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USA

Occupy Movement Goals: Socialist Revolution or Capitalist Reforms?

- Features -

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At last count 900 U.S. cities have joined the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement. Five hundred other cities and towns on every continent have joined the mushrooming mobilizations in solidarity. With each repressive blow, the movement comes back strongerâ€”more inclusive, more confident, and more clearly focused.

“The Americans are fighting back at last,” cried one European demonstrator, echoing the pride and solidarity felt by people the world over, who understand that they too are the 99 percentâ€”the working masses everywhere who create the wealth and yet are increasingly trampled on by the banking and corporate elite and their ever-distrusted political representatives or dictators.

When New York City’s Mayor Bloomberg threatened to close down the OWS encampment at Zuccotti Park, he was confronted with an unexpected threat from the AFL-CIO and its constituent unions, including the Communication Workers of America. The local union officialdom called on its ranks to “defend” the occupiers. “Defend” is a special word in working-class circles. It signifies a massive mobilization against those agents of a repressive society who would employ force and violence against peaceful protesters demanding fundamental change.

Bloomberg backed down when he and his cohorts judged that removing several hundred youthful occupiers would be quite a different proposition from challenging a mobilization of the organized labor movement.

Despite that victory, we can expect that the authorities will attempt to beat back the Occupy movement by repression, if they think they can get away with it. This was seen when, without warning, Oakland’s repressive apparatus was unleashed on Oct. 25, at 4 a.m. About 900 cops fired rubber bullets and beanbag missiles at close range at some 100 occupiers in Oakland’s Frank Ogawa Plaza, adjacent to City Hall. The attack included tear-gas and clubbing the non-violent occupiers.

In the name of sanitation concerns, the police destroyed the encampment, trashing some 100 tents and arresting scores of Oakland’s peaceful protesters. A police-fired missile sent 22-year-old Iraq War veteran Scott Olsen to the hospital with a severe skull fracture.

The next day, the Occupy Oakland General Assembly reclaimed the now renamed Oscar Grant Plaza, with some 2000 supporters mobilizing to protest the police attack.

In response to the attack, 1607 participants debated a resolution calling for an Oakland general strike on Wednesday, Nov. 2. The resolution passed by a 96.9% margin. The resolution stated, “Instead of workers going to work and students going to school, the people will converge on downtown Oakland to shut down the city. ... All banks and corporations should close down for the day or we will march on them. ... The whole world is watching Oakland. Let’s show them what is possible.”

Indeed, the whole world was watching the events in Oakland, and solidarity events took place in a number of cities. Occupy Wall Street in New York issued a call for a nationwide show of support on Nov. 2. And a planned march from Tahrir Square to the U.S. Embassy in Cairo, Egypt, included a statement of solidarity with the beleaguered Oakland protesters. It read in part: “The moment that we find ourselves in is nothing new, as we in Egypt and others have been fighting against systems of repression, disenfranchisement and the unchecked ravages of global capitalism (yes, we said it, capitalism): a system that has made a world that is dangerous and cruel to its inhabitants.”

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Most participants understand that the dramatic call for an Oakland general strike, without mass support from the labor movement, will likely not materialize. Nevertheless, it is encouraging that several unions have called on their members to take part. The expected outpouring of working people and youth in solidarity with Occupy Oakland will represent yet another powerful step toward their mobilization in critical class battles to come.

In 1946, as part of the post-World War II strike wave of industrial workers that engulfed the country in the largest multi-million-member labor mobilization in U.S. history, there was indeed a general strike in Oakland, one of the few in the nation's history. The strike began with the solidarity of local trade unionists who had witnessed the bosses herding scab workers through union picket lines at a department store. But the labor bureaucracy, as today, largely stood aside from what developed, virtually spontaneously, into a 54-hour general strike that closed down the city.

Then as now, there was a giant gap between the desire of labor's ranks to struggle and the willingness of labor's blustering misleaders to lead. But once again, the question of labor's leadership will be posed as rank-and-filers embark on the road to re-capturing their unions from the current crop of pro-capitalist bureaucrats.

In the process, as in 1946, they will take their struggles into the political arena and contemplate the formation of a mass labor party to compliment labor's struggle at the point of production with a political fight against the policies of the twin parties of capital.

With each passing day the Occupy movement gathers momentum as it reflects the deep-seated anger at the incursions on the quality of life, standard of living, and basic security of the broad working class and its allies among the oppressed and youth everywhere. This is a movement that in the main rejects the very essence of capitalist functioning worldwide, including its imperial wars and occupations and its outright domination by the billionaire and trillionaire ruling class—the one percent—whose interests are defended without question by the twin capitalist parties that govern in the interests of their corporate and banking overlords.

An October New York Times article tells the story well. Entitled, "New Poll Finds A Deep Distrust of Government," The Times poll found that "almost half of the public [a large plurality] thinks that the sentiment at the root of the Occupy Movement generally reflects the views of all Americans." This stands in sharp contrast to an earlier Times poll that found that the reactionary Tea Party's views reflects the opinion of some 27 percent.

The recent poll found that an astounding "89 percent distrust the government to do the right thing." The article asserted that "a remarkable sense of pessimism and skepticism was apparent in question after question in the survey, which found that Congressional approval had reached a new low of 9 percent."

Despite the mass sentiment and impressive and growing mobilizations against capitalist austerity, however, the official labor movement, as well as the organizations that purport to represent the interests of oppressed nationalities, have yet to exercise their still potent power to challenge and reverse the deepening capitalist offensive.

Today's labor officialdom, compelled now by rank-and-file pressure to at least posture with a modicum of identification with the Occupy movement, remains, with virtually no exceptions, bound in a deadly alliance with the Democratic Party and the Obama administration. This is despite the fact that the latter has proven to be capitalism's most fervent representative in imposing a level of austerity and war that the previous Bush administration never dreamed of.

For the ruling-class rich, and their twin political parties in the United States, there is no alternative to saving their degenerating social system other than continued austerity, cutbacks of every sort, imperialist wars of plunder and occupation, catastrophic assaults of the environment and the promotion of racist, sexist, and anti-immigrant hysteria

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aimed at dividing the working class to pit one sector against another.

Increasing numbers of Occupation activists are learning from bitter experience that the prospect of reforming capitalism is futile and that the system itself, at its roots, must be challenged, defeated, and replaced. In an ongoing process that combines mass actions, political discussion, and debate, socialist solutions are being considered to a degree not seen in a generation or more.

Socialism is a new social order where for the first time in human history the working masses rule in their own name, as opposed to the elite capitalist property owners and the governments they select to advance their own interests at the expense of us all.

This is not the bureaucratic caricature of socialism that existed in the Stalin era and that prevailed in the former USSR and Eastern Europe before it was challenged and overthrown by its victims, but the dynamic, democratic, and revolutionary socialism pioneered by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels—as well as by Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky and other early leaders of the historic 1917 Russian Revolution.

The socialist revolution in Russia was one in which the working-class majority ruled society in their own interests, and through their own institutions, in order to prioritize human needs in every social arena. The revolutionary government was based on the political and economic rule of mass working-class assemblies or councils of workers and the oppressed (“soviets” in the Russian language). This was a deep-going revolution that abolished the capitalist system of private ownership of society’s productive machinery, banks, and resources that had been previously organized to extract the wealth created by the people in the interests of the vast profits of the few.

No ruling-class minority in human history, from the time of the ancient slave societies of the Greeks and Romans thousands of years ago, to the centuries of feudal monarchies, and to today’s capitalist property-owning elite, has ever relinquished its power voluntarily. Socialist revolution, in the only true sense of the term, is the conscious organization and mobilization of the vast majority to challenge the rulers for power. To envision such a massive social transformation is impossible without the direct involvement of working people acting as a conscious class alternative to the present reactionary and minority social order.

It is no coincidence that the Egyptian people’s removal of the hated Hosni Mubarak dictatorship, beginning with the massive assemblies at Tahrir Square, served to inspire the original OWS activists in the U.S. But Mubarak’s forced departure was only the beginning of an ongoing revolutionary process. Egyptian capitalism, however discredited, remains in place and along with it a military regime that still rules with terror and has failed in virtually every respect to substantially change the lives of the Egyptian people.

The dictatorship of capital also remains in Tunisia and ever more so in Libya, where U.S./NATO military forces exchanged their previously favored Gadhafi dictatorship with another, even more intimately tied to imperialism. None of the deep social problems plaguing those countries will be solved short of a socialist revolution.

History has demonstrated that the construction of a mass revolutionary socialist party, rooted in the struggles of the masses everywhere and dedicated to the total re-organization of society to establish working-class power, is a prerequisite to any successful challenge to the capitalist order.

In the United States, Socialist Action strives to be part of the critical process of building such a revolutionary socialist party. Socialist Action’s “Workers’ Action Program to Fight the Crisis” is aimed at mobilizing millions around specific and realistic demands to challenge the capitalist offensive and, in time, the capitalist order itself.

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