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### A RIGHTS-BASED UNDERSTANDING OF THE ANTI-GLOBALISATION MOVEMENT

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1. Where does the human rights agenda end and the anti-globalisation agenda begin? How do the two influence and mutually constitute each other? The term “anti-globalisation” is itself a misnomer. It would be more accurate to view this medley of activists and organisations as fighting *for* social and economic rights and justice, rather than *against* globalisation. While it is true that “globalisation”, broadly speaking, has served as a rallying point for the “anti-globalisation” movement, we must unpack these terms in order to address them comprehensively. Otherwise, we risk reducing both these powerful and complex forces to mere caricatures. Further, in order to fully appreciate the import of the anti-globalisation movement for the international human rights movement, we must unpack our understanding of “universal human rights” as well. This paper is organised along three sections.<sup>1</sup> Section one attempts to situate the anti-globalisation movement in context, and explores its place and impact in the international arena. Specifically, it will address the following questions: What are the most important characteristics of the anti-globalisation movement? In what respects is it “new” and itself “global” (or representative of global opinion)? What are its organisational, political and intellectual strengths and weaknesses?
2. Section two seeks to examine the relevance of the anti-globalisation campaigns for human rights advocacy. Questions of especial interest to human rights activists and scholars include: To what extent can the demands of the movement be articulated in human rights terms? What are the tensions between traditional human rights advocacy and the campaigning approach adopted by the anti-globalisation protesters? Where would greater understanding of particular human rights, or measures for their realisation, assist in addressing current weaknesses in the anti-globalisation movement?

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<sup>1</sup> The authors are grateful to Volkhart Finn Heinrich for his contribution to understanding the effects of September 11<sup>th</sup> on the progressive movement, and to Siddharth Bannerjee for his contribution to assessing the state of the ‘anti-globalisation movement’.

3. Section three will address a question, which has emerged in the context of our transformed political and social landscape since the attacks on civilian populations and targets in the United States (US), and the ensuing regional war in Afghanistan. Thus, the question of how the current international crisis (post September 11) is likely to affect the growth and direction of the anti-globalisation movement is both of academic and tactical urgency, and one with crucial implications for human rights work.
4. The recognition that this is a transformed international moment has increased citizens' sense of insecurity all over the world. Yet, in a curious way, this moment also offers us the opportunity to unpack certain concepts and action-agendas, which we have taken for granted to the extent that they are in danger of losing their relevance and critical edge. This paper is a modest contribution to the timely discussions called for by the International Council on Human Rights Policy.

### HOW "GLOBAL" IS THE ANTI-GLOBALISATION MOVEMENT ?

5. It is true that the activists, trade unionists, environmentalists, lobbyists, farmers, feminists, anarchists, disenchanted students and curious onlookers who converge regularly at international trade and economic forums, and annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank are opposed to globalisation? They speak and demonstrate against growing multinational corporate power, inadequate safeguards against currency fluctuations, falling labour and health-care standards as represented by the conditions of sweatshop workers worldwide, and the severe, sometimes irreversible, ecological damages wreaked by the failed "development" projects of past decades. They are opposed, as well, to the cultural globalisation, or the spread of a Hollywood style mono-culturalism, as represented by name brands, products and services such as Nike, Starbucks, Coca Cola, and McDonald's.
6. By now, they have made it quite clear what they are *against*. Somewhere in the din of media coverage, and of protesters clashing with police, we seem to have missed out on an important message. These protesters are *for* social and economic rights, as well as the right to livelihood, health, and sanitary and safe environments. They are united in their stand that globalisation is creating losers and winners, and intensifying inequality within and across societies. Given the choice, these activists would, perhaps, reverse the process of not just economic globalisation, but also the cultural globalisation, wherein Western, specifically American tastes and preferences, are marketed under the assumption that they must, naturally, appeal to people everywhere.
7. International monetary, trade or economic forums, which in the past elicited little or no attention, are now drawing hundreds of thousands of anti-globalisation activists. Although the Ministerial Summit of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), held in Seattle in November 1998, is now considered a watershed (referred to simply as 'Seattle'), there have been other comparable demonstrations. The J18 protests, timed with the G8 Economic Summit in Cologne, six months prior to Seattle, and the A16 protests at the World Bank annual meeting, held six months after Seattle, are just two examples. Subsequent governmental and inter-governmental forums have been affected by protests at Prague, Quebec City, Chiang Mai and Genoa.
8. This activism is directed, first, against "big business" – multinational corporate power – and second, against "big money" – global agreements on economic growth. Allegations of exploitative labour practices and human rights abuses reach back to the late 1980s, when a number of corporations producing major brand name products, such as Nike sneakers, Gap jeans, and Starbucks coffee, were accused of union-busting, sweatshop-working conditions, and child labour practices on a global scale. Among other well-known multinationals, McDonalds, Monsanto, Wal-Mart, Mattel, Disney, and Shell and Chevron oil companies were picked out on similar charges. The range of alleged violations covers a broad spectrum: unacceptably low

wages, zero or minimal health benefits for workers, depleting old-growth and rain forests, using unsafe pesticides, bio-engineering agricultural crops, violating animal rights, and colluding with oppressive regimes.<sup>2</sup>

9. These anti-corporate protests are now being supplemented by stern criticisms and demonstrations against the WTO, IMF and the World Bank, seen primarily as facilitators of uninhibited corporate power, which is slowly eroding state sovereignty. Although several observers are calling for a moderated view of capitalism – in light of the fact that it has created more jobs, and greater technological innovation and economic prosperity in many communities around the world – it is now quite apparent that these protests are aimed at the very core of a capitalist philosophy, which seemingly ignores the social welfare of individuals, and destroys cultures and the environment in the quest for growth and profit.
10. In any event, the phenomenon of anti-globalisation protest has been quite intriguing to the mainstream press. Even leading magazines with impressive mainstream niche such as TIME, have deemed this phenomenon worthy of research and analysis. It must be noted however, that there is very little consensus on any final assessments. One of the most notable characteristics of the anti-globalisation movement is its diversity, having been described as “multi-generational, multi-class, and multi-issue”.<sup>3</sup> This diversity also applies to the tone and nature of the protests. While a large proportion of activists engage in marches and other peaceful forms of protest, there are also fringe elements, which use more violent forms of demonstration, including arson. One relatively small, but visible protest element is the militant anarchist faction, often identified as the *Black Bloc* (based in North America)<sup>4</sup>. Considered to be exponents of a virtually defunct philosophy, anarchists received a fillip for their cause in 1995, when the American ‘Unabomber’s’ manifesto was published. Paradoxically, the manifesto identified technology as a major source of the world’s ills, and called for the violent destruction of the system, especially the internet, which in large measure has contributed to promoting the anarchist message worldwide. Although some anarchists believe in more peaceful, moderate approaches, many defend the use of violence as the only means to achieve the classic anarchist society based on small, independent communities that function without leaders. Aside from being a sign of the heterogeneity of the ‘anti-globalisation’ bloc, violence in protests is also a source of much tension and divisiveness within the movement.
11. Along with the diversity, another, equally remarkable characteristic of the movement is the optimal use of innovative organising tactics and protest techniques. Gone are old-style gatherings confined to waving placards and banners, or controlled marches in specified locations. Reminiscent of the anti-war and anti-nuclearisation protests of the 1960s and 1970s, today’s activists use daring “direct action” methodologies that have given a whole new complexion to the nature of the demands. Thus, you can expect to find protesters chaining themselves to buildings or bridges, scaling walls, creating immovable street barricades through the use of chicken wire, PVC pipes and linked arms, and equipped with homely kerosene and vinegar-

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<sup>2</sup> In fact, the activism associated with these issues has put tremendous pressures on some of these companies to think seriously about their social responsibilities. The last ten years has consequently seen a major push on the part of many of these companies to change their business practices. These changes often fall short of the demands of activists, who dismiss them as public relations manoeuvres and window dressing. Yet, it is important to note that several civil society organisations have reached out to these companies to work with them to advance their social responsibility track records. The partnership between Care International and Starbucks Coffee is one such example. Several companies now concede that it makes good business to ensure that they have a certain minimum social responsibility record and that their reputational capital and their relationship capital, was linked into their overall business success. As western consumers began to learn more quickly and easily about appalling working conditions in developing countries, they began to exhibit their willingness to punish companies which had a bad social responsibility record and reward those that were trying to be more ethical.

<sup>3</sup> Time, 26 April 2000, p.21.

<sup>4</sup> David Samuels, “Notes from the Underground”, Harper’s Magazine, May 2000, p.37.

soaked rags for anti-tear gas and anti-pepper spray purposes. The internet, together with electronic gadgets such as cell phones, has breathed new life into the movement by increasing speed of communication, and mobility of activists. Thanks to the internet, individuals and groups are now able to cement alliances, recruit members, share experiences, establish meeting dates, accept responsibilities, arrange logistics, and initiate a myriad other taskings that would have been impossible to manage readily and rapidly in the past. International protests and demonstrations can be organised for the same date and time, so that multiple events can take place in concert, for added impact. The internet also minimises the need for centralised command and control, resources and bureaucracy of any sort.

12. As mentioned earlier, the organising tactics are also becoming more fluid, innovative, and supporters would argue, more democratic. In anticipation of large international gatherings, affinity groups are typically formed across the world, as a means of networking among like-minded individuals and organisations. Roles and responsibilities, as well as logistical details such as food and accommodation at the designated protest venue, are all negotiated through these affinity groups and clusters.
13. Financial and material support for these activities, partly self-generated and partly raised by contributions from interested parties, is fundamentally a matter of initiative and imagination. Again, the internet comes to the rescue by serving as a fast, simple and inexpensive fundraising vehicle. Many participants make their own way to demonstration sites, securing their own transportation, food, and accommodation. Frequently, attendees share their capabilities and facilities and are assisted by like-minded groups and individuals at the demonstration location. Some funding originates with large and better-known protest organisations such as Direct Action Network and the Alliance for Global Justice.<sup>5</sup> Protesters attending demonstrations considered to be in the interest of labour are often provided with funds, transportation, meals, and lodging by labour unions and affiliated groups. In fact, this is the closest approximation to “organised” support for this growing movement.
14. And what about the notable weaknesses of the movement? The first to be singled out is the presence of violent elements, be it on the fringes or at the forefront. They are usually the most likely to be covered by media, and projected into living rooms through unforgettable television images. Thus, the message(s) is often lost to sensational action and sensational media coverage. Second, although the anti-globalisation movement is truly diverse and multi-generational, the visible presence of youngsters is (rather unfairly) causing the protests to be dismissed as youthful and therefore immature flights of fancy. Thirdly, it has been noted that these protests, until now, have been primarily Anglophone in focus. The internet makes it easier to network in English and to a lesser extent, in other major international languages; thus, certain cultural aspects are not receiving attention because of prioritisation of social and economic rights (for instance, dozens of world languages and dialects are becoming extinct as a direct result of globalisation<sup>6</sup>).
15. If we were to judge the effectiveness of these protests, it would be a far more difficult call than identifying its strengths and weaknesses. In recent times, governmental and inter-governmental meetings have been cancelled or shut down, and venues have been selected with the intention of pre-empting protest (the choice of Qatar, which made no apologies for restricting freedom of movement and association, is particularly notable). Locale certainly influences the effectiveness - or even possibility - of dissent. North America and Europe are more likely to witness such activity, since a majority of the targeted meetings are scheduled there. Prominent locales such as London, Paris, New York, Berlin, Vienna or Prague are attractive to delegates, media and protesters alike, as were Washington and Seattle. Within relatively easy travel distance even for Trans-Atlantic journeys, they are readily accessible, offer a range of amenities, and possess

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<sup>5</sup> Time. 26 April 2000, p.21.

<sup>6</sup> The Economist. December 22<sup>nd</sup> 2001 – January 4<sup>th</sup> 2002, pages 65-67.

excellent communications. Besides, such major international cities have a cachet that enhances the impact of media coverage and encourages the presence and extraordinary actions of demonstrators. Increased police presence can dampen protests, just as easily as they can aggravate them. As well, the lack of obvious achievement by principals during a preceding conference, such as failure to approve debt relief for poor countries may serve to mobilise thousands more protesters and trigger a wave of anger and outrage at subsequent events.

16. In conclusion, it must be emphasised that just as “globalisation” is itself not a new phenomenon (there have been several waves of “globalisation” or global trade, technology-transfers and cultural exchanges throughout recorded human history), the current anti-globalisation movement is not “new”. Neither is it “global” in the sense that it has a mandate from every nation and every community in the world. In fact, it would be accurate to call it a “transnational” movement with alliances, networks and solidarities, which extend beyond national borders, and in direct challenge to these political parameters.
17. That it is neither “new” nor “global” does not in anyway diminish the importance of the anti-globalisation movement. It is a significant and growing movement with implications for human-rights activists and policy-makers alike. It draws its legitimacy from the fact that the globalisation process itself does not enjoy broad consensus, and in fact has been rejected by millions of communities around the world, including several indigenous people, rural and pastoral groups, fisherfolks, women’s groups, working classes and others who do not quite constitute the “mainstream”. As with the anti-slavery campaign, women’s suffrage movement, anti-colonial movement, anti-apartheid struggle, campaign against death penalty and so on, the anti-globalisation movement (or the social and economic rights movement) is premised on a strong conception of rights, justice and equity, and is genuinely transnational in scope.

#### **HOW “UNIVERSAL” IS THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS? WHERE DO HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES MEET SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS ACTIVISTS?**

18. **Civil and Political Rights:** The rights of citizens to liberty and equality; sometimes referred to as first generation rights. Civil rights include freedom to worship, to think and express oneself, to vote, to take part in political life, and to have access to information. **Economic, Social, Cultural Rights:** Rights that concern the production, development, and management of material for the necessities of life. The right to preserve and develop one’s cultural identity. Rights that give people social and economic security, sometimes referred to as security-oriented or second generation rights. Examples are the right to food, shelter, and health care. **Environmental, Cultural, and Developmental Rights:** Sometimes referred to as third generation rights, these rights recognise that people have the right to live in a safe and healthy environment and that groups of people have the right to cultural, political, and economic development. (Human Rights Glossary)<sup>7</sup>
19. The legitimacy of social and economic rights activists (anti-globalisation movement) is frequently called into question, by sympathisers as well as critics of the movement. Yet, the legitimacy of human rights advocates and activists is no longer an issue. The idea that human beings everywhere are entitled to certain basic civil and political liberties, and protection against abuse by their governments, is now endorsed and enshrined in all international instruments, starting with the United Nations Charter. On these premises, it is perfectly credible for one human being to stand up in defence of the civil and political liberties of a fellow human being either within his/her own society, or some other part of the world. This is perhaps one of the greatest collective human achievements of the twentieth century, and constituted a paradigmatic shift within a state-centric world-view during the era of world wars. The notion of human rights,

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.hrusa.org/hrh-and-n/Part-5/6\\_glossary.htm](http://www.hrusa.org/hrh-and-n/Part-5/6_glossary.htm) (Human Rights USA)

articulated in the principles of the UN charter (due to the vigorous campaigning of NGO activists as well as prominent political and social elites, including Eleanor Roosevelt), and eventually in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), disrupted a flow of events based on the primacy of state sovereignty, and the sanctity of territorial borders. Suddenly, governments everywhere became accountable to a larger “international community”. So potent was the appeal of these values, that they were transported into the various national constitutions which were being framed in the era of decolonisation.

20. In subsequent decades, Amnesty International (AI), the first non-governmental human rights organisation to become a household name around the world, charged itself with making the UDHR a living document. It launched global appeals and campaigns to free “prisoners of conscience”, or persons who were illegally detained, often without fair trial, and in complete violation of their civil and political liberties. Not only has AI secured the release of tens of thousands of human beings, and reunited thousands of families, it has also raised consciousness and awareness about the notion of the rights-bearing citizen. In the process, it has frequently called into question the absolute powers of governments. Over the decades, AI has also come under attack for being over-focused on rights violations in the third world, at the risk of ignoring abusive practices in first world countries. The alarmingly high rates of death penalty in the US, and the fact that statistically the poor, black and mentally ill Americans were more likely to be executed, only augmented these criticisms. Partly in response to these criticisms, Amnesty published a report on the death penalty in the US in 1999.
21. However, it has been noted that AI’s (and this includes its sister human rights organisations) greatest strength and greatest weakness are its focus on first generation human rights, so called because civil and political rights were the first set of rights to qualify for international “protection”, and have been given primacy over social, economic and cultural rights. When seen in the context of fascism, Nazism and absolute state power which characterised the first half of the twentieth century, the focus on the civil and political rights of citizens is understandable. What is, however, curious is the recognition that first generation rights continue to be favoured over second and third generation rights, although most people agree that the former set of rights is incomplete, and even limiting in the current context of intensive globalisation.
22. It is unfortunate that any critique of the universality of human rights must be qualified, so as not to be interpreted as moral or cultural “relativism”. Fortunately, there are compelling arguments for a more sophisticated middle ground between the two positions; i.e. between a code of human rights which is upheld as “universal” although it arises from the particular historical experiences and liberal traditions of the West on the one hand, and an outright rejection of this code based on the explanation that “around here, we do things differently”.
23. Indeed, it would be perverse to reject the fundamental rights to life, free speech and freedom of association, and there are very few volunteers for this cause. Rather, what is being called into question is firstly, the incompleteness of the human rights discourse (by not accommodating the aspirations and demands of people belonging to postcolonial, post-apartheid and post-segregation societies), and secondly, the paradoxical exclusion of the right to livelihood, cultural protection and other social, economic and cultural rights from the core of the human rights canon. This paradox is illustrated rather effectively by Professors Grovogui and Keck in their paper “Terms of Endearment, Rules of Engagement”,

“Nonetheless, political theorists are mistaken when they assert that Western vernaculars of human rights, those arising from the American and French revolutions, are the only available references. The American and French revolutions conferred dignity and legitimacy upon a specific historical subject -- the individual and citizen -- initially recognized by *his* masculine and property owning status or political clout. Still, even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this construction of the bearer of rights did not exhaust the possibilities. Occurring twenty years later, the Haitian revolution moved beyond the notion of

human rights developed with the first two revolutions (both of which upheld slavery!) by affirming different parameters for human dignity. For the Haitian revolutionaries, the subject of rights was neither the bourgeois individual (US) nor the political active one who claimed citizenship (France). The black Haitian slave could aspire to neither position. Rather, the Haitian revolutionaries grounded dignity in an account of personhood -- an idea that by virtue of being human, anyone was a worthy subject, even if the person in question were propertyless, powerless, illiterate, and black.”<sup>8</sup>

24. In other words, the present notion of human rights - which is a legacy of Liberal western philosophical thought, mediated through specific historical events - is by no means exhaustive or even comprehensive. Nor is it the only model or template which was available. Without diminishing its importance in any way, we must nonetheless recognise that other traditions of human rights have never quite made their way to the mainstream in the same way as the current universal standard. When the UDHR was being drafted, much of the world was still colonised, blacks in the US did not have voting rights, women did not have voting rights in certain European countries, and indigenous rights were not even an agenda-item on the table. Yet, as these categories of human beings gained “freedom” and began demanding access to economic resources and social privileges denied until then, these aspirations were termed second generation rights, or social and economic rights. They are somehow not seen as constituting ‘human’ rights.
25. Scholars and civil society practitioners alike have been arguing for a more comprehensive view of human rights, which considers poverty, underdevelopment, loss of livelihood and so on as a human rights problem.<sup>9</sup> There are theoretical as well as strategic questions involved here. Should development and poverty be presented as a human rights issue, or should human rights be expanded to naturally include social, economic and cultural rights? Apart from this, there are tactical questions to be considered. Are human rights activists and social and economic rights (anti-globalisation) activists working at cross-purposes? Is this a false dichotomy? Can both camps mutually benefit from each other’s experiences and campaign tactics?
26. Clearly the onus for a mutually beneficial engagement is on human rights activists as well as social and economic rights activists. At a most basic level, it can be argued that civil and political rights alone do not guarantee the full potential of a citizen, or of good global governance. As CIVICUS and its sister CSOs have long advocated, citizen participation is not just about casting one’s vote every four or five years.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it signifies meaningful engagement in all aspects of public life – right from framing the public policy agenda to executing it. Further, we need a nuanced understanding of global governance. Human rights activism traditionally defended citizens from their own governments. Social and economic rights activists do not necessarily want the demise of the nation-state although they oppose unqualified state power or inter-governmental power. To the contrary, they actually favour a strong state, which can protect them from International Financial Institutions (IFIs) as well as a strong civil society which can hold the state accountable.
27. Social and economic rights activists, or anti-globalisation activists, have also been surprisingly resistant to packaging their agenda in a human rights framework. An acceptable rationale for this reluctance is the desire to maintain the distinctness of the issues – at the micro-level we have job security, healthy working conditions, health benefits and childcare, and at the macro-level, we have third world debt cancellation, and the demand for new models of development which are sustainable and respect biodiversity, and are strong enough to counter any detrimental policies of the WTO, World Bank and the IMF.

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<sup>8</sup> Siba N. Grovogui and Margaret E. Keck, Terms of Endearment, Rules of Engagement, presentation at the Conference on the Political Uses of Human Rights, Columbia University, New York, November 8-9, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Professor Fantu Cheru at American University, Washington DC, is one such scholar-practitioner who has published extensively on the need for adopting a human rights-based approach to the development policies of the UN, World Bank and the IMF.

<sup>10</sup> Kumi Naidoo and Rajesh Tandon (eds.), Civil Society at the Millennium (Connecticut: Kumarian Press, 2000).

28. The clarity of purpose, and the focus of these demands is a strength of the movement, but is also a weakness. Activists are frequently unable to step outside their precisely defined territorial interests, and converse with each other, much less with “others” such as human rights or anti-war activists. Recognising the underlying commonality in all these campaigns, and promoting cross-cutting dialogues and exchanges, is a pre-requisite for any sustained and successful engagement between those who are, after all, fighting for different aspects of human dignity.
29. We are aware that this recommendation would be nothing more than a “nice idea” unless it consciously factors in the global conditions within which we currently operate. While considering the convergence between a narrowly-defined human rights agenda, and broader social and economic rights, there are several factors which come into play. Here we will consider just two: power in international relations, and the role of media. Power differentials in international relations and the prerogative of “national interest”, account for the inconsistencies in foreign human rights policy practised by various countries. A commonly cited example is the fact that the US is willing to trade with China, a known nuclear power with one billion consumers, while it is unwilling to lift sanctions which are severely hurting Cuba. The ostensible reason for sanctions on Cuba, are human rights violations by the Communist government. However, by tolerating serious human rights abuses by the Chinese government, for strategic considerations, US foreign policy reveals its fundamental inconsistencies in upholding universal human rights.
30. The second factor is the large role played by popular media in shaping our understanding of such issues, and in providing us with access to relevant information. The electronic and print media is more finely tuned to “traditional” human rights issues or idiom. By contrast, it has been quite reticent in trying to understand the language and message of social and economic rights activists, seeking often to portray issues as “pro” or “con”, or “black and white”. To some extent, the media focus on *conflict* rather than *dialogue* at international gatherings, has been driving a wedge between human rights and social rights activists, apart from betraying an overall shallow understanding of complex issue that lie outside the mainstream.
31. In conclusion, it must be reiterated that the time is now ripe for a long overdue engagement of human rights activists with the social and economic rights activists. Ultimately, both sets of issues need each other to present a complete picture, and to explain many of the inconsistencies in international and national politics. Human rights activists have, over the course of four decades, made governments accountable to citizens, and have invented and perfected several advocacy and campaign tactics, which can benefit other global movements. Anti-globalisation activists, for their part have demonstrated that the focus on governments as the sole violators of human rights and dignity is no longer relevant to our times. For several decades now, non-state actors, especially multi-national corporations and international governmental organisations and international financial institutions, have been exercising inordinate amounts of influence in world politics, often colluding with repressive regimes, or themselves violating human rights norms. Thus, the social and economic rights movement has revealed, unintentionally perhaps, that human rights violations are no longer the prerogative of states. Thus, the human rights cachet has opened up to include diverse issues, such as the worst industrial disaster in history (the gas leak at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1985) caused by the multi-national chemical company, Union Carbide, as well as the social and ecological devastation caused by World-Bank sponsored large dams in the third world.
32. If it is at all possible to cast human rights activists and social and economic rights activists into two separate camps, then clearly they have much to offer to each other.

## WHAT BEARING DOES SEPTEMBER 11 HAVE ON THE ANTI-GLOBALISATION MOVEMENT AND THE HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA?

33. 9-11-2001 will forever be seared in our memories as the day that forcefully gave shape to the politics of the new millennium. The carnage in New York and elsewhere in the United States sent shock waves throughout the world, and rallied governments and people into action. Unfortunately this has left very little time for reflection. The space for critical reflection has been constrained by an unimaginative and dangerous dichotomy set up by US President George W. Bush, in his famous proclamation to the world, "If you're not with us, you're with them". The "us", of course refers to the US-led "global" coalition against terrorism, while "them" is a reference to the Al Qaeda network, and its affiliates around the world.<sup>11</sup> US mainstream media, which in turn fuelled mainstream public opinion, did not register the possibility of nuanced, alternative positions which condemn the loss of lives and the destruction caused by terrorism, as well as call into question past and present foreign policies of the US government and its allies, which have contributed to global conditions of alienation and mistrust.
34. In an atmosphere eerily reminiscent of the early years of the Cold War, many critical political and social issues in the US and elsewhere are now being subsumed under this new rubric of the global war against terrorism.<sup>12</sup> Other pressing questions have been short-shrifted, and pushed to the back-burner with frightening alacrity: these include the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, the crisis of legitimacy of public institutions around the world in the face of massive mobilisations against policies affecting citizens everywhere, collapsing economies in countries around the world, the Kyoto protocol and related environmental concerns, and of course the ever-present scourge of global poverty.
35. The world has definitely changed since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Apart from the scale of the September 11<sup>th</sup> and subsequent tragedies, what has truly transformed the international landscape is the realisation that the events of the day are so intricately, and gravely, tied to questions of foreign policy, human rights, social and economic rights, and the fates of cultures and communities around the world. This changed moment is being used to maximum advantage by world governments, rebel factions with power aspirations, as in the case of Afghanistan, as well as the very networks which perpetrated these terrorist acts. The effects of these sweeping changes are being felt by the average citizen, the larger transnational civil society, and more specifically by the anti-globalisation and the human rights movements.
36. Thanks to harsh legislation passed by governments around the world, particularly in the US, citizens (especially foreign nationals and those of Arab descent) are now more vulnerable than ever to wire-taps, breach of attorney-client privileges, arbitrary arrests, detentions, and trials by secret tribunals, if there is so much as a suspected association, however remote, with a "terrorist" network. The definition of "terrorist" network has itself become alarmingly loose, and now even includes non-violent groups opposed to specific government policies.
37. However, it is important to note that the threat to citizens is not confined to their civil and political rights. Not surprisingly, their social and economic rights are under threat as well. The global economy was teetering on the brink of a recession much before September 11<sup>th</sup>, and is now in danger of being pushed over the edge. Waves of worker layoffs with little or no compensation or promise of health benefits have affected worker morale and welfare. Several

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<sup>11</sup> You will notice that the observations in this section are primarily focused on the effects of September 11<sup>th</sup> as felt within the US, because of both the magnitude of the impact and the tremendous implications of US actions upon the global unfolding of the events.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, the World Conference against Racism, which had just concluded in Durban, four days prior to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, and had generated intense debates around the world, completely disappeared from the global public agenda in the wake of the attacks, and is yet to resurface.

local and multinational companies, most notably Enron, have filed for bankruptcy. Workers in the US are beginning to notice that the government is pumping billions of dollars to resuscitate the failing businesses, without committing to any sort of protection for the men and women who have been laid off. Workers at home are not the only ones being short-shrifted. Workers abroad are also likely to be affected, as the fast-track legislation passed by US lawmakers makes it possible for trade negotiations to circumvent international labour standards.

38. This, of course, has profound implications for the progressive movement as a whole, but especially for the anti-globalisation and human rights agendas. At a very minimum, it is now becoming obvious that in troubled times, civil and political rights are as likely to be violated as social and economic rights. At the risk of stating the obvious, it appears that human rights advocates and anti-globalisation activists must make common cause as they seek to undo the damage caused by these “security measures”<sup>13</sup> over the past four months. Apart from the strength of numbers, there is also considerable potential for the sharing of resources, strategies and lending mutual support. At a broader level, this is also a time of necessary collaboration among civil society activists across the board. Faced with funding cuts and repressive legislation, civil society practitioners in several countries are now beginning to realise the need to link forces with colleagues outside their traditional spheres of activity.
39. Having stated the case for a common, collaborative approach to understanding and addressing the present crisis, it must be pointed out that there are marked differences in the way the effects of the crisis are being played out around the world. For instance, there is greater public tolerance for the traditional human rights agenda (be it the human rights conditions in several totalitarian Islamic societies at the present time, or the threat to civil rights and liberties within countries in Europe, North America and elsewhere) than there is for the anti-globalisation agenda. This is simply a measure of how much more ground there is to be covered before the anti-globalisation movement acquires a firm hold in the mainstream public opinion. Michael Edwards, a civil society analyst and a Director at Ford Foundation, observes, “The anti-globalization movement has been given an uncomfortable ride in the media since Sept. 11. Protesters have been uncharacteristically muted, fearful of the inevitable backlash if their activities are seen as insensitive, unpatriotic or merely irrelevant to fighting the battle of the moment.”<sup>14</sup>
40. Anti-globalisation activists are already beginning to experience restrictions to their mobility (especially when moving from third world to first world venues). Assuming they do get the necessary authorisation to reach a protest venue, their right to demonstrate peacefully will face restrictions. Emboldened by current political climate, police in riot gear are forcefully targeting even peaceful protesters, as witnessed recently in November at the IMF-World Bank meeting in Ottawa.
41. Yet, the greatest threat perhaps is from within the movement itself. The International Socialist Quarterly grimly proclaims that the “global justice movement has been derailed”<sup>15</sup> in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>. David Zirin, a youth organiser in Washington DC, and one of the leaders of the local anti-globalisation network, observes that the progressive movement within the US, more than anywhere else, has been “confused” and is searching for direction post-September 11<sup>th</sup>.<sup>16</sup> He notes that several of his fellow-activists, or the left-liberal intellectuals they look to for guidance, have simply been unable or unwilling to establish the connections between

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<sup>13</sup> Policy and decision-makers are yet again taking a narrow restrictive approach to national security, despite the best attempts by civil society activists and academics alike, to highlight the multi-dimensionality of the security concept. Security necessarily includes protection from attack, as well as human rights security, food security, environmental security, job security, health security and so on.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Edwards, “The Mouse that Roared; We’re Witnessing the Birth of a New World Politics”, Toronto Globe and Mail, January 3, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> International Socialist Review, November-December 2001, p.2

<sup>16</sup> Conversation with Dave Zirin, International Socialist Organization, December 18, 2001.

US foreign policy, global human rights, social and economic rights, and terrorism. Even the initial support of the war against Afghanistan by American labour, only proved the point that during emergencies, workers of the world do not unite, but rally behind their governments and national identities.

42. Any future strategies of the anti-globalisation movement must take into account the powerful emotional hold, and tremendous mobilising power which national governments still wield. The case for global justice must be made in creative ways, which are resistant to “patriotic” calls on the parts of governments. There is a growing realisation among anti-globalisation activists that they need to reassess their focus and strategies. At the same time, human rights activists must also seize the opportunity to do some stock-taking, solidify alliances where they do exist and build bridges where they do not exist. In some way, the human rights movement lost its “sexiness” to the anti-globalisation movement in the 1990s. While the “mainstreaming” of human rights is to be applauded, it must also do some introspection of its ‘universality’ to ensure that it remains relevant to changed global realities. It is encouraging to note that campaigners for human rights and social and economic rights have already started reaching out to each other. One such promising venue seems to be the World Social Forum to be held at Porto Alegre in conjunction with the World Economic Forum at New York. Registered participants include activists from both camps.
43. At the beginning of this section, we stated that the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> seem to be shaping the politics of the new millennium. We wish to conclude with the thought that this trend is neither irreversible nor inevitable. Anti-globalisation activists, human rights advocates, peace activists, and the larger civil society, can claim their due share of the agenda-setting role in world politics. Indeed, this was already happening before September 11<sup>th</sup>, and there is certainly the hope that present difficulties notwithstanding, this process can be put back on track. Professor Walden Bello of the Focus on the Global South opines, “In classical drama, September 11 was the *deus ex machina* – an external force or event that swings a destiny that hangs in the balance in favour of one of the protagonists. The Al Qaeda New York mission was the best possible gift to the US and the global establishment in the pre-September 11<sup>th</sup> historical conjuncture. Just a few weeks before some 300,000 people had marched in Genoa in the biggest show of force yet of an anti-corporate globalization movement...”<sup>17</sup> Other observers have noted as well that the US foreign policy and economic establishments, together with their global allies, have used this historic moment to consolidate their own positions at home, by deliberately undermining the progressive movements. Assuming this were true, it is to be hoped that the strength of the issues, which rest on the twin pillars of human rights and global justice, will recover the lost momentum of the movements.

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<sup>17</sup> Walden Bello, “The American Way of War”, Attac Weekly Newsletter, January 2, 2002.