

WHAT PROSPECTS FOR OWS? Will Occupy Spring Forward Or Melt Down?

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A healthy debate has finally gripped the Occupy Movement: there is now a discussion over strategy. Most Occupiers have learned that raw enthusiasm alone cannot bring victory to a social movement; ideas matter too. Action divorced from strategy equals wasted energy, divisiveness, diversions and unnecessary mistakes. Not all tactics push the movement forward.

Why this debate now? Anyone paying attention can tell that the Occupy Movement has lost momentum; the winter months showcased increasing amount of actions combined with fewer and fewer people. After taking the lead in national Occupy enthusiasm, Occupy Oakland is doing some soul searching after an attempted building takeover resulted in massive police violence.

Some Occupiers claim that Occupy was simply in winter hibernation, waiting for its own Arab Spring. But the movement in Europe has grown during the same winter months. The movements in the Middle East, Russia, and elsewhere too have voted with their feet against hibernation.

A social movement, by definition, requires masses of participants, without which momentum grinds to a halt; the movement ceases to move.

Numbers matter, and Occupy has been shedding numbers for months. A major reason for this is because Occupiers have swerved drastically left, leaving the broader 99% ashore. If this trend isn't corrected soon, Occupy will resemble the pre-Occupy left: small isolated groups pursuing their own issues, disconnected from the very broader population that must be involved to actually win any significant demands.

This is the original sin of Occupy: Without first sinking its roots deep enough into the broader population, Occupy marched quickly to the left, unconcerned with who was following. Hopefully Occupy can correct this mistake in time, since not doing so would be fatal fast.

Hopefully, Occupiers have passed through the movement's immature adolescence. For example, Occupy must shed its focus on radical-themed direct actions that inevitably attract only a couple hundred Occupiers but no one else. Again, this was the strategy of pre-Occupy that has already proved its lack of worth. Mass direction action is truly effective, but that raises the critical question: how to bring the masses of working people to Occupy, and vice versa?

Europe has already answered this question, having passed through the adolescence of its own movement, and now focused on bringing down unpopular governments. Greece, for example, went through an immature stage of rioting that showcased much bravery but could provide no real answers. Now, however, a massive workers movement has emerged, the entire 99% is directly involved in producing gigantic demonstrations that soon evolved into one-day General Strikes, and then two-day General Strikes. A common demand in Greece is now for an “indefinite general strike” to bring down the government and stop austerity, i.e., the massive cuts to public programs — education, health care, social services — and jobs.

Demands matter. The entire Greek population would not be going on strike against capitalism — at this time — or against corporate greed, etc.

Typically, an effective general strike — one where the entire 99% participates — happens after a prolonged struggle over demands that affect all working people, where they are agitated enough to take action in the streets. A general strike is the culmination of this movement, itself the byproduct of reaching out to and connecting with broader and broader layers of working people.

Throughout Europe working people are inspired to fight against austerity. Workers in the United States would likely also be inspired to fight against austerity. Unfortunately, there is no venue to do this. The labor and Occupy Movements have failed to take on the key issues that actually have the potential to unite the U.S. population in a European style social movement.

Austerity is happening fast in the United States; on a state-by-state level massive cuts are being pushed through while taxes on the rich stay low. Health care, education, and social services are being killed on a city, state, and federal level. Public sector jobs are being slashed in an epoch of mass joblessness. Medicare and Medicaid are undergoing a very public attack and Social Security is on the chopping block.

Yes, Occupy is too “radical” to unite around these demands; while the labor movement has acted too timidly. Some Occupiers avoid these demands because they fear Democrat co-optation; labor avoids seriously pressing for these demands because they don’t want to upset the Democrats. This is exactly the point: the Democrats — with the Republicans — are the ones pushing these cuts. Fighting austerity in the United States directly challenges the two-party system, while engaging the broader population into struggle.

Without struggle there is no movement. If working people do not identify with the issues that Occupy is fighting for, they will not join, and Occupy’s issues will remain un-achievable.

Occupy Oakland has called for a general strike on May Day. Unless conditions change fast, it is unlikely to succeed, and more likely it will put further distance between Occupy and working people, since the 99% will not take Occupy seriously if it calls for actions it cannot organize. Occupy would do better to follow Europe’s example: organize around demands that connect with working people, so that the real power of the majority of working people can be mobilized in the streets.

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