

Occupy Wall Street at a Crossroads

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Power concedes nothing without a demand
(Frederick Douglass).

Occupy Wall Street (OWS), giving vent to the pent up anger of the 99%, has inspired the people in the United States and other parts of the world to expose capitalism for what it is: a profit-driven system that tends to enrich and empower a tiny minority at the expense of everyone else. The movement has successfully shown how the two-party machine of the US politico-electoral system has increasingly become a charade, as the moneyed 1% is essentially in charge of the government. Regardless of its shortcomings and how it would evolve henceforth, the movement's achievements have already been truly historical, as it signifies an auspicious awakening of the people and a new spirit to fight the injustice.

Despite these glorious achievements, however, OWS does not seem to be growing. The initial excitement and novelty of the movement has dissipated, and the public has become almost indifferent to watching commando-like police raids and evictions of protesters from most of their encampments. Many of its potential allies such as larger numbers of working people seem to be taking a wait-and-see stance toward it.

Several nationwide polls clearly indicate that the movement has stalled. While polling results need to be viewed with caution, they cannot be ignored either, as their findings are by and large consistent. Three major polls (conducted by Gallup/USA Today, Public Policy Polling, and The Pew Research Group) uniformly show that while the Americans' overall view of the movement and their support of its goals have since mid-October remained largely unchanged, or even slightly improved, they have grown more critical (and less supportive) of its tactics, of the way the protests are being conducted. The Gallup/USA Today poll also showed that "most Americans [are] taking a neutral stance toward" the movement.

How is this to be explained? Why aren't more of the 99% joining the movement? And why has support for protest actions of the Occupiers declined?

An obvious reason for the fading of support for Occupy demonstrations is the carefully calculated use of excessive power and presence of the police force, designed to frighten or discourage ambivalent spectators who may contemplate joining the protestors. Another equally obvious factor is the corporate media that, in collusion with politicians, tend to drive a wedge between the protestors and their potential allies among the wider working population.

More fundamental reasons for the flattening of support for the Occupy movement's tactics, however, could be detected in the shortcomings of the movement itself. Three major weaknesses are (1) vagueness of demands and lack of a program for change, (2) lack of or

insufficient mobilization of broader working people, and (3) aversion to building an alternative political organization of the 99% to the two-party machine of the 1%.

VAGUENESS OF DEMANDS AND LACK OF A PROGRAM FOR CHANGE

OWS has done a wonderful job in exposing the unjust and corrupting nature of the capitalist system. But it has not done as good a job in explaining or calling attention to an agenda for change. Its Declaration of Occupation catalogues a list of more than 25 grievances, ranging from inequality to bank bail outs to illegal house foreclosures to unemployment and job outsourcing, but, beyond general calls for justice and equality, it refuses to make specific demands. Exposing inequality, injustice and corruption is, of course, necessary—but not sufficient. More importantly is what to do about these corrosive maladies of capitalism. How can they be cured or rectified? What demands are to be made or what political steps are to be taken in order to change the status quo in favor of the 99%?

I am aware of the OWS's rationale for shying away from making specific demands: "concrete demands tend to narrow the movement's focus and limit its ideals and goals; focusing on specific demands is tantamount to focusing on trees while losing sight of the forest; or demands may balkanize the 99% and diffuse their energy as they tend toward the least common denominator." In an article titled "Occupy Wall Street won't be pigeonholed," Professor Nicolaus Mills of Sarah Lawrence College argues, for example, "The refusal of Occupy Wall Street to tie itself down with an agenda that can be debated piecemeal is one of its great strengths. The decision allows Occupy Wall Street to remain a *cri de Coeur* [an impassioned cry] for all who believe they have lost ground over the last decade" [1].

Another example of this line of reasoning reads as follows: "Occupy Wall Street has left open a space for us all to feel we are a part of the movement. If the demands were already set, many of us might feel outside—that there wasn't a place for us, that we couldn't dream about our issue, that we had to stay on message. . . . Occupy Wall Street feels exciting in part because it doesn't force us to choose, to prioritize" [2].

I understand the Occupiers' concern when they argue that focusing on specific issues as rallying points may whittle down their broader and bigger ideals such as fighting for democracy, justice and equality. I also realize why they may argue, "Why bother with the branches when you could go for the roots of the tree."

But, as Shamus Cooke aptly puts it, "any tree-removal worker will tell you [that] the tree comes first, then the roots." Far-reaching goals such as "democracy now," or essential grievances such as "banks got bailed out, we got sold out," may sound loftier and more important than specific demands such as "save Social Security," or "affordable healthcare." But they are not as useful or as effective in mobilizing the people, escalating the struggle toward palpable/achievable results and, therefore, maintaining the movement. Again, as Cooke puts it, "although a general anti-1% sentiment sounds appealing to the 99%, a struggle to win worker-friendly demands can help pull these people into the streets" [3].

Furthermore, the argument that having a political agenda for change, or making specific demands, may "balkanize" the 99% and diffuse its energy is unwarranted. Demanding "Medicare for all" or "save Social Security," for example, are bound to resonate with the overwhelming majority of the 99% and unite them all into a powerful fighting force in pursuit of achieving these goals.

Likewise, demanding “no budget cuts, no layoffs, jobs for all,” is certain to echo loudly with the working people, and further expand the fighting coalition against the 1%. A critically important natural ally of the Occupy movement, without whose participation no meaningful change could be brought about, is the working class. Although individual workers or unions have occasionally participated in the Occupy protests, the overwhelming majority of the working Americans seem to have taken a position on the fence; apparently torn between the Occupy movement, on the one hand, and the labor bureaucrats, in collusion with the Democratic Party, on the other.

So far, the movement has not done enough to begin to cut the umbilical cord that has traditionally tied the rank-and-file of the US labor to the Democratic Party and its allies in the labor bureaucracy. True, Occupy did have a number of auspicious joint actions with labor unions and college students, as in the case of shutting down the Port of Oakland, or the case of support for public education in California. Such promising instances of Occupy-labor alliance, however, remain sporadic, few and far between.

Only through specific demands such as “jobs for all” can OWS woo away the hitherto ambivalent mass of labor ranks from the corrupt union chiefs and the movement-wrecking Democratic Party. If OWS mobilizes around issues that resonate with the working majority, labor ranks and, therefore, unions will follow as they would be left without much of a choice. The resulting Labor/Occupy alliance would constitute an irresistible force of change in favor of the 99%.

Perhaps it would be instructive to recall historical evidence indicating that major social revolutions such as the French revolution (1789), the Russian/Bolshevik revolution (1917), the Spanish revolution (the 1930s), and the Chinese revolution (1949) were all precipitated and won by a few simple demands (like bread, peace and land) that resonated with the majority of the people. Likewise, the New Deal reforms in the United States and Social-Democratic reforms in Europe resulted from a few seemingly modest demands such jobs and economic security that galvanized and united the people against the ruling class, thereby effecting positive change in favor of the public.

Demands such as “Medicare for all,” “jobs for all,” or “save Social Security” are obviously unifying and strengthening causes for the Occupy movement, not “balkanizing” and “weakening,” as many Occupiers seem to think. More importantly, in the absence of such concrete, winnable demands it would become increasingly more difficult to sustain the movement on the basis of general grievances, or lofty but amorphous ideals.

LACK OR INSUFFICIENT MOBILIZATION OF THE WORKING PEOPLE

Another weakness of the Occupy movement is that it has not made a concerted effort to reach out and mobilize the working people, especially the organized labor, which has sporadically engaged in protest actions around key demands related to job protection, but frequently hamstrung by many of the class collaborationist union leaders. Working class is, of course, not limited to the so-called “blue-collar” workers; it also includes vast layers of “professionals” or “white-collar” workers. The uniquely significant role of the working people lies not merely in their numbers; more importantly, in their critically important economic role as producers of the wealth of nations. Not only do they run factories, but also transportation and communication networks, schools and hospitals, food and entertainment industries . . . in short, the economy.

As long as they keep producing goods and services, and thus running the economy, no symbolic occupation (by groups of dedicated radicals) of Wall Street premises, of major banks, or of politicians' offices would force the 1% to pay attention to the needs of the 99%. Agitating and organizing the working people around specific issues takes time and patience; but there are simply no short-cuts around it.

“Escalating the Occupy Movement without having engaged working people with their most pressing issues will amount to strangling it (imagine a battlefield where the cavalry charges and the infantry stays put, unable to back-up those mounting the advance). The real organizing still needs to be done, but the activists' impatience is fast becoming a threat. This weakness has its roots in the left's inability to link their 'more radical' ideas to the needs and current consciousness of the broader population. . . . This impatience pushes some activists to create change 'now'—the urge to harvest the crops without having first plowed and sown the field. Working people soon get dismissed as being 'not radical enough,' and the most progressive participants become further isolated. No social movement can survive with this dynamic; in fact, many have died from this disease” [3].

The Occupy movement, too, seems to be in danger of being plagued by “this disease.” This is clearly reflected in the findings of the polls mentioned above, which show stable or increasing support for the goals of the Occupy movement but decreasing support of its tactics, or protest actions. Tom Jensen of Public Policy Polling makes this point clear in the following words: “I don't think the bad poll numbers for Occupy Wall Street reflect Americans being unconcerned with wealth inequality. . . . I don't think any of that has changed - what the downturn in Occupy Wall Street's image suggests is that voters are seeing the movement as more about the 'Occupy' than the 'Wall Street.' The controversy over the protests is starting to drown out the actual message” [4].

So far, only a small fraction of the of the 99% (the most radical, largely young, student and media/computer savvy) has been directly engaged in the Occupy movement; the rest could be won over or turned away depending on how the movement relates to them, and their specific needs, not on how much or how loudly it condemns the woes and wickedness of capitalism in general.

RELUCTANCE TO ORGANIZE AND COORDINATE NATIONALLY

Not only does the Occupy movement need to put forth specific demands and connect or communicate with the working people around such demands, it also needs to become better organized. While Occupiers have organized many successful protest actions in various venues around the nation, overall the movement remains very much disjointed and uncoordinated. To grow, to become sustainable and to transform the status quo, a social movement needs to be organized on a national level. Smaller numbers of dedicated activists, working on different social issues in various times and places are, of course, important. But the collective impact of massive nationwide actions against the 1% would be much more effective than the sum total of “autonomous” local actions.

The history of labor struggles to achieve a modicum of workers' rights could be instructive here. In their negotiations with employers many local unions lost to the bosses because they were not supported by other unions. By contrast, local unions that enjoyed the support of other unions experienced higher rates of success in their collective bargaining with employers. Working people would feel truly powerful only when their fights for peace and social justice are coordinated in a collective national front against the 1%.

I am not unmindful of the movement's wariness of "organization"—lest it should lead to centralization and bureaucratization of power. This is a legitimate concern. But there is such a thing as being too cautious. We can no longer afford not to use automobiles out of fear of auto accidents; we must drive carefully, and not allow drunkards to seat at the wheel. The solution to the problem of centralization of power is not doing away with organization; it is guarding against it through democratic means and "appropriate" checks and balances.

Decentralization does not necessarily mean "democracy," just as centralization does not necessarily mean authoritarianism. The Occupy movement needs (and can have) both organization and leaders without losing democratic operations. Furthermore, claiming that the Occupy movement has no leaders, and that major decisions within the movement are made collectively is not altogether true. "Leaders exist within Occupy regardless of intentions; saying that Occupy is a "leaderless movement" does not make it so. The inevitable leaders of Occupy are those who dedicate their time to the movement, organize events, are spokespeople, those who help set agendas for meetings or actions, those who set up and run web pages, etc. In reality there already exists a spectrum of leadership that is essential to keeping the movement functioning" [5].

Surely, individual occupiers can utter any slogan or make any demand they wish to, but they can do so only as expressions of their personal opinions. But when it comes to issues or proposals to be approved or sponsored by the General Assembly, such issues are carefully screened by the influential members of the movement. For example, many a time proposals by individual members or Working Groups to make specific demands have been rejected by the General Assembly. Here is an example from New York: on December 18, 2011, the "Demands Working Group" proposed the following demand to the New York City General Assembly:

"JOBS FOR ALL—A Massive Public Works and Public Service Program:

"We demand a democratically-controlled public works and public service program, with direct government employment, to create 25 million new jobs at good union wages. The new jobs will go to meeting the needs of the 99%, including education, healthcare, housing, mass transit, and clean energy. The program will be funded by raising taxes on the rich and corporations and by ending all U.S. wars. Employment in the program will be open to all, regardless of immigration status or criminal record" [6].

The Proposal did not pass the General Assembly!

An obvious inconsistency can be detected between the Occupy movement's goals and ideals, on the one hand, and the ways or tactics to achieve those objectives, on the other. For example, the movement has worked hard to show that President Obama and the Democratic Party are as beholden to the interests of the 1% as their Republican counterparts, which means that the 99% should not waste their energies to reform the Democratic Party, or their votes to elect its candidates. But then it refuses to organize an independent political organization, or put up alternative candidates to the Republican and Democratic candidates, thereby leaving the 99% with no alternative candidates to vote for.

The Occupiers argue that instead of building a third political party, developing an independent agenda for change, and putting up alternative candidates, they would put pressure on the Democratic and Republican politicians to bring about change in favor of the

public. But why would these politicians, whose election/reelection is bankrolled by the 1%, and are therefore beholden to the interests of their benefactors, feel pressure from the Occupiers when their comfortable positions are not threatened by alternative candidates of the 99%?

Furthermore, smaller groups of autonomous local protesters would be easier targets for police raids and imprisonment than massive numbers on a national level. The often repeated cliché that there is power in numbers is as relevant here as in any other context. The Occupiers' optimistic view that uncoordinated, independent local protests and occupations can effect change within the existing political structure seems to overlook the fact that the ruling 1% does not take class struggle lightly. As one observer of the commando-like police raids of the Occupiers' camps has aptly put it, "The repression by the state provides its own answer to all those who claim that the rights of the working class can be secured through the existing political system" [7].

Divide and rule is a well-known policy of oppressive powers. By voluntarily remaining divided, OWS is inadvertently making this insidious policy of oppressors less onerous. Evidence shows that, in deciding to raid and evict an encampment, the police and politicians often base their decisions on the numbers and the level of popularity that the Occupiers have with the broader population, especially with the people who live in the immediate vicinity of an encampment. They often buy their time, hold off their storming raids and brutal evictions until such moments when they see that the number of campers and/or their supporters is dwindling. Reflecting on this experience, an observer has written: "Although the police deserve total blame for their tactics, Occupiers must out-flank them with a political strategy that leans towards organizing massive events, so that the police's power is muted and the media cannot portray Occupy as a minority of extremist activists playing cat and mouse with the police" [8].

WHAT NEXT (AFTER THE ENCAMPMENTS)?

The Occupy movement seems to be at a crossroads. It may continue with the self-imposed policy of "no leadership," "no program," "no organization"; limit itself to sporadic protest and occupation activities around general goals such as peace, democracy and social justice—and quite likely witness its gradual decline. Or it could grow and become a true vehicle for meaningful changes in favor of the 99% by making specific winnable demands, by communicating with and organizing the broader layers of the working people around such demands, and by building a nationwide political organization of, by and for the 99% with its own candidates for public office.

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Notes

[1] Nicolaus Mills, "Occupy Wall Street Won't be Pigeonholed": <http://www.cnn.com/2011/10/26/opinion/mills-occupy-sds/index.html>

[2] Stephanie Luce, "More Observations from Occupy Wall St.":

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/current/node/3406>

[3] Shamus Cooke, "Occupy Movement Needs a Good Fight":
<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=COO20111106&articleid=27509>

[4] Tom Jensen, "Occupy Wall Street Favor Fading":
<http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2011/11/occupy-wall-street-favor-fading.html>

[5] Shamus Cooke, "Theory and Practice in the Occupy Movement":
<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=28596>

[6] "Proposal for Sunday, 12/18, General Assembly: Jobs for All - Demands Working Group":
<http://www.nycga.net/2011/12/18/proposal-for-saturday-1217-general-assembly-jobs-for-all-demands-working-group/>

[7] Joseph Kishore, "Occupy Wall Street movement at a crossroads":
<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/oct2011/pers-o26.shtml>

[8] Shamus Cooke, "Reform vs. Revolution Within Occupy":
<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=28196>

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