

Seeing red (and black) at the WSSD

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Let us be clear on one thing. The UN's World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) – which will take place in Sandton from 26 August to 4 September 2002 – will achieve nothing for the working class.

It will provide an opportunity for a lot of speeches by business. It will provide an opportunity for the ANC government to smile at the cameras and pose as friends of the poor. It will be a great opportunity for NGOs to raise funds.

But it will achieve nothing for the working class. Why? – *it is not meant to do so.*

RIO 1992

The WSSD is a follow-up to the ill-fated “Earth Summit” that was held in Rio, Brazil, in 1992. This brought together a 100 “world leaders” who shed many tears about the environmental problems facing the world.

A pious “Rio Declaration” was adopted, which set targets for the reduction of pollution and the phasing out of harmful technologies... and was promptly ignored.

Industrialised western countries circumvented the declaration under pressure from the huge multinational corporations that dominate the world economy. By 1992, these companies controlled 70% of world trade, 50% of foreign investment and 30% of global gross domestic product. Being the main polluters, they were also powerful enough to scupper the vaguely worded Rio Declaration.

At the time, Germany's powerful chemical industry fought a rearguard action against proposed environmental regulations; Dutch industrialists threatened to leave Holland if a proposed carbon emissions law was adopted; and Californian furniture industries simply moved their highly pollutive factories straight to Mexico.

At the same time, George Bush senior rejected any inclusion in the Rio Declaration of measures that would compel US companies to restructure.

THIRD WORLD ELITES

At the same time, the rulers of the largely non-industrial “third world” sought to recast the Rio agenda in their own image.

On the one hand, they solemnly declared that they were not really responsible for industrial pollution. At the same time, they encouraged massive clearances of the Amazon and Congo rainforests, privatised nature reserves, and enticed western corporate investment by promising NOT to implement pollution laws.

On the other hand, they helped shift the agenda from environmental protection to the vague notion of “sustainable development,” a catch-all, empty phrase which most third world elites interpret as meaning privatisation and desperate efforts to woo multinationals to our shore with cheap labour and deregulation.

RICH MAN'S CLUB

There will be conflict within the official WSSD. We need to be clear about that. There will be conflicts between the representatives of different western power blocs, most notably between those countries associated with the European Union (EU) and the USA.

There will also certainly be conflict between the western powers and third world elites. We can also be sure the ANC government will use the event to posture to the world-at-large as a decent group of human beings who really care about the poor (despite mass evictions, strike breaking, and so on of course).

The West will selectively argue for better “human rights” – and more corporate investment in the third world, while third world elites will defend their brutal regimes and demand more free trade in agricultural goods with the West.

The most we can expect from the thugs of the African Union is that they will wave their NEPAD plan (which advocates mass privatisation of social and economic services and opening the continent to exploitation by multinationals) and at the same time dismiss criticism of the dictatorships that flourish continent-wide, whether in Libya, Zimbabwe or the DRC.

The WSSD will be a site for in-house squabbles between the world's elite, debates that will take place in lavish centres, 5 star hotels, over R1000 a plate meals, within an area of South Africa that will be locked down to exclude protestors, crawling with police, helicopters, Casspirs etc. Secure from the poor, the rich will squabble about who gets richer, and how... and nothing more.

POLITICAL USE

What about the parallel NGO summit being organised at NASREC by the Civil Society Secretariat?

As we argued in the last issue, this NGO summit, the “Global Social Forum,” is sponsored by the UN to give the main WSSD summit in Sandton an aura of legitimacy. It creates an illusion of participation, when in fact it is perfectly clear from the experience of all previous NGO summits that they are ignored by the real players in the official UN meetings.

Underlining the general contempt the official summit has for the NGO summit is the lack of adequate funding it has attracted, with an expected shortfall of R100 million anticipated months back. Meanwhile, the NGO delegates have found themselves being booked into overcrowded run-down hotels in the inner city... miles away, in every sense, from the real action in Sandton.

Early signs from COSATU and SANGOCO – the main players- are also not encouraging: there is a very real danger of the NGO summit being used to win space for the capitalist ANC in the very heart of the left. That will not do!

PROTEST AND SURVIVE

Nonetheless, the WSSD provides an excellent political opportunity for South Africa's nascent anti-capitalist movement. The interest generated by the WSSD, the concentration of rich elites in Sandton, the issues the WSSD raises, the global and local media attention it will generate, all mean that the WSSD will be an excellent place to focus the emerging movement.

We can be sure that many, many protestors will be present. This strength can be used to put the real issues that are sure to be sidelined in the WSSD – poverty, capitalism, ecological disaster- in the spotlight. It can also be used to link up movements and individuals. We can share experiences, plan actions, learn from one another, build alliances.

And while we have no illusions that protest at the WSSD will fundamentally change society, it will help build confidence and momentum in the local and international anti-capitalist movement. And it is through this momentum that we can start to really change the world.

So, we can use the WSSD against the WSSD, against the UN, against the elites... despite the best efforts of these bourgeois groups to prevent us from struggling, advancing, and winning.

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