

From “Occupy” to ...

Sunday 8 January 2012, by [Against the Current](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2012).

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THE QUESTION ISN'T whether the magnificent “Occupy” movement will continue after police action and the onset of winter have largely emptied the encampments. The righteous rage that made the movement possible, and the enormous social and economic crisis that made it necessary, are not going away anytime soon. Quite the contrary — capitalism's inherent contradictions, made worse by economic policies in Europe and the United States that seem calculated to maximize the damage, pose the real possibility of a new global financial meltdown and potential world depression.

Let's assume that the worst-case scenario of a collapse of the euro and widespread bank failures can be avoided. Even then, the post-2008 recovery at best will remain weak, with bitter austerity in southern Europe and too few jobs created in the U.S. economy even to accommodate the growth of the work force, let alone seriously reduce the appalling prevailing unemployment rate. Savage cuts in public employment are wiping out, in particular, much of what was called the African American “middle class.” A new generation of students, already crushed by debt, is entering a labor market without jobs to offer them.

No wonder then, as the United States becomes a more unequal, more unfair and nastier society, that the anger over corporate and banking pillage — to say nothing of the brutality of police assaults on city encampments and on college campuses — all of which fuelled Occupy Wall Street and its amazing proliferation, will grow and will find new forms of expression and mobilization.

What forms? We don't claim to know. But let's begin by reviewing what this movement accomplished in only its first two months of existence. While “Occupy” has won some grudging respect from mainstream media, recognizing that its protests resonate among huge sectors of the population, the movement is snidely criticized for seeming to operate on instinct and tactical innovation rather than some crisply articulated “program.” But if this may be partially true, the movement's instincts have been generally brilliant.

First of all, this movement is not narrowly aimed against “the right wing,” as vicious and appalling as the Republicans' offensive in state legislatures and the freak show of the party's presidential candidates certainly are. The movement quite rightly targets the system, particularly Wall Street and the banks, in full knowledge that the disastrous deregulation of the financial industry was a thoroughly bipartisan affair and that the Obama administration itself loyally represents the interests of banks and hedge funds. The powerful flow of the Occupy upsurge will not be easily channeled into the usual stagnant pool of Democratic electoral politics in 2012 and beyond.

Second, the people actually engaged in “Occupy” are not only fighting on behalf of other folks or for a righteous cause, as important as those can be — they are fighting in many cases for their own survival. They may be students confronting education cutbacks, huge tuition increases, unpayable debt burdens from student loans, and jobless futures. They may be employed or recently

unemployed workers staring at foreclosure and homelessness in their own lives. They are looking at capitalism's crisis not as an abstraction or as some less fortunate folks' emergency, but as a central aspect of their own lives and futures. That's where the movement's demands come from, rather than some "programmatically" manual.

In this sense the popular chant "We are the 99 percent!" takes on more than rhetorical meaning. It may not be perfect sociological or scientific terminology, but it certainly beats the sad-sack "save the middle class" pleas coming from the labor leadership. It lays the basis for genuine — and most importantly, ongoing — solidarity in its full meaning of common struggle.

Third, the Occupy movement has begun to do precisely that — to find hookups with already existing points of struggle in its own communities — and thereby to begin blazing its own future, as in connecting with the Sotheby workers' struggle in New York, with student battles to save their education in California, with homeless folks in many of the encampments, with city workers in Detroit and people cut off from welfare by the Michigan state legislature, and in other examples yet to be publicized.

Fourth, the movement has shown fantastic tactical creativity and, in general, amazingly disciplined combativity. The way people poured into the streets on two occasions when police raided the New York Liberty Square/Zucotti Park encampment; the mass mobilization that blocked the first police move on the Occupy LA camp; the successful shutdown of the port in response to the attack on Occupy Oakland; the student resistance to police assaults at the University of California at Berkeley — and most astonishing of all, students at UC-Davis nonviolently driving campus police away with their tails between their legs after the pepper-spraying attack that instantly went viral — these are signs of a movement with roots and staying power, even if it now faces a moment of tactical and strategic decision following the forcible breakup of most encampments.

The Global Context

We've already noted the interconnected global nature of the crisis that sparked the Occupy upsurge. Activists have rightly drawn some inspiration from Egypt's Tahrir Square and the democratic Arab Uprising, which are fuelled by mass youth unemployment and economic discontent as well as political blockage, but a more direct parallel lies with the response to the austerity programs that are ravaging countries like Greece, Spain and now Italy.

In Greece and Spain particularly, austerity — severe cutbacks in public employment, services and pensions — have been enacted under governments led by nominally social-democratic parties (PASOK in Greece, PSOE in Spain) that have turned sharply "social-neoliberal" in the past decade. In other words, these are parties that are supposed to represent the rights of working people and the social safety net, but have now become overt destroyers of those interests. (Something similar has occurred in the Israeli state, where the Labor Party long ago ceased to be a workers' party in any sense, even a party of Jewish workers.)

It is this vacuum of political representation that has given the response to austerity by the indignato movements and the unions in southern Europe — and now also by public sector unions in Britain — a sharp, militant and not so easily controlled character. One can only imagine the scale of anger and resistance that might erupt in Europe as the elites attempt to impose a "fiscal union" in which countries' budgets would be under direct EU discipline, bypassing national parliamentary rights and procedures.

The European upheaval has a certain parallel with the United States, where the Democratic Party —

although it has never been a social-democratic or labor party — was known as the party of the 1930s New Deal and has traditionally posed as the defender of labor rights, Social Security and the so-called safety net. The Democrats' long record of capitulation to the right wing, their failures on health care and labor law reform, the wars Obama inherited and continued, and the takeover of the party by huge-money corporate and banking interests, have hollowed out that reputation to the point where the Occupy movement certainly doesn't look to that party for leadership — and generally doesn't want to listen to politicians of any stripe.

A strong economic recovery is not the likely perspective now. Rather, the crisis is grinding on and will be protracted even if it doesn't produce a full-blown global collapse. Combined with the lunatic logic of deficit-cutting regimes that are further depressing producer and consumer demand, pushing the economies of Europe and the United States further into the ground, conditions are developing for a real social explosion — and the Occupy movement can be seen as the potential forerunner of the truly massive phenomenon that a crisis on this scale might produce in the United States.

That potential is what the system's managers truly fear — not so much the small inconvenience of encampments in city squares or parks as the emergence of possible organizing centers for mass action of colossal magnitude, fuelled by a spirit of systemic resistance manifested in activist networks ready to move flexibly and creatively when action is needed.

Going Forward

With all its positive accomplishments in hooking up with existing struggles, the Occupy movement has an unfinished agenda. Prior to the breakup of most large encampments, it hadn't strongly connected with immigrant communities under attack, particularly Latinos and Muslims — a difficult undertaking to be sure, given the fears sweeping those communities — and it had remained majority if not overwhelmingly white.

It's possible that the tactical setback suffered in the breakup of the major encampments may be offset by smaller-scale "Occupy the hood" efforts, closer and more accessible to immigrant and people of color communities and struggles. Or maybe the movement will invent new ways and means of direct mass action and disobedience to keep the forces of repression and austerity off balance. It doesn't necessarily require a physical space, although that's helpful where possible, and most certainly not a staffed or foundation-funded NGO-type apparatus which may be useless or worse.

New directions are being tested. The much-debated December 12 attempted shutdowns of West Coast ports yielded mixed results, to be carefully sifted for lessons about the possibilities and central importance of building connections among communities, union leaderships and rank-and-file workers. In a number of cities, Occupy activists are moving to direct action against home foreclosures — taking back already-seized properties for their rightful occupants, and protecting threatened families both by legal and by physical means — in what can become an ongoing campaign of national significance.

The central points to grasp, we believe, are first, that this movement is only at its beginning, because it captures the anger and the real, deepening grievances of huge sectors of society that indeed add up to something like "the 99%," and second, that its possibilities for social mobilization have barely been touched. And not only in the big cities: At the height of Occupy Wall Street, hundreds of folks came in from New England, mid-Atlantic states and from farther-away Midwest and even Plains locations. What experiences, lessons and inspiration are they bringing back to the smaller cities, towns and communities where the capitalist crisis is striking with savage force?

In the city where this magazine is published, Occupy Detroit has been spirited but not among the largest manifestations of the national movement. But the crisis in Detroit — where bus service has almost collapsed, where the public school system is being torn apart under a second state-appointed “emergency manager” and where somewhere between 1000 and 2300 city workers will face layoffs early next year — is the mirror of the future for many U.S. cities. What will be the response of the city workers and their unions? Will the Occupy movement be capable of answering the call to action at a critical moment? And what about your city or town, wherever you are?

None of us know, but we need to be part of making it happen. In this issue of Against the Current we present self-portraits of the Occupy movement in several cities, not a definitive collection by any means but a representation of what activists are thinking about their experiences and the future.

It’s long past time to speculate about “the coming crisis.” We know now that the crisis is not “coming” — it’s here, it’s global, and the political circus and the elections of November 2012 will not resolve it. The Occupy movement, even if its next forms or tactics are still in the process of becoming, is the revival of hope.

The ATC Editors

P.S.

* From Against the Current (ATC) N°156, January/February 2012. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>