CHAPTER 2

The US Social Forum: Building from the Bottom Up

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Atlanta has never seen anything like this,” commented Jerome Scott of Atlanta-based Project South, this march was the most multinational action I have ever seen.

Rebick (2007)

It may be too early to judge the historical significance of the United States Social Forum (USSF), but ultimately it could mark one of the most important political moments in recent US history. From June 28 through July 2, 2007 over 12,000 people rallied under the banner “Another World is Possible, Another U.S. is Necessary!” They convened in the summer heat of Atlanta, Georgia, and wrote the latest chapter in the history of the World Social Forum (WSF). The USSF signified a turning point in both the emerging social movements within the US, and perhaps the global social forum process as well.

One of the salient characteristics of the USSF was its diversity. A number of writers have commented on the range of ethnicities represented, the large numbers of poor and working-class delegates, the range of sexual identities and more.

Canadian writer Judy Rebick (2007) commented,

...the racial diversity not only of the participants but of the leadership is remarkable. It is no longer just black and white, Indigenous people have a place of pride, there is a rainbow of immigrants, and children of immigrants: Latino, Chinese, Korean, South Asian, East Asian, every place you can think of and always hyphenated with American. There are more people with disabilities than I have ever seen at a movement event and the LGBT presence is visible and proud.

International relations scholar Thomas Ponniah (2007) wrote that the USSF was more diverse than any of the World Social Forums in the last
three years. The USSF and the World Social Forum in India in 2004 embodied cultural and economic diversity among the most visible speakers and facilitators, not just among delegates. According to Tammy Bang Luu, Chair of the USSF Outreach Working Group, it was the intentionality of the organizing process that assured the diverse representation.

A fundamental principle for us was to assure the participation of the most marginalized communities in the country. We initiated the USSF based on the belief that working-class people, the poor, indigenous people and people of color must be central to the leadership of creating fundamental social change in the U.S. This meant a massive investment of time, patience and resources in the outreach process.1

**Grassroots Organizing in the US**

The driving force behind the organizing of the USSF was a sector of grassroots organizations largely overlooked in national politics. For the past three decades these organizations have been building dynamic community and worker institutions in indigenous nations, working class neighborhoods and communities of color. This grassroots movement represents the potential for new political direction and hope for fundamental change in the US.

A wide array of organizations makes up the grassroots organizing sector. They include anti-racist organizations (Project South, Institute for the Elimination of Racism and Genocide in Atlanta and the Peoples Institute for Survival and Beyond in New Orleans), farm workers organizations (the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in south Florida, the Border Agricultural Workers Union in El Paso, TX, and the Farm Labor Organizing Committee in Toledo, OH) environmental justice organizations (Indigenous Environmental Network, the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice, PODER in San Francisco, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network in Oakland, and the Southwest Organizing Project in New Mexico), welfare rights organizations (Community Voices Heard in New York City), groups fighting displacement and gentrification (Miami Workers Center, Tenants and Workers United in Alexandria, VA, and POWER in San Francisco), labor and community formations (Southwest Workers Union in San Antonio, TX, the Labor/Community Strategy Cen-

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1 Tammy Bang Luu, Interview with author, July 4, 2007.