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Control Freakery at the UK ESF . . . . . 1



# Control Freakery at the UK ESF

By Laura Sullivan

The organisational chaos that engulfed London's European Social Forum this October is by now legendary. The SWP-SA dominated Coordinating Committee, with its centralist and doctrinaire practices, has a lot to answer for. Laura Sullivan, writing in the weeks before the event, gives a behind the scenes account of the process, laying special emphasis on the role of culture

Tensions and developments coalescing around the cultural elements of London's European Social Forum this October are emblematic of the power struggles that have blighted the UK-ESF organising process from the start. The emergence of equivalent factions had already occurred at the Paris ESF in the fall of 2003. The UK-ESF saw, on the one side, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Greater London Authority (GLA) contingent, who lobbied hard and ultimately successfully for London to get the bid for 2004. On the other, members of the London Social Forum<sup>1</sup> and other grassroots organisations, who argued that 2005 was a more feasible target date. From the first UK meetings in the winter of 2003, members of the SWP and the more secretive Socialist Action party, firmly ensconced within the offices of the GLA, demonstrated principles and behaviour far removed from the democratic consensus model espoused by the Porto Alegre Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum. At the first organising meeting held at the GLA (directly contravening the Charter's prohibition of meetings in state institutions), Redmond O'Neill, one of London mayor Ken Livingstone's right-hand men at the GLA and prime mover within Socialist Action, outraged the grassroots activists in attendance by unilaterally 'declaring all working groups (e.g., practicalities, programme, accommodation) to be hereby abolished.'

Significantly, after O'Neil's nullifying announcement, the Culture Working Group (CWG), uniquely continued to meet. A hybrid of independent activist-artists, and a few SWP members, the CWG managed to maintain a civil and productive relationship through the winter months, while in every other area of UK-ESF organising the SWP-SA wreaked havoc, offending everyone, and causing most of the grassroots left to leave the process entirely. I know from personal experience that the way these folks sought to control the meetings and policies was eerily and frustratingly Stalinesque.

From the start, it was clear that the SWP-SA stronghold had visions of an ESF which marginalised cultural and artistic endeavours, particularly those with a more explicit anti-capitalist perspective. This stance reflected the increasingly obvious reformist agenda of these groups, who sought to use the ESF to advance their party platforms and to heighten the profiles of their 'star' players – not only the GLA's Livingstone, who was significantly up for re-election in June 2004, but also the SWP-heavy Respect coalition's George Galloway, now on the programme as a plenary speaker. This same ethos was evident in O'Neil and company's repeated refrain equating 'culture at the ESF' with a 'big rally in Trafalgar Square with Ms. Dynamite'. Hostility and disdain for cultural or artistic projects with any substantive content was revealed at a 25 March 2004 meeting of the Coordinating Committee (another SWP-SA formation that in actuality functioned as a 'central committee', making all decisions in lieu of the larger, less frequent Organising Committee meetings, where CC decisions would be 'reported'). Two representatives of the Brazilian-based Mosaico de Livros – Biblioteca Social Mundial (Mosaic of Books – World Social Library) requested time at the upcoming Birmingham OC meeting, but when O'Neill called their project 'irrelevant', all at once we were expected to go along with the idea that showing a WSF-sponsored film at an OC meeting was ludicrous. In April 2004, the unilateral control of all cultural production and information continued, with SA insistence that no one outside of the SA-SWP alliance be allowed to participate in the production or design of the official website (which ultimately cost over £40,000). Not surprisingly, when discussions about UK-ESF graphics and logos began, instead of open calls for contributions or invitations for anyone outside of the hallowed circle

of power to make suggestions, SWP member Noel Douglas was appointed to create preliminary designs for the logo for the website and ESF publicity.

Meanwhile, another group of artists/activists were gathering to put together events making culture and art central to the ESF. Calling themselves the European Creative Forum (ECF), by early spring of 2004 the group was completely uninterested in participating in the official ESF organising process, while the CWG was still working within the official framework. At the end of March, members of both groups met to discuss their joint participation in the first of the European Creative Forums, planned for the second Saturday of each month from April through to the ESF. In total contrast to the chaos and ill will characterising official ESF meetings dominated by the SA-SWP faction, this planning session saw close to 30 people treating each other with respect and encouragement, bubbling over with energy and creativity. Held at the squatted artists' warehouse Area 10 in Peckham, London, the first ECF on 10 April 2004 was especially designed to give the CWG a boost. It kicked off with a Creatives Assembly, where 60 artists and activists of all hues gathered to share ideas about collaborative projects to launch in the run-up to or during ESF. Performance artists, shamanic poets, painters, independent film-makers, dj's, peaceniks, singers, drummers, rappers, new media 'geeks', digital artists, actors – the sheer range of interests and talents of the people attending was staggering. A huge success, the April ECF was attended by more than 450 people from all sectors of political, activist, artistic, and grassroots organisations, including people from the local community of Peckham.

Without doubt, the scale and success of the first European Creative Forum hit the SWP-SA's radar; several SWP members were sent to investigate the second ECF in May. In the Creatives Assembly, they denied what they called 'false rumours' of the tensions surrounding the organising meetings. Recognising the blatant lies of these SWPers, no one – including those non-aligned independents, aka 'horizontals', who had been fighting for democracy in the organising process for months – was fooled by the SWP's attempts to do 'damage control' and limit the participation of the ECF in the larger ESF itself. Their snide remarks in the breaks at the event, slugging it off as 'hippy bullshit', for example, did nothing to boost their credibility.

At a CWG meeting to choose the group who would vet programme proposals involving 'culture', SWP members made sure their pet people, such as Douglas, were selected, and specifically insisted that they would 'only allow one "horizontal" to be on this committee' of four. This directive was in keeping with all previous behaviour of the SWP-SA faction, in which they attempted to keep 'horizontals' out of all working groups and the office staff. Their overall strategy was to control every aspect of the UK-ESF organising process so as to make the event itself a combination of SWP recruitment rally and GLA/Ken Livingstone photo-op. They sought to control both participation and information at all levels. For example, without consensus or consultation of anyone else involved, they held unannounced 'outreach' meetings for particular groups, such as 'women' or 'refugees', and always, again, at the GLA. This proprietary attitude was exemplified by SA member Milena Buyum who, at a gathering of programme working group members at the Birmingham OC meeting, blurted, 'I'm in charge of the black groups – I don't want anyone else contacting them or having meetings with them.' For the SWP and SA, sectors are objectified pieces to be moved around on a chessboard.

ESF graphic material produced by Douglas also reflects the entrenched SWP agenda infiltrating every aspect of the organising process. The logos and leaflets are not only atrociously designed, they are also uncannily and disturbingly reminiscent of SWP/Respect Coalition party graphics with their rainbow colour schemes. The imagery is as visually illiterate as it is politically problematic: on the publicity leaflet's cover, the unthinking adoption of the colonialist Mercator projection clashes tellingly with the slogan, 'another world is possible', an insulting juxtaposition betraying an underlying naivety and conservatism. And the fold-out poster inside features a collage of people marching in protest, the requisite 'diversity' of the composite crowd emphatically apparent, waving generic, deliberately

unidentifiable multi-coloured flags.

Similarly, the language of the publicity material imports SWP concerns and terminology wholesale, featuring phrases that were shoved down the throats of the horizontally minded participants at programme group meetings throughout the spring. Instead of overtly anti-neoliberal or anti-capitalist slogans, we get 'for global justice' and 'against privatisation'. The more radical and politically substantive language of the original calls for ESF participation has been so watered down or distorted as to completely diverge from the intent of the social forums themselves, as expressed in the Charter of Principles. Criticisms of preceding European and World Social Forums include debates about whether these efforts are inherently reformist and complicit with capital, especially given the heavy involvement of NGOs and state structures, or whether they help move forward anti-capitalist efforts. While subject to these same criticisms, the UK-ESF organising process has been hijacked in an even more vicious and politically reactionary manner.

The status of the cultural and artistic aspects of the ESF is still very troubled. An email in August requested that people check the official website for their cultural proposal – apparently, they'd lost some of the original ones. (Such ineptitude has been pervasive, another by-product of the unfortunate SWP-SA control freakery characterising the organising process.) Now, less than two weeks before the ESF itself, there is still no finalised cultural programme online and the online registration system of the expensively procured website has been plagued with problems. Is it any wonder that now, as the October weekend of the ESF approaches, we are being told that while many proposals for provocative and powerful artistic and cultural events and workshops have been accepted, there is no money to provide the technical or other infrastructure needed to put on most of these events? And given the completely undemocratic history of the UK-ESF organising process, is it surprising that much of the vibrancy of cultural efforts and artistic productions will be channelled into the alternative spaces of the ESF instead of the overpriced, badly organised official event?

#### LINKS

official UK-ESF site <http://www.fse-esf.org/>

alternative UK-ESF site <http://www.esf2004.net>

horizontals' 'Call for Democracy'

[http://esf2004.net/en/tiki-read\\_article.php?articleId=6](http://esf2004.net/en/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=6)

WSF Charter of Principles <http://www.wsfindia.org/charter.php>

ECF <http://www.europeancreativeforum.org/>

Mosaic of Books [http://pwweb2.procempa.com.br/pmpa/Mosaico\\_Livro/](http://pwweb2.procempa.com.br/pmpa/Mosaico_Livro/)

Area 10 <http://interoperable.org.uk/area10/Xoops206/html/modules/news/>

#### FOOTNOTES

1 Complementing the World and Regional Social Forums, local chapters such as the London Social Forums meet regularly and organise political events

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