

About the Russian Social Forum

The second Russian Social Forum took place from Jul 13-16 as part of a Counter-summit against G8 in Saint-Petersburg.

Despite the severity of reprisals (around 300 people preventatively arrested in their local regions or on their way to Saint-Petersburg, around 200 people arrested in Saint-Petersburg) and the disproportionate police response, the participants of the Counter-summit proved that a resistance movement does exist, and that Russia is very much a police state.

Around 1500 participants signed up for the Russian Social Forum (RSF). 500 people participated in the protest, organized by the Communist party of Russia; hundreds took part in events organized by the "anti G8 network". Although modest, these Counter-summit stats are significant.

The Counter-summit and of course the Russian Social Forum reveal the movement's dynamic and its desire to unite and act, in spite of its relative weakness. What emerges is a political alternative. July 14, the first day of RSF, was a perfect example of this. The discussions and seminars touched upon all the questions in the program: energy security, educational reform, the nature of alterglobalism, the campaign for the right to housing, the war in Tchetchenia, culture. Most of the seminars ended with the adoption of a resolution and campaign plan. In some cases, the discussions led to the creation of new movements (Russian temporary housing movement, Movement for housing, etc.). Of course, the absence of various influential people and the oppressive police presence in the stadium slowed progress. Also, it was of no help that certain political factions opted to keep out of proceedings. Nevertheless, the overall outcome was positive, with decisions taken that will help solidify the social movement in its diversity.

The Soviets Coordination Union (SKS) had their fourth conference on July 13, the evening before the opening of the RSF. It had been formed a year earlier during the Russian Social Forum by committees of different regions, to fight against the reduction in social advantages that benefit various groups (retired people, disabled people, etc.). Today, the movement exists in 24 regions and continues to expand and diversify, with the primary focus being on housing rights. A coalition that refuses to associate with any political party, the SKS has been subject to OPA from political organisations, nearly causing internal divisions. But after heated debate, the SKS has emerged stronger than ever. It has increased the number of participating regions to 24 and founded a "work group", putting the most well-known leaders in charge of coordinating future events.

In the morning of July 15th, the plenary assembly provided evidence of the participants' willingness to fight. Participants had adopted a motion denouncing repression and affirming complete solidarity with the arrested activists. After the assembly, the Counter-summit participants sought an opportunity to exercise their right to protest. In spite of the protest ban, participants gathered with banners and flags to show that they still intended to occupy the space between the Kirov stadium and the Aurora cruiser. However, despite their determination, they did not succeed in breaking the barriers of the OMON, mainly because they were not able to meet and combine forces with the protest organized by the Russian Communist Party (this protest had seen violent clashes with the police). In spite of their efforts, the participants did not manage to leave the stadium, chanting slogans such as "Russia is not a prison" and "Free the imprisoned activists". There were no arrests during this protest, thanks to the composure and good behaviour of the participants. However, 30 participants in the Russian Communist Party's protest were taken in for questioning, amongst them Ilya Ponomarev, leader of the Left Front, as well as Sergei Udaltsob, leader of the Avant garde of Red Youth.

The initiatives and events continued the following day. Early on the morning of July 16th several dozen members of the "anti G8 network" organized a sit-in at Nevski Prospekt [the city's main road]. Thirty-seven people were taken in for questioning. Amongst them were not only Russian citizens, but also Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Polish, Bulgarians, Germans, and Brits. Another protest, against the war in Tchetchenia, also led to arrests. At the end of the evening, police stopped a march of anarchist protesters dressed as clowns on Vassilievski Island. Some arrests were made. Legal Team, an organisation that provides legal aid to detained activists and to victims of unlawful arrest, was overwhelmed by the extent of the repression.

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