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USA

From Occupy Wall Street to Occupy America

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A handful of young people started Occupy Wall Street in mid-September, as a protest against the banks and corporations that have grown rich while most Americans have grown poorer. Within weeks they had attracted hundreds and then thousands to marches and demonstration in New York City—“one of them leading to the arrest of hundreds on the Brooklyn Bridge. The movement’s chant “We are the 99%” rang out not only in the Wall Street canyon but also across the country.” Now there are scores of Occupy groups across the United States camping out in public places, marching and rallying in cities and towns against corporate greed.

Occupy Wall Street and its offspring, nearly all of which began with white youth, have grown not only larger, but more diverse, attracting people from all walks of life and every segment of the society. They are making real their chant, “This is what democracy looks like.” While some of the young people have been inspired by the occupation of Tahrir Square and by the indignados of Spain, this is an essentially American movement about American issues. The Occupy folks are furious at the corporations and many are angry at government as well, they are generally hostile to the Republicans and disappointed in the Democrats. Frustrated with the economic and political situation, they want to tax the rich, they want to stop the foreclosures, they want jobs for themselves and all the other unemployed. Many demand an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

An impressive organization

While most of those down at Zuccotti Park where the occupation is taking place are from New York, others have come in ones and two from around the country to take a stand against corporate greed. Visitors are impressed with the organization: the kitchen, the medical center, the media center, the daily lectures. Intellectual luminaries such as Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist of the World Bank; Jeffrey Sachs, Harvard Professor and special advisor to the United Nations’ secretary general; and Barbara Ehrenreich, feminist and author. There is now also a newspaper, The Occupied Wall Street Journal, which plans to go national soon. Tens of thousands of dollars have been raised through small contributions by both Occupy Wall Street and the newspaper.

The peaceful movement has had clashes with the police both in New York City and in other cities and towns, but it has forged ahead. There have been dozens of arrests not only in New York City but also in Boston, Seattle, Des Moines, and yet this has not deterred the growing movement. The weekend of October 8-9 saw a huge demonstration of 10,000 in Portland and good size protest of 750 in Cincinnati. While, as usual, things may be larger, faster moving, and more radical on the coasts, the movement has also touched the “fly-over” country of the Midwest. In Chicago previously planned protests by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), other unions and community groups brought out thousands in demonstrations against financial institutions that ended up merging with Occupy Chicago, a development that could either strengthen or swamp the Occupy movement there.

Utopian and inspiring

Occupy is in part a coming together of activists. Watching any of the demonstrations in any city on any day one sees pass by on the t-shirts and jackets all the logos of every movement that has touched the country in the last decade: anti-war, LGBTQ, foreclosures, and civil rights activists. Walking among them are others new to the movement, blue

collar and white collar workers, so far without their logos, slogans, and banners, carrying their hand painted signs with slogans like "Create Jobs, Reform Wall Street, Tax the Wealthy More," and "The People are Too Big to Fail" (a reference to the argument that the U.S. government had to save the banks because they were "too big to fail"). The sense of hope that the movement is creating was expressed by one sign down at Wall Street that read, "This is the First Time I've Felt Hopeful in a Very Long Time."

The movement has a utopian character. Many of those involved in it want not only to overcome the immediate effects of the economic crisis—they want a better life, a better country, a better world. The movement as such has no ideology. This is populism of a left wing sort: the people versus big business and bad government. Though there are anarchists in it and they have given it some of their style, it is not an anarchist movement. Though there are some socialists in it, the movement is by no means socialist. What is perhaps best and most exciting about the movement is the confluence of the many social movements with middle class and working class people who have come down to Wall Street or in some other town or city down to Main Street to say, "We've had it." The utopianism of the movement has inspired ordinary people to say, "We can live differently, we must, and we will."

A month or so into the Occupy movement, the labor unions began to take an interest. In New York the unions turned out thousands of their members for a major march in October. At about the same time, Richard Trumka, head of the AFL-CIO spoke out in favor of the movement, as did leaders of various national and local unions. Yet the AFL-CIO and the Occupy movement remain wary of each other. The AFL's principal goal in the next year is to help Obama and the Democrats win the November 2012 elections, and both the AFL and the Democrats would love to figure out how to harness Occupy for their political goals. Many in the Occupy movement would love to have more workers involved, the unions involved, but they fear the labor bureaucracy's heavy hand. And, more important for some, they fear losing their political independence to union officials and Democrats.

Occupy Wall Street and politics

The Republican Party, of course, loathes the politics of Occupy. House Majority leader Eric Cantor referred to the Occupiers as "mobs." Alluding to President Barack Obama he said, "Some in this town condone "pitting Americans against Americans." Mitt Romney, the leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination said, "I think it's dangerous, this class warfare." Whatever they may say to the media, the Republicans' real fear is that Occupy Wall Street could buoy up the Democrats, while their hope that the movement's radicalism will blow their opponents to the left, costing them votes in the center.

The Democratic Party Congressional Campaign Committee and the think-tank Center for American Program would like to bind the Democratic ties to Occupy Wall Street, believing that the movement could put wind in the party's sails for the 2012. Other party leaders fear that the identification with the movement would move the party toward the left and away from the center where they believe the voters are. Even more important, some Democratic Party leaders argue, supporting a group that is attacking Wall Street could result in fewer donations from the banks and corporations that fund the Democrats. Bernie Sanders, the only independent in the Senate who calls himself a socialist (though he caucuses with the Democrats) spoke to the Occupy movement with an op-ed piece calling upon the government to break up the banks, support small business, and stop speculation in the oil industry. That was the Progressive Party program of 1912, the traditional program of American populism, but it misses completely the radical spirit of this movement.

Some Democrats would like to see Occupy Wall Street become their Tea Party, the rightwing group that brought new vitality to the Republicans. But Occupy Wall Street activists have kept their distance from the Democrats refusing to provide them a platform for their candidates. For example, when Representative John Lewis, a legend of the civil right movement and liberal African American Congressman from Georgia appeared at an Occupy Atlanta, he was not

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permitted to speak. Apparently, so far, the movement is committed to defending its independence.

Many of us are working to nurture this movement, to build it, and to help its potentially radical implications emerge.

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