

USA: Occupy and the tasks of socialists

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Contents

- [Occupy's class character \(...\)](#)
- [OWS's birth and the socialist](#)
- [Socialists on anarchist \(...\)](#)
- [Socialists and Occupy working](#)
- [Anarchists and the Black Bloc](#)
- [Reds and blue](#)
- [The danger of the Democratic](#)
- [Some conclusions](#)

"Out of clouds of pepper spray and phalanxes of riot cops a new generation of revolutionaries is being forged, and it would be a shame if the Peter Camejos, Max Elbaums, Angela Davises, Dave Clines and Huey Newtons of this generation end up in separate "competing" socialist groups ... Now is the time to begin seriously discussing the prospect of regroupment, of liquidating outdated boundaries we have inherited, of finding ways to work closely together for our common ends."

December 14, 2011 — *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — Occupy is a once in a lifetime opportunity to re-merge the socialist and working-class movements and create a viable broad-based party of radicals, two prospects that have not been on the cards in the United States since the late 1960s and early 1970s. The socialist left has not begun to think through these "big picture" implications of Occupy, nor has it fully adjusted to the new tasks that Occupy's outbreak has created for socialists. In practice, the socialist left follows Occupy's lead rather than Occupy follow the socialist left's lead. As a result, we struggle to keep pace with Occupy's rapid evolution.

Occupy Wall Street (OWS) mobilised more workers and oppressed people in four weeks than the entire socialist left combined has in four decades. We would benefit by coming to grips with how and why other forces (namely anarchists) accomplished this historic feat.

The following is an attempt to understand Occupy, review the socialist response, and draw some practical conclusions aimed at helping the socialist left become central rather than remain marginal to Occupy's overall direction.

Occupy's class character and leadership

Occupy is more than a movement and less than a revolution. It is an uprising, an elemental and unpredictable outpouring of both rage and hope from the depths of the 99%.

Occupy is radically different from the mass movements that rocked US politics in the last decade or so: the immigrants' rights movement that culminated on May 1, 2006, in the first national political strike since

1886, the Iraq anti-war movement of 2002-2003 and the global justice movement that began with the Battle of Seattle in 1999 and ended on 9/11. All three were led by liberal non-governmental

organisations (NGOs). They sponsored the marches, obtained the permits and selected who could and could not speak from the front of the rallies. Militant, illegal direct action tended to be the purview of adventurist Black Bloc elements or handfuls of very committed activists.

Compared to these three movements, the following differences stand out: Occupy is broader in terms of active participants and public support and, most importantly, is far more militant and defiant. *Tens of thousands of people* are willing to brave arrest and police brutality. The uprising was deliberately designed by its anarchist initiators to be an open-ended and all-inclusive process, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of the failed conventional single-issue protest model. The “people’s mic” [1], invented to circumvent the New York Police Department’s (NYPD) ban on amplified sound, means that anyone can be heard by large numbers of people at any time.

One of the most important elements that makes Occupy an uprising and not merely a mass movement is its alleged leaderlessness [2]. Of course as Marxists we know that every struggle requires leadership in some form, and Occupy is no exception. The leaders of Occupy are those who put their bodies on the line at the encampments and get deeply involved in the complex, Byzantine decision-making process Occupy uses known as “modified consensus” [3]. Occupy’s leaders are those who make the proposals at planning meetings, working group, and general assemblies (GAs) that attract enough support to determine the uprising’s course of action.

The people leading the uprising are those who are willing to make the biggest sacrifices for it.

Since Occupy is self-organising and self-led by its most dedicated participants, attempts to make its decision-making process more accessible to those who are not willing or able to dedicate themselves to Occupy 24 hours a day, seven days a week will fall flat. “All day, all week, occupy Wall Street!” is not just a chant, it is a way of life for Occupy’s de facto leadership.

This reality has affected the class character of encampment participants, who tend to be either what Karl Marx called lumpenproletariat (long-term homeless, hustlers, drug addicts and others who have fallen through the cracks of the capitalist edifice) or highly educated (white) students, ex-students and graduate students. The former joined the encampments not just to eat and sleep in a relatively safe place but also because they hope the uprising will win real, meaningful change. The latter tend to dominate Occupy’s convoluted decision-making process and what motivates them is identical to what motivates the lumpenproletarian elements: hope that Occupy will win real, meaningful change. Many of these people are saddled with tremendous amounts of personal debt, have worked two or three part-time jobs simultaneously, or were unable to find work in their field despite their expensive, extensive educations. They were destined to be secure petty bourgeois or well-paid white-collar workers before the ongoing fallout from the 2008 economic crisis claimed their futures and put their backs against the wall. This is the material reality underpinning the determination of Occupy participants to keep coming back despite repeated arrests, beatings, and setbacks. Their determination is the stuff revolutions are made of.

The advantage of Occupy’s structure and form is that the Democratic Party, liberal NGOs and union leaders have been unable to co-opt the uprising before it exploded into over 1000 US towns and cities and targeted President Obama [4]. The disadvantage is that it limits Occupy geographically to places where authorities will tolerate encampments and sociologically to the least and most privileged sections of the population, to those who have nowhere else to go besides the encampments and to those who can afford to camp out for weeks at a time.

The undocumented immigrant who works 60 hours a week and the wage slave who works 40 hours a week will find it very difficult to shape Occupy’s decision-making process. Attempts to scrap Occupy’s existing structures and forms to make them more accessible to those other than full-time

occupiers carry two inherent risks: 1) opening it up to forces that would love nothing more than to turn the uprising's fighters into foot soldiers for Obama's 2012 campaign and 2) diminishing the power wielded by Occupy's most dedicated participants. In places where Occupy does not take the form of a permanent encampment its decision-making process can be even more diffuse and difficult to participate in.

OWS's birth and the socialist response

The US socialist left did not cover OWS in its daily publications until after NYPD deputy inspector Anthony Bologna pepper sprayed cornered women on a sidewalk near Union Square on September 24 [5]. The Socialist Equality Party's coverage on its *World Socialist Web Site* began on September 26 [6], the Party for Socialism and Liberation's (PSL) coverage in *Liberation News* began on September 27 [7], the International Socialist Organization's (ISO) first article appeared in *Socialist Worker* on September 8 [8] and Solidarity's initial discussion began on October 3 [9].

This tardiness reflected the socialist left's deep-seated scepticism [10] at a protest without demands, a rally without a permit, OWS's talk of prefiguring a future non-capitalist society [11] in an outdoor camp in the middle of Manhattan's financial district and a "leaderless" "horizontal" process. The preponderance of these anarchist elements, combined with the socialist left's theoretical sophistication and political preconceptions, led to a "wait and see" approach that consigned us to the role of rearguard, not vanguard.

The uprising succeeded not only *in spite of* its alleged weaknesses but *because of them* [12]. Repression from above and determination from below combined to win Occupy mass support in the weeks after September 24. The socialist left made OWS a priority and moved beyond sending its members to OWS organising meetings in early October as the trade unions, MoveOn.org and other left-liberal groups mobilised for the October 5 march of over 20,000 to protest the NYPD's bait-and-arrest operation on the Brooklyn Bridge the previous Saturday [13].

Socialists on anarchist terrain

Occupy is undoubtedly related to the "occupy everything, demand nothing" trend [14] that appeared in student mobilisations against budget cuts to higher education in 2009-2010. David Graeber, the anarchist OWS organiser who coined "we are the 99%", pointed out how anarchism informs Occupy's refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of state and corporate authorities and its insistence on direct action, direct democracy, non-hierarchical organising, consensus and prefigurative politics [15].

The task for the socialist left with respect to these issues is to understand: 1) how and why these methods dominate the uprising and 2) what to do about it.

Anarchist practices have become widespread because success breeds imitation. Just as the 1917 Russian Revolution a century ago spawned communist workers' parties with tens of thousands of members hoping to imitate the Bolshevik example in their own countries, so today the thousands of people inspired to imitate OWS in their own towns and cities copied what *proved in practice to be an effective means of bringing tens of thousands of workers and oppressed people into motion*, the socialist left's criticisms notwithstanding [16]. In the weeks following September 17 OWS's facilitation working group [17], which is tasked with running the New York City GA [18], trained organisers all over the country in the modified consensus process with dozens of video sessions

broadcast over livestream.com in addition to face-to-face sessions with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of OWS participants. Many of these trainees then traveled to other cities or returned to their home cities to launch new occupations.

Occupy is the vanguard of the 99% and OWS is the "vanguard of the vanguard", to borrow an expression of Leon Trotsky's [19]. OWS's vanguard role explains why its methods prevail over those preferred by more traditional organizations such as unions, liberal NGOs and socialist groups.

The socialist left must learn to navigate Occupy's anarchist terrain if we hope to shape and lead the uprising instead of being shaped and led by it. Trying to overturn existing practices in favour of Roberts Rules of Order, majority voting and formally electing leaders by making proposals along these lines at GAs will fail because Occupy participants have not been shown by example that these methods are superior.

In short, if it ain't broke, don't fix it, and if it is broke, show and prove what a better model looks like.

The reality of OWS is that the "horizontal" modified consensus method, the GA and the spokescouncil [20] are all highly dysfunctional but not fatally so (at least at this stage). Prior to the eviction, many OWS working groups began secretly hoarding street donations they received from the GA's official finance working group (FWG) [21] because they put lots of money into the general fund but faced serious hurdles in getting any money out of it for badly needed items due to OWS's protracted, bureaucratic decision-making process. Also, because FWG administers over \$500,000 in internet donations, many working groups saw no need to contribute to a fund flush with cash and resented what amounted to a one-way cashflow.

The money hoarding was part of a divide that emerged between full-time occupiers who felt disenfranchised and eventually boycotted the GA on the one hand and movement types (many of whom did not sleep in Liberty Park) who believed that the modified consensus process was the single most important element of the uprising on the other. This divide manifested itself geographically with the emergence of a "ghetto" and a "gentrified" area [22] that was captured in a *Daily Show* segment [23].

The spokescouncil structure [24] approved by the New York City GA, aimed at alleviating its frustrating and undemocratic logjams [25], simply *transferred* those problems to the spokescouncil while not significantly improving the GA's process. All of these problems worsened after NY Mayor Michael Bloomberg evicted OWS from Liberty Park and OWS did not contest the eviction by returning there, a blow the uprising is still struggling to recover from (an improved encampment is planned for a new location).

Although the socialist left might see these problems as a vindication of its dim view of modified consensus and Occupy's decision-making process generally, the task of socialists is not be vindicated but to aid the uprising in overcoming its stumbling blocks with practical solutions arising from the experiences of Occupy participants that utilise the uprising's existing framework, infrastructure and terminology.

Instead of proposing at a GA or a working group to scrap modified consensus from the outset, a more fruitful approach would be to raise process reform proposals *only after* building close relationships with fellow activists through joint work. If (or when) they become frustrated with the shortcomings of modified consensus [26], a suggestion to modify the 90% approval margin necessary to overcome a block to a two-thirds margin or 50% plus one might then become appealing.

The difficult, painful and protracted process of trial and error cannot be skipped. We may be right about the shortcomings of modified consensus, but only peoples' direct experience will prove it conclusively.

Socialists and Occupy working groups

Every local Occupy has working groups organised around a wide variety of tasks, a reflection of Arun Gupta's observation that "all occupations are local" [27]. The challenges facing OWS are not the same as Occupy Philadelphia, Portland, Mobile or Nashville. OWS has over 40 working groups, some of which were forced to transform after the eviction (sanitation became focused on housing, for example) due to new circumstances. Local Occupys have adapted OWS's model to their local needs and created a dozen or so working groups such as labour, demands, direct action, security, medical, food/kitchen, comfort, internet, media and facilitation.

The socialist left has generally limited its participation in Occupy to a handful of working groups, usually those engaged in what Ross Wolfe of Platypus correctly described as mental labour [28] — demands, labour outreach, direct action — and shied away from the physical labour or "grunt work" done by security, comfort, medical and food/kitchen. This is problematic because it cedes the majority of working groups to the influence of other political forces (anarchists and liberals), inadvertently creating "Red ghettos".

Prioritising groups devoted to mental as opposed to manual labour is predicated on the false notion that running a kitchen or securing tents to sustain occupiers is less political or less important than talking about demands or ideological issues. When Genora Dollinger led the Flint sit-down strike in 1936, feeding strikers hot food was just as crucial to beating General Motors as picket lines were [29]. Without one the other was impossible. The example of post-eviction OWS bears this out as well. At this stage of the uprising's development, mass mobilisations and political discussions have no launching point or organising centre without a physical occupation, and the physical occupation of a space requires a lot of "grunt work".

The socialist left must be involved with all of Occupy's aspects and develop a reputation for being the most committed, most serious, most effective fighters. Only on that basis will we be able to effectively influence people and steer the uprising's course.

Anarchists and the Black Bloc

One stark difference between Occupy and its great dress rehearsal, the global justice movement, is the role played by Black Bloc (BB) and the broader anarchist reaction to BB. BB (not an organised group but a tactic) came to the fore of Occupy for the first time during the November 2 Oakland general strike [30] called in response to the police department's crackdown that left Iraq veteran Scott Olsen in the hospital with a serious brain injury (he was hit in the face with a tear gas canister) [31].

The first notable BB incident was the vandalism at Whole Foods and major banks during the November 2 day-time marches [32]. The second incident occurred when BB led a failed attempt to seize the Traveler's Aid Society (TAS) later that evening after the general strike succeeded in shutting down Oakland's port with a 10,000-strong throng [33]. Although related, these two incidents should be examined separately because they involve different issues and had different dynamics.

The vandalism at Whole Foods seemed like a replay of BB's infamous Starbucks window-smashings in 1999 that came to (unfairly) symbolise the global justice movement. Things turned out differently this time when BB's actions touched off physical fights *among* demonstrators, with people shouting and eventually *throwing objects at BB* when they refused to stop damaging the property of Whole Foods and other corporate behemoths along the march route. BB acted with impunity in the global justice movement because the mantra of "diversity of tactics" prevailed, which, in practice, meant no one had the right to tell anyone else what they could or could not do even if their actions damaged the movement as a whole. This childish attitude has given way to a much more serious approach by Occupy participants who feel a strong sense of ownership over the uprising and will not allow adventurists to wreck it.

The Whole Foods incident led to thoughtful criticisms of BB's actions [34] in the context of Occupy from fellow anarchists [35]. This marks a significant turning point in the maturation of US anarchism. The socialist left needs to incorporate this reality into its Occupy strategy.

Later that evening, 150 people led by BB occupied TAS, an empty building that became vacant as a result of recent budget cuts. After dropping a banner in celebration of the easy seizure of TAS, the crowd of occupiers swelled to 700 or so [36]. They erected barricades at the two nearest intersections and set them on fire when hundreds of Oakland riot police appeared (the cops kept a low profile throughout the day). The fires and small barricades blocking the street [37] did nothing to stop police from marching on TAS and arresting those who stayed to defend it (many BB fled to avoid arrest).

The reaction within the anarchist camp to the TAS debacle was even more visceral than to the Whole Foods incident. A local street medic blasted the BB members for fleeing the scene they helped create [38] and a post on San Francisco *Indymedia's* website [39], presumably from those who led the seizure, defending the action drew intensely critical comments slamming their political and tactical failures during the short-lived occupation. Kim Lehmkuhl even went so far as to describe the fire starters as faux-anarchists, provocateurs, and used other profanity-laced pejoratives unfit for a political publication to describe their actions [40].

By contrast, the socialist left's criticism of the TAS occupation focused on process rather than substance. Todd Chretien wrote in *Socialist Worker* that the action's organisers failed to participate in much less win the approval of Oakland's GA, that they underestimated the police, and "sought to replace the power of mass unity with the supposed heroism of an elite" [41].

These mistakes are irrelevant to why the TAS occupation failed. This line of argument is one of many indications that the socialist left may not fully understand how Occupy works.

The overwhelming majority of actions, especially direct actions, that Occupy engages in are not approved by GAs. Autonomous groups (sometimes working groups officially recognised by local GAs, sometimes not) call actions, and occupiers choose to get on board or not. If every group with an idea for an action had to get GA approval, said action would simply never happen because of the bureaucratic nature of the modified consensus process when used by large groups. Expecting anarchists, especially BB, to come to a GA for approval before taking action is not realistic, nor is it a viable strategy for dealing with the very real problem of adventurist trends within Occupy. Furthermore, the TAS occupation was not an attempt to hijack or disrupt an explicitly non-violent march by an ultra-left minority as the Whole Foods incident was.

OWS itself began with the "heroism of an elite", the 100-200 people who risked arrest by sleeping in Liberty Park starting on September 17 to make their point. Without their heroic action, the "mass unity" of the Occupy uprising would never have been born.

The TAS occupation failed because:

- 1) The occupiers didn't sneak into the building and begin quietly building fortifications inside to hold it. Instead they celebrated the seizure by blaring dance music, unfurling a large banner on the side of the building and dropping hundreds of leaflets from above. This attracted the attention of the local media and alerted the Oakland police to the situation, which gave them time to muster their forces for an attack at the time of their choosing.
- 2) After celebrating their victory publicly, TAS occupiers set up ineffective, tiny barricades (not more than a two or three feet tall) strewn across the two nearest intersections [42]. Neither of these barricades were staffed with enough occupiers to hold those positions.
- 3) The mini-barricades were set on fire but not physically defended from the slow, methodical police advance.

Hundreds of people outside BB got involved in an exciting action that was ill conceived, poorly executed and an avoidable failure due more to the organisers' inexperience (no doubt this was their first time trying to seize a building with hundreds of people) than any horribly elitist ultra-left politics. Setting up barricades was a necessity, but their placement on the outside of the building half a block away with a few dozen defenders (who set them ablaze) did nothing in terms of accomplishing the goal of holding TAS. If 150-700 people unobtrusively barricaded themselves inside of the building and held it until the next day, TAS could have been a big victory and opened a new chapter in the uprising which, thus far, has depended on seizing and holding outdoor locations for mass assemblies.

Our tasks with respect to the anarchists are twofold:

- 1) to work with them in neutralising adventurists and ultra-lefts when their activities threaten Occupy as a whole, and
- 2) to out-compete them in daring, audacity, creativity, improvisation, and revolutionary elan in the most friendly, collaborative, and comradely manner possible.

Only when we do both will we truly be contending for leadership of the Occupy uprising and fulfilling our duties as socialists.

Reds and blue

One of the socialist left's most consistent criticisms of Occupy has concerned the issue of the police. PSL's *Liberation News* ran an article entitled, "Are the police forces part of the 99% or tools of the 1%?" The Internationalist Group attributed the predominance of whites at OWS to its "line" on the police [43]: "A main reason why there are relatively few black and Latino participants in Occupy Wall Street is this positive attitude toward the police, who day-in and day-out persecute the oppressed." *Socialist Worker* correspondent Danny Lucia concluded an article entitled "Officer not-at-all-friendly" this way [44]:

"I'll ask the same question now to all those chanting and blogging about the police being part of the 99 percent. When you chant and blog support for the cops, when you publicly speculate that maybe deep down the cops really like you, how does that make you appear to your darker-skinned comrades in the movement who have no doubts about how the police feel about them?"

The New York City ISO even held a public meeting on the topic: "Our Enemies in Blue: Why the Police Are Not Part of the 99%." [45]

Socialists are duty-bound to object to politics, strategy, tactics and slogans we believe harm or impede movements of the oppressed and exploited. On this point there can be no debate.

However, the socialist left's objections on this issue are not rooted in the needs of the uprising but in our desire to "teach" Occupy Marxist orthodoxy. According to the socialist left, OWS was and is too friendly to the police, when, in reality, OWS had the opposite problem: hostility to the NYPD was so strong that incidents of groping, sexual assaults and rapes that began almost from day one of the occupation went unreported for weeks. This practice changed as the incidents escalated and occupiers realised it could not be handled "internally" [46], (When such reports were filed, the NYPD blamed the victims [47], creating an opportunity for OWS to link up with SlutWalk.)

None of the socialist publications acknowledged or seemed to be aware of this development within Occupy, nor did they offer any practical guidance on what to do about the sexual assaults that plagued occupations across the country [48].

The socialist left objects to the inclusion of the rank and file of the police force in what Occupy calls "the 99%" by which the uprising means everyone outside the wealthiest 1% who destroyed the economy, paid themselves and rigged the political system. These objections have been framed in a problematic way; the issues have been mixed up and, as a result, Occupy's "friendliness" towards the police in the face of repression appears to be stupidity, insanity, or both. For example, Lucia wrote in the article quoted previously:

"Maybe the horrifying [police] attack on Iraq vet Scott Olsen and the rest of Occupy Oakland will finally settle the debate inside the movement about whether or not the police are on our side. Up until now, some protesters have been determined to maintain sympathy for the cops despite the near-constant harassment of many encampments."

No act of police violence will "finally settle the debate" about whether the police are part of the 99% because there is no debate, at least within Occupy. The police rank and file are part of the 99%. They are the part of the 99% that keep the rest of the 99% in line at the behest of the 1%. The police rank and file are professional class traitors. Shouting "you are the 99%!" at them drives that point home far better than calling them "pigs" or "our enemies in blue". PSL's juxtaposition, "are the police forces part of the 99% or tools of the 1%?" is false because they are both. It is not a case of either-or.

To argue that the police are "not part of the 99%" means to argue that they are somehow part of the 1%, a radically and demonstrably false notion. This explains why the socialist left's argument on this issue has gained zero ground within Occupy despite all the beatings, arrests, abuse and brutality. Where the police rank and file fit into the 99%-1% dichotomy is separate from questions like whether Occupy should march in defence of police pensions or if shouting "you are the 99%!" or "join us" at the police is something Occupy should do. These are the live issues facing Occupy that the socialist left should be discussing and providing a political lead on instead of criticising who occupiers maintain "sympathy" for.

Occupy is absolutely correct in its openness to including rank-and-file cops in a struggle against the 1%. This correctness has been proven in practice many times over. Police in Albany resisted pressure from Democratic Party Governor Anthony Cuomo to clear and arrest occupiers [49]. Retired Philadelphia police captain Ray Lewis joined OWS [50] and was arrested in full uniform during the November 17 day of action; he carried a sign that read, "NYPD: Don't Be Wall Street

Mercenaries" [51].

It is precisely because the uprising says, "you too, officer, are part of the 99%" that Christopher Rorey, a black officer with the DeKalb County Police Department, emailed Occupy Atlanta for help fighting the unjust foreclosure of his family's home [52]. Occupy Atlanta sent a dozen occupiers, delaying the foreclosure temporarily [53]. Now the bank (government-owned Fannie Mae) is taking legal action to force Rorey to turn over all email correspondence between his family and Occupy Atlanta, as if evicting them was not enough [54].

If the socialist left's "line" on the police prevailed in Occupy and the uprising treated rank-and-file cops as "the enemy", none of these things would have happened. If officer Rorey is not part of the 99%, then Occupy Atlanta is guilty of betraying our cause and siding with "our enemies in blue". No single socialist publication has mentioned Rorey's case in any of its articles on Occupy and the police because doing so would force them to answer the most basic of political questions: which side are you on?

Occupy Atlanta was not afraid to pick officer Rorey's side and we should not be afraid to either.

As socialists we should be going out of our way to organise actions that might split the police along class lines or cause them disciplinary problems. Cases like Rorey's are a golden opportunity. It offers us the exceedingly rare possibility of fanning the flames of discontent *within* the police force, *between* the rank-and-file cops and their bosses, *between* the police force and the 1% they work for.

The tension between the police and their political bosses became evident after the Oakland police union issued a scathing rebuke to Oakland's Democratic Party Mayor Jean Quan, who ordered them to clear Occupy Oakland and then tried to distance herself from the crackdown after they nearly killed Iraq veteran Scott Olsen and provoked a general strike. Imagine the difficulty that would have emerged within the Atlanta police department if they had been ordered to clear the house of a fellow officer, his family, and "pro cop" occupiers.

It is for these strategic reasons that Occupy the Hood founder Malik Rhaasan spoke positively about the prospect of marching on NYPD headquarters in defence of their pensions. Such an action would put the NYPD in the awkward position of possibly pepper spraying and arresting a "pro cop" march. Rhaasan's position should also serve as a warning to disproportionately white socialist groups not to use the suffering of oppressed peoples at the hands of the police to make bogus arguments about Occupy and the police.

The task of socialists is not to "teach" Occupy that the police are "our enemies in blue". Our task is to *overcome* the police as a repressive force, to *neutralise* them, as US Marine and Iraq veteran Shamar Thomas did when he stopped 30 cops from arresting peaceful Occupy protesters at a massive Times Square OWS demonstration [55]. Thomas shamed them, implied they were cowards, and told them there was "no honour" in brutalising the very people they are supposed to protect. He utilised the contradiction between the stated purpose of the police and their actual purpose to impede police repression on behalf of our real enemies, the ruling class.

The danger of the Democratic Party

After the socialist left recognised the importance of Occupy and got on board, it began warning of the danger of being co-opted by the Democratic Party. A typical example was Dan La Botz's article "Occupy the Democratic Party? No Way!" [56] which used current and historical events to make a very strong case against the Democrats but did not offer any *practical* guidance on how to avoid being taken over (aside from just saying "no" to the drug known as the Democratic Party).

This type of negative “don’t do the following” or “it would be a mistake if” advice to Occupy is common for socialist publications. Danny Lucia’s “Co-opt-upy Wall Street?” in *Socialist Worker* [57] had a detailed account of how the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) broke promises made in joint meetings with OWS organisers when it took over the November 17 march to ensure there would be no traffic disruption on the Brooklyn Bridge or grassroots people’s mic speakouts at the closing rally. (Given the SEIU’s union-busting in the health-care industry on the West Coast, this betrayal should come as no surprise [58].) Lucia argues SEIU’s actions were part and parcel of its strategy to maximise the vote for the Democrats and minimise Occupy’s militancy.

However, the practical conclusion Lucia draws about how OWS should deal with this is to “not to turn away from organized labor, whose participation in OWS in New York City has been one of the movement’s biggest strengths”. He continued:

“OWS has breathed new life into a labor movement that has been in retreat for decades. At the rank-and-file level, the Occupy movement was a lightning rod for many people who have been looking for a way to take action. ... Continuing that engagement with labor will be important for the future of the Occupy movement. And within unions, it will serve as a counter-weight against officials who want labor to go back to mobilizing only for the polls—rather than for the protests that have galvanized people around the country in a long overdue struggle against the One Percent.”

These arguments are correct so far as they go, but they do not go far enough. These are not concrete, practical conclusions. Of course Occupy should not abandon its work with unions (no one in OWS is in favour of doing so), but refusing to shun unions in general does nothing specific to prevent SEIU from hijacking future marches. Should OWS organise any future actions in conjunction with SEIU since it has proven it cannot be trusted, especially as the 2012 elections approach? Should SEIU representatives be allowed to attend OWS logistics meetings? If the SEIU tries to hijack another action, what should OWS do? March somewhere else? Hold an ad-hoc GA to discuss a potential course of action?"

The article says not a word on these burning questions.

The task of the socialist left is not simply to warn and advise Occupy about the danger of being co-opted by the Democratic Party (a danger that is keenly felt by a large number of participants, including liberals) but to propose, organise and lead Occupy actions against individual Democratic Party politicians and the party as a whole, thereby creating facts on the ground that will make co-optation difficult or impossible.

For example, after congressman Charlie Wrangel visited OWS to “show support”, OWS marched on his office because he voted in favour of a free-trade agreement with South Korea [59]. In New Hampshire (a blue state [60]), Obama was “mic checked” [61] for his silence on the police brutality directed at Occupy and his refusal to do anything about the banksters’ ongoing destruction of the US economy. Jesse La Greca, who famously destroyed a Fox News reporter in an unaired interview that went viral [62], called for occupying the offices of “worthless Blue Dog” Democrats like Senators Ben Nelson and Max Baucus [63]. OWS has also gone after an Obama fundraiser and the 2012 Democratic National Convention [64] will also be a likely Occupy target (the host city has already tried to ban Occupy actions [65]).

These actions are a reflection of the fact that Occupy is a rebellion against policies the Democratic and Republican parties have implemented for four decades, that most of the mayors who ordered crackdowns on encampments are Democrats [66], and that the uprising exploded under a Democratic Party president that millions of Occupy participants voted for in the hope that he would govern differently than his predecessors had. For these reasons the uprising does not see sharp

distinctions between the two parties, unlike the 2002-2003 anti-war movement.

This is not to suggest that the danger of co-optation is non-existent but to point out that Occupy's self-led self-organised nature does not lend itself to Wisconsin-style derailment [67] (where the socialist left did not create popular bodies like GAs that could have served as authoritative counterweights to the union leaders and provided the basis for an Oakland-style general strike). Just as Occupy created new and unexpected forms, so too will the Democratic Party's intervention into Occupy come in a form that is new and unexpected.

We must do everything possible to hinder that eventuality. Deeds not words, agitation not propaganda are decisive now.

Given Occupy's fluidity, the socialist left should be careful about ruling any course of action out. An attempt to "Occupy the Democratic Party" is not necessarily a road for activists out of militant struggle and into the voting booth. For example, Occupy activists might decide to copy the example of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party which held an integrated primary and then tried to claim the official segregated delegation's seat at the party's 1964 convention. This was an effort to bring the fight for civil rights into the Democratic Party, not an attempt to trap the civil rights fight in a dead end. We may see Occupy efforts to hold "99% primaries" that ban contributions by corporations and lobbyists and select delegates to the 2012 convention that challenge the legitimacy of the party's official delegates. Such an action would probably be a road out of the Democratic Party since it would prove to thousands of people in practice that the party is owned lock, stock and barrel by the 1%.

This is hypothetical but Occupy thus far has pulled off many creative and original actions that the socialist left did not foresee but then wholeheartedly supported once they emerged. Failure to be open minded is what caused us to lag behind Occupy's rise in the first place.

Some conclusions

The most basic and fundamental task facing socialists is *to merge with Occupy and lead it from within*. Socialist groups that insist on "intervening" in the uprising will be viewed as outsiders with little to contribute in practice to solving Occupy's actual problems because they will be focused on winning arguments and ideological points rather than actively listening to, joining hands with and fighting alongside the vanguard of the 99% in overcoming common practical and political.

One difficulty the socialist left faces in accomplishing this basic and fundamental task is the divisions in our ranks that serve in practice to weaken the overall socialist influence within Occupy, thereby strengthening that of the anarchists. They have their Black Bloc, but where is our Red Bloc? Where are the socialist slogans to shape and guide the uprising's political development?

Out of clouds of pepper spray and phalanxes of riot cops a new generation of revolutionaries is being forged, and it would be a shame if the Peter Camejos, Max Elbaums, Angela Davis, Dave Clines and Huey Newtons of this generation end up in separate "competing" socialist groups as they did in the 1960s. Now is the time to begin seriously discussing the prospect of regroupment, of liquidating outdated boundaries we have inherited, of finding ways to work closely together for our common ends.

Above all else, now is the time to take practical steps towards creating a broad-based radical party that in today's context could easily have thousands of active members and even more supporters. Initiatives like Socialist Viewpoint's call for a joint revolutionary socialist organising committee in

the Bay Area [68] is a step in the right direction. We need to take more of those steps, sooner rather than later. The opportunity we have now to make the socialist movement a force to be reckoned with again in this country depends on it.

Anyone who agrees with this conclusion, whether they are in a socialist group or not, and wants to take these steps should email me so we can find ways to work together.

Pham Binh

P.S.

* <http://links.org.au/node/2657>

* Pham Binh's articles have been published by Occupied Wall Street Journal, The Independent, Asia Times Online, Znet, Green Left Weekly and Counterpunch. His other writings can be found at www.planetanarchy.net.

Footnotes

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