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WORLD SOCIAL FORUM

New and Old, US Groups Forge Broad Alliances

By Matthew Cardinale

ATLANTA, Georgia, Jan 15, 2010 (IPS) - With civil society gearing up for the 2010 World Social Forum, and later this summer, the 2010 U.S. Social Forum in Detroit, Michigan, activists here say new alliances created at the first USSF in 2007 are going strong.

Two of the most notable were the **Right to the City (RTTC)** and the **National Domestic Worker Alliance (NDWA)**, a grouping of 11 local and regional domestic worker organisations.

"There's been a tremendous amount of progress [since the USSF]. The alliance has expanded to include 10 cities and over 20 groups of domestic workers around the country," Ai-jen Poo, a participant in the founding meeting of the NDWA, told IPS.

"We have started working on an international campaign together with domestic worker organisations around the world to impact the first International Labor Organisation Convention on Domestic Work. That's going to be discussed at the ILO in Geneva in June of this year and next year as well. It would be the first ever," Poo said.

"We've also started working with the U.S. Department of Labour to look at potential administrative and regulatory reforms at the DOL that can include enforcement of existing laws for domestic workers at the federal level," Poo said.

She said that the New York chapter has been fighting for statewide legislation to establish labour rights for domestic workers there, while domestic worker groups in California are launching a statewide domestic worker bill of rights campaign.

"Now we actually have a national vehicle to build power which we never had before the Social Forum, and to raise the level of respect for this work and really bring attention to the conditions and the abuses but also the tremendous organising that's happening in the sector," Poo said.

"It's a new attempt to build power in a sector which has been very challenging to organise in the past, where workers are all isolated and it's mostly women of colour who are primary income-earners for their families," she added. "It's almost like a national union. We have partners and lawyers, but the membership is based on the women themselves."

The other group, RTTC, was organised as "a new alliance that unites our struggles for housing, health care, and public space to fight neoliberalism and build an alternative for our cities," according to its website.

RTTC held its first business meeting at the USSF later that year and ratified its organisational structure.

It brings together **over 36 different organisations from seven cities** across the U.S.: Boston, Massachusetts; Washington, DC; Los Angeles, California; Miami, Florida; New Orleans, Louisiana; New York, New York; Providence, Rhode Island; and San Francisco, California.

The alliance also unites **various types of organisations**, including those based upon identification with a common ethnicity, sex, race, or class; and those founded to address a particular issue.

For example, Right to the City includes numerous Hispanic groups – such as **Centro Presente** and **City Life-Vida Urbana** in Boston; **Esparanza** and **Union de Vecinos** in Los Angeles; and **Vecinos Unidos** in Miami - as well as two chapters of the **Chinese Progressive Association**, in Boston and San Francisco. It also includes **Picture the Homeless** in New York, **Safe Streets** in New Orleans, and **St. Peter's Housing Committee** in San Francisco.

"Since [the USSF], we've gone on to do all different sorts of work," David Dodge, regional coordinator for RTTC's New York chapter, told IPS.

Dodge said that each region of RTTC has its own work in addition to the work done by the national campaign.

In New York, "We're converting vacant luxury condos... to affordable housing. We've sent 200 community members out into low-income communities to count the number of [condo] buildings empty. We've found 601 buildings that are completely or partially empty. We're doing follow-up research on owners on how we could convert these to low-income housing," Dodge said.

"The national alliance is developing a campaign to track the stimulus money that has gone to cities all over the country. We're going to track where this money is going to make sure it's going to where it should be going," Dodge said.

"New York City is just a small part of what's happening with Right to the City," Dodge said.

While the NDWA and RTTC are two of the most well-known groups to emerge out of the USSF, there are many other new alliances that were formed or strengthened in the process, according to Christi Ketchum, a member of **the Executive Leadership Team of the Project South Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide**.

Project South members helped organise the first USSF and are involved with the **Detroit forum** this summer as well.

Prior to the first USSF, Project South organised **a Southern regional USSF** in June of 2006, which brought together civil society groups across the Southeast United States.

"Forty percent or more [of attendees were] of Latino descent, which is unprecedented," Ketchum said.

"This was the first time in record that people came together in regards to building the movement of Brown and Black alliance as part of the gathering, and also set the precedent of the

demographics of the USSF," Ketchum said.

The USSF, for example, brought together groups in the Southeast U.S., primarily made up of African American members, and groups in the Southwest, primarily made up of Hispanics. Southwestern groups included the **Southwest Organising Project (SWOP)** of **New Mexico** and the **Southern Workers Union (SWU)** of **San Antonio, Texas**.

"We've been able to build a huge network between the Black and Latino organisations in those two regions," Ketchum said.

The USSF brought together many old organisations from the Civil Rights Movement as well as new organisations dealing with civil rights in order to work with each other, Ketchum said.

"A lot of organisations were able to build stronger alliances as a result of the Social Forum being in the Southeast region," Ketchum said.

They include Highlander, a 70 year-old group; **The Ordinary People's Society (TOPS)** of **Alabama**; **Southern Echo** of **Mississippi**; the **People's Institute for Survival and Beyond**; **SPARK Reproductive Justice Now**; the **Georgia Citizens' Coalition on Hunger**; and **Southerners on New Ground (SONG)**.

A new group called **Kindred**, a Southern healing collective, was also formed at the USSF, in addition to NDWA and RTTC.

"Most of these are long-standing organisations. **But this was an opportunity to work together in a way that was unprecedented since the Civil Rights Movement.** We were all familiar with each other, but actually working together, that had not actually happened," Ketchum said.

In addition, there was a new alliance of queer-identified progressive organisations across the country informally called the Queer Visibility Committee, Ketchum said. Participating groups included the Audre Lorde Project in New York, Queers for Economic Justice, and the Atlanta Transformative Justice Collaborative.

Finally, as previously reported by IPS, the USSF brought together **organisations based in various cities trying to prevent the demolition of public housing**. These groups have continued to collaborate since the Forum, including by holding a national meeting in New Orleans and by working together to facilitate the recent visit of the United National Special Rapporteur on Housing to the U.S. which took place in late 2009.

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