

Occupy Portland Is Born with Ten Thousand Strong

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Global Research, October 07, 2011

7 October 2011

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It should be no surprise that a city dubbed “Little Beirut” by President Bush Senior — due to the large protests against him — began its “occupation” on a level on par with Wall Street.

On October 6th, in Portland, Oregon, ten thousand people assembled at noon at Waterfront Park on a workday in anticipation of the non-permitted march, which would make a pit stop before ending at its official, secret “Occupation” spot.

The buzz for the event had permeated all sectors of Portland society. People who had never shown a political urge in their lives were suddenly convulsing. Hundreds of people started showing up at the organizing meetings, many of them younger people unknown by the “usual suspects” of Portland activism. A refreshing sign, since new blood is a key ingredient to all social movements.

Although people were warned of police violence during the non-permitted march, nothing came of it. This isn’t surprising, given the close spotlight on Portland’s police (the Justice Department is investigating them for police brutality and having heavy trigger fingers). Also, Portland’s Mayor has a reputation for being Mr. Liberal, and cracking heads in broad daylight must not have sounded appealing to him. Most importantly, the march was large enough to defend itself, permits or not.

The atmosphere at Occupy Portland is one that forms the nucleus of any successful social movement: solidarity. Young and old from all backgrounds holding signs, chanting, and forming bonds with complete strangers over the issues that naturally bind all working people together: jobs, inequality, anti-war, student loan forgiveness, defending Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid (the social safety net), etc.

These are the demands of the movement, whether or not they are officially recognized. They are the organic demands that arise from the experience of working people, as showcased by the countless signs in Portland’s protest.

There were many “anti-system” signs as well; Portland has a healthy number of anarchists, socialists, etc. But many of these more-radical signs were held by working or unemployed families; some of the banners were vague or instinctive, while others were specifically anti-capitalist. The majority of signs were of immediate demands (tax the rich, etc.), but many were “system-based.” This is the dual nature of the protests, something that will be eventually reconciled during the life of the movement. One demand needn’t be sacrificed for another, but focusing on certain demands at critical times will be crucial to give the movement momentum after the initial burst of energy has subsided.

For example, the majority of working people can instantly unite and be moved to action with

a demand similar to “tax the rich to create jobs and save Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid,” while only a minority of working people will unite indefinitely around the banner: “End Inequality” or “end capitalism.” This is the main reason why specific demands must eventually be put forth; working people are only powerful against their corporate competition when they are united. Indeed this is the very basis for the plight of working people today — we are ruled because 99 percent are divided against the 1 percent.

Linked with unity is organization. The Occupy movement has shown an expert use of organizational tools such as social media. The day that Occupy Portland began, one could watch the protest live at www.occupyportland.org. Linked with organization is leadership, and although the Occupy movement rejects the word, there are already obvious leaders emerging.

For example, the organizers who knew the end location of the march are leaders, as are the organizers who committed to doing the most legwork towards outreach and communication. The leaders also decided that this march was to be non-violent, which angered a minority of protesters in Portland. Leaders also control the use of the web page. Democracy is crucially important, the majority must make the decisions for the movement. But leaders emerge with any organizational effort. They are the people who contribute most and create the space for others to occupy.

After the non-permitted march, protesters gathered in “Portland’s Living Room,” Pioneer Square, where the festivities continued. Later, the march continued to its overnight venue, a public park across from the county courthouse. As of this writing the Mayor had officially approved the occupation space until 9am the following morning, when the police would evict the occupants in favor of the Portland Marathon run, who had the park reserved. The occupiers hadn’t yet decided whether to pack up and move elsewhere or test the power of the police. The optimism and numbers of protesters made the crowd courageous, but the 10,000 high mark had dwindled over the course of the night to a couple of thousand, especially after the drizzle began.

If Portland is any indication, there is plenty of energy ready to be funneled into victories for working people. It is up to the Occupy movement to find ways to best funnel this energy, since people will not indefinitely occupy something without a clear goal in mind, or without a barometer to measure their success. In Egypt, protesters proudly declared “I will occupy Tahrir Square until the dictator has fallen.” As it stands now, nobody in Portland can make a similar statement. Demands and goals do matter; wanting general change is not enough, as the Obama campaign clearly proved: vagueness invites political opportunists and their offspring, which ends in disappointment.

But for now occupying is enough. We are entering the infant stage of a new social movement, and once the newborn’s excitement of being alive passes away, real life must be dealt with: the infant must learn to walk; must learn what to value and how to achieve its goals while clearing obstacles out of its path. Although there is no telling how this baby will mature, we can only hope that adulthood will be successful.

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