

A Chill Descends On Occupy Wall Street; “The Leaders of the allegedly Leaderless Movement”

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Global Research, November 04, 2011

Countercurrents.org 4 November 2011

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

In-depth Report: [OCCUPY WALL STREET](#)



On Sunday, October 23, a meeting was held at 60 Wall Street. Six leaders discussed what to do with the half-million dollars that had been donated to their organization, since, in their estimation, the organization was incapable of making sound financial decisions. The proposed solution was not to spend the money educating their co-workers or stimulating more active participation by improving the organization’s structures and tactics. Instead, those present discussed how they could commandeer the \$500,000 for their new, more exclusive organization. No, this was not the meeting of any traditional influence on Wall Street. These were six of the leaders of Occupy Wall Street (OWS).

Occupy Wall Street’s Structure Working Group (WG) has created a new organization called the Spokes Council. “Teach-ins” were held to workshop and promote the Spokes Council throughout the week of October 22-28. I attended the teach-in on Sunday the 23rd.

According to Marisa Holmes, one of the most outspoken and influential leaders of OWS, the NYC-GA started receiving donations from around the world when OWS began on September 17. Because the NYC-GA was not an official organization, and therefore could not legally receive thousands of dollars in donations, the nonprofit Alliance for Global Justice helped OWS create Friends of Liberty Plaza, which receives tax-free donations for OWS. Since then, Friends of Liberty Plaza has received over \$500,000. Until October 28, anybody who wanted to receive more than \$100 from Friends of Liberty Plaza had to go through the often arduous

modified consensus process (90% majority) of the NYC-GA—which, despite its well-documented inefficiencies, granted \$25,740 to the Media WG for live-stream equipment on October 12, and \$1,400 to the Food and Medical WGs for herbal tonics on October 18.

At the teach-in, Ms. Holmes maintained that while the NYC-GA is the “de facto” mechanism for distributing funds, it has no right to do so, even though she acknowledged that most donors were likely under the impression that the NYC-GA was the only organization with access to these funds. Two other leaders of the teach-in, Daniel and Adash, concurred with Holmes.

Ms. Holmes also stated at the teach-in that five people in the Finance WG have access to the \$500,000 raised by Friends of Liberty Plaza. When Suresh Fernando, the man taking notes, asked who these people are, the leaders of the Structure WG nervously laughed and said that it was hard to keep track of the “constantly fluctuating” heads of the Finance WG. Mr. Fernando made at least four increasingly explicit requests for the names. Each request was turned down by the giggling, equivocating leaders.

The leaders of the Structure WG eventually regained control of the teach-in. They said that they too were unhappy with the Finance WG’s monopoly over OWS’s funds, which is why they wanted to create the Spokes Council. What upset them more, however, was the inefficient and fickle General Assembly. A major point of the discussion was whether the Spokes Council and the NYC-GA should have access to the funds, or just the Spokes Council.

Daniel, a tall, red-bearded, white twenty-something—one of the six leaders of the teach-in—said that the NYC-GA needed to be completely defunded because those with “no stake” in the Occupy Wall Street movement shouldn’t have a say in how the money was spent. When I asked him whether everybody in the 99% had a stake in the movement, he said that only those occupying or working in Zuccotti Park did. I pointed out that since the General Assembly took place in Zuccotti Park, everybody who participated was an occupier. He responded with a long rant about how Zuccotti Park is filled with “tourists,” “free-loaders” and “crackheads” and suggested a solution that the even NYPD has not yet attempted: Daniel said that he’d like to take a fire-hose and clear out the entire encampment, adding hopefully that only the “real” activists would come back.

The main obstacle to the creation of the Spokes Council was that the NYC-GA had already voted against it four times. One audience member observed that no organization would vote to relinquish its power. Some of the strongest proponents of the Spokes Council responded that they had taken this into account, and were planning on creating the Spokes Council regardless of whether the NYC-GA accepted the proposal. They claimed that, in the interests of non-hierarchy, neither the Spokes Council nor the General Assembly should have power over the other.

In the minutes of the teach-in on Saturday the 22nd, the leaders recognize that usurping power from the NYC-GA might make people uncomfortable. The Structure WG’s eventual proposal was to keep the General Assembly alive and functioning while the Spokes Council “gets on its feet.” Working Groups could still technically get funding through the NYC-GA, but the “GA may stop making those kinds of decisions because people [will] stop going... To officially take power away isn’t necessary,” especially because the NYC-GA works on the consensus model. A small group of people aiming to delegitimize the NYC-GA could easily attend each session merely to block every proposal. According to a member of the Demands WG, this is already occurring in several Working Groups.

To placate the rest of OWS, the Structure WG amended their original proposal and gave the NYC-GA power to dissolve the Spokes Council. This amendment is irrelevant, however, given the 90% majority requirement in the NYC-GA, and the ability of members of the Spokes Council to vote in the NYC-GA.

The “Spokes Council”

The newly formed Spokes Council claims to adhere to the “statement of principles” adopted by the New York City General Assembly, including “direct-democracy, non-hierarchy, participation, and inclusion.” The Spokes Council differs from the NYC-GA, however, in three main respects: the Spokes Council has the power to exclude new groups that don’t receive a 90% majority vote for admission; in the NYC-GA, everybody technically has the right to speak, whereas in the Spokes Council each Working Group has a spokesperson, who can be recalled only by a 90% majority; and the NYC-GA allows one vote per person, whereas the Spokes Council operates more indirectly, granting each Working Group one vote.

When I pointed out the contradictions these differences present to the Council’s stated principles, the leaders of Sunday’s teach-in insisted that the Spokes Council was the most participatory, democratic organization possible—the same slogan they repeated last month about the General Assembly. I felt like I was watching a local production of *Animal Farm*.

I’ve attended two mock Spokes Councils in the past month. At the Spokes Council in Washington Square Park on October 15, the unelected facilitators set the agenda: Occupy Washington Square Park. Then they set the terms of debate, breaking the group into three circles: those who wanted to occupy and possibly get arrested, those who wanted there to be an occupation and would assist those being arrested, and those who wanted to build the movement in other ways. I went with the third group.

The facilitators told each group to elect a facilitator, a note-taker, and a spokesperson who would read the notes from each group’s meeting. Almost immediately, one of the members of the OWS inner-circle asked my group if anybody had a problem if she facilitated. Nobody objected, so she was “elected.” Although she was in the one group that opposed occupying Washington Square Park, she lectured us about the need to occupy public parks.

I was vocal in my group, arguing that the fundamental problem in our hierarchical, bureaucratic society is the lack of a truly democratic, dialogic way of relating to one another—not that public parks close at midnight. I repeated the arguments I had raised in previous General Assemblies, concluding that OWS’ main goal should be to develop dialogic, democratic methods in the occupied areas, and to extend this way of life into every home, workplace and school, and in local, regional, national and international bodies.

My advocacy for radical democracy wasn’t particularly popular. Ironically, the predominantly middle-class, white men leading the movement claim that their hostility to democracy is in the interest of “protecting minorities,” referring to oppressed genders, races, classes, ages, and nations. Far from being “minorities,” these people make up the majority of the world’s population; the worldwide outcry for democracy vitiates the paternalistic notion that the oppressed need “protection.”

The discussion turned to which locations the movement should occupy, ignoring the question of whether occupation for the sake of occupation was a good idea. I suggested teaming with evicted tenants and former homeowners to occupy foreclosed homes,

abandoned apartments and unsold condos—an act that would strike at the heart of the economic crisis, and endear the movement to the oppressed. This idea generated a lot of support, but was not repeated by my “spokesperson” when the groups reconvened.

At the teach-in on Sunday the 23rd, one of the leaders’ main gripes—rightfully so—was that the NYC-GA was inefficient and dominated by society’s vocal minorities, particularly middle-class white men. The underlying cause is not eliminated by the Spokes Council, but is in fact exacerbated by it. The major flaw of the General Assembly is the need for a 90% majority to pass proposals. This “modified consensus” ensures the continuation of the dominant culture through the passage of only the most conservative measures. In the Spokes Council, proposals can be blocked by 11% of the members of 11% of the Working Groups, meaning that a minority of 1.2% can stymie the will of 98.8% majority.

Instead of cutting to the structural and psychological core of oppression, the proponents of the Spokes Council merely apply a topical cream by demanding that no WG have the same spokesperson more than once a week. The leaders of OWS seem to understand that a genuinely revolutionary movement would lead to deepening involvement by oppressed communities. The leaders then try to reverse-engineer a revolution by consistently choosing among the few people of color and women involved in OWS to be its spokespeople and facilitators, as if this token involvement will guarantee a genuine revolutionary movement. In fact, tokenism obscures the need for systematic change by misrepresenting the demographics of OWS. Tokenism also gives the leaders of OWS an argument to fall back upon when confronted with the fact that they have thus far been unable to mobilize and involve most of the 99%.

The Spokes Council, in fact, doesn’t have enough regard for working people, students and people with dependents to have one of their three weekly meetings on a weekend afternoon. Instead of ensuring broad participation of traditionally marginalized and oppressed communities, OWS limits participation to individuals from these communities who are privileged enough to be able to spend three workdays a week at Zuccotti Park.

The participation of oppressed people in oppressive organizations is not a step towards liberation, but is the deepening of their complicity in their own domination. The unabated war on women and people of color in America, during Obama’s presidency, with Hillary Clinton as his Secretary of State, is a testament to the structural and psychological nature of oppression, and the inability for spokespeople to represent the oppressed.

My Address to the General Assembly

After the Structure WG’s teach-in ended, I put together a short summary of what I’d heard. I waited for two hours while the General Assembly slowly got to the announcements—the only part of the NYC-GA open for anyone to participate.

When my turn came to speak, I brought up the plans of “the leaders of the allegedly leaderless movement” to commandeer the half-million dollars sent to the General Assembly for their new, exclusive, undemocratic, representational organization. Before I could finish, the facilitators and other members of the OWS inner circle started shouting over me. Amidst the confusion, the human mic stopped projecting what I, or anybody was saying. Because silence was what they were after, the leaders won.

Eventually one of the facilitators regained control of the crowd and explained that I was

speaking “opinions, not facts,” which is why I would not be allowed to continue. He also asserted untruthfully that I had gone over my allotted minute. Notably, the facilitators and members of the OWS inner circle regularly ignore time restrictions.

This reaction shouldn't surprise anyone. It is reasonable to expect any undemocratic organization to be co-opted eventually by a vocal minority or charismatic individual. On Friday, October 29, the proposal to create the Spokes Council was put to the NYC-GA for a fifth time, and finally received a 90% majority. The facilitators assisted the process by denying two vocal critics of the Spokes Council their allotted time to speak against it.

Sometimes it snows before the leaves have fallen. The ineffective and increasingly symbolic NYC-GA will most likely continue to hang around as long as the people who congregate in Zuccotti Park hold out hope for a more participatory, democratic society. The Spokes Council will only be more effective in its exclusiveness.. Let's hope the inclusive spirit driving the Occupy movement is not frozen out.

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