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The People's Movement Assembly & the Southern Movement Assembly Rising: A conversation with Stephanie Guilloud & Emery Wright of Project South

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Rose Brewer and Walda Katz-Fishman interviewed Stephanie Guilloud and Emery Wright of Project South: Institute for the Elimination of Poverty & Genocide on September 27, 2013. Stephanie and Emery have been organizing and helping anchor the Peoples Movement Assembly (PMA) process and the Southern Movement Assembly (SMA) during and since the 2007 US Social Forum in Atlanta, GA when Project South served as the first anchor. As some readers will know, the People's Movement Assemblies are a key part of the next U.S. Social Forum. USSF organizers are supporting PMAs around the country as we build towards our national convergence in the next USSF. The purpose of the PMAs is to help us move beyond simply converging in national forums to building more political cohesion among social movements in this country and around the world. We hope this account will help others gain insights into this organizing method and encourage groups to host and participate in PMAs.

Rose & Walda: The day we spoke, Stephanie and Emery were summing up the very intense and powerful year for the SMA – three convergences moving forward the work of building a Southern movement for transformation, and the Walk for Dignity from Jacksonville to Sanford in response to the horrific murder of Trayvon Martin and the innocent verdict for his killer, George Zimmerman. The good news was that Marissa Alexander, a mother and young African American woman, had just been granted a new trial for “standing her ground” in self-defense – one of the key demands of the SMA and Walk for Dignity. (See www.southtosouth.org)

Stephanie:

This was a huge win. It shows the impact and what is possible with collective work. The fall 2013 plans are how to carry this momentum forward.

R & W: In preparing for the US Social Forum and PMA process over the next three years – 2014 to 2016 – Stephanie and Emery emphasized not just showing up, but the political, relational and organizational preparation, the building process, and the political will that grounds the work. Foundational to the organizing process is the before, during, and after assembly work that informs and makes possible transformative movement building for the long haul. There is a need for movements to converge. There is the need to build a clear organizing process. A key question is how people are preparing to come together to make it happen. How do we bring people into the work – develop the political will. And, there are multiple levels on how to do it: communities, organization to organization, across geographies, assembly to assembly, multiple streams of entry.

Background, history & methodology for the People's Movement Assembly

Stephanie: The US Social Forum original planning process always embodied the purpose of moving toward converging and strengthening US social movements in relation to global social movements. Ruben (Solis) from Southwest Workers Union (SWU) and now the *University Sin Fronteras* brought experience with the Social Movements Assembly of the World Social Forum (WSF) and global movement processes to the USSF.

Politically we made the connection between converging social movement forces and also creating the space for deeper analysis and ways of moving forward together. What was the method? How would we do this? Where within communities do multiple organizations come together, or build across space for a National PMA across fronts of struggle? (These questions informed the first PMA at USSF 2007).

2007 opened this space. The Peoples Movement Assembly at the first US Social Forum collected over 50 resolutions for action and showed a hunger for coming together, not just to share stories and work but to put forth a political action agenda. So how did we learn from our experience in 2007? In 2008 we focused on our vision and building the process out.

In 2009 we helped facilitate the PMA organizing process leading into 2010. We supported 40 to 50 PMAs going into the Detroit social forum – where folks worked to facilitate community governance and bring local groups together. 50 PMAs happened at USSF2. We coordinated the PMA Working Group and created the *PMA Organizing Kit*. (See www.peoplesmovementassembly.org for the kit and additional information.)

We are learning from this experience how to continue to grow organizational, community, and movement forces. These require different kinds of tools. The vision of the social forum is to reflect a social movement that is growing on all different fronts across the country. The PMA offers a methodology of how to do this.

The new practice we developed in 2010 at the USSF was the synthesis of all the assemblies. It was a difficult process, but successful. At the National PMA the last day of USSF2 we presented and adopted the *Synthesis Statement* and a set of actions.

The big evolution in 2010 was the synthesis assembly. It represented a process to converge the collective thinking of over 50 Assemblies happening during the Forum. Synthesis allows groups to evolve community spaces and movement spaces beyond issue and sector to generate new knowledge and analysis that grows our movement force.

After the USSF in 2010 the Assembly of Assemblies continued to grow, even with no date set for USSF3. So 2010 and 2011 represented the “after” plan. As co-facilitators of the PMA process, SWU and Project South organized annual Assemblies of Assemblies in 2011 and 2012 and gathered groups that were using the process. These national assemblies shared best practices, evolved the process, and produced action plans and coordination. This coordination of the PMA process was born out of the social forum process. At the same time, PMA coordination was happening in relation to community governance, working within particular fronts of struggle, and broader movement coordination and governance.

As the PMA process developed over the period from 2007 to now, we identified three important interrelated, but distinct strands of the bigger process:

1. community governance and self-determination,
2. bringing together various actors and forces around specific fronts of struggle,
3. broad movement governance process

Additionally, PMAs are organized in direct relationship to converging and preparing movement forces for the next USSF.

How does the SMA methodology express the PMA methodology? How does this distinguish itself from other forms of moving forward?

Emery: Project South co-led the coordination of all these strands nationally in 2010 and 2011. But in 2011 we asked what does Project South want to develop with this process? We took up several organizing projects: 1. concentrating on work with our partners to develop community governance and organizational capacity, 2. focusing on the front of struggle around state repression and criminalization of Blacks and immigrants, and 3. creating space for Southern movement governance.

Many of our partners had been using the PMA process to organize and converge along different frontlines. For example, one of our partners SONG (Southerners on New Ground) did a powerful Queer PMA at the 2010 US Social Forum, and we collaborated to facilitate one in January 2012 at the Creating Change conference. Gulf Coast organizations used the process to converge and develop strategies to advance Climate Justice before and after the BP Oil Spill in 2010 and just a few weeks ago in Mobile Alabama. Also, since 2007 at the Peoples Family Reunion (at the first USSF), the Ordinary Peoples Society (TOPS) has been co-facilitating a national assembly process with the Formerly Incarcerated and Convicted Peoples Movement.

So we initiated building the Southern Movement Assembly (SMA) as a movement governance process. It was decentralized, but coordinated. And the organizing process has encouraged community governance and decision making in the South.

This can happen anywhere to build movement momentum and fronts of struggle.

We want to share the SMA as a working example of Southern movement governance process. For Project South, the SMA is a model of how to use the PMA process in our core work in the South.

Our work in the South is located within the Southern history of movement struggle. Other regions – like the Pacific Northwest or the Southwest Border, may be very different. Work needs to be contextualized within these different local, regional, and front of struggle realities.

We have also supported the process by sharing the assembly methodology with networks such as Free Minds Free People for their national gathering. The Assembly is often a productive process for existing conference and convergence spaces.

It takes work and experience to relate across organizations and across fronts of struggle. It's important to recognize that there are many entry points between and among organizations and people who are participating in long term movement building processes.

The SMA is a long term effort and collaboration among partners who have been working together for years – from the Southeast Social Forum in 2006 through the 2010 USSF and the ongoing assembly process.

We developed SMA principles and best practices that are important to our collaborative work. Key principles include: ***Respecting individual organizations' and communities' self-determination*** – and establishing agreements at the outset that organizations can opt out or self-define their participation. This is critical so organizations are not being absorbed into the larger process and become invisible.

Trusting that the organizations and folks that the PMA brings together will actually develop a plan of action that all will support.

The SMA is cumulative in terms of relationships, knowledge, and work. It is a convergence space with challenges and strengths.

There are several steps to building toward governance. The first layer is organizing and making it happen. Then, what does it mean to be an anchor? We spelled this out at the third assembly: Name the work. Name the goal – what does it take to put the plan into action? And developing commitment to action – to facilitate and to move the assembly work before, during and after.

The role of anchors is key. SMA governance is meaningful here. There is a governing circle of anchors who have built political trust. Organizations get to the governing circle by work and building political trust. Some organizations have not worked together, so this takes time.

Being part of the governance council or movement council is all based on common work. All organizations hold pieces of the assembly work. We represent particular sets of work based on a collective division of labor. The practice grows trust. Ongoing big questions we are tackling include: What is required to anchor movement? What is the work in this moment? What does it mean to develop movement synthesis, facilitation, and governance? What does it mean to build political will and trust? These are big projects.

It is important to note that ***Assembly work happens before, during, and after the assembly and the social forum.***

The before, during and after process involves many components.

- Organizing the assembly – identifying and bringing organizations together, planning the assembly, logistics, communications, technology, and program.
- Facilitation of the assembly – planning the agenda, developing materials, and implementing it.
- Building long term relationships leading to collective action.
- Leadership throughout the process, but especially who takes on the after plan.
- Leadership of the action and coordination work after. If leadership is not invested in the after plan before the PMA happens, then the assembly and movement building process falls off.

Lessons for the National USSF PMA process

R& W: Steph and Emery observed that the national process of coordination is difficult and challenging.

Stephanie& Emery: We can offer the process, talk through it, and urge organizations to use the assembly practice as movement vehicles and methodologies. But it is still difficult. We must think through how we coordinate across efforts. We have to think about and use strong benchmarks when factors and forces are not aligned. There must be different entry points, and that is part of what people should co-create.

At the center of the People's Movement Assembly process is a deep commitment to movement building. There is a wide arc which begins with an organizing sensibility extending into the PMA itself and continuing afterwards as the organizations move forward for deeper change. This captures the strategy and spirit of the

Southern Movement Assembly. The work has occurred in an open and facilitative space. The regional history and shared political direction has contributed to the work.

- **ESPAÑOL**