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The World Conference Against Racism: A Strategic Sum-Up

On September 11, 2001, a Black man from Harlem, an NGO delegate to the just concluded World Conference Against Racism (WCAR), was returning home to New York when his plane was detoured to Newfoundland, where he and his fellow passengers were detained for several days. The symbolism was painfully reflective of the conference from which he was just returning, for Newfoundland had been attacked, not discovered, in 1497, by Giovanni Caboto, an Italian sailor backed by the English Crown. The English called their stolen treasure “new found land” only to subjugate the indigenous Mi’Kmaq people

and kill all the Beothuk. It was not just a few delegates from WCAR who were driven off course and detained on September 11, 2001. It felt like the whole conference and all we had worked for was being eclipsed by a shadow of reaction. Seemingly overnight, the Bush Administration and the two-party elite were able to use the events of September 11 to move against any vestiges of progressivism and liberalism—let alone radicalism, anti-imperialism, and socialism—that they hadn't already beaten out of the body politic over the past two decades. The U.S. Republicans and Democrats have formed a unity party; the Left's accusation that there is only one capitalist party with two branches is no longer debated, as there is "bipartisan" support for racial profiling, massive expenditures for the military, restrictions on already limited civil rights and civil liberties, wholesale layoffs of workers, and a war hysteria that the Bush Administration is trying to institutionalize. In every historical circumstance, there is a challenge to the Left. In this situation, the challenge is how to build a movement against war, racism, and imperialist expansion in the midst of the most bellicose and reactionary mass politics.

Robin Kelley, in his foreword, compares WCAR to the 1955 Bandung Conference of Non-Aligned Nations in terms of historical significance. The actual historical impact of an event depends upon the actions, events, and consequences that follow it; the writing of the "historical record" is an organizing project, a reflection of class struggle and national liberation struggles. We are all actors in making history, and the writing of it is one form of its making. Walter Benjamin, a German antifascist revolutionary, commented on the Right's efforts to smash the history of the Left's victories: "Only that historian will have the gift of fanning

the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins.”¹ The organized Right, including far too many self-promoting or disillusioned former “sixties radicals,” is constructing a mass amnesia about the enormous victories of the U.S. and world Left during the “two decades of the sixties.”² The struggle to put WCAR back on the agenda begins with the reconstruction of the historical record.

The events that have unfolded since September 11 make a thoughtful sum-up of the World Conference Against Racism even more important than it was in the days immediately following WCAR. To move on, without considering the deep and strategic connection between the two events, would be a grave mistake. At this point in history, reconstructing an ideological, political, organizational, and tactical unity for a not yet created antiracist, anti-imperialist U.S. Left is the central challenge facing the disparate if courageous social movements in this country. Durban, WCAR, and the Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Forum in particular, created an important laboratory for assessing the actual state of these movements and their efforts to impact a world event of great possibility. If there is ever to be an effective anti-war movement in the U.S., it must be tied to the development of a viable international antiracist,

1. Walter Benjamin, “Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, (1938; New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 255.

2. Especially for a younger generation that did not live through those epochal events, I use the term “two decades of the sixties” to refer to the period, arbitrarily constructed, from 1955, the time of the Bandung Conference and the Montgomery Bus Boycott to 1975, the defeat of the U.S. in Vietnam. I would mark, again arbitrarily, the counter-revolution against the gains of the New Left as 1980, with the election of Ronald Reagan.

anti-imperialist united front. The story of WCAR must be told as part of that process. This is one such effort.

The final governmental document coming out of Durban and the brazen U.S. walk out from the entire conference clearly demonstrates that the antiracist forces at Durban did not win many concrete demands. Still, as a dress rehearsal for future world struggles, WCAR was an important and, at times, amazing event, the high points of which were the complete disgrace and isolation of the United States government and its self-exposure as a racist bully, the spirited show of support for the Palestinian liberation struggle, and the strong NGO document against racism—even if rejected in its essence by the world's governments.

At every point in history, left forces must judge their progress, achievements, and failures against some barometer of what is historically possible given the actual balance of power. There was no way a disparate array of groups from around the world, many of whom had no previous history of working together, could have imposed their will on their own governments, let alone a world body dominated by the U.S. The low point of Durban was the recognition of the generally disorganized and ineffective state of progressives working within the UN structures, demonstrated by the inability of any forms, structures, or political forces to provide political or organizational leadership. The historic significance of Durban will depend largely on post-Durban initiatives to move history forward, initiatives that are desperately needed and for which this strategic sum-up can provide a point of reference for debate, discussion, re-examination, regrouping, and reconstruction. Thus, this book is a tactic within a larger antiracist organizing strategy.

When I first knew I was going to Durban, I planned to participate in and analyze two separate but interrelated conferences—the UN Governmental World Conference Against Racism, and the WCAR NGO Forum, a meeting of non-governmental organizations held the week before the governments met, ostensibly to impact governmental deliberations. In fact, this narrative focuses almost exclusively on the NGO Forum for several interrelated reasons: 1) my own work focuses on the building of radical and, if possible, revolutionary movements to challenge existing state and corporate structures; 2) the NGO Forum was so badly organized and so ineffective on its own terms that it was unable to actually impact the UN governmental conference; these were fundamentally two separate events that theoretically needed to be interconnected but in practice were not; 3) the UN Governmental Conference did everything it could to exclude participation of the NGO delegates—denying credentials, denying press passes to established media if they were also delegates from NGOs, and denying access to the conference, even as observers, for the thousand or so delegates from the NGO Forum who stayed in Durban for the second week.

In this chapter, I will summarize the main strategic debates and developments at the NGO Forum and evaluate WCAR on its own terms and stated objectives.

The U.S. Threat

Malcolm X often repeated his threat to take Black peoples' grievances against the United States to the United Nations on the grounds that Black people had inalienable national rights as an oppressed people, and had demands for autonomy and equality that went beyond civil rights granted in the U.S. constitution.

These were “human rights” that were protected by international law, and were best won in an international arena. Despite Malcolm’s agitational threat, there was, in fact, no concerted effort to go to the UN. Everyone in the Civil Rights Movement and Black Liberation Movement understood that the UN was not and could not be an “independent” institution. It was located in New York, “U.S.A.” The United States was the most powerful world superpower at the time, and the U.S. and the European colonial powers dominated the Security Council. Still, how times have changed. Malcolm’s thinking was shaped by a revolutionary period in which every year contained events of such historical import that they seemed like decades. The Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc nations provided a military and even nuclear counterbalance to the U.S.; the revolutionary movements in the Third World were distinctly anti-U.S., anti-imperialist, and generally pro-socialist, and the U.S. was painfully aware of some of the limits of its own power, even its need to curry favor with Third World governments to prevent them from “going communist.”

Despite the structural obstacles, Malcolm did indeed carry out his UN strategy. He organized one of the most important events in 20th century antiracist history—his brilliant alliance with Fidel Castro to bring the Cuban communist leader to the Hotel Theresa in Harlem, after he heard that the Cuban delegation had been pushed around and discriminated against in a midtown luxury hotel near the UN at the instigation of the U.S. government. For days, Cuban revolutionaries, many of them Black, and Black activists from Harlem held a love fest—infuriating the U.S. government, whose move had backfired. The famous pictures of Fidel and Malcolm talking strategy to each other in the

heart of Harlem were sent around the world. This was an embryonic but profound expression of the same strategy articulated in *Dispatches*: build a strategic alliance of the multinational multiracial working class inside the U.S. with oppressed peoples and nations both inside and outside the U.S. to directly challenge U.S. imperialism.

But WCAR took place in an age of world counter-revolution, 40 years later, in what seems like light years later, in which the former Soviet Union no longer exists, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Hampton, Mark Clark and too many other Black leaders in the U.S. have been assassinated, the vast majority of Third World nations have been recolonized into the most blatant form of economic and political dependency, and the U.S., now the unchecked “rogue superpower,” is throwing its weight around the world with the greatest imperial arrogance. And this was *before* September 11.

Throughout WCAR, before and after the U.S. walk-out, the United States was aggressively pushing its objectives and had enormous influence with, or upon, virtually every government in the world. Within the Third World especially, the level of economic dependency, fear of U.S. military intervention, and even cultural subordination made a coordinated resistance to U.S. domination very difficult. The U.S. understands the role of ideology. It tries to rule by intellectual and ideological hegemony when possible and brute force only when persuasion and voluntary self-servitude fail. The U.S. approaches each UN conference as a tactic in its broader strategy of world rule. Thus, despite the weakness of many of the actual antiracist organizations at WCAR, the sum total of their work was still effective enough to momentarily drive the U.S. off a world stage. Clearly, it does

not like to be criticized, let alone attacked. The U.S. was uniquely and profoundly vulnerable at the World Conference Against Racism because of its history of racism, which is not only reflected in the vicious ideology of white supremacy, but also in the fundamental structures of capitalist and later imperialist conquest—genocide, slavery, mass torture, and murder. The myth of white, Christian, European capitalist superiority is central to the master narrative of the U.S. nation-state and its historical justification for its manifest destiny. As such, the antiracist movement in general and the movement for reparations in particular are enormous threats to U.S. ideological hegemony. This history, once exposed, shows Western civilization as Western barbarism and calls into question the very historical right of the “United” States to exist.

Thus, whether through its own direct threats and influence or working through its proxies in Europe such as the pathetic Belgians (with their own nation also built upon African genocide), the U.S. took WCAR and its potential outcomes very seriously.³ As a result, the efforts of the U.S. to intimidate Third World nations was a prominent theme at Durban; it threatened dependent governments to stay away from criticisms of Israel, and to disassociate themselves from support for Palestine and reparations, or suffer the consequences.

This UN conference attracted a group of self-selected antiracist NGOs, many with ties to actual struggles on the

3. The story of Belgian “slave labor” and “mass murder” in the cruelly named Congo Free State or as it was once called “the Belgian Congo” and the account of one of the first anti-colonial movements inside a Western imperialist nation is told by Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

ground. In that context, the efforts of the majority of NGO delegates to push a strong antiracist agenda, and in particular the work of those who tried to directly focus on the link between racism and Western imperialism provided a strategic challenge that shaped the entire conference. The central contradiction at Durban was between the United States and the G8 nations on the one hand and the world antiracist movement on the other. And this time, the antiracist movement *was* choosing the United Nations as an important site of struggle.

Decoding the United Nations

At its heart, the World Conference against Racism should be understood as the *United Nations Conference Against Racism*, only a part of which was the NGO Forum. Many on the antiracist Left see the United Nations as a marginal or even irrelevant site of struggle. The UN General Assembly, the institution's most democratic structure, allows each nation one vote; but because of Security Council permanent member veto power (held by the U.S., Britain, China, Russia and France) any resolutions that challenge the U.S., the G8, or their allies can be roadblocked. And yet, the UN creates an organizational opportunity for diverse forces to coalesce, debate, and negotiate. In its international aspirations, its structures of public debate on the behavior of the United States, its progressive world conferences—antiracism, environment, development, women, HIV/AIDS, human rights, children and poverty—the UN offers a ray of hope for many Third World nations. In the absence of a Non-Aligned Movement with its own structures, a world Left, or a socialist or communist international, the UN

reflects the potential and the limits of the G77 and China (the nations of the Global South) and the actual balance of forces in the world.⁴

The NGOs—Situating a Resistance in a Structure of Accommodation

The world governments reflected in the UN have, over the last 25 years, supported an expanded role for NGOs, corresponding to the decline and fall of many state socialist governments. The ideological focus on “civil society” and NGOs (along with the transnational corporations) as “civil society players” comes out of anticommunist theories that critique many of the totalitarian forms of state socialist experiments but never acknowledge the dictatorial tendencies and realities of capitalism as well. The NGOs play an ideological role in the new neoliberal world, in which capitalist governments in structural alignment with the corporate class try to create the illusion that they are impacted by the democratic interaction of “civil society players.”⁵

The UN, whose processes for years were restricted to governments only, has opened up many of its processes to include

4. The United Nations is organized into many different blocs of countries: the United States often functions as a caucus of one, the European Union as one block, and the G77 and China as another. The Group of 77 (G77) represents all the nations of the Global South or Third World, and in actuality contains more than 130 individual nations.

5. For a critique of the co-optive process and the myths involving NGO's, see Eric Mann, *Grassroots Strategies for Bali and Johannesburg: Confronting Corporate Power at the World Summit on Sustainable Development* (Los Angeles: Strategy Center Publications, 2002) available from www.thestrategycenter.org.

NGO and “civil society” participation, if only at the most minimal and often tokenistic levels of “input.” Right now, the UN governments are not that worried about the critiques by NGO structures because, frankly, many of the NGOs are poorly organized, represent little or no social base, have voluntarily accepted accommodationist politics or are directly funded by their own governments, or other governments. Many Third World NGOs are funded by the European Union and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) or by the UN itself. Many Third World NGOs cannot afford to get to UN meetings without stipends from the UN. These ties that bind, as one can imagine, create a material constraint on their behavior once they arrive.

Outside of the UN context, the NGO phenomenon is under sharp critique by independent social movements, grassroots groups, left trade unions, and national liberation movements—that is, any intellectual or group that is situated in opposition to world racism and imperialism. James Petras, an expert on Latin American revolutionary movements, accuses the NGOs as a whole of being “agents of imperialism,” siding with their governments to undermine radical and revolutionary movements, and putting forth an “anti-state” ideology that fosters the myth that there is a big world of “civil society” in which the poor and the rich interact democratically. In that way, the NGOs function to leave the capitalist state relatively immune from attack.⁶

6. James Petras, “Imperialism and NGOs in Latin America,” *Monthly Review*, 49 (1997): 10-27.

The noted Palestinian intellectual, Edward Said, expresses similar views, criticizing the Palestinian NGOs for their objective opposition to genuine national liberation:

Put very simply are they a substitute for a political movement, and can they ever become one? I don't think so since each operates in a bilateral relationship with the funders, each of whom makes clear that money for work on democracy, health care, education—all important things—is forthcoming only within the overall frame of the current peace process [which the Palestinian Intifada is rejecting]. And these NGOs, necessary as they are to keep Palestinian life going, themselves become the goal, instead of, for example, liberation, or ending the occupation, or changing Palestinian society.⁷

Given these historically-determined constraints, many militant, radical, and even revolutionary forces have accepted the technical definition of a non-governmental organization while simultaneously distancing themselves from the dominant history and culture of an NGO structure they are trying to impact.

At WCAR, while there was awareness of the dangers of the NGO phenomenon, many of the delegates were not “regulars” at UN events, but had come to Durban out of a passion to fight racism and just to have said that they had been there. There is a radical edge to the fight against racism, rooted in the abuses that people of color all over the world have suffered and continue to suffer, that exerted a powerful impact on the general category of NGO and attracted a more militant and independent cross-section of grassroots groups. This

7. Edward Said, *The End of the Peace Process* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), xx.

is not to say that careerism, funder-driven behavior, and “going along with the program” dynamics were not present at Durban, but they were not at all the dominant tendency.

While the NGOs still ranged over a wide spectrum of politics, as a group, they had come to Durban to launch a historic challenge to world racism—not through sit-ins or take-overs or armed struggle, but in the equally important arena of ideological struggle, in the battle over the language of resolutions. The primary goal of the NGO Forum was to draft a strong document to influence the subsequent UN governmental conference and its final declaration and program—with the understanding that the antiracist movement in the world, reflected in mass organizations or even “advocacy organizations,” was far more militant and concerned about the structural causes of, and cures for, racist policies than most of the world’s governments. Thus, Durban was a world workshop to evaluate the capacity of the NGOs to impact the policies of the UN.

Many NGOs from the United States, especially those from the Black Liberation Movement and Civil Rights Movement, were aware of the efforts of Malcolm X (and some were aware of the prior efforts by W.E.B. Dubois and Paul Robeson decades before) to bring the antiracist and national self-determination demands of Black people to the UN. But in reality, very few groups had really tested the UN as a forum for moving public debate forward, or tested the capacity of any international body to get the outlaw and racist West to ‘fess up to its past sins, let alone force the U.S. and Europe to begin a process of introspection, repentance, and reparation.

The Historical Opportunity—Based on Time, Place, and Conditions

Given the organizational structure of the UN, and the actual state of the antiracist forces worldwide, what could the delegates from the non-governmental organizations, expect to achieve?

- We might expect to coalesce progressive antiracist forces. Many city-wide and regional groups in the United States, the most viable grassroots organizations with any base on the ground, have very little experience in international networking and relationship building. The UN provides an efficient way to meet people from all over the world, in one centralized venue and to learn from each other. This conference, focused on racism, would draw together some of the most progressive NGOs.
- We might be able to unite in the production of an NGO Forum Declaration, a unifying progressive antiracist statement of policy and demands that could function as an ideological instrument on its own terms and generate a focused and prioritized set of key demands to raise against the Western powers.
- We might expect to unify as many of the 10,000 NGO delegates as possible around an antiracist NGO document, and then try to exercise influence on the governmental document. Even if rejected by the US and G8 the actual movements on the ground could come out of the process strengthened with greater international moral and political authority. That would require producing a high-visibility

document, the NGO Forum Declaration, a manifesto of antiracist, anti-imperialist resistance that could be circulated throughout the world, and among each group's home constituencies.

□ We might expect to create networks of cooperation among the NGOs, both outside and inside UN structures, forged in the process of struggle that could continue after the Durban conference to place even greater pressure on transnational corporations and governments in subsequent months and years.

The idea of using the WCAR as a “court of public opinion” is not utopian. At the past two UN World Conferences to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination (both in Geneva, in 1978 and 1983), the antiracist forces focused their efforts on toppling the Apartheid regime in South Africa. As a tactic, the UN forums played a positive role in an overall international strategy by the African National Congress (ANC) to isolate and eventually bring down the racist government and achieve Black majority rule. The 1983 conference declared “Apartheid is totally abhorrent to the dignity of mankind and a threat to international peace and security.”⁸ (The United States boycotted those conferences as well.)

It was possible at Durban that the NGOs and some progressive governments developed a mass antiracist mass initiative with a foundation of support for reparations and Palestinian national liberation. But such a forceful antiracist initiative would

8. South Africa Human Rights Commission, “Countdown to World Conference,” <http://sahrc.org.sa.za/count_down_to_world_conference.htm> (accessed 1 August 2002).

have required an international movement at a far higher level of consciousness and organization than presently exists. A few of the problems faced by the NGO forces and the NGO Forum illustrate this gap between an ideal plan and the actual practice at Durban.

Structural Opportunity for Leadership

Every United Nations conference on a major issue, such as WCAR, has a complex but relatively orderly process by which a series of preparatory committees—PrepComs—are organized, at which governmental delegations argue over policy issues, write draft language, debate, bargain, and negotiate toward a final document. In anticipation of Durban, Regional PrepComs were held in Europe (Strasbourg, France), the Americas (Santiago, Chile), Africa (Dakar, Senegal), and Asia/Middle East (Tehran, Iran). These regional meetings were supposed to feed their results into full international PrepComs at Geneva. NGO activists were present at all of those meetings. The point? That there was plenty of opportunity to develop a functional leadership to provide structure and guidance to the antiracist NGOs in Durban.

At WCAR, an official UN structure existed for the NGOs to write their own parallel document. The UN had organized a parallel and even anticipatory NGO structure (with the NGOs meeting almost a full week before the governments in Durban), allowing the NGOs to have a significant voice, audience, and separate structure from which to try to influence the governmental declarations. These structures were mandated to develop a virtually finished draft document that could be amended and then ratified by the NGO Forum delegates. *Some* credit should be

given to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, the ranking UN chair of WCAR. The UN structures created an organized forum for grassroots groups to challenge the world governments, literally handing the NGOs a golden opportunity. Caucuses and tendencies within the broad category of “NGO” had the chance to carry out militant challenges under UN auspices, and, at times, protections.

The question remained, who would, and could, provide leadership among the NGOs? Who could take advantage of those opportunities? As we will see, the sad answer was, “No one.”

There are some NGOs, national and international, who make the UN a main site of their work, and have specific recognized status with the UN bodies called ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council) consultative status. These groups, e.g. Amnesty International, had some organizational authority to lead out of their experience in UN structures but did not reflect a multiracial base or a political point of view around which they had built support, either among the newer NGOs, or in actual communities, workplaces, or specific countries. Others, like SANGOCO (the South African NGOs Coordinating Organization) tried to call for plenary meetings but claimed they were overruled by the International Steering Committee. While these internal and factional conflicts are complex, one result of them was that these leadership structures were often invisible, and played no public role in trying, let alone succeeding, to organize, mobilize, and focus the activities of the many thousands of delegates who were new to UN proceedings—most of whom went there to *be* organized.

The logical site for such leadership would have been the opening plenary and yet the first day gave clear indications that

no such structures of leadership or rank and file resistance existed. At first, watching 10,000 delegates fill a section of the stadium, with banners and chants from all over the world, there was a sense of hope. Within a few hours, however, it was clear that things didn't look good. This was not a serious political plenary but a bad attempt at a "feel good" diversion by the UN High Commission and the International Steering Committee; Scandinavian singing, African dancing, and militant but vague speeches masked a political crisis at the conference that was already in full swing.

What would have been reasonable and historically possible for new delegates to expect?

We might have expected orientation to NGO and governmental structures, political leadership in analyzing the governmental document and preparing the NGO document, and tactical leadership on daily actions to impact media, the people of South Africa, and the governments. None of those took place.

Perhaps 90 percent or more of the NGO delegates had not attended any PrepComs for WCAR. That meant more than 9,000 people had come to Durban looking for direction and looking for structures in which to be effective. At a minimum, the opening NGO plenary could have provided some sense of structural, if not political, orientation. Instead, the canned opening show was a kickoff for a conference rife with backstage factional disputes among the NGO organizing committees, and within every NGO structure, including, unfortunately, many unresolved political conflicts among the South Africans themselves. Because Durban was the first UN meeting I had ever attended in my life, I had nothing to compare it to. But having subsequently attended three PrepComs for the forthcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg (two at the UN Headquar-

ters in New York and one in Bali, Indonesia), I have now seen far better structures for NGO leadership and participation. Such structures could have existed, and needed to exist, at WCAR.

For example, at WSSD there are two competing NGO leadership groups, the International Steering Committee (ISC), the official NGO steering committee authorized by the UN (which had a comparable structure at WCAR), and a relatively new structure, the Sustainable Development Issues Network (SDIN), an independently organized NGO caucus. Despite their competition and rancorous history, they both provide an important framework. They organize daily morning meetings at each PrepCom in which a general sense of orientation is provided. In that I spent most of my time at the SDIN meetings, the work of the Third World Network and several other NGO networks within those structures will be used as examples of what was needed and lacking at Durban.

Every day, at the Bali PrepCom for WSSD, held in May/June 2002, more than 150 of 500 NGO participants chose to attend the SDIN morning briefings. There they received an analysis of the governmental documents, reports on the fights among governments about policies and texts, and the suggested issues and language most possibly impacted by NGO pressure. It also provided a forum where NGO delegates trying to initiate daily actions could find a ready-made audience and could recruit to their specific tactical plans, with each delegate voting with her feet as to whether she agreed. At WCAR, although the governments were not yet meeting when the NGO conference began, there was a marked draft of the governmental document available to every delegate. Each section of the document was marked with bold letters and “brackets”; governments put language they were dis-

puting in brackets, e.g. “[U.S. should take responsibility and pay reparations for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade].” Given that the NGOs had five days of preparation before the governments formally began their own sessions in Durban, it would have been possible to have a daily briefing on the governmental document, each day focusing on specific components that were weak or objectionable, led by representatives of NGOs that had taken leadership on those issues. Instead, there was *no* coordinated effort to publicly discuss the governmental document and to find ways to impact it. There were no daily meetings open to all NGO delegates for orientation or where debates about daily opportunities and tactical interventions could take place.

Ravi Nair, of the South East Asia Human Rights Network, whose organization independently put out a daily bulletin at WCAR, challenged the authority of those who had taken institutional power in the NGO structures preceding and during the conference:

To begin with, the success of the conference depended upon the International Steering Committee (ISC) and the UN NGO Secretariat, represented by the regional NGOs. But in fact, the ISC and in most cases the regional NGOs had no moral authority to call a plenary, no moral authority to put forth any views on policy. Most of them are fly-by-night operators. If you had a ticket to Geneva you could play a role in the Preparatory Committees but these people had no constituency, no track record, and no outreach program. The only exception was the meeting of the Americas, held in Santiago, Chile, where many of the delegates had a certain legitimacy and generated substantive language that was not reflected in the final WCAR declarations.⁹

9. Ravi Nair, interview with the author, Durban, South Africa, 3 September 2001.

The Role of the Issue Caucuses

With no daily plenary at which a common program and tactical plan could be struggled out, the conference was set up so that if you wanted to be involved, you joined a specific workgroup or issue group. There were 39 such caucuses: Africa, South Africa, Africans and Afro-descendant, Americas, Caribbeans, HIV/AIDS, Women, Youth, Environmental Racism, Poverty and Racism, Indigenous peoples, Indigenous women, and so on. In terms of their impact on the overall WCAR processes, the issue caucuses reflected both the strengths and the weaknesses of the NGO forces and in no way could be called a NGO “movement.” Given the power of Western imperialism and the growing disintegration of public life they so proudly call “civil society,” it is often a good tactical approach that activists and organizers grab one piece of reality, one major problem that the system generates, and try to build an organization or even a cause around one specific and often profound abuse, such as global warming, police brutality against Black youth, educational racism, violence against women, or Third World debt. The list of good causes is almost infinite. Still, the challenge is how can we build a movement? How do we form a larger political organizations with a broader and more comprehensive political vision? How do we develop a totalizing strategy and organizing plan to challenge a totalizing enemy—in this case world imperialism led by the U.S?

Despite the dilemmas I discussed, the intention of the UN to divide people up to work on particular issues was actually a good idea. The general NGO document would gain its strength from the power and clarity of people working on the frontlines of actual struggles, who could bring an analytical focus to the actual

language of the document, and from there, negotiate with the governments who generally want to weaken or delete the language. Moreover, many oppressed groups have needed specific organizational forms to advance their goals, often forming separate organizations to unify their own people. From there they can then address the specificity of their oppression as Indigenous peoples, Blacks, Latinos, Asian/Pacific Islanders, women, or Third World women. Each of these structures is in fact essential to the demands for self-determination, for sovereignty, and for finding ways to challenge the larger racist structures formed by Western imperialism.

In the specific political dynamics of Durban, no one was capable of organizing viable plenary sessions and no political leadership came forth to propose a program with lead demands, that could, in turn, provide context for the many particular demands. One example could have been that all the caucuses would prioritize support for the Palestinians, and for reparations, not at the expense of “their” issues, but in a way to express that the genocide against the Palestinian people and the crimes of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade are *all* of our issues. There were no open and effective left or organized groups trying, let alone succeeding, at such a tactical plan. In the absence of a more compelling overarching politics, the issue workshop structure fostered particularism and isolation. Each individual delegate or even small group of delegates had to make individual choices.

Again, without valorizing the subsequent World Summit on Sustainable Development, which has many distinct problems of its own, the model I hoped for in Durban *did* materialize at the Bali PrepCom for WSSD. It came in the form of an informal

but functional left, feminist, Third World-centered, anti-corporate, anti-imperialist united front. At Bali, the existence of a daily structure for reports, announcements, and even the opportunity for NGOs to organize other NGOs, allowed a far greater opportunity for specific issue-based caucuses to find ways to focus on both the specificity of their central issue and, from that powerful base, to help generate and organize a common program more comprehensive and potent than the sum of its parts. At the Bali PrepCom, 13 NGO issue caucuses collaborated on an anti-U.S. demonstration, “What Are We Going to Do About The United States?” and organized against the idea of “public-private partnerships” being promoted by the U.S. to circumvent signed agreements among governments. We held a well-attended press conference denouncing the U.S. and G8 for imposing a corporate agenda on the conference, sabotaging progress on poverty reduction and on placing ecological constraints on the U.S. and EU production and consumption. The Women’s Caucus in particular took tremendous leadership on many of those campaigns as did the Third World Network and Strategy Center.

It was this level of unified, creative daily tactics and coherent cooperation from issue-based NGOs that was missing at Durban and could have placed sustained pressure on the governments, whether or not the U.S. walked out. The excellent work in the individual, issue-based caucuses was later reflected in a strong NGO Forum Declaration, but even that was not more and in fact less than the sum of its parts. The caucus work did *not* translate into a vibrant conference-wide movement or a highly visible challenge to the world governments.

So What Were People Doing at WCAR?

If there were no daily orientation programs, no common actions to impact the delegates and no efforts at a common written program that could impact the governments, what exactly were people doing at Durban? What did the conference actually look like? Major Kobese, Program Coordinator of the South African NGO Coordinating Organization (SANGOCO), commenting on the second day of the conference, observed:

There were no commissions yesterday. Today the delegates are wandering around aimlessly; the panels are in a mess; commissions have failed and will fail. The deadline for the submissions of the inputs is tomorrow. What will the nature of the final document be, considering that the thematic commissions will not have had any opportunity to provide substantive input? What will the final document out of this process represent, and whom? ¹⁰

In the absence of structures for a real political convention, people created their own itineraries. Durban was organized like an antiracist fair with many organizations running booths to advertise their organization and their products in large tents around the Kingsmeade Cricket Stadium.

□ There were daily issue caucus meetings in tents outside the stadium, in which 20 to 30 delegates fought over language on Dalits in India, Environmental Justice, Sex Trafficking, and Indigenous

10. "Program Coordinator of the NGO WCAR Secretariat calls for an NGO plenary," *Human Rights Features*, 30 August 2001, 1. (Exactly. The absence of NGO plenaries throughout WCAR, more than any internal struggles or factionalism, was the primary failing, because in such a public context, individual groups would have had the chance to vie for leadership and offer specific programs and proposals.)

peoples. Perhaps 1,000 people were directly involved in caucus writing and debates.

□ Workshops organized general discussions of key issues, often, however, with no action plan to impact WCAR. Some NGOs had the objective of publicizing their work for an international audience, others of giving academic presentations to an international audience, and some of gaining international support for specific and popular antiracist struggles. While many of these were meritorious as workshops, others fell far short of what was historically required. Unfortunately, the efforts of organizations to publicize their own work did not evolve into a larger coordinated strategy.

□ In some instances, there were large workshops of considerable import—historical inquiries into slavery and reparations, a panel of ten women from Indigenous peoples rights struggles, a chronicle of human rights abuses in Palestine, a compelling presentation about the struggle of Dalits—many with 500 or more attendees. These had the impact of popularizing a social movement, picking up international connections, and organizing the consciousness of other delegates.

□ The South African Independent Media Center set up a media room with computers for NGO journalists, ran a website for the conference, and held daily press conferences, often well attended by NGO delegates. The press conference criticized Mbeki's opening speech to WCAR, publicized the demands of the Palestinians, and supported the Durban Social Forum coalition's critique of South African neoliberalism, in particular the privatization of public services such as water and its support for the demands of the landless movement.

□ The African National Congress organized a well attended lecture series at the nearby University of South Africa (UNISA) campus at which speakers, including Blade Nzimande, General Secretary of the South African Communist Party, Jacob Zuma, Deputy President of South Africa, Aziz Pahad, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mamoud Mamdani, a former Ugandan intellectual who is now a professor at Columbia University, Ibo Mandaza, a Zimbabwean Marxist political economist, and Samir Amin, an anti-imperialist author, modeled what a high level of principled political debate looked like.

□ Many groups were able to set up meetings with South African intellectuals, organizers, and revolutionaries, ANC, SACP, and COSATU leaders, and those from the Durban Social Forum Coalition, or just approach them at the many public events in which they participated. Many U.S. NGOs who had worked in the anti-Apartheid struggle for years had built up many international contacts with South African leaders and were able to help facilitate meetings for other members of their delegations. For example, the Third World Women's Alliance and the Applied Research Center, both out of Oakland, California, organized large delegations of U.S. activists and set up tours of South African townships in Soweto and Alexandra and meetings with various left organizations in Durban, Capetown, and Johannesburg—many of whom were present at the Durban conference. Black Workers for Justice, based in Georgia and North Carolina, and the Environmental Justice Caucus also spent a great deal of time setting up meetings with their South African counterparts.

□ The Palestinian NGOs generated public events everyday, spending most of their time out in the sunlight, away from the backroom word crafting. They held press conferences and organized daily traveling demonstrations of 50 to 100 people that went all over the Kingsmeade fairgrounds in search of audiences. They handed out leaflets, sought out Israeli delegates, who often sought them out as well, held angry public debates, and displayed large banners at the opening and closing plenary sessions: “Racism: Israelis Have Right To Return, Palestinians Do Not.”

□ The South African Congress of Trade Unions (COSATU) and the Durban Social Forum both organized large marches to protest specific policies of the South African government. These were profoundly important historical events but were also fundamentally internal to South African politics and the struggle of many forces to define the terms of self-determination. Neither focused on the United States as the main target, nor am I arguing that they should have. But for U.S. delegates trying to place the primary onus for racism on our own government and trying to make the strategic connection between racism and imperialism, these marches were no substitute for an independent tactical plan.

While all those events, especially taken as a whole, could easily provide a productive week in Durban, the challenge to the NGOs at the World Conference Against Racism was to make an international impact against racist policies and racist governments at Durban, in particular the United States and the G7. In that context, many of the events at WCAR, while of enormous educational value, did not serve those objectives.

The U.S. walk-out provided a ready-made vehicle for two days of protest. All NGO delegates could see a common enemy taking a bold and provocative step, and the world media in Durban saw the walk-out and the anti-U.S. NGO protests as “a good story.” But had the U.S., instead, stayed in Durban and chosen to further impose its racist agenda on the entire conference through more formal UN structures, could the world NGOs have launched an effective confrontation? My sense is no. That would have required the completion of the NGO Forum Declaration with a well-publicized challenge to the governments as well as organized mass demonstrations against the U.S. for its failure to support true Palestinian self-determination, its failure to stop Israeli aggression and brutality, and its failure to support reparations. The U.S. walk-out offered an historical opportunity for a short-term resistance, which the NGOs carried out well. But as the NGO Forum limped into its last days, the very low level of organizational unity and capacity among at least 500 highly visible left antiracist activists in the U.S. delegation became more apparent. As such, while the heady events at Durban created a historical experience of a lifetime, they actually camouflaged an even greater crisis of will and organization among the NGOs and the absence of even the most minimally coordinated movement—even for the duration of WCAR alone.

The Challenge of Leadership in the World Antiracist Movement

In the specific context of Durban, the U.S. NGOs—given the prominent and destructive role played by the U.S. governmental delegation—were needed to play a prominent and constructive role in mobilizing a worldwide resistance to the U.S.

In particular, Black delegates from the U.S. have historically had the moral authority and legitimacy to lead the fight against slavery, apartheid in all its forms, genocide, and now reparations. Unfortunately, the conference also exposed profound splits and weaknesses within the Black Liberation Movement, and within the overall U.S. antiracist movement, that prevented such coordinated leadership.

In the absence of an organized antiracist movement, several forms of “legitimacy” are needed to be an effective leadership group: moral authority, political power, and organizational will and capacity. For example, the national March on Washington in 1963, a major antiracist united front, was led by what were called the “Big Five” civil rights groups—National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Urban League, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). While they had enormous tensions among themselves, they were able to maintain a viable united front, at least for the duration of the march. The Kennedy Administration and the U.S. public *did* accept both their moral and political authority and the representative nature of the march that they called. The problem today, however, is not the political and strategic differences in the Black Liberation Movement, most of which would take years or decades to be resolved or even reduced, but the absence of the united front culture that characterized the movement in the 1960s. Such a renewed focus on the united front would give greater urgency to finding common plans of action, and creating some leadership and governance structures that could help resolve what seem to be historically endemic

conflicts among particular individuals and groups that, at least so far, have proven intractable.

Unfortunately, no U.S. antiracist forces have anything near the moral authority that the frontline civil rights groups had in the 1960s. Jesse Jackson, who showed up in Durban surrounded, as usual, by a coterie of media, had more political authority than all the rest of the U.S. delegates combined. Despite the disagreements many of us have with Reverend Jackson for his binding ties to the Democratic Party and U.S. big business, his presence as a one-man movement was a walking criticism of the *lack of an organized antiracist united front in the U.S.* that was so needed at WCAR.

There was nothing, at least in theory, that would have prevented a U.S. coalition of antiracist forces from holding a pre-convention in the U.S. prior to WCAR. Such a conference could have elected representative leadership and agreed upon a common program and common tactical plan for WCAR. Such an antiracist convention could have had enormous capacity to impact every UN structure—the PrepComs, the regional meetings, the International Steering Committee, and the WCAR NGO delegates as well as setting up mass structures of participation at Durban.

Once in Durban, given the vacuum of official leadership at the UN NGO level and the enormous number of U.S. delegates (estimated at 3,000 or more out of a total of 10,000), any call for an open U.S. plenary meeting, to discuss draft program language and to lay out a tactical plan for the conference, could have drawn 1,000 delegates or more. But the problems would have been enormous and immediate. Who had the moral authority to call the meeting? Who had the political respect and

trust of other delegates to put forth an initial political agenda, even for discussion? Which organizations would have had the unity, maturity, and capacity to withstand the inevitable attacks? And would there not have been a strong probability of the meeting breaking up into factional disputes? For all of those reasons, no forces even tried to organize such a meeting or to reach out to others to see if such an ambitious project were possible. In that individual South Africans and groups called for a *decision-making* NGO plenary but did not have the capacity or moral authority to make one happen, the dilemma was not particular to the U.S. delegation. There was a unique historical responsibility for the left antiracist forces in the U.S. to challenge our own government. In Durban, that coordinated campaign among U.S. NGOs was limited to the protest against the U.S. government walk-out. One objective of this strategic sum-up is to encourage a better outcome at the next international antiracist conference.

Drafting the NGO Forum Declaration and Programme of Action

The final WCAR NGO Forum Declaration sought to address many issues that would be relevant and historically essential in any comprehensive plan to reduce world racism. Yet, it was the product of an unrepresentative and flawed process whereby more than 90 percent of the NGO delegates played virtually no role in writing, discussing, or voting on it in any manner. The organizational amateurism and factionalism among the NGOs was very unfortunate, because the final document is quite impressive. It has compelling sections on reparations, Palestine,

environmental justice, and Dalits. In fact, many NGOs working on specific issues, e.g. immigration and women, look to their own section of the document as a breakthrough for their work. The problem is that the declaration was supposed to be a highly publicized, historically on-time public document, an actual tactic of intervention in an actual struggle. It failed in that sense, in that most NGOs, even those who attended Durban, have never seen or read it as it finally appeared long after most of them left.

One dilemma that held up the NGO Declaration interminably was whether it was to be a “consensus document” in which all parties had to agree with all sections, or a compilation of each caucus’s writings on each subject area. On September 3, two days after the September 1 final plenary of the NGO Forum, 200 delegates (out of 10,000) were still arguing and debating among themselves in an effort to finish the NGO Forum Declaration and Programme of Action.

At a press conference on September 3, several international human rights organizations (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the International Service for Human Rights, the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, and Physicians for Human Rights) tried to, in their words, “refocus” the NGO challenge to the governments in anticipation of their disagreements with the final NGO Declaration. The groups’ press conference was an effort, in their view, to accomplish several things:

- They wanted to move the debate away from Palestine and Israel and toward other key issues, such as “the rights of Dalits and Roma, racial discrimination in criminal justice systems, the plight of extremely vulnerable

groups such as refugees, and dire health issues such as HIV/AIDS.”¹¹

- Some groups, such as the Lawyers Committee on Human Rights moved to distance themselves from what they felt was “inaccurate and inflammatory” language against Israel.
- Some wanted to criticize the decision to make the final document, not yet released, a “collection of voices from the victims” as opposed to a “consensus document” drafted to correspond to the specific language of the governmental document.

Many organizations and individuals at WCAR, including this author, fundamentally disagreed with all of their assumptions. First, who are these groups and who and what do they represent? There are too many groups, some with large staffs and big budgets, others with just a mailing list and post-office box, that try to project themselves as “international organizations” onto a world stage with no accountability to a grassroots base anywhere. At a conference in South Africa where the vast majority of delegates rallied behind the lead demands of reparations and Palestinian self-determination, who were these “human rights” groups to claim they represented the interests of Africans, Blacks, and Palestinians? None of them had a base in any of those oppressed constituencies. During the anti-U.S. protests, none of the “human rights” groups were present.

11. “Trying to Get Back on Track: Major international human rights organizations attempt to refocus meeting,” *Human Rights Features*, 4 September 2001, 1.

Second, the criticism of the Palestinian and Arab caucuses for “inaccurate and inflammatory” language against Israel at a time of Israeli massacres of Palestinian civilians was, objectively, a strong intervention on behalf of Israeli apartheid and racism. The Palestinian people are fighting for their lives, having their land stolen and their children murdered. What possible crime of inflammatory language could exist even in the same breath as the inflammatory weapons the Israelis are using against Palestinian civilians, in violation of every human rights statute in the world? Even if some of the groups had specific tactical criticisms of the Palestinian NGOs, the calling of a press conference to distance yourself from Palestinian rhetoric is simply chauvinist. You don’t criticize the Vietnamese when they are having napalm dropped on them by your own government. You don’t criticize the Jews’ outcries when Hitler is putting them in the ovens. And you don’t criticize the Palestinians publicly for excessive language, unless you want to side with the United States and Israel, who used that “language” as the pretext for their walk-out. This language, by the way, after further investigation into the actual NGO text, proved to be analytical, factual, and consistent with UN program protocols.

Third, generating a final NGO document based on negotiations between all the NGOs over each caucus’ language, instead of constructing a document based on the core contributions of each caucus, is a recipe for disaster. Achieving “consensus language” would have involved all 39 different issue caucuses voting on each section and each sentence of the final NGO Declaration and Programme of Action. Under this arrangement, the Women’s caucus would have veto power over language in the Reparations section and the Dalit caucus would be debating the

declaration of the Palestine caucus until a “consensus” was reached. In that some NGOs felt they were mandated to mimic the UN government process of “consensus,” it is no wonder that the document failed to meet its deadline.

With each caucus meeting often twice a day during Durban, there was the chance to hammer out consensus language within the *caucus*. At least in each issue caucus there was a chance for international unity, a chance for a coherent politics that could impact the governments and the world, a chance for a negotiated text, and the moral authority that the final language comes from participants with long track records on the issue in question.

Chee Yoke Ling, from the Third World Network in Malaysia, an experienced UN NGO leader who has spent the last ten years trying to build the NGO movement on issues of trade and the environment, raises real concerns about NGO efforts to draft broad manifestos parallel to those of the governments:

Some of the NGOs are as bad as the governments. They behave in a self-important manner; they can never reach consensus or even simple agreements. I think the best way to reach greater agreements among NGOs is to begin with bilateral initiatives between specific groups with whom we have some political agreement and a history of common work. Then we generate a document and see who wants to sign onto it. If every group has editorial power we would have a movement of editors, not organizers.¹²

Building on this view, the NGO press conference at the WSSD PrepCom in Bali, Indonesia (a PrepCom for the 2002

12. Chee Yoke Ling, conversation with the author, New York, 28 January 2002.

WSSD) was a model of how this could have worked at Durban. In Bali, we organized a press conference of 13 different issue caucuses with each caucus focusing on its central issue. What did it come to Bali to achieve? Did it believe the governmental document reflected progress or regress on that issue? What was the caucus demanding? Unlike WCAR, the World Summit on Sustainable Development has no process for a parallel NGO document. One reason the press conference worked was because all of the caucuses had a *baseline political unity in theory and practice*—they saw transnational corporations and the United States sabotaging the work of the conference, and they had some actual practice together throughout two weeks of the PrepCom in preparing joint statements as well as organizing actual protests and demonstrations. Still, when those of us on the press conference planning group read each caucus's statement, we realized that each caucus did not really have complete agreement with each other caucus's statement (e.g. the Arab caucus's demand that world governments stop blockades against Iraq and Cuba). So, we came up with a format in which the spokesperson stated, "The Women's caucus says; the Energy caucus says, etc," with an understanding that each caucus spoke for itself and we did not speak for each other. And yet, that format, the "collection of voices of the victims" (versus "consensus" format) worked because none of us strongly wanted to disassociate ourselves from the views of any other caucus.

At WCAR, the strength of the final NGO Declaration was the passion and issue-specific knowledge of each section, written by each individual caucus. It was not, nor did it have to be, a "consensus" document. And the self-important human rights groups who felt embarrassed by the language of many of the

caucuses, were in fact, inappropriately, trying to speak for the entire NGO Forum. Note that when they put forth *their* choice of critical issues, they completely omitted Palestinian self-determination (except to condemn its rhetorical excess) and reparations. That is, their effort to get the public message “back on track” came out of a “human rights bureaucracy” caucus no more representative, and in fact a great deal less so, than the African, Black, and Palestinian caucuses which gave the sharpest edge and the most profound content to the antiracist agenda.

I worry that it was the efforts of those who were arguing for a “consensus” document that may have been a major disruptive force, causing the document to never see the light of day while all the NGO delegates were still in Durban. The NGO Declaration never was available for a launch at the final plenary, never was printed in substantial quantities, and still, a year after WCAR, is not available as a mass produced document.

In retrospect, this was a lost opportunity. Had several of the key NGO caucuses been able to reach unity *with each other* instead of focusing on trying to cobble together the final declaration, the Indigenous peoples, Palestinian, African, Environmental Justice, and Reparations caucuses could have released their own language at a press conference. They could have supported each other’s key demands, printed up an immediate document that was partial but in many ways more representative, and asked all the delegates at WCAR to rally around that document and bring its message to the governments. This could have had so much more impact than the fight for “consensus” on a parallel document that generated neither consensus nor a document that could impact WCAR.

The printed NGO Declaration finally arrived—days after the closing of the NGO Forum. Although the document has some impressive resolutions, it was never presented to an NGO plenary and was delivered to the public and the UN three days after almost all the NGO delegates left. Even when it was finally presented on September 4, only 15 copies were made available and even those had missing pages. In spite of this undesirable and ineffective process, the caucus model succeeded in generating a document worthy of study and use today.¹³ This discussion is one such effort to continue its impact after the actual events in Durban.

A Textual Analysis of the Final NGO Declaration and Programme of Action

The final NGO Declaration contains important language on slavery, reparations, Israel, and Palestine. Many other important sections of the document—immigrants, women, Dalits, Roma, trafficking, in fact, all 39 issue caucuses—require study and commentary by activists in the field. I have chosen to focus on two key sections—Slavery/Reparations and Palestine/Israel, because those were the issues that most threatened the U.S., the issues over which the U.S. staged its walk-out, and in my view, the issues that represent key demands for a world antiracist Left. In this section, I compare the NGO language to the final governmental language on each subject and make some summary analytical conclusions.

13. “WCAR NGO Forum Declaration,” 3 September 2001, <<http://www.racism.org.za/declaration.htm>> (31 July 2002).

Reparations for Africa, Blacks in the U.S., and the African Diaspora

Excerpts from the WCAR NGO Forum Declaration on Reparations

- “We recognize that the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and slavery, which constitute crimes against humanity, forced the brutal removal and the largest forced migration in history (over one hundred million), caused the death of millions of Africans, destroyed African civilizations, impoverished African economies and formed the basis for Africa’s underdevelopment and marginalization which continues to this date. We acknowledge that Africa was dismembered and divided among European powers, which created Western monopolies for the continued exploitation of African natural resources for the benefit of Western economies and industries”(66).¹⁴

- “We strongly call on the UN to establish, within one year from this World Conference Against Racism, an international tribunal to measure the extent of the damages resulting from the slave trade, slavery, and colonialism on Africans and African Descendants. We call on the United Nations to establish and resource a world institute based in Africa and dedicated to research, fact finding, and resource networking for Africans and African Descendants in the Diaspora” (232).

- “We demand that the United States, Canada, and those European and Arab nations that participated in and benefited from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the Trans-Sahara Slave

14. Ibid., numbers in parentheses refer to the section numbers in the final WCAR NGO Forum Declaration.

Trade, the Trans-Indian Ocean Slave Trade, Slavery and the Colonization of Africa, within one year of the WCAR, to establish an international compensatory mechanism for victims of these crimes against humanity—reaching the masses of the victimized and not merely an elite few...” (237, 240).

□ “[We demand] restitution encompassing the unconditional return of land, heritage icons and artifacts; the provision of land to those forced to leave their homelands and forcibly resettled in foreign lands; cancellation of debt of countries victimized by these crimes against humanity including African countries and impoverished countries in the Americas” (241).

□ “[We demand] monetary compensation that will repair the victims... programs for the creation and enhancement of participation in production enterprises; full accessibility and affirmative inclusion in all levels of employment opportunity; grants of cash payments based on assessment of losses resulting from the violation of human rights and crimes against humanity” (242).

□ “[We demand] restoration including release of all political prisoners, providing for health care, including mental health care, educational and social services that are specifically designed to correct the injuries caused by the violations of human rights and crimes against humanity” (243).

□ “[We demand] Satisfaction and guarantee of non-repetition includes the public acknowledgment of the crimes against humanity, the correction of the history of Africa,

African and African descendants in educational materials, in the media, acknowledgments of the economic base of exploitation of the victims...and the unjust enrichment of the perpetrators” (244).

□ “We call for an independent international and regional monitoring organization with the responsibility to assure that programs of reparations are designed and implemented with timetables that satisfy the provision of this program of action is accomplished” (245).

□ “We call on all concerned African nations to take formal action to obtain the return of stolen cultural artifacts, gold, money, mineral wealth and the return of the occupied land on the continent and call on the international community to support such actions” (247).

***Excerpts from the UN Governmental WCAR
Declaration on Reparations***

□ “We acknowledge that slavery and the slave trade, including the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, were appalling tragedies in the history of humanity not only because of their abhorrent barbarism but also in terms of their magnitude, organized nature and especially their negation of the essence of the victims and further acknowledge that *slavery and the slave trade were crimes against humanity* [author’s italics] and are among the major manifestations of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, and that Africans and peoples of African descent, Asians and peoples of Asian descent, and indigenous peoples were vic-

tims of these acts and continue to be victims of their consequences” (13).¹⁵

□ “We acknowledge and profoundly regret the massive human sufferings and the tragic plight of millions of men, women, and children caused by slavery, slave trade, Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, apartheid, colonialism and genocide, and call upon states concerned to honor the memory of victims of past tragedies. We affirm that wherever and whenever these occurred they must be condemned and their re-occurrence prevented...”(99).

□ “We further note that some States have taken the initiative to apologize and have paid reparations where appropriate, for grave and massive violations committed” (100).

□ “We recognize the efforts of developing countries, in particular the commitment and the dedication of African leaders to seriously address the challenges of poverty, underdevelopment, marginalization, social exclusion, economic disparities, instability, and insecurity, through initiatives such as the New Africa Initiative and other mechanisms such as the World Solidarity Fund for the Eradication of Poverty and call upon developing countries, the United Nations, and its Specialized Agencies, as well as international financial institutions to provide... new and additional financial resources as appropriate to support these initiatives” (157).

15. United Nation General Assembly, “Programme of Action,” *Report of the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance*, A/CONF.189/12, 25 January 2002.

- The governmental document then laid out a long list of remedies to address African “poverty, marginalization, social exclusion, economic disparities, instability, and insecurity” including “debt relief, poverty eradication, building or strengthening democratic institutions, promotion of foreign direct investment, market access, transfer of technology, education, training and cultural development, mutual assistance in the reparation of illegally obtained and illegally transferred (stashed) funds in accordance with national and international instruments, restitution of art objects, historical artifacts, and documents to their country of origin in accordance with bilateral agreements or international instruments” (158).

The Politics of Reparations—A Short-term Victory with Danger Signs Emerging

The NGO resolutions reflect a major breakthrough in content, regardless of the many contradictions within the African states and the Black Liberation Movement in the U.S. In terms of its polemical and strategic approach, the NGO Declaration addresses many potential pitfalls in, and attacks upon, the nascent Reparations Movement:

- It offers structural and systematic demands that would take centuries to implement, and would preclude efforts by the West to “settle all claims.”
- Its proposal that the West admit to crimes against humanity and institute a cultural introspection to acknowledge that it was built on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade would, of course, put the West on the moral, political, and legal defensive.

□ It included, but did not restrict reparations to, individual monetary compensation. It addressed the complexity of the return of land, cancellation (not “relief”) of debt, return of art and artifacts, massive expansion of foreign payments for social services, including mental health care for the ongoing pain of colonialism, release of political prisoners, and the correction of the historical record through the creation of tribunals and research institutions. That is, it addressed a comprehensive cultural, economic, structural, psychological payback that involves a complete turning of the tables with the West.

The governmental declaration is complex. On the one hand, it provides language that for the first time admits that slavery was a “crime against humanity,” a major breakthrough of the work of the Reparations Movement that may open the door to future legal claims in both national and international courts. Several governmental delegates from the EU told me that the language was carefully drawn, in order to get European and U.S. support, to make a heartfelt apology but to preclude any legal liability. Obviously, for most in the Reparations Movement, there can be no “heartfelt” anything without opening the door to legally enforceable reparations. Still, other legal scholars, such as Charles Ogletree, co-chair of the Reparations Coordinating Committee, argue that this is a major legal breakthrough for the Reparations Movement, in that “crimes against humanity” is a specific legal concept in international law that can contribute to both liability and remedy.¹⁶ Much of this will be

16. Charles Ogletree, “Litigating the Legacy of Slavery,” *New York Times*, 31 March 2002.

tested in future reparations litigation, but as a first step, this was an important victory that should be given even greater attention and scrutiny.

Having admitted that slavery was a “crime against humanity,” there is no offer of reparations in the final UN governmental document, as the text makes clear, by the perpetrators of the Trans-Atlantic, Trans-Sahara, or Trans-Indian Ocean Slave Trade. There is no support for the institutional structures proposed by the NGO declaration to study and document the impacts and scope of slavery, and no willingness whatsoever to address the issue of reparations squarely, except to say that some unnamed nations have already granted reparations.

Worse, after the vaguely-worded general sentiments of apology, the governmental document takes a dangerous U-turn—trying to substitute a U.S./G8 imposed “free market” diet of “aid” and “economic development” for reparations—that steers clear of the demands for reparations. Unfortunately, while the Mbeki tendency within the ANC government has played an active role in the UN governmental policy debate on reparations, it has equated its immediate demand for “economic development aid” from the West *with its definition of reparations*. This is in sharp disagreement with the political, moral, ideological, historical, analytical, and strategic approach reflected in the NGO Declaration.

The problem with situating the demand for reparations into more immediate, state-to-state demands for “ensuring equitable market access and fair competition,” “bridging the digital divide” and “democratizing international institutions such as the IMF, World Bank, and WTO” is that they, in fact, undercut the Reparations Movement by:

- Eliminating the entire process of documenting the crimes of slavery;
- Reducing a mass question of individual and group rights to a state-to-state negotiation, replacing direct democracy with “representative democracy;”
- Reducing a cultural, ideological, and political campaign that must take centuries, to a series of very immediate efforts to reduce the profound vulnerability of the African governments in a world market that is a stacked deck.

Many of the West’s aid proposals mirror a neoliberal development model. There is the danger that the West will make tiny concessions to African states in return for luring them even further into a globally integrated imperialist system dominated by the United States and the EU—a system that will even further strengthen the ropes of dependency.

But it should be agreed upon that such programs have nothing whatsoever to do with reparations and should not be used by either the slave-trading West or the African nations fighting for self-determination, as a substitute, in any way, for a Reparations Movement. The ANC leadership has enormous moral authority in the world. Whatever plans and strategies it has for South Africa’s development, it should be careful to not give the impression that its proposals for Western investment in any way compete with or undermine the fledgling Reparations Movement.

There is the view within the nascent Reparations Movement, with which I am allied, that no government and no civil rights or antiracist group or coalition is authorized to “sign off” or “settle”

the demand for reparations. According to this view, each generation, in each nation, has the right to evolve its own understanding of specific remedies and demands (which in itself will involve the most contentious arguments) but no generation has the right to play into the hands of Western bourgeois law in which the entire purpose of “settlement” is to indemnify the perpetrators from any future claims against them and to settle “all present and future claims.” No generation can settle all claims for future generations.

Within the Global South, there is a raging debate about how to effectively and democratically exercise state power, how to drive out, or at least limit, colonial economic penetration, and how to win true self-determination. These ideas were once at the center of anti-imperialist movements in the Third World. Now, governments and anti-imperialist movements in the Global South are fighting to re-establish their authority and viability in the present reactionary climate. At Durban, we saw the power of the structural demands for reparations and its enormous threat to the ideological and cultural hegemony of Western imperialism. The struggle for reparations will be central to the rebuilding of a Black Liberation Movement and a multiracial left antiracist movement in the U.S. and throughout Africa. It can provide a framework for a programmatic center of a Black and African renaissance that can impact and reshape a world Left and have profound impacts in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and among oppressed nationality peoples all over the world, including those in the United States. Given its profound potential and relatively fragile organizational state at present, the Reparations Movement and its future evolution must be carefully protected and supported.

Palestine—Who Was Hijacked?

The Palestinian people have been subjected to the most unprincipled and racist attacks as they struggle to restore their own nation, their own territorial integrity, and their own political and cultural identity in the face of an international campaign of slander and distortion. At Durban, the primary objectives of the Palestinian movement were to popularize their cause in front of an international audience, to articulate their demands to buttress the concept of Palestinian self-determination, and to stop the Israeli aggression against the Palestinian people, the military occupation of their land, and U.S. support for it. In that the NGO Forum Declaration was an ideological document, the Palestinian NGO delegates' goals were to win an international vote of confidence in their movement and an international condemnation of Israel's policies to help move forward an eventual political solution on terms favorable to the Palestinians.

These were life and death objectives. The Palestinians hoped to win a moral victory, to stay the hand of Israeli violence and conquest, to challenge the Israeli assassination of leaders and murdering of civilians, to stop the illegal occupations by Israeli settlers, and to cut off U.S. military and economic aid to Israel of more than \$5 billion a year that pays for and encourages these abuses. The Palestinian delegates at WCAR worked to back up their charges against the Israelis of "racism," "apartheid," and "genocide." This was an effort to win the battle of ideas and to confront the way that Israel has manipulated the deserved worldwide sympathy for the Jews because of the horrors of the Holocaust carried out by the Germans, Italians, Poles, Austrians, and French, and tried to turn

it into support for, or silence on, the terror that the Israelis are imposing on the Palestinians.¹⁷

***Excerpts from the WCAR NGO Forum
Declaration on Palestine***

- “Affirming the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, statehood, and independence and freedom, and the right of the return as stipulated in UN Resolution 194” (20).

- “The Palestinian people... are currently enduring a colonialist, discriminatory military occupation that violates their fundamental human right to self-determination including the illegal transfer of Israeli citizens into the occupied territories and establishment of a permanent illegal Israeli infrastructure; and other racist methods amounting to Israel’s

17. The use of any analogies with Nazi Germany to describe Israeli treatment of the Palestinians should be done with the greatest of care; there are many abuses in the world that need not invoke Nazi war crimes. But especially after the latest round of efforts by the Sharon government to literally “wipe out” the Palestinian resistance, the dividing up of all Palestinian land into cantons, the military re-occupation of refugee camps, the use of “shoot to kill” orders indiscriminately, the assassination of Palestinian leaders and the holding hostage of their acknowledged president Arafat, even many former close allies of the Israeli people such as Desmond Tutu, and a growing number of courageous Israeli intellectuals such as Yitzhak Laor are choosing to make analogies with Hitler in a way to signal to the Israeli government that any last honeymoon or pulling of punches is over. Laor writes, “Amir Oren, a senior military commentator for Ha’aretz, quoted a senior military officer, ‘In order to prepare properly for the next campaign, one of the Israeli officers in the territories said that it is justified and in fact essential to learn from every possible source. If the mission is to seize a densely populated refugee camp, or take over the kasbah of Nablus, and if the commander’s obligation is to try to execute the mission without casualties on either side, then he must first analyze and internalize the lessons of earlier battles—even, however shocking it may sound, even how the German army fought in the Warsaw Ghetto.’” Yitzhak Laor, “After Jenin,” *London Review of Books* 24, no. 9 (2002).

brand of apartheid and other racist crimes against humanity. Recognizing therefore that the Palestinian people have the clear right under international law to resist such occupation by any means provided under international law until they achieve their fundamental human right to self-determination and end the Israeli racist system” (98).

□ “Appalled by the on-going colonial military Israeli occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territories (the West Bank including Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip), we declare and call for an immediate end to the Israeli systematic perpetration of racist crimes, including war crimes, acts of genocide and ethnic cleansing (as defined in the Statute of the International Criminal Court) including uprooting by military attack, imposition of measures... on the population to make life so difficult that the only option is to leave the area, and state terrorism against the Palestinian people. Recognizing that all of these methods are designed to ensure the continuation of an exclusively Jewish state with a Jewish majority and the expansion of its borders to gain more land, driving out the indigenous Palestinian population” (160).

□ “We declare Israel is a racist, apartheid state in which Israel’s brand of apartheid as a crime against humanity has been characterized by separation and segregation, dispossession, restricted land access, denationalization, ‘bantustanization’ and inhumane acts” (162).

□ “We recognize that targeted victims of Israel’s brand of apartheid and ethnic cleansing methods have been in particular children, women, and refugees, and condemn the

disproportionate numbers of children and women killed and injured in military shooting and bombing attacks” (164).

□ “[We are] appalled by the discrimination against the Palestinians inside Israel which include: the imposition of discriminatory laws, including discriminatory laws of return and citizenship, which emphasize the ethnicity of the Israeli state as a Jewish state; the granting of benefits or privileges solely to Jewish Israeli citizens, the imposition of restrictions on the civil and political rights of Palestinians because of their national belonging or because they do not belong to the majority ethnic group; the negation of the right of Palestinians to equal access to resources of the State and civil equality, including affirmative action policies, which recognize the historical discrimination against Palestinians inside Israel” (165).

Excerpt from the UN Governmental WCAR Response on Palestine

The world governments rejected this language and passed a far more conciliatory position that, in essence, represented a victory for the U.S. and Israeli line on the subject:

“We are concerned about the plight of the Palestinian people under foreign occupation. We recognize the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to the establishment of an independent state and we recognize the right to security for all states in the region, including Israel, and call upon all states to support the peace process and bring it to an early conclusion” (60).

The language of the UN governments included no criticisms whatsoever of Israeli racism, brutality, or apartheid. This was hardly surprising given the strength of the U.S. and Israel and the weakness, internationally, of the Palestinians, and given the capitulation of most of the Arab states, many of whom have neocolonial dictatorial regimes closely allied with and dependent upon the U.S. The general statements in support of a Palestinian “independent state” are meaningless. Such statements are not even buttressed by specific reference to far stronger UN resolutions on Palestine already passed, in particular UN Resolution 194 which grants Palestinian refugees the right of return to their homes of origin, and UN Resolutions 242 and 338 which call for the immediate end to Israel’s illegal occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Nonetheless, the expansion of support for the Palestinian movement cannot be understood by the cold, harsh words of the WCAR governmental document. After all, if it was such a victory for the U.S. and Israel, why did the U.S. need to walk out?

A big part of the Palestinian organizing work is to create an ideological counteroffensive, to beat back the onslaught of unprincipled attacks from U.S., Israeli and Zionist ideologues, amplified by a pro-Israeli world press, that have kept their movement so often on the defensive. At the UNISA debates, Blade Nzimande, Secretary General of the South African Communist Party asked, “Why is there not more outrage about the mass murders of the Palestinians? I do not use this word lightly, but is this not genocide? How can we build more support for their struggle?”¹⁸

18. Blade Nzimande, author’s notes, ANC lecture series at UNISA, 1 September 2002.

On the first day of WCAR, right after the opening plenary, the South African Independent Media Center held a press conference in which South African Leftists affiliated with the Durban Social Forum raised criticisms of Thabo Mbeki's just-concluded opening speech to the NGO delegates. During the questions and answers, seemingly out of the blue, a European NGO delegate asked the panelists, "Don't you think the Palestinian charges of racism and apartheid against Israel are deflecting from the other key antiracist issues we are trying to raise here?" Oupa Lehulere, from Khanya College in Johannesburg, replied, "That was the same criticism some people raised about the anti-Apartheid struggle for decades, that somehow our struggle against Apartheid was 'crowding out' other causes. We thought that the struggle against the Apartheid regime was in fact giving a focus to an international antiracist movement. Today, the Palestinian struggle is on the frontlines. They are risking their lives every day. They inspire people all over the world. If the Palestinians win, we all win."¹⁹ While his remarks carried the day, the criticism of the Palestinians for being too militant, or organizing too well, at a time when their entire movement and story is being suppressed, reflects what some have called "soft Zionism" and perhaps anti-Arab racism even within the world antiracist movement that requires constant struggle and vigilance.

Later, during the heated debates among U.S. NGOs about the best politics and tactics to protest the U.S. governmental walk-out, a few Black civil rights moderates argued that the Palestinians "provoked" the U.S. and Israel to leave. Then, a few

19. Oupa Lehulere, statement at press conference, South African Independent Media Center, 27 August 2001.

Black delegates who had been working on the reparations issue, who did not buy the “provocation” argument, still proposed that any statements criticizing the U.S. walk-out should be restricted to the demands for reparations. They argued that the Palestinian issue was distracting from media coverage of the crimes of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and preventing progress on the issues of reparations. As reported earlier, each time that these critiques were raised, the vast majority of U.S. Black delegates and NGO delegates of all races backed the Palestinian cause as well. As several of us argued, if you read the language of the NGO Declaration on reparations, even the most minimal interpretation of those demands essentially asks the U.S. and the European states to commit political suicide. Do we really expect the U.S. and the Europeans, who have committed mass murder systematically and structurally from their inception, to agree to the formation of, let alone abide by the recommendations of, a world court on reparations? Do we understand that even the most minimal but substantial economic payback for slavery to Blacks in the U.S., Africa, and the African Diaspora would virtually bankrupt the U.S.? Again, what have the oppressed and politically isolated Palestinian people done but try—with sticks and stones, bare fists, and, if necessary, their lives—to fight for their survival, and how can that not enormously help the movement for reparations? In that context, what in the world do the Palestinians have to do with this problem of Western arrogance and racism? Is their struggle a cause, or a symptom? And do we think, even for a nanosecond, that the U.S., able to bomb entire societies with impunity, walked out over “language” from the Palestinians, or “resolutions” from WCAR?

Then there are charges by pro-Israeli U.S. Jews and Israelis that they were harassed, even attacked verbally by the Palestinians at Durban and subjected to anti-Semitic slanders. They argue that the Palestinians provoked fights with the Israeli delegates, and that, of course, the U.S. walked out to protect the “human rights” of the Israeli delegates from Palestinian attacks. This is just not true. I was at Durban for two weeks, attended every plenary session, walked around Kingsmeade every day, and talked to the Palestinian delegates several times. Even given my support for the Palestinians, if I had seen what I felt were anti-Semitic attacks on Jewish and Israeli delegates, I would have stood up against them. At one time I saw a Palestinian demonstration and a bitter argument between Palestinian and Israeli delegates. I should hope there would be bitter argument as the Israelis are killing the Palestinians as a people. Still, the myth of physical attacks on Israeli or Jewish delegates is typical misinformation—the Palestinians were doing their job fighting for their lives, and given the deaths of their children, they were amazingly restrained and diplomatic. This despite the Israeli army’s newfound penchant for painting the Star of David on Palestinian buildings and homes. Moreover, since the Israelis have tried to slander Jewish opponents of their brutality as “self-hating Jews,” I suppose they would not be dissuaded from their cries of anti-Semitism to learn that when some Jewish WCAR delegates approached the Palestinian protestors as Jews to offer their sympathy and solidarity, we were literally embraced physically and emotionally, in a bear hug of internationalism.

Six months later I met an Israeli delegate to the World Summit on Sustainable Development at the UN in New York. She certainly felt enough ambivalence about Israeli policy to confide

in me that a few of her friends are beginning to lose faith in the whole Zionist idea—still, she was more upset by Palestinian counter-violence than by that of her own government. She repeated to me the story that was going all over Israel that the U.S. walked out to prevent the Israelis from verbal and physical abuse. I tried to reason with her. Would we criticize the Vietnamese for screaming at U.S. supporters of the war in Vietnam? Is screaming and yelling “abuse,” or in this case, making a desperate cry for help and support, totally appropriate behavior? Were the Israelis really in any danger at WCAR, even with their government’s mass murder of Palestinian civilians? What exactly is polite and diplomatic behavior in the midst of genocide? As I described objectively what had happened, she said, “You should tell that story to others. On this one I feel our government has deceived us about Durban.”²⁰

In April 2002, the Israeli army initiated the Jenin massacre—another war crime initiated by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who many in the world call the “butcher” for his role in the earlier massacre of Palestinian civilians at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in South Lebanon in 1982. As with many of the world’s abuses today, one can only wonder how the Palestinian people continue their fight for liberation and how those of us appalled at Israeli brutality can land effective blows.

The story of the Palestinian resistance at Durban and the WCAR NGO resolutions in which the Palestinians documented specific abuses and violations of international law are positive examples of what advance planning for such a conference can achieve.

20. Israeli NGO delegate to WSSD PrepCom II, conversation with the author, United Nations, New York, 5 February 2002.

I am convinced the Palestinians made new and stronger allies in the U.S., and throughout the world. The growing international outcry against Israeli policies, including a growing militancy among Israeli army reserve “refuseniks,” the open analogy between Israeli behavior and Nazi tactics by both Israeli supporters and opponents of the attacks on Palestinian refugees, and the recent international appeal for support for the Palestinians by former South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu continue the positive legacy of WCAR.²¹

The Final Plenary: Running on Empty

Six days after it began, the NGO Forum at WCAR held its closing plenary session. It turned out to be the mirror image of the opening plenary—two book-ends with no book inside. As the WCAR meeting of the world governments had already started, this was the last chance for the NGOs to raise a coherent, organized political challenge to the world’s governments. It didn’t happen.

On Saturday, September 1st, as the NGO delegates once again returned to Kingsmeade Cricket Stadium for the closing plenary of the NGO Forum, there was a long delay in the beginning of the program. There was a growing buzz, “What is going on?” “What is the program?” “Where is the political declaration?” Soon, this implied critique of the leadership was drowned out by a far louder buzz, “I hear that Fidel is coming, Fidel is coming!” Soon, an advance guard of Cuban organizers began distributing paper Cuban flags. People were literally stepping over each other to get them, a combination of revolutionary sentiment

21. Desmond Tutu, “Apartheid in the Holy Land,” *The Guardian*, 29 April 2002.

and a pent up desire to do something. Then, after perhaps an hour of anticipatory chanting—for Fidel, for the Palestinians, for ourselves—a ten car caravan arrived. Fidel Castro Ruiz, the president of Cuba, stepped out and was received like a revolutionary rock star. Except for the COSATU and Durban Social Forum demonstrations, each outside of the aegis of the WCAR, this was the first time during the conference that people had anything about which to be militant, antiracist, and, yes, anti-imperialist. Even though many of the delegates from the U.S. and Third World NGOs had positioned themselves as moderate, some even explicitly anti-revolutionary, it was as if Fidel Castro—the man who stood up to the giant, the U.S.—represented everyone’s most revolutionary sentiments.

At the NGO plenary, Fidel spoke for two hours. And while he has not lost his profound ability to agitate, he is equally skilled as a propagandist in bringing complex ideas to an advanced audience. His major theme was the relationship of racism to imperialism, and the truly desperate condition of the Third World today under the domination of the United States, the “unchallenged superpower.” Here is a head of state from a tiny island that had been ravaged by the slave trade, subject to Spanish and then U.S. colonialism, subjected to the classical tyranny of United Fruit Company and the U.S. Mafia and now, with no military or economic aid from a Soviet Union that no longer exists, he is still willing to openly challenge U.S. imperialism—morally, politically, and intellectually, in a world arena. In that brief historical moment, the power of an anti-imperialist socialism and just the simple courage of a leader and a nation willing to stand up to the world’s bully gave Fidel the real mantle of the “leader of the free world.”

Even though most delegates were thrilled to hear Fidel Castro, under the actual time, place, and conditions of WCAR, Fidel's speech was not an appropriate use of two hours of the final session. This was the last chance for the presentation of the NGO Declaration Programme of Action. It was the final debate and the final effort to mobilize the delegates, if only to ratify a declaration most of them had never seen, and to develop a plan to use that document to impact UN governmental policy in the world fight against racism. Instead, the UN NGO bureaucracy, by featuring the West's anathema, Fidel Castro, as the final and featured speaker at the WCAR NGO Forum, created a distraction as a cover for their own failures. Had there been a viable tactical plan to produce and distribute the Declaration presented to the NGO delegates, had there been even a hint of a grassroots NGO movement at Durban, Fidel could have been a great addition for emphasis. But Fidel is no substitute for the absence of an international movement or a viable conference. As thousands of WCAR delegates filed out of the stadium, they went home in much the same state as they had arrived—dedicated and angry, but fundamentally isolated, alienated, and disorganized. While it would have been naïve to expect a week in Durban to change those conditions, the World Conference Against Racism reflected the organizational and political disunity in the world antiracist movement more than it was able to remedy it, or even move the process forward. It would take those who were there, who saw the opportunity and the enemy in front of their own eyes, to pick up the pieces and reconstruct a new image and a new reality out of the many fragments and jewels that WCAR did produce.

A Sum-Up of WCAR's Historical Contributions

How does one understand the historical impact of an event like the World Conference Against Racism? Even before the massive post-September 11 backlash, Durban did not create the world challenge to the U.S. that it so richly deserved. The U.S. in general and the Bush Administration in particular had already calculated the cost of walking out, after barely walking in. The Republican Right hardly had to worry about the most radical and militant world forces or about a small sector of angry Black community activists, in that it already writes off more than 90 percent of the Black vote. Many of the weaknesses of WCAR were the limits of the historical period and the historical balance of forces in which it took place. With all the many limitations and indeed failures that I have tried to analyze squarely, there were some important components of the event that warrant final comment, some of which offer hopeful possibilities for future organizing work.

WCAR Exposed the Achilles Heel of the United States, Despite Its Enormous World Power

Generally, the United States forces others to walk out of international meetings as it controls the rules of the game at the UN, at the World Trade Organization, and in virtually every arena in which it operates. So why has the U.S. boycotted the two previous UN conferences against racism and used the flimsy pretext of Israel to hide its own vulnerability at WCAR? Why is the U.S. so afraid of a world debate on racism? Because racism has been the ideology, not of "discrimination" alone, but of the far more fundamental crimes upon which U.S. society has been built: slavery

and genocide. Antiracism, when tied to anti-imperialist movements and strategy, contains the seeds of a revolutionary challenge to the existing order. There is encouragement to be found in the U.S. over-reaction, or perhaps appropriate reaction, to the challenges of an antiracist movement. In Europe as well, other Western capitalists are demonstrating their own vulnerability on the issue of racism as it relates to reparations. France passed a law in 2001 that “recognized the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade as well as the slave trade across the Indian Ocean” as “crimes against humanity.” This contradicted the European Union’s public stance which has, so far, refused to make such an acknowledgment. While many Africans in French speaking former colonies praised France’s leadership, France went out of its way at a press conference at WCAR to distinguish between slavery and colonialism. To some this may seem like a distinction without a difference, but it has profound political and legal ramifications. Politically, it seems to be saying that “colonialism,” the foundation upon which every European nation and the U.S. has been built, is not in itself a “crime against humanity” whereas the slave trade is a “crime against humanity,” a difference between what France is and what France did—a distinction that really can’t be made. But also, as explained to me by several African delegates to WCAR, in their view the French government was trying to make a substantial apology for its past actions while simultaneously trying to protect itself from legal claims in a world court. Many European governments want to negotiate an “apology” as a way of “settling all claims” which the worldwide Reparations Movement would never accept. The point is that slavery, colonialism, and the demand for reparations are intertwined, and at Durban we saw the G8 powers, at least for a

moment, on the defensive in the face of an antiracist offensive. The strategic lessons must be fully understood and applied in the most rigorous and militant manner to present conditions.

***The Reparations Movement is Happening—
There is No Going Back***

At Durban, we saw not just the strategic weakness of the U.S. and European nations on racism but their literal panic in the face of demands for reparations. The U.S. in particular understands the scope of the programmatic demands of a Reparations Movement. Moreover, the U.S., as distinct from the European states, has a Black population of more than 34 million people located in every strategic urban center—New York, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, New Orleans, Atlanta, Houston, Detroit, Chicago, Oakland/San Francisco, and Los Angeles. If we carefully review the NGO declaration on slavery and reparations previously described in this chapter, we will understand that the many components of redress and restitution—punishment for the perpetrators, making the victims whole—will involve demands that are so revolutionary they can barely be imagined—just as the depravity of each individual European and white U.S. colonist and slaveholder murdering each of the tens of millions of individual Africans and Indigenous peoples can barely be imagined.

The Reparations Movement has the opportunity to create the central defining political framework for Black and left politics in the U.S. in the 21st century. It can become the most historical, ideological, and material challenge to Western imperialism and can frame a new series of initiatives among Blacks, Latinos, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Indigenous peoples, and antiracist whites to reconstruct new politics and new

organizational forms for the antiracist movement. It can build new bridges between Blacks in the U.S. and African nations, provide a broader base of support for the urgent demands of 400,000 Indigenous peoples throughout the world, and put the system back on the political defensive.

The United Nations: Site for Anti-Imperialist Movement Building

While Malcolm X (and W.E.B. DuBois and Paul Robeson before him) used the United Nations as an important tactic in the struggle for Black liberation in the U.S., many grassroots activists, for good reason, are skeptical. The United Nations is still an institution headquartered in and dominated by the United States. The U.S. has always threatened and bullied the UN, withholding its dues as ransom against policies with which it disagrees and maintaining a completely selective and arbitrary posture toward UN resolutions. The U.S. shoves resolutions down the throats of nations when it serves its interests but blatantly refuses to abide by any resolutions that it sees as limiting its national sovereignty. Thus, UN votes are the ultimate stacked deck.

The recent actions by the U.S. in the UN Security Council to defy the authority of the International Criminal Court (ICC) raise imperial arrogance to legendary levels. The nations of the world ratified the ICC, and the Security Council, always dominated by the U.S., voted to require all governments involved in UN “peacekeeping missions” to abide by its provisions, in particular that any troops committing war crimes under UN auspices would be prosecuted under the ICC. It provides a reasonable reassurance to nations inviting in UN troops that troops will not torture, rape, or murder civilians or prisoners of war. The U.S.

threatened England, Mexico, and other Security Council members that if they did not grant U.S. troops an exemption from the ICC, the U.S. would not participate in any peace keeping missions. The Security Council members should have let the U.S. go, leaving the U.S. as a pariah on human rights. Instead, the U.S. twisted one arm after another; the Security Council reversed its original motion and agreed by a 15-0 vote to exempt the U.S. from the International Criminal Court's authority for one year, with a series of renewable one year exemptions obtainable until infinity. This incident brought disgrace and humiliation upon every member of the Security Council and the UN as an institution, but again, that was the U.S. strategy—to show time and time again that it is the world's policeman and will not be restrained by any principles or any collective institutions. This goes beyond hubris; it's a calculated strategy to terrorize the world.

Knowing this, why would antiracist forces, environmental and human rights forces, Indigenous peoples, anti-imperialist forces, or any progressive people waste their time at the UN? Because, with all its dilemmas, it is not a waste of time; it is a critical site of international struggle at this point in history.

Given the weak state of the international movement, the United Nations provides an effective way to meet thousands of activists, scholars, and key political figures in every issue area from all over the world. At WCAR there were 10,000 NGO delegates; the forthcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development is expected to draw 30,000 to 50,000. At WCAR I met important activists, organizers, scholars, and progressive representatives of Third World governments from many nations in the world as well as making more than 100 new contacts from the U.S. antiracist movement.

Networking alone is not a strategy, but it is great tactic for those who have a strategy. At the Labor/Community Strategy Center, for example, we now have a key list of more than 200 new international contacts that were derived from the work at WCAR and WSSD PrepComs. Documents and emails are circulating, and some of the WCAR people will also be coming to Johannesburg. There is not now any socialist or communist international body or antiracist international organization. If we have a strategy that focuses on the needs and interests of the Global South against the G8 world dominators, the UN is a critical place to test its possibilities.

The UN allows us to understand the behavior of governments and the many contradictions among them, to watch UN representatives as real people, to observe the palace intrigues among them, and through trial and error, to learn the few instances when NGO pressure, or simply the governments' own contradictions with each other, can move things in a positive direction. For example, in the ICC story, one should not see the U.S. victory in a one-sided way. It was achieved at great costs to its imperial interests. It is not smart politics to humiliate your allies. Every country, rich or poor, big or small, that was forced to change its vote under pressure from the United States dreams of paying the U.S. back. One should not think, for example, that the governments of China or Mexico do not hope to be greater world powers and do not tell themselves that they are only biding their time until more fortuitous conditions arise to challenge U.S. hegemony. We should not see the struggle among the world's governments as simply a puppet show run by the U.S. The U.S. "winner take all" politics—from defying Kyoto to threatening nuclear first-strikes—reflects the overextension of the empire and offers possible points of strategic resistance.

The UN NGO structures offer tactical opportunities to challenge U.S. policies. At Durban, the UN provided an entire structure for NGO organizing, including a massive cricket stadium in which NGOs could assemble, the opportunity to develop their own parallel NGO Forum Declaration and Programme of Action, and some access to the UN governmental structures—if only through considerable struggle. At the May/June 2002 Bali PrepCom for WSSD, the UN organized “multi-stakeholder” dialogues and many structures by which NGOs could put forth their politics and try to impact the governments. The UN is a very promising arena, all things considered, for strengthening international grassroots connections, even if at a later point in history more effective structures and opportunities supercede it.

At the recent UN PrepCom at Bali, an angry NGO delegate complained to Dr. Emil Salim, the Chairman of the Commission on Sustainable Development Bureau in charge of the Preparatory Committees for the WSSD, “Why should we come to the UN when the governments don’t listen to us? I just returned from the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and we were able to lay out a whole vision of a new world we want. We had a chance to speak, we were listened to.” Salim rebuked him, “Fine. So if you want to go to a conference of Leftists where you debate strategies that is fine. But when you finish with that strategy, now what do you do? Here is where the power is, here is where the governments are, and you either can or can’t get them to listen to you, you either can or can’t change their policies. But this is where the challenge is. I can’t make them listen to you, that’s your job.”²²

22. CSD Bureau Chair Emil Salim, statement to NGO delegates at PrepCom IV, Bali International Convention Center, Bali, Indonesia, 26 May 2002.

For the foreseeable future, international conferences, both inside and outside UN aegis, addressing racism, human rights, trade, environment, women's liberation, Indigenous peoples rights, world peace and world war are critical arenas for organizing. Any serious grassroots movement rooted in a major constituency has to develop an explicit international organizing strategy. The UN is one important venue in which to carry it out.

Also, the UN holds conferences at important international locations—key meeting spots for building an antiracist anti-imperialist movement. Remember that it was not just the World Conference Against Racism but the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa. The forthcoming WSSD will be held in Johannesburg, South Africa. The Strategy Center chose to pay great attention to the World Summit on Sustainable Development because our work has a strong emphasis on challenging environmental racism and fighting for environmental justice but also because we wanted to make a “one-year round trip from Durban to Johannesburg” and deepen our ties to South African political forces and South African society. For many of us at Durban, just walking on the ground of a free South Africa, under Black majority rule was a mind-blowing and life-changing experience—a model of a society in which talking and doing politics is deep in the daily life of the popular culture, something that is hard to imagine in the United States.

At the WSSD PrepCom IV in Bali, Indonesia, a “tourist paradise” distorted by Western as well as Eastern economic domination (U.S., England, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Taiwan), we met hundreds of activists from the Indonesian People's Forum as well as key organizers from the Philippines, Malaysia, and India. The PrepComs for WSSD held at UN head-

quarters in New York have not been nearly as valuable for U.S. delegates because very few NGOs from the Third World come to them. The critics of NGO opportunism have trenchantly observed, "Join an NGO and see the world." Still, for U.S. organizers in particular, breaking out of a U.S. frame and seeing the world through the eyes of the oppressed nations gives far greater meaning and intensity to concepts of international solidarity, as well as a much broader perspective on organizing in the U.S. We saw Black women in South Africa standing on the highway, risking their safety to stand in traffic for an entire day to sell, hopefully, five or ten giant avocados for perhaps ten rand (\$1). We saw groups of 20 men in Bali pulling massive telephone cables by hand in a coordinated work team, giving the distinct impression of a prison chain gang, in which their pay would be unimaginably low for back-breaking labor. The UN has created important arenas of international participation. It is the job of an aspiring movement to grab those opportunities, and with a sense of orientation and power rooted in a grassroots base on the ground, to learn how to operate in an adversarial international arena with big governments and big business.

One of Durban's greatest achievements was to give greater visibility and moral authority to the anti-imperialist wing of the antiracist movement, and in particular to strengthen actual links between the Black Liberation Movement in the U.S. and the African liberation movements. There has always been a strategic struggle among forces that, broadly construed, could be called "the world antiracist movement." There is a struggle between a pro-imperialist civil rights strategy and an anti-imperialist, antiracist, civil rights and national liberation strategy.

The form of that debate I am most familiar with has been sharply delineated within the Black community in the U.S. The dominant view for most of U.S. history has been the pro-imperialist demand for “equality within the empire,” most explicitly advocated by forces within the civil rights establishment. For example, the NAACP, in its pleadings in front of the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*, argued that racial equality was in the interests of the U.S. in its fight against the communists. They urged that civil rights could be a tactic with which to win the Cold War.

A decade later, the civil rights establishment, tied as it was to the Democratic Party and the ideology of “loyal Americanism,” supported the genocidal war in Vietnam. Many group such as the NAACP and Urban League, up until anti-war sentiment in the Black community became dominant, tried to trade off a hoped-for progress for Blacks “at home” in return for allowing young Black men to fight, kill and die in a war against Third World people. The fledgling Black Left at the time, reflected in Malcolm X and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), opposed the war in Vietnam. It said, “Hell No, We Won’t Go” to fight in an imperialist war, and articulated the Black Liberation Movement as one for *both* full equality within the U.S. and a revolutionary transformation of U.S. society, including solidarity with the anticolonial movements against the U.S. government. The general transformation from “civil rights” to “Black liberation” was not simply rhetorical. It articulated a new strategic and ideological view that Black people in the U.S. were an oppressed people—for some a Third World people, an African people, an oppressed nation—with rights to self-determination.

Similarly, Malcolm X argued that the U.S. Black Liberation Movement needed to expand its demands for “civil rights”—that is, legal equality inside the U.S.—to “human rights,” a framework for demands that could be brought to the UN and other international bodies. Malcolm’s argument, rooted in revolutionary Black nationalism, was based on the idea that *Black people in the U.S. had certain inalienable and national rights that the U.S. government could not subjugate nor adjudicate*. This analysis was extended by the demand of the Black Panther Party for a plebiscite of Black people to determine their relationship to the U.S., reflecting that Black people had separate national rights, had a voluntary and conditional relationship to U.S. society that they could terminate if they so chose, and had the right to establish structures for Black people independent of the U.S. government. The tradition from SNCC to Malcolm X to the Black Panthers (rooted in the prior work of W.E.B. DuBois, among many others) reflected the view that *the effective fight for civil rights had to be embedded in the struggle for self-determination and sovereignty for oppressed nations and peoples*.

The leadership of the Black Liberation Movement at that time influenced the revolutionary tendencies within the Chicano, Puerto Rican, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Indigenous peoples movements, whose advocates argued that U.S. racism was tied to *a structural national oppression* which in turn led to a concept of “solidarity” between oppressed peoples inside the U.S. and those in the Third World. The Black Liberation Movement also transformed the lives of tens of thousands of antiracist whites who debated about the best tactics for directly challenging the racist practices of U.S. society in direct alliance with and support for the programmatic

demands for self-determination of Black, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Indigenous peoples and communities.

Today, we live at a time of profound counter-revolution, and many ideas that were once ascendant and even dominant in oppressed nationality communities have been suppressed and subjugated, as have the organizations and individuals who once advocated them. From 1980 on, we endured 12 years of the most virulent racist Reagan/Bush Administrations. This was followed by eight years of the Clinton Administration systematically working, often with great success, to cultivate and co-opt a Black and Latino political elite by encouraging it to tie its fortunes to the Democratic Party and world imperialism. This growing Black and Latino comprador bourgeoisie has contributed to enormous suffering for working class and low-income people of color, while many Black and Latino Democratic and now Republican operatives are playing a destructive role as agents of imperialism in Africa and Latin America.

As these relatively small Black and Latino elites enrich themselves at the expense of their own people, there is a break in the multi-class united front for civil rights. The Black and Latino working classes are losing hard fought civil rights on a daily basis—as almost two million people, more than 60 percent of whom are Black and Latino, languish in U.S. prisons. Meanwhile, the Black, Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander working class, many of whose members are women and immigrants, suffer growing economic exploitation and political repression. They are trying to organize their own movements and organizations of resistance—some “national in form,” others multiracial including antiracist whites, to challenge the hegemony of white supremacy, U.S. imperialism, and the treachery of pro-imperialist elites of

every nationality. But this is very difficult, for the struggle for national liberation still requires a multi-class united front, and the leadership of the working class of color would be strengthened by more allies from the professional and middle classes of color as well as greater antiracist, pro-working class politics among progressive whites.

The dominant, pro-imperialist line has been in bold relief in U.S. politics after September 11, in which the entire Democratic Party, most of the civil rights establishment, and virtually the entire Congressional Black Caucus—with the notable and heroic exceptions of Barbara Lee and Cynthia McKinney—have lined up with the Bush Administration. They have offered no moral or political leadership against the saturation bombing of the civilian population in Afghanistan or the proto-fascist moves of the Bush Administration at home.

This effort to separate antiracism from anti-imperialism was also operative in Durban. There were forces in the United Nations bureaucracy, in anticipation of strong reactionary pressure from the Western governments, who tried to give WCAR a soft line on racism. They focused on individual stories of “victims’ experiences of racism” as a reflection of individual and group irrationality and superiority complexes and thereby decontextualized painful experiences from their structural and colonial roots, the context that would establish the need for the most radical and structural redress and reparations.

The final NGO document, while unable to serve as a powerful on-the-spot tactic for intervention with the governments, was generally representative of the sentiments of the mass of attendees in that it presented a strong anticolonial content. In Durban, the power of the South African Left in its demonstrations

against neoliberalism (both COSATU and the Durban Social Forum), the demonstrations of the U.S. delegates against the U.S. walk-out, the active organizing by the Palestinians, and the pre-eminent moral and political leadership of Fidel Castro and the government of Cuba set a powerful anti-imperialist tone that became the dominant political discourse of the NGO conference. This momentary vision of a world antiracist, anti-imperialist united front, even in its constituent parts as of yet unrealized as a coordinated whole, was very encouraging. It remains to be seen whether those momentary unities can be consolidated organizationally in the years after Durban. But the antiracist, anti-imperialist united front and its challenge to the power and brutality of U.S. and Western imperialism did exist, at a very large scale, on an international stage, at least for a few days. The challenge of course is how to build on those partial understandings, momentary organizational breakthroughs, and new alliances made by groups all over the world. Still, in a world filled with capitalist pollution, ideological and material, the World Conference Against Racism was a breath of fresh air.

I end this sum-up with an excerpt from Fidel Castro's speech to the NGOs at Durban, a model, in microcosm, of the unapologetic voices needed to change the world:

Nobody has the right to sabotage this conference which, in some way, is attempting to alleviate the terrible suffering and enormous injustice that these deeds have signified and still signify for the overwhelming majority of humanity. Far less does anybody have the right to impose conditions, and demand that the issue of historical responsibility and just reparations are not even mentioned, or the way in which we decide to qualify the horrific genocide at this very minute being committed against our sister

nation of Palestine on the part of extreme-right leaders who, in alliance with the hegemonic superpower, are currently acting in the name of another people which, for close to 2000 years, was the victim of the greatest persecution, discrimination and injustice committed in history.

When Cuba talks of compensation and supports this idea as an ineludible moral duty to the victims of racism, it has an important precedent in the compensation being received by the descendents of those very Jewish peoples who, right in the heart of Europe, suffered an odious and brutal racist holocaust. However, it is not with the intent of attempting the impossible search for direct family members or concrete countries of origin of the victims in terms of deeds that occurred over centuries. The real and irrefutable fact is that tens of millions of Africans were captured, sold like merchandise and dispatched to the other side of the Atlantic to work as slaves, and that 70 million native Indians died in the western hemisphere as a consequence of European conquest and colonization.

The inhuman exploitation to which people of the three continents, including Asia, were subjected, has affected the destiny and present-day life of over 4.5 billion persons inhabiting the Third World nations, and whose indices of poverty, unemployment, infant mortality, life prospects and other disasters impossible to enumerate in a brief speech, are both shocking and horrifying. These are the current victims of that barbarity that lasted for centuries, and the unmistakable creditors of reparations for the horrendous crimes committed against their ancestors and peoples.²³

I will keep you posted.

23. Fidel Castro, key-note address for the closing ceremony of the WCAR NGO Forum, 1 September 2001.