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Global Justice

# Occupy America

- Features -

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**Movements always arrive unexpectedly. And those who have worked hardest in previous years and months to push towards an escalation of struggles and mobilizations are usually the most surprised by a movement's arrival. In spite of the many surprises – Who would have imagined that the occupation of Tahrir Square was possible? Who would have imagined the Spanish acampadas? – Leftist activists tend to insist in thinking that movements and the specific forms the movements take can be predicted. The reality is that one can predict that there will be a struggle, for class conflict is inscribed in the capitalist relations of production. But when, where, and which form this struggle will take is impossible to predict. The impossibility of predicting the specific constellation in which those who are below decide that the situation is simply not acceptable any longer does not mean that movements explode like lightning in the sky.**

Whereas a movement cannot be predicted, it can be prepared. The patient daily work of organizing, the isolated struggles, the failed attempts at action and mobilization, and their memory: all this is part of the preparation of a movement. This preparation, however, does not function as a linear quantitative growth which at a certain point will lead to the unavoidable birth of a movement, in the way water boils when its temperature reaches 212 degrees Fahrenheit. For a movement explodes when a certain number of highly contingent circumstances coincide to create the very specific situation in which fighting becomes a credible option. And the movement grows when the forms of mobilization are adequate to the specific social composition of those who are protesting.

## Some history

Occupy Wall Street began, unexpectedly, on September 17 with the occupation of Zuccotti Park, a private park owned by the commercial real estate company Brookfield Properties, in the Financial District, a few blocks away from Wall Street. In fact, this was not the first occupation of the year. In the spring, thousands of citizens and union members occupied the state capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin for two weeks in order to protest against the austerity program of the local governor, Scott Walker. Many hoped that this experience, which combined a social struggle against neoliberal policies with the practice of radical democracy, could expand to other cities across the United States. In spite of the sympathies that the occupation in Madison attracted from all over the country, however, this struggle did not start a movement. A few months later, a network of unions, political organizations and local community organizations, New York Against Budget Cuts, launched another campaign against austerity policies and the crisis, starting an occupation near the City Hall, called "Bloombergville". [1] While Bloombergville attracted several hundred participants and became a focal point for citywide opposition to cuts in education, health, and other social services, it too did not manage to start a larger movement. Despite this, both the occupation in Madison and Bloombergville helped prepare the ground for OWS, by showing that protesting against the crisis was not only necessary, but possible, and by importing the practice of the occupation of public spaces from Tahrir Square into the United States.

OWS was launched out of a call by the magazine Adbusters, a "global network of jammers and creatives", [2] for hundreds of activists to descend on Wall Street on September 17. After the call, published in a poster in the 97th issue of Adbusters magazine, a general assembly of 150 people, activists of social networks and people not affiliated to any political organization, was held in New York. The activists of the general assembly then held a series of meetings during the summer to prepare the demonstration of September 17.

On September 17, a few thousand people marched down to the Financial District: after the police barricaded Wall Street, the march directed itself to Liberty Street, where it held an assembly and started a semi-permanent encampment. Around 100-200 people stayed the first night. During the first week of occupation few on the left paid much attention to these protesters with no clear demands and political identity (except a vague reference to Tahrir Square and the Spanish *acampadas*), with no clear project in mind, almost all white, young and middle class. The form of the movement initially left many quite cold and suspicious: this was not what one would have expected and predicted. But something started changing already the next Saturday, when the police beat protesters who were marching uptown in a non authorized demonstration, used pepper spray against some young female demonstrators and arrested around 80 people. The completely unjustified violence employed by the NYPD finally started drawing the general attention to this tiny occupation near Wall Street. Other occupations were launched around the country, spreading like mushrooms in cities coast-to-coast, from Boston to Los Angeles, from Austin to Chicago. Hundreds of people went down to see what was happening in Zuccotti Park and to take part in the general assemblies and working groups. The following Saturday, on October 1st, another march, on the Brooklyn Bridge, was organized in order to protest against police repression: this time more than 5000 people took part in the demonstration. This day the NYPD made a fatal mistake: 700 people, who were marching on the roadway of the Brooklyn Bridge blocking the traffic, were arrested and carried off the bridge on ten buses. The attitude of the NYPD in both cases and throughout the following weeks reflected a break with the tactics employed by the American police towards social movements until the Seattle anti-WTO demonstrations of 1999. Since Seattle, police efforts to frustrate activists are usually characterized by attempts to isolate movements and struggles, and to prevent them from spreading: the panoply of police tactics consists of forcing people to demonstrate only on the sidewalks, putting barricades between one sector of the demonstration and another in order to block any communication and mobility between the different sectors, isolating the demonstration from the rest of the city, and quickly arresting demonstrators — often forcefully or violently — who are perceived to be in the slightest violation of the rules. The enormous popular disgust evoked by the NYPD's mass arrest on the Bridge pushed the unions to take position in support of the movement. Three days later, on October 5, a massive march was organized in support of OWS by a network of unions, among them SEIU 1199 (healthcare), AFL-CIO, CWA 1109 (telecommunication), RWDSU (trade), Transport Workers Unions (which organizes the workers of the NYC subway), and a range of community organizations, including the Alliance for Quality Education, New York Communities for Change, Coalition for the Homeless, and the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice. Students from some of the biggest campuses of New York also supported the march, organizing a walk out of 2000 students and then proceeding downtown to join the unions.

By October 15, the date of the international day of action of the “indignados” and of the antiwar days of protest in the States, protests had spread in more than 200 cities across the country. Police repression spread at the same pace. In Times Square, where thousands of people gathered for hours, police attacked the protesters with horses and arrested 40 people in the square, arresting 70 in total during the day. 175 people were arrested in Chicago and 100 in Arizona. But it is Occupy Oakland which suffered the most brutal repression by the police, ten days later. In the early morning of October 25, the Democratic mayor of the city, “worried” for the safety of the citizenry, ordered the Oakland police to evict the occupation, which had started on October 10 in front of the City Hall. The occupiers responded to the eviction by organizing a mass rally in the evening in order to occupy the space again: they were attacked and dispersed with tear gas by police officers in riot gear, 120 arrests followed. In the midst of that attack, Scott Olsen, an Iraq War veteran and member of Veterans for Peace, had his skull fractured by a tear gas projectile. The particular violence of the eviction was proportional to the peculiar political and social radicalism of Occupy Oakland. Oakland, a city of the San Francisco Bay Area, near the campus of Berkeley, has a long history of struggle. This is the city in which a general strike paralyzed production for 54 consecutive hours in 1946; where the movement of the Black Panthers was born; where in 2003 the dock workers shut down the port in order to block the ships which were sailing to Iraq. On October 19 the general assembly of Occupy Oakland passed a resolution in which it declared that it would actively support all strikes, both those organized by unions and wildcat strikes, of workers and students in the San Francisco Bay Area. That this declaration was not just a matter of words became clear on November 2nd, when Occupy Oakland called for a general strike in response to police repression. General strikes in the United States have been banned since 1947 by terms of the Taft-Hartley bill: workers who break this law can be punished with immediate firing or arrest. This is why Occupy Oakland suggested on its website several ways of taking part in the general strike:

“We are asking that all workers go on strike, call in sick, take a vacation day or simply walk off the job with their co-workers. We are also asking that all students walk out of school and join workers and community members in downtown Oakland. All banks and large corporations must close down for the day or demonstrators will march on them [...] Occupy Oakland recognizes that not all workers, students and community members will feel able to strike all day long on November 2, and we welcome any form of participation which they feel is appropriate. We urge them to join us before or after work or during their lunch hours.” [3]

The results of the November 2nd general strike were astonishing: not only the banks downtown and the schools were shut down, but the march of 20,000 people managed to shut down the port for a couple of hours, with the support of the rank and file workers of ILWU, who organized wild cat strikes in different sectors of the port through the entire day. Another port blockade, this time endorsed by several Occupy on the West Coast, was launched by Occupy Oakland a month later, on December 12th. The general strike of November 2nd, organized within only six days by Occupy Oakland, and its sequel with the port blockade of December 12th garnered support from the occupations in other cities across the country, which also launched marches and actions in solidarity with Oakland. But besides the solidarity among the occupations, the general strike in Oakland and the port blockade in the West Coast not only mark the most concrete radical action undertaken by the movement, they also open the possibility of an intensification of the strategic direction of the movement. What Occupy Oakland managed to do, indeed, goes beyond the simple interaction between the movement and unions, which also characterizes other experiences in other cities. By calling for a general strike, Occupy Oakland managed to become something more than a cousin to the struggles organized by somebody else, and positioned itself to become a touchstone for ongoing struggles in many cities. It became the very propulsive center of the struggle, and forced the major unions to support the strike, at least in words, if not in facts. In this sense the general strike of November 2nd and the port blockade set a possible model to be exported in the other cities: a model that pushes the occupy movement to pass to a further stage, to become the propulsive starting point for a new season of social struggles.

## Democracy or consensus?

With slight differences the movement has adopted similar organizational forms everywhere. These forms can be summarized in the following way: decisional centrality of the general assembly, open to everybody and run by facilitators through the method of consensus or large majority; proliferation of working groups whose decisions are reported and discussed in the general assembly; refusal “implicit or explicit” of any kind of representative democracy; adoption in some cases of spokes councils, composed by spokespersons for every working group, who rotate at every meeting and do not have any decisional mandate. This organizational form has been adopted in particular by the OWS movement in NYC, where within a month approximately 75 different working groups have been created “from Buddhist meditation to the drummers, from labor to education, outreach and media. To understand the centrality of the issue of democracy within the movement it is not sufficient to look at its social composition or at the strength of the anarchist tradition in the United States. In fact, if at the beginning the social composition of the occupation in Zuccotti Park was mainly middle class, it started changing quite soon and should in any case be understood in light of the role played by organized labor at least starting from October 5th. Moreover, the initial occupiers and the group of facilitators who were de facto running the occupation were not all anarchists, but came from a diversity of political traditions. This is not to say that these elements played no role, but to say rather that their presence is not sufficient to explain why democracy is so central. Another element to take into consideration is that the centrality of the issue of democracy is not a characteristic of the American movement alone, but has strongly characterized at least also the Spanish *acampadas* as well, and is a general feature of social movements in recent years. This most likely represents, at least partially, a reaction to the progressive shift of decisional power towards executive institutional bodies or extra-political organisms. If this process has already characterized the European institutional and political dynamic for the last twenty years “it suffices to mention the procedure adopted during the European Constitution” it is also important to note that the United States, the mythological land of democracy and freedom, in fact has one of the least democratic representative systems found in Western countries

(not to speak of its rapidly growing economic inequality). The very act of the OWS movement's self-definition as a leaderless movement, which was prominently asserted from the beginning on the OWS website and by the occupiers themselves, carries with it a decisive criticism of the substantial lack of democracy in the United States, where even the election of union officials is based on personal leadership.

While this new attention to horizontal democracy could have extremely positive effects on the reconstruction of social movements in the United States, the fetishism of democratic, consensual procedures could also have a paralyzing effect. Indeed, in New York, after almost two months of occupation, discussion of decision-making processes has increasingly replaced political discussion both in the general assemblies and in the newly-formed spokes council. In the spasmodic search for the alchemic combination between the most possible democratic organization and the efficiency necessary to catalyze the movement, politics has been lost in translation, falling into a self-referential spiral. While this focus on direct democracy can be explained also by the attempt to maintain the political autonomy of the movement against every attempt at external cooptation, the result has been the almost paranoid focus on procedural detail and organizational minutiae. This attitude, being fundamentally time-consuming, ultimately becomes more exclusive than inclusive. It automatically excludes all those who do not have the time to take part in interminable discussions which surround, in the end, minor concrete implications for they need to reproduce their life. Moreover, the difficulty of reaching wider political decisions and of elaborating a political strategy through this method, gives the opportunity to traditional political and labor organizations to strategize and take the initiative. The practice of consensus tends to cultivate the illusion of an impossible homogeneity, which would be counterproductive even if it were realized, for it would limit the diversity of the ways in which class, race and gender interests can be represented in a political position or decision. If, as Daniel Bensaïd pointed out, politics is more similar to algebra than arithmetics [4], this is because it is based on a constant disequilibrium, in which negative numbers must also be included in one's calculations. Majority vote, unlike consensus, takes into account this disequilibrium. Instead of trying to reduce decisions to an impossible synthesis, leaves open the possibility of a persistent, and even organized, dissent, without for this reason paralyzing the decision making.

In these cases Democracy has been confused with consensus, which itself has been confused with procedure. In the end the consensus procedure has been divorced from its content or rather it has become its own content. The point, however, would be to treat democracy not as an abstract organizational form, but rather as a process of empowerment of specific social actors, who find their own way to organize themselves and let their voices be heard, in the middle of the struggle and through the struggle. The question then becomes political once again: Democracy for whom, to arrive where, and to obtain what?

## Unions and OWS

The future dynamic of the movement largely depends on its capacity to spread outside the occupied square and to propel social struggles in schools, working places and neighborhoods. Contrary to what happened to the Seattle movement, most unions decided to support the OWS movement very quickly. Their decision to embrace the occupation reflected the realization by union leaders in New York and around the country that the movement was having a significant impact on the national political debate by coalescing popular anger around issues of class inequality, budget cuts, and mass unemployment. It has also shifted mainstream political discussions, intensifying opposition against attacks on labor. The support Unions have offered to the movement has not been merely formal: several powerful unions have offered the use of spaces, money, food and supplies, and health care. The collaboration between unions and OWS led first to the demonstration of October 5th and then to the national day of action on November 17th. Moreover, AFL-CIO actively mobilized its members in order to protect the occupation from the first attempt at eviction ordered by mayor Bloomberg. Among the working groups in Zuccotti Park a labor working group was also organized: this working group, in which many union members took part, supported the campaign of Sotheby's workers against Sotheby's attempt to eliminate union rights. All these elements are certainly positive and have opened the possibility for a new empowerment of workers all over the country. However, securing union support

for the movement does not guarantee a change of unions' tactics moving in the direction of internal democracy, and the escalation of concrete labor struggles. Particularly in New York, the movement has encountered some difficulty in actively organizing initiatives in support of workers' struggles, beyond a formal endorsement.

Finally, a more general problem concerns the capacity of the movement to take the initiative and somehow determine the political and social agenda. The Oakland experience showed the possibility of pushing the unions to radicalize their positions and to support, at least formally, the general strike. OWS in New York, however, did not show the same capacity of political initiative. Also the response given to the eviction from Zuccotti Park ordered by Bloomberg on November 15th was not as effective, nor as radical as the response in Oakland. Evicted from the park, being prohibited to use tents or to sleep in the park after 11pm, the occupation seemed to have lost momentum and did not manage to escalate the struggle or to spread occupations. The demonstration of November 17th, mostly promoted by the unions, saw a massive participation of thousands of people. However, entirely controlled by union leaders, it reproduced the most conventional forms of protest. Shortly before the demonstration, the president of SEIU, Mary Key Henry, publicly announced her endorsement for Obama in the next presidential elections: "We need a leader willing to fight for the needs of the 99 percent... Our economy and democracy have been taken over by the wealthiest one percent". As pointed out by Glenn Greenwald [\[5\]](#), Henry's endorsement of Obama is an attempt to pretend that the protest is grounded on the belief that the Republicans are the party of the wealthy, whereas the Democrats stand for the working class. The consequence of this public endorsement became visible already on November 17th. SEIU 1199 clearly tried to control the messaging of the protest, for example by bringing a huge Jumbotron and blaring sound system, which replace the people's mic, and even more significantly, by actively preventing a real occupation of the Brooklyn Bridge by actually blocking the traffic. What happened on November 17th signifies that the movement is now at a crucial turning point. The practice of consensus alone is not a sufficient antidote to ward off co-option by the Democratic Party: the only antidote would be the capacity of the movement to elaborate an autonomous political strategy and to escalate and spread the struggles.

## The students and OWS

At the end of November 17th it was still not clear what dynamic the movement would or should take. Something, however, happened just one hour before the unions' march: a sector of the students' demonstration, which was heading to Union Square, occupied one of the buildings of a progressive but expensive private university, The New School. This was the first occupation of a university building within the OWS movement. The American system of education is known worldwide for its deep inequity. In the last thirty years the dominance of private education over public universities has drastically increased. Between 2001 and 2006 tuition has increased 56%, each American student has an average of \$24,000 debt with the total amount of the student debt hitting \$805 billion: this is an amount comparable to that which led to the subprime crisis. The rate of insolvency is now around 10%, and it is clear that it will only continue to increase, as a result of the increasing rate of unemployment and underemployment. The enormous cuts to public education and increase in tuition both in private and in public education are leading to an increasingly systematic exclusion of working class children and people of color from higher education. Students had already started organizing themselves by the beginning of October. In NYC they created an All Student City Assembly in which students from NYU, Columbia, New School, Cooper Union, Julliard, Pratt, and CUNY took part. CUNY is NYC's public university, a truly giant institution with nearly half a million students and dozens of colleges planted throughout the city. During the month of October the All Student Assembly organized dozen of events, including a People's University and a week of student action from November 14th to November 21st. The main targets of the week of action were the tuition hike at CUNY and general student debt, with the launch of a campaign based on four principles: 1) Student loans should be interest-free; 2) Public colleges and universities should be federally-funded and tuition-free; 3) Private and for-profit colleges and universities, which are largely financed through student debt, should open their books; 4) The current student debt load should be written off. The answer by the police in NYC as in the rest of the country has been characterized, once again, by an excess of brutality. While on November 21st police attacked the students peacefully demonstrating at Baruch College, CUNY, and arrested 25



students, some days earlier police brutalized students and faculty at Berkeley; shortly after, shocking images of the repression against the students of UC Davis, near Sacramento, California, circulated rapidly on websites, newspapers, and mailing lists throughout the whole world. Called for by the Chancellor Linda P.B. Katehi, the police attacked the students peacefully protesting on campus in order to evict the occupation and pepper-sprayed the students who sat on the floor and refused to leave. As Nathan Brown, an Assistant Professor at UC Davis, recounted in an open letter in which he demanded the resignation of the Chancellor: "Police used batons to try to push the students apart. Those they could separate, they arrested, kneeling on their bodies and pushing their heads into the ground. Those they could not separate, they pepper-sprayed directly in the face, holding these students as they did so. When students covered their eyes with their clothing, police forced open their mouths and pepper-sprayed down their throats. Several of these students were hospitalized. Others are seriously injured. One of them, forty-five minutes after being pepper-sprayed down his throat, was still coughing up blood". [6]

The repression suffered by Californian students led only to an expansion and escalation of the movement. A GA of 5000 students in December passed a resolution in favor of a national day of student action, on March 1st: the call for the day of action was then modified and endorsed by the NYC Student Assembly and started circulating among campuses and gathering endorsement and support around the country.

Coordinating and unifying the student movement, however, is no simple task. The division between private and public universities is also a division between middle class, predominantly white students and students coming from working class families, with a higher rate of people of color. In order to push in direction of a nationwide student movement it would be necessary to bring forward a unifying platform grounded on the overarching idea of free education for everybody and on the critique of the current American system of education including its reproduction of divided class relations and race and gender inequalities; to build the solidarity of the students of private universities towards those of public universities; and to create effective forms of coordination among the different struggles and occupations.

## Conclusion

After two centuries of social struggles we should have learned that there is no spring awaiting the movement, for the only spring is the movement itself.

The OWS movement took place after years of absence of cohesive nationwide movements and amidst an extreme fragmentation of struggles. The economic crisis and the evident inequity of the austerity policies implemented by the government created the conditions for a new social explosion. The first great merit of the OWS movement is that it provided an answer to the danger of the rise of a racist and libertarian right, which is always a possible outcome of any economic crisis. It also allowed a reconnection between these fragmented struggles to emerge again and give visibility to a plurality of experiences of resistance and protest which, in their isolation during the last decade, remained muted by the noise of mainstream politics. The winter has arrived, and the presidential elections are now approaching. This is the moment in which the movement needs to rethink itself. Rethinking itself does not mean withdrawing from the squares and taking a break until the spring, as the magazine *Adbusters* seemed to suggest on November 14th: "Then we clean up, scale back and most of us go indoors while the die-hards hold the camps. We use the winter to brainstorm, network, build momentum so that we may emerge rejuvenated with fresh tactics, philosophies, and a myriad projects ready to rumble next spring" [7] After two centuries of social struggles we should have learned that there is no spring awaiting the movement, for the only spring is the movement itself. It is not fortuitous that in January, the most interesting and innovative political statement "this time in support of a general strike for May 1st" came from Occupy Oakland, which precisely did not take a break, but on the contrary resisted every attempt at repression and isolation of the movement, constantly trying to escalate the struggle. Besides the discussion on the question of the existence of the concrete conditions to call for a general strike or not on a national level, the political reasoning articulated in this statement grasps a crucial point: the relation between structural changes in the class composition of the last decades and the forms of the struggle. As the statement reads:

In 2011, the number of unionized workers in the US stood at 11.8%, or approximately 14.8 million people. What these figures leave out are the growing millions of people in this country who are unemployed and underemployed. The numbers leave out the undocumented, and domestic and manual workers drawn largely from immigrant communities. The numbers leave out workers whose workplace is the home and a whole invisible economy of unwaged reproductive labor. The numbers leave out students who have taken on nearly \$1 trillion dollars in debt, and typically work multiple jobs, in order to afford skyrocketing college tuition. The numbers leave out the huge percentage of black Americans that are locked up in prisons or locked out of stable or secure employment because of our racist society. [8]

The question is not to oppose unionized workers to non-unionized workers and unemployed people, but rather to rethink what a strike means in a situation in which the class composition and the concrete organization of labor has radically changed, in which unemployed and underemployed people, women and people of color represent an increasing large part of the working class, and in which the processes of subjectification of the working class are not the same we have known in the past. This implies reimagining different ways in which production and circulation of commodities can be blocked, including the possibility of variable forms of participation to the strike, and rethinking the sites of democratic empowerment of the working class.

The Oakland example shows in practice that the question of combining the event of the social rebellion and the laborious work of organizing, coordinating, keeping a memory alive, and transmitting experience when the movement recedes is a matter of combining together two different, discordant temporalities: the urgent time of the movement and the slower time of continuity. Such work is not an easy task, although it is a necessary task. But combining these two temporalities does not mean freezing the time of the movement, with the assumption that it will be possible to simply restart it again at a later time. In order to rethink itself this movement needs to spread, to go outside of the squares, to invade all aspects of the reproduction of capitalist relations. In a word: to escalate.

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[1] From the name of NYC mayor, Michael Bloomberg, who has governed the City since 2001. During the last ten years, Bloomberg, who is the 12th richest man of the United States, switched from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, to become later an independent.

[2] <http://www.adbusters.org/magazine>

[3] <http://www.occupyoakland.org/strike/>

[4] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/ben...>

[5] [http://www.salon.com/writer/glenn\\_g...](http://www.salon.com/writer/glenn_g...)

[6] <http://allcitystudentoccupation.com/>

[7] <http://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbu...>

[8] <http://occupyoakland.org/2012/01/oc...>