

**Review of Eric Mann, *Dispatches from Durban: Firsthand Commentaries on the World Conference Against Racism and Post-September 11 Movement Strategies*, Los Angeles: Frontlines Press, 2002. 245 pp. \$14.95.**

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By Joseph Nevins

What do we do about the United States?

This is the big question that animates Eric Mann's provocative, insightful, persuasive and highly stimulating book. A compilation of reports from and analyses about activist efforts to influence United Nations conferences, *Dispatches from Durban* is a strategic manifesto of sorts for building an "antiracist, anti-imperialist united front, a positive vision of a society, organizing to stop the abuses of the existing [U.S.-dominated, global] system," while suggesting myriad tactical interventions aimed at progressing toward the larger strategic goals.

The historical focus of the book is the United Nations World Conference Against Racism (WCAR) that took place in Durban, South Africa in September 2001. Mann attended the conference as a delegate of a U.S. non-governmental organization (NGO) and provides a valuable overview of what took place, thus breaking through the gross media distortions of the historic international gathering. While the conference, in and of itself, was of great importance, Mann sees the fact that it took place in South Africa as adding to its significance. As such, the first portion of the book concentrates on the challenges faced by progressive forces in South Africa—a country Mann characterizes "as an advanced workshop for the world Left."

*Dispatches* provides a fascinating and nuanced discussion of the multiple challenges faced by the various components of the South African Left—the African National Congress (ANC), the Communist Party (SACP), and COSATU, the country's confederation of trade unions. Together, they make up a tripartite alliance within the context of an imperialist world order. (The SACP and COSATU, in fact, are part of the ANC, which they try to transform from within—as well as from without.)

As Mann shows, it is not an alliance without serious divisions. During WCAR, COSATU launched a two-day general strike to protest the ANC government's privatization of public services. The vibrant debate and ideological commitment to a Left vision manifested by the COSATU strike inspired Mann: "Watching thousands of workers in the streets," he writes, "I am moved by the motion of the masses and by the fact that socialism is a mass question here."

Mann is clearly sympathetic to the critique of the ANC government put forth by leftist activists within the SACP and COSATU. At the same time, he labors to show the complex set of pressures faced by the governing party, challenges from South African and international capitalists that significantly limit its space for progressive action. Given past U.S. subversion in places like Chile and the growing belligerence of the United States government toward those who challenge American domination in the post-9/11 era, "we must take seriously the belief of the ANC leadership," Mann asserts, "that they have restricted capacity for actual self-determination." But this does not mean that the situation is hopeless. Indeed, according to Mann, such a situation makes leftist organizing from below all-the-more necessary, arguing that "the SACP's leadership of mass

struggles is critical to counteract that pressure” so that the promises and dreams of the anti-Apartheid revolution can be realized. The central challenge to achieving this vision involves figuring out how South Africa’s Left “can develop a class-based politics still rooted in national liberation traditions and intensify struggle with the growing Black bourgeoisie leadership, while building a broad united front against U.S. and Western imperialism.” It is in this area that the U.S. Left has a role or, more important, a responsibility, Mann contends. Rather than launching broadside attacks against the ANC or to debating what the Left in South Africa should be doing, progressive forces in the United States should struggle against the U.S. government so that South Africans have greater space to determine their own political-economic system.

In that regard, Mann sees the political battles in and around the World Conference Against Racism as key. Reparations for the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the pillaging of Africa by European imperialism, core concerns of the conference, are the ultimate counter-hegemonic demand, Mann asserts. It has the potential to delegitimize the United States within Africa and to reduce the pressure on the South African government in the process, thus allowing greater maneuverability for popular movements. More broadly, it calls into question the very legitimacy of the United States—due to its long history of racism, slavery, and slaughter and dispossession of the native population—and the global political-economic order as a whole, while opening space for tactics that chip away at that order.

Although the Durban gathering fell far short in achieving the goal of giving substance to the demand for reparations, Mann sees the WCAR as having achieved some significant goals for international antiracist and anti-capitalist forces. The walk out by the United States government subverted the reparations efforts and the conference as a whole. And in conjunction with various Western countries, Washington successfully endeavored to water down WCAR’s final declaration so that it was a non-enforceable statement of platitudes denouncing racism and xenophobia in general, while failing to address specific cases. Nevertheless, despite strong pressure from Washington and other Western delegations, the NGOs arrived at a strong statement calling for reparations for the slave trade and the plundering of Africa, while denouncing Israeli apartheid and championing Palestinian self-determination. In doing so, they laid the basis for future work, while forcing the hand—somewhat—of national governments whose declaration acknowledged that slavery and the slave trade constituted “crimes against humanity.” Although the statement made no mention of restitution for these crimes, the admission of guilt could *potentially* open the door for future litigation aimed at seeking appropriate redress, Mann suggests. In addition, the U.S. walkout represents a victory of sorts as it served to expose Washington’s racist underbelly, while demonstrating the potential for international resistance and a resurgent antiracist Left within the United States.

While official commentary and a compliant mainstream press framed Washington’s non-participation in Durban as a principled reaction to efforts by pro-Palestinian forces to win support for the position that Israel is a racist state, Mann contends that this was a smokescreen. The real reason was the possibility that the conference would endorse reparations for slavery and colonialism that was Washington’s chief worry. Indeed, as Mann points out, Washington’s obstructionism is part of a pattern: the U.S. refused to participate in the two previous UN World Conferences to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination (in 1978 and 1983) at which activists

successfully used the fora to pressure apartheid South Africa. It is unfortunate that Mann only mentions this without explaining why this occurred, leaving the reader to engage in guesswork.

Mann focuses most of his opprobrium on the United States, which he sees as the linchpin of an unjust world order, one based on racism and imperialism—“the political, economic, and military system of monopoly capitalism that subjugates whole nations and peoples.” To challenge this institutionalized injustice requires an international movement that enjoys a far greater level of consciousness and organization than it now does. While Durban demonstrated just how far the U.S. and international Left are from achieving such a movement, it also showed the potential for realizing one.

In trying to build such a movement, Mann embraces the strategy employed most famously in the 1960s by Malcolm X, who saw the wisdom of moving beyond “civil rights” and internationalizing justice-based demands—framing them as “human rights.” The antiracist Left must do the same today, Mann advises, by building “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.”

Mann sees the United Nations as a key site for waging this struggle. He is painfully aware of the profound limitations of the international body and how Washington has a grossly disproportionate role in shaping its agenda and activities. (See Phyllis Bennis’ excellent *Calling the Shots: How Washington Dominates Today’s UN.*) Nevertheless, Mann perceives the United Nations as offering “a ray of hope for many Third World nations” because it allows a platform for important, international public debate, it embodies progressive aspirations, and it holds high-profile world conferences of great importance to progressive forces. In this regard, Mann’s extensive critical analysis of the activities of non-governmental forces at Durban, as well as in Bali (site of the Preparatory Committee meeting for the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, the latter held in August-September 2002), is of immense significance. Mann’s behind-the-scenes account of grassroots efforts to shape the tone and product of the conferences, to create an effective counter-weight to the U.S. and its allies at both meetings, is highly informative. And his analysis of the limitations and potential for achieving radical demands within the context of the United Nations is brilliant. This section alone makes the book not only worthwhile, but also indispensable for any serious leftist wanting to make effective connections between the local, national, and international arenas.

As an organizer, Mann cut his teeth in the 1960s, working with groups such as the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and Students for a Democratic Society. He sees much of value having taken place during that time and seems to draw much of his strategic vision from what he learned during that period. That vision is one in which oppressed ethnic and racial groups within the United States—what Mann and others have characterized as oppressed nationalities—struggle for self-determination, while establishing links of solidarity with anti-racist whites and progressive “Third World” nationalist movements abroad. What exactly national self-determination within the United States might mean is not very clear. But Mann implies that groups engaging in such efforts, given the nature of their incorporation into the United States, have a conditional relationship to U.S. society, one that they can end if they so choose and have

the right to establish structures independent of those of the dominant society and the federal government. Undermining such a move, among other factors, has been the “creation of larger and larger layers of Black, Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander elites who are directly involved in the suppression of their own people,” a development Mann describes as “a brilliant tactical plan by the establishment.”

By criticizing individuals from oppressed groups for serving the interests of the establishment in the manner that he does, Mann verges on essentialism, seeming to imply that one’s racial and/or ethnic identity should reign supreme over others. He thus ignores the complex and often contradictory nature of identity. He also implicitly denies the agency of those who cast their lot with the interests of an imperialist capitalism—presenting such a move as the result of establishment machinations.

That said, Mann convincingly argues for the centrality of antiracism as part of any serious struggle of radical social change within the United States and on the global scale as well. And he is certainly correct to call into question the American “nation,” which, like most, if not all others, has been borne of the violent incorporation and dispossession of various groups under a dominant ideology that denies such injustice. But Mann is not opposed to nationalism. Indeed, he sees national self-determination as the vehicle of liberation for oppressed racial and ethnic groups—as well as for countries under the yoke of imperialism. In this regard, he perceives nationalism as a potentially progressive force.

Many nationalist movements (or at least the leaders of such) have, of course, been utterly reactionary and/or have ferociously repressed or denied some of the most basic human rights of those within and without the socio-political and/or territorial boundaries that define their particular national groups—something of which Mann is undoubtedly aware. While the principle of national self-determination in a world divided into nation-states is important—in and of itself and as a means for helping to redress profoundly unequal power relations between peoples and countries—it comes into conflict with efforts to create a world beyond national allegiances. But because Mann does not address such matters, the author leaves the reader in the dark as to what he sees as the tensions inherent in a strategy based on support for national self-determination struggles, the ultimate goal of which, it would seem, is to create a radical *internationalism* that seeks to erase material differences embodied by the categories of race, class, and, indeed, nation, which, along with gender, form the very foundation for global inequality. In that regard, it would have been helpful had Mann offered his reflections on what the 1960s might have shown to be the dilemmas presented by the antiracist, anti-imperialist Left strategy of progressive national self-determination that he champions. (It is thus worth putting into dialogue *Dispatches from Durban* with Max Elbaum’s outstanding *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che.*)

Mann overcomes these shortcomings when he turns to the concrete. In what is undoubtedly a highly inspiring and instructive portion of the book, he provides an overview of the work of the Los Angeles-based Labor Community Strategy Center—a “think tank/act tank” for which he serves as director—and its principle organizing effort, the Bus Riders Union (BRU). Here, Mann reveals himself to be, in addition to a brilliant strategist and tactician, a pragmatist of the best sort—one who knows how to give concrete expression to one’s ideals while remaining true to one’s ideological convictions. The BRU, a vibrant grassroots group in which working class people of color play a leading role, for example, has reshaped the debate in Los Angeles about public

transportation while highlighting the racist and classist nature of publicly funded transit. In doing so, it has realized a number of concrete and significant victories for the city's public transportation-dependent population. At the same time, the BRU has engaged in consciousness-raising work on the Palestinian struggle as part of its organizing efforts.

The Strategy Center has decided to make work around the United Nations an important component of its organizing agenda, something Mann feels Left groups throughout the United States need to do. The organization's next project—a Climate Justice/Global Warming campaign that grew out of its participation in the U.N. preparatory meeting in Bali—flows from this commitment. The project will focus on Los Angeles bus riders and highlight the links between racism, various respiratory and other illnesses and auto and factory emissions. It will also explain how these same emissions generate greenhouse gases that create great hardship for many Third World countries, threatening the very existence of some small island nations. “This experiment will, of necessity,” Mann predicts, “bring Bus Rider Union members into a direct collision course with the oil and auto industries and will require international cooperation with public health and environmental justice groups around the world.”

In discussing such efforts, Eric Mann gives exciting substance to his more abstract analysis and strategizing. Combined with a long, final, and interesting chapter on the strategic challenges facing the anti-racist Left in the post-9/11 era, Mann provides a bold, hope-infused vision. By doing so, he provides a foundation for what he characterizes as “a movement that does not yet exist,” one struggling to be born—and one desperately needed at a time when the Democratic and Republican establishments openly embrace empire and willingly employ horrific violence to further their imperialist project.

While Mann's prose is, on a few occasions, overly polemical, it is very compelling overall. Taken together, the various aspects of this ambitious and highly readable work make it an excellent Left resource. In this regard, it is unfortunate that it lacks a glossary and a list of key readings—especially for some of the more historically and politically loaded concepts it presents—thus limiting the book's use for facilitating further study.

But such matters do not at all alter the fact that Eric Mann's *Dispatches from Durban* is an extremely valuable and important book, one that all Leftists need to engage and debate as part of the struggle to find and build the answer to one of the central questions facing the world today: What do we do about the United States?

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