

Reform vs. Revolution Within Occupy

By [Shamus Cooke](#)

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Many Occupiers have expressed a valid concern over the Obama campaign attempting to hijack the Occupy movement. To avoid this pitfall some Occupiers advocate more radical methods, ideas and strategies. But sometimes these tactics create new problems. While swerving safely left of the Democrats' grasp, some Occupiers have overreached and exited the orbit of most working people, who would otherwise naturally gravitate to the Occupy movement. Some Occupiers dismiss this new worry, viewing the Occupy movement as an unstoppable social movement.

This raises the question: is Occupy a real social movement or one still struggling to be born? The answer to this question helps determine what strategy the Occupy movement should take, what demands it should fight for and the level of confrontation of its actions. If you believe that the Occupy movement is still struggling for a mass base, as this writer does, then you'll likely agree that Occupy needs to immediately focus on broadening its base and wage militant struggles for demands that will bring in the wider working class community.

Such a campaign may not at first appear as radical as some Occupy actions, and will likely draw accusations of "reformism" (the Democrats cannot be lumped into the reformist category, because they are not advocating pro-worker reforms; they are basically for maintaining the corporate dominated status quo by rolling back previously won reforms). Some "reformist" demands might include: a massive public Jobs program, Save Social Security and Medicare, End the Wars, Tax the Rich and Corporations, Medicare for All, etc.

Yet these demands are more radical than the Democrats can stomach, but make some Occupiers yawn. The irony is that only a truly mass movement of working people has the potential to achieve the various demands of the Occupy movement. And only a militant campaign fighting for these immediate demands has the real mass, revolutionary potential of organizing working people into a cohesive unit. But an Occupy movement that ignores these popular demands and fails to unite the vast majority- and instead fights for more radical demands that are now only embraced by a relative few — has no real revolutionary potential, since it ignores the basic needs of the majority of working people.

This is the reformist-revolutionary paradox. It may seem bizarre to many radicals that previous revolutionary movements were won on the basis of a few basic demands: the Spanish revolution in the 1930s mobilized the 99% over land and freedom. The Russian revolution of 1917 aroused virtually the entire population with the demands for bread, peace, land and rule by the majority.

Countless other revolutionary movements united around a few, seemingly modest demands. This is because there are few things that directly effect the majority of working

people enough that they will assemble in the streets to fight. In times of economic crisis these types of demands have revolutionary potential, since they are not freely granted by the employers nor their government, but must be fought for.

Occupy has yet to win over the majority of the population, or even one-third. There have been several nationwide polls that support this. And although polls are not a perfect way to measure public support, they cannot be ignored (as President Bush insisted on doing). The following conclusion was drawn from a recent USA Today/ Gallup poll:

“Americans’ views about the Occupy Wall Street movement have changed little since mid-October, with most Americans taking a neutral stance toward it.”

Polls aside, it seems obvious that most people in America are on the fence as to whether or not to support or reject Occupy. These people cannot be dismissed as Conservatives or “apathetic.” Many of them will be willing to fight with Occupy in the streets, as some unions have, if they see Occupy’s fight as their own. Occupy must demonstrate to the 99% that it is serious about waging a real struggle for working class demands, since tens of millions of working people are suffering and would rally to a movement they saw as providing real hope, not merely moments of bravery combined with anti-1% rhetoric.

The USA Today poll also showed a concerning shift of support against the tactics employed by the Occupy movement, as did a poll by Public Policy Polling (PPP). A pollster for PPP concluded:

“I don’t think the bad poll numbers for Occupy Wall Street reflect Americans being unconcerned with wealth inequality... [but]The controversy over the protests is starting to drown out the actual message.”

This is almost certainly true, and may soon become critically important. Since the majority of people in the U.S. are still waiting to see if their interests will be represented by Occupy, organizing smaller confrontational/radical actions over more radical demands that do not connect with most working people may only deepen the above divide. Such concerns may seem naturally repulsive to many Occupiers, who deeply want “change now” — an understandable frustration. But this impatience can be self-destructive if more radical acts separate the current Occupy activists from the wider community. The media is doing its best to drive a wedge between the radical occupiers and the wider population of working people, giving them opportunities to use this wedge tactic should be avoided.

The police are also driving this wedge deep, using an excessive police presence combined with excessive force to frighten average people from attending demonstrations that include civil disobedience or other confrontational tactics. And 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.

The police and politicians are basing their level of repression against Occupy on the level of popularity that the movement has with the wider population; many of the Occupy camps were torn down only after demonstrations became smaller and anti-Occupy coverage influenced the still-indecisive majority of people. Occupy must use the same barometer as the police and politicians for the opposite purpose: successful actions should be judged by

whether or not they connect with the majority of the population and increasingly draw them into rallies and actions of massive numbers. By implementing this approach to organizing it will become unmistakable that working people stand with Occupy and Occupy with them. Together they are one.

The Occupy movement has inspired people around the country and world by opening debates about inequality that were shut before. But in order to grow into a democratic revolutionary movement, the working majority of the population must join in, requiring that Occupy broadcast a message based on concrete working-class demands. Working people instinctively know that their demands can only be won by a massive movement, that the power of the 1% can only be challenged by the prolonged mobilization and militant action of the majority of the 99%.

Working people also want “change now,” since they are deeply affected by the jobs, housing and health care crisis. They are not apathetic, just not convinced that Occupy is fighting for them; they want to see if this fight is a serious fight or just a symbolic one.

Shamus Cooke is a social service worker, trade unionist and writer for Workers Action (www.workerscompass.org)

Notes

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/150896/support-occupy-unchanged-criticize-approach.aspx>

<http://www.publicpolicypolling.com/main/2011/11/occupy-wall-street-favor-fading.html>
Public Policy Polling

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