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## Building On the Success of the London ESF

*Alex Callinicos*

The third European Social Forum in London (14-17 October 2004) provided further evidence – if more were needed – of the vitality of the *altermondialiste* movement. It also confirmed – after Porto Alegre and Paris, Mumbai and Florence – that the social forum remains an astonishingly dynamic and successful political form. The success of the London ESF can be demonstrated in various dimensions:

**First of all, the figures:** approximately 25,000 people took part in 500 plenaries, seminars, workshops, and cultural events, which were addressed by over 2,500 speakers. The figures for pre-registered delegates show that the participants came from right across the continent and beyond the boundaries of even the expanded European Union.

The concentration of the bulk of the ESF at Alexandra Palace recaptured something of the atmosphere of the Fortezza at Florence, producing an intensification of energies by bringing together a large number of different actors and debates in a confined space for two and a half days.

London also displayed the same interplay of mobilization and debate that has been the driving force of all the great social forums: the ESF culminated in a demonstration in central London of around 100,000, before which the Assembly of the Social Movements launched a call for international protests against neo-liberalism and war on the weekend of 19-20 March 2005.

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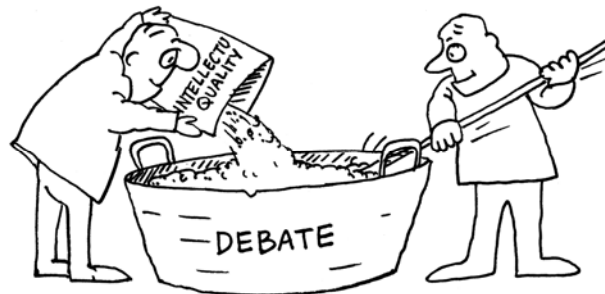
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These are all measures common to the London ESF and its predecessors. But in certain respects, the ESF marked a significant step forward.

- The mainstream of the trade union movement in Britain was actively involved in both the preparatory process and the Forum itself: feedback from various unions has been overwhelmingly positive, with reports of highly successful seminars involving important networks of activists.
- There was also a marked increase in participation by black, Asian, Muslim, and refugee networks: this is an important achievement given the Europe-wide offensive against civil liberties and the rights of migrants and asylum-seekers.
- There was a very rich and ambitious cultural programme. The number of plenaries was sharply reduced, giving more space to self-organized events. Moreover, the efforts to reduce the number of plenary speakers, establish a gender balance among them, and allow more time for discussion from the floor were quite successful.
- My impression - and that of others to whom I have spoken - was of



a significant increase in the intellectual quality of the debate: in the seminars that I attended I was very struck by the extent to which both platform speakers and contributors from the floor avoided the ritual denunciations of neo-liberalism and imperialism for serious analysis and discussion. All these improvements did not occur randomly. They were among the aims of those centrally involved in organizing the ESF. We are therefore entitled to claim a fair measure of success.

The ESF in London was smaller than its predecessors in Florence and Paris, which each attracted around 50,000 people. This is hardly surprising: the *altermondialiste* movement first began to take shape in Europe with the formation of ATTAC in France in 1998; since Genoa the movement has been strongest in Italy. In Britain there has been a very strong anti-war movement, but only a widespread, but diffuse anti-globalization consciousness.

**The London ESF was accompanied by plenty of political noise.** To a significant degree this reflected the fact that our very diversity means that there are plenty of political disagreements. For example, many comrades, especially from France, didn't like the fact that the war in Iraq was very prominent in London, as it was in Florence.

In part, this disagreement reflects differences in national context. In



Britain the war dominates politics and is far and away the biggest mobilizing issue. Without the prominence of the war and the leading involvement in the ESF of the British peace movement, the Forum would have been a far less dynamic affair, and the final demonstration

would have been little larger than the participation in the Forum itself.

At different stages this process embraced a very wide range of forces – stretching from the Trade Union Congress and mainstream NGOs to autonomist groups with a history of intermittent violence. Holding this coalition together would have been difficult in any circumstances. Of course, the Italian and French comrades also have developed very broad coalitions, but it was probably an advantage that these had been constructed well in advance of actually organizing the ESF, so that people had an experience of working together.

In Britain, by contrast, the *altermondialiste* networks that had participated in the earlier Forums were relatively weak. A coalition had to be created from scratch to organize the London ESF. This involved

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bringing together very diverse organizations with no history of working together and huge differences in political culture. Working together would have been hard in any circumstances.

### **Disagreements spilled over into several attempts at disruption**

A very heavy responsibility for the difficulties that developed must rest with the autonomist circles. Their attitude towards the ESF varied between outright opposition (theorized in a critique of the Social Forums as inherently reformist) and variable but usually not very constructive participation in the process.

Every effort was made to accommodate them: for example, the London



ESF provided an Autonomous Space along the lines of those organized in Florence and Paris. As agreed at the European Preparatory Assembly, all meetings of the UK Organizing and Coordinating Committees were open.

But even if the criticisms that have been made of the British organizers were largely correct, this would not justify the introduction of violence inside the Forum. Violence and debate are antitheses: those who believe that diversity and discussion are among the greatest strengths of our movement cannot tolerate attempts to settle arguments by force. Moreover, those who bring violence into the movement bring the state in with them: the attacks in Trafalgar Square gave the police the pretext to intervene and arrest people.

Overall these incidents had very little impact on the ESF.

**It is, in any case, the future about which we need to be thinking.**

The next ESF will be in Athens in the spring of 2006. What political lessons does the experience of London offer? The most important is that, as the Italian comrades pointed out after Florence, the great strengths of the movement are radicality and diversity. We have managed the near-miracle of developing a movement that embraces an extraordinarily wide social and political range but that has mounted a challenge to capitalist imperialism as a system. This was very evident in London: as at Florence, many of the largest and most dynamic meetings were dominated by the politics of the radical left.

But London also showed that combining radicality and diversity becomes harder, not easier, over time. Important divergences have crystallized over a variety of issues - the war, the European Constitution, the *hejab*, the role of the radical left. There are also differences over how to build the movement: some networks are much more ambivalent about involving the trade-union mainstream than others.

We must also confront the fact that the process itself is becoming increasingly dysfunctional. ATTAC France rightly points to the fact that attendance at the European Preparatory Assembly has stagnated since Florence and argues that 'the functioning of the EPA must be improved in a logic of democratization, of representativity and of enlargement'. This is easier said than done, particularly given the stress laid in our procedures on meetings being open to all and deciding by consensus, which can give great power to disruptive but unrepresentative minorities.

We still have a fair distance to travel before we can imagine having achieved any of the concrete goals adopted in all our seminars and plenaries. But our successes - most recently at the London ESF - leave me confident of our ability to build a movement that can start to win real victories.

