroit radicalism, including the watershed 1960s upsurge of revolutionary-minded Black workers recounted in the now-classic volume *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*.

For those of us focusing on antiwar work, there was a lot to be excited about. The number and diversity of peace and anti-militarist workshops, actions and events were as dizzying as the opening march. Yet we also knew that the antiwar movement was in need of rebuilding itself. We were acutely aware that with economic crisis shaping the daily realities of most people in the U.S. the peace movement will only be able to grow if it reaches far beyond its antiwar-focused core. Figuring out collectively how this might be accomplished and which social forces might drive the process were key reasons for gathering at the Social Forum.

The USSF fulfilled our hopes and then some. It proved a great opportunity to strategize and network. It gave us a vivid picture of the potential for building a peace movement among those in the U.S. most affected by state violence and empire: women, communities of color, the working class, veterans and GI's. Many of the sessions attended by War Timers were majority people of color, with large numbers of young people. Particularly exciting was the prominence of Palestine solidarity work and the cross-movement-building efforts that Palestinian and Palestine solidarity activists modeled, which is evolving as a strategic orientation for other components of the antiwar movement as well.

In Detroit we got a glimpse of the ingredients necessary to revitalize the antiwar movement: making connections and building relationships across sectors and communities; integrating anti-militarist demands into crucial fights for jobs and services; infusing the movement with the energy of the most oppressed; strategic focus. It will not be easy to do the patient, steady work of organizing a movement on this basis, but Detroit left us all with renewed optimism and determination to do so.

No single article could cover all the peace and solidarity events which contributed to the Forum's success. (An earlier article previewing peace activities in Detroit and a full list of

antiwar and anti-militarist workshops can be found in the special USSF Box at www.war-times.org). Here we offer a sampling of those that impacted us the most.

TARGETING MILITARIZATION, NOT JUST HOT-SPOTS

Recognizing that heightened militarization is one part of a domestic and international agenda to maintain U.S. hegemony in a radically changing world order, the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance threw its weight behind several anti-militarist sessions in Detroit. Through its Beyond Empire (BE) work group, GGJ's member organizations – based in poor and working-class indigenous communities and communities of color – is working to promote an expanded framework for an antiwar movement with a broader and deeper scope: one that focuses not just on hot spots of conflict, but on all points of U.S. militarization at home and abroad, and which centers the leadership of the most impacted peoples, communities of color in particular.

The “Galvanizing Ourselves against U.S. War and Militarism” caucus was an exciting focal point of BE's work. The caucus attracted more than 100 participants and looked like a microcosm of the broad movement needed to truly challenge U.S. militarism and empire: veterans, communities living near U.S. military bases and dying from military toxins, white peace activists, people of color fighting criminalization in our schools and neighborhoods, indigenous people fighting for land rights, and people of color fighting for sovereignty in our homelands. Key outcomes of the session included agreement that war veterans and conscientious objectors must be central in the struggle, and that anti-militarization campaigns must support existing fights for racial, gender and economic justice.

BE also initiated a Resolution Opposing U.S. Imperialist Wars and Militarism, signed by 23 organizations and integrated into other resolutions in the Final People's Assembly. The resolution calls for October to be a month of people's resistance against empire, with actions taking place across the U.S. and internationally. October 2 is the NAACP/Labor Rally in Washington, D.C., an opportunity to make a national call for war money to be moved to create healthy living wage jobs for poor and working-class people. October 3–7 marks the anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, to be marked by decentralized actions to expose the wars' empire-building agenda and demand the immediate withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The full text of the resolution is at: <http://pma2010.org/node/176>.

USLAW & ORGANIZING IN THE UNIONS

The Forum came just days after an historic victory in Oakland, California, as hundreds of activists were able to stop the unloading of an Israeli cargo ship with the support of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union Local 10. Energized by this important step forward, labor organizers gathered in Detroit to discuss how to build support for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) against Israel in the trade union movement. “Labor for Palestine” is one of several groups in different sectors working to position Palestine solidarity and anti-militarism within ongoing struggles of organized workers and the specially oppressed.

U.S. Labor Against the War, the main organization conducting antiwar work within the trade union movement over the last eight years, brought its wealth of experience to the Forum. USLAW sponsored two workshops in Detroit, one on the importance of antiwar work for labor's overall agenda, and the other looking back at USLAW's extensive work building solidarity with Iraqi trade unions and looking forward to the challenges of building solidarity with workers in Afghanistan.

In the coming months USLAW will focus on linking the economic crisis, the blistering attack on working people and social services and the cost of wars and empire. The heightened presence of labor relative to the 2007 USSF in Atlanta – the AFL-CIO itself sponsored two workshops in Detroit, including one on immigrant rights – indicates the potential for these efforts to move forward.

BUILDING GI & VETERAN LEADERSHIP

The prominence of GI and veteran resistance organizing in Detroit showed the growing strength of this important sector. Sessions were organized by Iraq Veterans Against the War (IVAW), the Civilian Soldier Alliance (CSA), Veterans for Peace, Military Families Speak Out, Courage to Resist, and the War Resisters League. Topics included how to support soldiers to file Conscientious Objector claims, GI resistance organizing strategies, and the strategic role of veterans and military families in the antiwar movement.

On the weekend prior to the Forum, forty organizers dedicated to GI Resistance gathered in Chicago for a Leadership and Organizing Training hosted by IVAW and CSA. The group was made up of half IVAW veteran members and half civilian allies committed to supporting veterans' leadership. This was the first training of its kind, with sessions focused on leadership, organizing, and campaign development, with key facilitation by organizers from United Workers and Student Farmworkers Alliance.

Throughout militarism's history, soldiers have always resisted. Today is no different. With a new organizing model focusing on leadership development at the grassroots, IVAW is building a veterans and GI resisters movement to end the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, attain quality healthcare and rebuild Iraq. CSA is committed to building networks of accountable ally support. The Training went through a process of prioritizing issues important in the veteran community and narrowing them down. IVAW member veterans then autonomously chose one area to focus on for an immediate campaign. It was a very challenging process, but with tenacity, the veterans pushed through. Women veteran leadership was especially strong throughout the weekend, creating an inclusive space for a diverse array of voices to be heard, and highlighted issues including military sexual assault and community building. By the end of the training, veterans and allies alike left with clear next steps to carry out the work and gain momentum over the coming months.

CONFRONTING ISRAELI APARTHEID

An exciting development at the USSF was the centrality of Palestine solidarity perspectives and Palestinian leadership – something all too often lacking at progressive and antiwar gatherings in the U.S. over the last several decades. The U.S. Palestinian Community Network (USPCN) and the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN) were both represented on the Forum's leadership body, the NPC. A USPCN organizer explained the significance of this:

The participation of the USPCN in the NPC signifies a momentous shift for both the Left movement in the U.S. as well as for Palestinian rights activism. Through Palestinian community participation, we aim to encourage the U.S.-based Left movement to integrate the Palestinian struggle for self-determination into its analysis and work.

Conversely, participation allows Palestinian rights advocates as well as Palestinian-Americans who struggle for their labor, housing, immigrant, racial and criminal justice rights, to align themselves more firmly within the Left to build another world together.

Full text: <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article11184.shtml>.

The resulting powerful Palestine Track at the Forum included over fifty workshops; two tents featuring Palestinian and Arab culture, history and educational resources, and two People's Movement Assemblies. Additionally, there were Palestinian speakers on the Forum's plenary panel "From National to International: The Effect of Neoliberal Policies at Home and Abroad," including a live Skype with Jamal Juma of the Grassroots Palestinian Anti-Apartheid Wall Campaign, and Rabab Abdulhadi from the Arab Muslim Ethnicities and Diaspora Initiative at San Francisco State University. More information on the developments from the Palestine Track can be found at <http://ussf.palestineconference.org/ussf-blog>.

Just prior to the USSF, IJAN was a major sponsor of the "2010 U.S. Assembly of Jews: Confronting Racism and Israeli Apartheid." Occurring on the heels of the 36th Congress of the World Zionist Organization (WZO) in Jerusalem, the Assembly brought together more than 200 people around a sharply contrasting internationalist and anti-racist politic. With markedly inter-generational participation and over fifty endorsements from organizations in the U.S. and internationally, the Assembly reflected today's renewal of anti-Zionist sentiment among Jews in the U.S. and elsewhere. Post-Assembly we can expect to see growing participation of anti-Zionist Jews in BDS campaigns, including campaigns against the Jewish National Fund, and political organizing that targets the U.S./Israeli militarist agenda.

CROSS-MOVEMENT LINKS

Building cross-movement links, a main feature of USSF as a whole, was especially stressed in many peace and antiwar-focused sessions. One moving workshop, "Transnational Feminist Organizing to Resist Militarism and Empire," took up connections between feminists in the U.S. and those working to confront patriarchy and militarism abroad. Participants went into depth about how militarism is used to rape women, inflict violence on people, contaminate the environment, and strip farmers and peasants of their land and sovereignty. One powerful speaker at the session, Graciela Sanchez of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas – home to five U.S. military bases – called for women "to do the work as mujeres to change the culture of violence" and offered a stinging critique of how organizing in this country has been defined by men and by narrow definitions of people's identities: "I can't separate my queer self, my woman self, my working-class-background self, my immigrant-family-from-Mexico self, or my curly-headed self. We can't separate our identities; we must look at issues holistically and make the connections."

Bringing together often separated movements was a special focus of many Peoples Movement Assemblies. For example, the resolution coming out of "The Way Forward: Strategy, Tactics and Seeding Boycott Divestment and Sanctions in the U.S." called for "support of BDS to be centered in the core of the U.S. social justice movement and internationally thus highlighting the intersections that exist across these struggles against Imperialism and Colonialism." Full text: <http://pma2010.org/node/216>.

Representing a powerful convergence of anti-racist, anti-militarist organizing, several organizations including Left Turn, United Against Racism and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, as well as USPCN and IJAN, collaborated toward development of demands that could weave different sectors together. While there was no formal PMA, this project was able to convene and explore common issues and goals ranging from challenging militarization and policing of our communities and our lands to freeing political prisoners to supporting BDS.

At another session, several organizations rooted in communities of color developed an International Solidarity and Responsibility Peoples Movement assembly, which included a resolution calling for "the end to U.S. interventions and occupations in Palestine, Haiti, Iraq,

Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, Colombia, etc ... and a framework of reparations, restitution for slavery colonization, and genocide. The resolution included a call to endorse the Cochabamba accords developed at April's World People's Summit on Climate Change and to engage the International Day of Action for ecological justice.

Full text: <http://pma2010.org/national-pma>.

“MOVE THE MONEY– STARVE THE EMPIRE”

Organizers from a variety of groups and sectors came to Detroit thinking “Move the Money” organizing – demanding a shift of resources from the military budget to human needs at home – ought to be a key strategic focus under today's conditions. In the post-USSF article “Move the Money – Starve the Empire” Christine Ahn put it this way:

We can't address the economic crisis blighting neighborhoods throughout the U.S. without moving money away from war. That's the only part of the national budget not being cut. Organizers at the USSF united two disparate sectors. One is comprised of grassroots base-building organizations with multicultural constituencies working to secure jobs, education, and services. The other includes national peace organizations with mostly white, middle-class membership. These two groups largely organize separately. But they came together at the USSF because working poor people clearly can't get the jobs and services they need without challenging military spending. Likewise, peace groups can't end wars without a broad movement challenging the military-industrial complex.”

Full text: www.fpif.org/articles/move_the_money_starve_the_empire.

The “Move the Money” workshop in Detroit, co-sponsored by War Times, succeeded in bringing those exact sectors together and laying the groundwork for future collaborative work.

UNITED FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

From 2002 through 2007–2008 UFPJ was the main nationwide antiwar coalition. In the last two years it has been struggling with severe financial problems and difficulty finding a unifying focus in a changed political landscape. At a Detroit workshop UFPJ's national leadership explained its recent transition to a network and the loss of all paid staff. That UFPJ has been able to survive is a plus for the antiwar movement, keeping some level of nationwide infrastructure intact. But the coalition is not in position to play the pivotal role it did previously. At the UFPJ organizational workshop, spirited member groups like the Washington Peace Center and individuals from as far away as Chico, California exhibited the energy that remains in UFPJ. The group was also able to put together an impressive array of workshops, including a strategy session on ending the Afghan war featuring Phyllis Bennis. In the coming months UFPJ will prepare for the October jobs mobilization in Washington DC and is working on getting antiwar perspectives as part of the platform. The group is also working on decentralized actions around the anniversary of the Afghan invasion in October.

SPREADING USSF'S ENERGY ACROSS THE COUNTRY

The 2010 US Social Forum provided a much needed opportunity for the antiwar movement to re-ground itself and build momentum for the challenges ahead. Since the economic crisis and the election of Barack Obama, the movement has struggled to find its place on the national political map as popular attention has shifted from the wars to issues of the economy, immigration, and now the catastrophe in the Gulf. Yet rather than being a diversion from issues of war and peace, fights for racial, economic, and environmental justice offer key opportunities and important terrain for the antiwar movement to engage. Just as struggles to defend education and social services will never gain real ground as long the military budget

balloons, the fight against U.S. militarism and empire needs to be led by those sectors based in working class and oppressed communities.

A revived antiwar movement needs new strategies, expanded outreach that resonates with key constituencies and new vehicles for coordination. Winning victories under today's conditions will require patient, steady organizing, with a long-term view and a commitment to building power and alliances among all the communities impacted by war and militarism. This will not be easy. Yet the energy and ideas of the thousands who gathered in Detroit shows the potential for breakthroughs ahead. With an antiwar movement re-energized in vision and leadership, we can make a big dent in militarism and win victories for social justice. Marching down Woodward Avenue with thousands of fighters for a better world was a great reminder that – hot as it was on the Detroit summer day – we can make things even hotter for the war-makers, racists, and exploiters if we turn the spirit of Detroit into day-to-day work across the country.

*The authors are part of the new team that will be writing the "Month in Review" column and other features and analytic articles for **War Times/Tiempo de Guerras**.*