

# The Occupy Wall Street Movement: A Convergence of Realities

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WHAT'S STRIKING ABOUT the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) Movement and its popular slogan "We are the 99 percent" is how much the central demand of the movement resonates with the Black community. African Americans with few exceptions are in the bottom 20% of income and wealth. Double digit unemployment is the norm in "good" economic times.

Yet the social composition of most OWS occupations (some 10,000 including college campuses) has had few Black faces including in urban areas with large Black populations. The reality of high unemployment, few job opportunities, poverty and inadequate health care has most poor people trying to survive. It is why African Americans are not visible in large numbers.

In many cases, however, African Americans are taking to the streets and using civil action to protest police brutality and the shutdown of community schools, hospitals and obvious acts of discrimination. These protests, while widely known in the Black community and Black-oriented media, rarely get prominence in the mainstream newspapers and networks.

In Oakland, for example, at the same time Occupy Oakland was center stage with cop violence on protesters, there were community actions to protest plans to shut down local schools.

## Taking a Leadership Role

Historically African Americans will march and rally around issues of racism that directly affect them. There is little faith that politicians or the legal and political structures will act without such extra-parliamentary and civil disobedience tactics.

The most energized and committed group in unions ready to take on the bosses are African American workers, because of their understanding of how change is won. Disproportionate to their numbers, Blacks have taken leadership roles in fightbacks. Their actions have inspired and mobilized others to fight for their own interests and join in broader coalitions as occurred in the 1960s and '70s.

Blacks understand from their history the inequality and social injustice of American capitalism — what African Americans have lived under before the Great Recession and continue to suffer today.

The OWS movement is a convergence of African American reality with the broad working class and

“middle class” concerns due to the housing crisis and demise of “good” paying jobs. Temporary jobs with no benefits are increasingly what wealthy “job creators” offer even to educated whites.

The key point is that the social injustice and inequality gap that fuels the OWS movement is the reality that Blacks have experienced for four centuries.

The ruling-class counteroffensive against the gains of the civil rights revolution of the 1960s and 1970s hit African Americans and unionized workers the hardest. Nearly six million manufacturing jobs have disappeared since 2000. More than 40,000 factories have closed. Outsourcing of better-paying jobs is still rampant. African Americans have endured what has been described as the greatest loss of collective assets in their history. Millions have been thrown into severe poverty and desperation.

What’s called “the Black middle class” is not based primarily upon small business owners, entrepreneurs and professionals. It is actually the better off working class group, largely employed in government jobs or blue collar union jobs that are in decline or under attack. Labor joining the Occupy movement reflects a fundamental coming together of unions with high Black memberships and issues that reflect the broad interests of the African American community.

### **Attack on Postal Service**

A case in point is the United States Postal Service (USPS) that the right wing has targeted during the past decade. The adoption of a 2006 law by Congress makes the Post Office (a self-financing body but under the Congress’s direction) put aside billions of dollars in ten years’ time to cover health and pension benefits for the next 75 years.

No other government agency or private sector company has a similar obligation. The goal is the destruction of the Postal Service as we know it. It is the only government agency authorized under the U.S. Constitution and thus can’t be eliminated without an Amendment to the Constitution.

A radical restructuring of the USPS will mean the elimination of Saturday mail service, closing of post offices and reduction of 200,000 jobs — one-third of the workforce. Some 25% of the USPS workers are African Americans. Many other employees are Latinos and Pacific Islanders. These jobs are the backbone of stable families in most urban Black communities. In addition, they are unionized; and thus relatively better paying jobs with good benefits.

Conservatives have targeted the public sector (Federal, State and Local) since the so called Reagan Revolution that began in 1981, when Reagan declared the “government as the problem” and began the three-decade redistribution of wealth from the bottom 80% to the top one percent. Corporate taxes were slashed and the top personal income taxes sharply reduced for the top one percent.

Recent studies by the Brookings Institution and the Center for Labor Research and Education at the University of California note the great impact of this class warfare to public sector jobs. About one in five Black workers have a public sector job, and African-Americans workers are one third more likely than white ones to be employed in the public sector.

“The reliance on these jobs has provided African Americans a path upward,” said Robert H. Zieger, emeritus professor of history at the University of Florida, and the author of a book on race and labor. “But it is also vulnerability.” [\[1\]](#)

## Old and New Robber Barons

The power of the demand of defending the 99% against the one-tenth of the one percent is that it unifies all races and ethnic groups suffering what African Americans have endured for decades.

From a historical point of view there has been a link between the rise of new progressive movements and the state of Black America. That convergence has helped to build powerful protest campaigns against the capitalist system and its elites, which include ruling Republican and Democratic parties.

The wealthy elites respond with violence and use racism to divide suffering whites from oppressed Blacks. It is still a widely used weapon today especially in the Old South. It targets not only African Americans but Latino immigrants. The objective is to reverse gains and reestablish old white dominant relationships, which in the long run as demographics change cannot last — but in the short run can delay change and roll back important social gains.

The first major counteroffensive occurred in the 1880s and '90s with the defeat of the Radical Reconstruction period that began to bring some equality to freed slaves. Both ruling parties, like today, served the interests of the corporate robber barons in this Gilded Age of U.S. history.

A progressive movement arose after the 1893 financial crisis. The backlash against the elites led to the popular campaigns that produced antitrust legislation, labor legislation and the women's suffrage moment. It included, in 1913 following a series of financial panics, the creation of the Federal Reserve that the libertarian right has attacked as undermining free markets.

Black civil rights, however, made little progress even though African Americans backed the progressive movement.

The second gilded age came in the 1920s. Again it came after the rightward push against immigrants, Black civil rights and labor unions. The decline of organized labor was drastic in the 1920s. Unions were crushed; Black militants like Marcus Garvey and his urban-based movement came under fierce government attack. Thousands of Blacks who migrated from the Caribbean during the First World War were arrested and deported.

White vigilante violence escalated. The "Roaring 20s" was the heyday of the new rich and hell for Blacks and the working class.

In the 1930s African Americans began to push for social justice during the Great Depression. The white unemployed fought back and the rise of the trade unions as a fighting force occurred. While legal racism still reigned, the unity of Black and white workers in the North developed to a degree never seen up to that time. While still rampant, racism began to recede as industrial unions emerged in the North.

Some of the most significant labor laws and restrictions on the Robber Barons occurred as the 99% gained more power. It shook the super-rich and Wall Street to their core. The socialist and communist left joined the antiracist campaigns and helped integrate the trade unions.

The retreats after WWII and rise of McCarthyism did not wipe out the gains of the 1930 and '40s. The growing postwar influence of the civil rights movement inspired organized labor, helped to radicalize students and sparked the 1960s social movements. The big gains for Blacks and other social groups weakened the one percent and its supporters.

## **New Reaction, New Response**

The counteroffensive that opened in the Reagan era came at a time when African Americans had already won some of their greatest gains. Many of the movement's leaders had become prominent elected officials, and others won seats at the table including on Wall Street. But the steady decline of the social movements set the stage for the rise of the new Gilded Age that we live in today.

Labor lost tens of thousands of members, a resegregation of big urban cities and schools accelerated, and much of the new Black professional class moved to the suburbs. No groups stood up to the far right's ideological offensive that the public sector was "evil" and had to be cut down to a size that it could be "drowned in the bathtub."

African Americans have always played an objectively vanguard role in responding to the one percent — raising protest on behalf their own interests, and making demands on the state and system. What's happening now with the OWS movement is the convergence of African American interests and the broader community, shaking up the political system.

While Blacks are not the "leaders" of OWS, the example African Americans have played in U.S. history shows the potential of the new social movement. It also explains why the political and economic elites are so intent on their brutal class warfare against the oppressed and exploited: The fear of Wall Street is that the masses will not stop with simply demanding higher taxes on the rich, but will demand political power for the 99%.

**Malik Miah**

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**P.S.**

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

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## **Footnotes**

[1] (See "Public Sector Sheds Jobs; Blacks are Hit Hardest" by Timothy Williams, The New York Times, November 29, 2011.