

# Five Questions to the Proponents of the World Social Forum 2016 in Montreal

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*On March 31st, Le Devoir, the last independent daily newspaper in Quebec, reported that Montreal would host the next World Social Forum (WSF) in 2016. The article refers to the recent decision of the International Council (IC) of the World Social Forum announced with great fanfare in Tunis. It also specifies that it is the first time that a Social Forum is to be held in the Northern hemisphere, after numerous past successes in the South in Latin American countries and in post-revolutionary Tunisia.*

Though the proponents of the Montreal proposal welcomed with the greatest joy the International Council's green light, several fundamental questions remain unanswered, especially regarding the plausibility of their aims. Core issues are still unresolved, namely the level of local and international participants, funding sources and, most importantly, the real political impact of the magnitude of required resources on social groups and movements already grappling with many difficulties in Quebec and in the rest of Canada. The stakes and the risks are high. It is time for the proponents of the event, if they are serious about turning it into a real political success, finally address the issues raised by their project.

1- Who will be the 80,000 people expected at the WSF 2016?

The proponents of the WSF in Montreal announced a record mobilization of 50,000 to 80,000 people. However, this estimate appears unrealistic considering, first, the last WSF experience in Tunis that gathered 48,600 people and, second, the past Canadian experiences of Social Forums. A quick look at the number is revealing. In 2007, 5,000 people joined the first Quebec Social Forum in Montreal. In 2009, they were only 3,500. In August 2014, the first Peoples Social Forum held in Ottawa brought together between 5,000 and 6,000 people from Quebec, Canada, and First Nations. The issue of the number of participants is important because it is an indicator of the political success of the event but also the finances, since every participant pays registration fees.

According to the global statistics of the World Social Forum, compiled after every event, local participants systematically constitute 80% of the total participation. Moreover, past forum experiences in Quebec teaches us that on average, the province is only able to mobilize 4,000 people each time. Therefore, to be able to reach the estimated 50,000 to 80,000 participants, the Montreal WSF would need to mobilize between 40,000 and 64,000 Quebecers. That would represent quite a challenge as it would need to boost the average participation by a 1000% to 1500%.

The level of international participation for the event is another layer of uncertainty. Because

of Canadian visa restrictions, high costs of transport and accommodation for those coming from overseas during in the high tourist season, many international participants will face great obstacles before being able to attend. Given the importance of those barriers, proponents of the WSF in Montreal admitted the problem in their own original presentation of Montreal's candidacy to the International Council. As a "solution", they suggested a "massive use of the Internet's potential to foster 1,000 simultaneous remote Social Forums in the four corners of the world". By their own volition, they were proposing to "solve" the potentially lacking international participation by discouraging their physical presence in Montreal. Yet, international participants represent 20% of the expected participation. Since the last IC meeting in Tunis, proponents of the Montreal WSF have adjusted their solution and decided to launch a major campaign demanding that the Canadian government reduces the level of visa restrictions. However, since the current Conservative government is currently doing exactly the opposite, it seems highly uncertain that this campaign, as important as it is, will facilitate the entry in Canada of participants from the Global South.

The Canadian (outside Quebec) and Aboriginal participation is also a huge challenge given the size of the Canadian state. For the People Social Forum in August 2014, a solidarity fund of nearly 40,000\$ had been set up mainly to allow the participation of indigenous communities and people from the West and Maritimes who otherwise would never have been able to participate. Even at the preparatory meetings, such funds had been put forward with the same goal in mind, which is to ensure their participation. Will this be the case of the WSF 2016? The question must be raised and addressed since it seems no resources were set up to facilitate participation from outside Quebec during the initial assemblies held in Montreal.

## 2- Who will pay the 2.4 million that the project requires?

The proponents of the Montreal WSF are proposing a total budget of 2.4 million, including 1.6 million from participants registration fees, sponsorships, and government programs. They also spoke of a total of \$830,000 in services and facilities that they hope to receive for free from volunteers, universities and colleges as well as the city of Montreal.

The financial analysis of the previous three Social Forums held in Canada, however, reveals problems with each of these budget lines.

First, with an average turnout of 5,000 people for the three previous forums in Canada, none of them could gather more over \$100,000 from the registration fees. More importantly, previous experience has taught us that the money generated by the Forum itself (the registrations of participants, groups and activities) never exceeded 40% of total revenues. In Ottawa, for the People Social Forum, only 25% of the total budget came from those sources. This is far from the 66% announced by the promoters of the Montreal WSF 2016.

Worse, should there be a deficit, who will be held accountable? In Tunis in March 2015, the organizers reached a deficit of at least 30 000 euros caused by a level of participation lower than expected. In 2009, the low participation levels at the 2nd Quebec Social Forum imposed on the organizers a deficit of more than \$20,000 dollars. At the end, civil society groups, namely the labor sector in the Canadian experience, have to endorse the bill. In a context of austerity, placing the bet that local civil society groups will be able to absorb any deficit resulting from the Montreal 2016 is a dangerous move and one that social movements do not need right now.

Secondly, the budget involves nearly a million in voluntary services that would be offered, for free, to the event. However, volunteers do not come freely. At the very minimum, they need to be housed, transported, and fed. Reserving venues and spaces is also an issue. The WSF 2016 proponents expect to have access to two universities, one college, the *Palais des Congrès*, (Montreal's Convention Centre) as well as some outdoor sites. Even if all those venues are available, any experienced organizer know that a "free space" actually costs money to cover security, insurance, technical assistance, equipment, furniture, permits and much more.

Third, despite the existence of letters of support from various levels of government (Canada, Quebec, and the City of Montreal), the involvement of these authorities is not at all guaranteed. Social forums are political: they aim to mobilize and organize those who are fighting against increasingly restrictive and neoliberal policies promoted by those specific authorities. To assume that the federal and provincial governments and the municipality would support an initiative whose final aim is to organize the struggle against their reactionary policies is a highly unrealistic position. More importantly, if the authorities do not, with little surprise, decide to invest money in the project, are we going to impose the burden on trade unions and social groups to financially supporting an event with estimated costs five times exceeding that of the latest experience?

### 3- What are the political objectives of the WSF 2016?

If the issues of money or participation could be seen as "technicalities" by some, the main question raised by the possibility of a WSF in Montreal is much more fundamental. It is articulated around the very political objectives of the project. According to its proponents, the aim of the process is to "boost local social struggles by giving them international resonance". Though the intention appears honourable, even considering the excepted difficulties regarding the mobilization in Quebec, Canada and internationally, the usefulness of this "international resonance" remains to be demonstrated for social movements in Quebec and Canada who are already involved on multiples fronts against the provincial and federal governments. In that context, we must ask the question of the proportionality of the human and financial investments required by the WSF 2016 in relation to the expected benefits for the very social movements it aims to boost.

So far, on the question of the very purpose of the Forum and the expected results, the documentation offered by proponents of the WSK 2016 only manages to provide vague logistical answers. They tell us of long demonstrations that will open and close the event, "1500 self-organized activities" will happen within a "World Social Territory" of "3 km from UQAM to Concordia University" with "gathering places" on the "premises of these two universities, the Cégep du Vieux-Montréal (a college), the Emilie Gamelin Place, the Place des Festivals, the Victoria Square and the Convention Centre. That is certainly a lot of space. But it doesn't answer the question as to the expected or desired outcomes of the event for the social struggles here. The WSF 2016 only exists for the event and will not survive its own process.

To highlight the importance of a clear political project behind a Social Forum, it serves to look at the initial goals of the 2014 People Social Forum. Thirty months were required to build, through social movements, a social forum with the aims of creating historical alliances between Quebec, Canada, and First Nations. It was an innovative project in the context of an all-out attacks by the federal government against all spheres and sectors of civil society. The premise was - and still is - that different groups and movements from Quebec, Canada,

and First Nations must learn to work together because they have a common enemy. Those links and alliances must be nurtured, not discarded.

So far, the project of the Montreal WSF appears without any purpose. The event does not seem to address any political issue other than its own occurrence in August 2016. Moreover, the achievements of the People Social Forum are ignored as demonstrated by the lack of willingness to involve or retain any commitment from the sheer number of social groups and movements who were involved in the People Social Forum. It is revealing to compare the list of groups that supported each event. As far as the Montreal WSF is concerned, there is a blatant lack of representation from movements in English Canada and indigenous movements. There is even a stark absence of important groups in the Quebec civil society, the very basis, at least in theory, of the Montreal WSF. Where are the important women's rights groups? The students? Where are environmental groups and citizens active on the climate justice front? The labour groups and the unions? Not only did those important groups have not yet expressed support for the Montreal WSF, but the overwhelming majority of them have not been approached or consulted on the matter of the political orientations of the event.

#### 4- Is the WSF 2016 rooted in social movements?

The lack of prior consultation with local social movements and others social justice actors speaks to the disconnection between the WSF project and the people. The fact that those behind it chose to first convince the International Council of the merit of their project before convincing local movements, who are supposed to be at the heart of the process and are supposed to be the main beneficiaries of it is another indicator of that disconnection. The majority of those involved in the WSF 2016 main organizing body are individuals neither connected to local social movements nor representing any of them.

The same mistake was done in 2009 when organizing for the second Quebec Social Forum. At that time, social movements were barely consulted during the process. As a result, most of them chose to simply sit idly without engaging. In the end, there was a significant decline in the 2009 forum compared to the 2007 one. Unfortunately, the same recipe for a forum without connections to social movements is still presented to us for 2016.

After the death of the Quebec Social Forum in 2009, the idea of a new social forum in Canada was revived during the People Social Forum as bridges between French Canada, English Canada and Indigenous movements were built. Yet, the work done during that process, though it was unprecedented, doesn't seem to have left traces as, only 18 months later, we find ourselves in a process focused mainly on Quebec. It may constitute a desirable side track for some members of the large nationalist Quebec left who do not wish to bother themselves with endless conversations with the anglophones or the indigenous communities. How can we claim to be ready for a World Social Forum in Canada if not a single debate with those two groups were held?

#### 5- How to hold a real WSF 2016 on those conditions?

Several fundamental concerns remain unanswered here. Will the social groups and movements mobilize for the event? What expectations should we have in terms of support to local struggles? What is real involvement from outside Quebec, including indigenous movements and from overseas? What are the financial implications for movements already struggling on many fronts, both at the provincial and federal levels? What are the long-term

prospects?

We can ask many others questions, like regarding the real risk that the occurrence of the Montreal WSF damages a world process that is already reflecting on its own difficulties, with the latest Tunisian experience having received a very mixed assessment. But the fundamental question here is: How to move forward? Is it really possible, or even necessary, to hold a WSF when we know that it is not connected to any social base and that it might turn into the faulty Quebec Social Forum experience.

For reasons of its own, the International Council decided to support the Montreal initiative of the WSF 2016. But the Council is neither Quebec nor Canada. It knows little about realities and struggles here. The fact that they approved the project should not be enough, by itself, to impose through magical thinking a world social forum on local grassroots groups and social movements with unreasonable expectations, important investments and murky benefits.

If the Montreal WSF project is to move forward, then these questions must be answered now.

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