

Labor Must Choose Between Occupy and the Democrats

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The Occupy Movement couldn't have come along at a worse time, from the viewpoint of the Democrats. Election season is just getting started and Occupy has thrown a giant wrench into the political machinery. Some labor leaders too are sensing "politics as usual" shifting under their feet; the "get out the vote" for the Democrats may elicit blank stares from the rank and file.

Occupy has the potential to create earthquakes within the labor movement and labor's relationship to the Democrats, if it approaches the subject intelligently. This seismic shift could permanently change politics in the United States, much for the better.

Many commentators have noted that the Occupy Movement can be only poison for the Democrats. Unlike the Republicans, who benefited from the corporate sponsored far-right Tea Party, the Democrats have no intention of moving — or even flirting — with an independent movement to its left. Long before the corporate Presidency of Bill Clinton, the Democrats have moved only to the right, with the leftist talk reserved strictly for election campaigns. This evolution is now to the point where President Obama stands to the right of President and arch-Conservative Richard Nixon on most economic and social issues. Times have certainly changed.

In an effort to pretend that times haven't changed, some labor leaders are obsessed with comparing the modern Democrats with the modern Republicans, the latter who have evolved into a party that openly denies evolution and disdains all things non-corporate. Comparing Democrats with Republicans in this distorted manner certainly makes Democrats look good, while also avoiding the real issues at stake.

And then came Occupy. Real issues are now being talked about. Occupy has successfully pointed out the absurd policies of both corporate owned political parties. This disruption has created open hostility from Republicans and Democrats, the latter have stood silent as local riot police- controlled mainly by Democratic Party administrations- have attacked peaceful Occupy protesters all over the country. Even the eternally loyal Democrat Daily Kos website has spewed anti-Democrat anger over this:

"The deafening silence from Congress, from both the Democratic and Republican parties, and President Obama on the abuse of civilians exercising the right to assemble, and the right to freedom of speech, speaks volumes as to the priorities, concerns and goals of the political class in D.C. We should be very, very concerned and angry over this silence...Silence is in fact, complicity." (November 16, 2011).

The labor movement sees a natural ally in Occupy and is openly embracing it, to varying degrees. Of course the two movements are mutually compatible: labor has been fighting off and on against corporations since unions were born. The Occupy Movement is breathing fresh air into the working people's movement, and the unions had better go "all in" with Occupy, lest they stand alone and become totally irrelevant.

The labor movement thus has a foot in both worlds; one in step with the Occupy Movement and the other with the Democrats, who are working to crush Occupy outright. Labor's split personality is obviously unsustainable; something has got to give. A stark example of these incompatible positions was put forth by Mary Kay Henry, President of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), when she discussed SEIU's recent endorsement of President Obama:

"We need a leader [Obama] willing to fight for the needs of the 99 percent . . . Our economy and democracy have been taken over by the wealthiest one percent."

What?! Corporations gave Obama far more money than his previous Republican opponent, John McCain. Corporations are again giving Obama more money than his current Republican counterparts. He doesn't need the dues money of union workers; he's already flush with corporate cash.

Mary Kay Henry is just one of several top labor officials who frame the Occupy Movement as a battle against "the right wing," i.e., Republicans. In response to this argument, Glenn Greenwald of Salon commented:

"...pretending that the ongoing [Occupy] protests are grounded in the belief that the GOP is the party of the rich while the Democrats are the party of the working class is likely to fool just about nobody other than those fooled by that already" (November 19, 2011).

If labor plans on being relevant to the Occupy Movement — and this means being relevant at all in the near future — major changes must occur. And although many Occupiers have expressed concern about Labor having ulterior motives to co-opt the Occupy Movement, the threat is greatly exaggerated.

Most labor unions are politically co-opted by the Democrats. Labor still needs a national political voice. Though the mass actions of the Occupy Movement have done more to change the political climate than the millions who voted for Obama, most of Labor's entrenched leadership remain attached to the Democrats in an illusory attempt to have a national voice.

In practice this means that labor ignores the pro-corporate policies of Democratic politicians while unions water down its demands to make them compatible with the positions of Democrats. Occupy won't stand for this, or even listen to it.

Some major examples of labor's neutered pro-Democrat Party politics are:

- National labor unions largely ignored the fact that Democratic Governors, elected with the help of the unions, recently forced major concessions on public sector unions all over the country, substantially weakening the larger labor movement.

- Labor's political subservience to the Democrats also means that, instead of demanding a

real jobs program, labor is reduced to supporting Obama's truly pathetic jobs program, which would create a million or so jobs, when 20 million plus are needed.

-Worse yet is labor's virtual inaction in response to Obama's Super Committee, which intends to cut the national budget deficit on the backs of working people, especially by slashing Medicare and Medicaid, and very likely Social Security, creating a precedent for even larger cuts in the future. This amounts to perhaps the biggest single attack on working people in recent U.S. history, as it would dramatically affect the lives of hundreds of millions of people. While AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka has made some strong statements against these cuts, neither he, nor any of the other top labor officials, have called for what is really needed, which is a massive, nationally coordinated mobilization of the ranks of the labor movement and labor's allies, the 99%, to take to the streets of America to demand of the government: No Cuts! No Concessions! Tax the Rich!

If labor plans on building a strong movement with Occupy — and they had better — then these suicidal pro-Democratic Party policies must end. Labor cannot earn credibility within the Occupy Movement and then completely change course to campaign for Obama, in effect throwing all credibility in the garbage.

If labor puts forth watered down demands — like Obama's jobs bill — it will elicit no response from the vast majority of Occupiers and their supporters. The Occupy Movement recognizes the dire economic situation the country is in and is not held back by mainstream politicians.

This gives the Occupy Movement an amazing chance to lead labor down the right path. There is a wide gulf between the demands that the labor movement and the Democratic Party are putting forward and what working people desperately need. Occupy would not exist were this not the case.

Therefore, Occupy must address the nationwide social crisis in a serious way that can unite working people, and help drive the labor movement forward in the process.

For example, instead of the labor movement merely demanding End the Bush Tax Cuts, Occupy could demand Tax the 1% at 90% (as it was under Franklin Delano Roosevelt).

Instead of labor demanding that Obama's Jobs bill be passed, the Occupy Movement should demand that revenue from taxing the rich be used to create 20 million new jobs, a federal jobs program similar to the one implemented in the 1930s, but bigger.

Most importantly, Occupy could start a national campaign demanding NO CUTS to Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid by taxing the rich and corporations.

Taxing the rich should be a critical demand of the Occupy movement, since it naturally unites working people against cuts and produces revenue that can create jobs. Taxing the rich is also the demand that naturally emerges from the slogan "We Are the 99%," which reveals the giant wealth disequilibrium that has happened in the country, in large part due to the shrinking tax rates of the rich.

There is plenty of room for Occupy to prove its political independence by putting forth demands that will discredit the Democrats and lead Labor towards campaigns that the majority of working people will join, making Occupy/Labor an unstoppable force. If occupy mobilizes over key demands that resonate with the majority, the unions will follow. They will

have no choice, since their rank and file will already be following Occupy.

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<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/11/16/1037192/-The-Silence-of-the-Democratic-Party-is-Complicity>

http://www.salon.com/2011/11/19/heres_what_attempted_co_option_of_ows_looks_like/singleton/

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