

USA: Occupy Together Reports from the Ground

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If there was any doubt just one week ago, it is now abundantly clear that the Occupy Wall St. movement is not an isolated phenomenon. It has reached towns large and small and has proven to resonate with individuals from a variety of backgrounds - from the politicized 'usual suspects' to those previously reluctant to participate in any such demonstration - who are recognizing the criminality driving the financial services industry and connecting their concerns to a broader anti-capitalist politics. Though it may be too soon to speculate about OWS's long-term prospects, it is safe to say that this is one of the most encouraging developments our side has made in recent years. Here are some on the ground reports from comrades across the country.

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Part One

Portland, Oregon

Bill Resnick and Johanna Brenner

Occupy Portland's march on Thursday October 6 was huge—over 10,000 people jammed Portland's central square after marching through downtown. The participants were an extremely diverse group of white people — all ages— though best represented by the 20-30 somethings many on bicycles. Several drumming bands and music groups kept us all moving. There were mostly homemade signs and the overwhelming message was "we are the 99%," but lots of other ideas got expressed—from stop Israeli Apartheid, to "They call it the American dream because you have to be asleep to believe it". Marchers called for an end to corporate greed and corporate personhood, getting big money out of elections, jobs, debt relief, health care. One of the advantages of a middle of the week, mid-afternoon march through the central retail/office district was that the streets were full of people and office workers hung out the windows many with thumbs up, and some dropping confetti.

At the last General Assembly before the march, the organizing group was very concerned about keeping everything legal; they advocated for getting a permit, but participants at the GA refused to consent. Ultimately, the city was told we're marching without a permit; the organizers gave the police the route the morning of the march. At the beginning of the march, the organizers tried to

keep the crowd on the sidewalks but the crowd was so large and so ready to begin that they swarmed into the street.

The Mayor agreed to allow people to camp out in two parks next to each other downtown—and the police closed off the street so people could flow between them. The huge size of the march encouraged the police to take a laid back position. Police allowed the group to set up tents even though tents are illegal in city parks—an ordinance that targets homeless people.

A test of this movement's momentum will be this coming Saturday at an anti-war and labor march, planned many months in advance. Until now, Occupy Portland has been consumed by the details of setting up and protecting the encampment with the police hovering, and no one is venturing proposals for what will happen next. But all kinds of organizations and organizers are engaging with the encampment and the huge turnout for the march has energized everyone.

Salt Lake City, Utah

Dayne Goodwin

Occupy Salt Lake had been coming together for over a week before it was launched on October 6. Leading up to the event, open daily discussions were held at the public library about OWS and the economic and political difficulties experienced by "the 99%". About 250 people rallied on the morning of Thursday, October 6th at the State Capitol in about the worst weather possible in Salt Lake City (SLC) - an early winter storm with heavy rain in cold and windy thirty-degree weather. Numbers grew during the march, which stopped for brief protests at the Federal Reserve and major banks along the way.

According to reports in the media, local and state government officials were saying that an 'occupation' would not be allowed since overnight camping is illegal on public property. US Senator Orrin Hatch said, "We are going to have riots in this country because of what these people are doing." But the city and police authorities were cooperative as several hundred people built a tent city in Pioneer Park and prepared to stay around-the-clock indefinitely. Congressman Jason Chaffetz, who had openly considered challenging Hatch in the Republican primary election, visited the encampment October 7 morning and expressed solidarity with Occupy SLC's right to protest. Democratic SLC mayor Ralph Becker put out a statement saying he supports "residents' rights to peaceful protest and free speech." This variegated support corresponds with the wide political diversity from right to left now participating in Occupy SLC.

Madison, Wisconsin

Colin Gillis

In the early afternoon on Friday, October 7, a small group of activists gathered in Reynolds Park for Occupy Madison, bringing the nationwide #occupy movement to the site of the 2011 Wisconsin Uprising. Hourly informational meetings commenced at 1:00 pm, and, as the afternoon carried on, the crowd grew. Over 150 people attended the first general assembly, where the group began to

establish a procedure for self-governance, plan future actions, and discuss their reasons for joining the #Occupy movement. The event received extensive local media coverage.

The size of the occupation fluctuated during the weekend, and early attempts to organize events have met with uneven results. Many of the lead organizers have little experience with political organizing and some do not live in Madison. As a result, the occupation was initially disconnected from the local activist community. Meetings and organizational strategies have improved as local activists joined the occupation. Its future is unclear. Madison Police have set a firm end-date for the occupation and while the first deadline, set for Sunday, was extended to Monday evening they likely could end the occupation whenever they wish. The survival of Madison's fledgling occupation will depend on its ability to establish solidarity with other local organizations, especially unions.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Paul Prescod

Tuesday, October 4th was the second general meeting for OccupyPhilly. This second meeting had, to my great surprise, over 1,000 people in attendance, up from 200 at the first meeting. It was overwhelmingly young people, mostly white, with a decent gender balance. Many different organizations were represented, including the Green Party, Socialist Action, DSA, Philly Jobs with Justice, and some others.

There was a very strong energy in the room. Despite how skeptical I was about everything, I could not help but get a little excited about it. The most positive thing about this meeting was the amount of people I saw who are not part of the Philly activist scene or involved much in politics. I saw many students from Temple University who were not in any student organizations or involved politically, and even some old friends from high school turned up.

The point of this meeting was to decide on a place, date, and time to start the occupation. Consensus process was used, and it was effective enough at helping us to decide that we would occupy starting at 9am on Thursday, October 6th. There were no concrete demands or goals discussed, as seems to be the case in many other cities. After this was decided (it took about two hours) we broke up into committees: education, labor, arts and entertainment, medical, legal, and sports and recreation were just some of them.

Oct. 6th was the first day of the occupation. When I arrived there were a few hundred people there, mostly young and white. There was a decent amount of creative, homemade signs. At the general assembly, introductory remarks were made, and they began explain the different committees. This took a long time because there are so many different committees and everything had to be repeated twice so everyone could hear. They were not finished with this process yet when I had to leave two hours on.

One thing I find troubling is that there has been no attempt yet to reach out to the many devastated African American communities in Philadelphia, those getting hit the hardest. However many comrades have suggested that we should not just stand on the sidelines and criticize this. We should be participating, helping to build it and learn from it, despite all the weaknesses. It is generating excitement, and people are acting outside the traditional political parties. In the Philly branch most of us agree with this assessment and have been plugging into different committees, doing what we

can.

Part Two

This continues part one of on the ground reports from rank and file Solidarity members regarding their observations, experiences and impressions of the Occupy Together actions from around the country. Contributors in part two take a few different approaches to their reports, writing personal narratives, journalistic reflections and accounts about how OWS events have impacted their longstanding activism.

Boston, Massachusetts

Karin B

Occupy Boston was first conceived on Tuesday September 27, and people moved into Dewey Square, across from South Station in Boston, that Friday. My family and I drove out from Western Massachusetts to join in for a weekend on Saturday, October 8.

We'd heard about the effort from our housemate who had been to Boston to attend a march and rally put on by Right to the City, who held a congress in Boston that weekend. RTTC were a bit put off that the Occupy Boston crowd organized march without consulting and coordinating with the them, since they had planned their event months before and it was perceived as one big spin off of Occupy Wall Street. They felt torn about it, because they supported the occupy effort at the same time. From what I heard, they saw the group as young, inexperienced activists, who were simply unaware of the complexities involved in being good organizers.

When we got there, a week after it began, the camp filled the entire square, with tents shoulder to shoulder, and only a few narrow lanes leading through them. There were at least 50 tents, possibly as many as 70. The group on Saturday night were probably more the central core of participants. The General Assembly at 7:00 was perhaps 50 people at its peak, youth in their early 20's, 15-25% people of color, although it's really hard to say.

The GA spent little time on logistics, but was almost entirely focused on discussing various statements. The first was a preamble to a statement that a committee or committees are drafting. The second was a series of proposals against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and in favor of an upcoming antiwar march. After much discussion the effort was blocked and the statements tabled. A concern was that these sounded like demands and there is a committee working on a list of demands. Another proposal did pass: a statement of solidarity with indigenous groups, pointing out that Boston is already occupied territory. Four women spoke of sexism in the group: language, men openly judging women's appearance and inviting women to their tents. There was a lot of good discussion, but also a fair amount of defensiveness and tangents followed rather than acknowledging the issue.

I found myself thinking that the discussions at the GA's were exposing a lot of people to this type of process, and to some extent the dissemination and experimentation with the process was at least as important as the content. And while the process can be cumbersome, a lot of people participated, including a good gender representation and ethnic representation, suggesting that the process is

comfortable and accessible for many people. The people's mic seemed to help discussions in that it encourages people to get to the point.

My favorite quote of the weekend: "Attention please. The Tools Against Sexism Workshop will be taking place shortly across the street in the gardens at the Federal Reserve."

Bloomington-Normal, Illinois

College students started organizing on Occupy Wall Street in Bloomington-Normal, attending various organizations' meetings in town, during the weekend of Oct. 1-2. A few traveled to other demonstrations, one to Portland, Oregon and another student traveled to D.C.

Wednesday, October 5th, there was a rally and march of 200 students on the Illinois State campus, which is very large here and inspired the participants. Many of the people that came together to organize the protests have been attending each others' events for months now, which we credit to the Wisconsin occupation and local networking this year. On Thursday, October 6th, the monthly anti-war protest was well over double its size, bolstered by the Occupy BloNo activity, and on Saturday, a number of people traveled to Chicago to attend the mass action against the war.

On Sunday, October 9, late in the evening, there was a meeting of 35 people in Normal, near the campus, to discuss starting an occupation. It was attended by both students and workers, mostly younger with a few older people, majority white. There is a widespread desire to organize a more diverse occupation. The meeting established a week of actions, including the start of an occupation and future general assemblies. All these numbers sound small, but our impression in this town is that the energy is new and exciting.

Long Beach, California

Barry Saks

On Saturday, Oct. 8, more than 100 people from Occupy Long Beach marched along Ocean Boulevard to Magnolia Avenue to Lincoln Park, next to city hall. At Lincoln Park, residents told their stories with an open microphone. Marchers were multiethnic, many being students with a small sprinkling of unionists.

Jennifer Klasing, a political science major at Cal State Long Beach, said before the march, "I'm concerned about my future. This is the first time my generation has stood up. I want to be a part of it." Klasing came with five other students.

Lakewood High School student Alyssa Mullenix, who identified herself as gender non-conforming, told the marchers that at her school the students have no computers, books, or the proper chemicals for their chemistry classes. She said at her school nine students have committed suicide because of LGBT harassment. Before the march, retired Longshoreman from ILWU Local 13, Louie Rodriquez, said, "The corporations are greedy. They are taking away people's homes." Rodriquez came to the march with two other longshoremen. Elizabeth Spidner, who has been a nurse for 12 years and is a

member of SEIU Local 721, said, "I'm tired of the banks ripping me off. I'm worried about my kids future." On Sunday, Oct. 9, at Bixby Park, another event is planned where residents again will have a chance to tell their stories.

The GAs have had been 20 to 40 people each night. The people attending tend to be white and in their middle twenties; some are recent college graduates. While women were slightly less than half of the group, some of them are playing important leadership roles. No site has been chosen to occupy yet.

Burlington, Vermont

Traven L

Perhaps three times larger than last Sunday's rally, about 450 people marched and demonstrated Sunday in Burlington, Vermont outside Citizens Bank. 'Occupiers' drew connections to local economic justice campaigns: University of Vermont workers struggling to win fair contracts while former UVM President Dan Fogel gets a \$660,000 golden parachute; the Vermont Workers Center's Put People First: Peoples Budget Campaign; the efforts of 11,000 Early Childhood Educators to win union rights and fair pay; and the efforts to stop Wisconsin-like budgetary slash and burn policies from taking root in the Statehouse and Burlington City Hall. The crowd was mostly under 30.

Nashville, Tennessee

Jase Short

The Occupy Nashville "movement-in-formation" represents a potential sea change in activism here. A grouping of inter-generational politically-active people, accompanied by some academics, held the first General Assembly meeting last Sunday. Over 150 attended, stunning all those involved as most demonstrations fail to yield such a number in this political environment.

The first rallies—one at Legislative Plaza on the 6th and another later the same day at the important Centennial Park—attracted between them well over 600 people, something quite uncommon for this area. Many of those involved expressed a qualitatively different level of commitment to the politics at hand. Many of those involved seem adamantly opposed to both major parties, something increasingly common as the state's Democratic Party has effectively imploded on itself since 2008.

Highlights of the actions included our contact with several union members—mostly the Teamsters—who saw the events early in the day on Television and then came to the later action in the park. Relationships were developed between union members and activists of various stripes. The involvement of the Workers' Dignity Project—a low-income, Spanish speaking workers' center—brought immigrant rights to the agenda at the event, as well as enormous support from the crowd for their recent efforts to combat wage theft in Nashville.

A small group of 10 or so Ron Paul supporters and their Oath Keeper friend managed to convince around 100 people to march on the Federal building in town. Upon arrival they proceeded to

denounce the Federal Reserve and the international Bilderberg conspiracy, much to the crowd's surprise. The experience has led to a greater integration among the "informal leadership," various radical elements and others, who have united to ensure a degree of collective discipline concerning messaging and democratically-sanctioned actions. Another General Assembly—with more community and labor participation as well as a united front of progressive and radical activists—is planned and we will have to see where things go from there.

Chattanooga, Tennessee

Ryan

"Occupy Chattanooga" held its first General Assembly Friday (Oct. 6) in a park filled with about 200 people. The meeting was facilitated by a layer of organizers associated with a multi-issue social justice group called Chattanooga Organized for Action (COA), as well as UTC students and independents. The agenda started with a rousing "welcome" and explanation of ground rules. We then split into small groups (each group was about 20 people) where people collectively made lists of "demands" to prioritize. After that, each person in the small groups voted for two demands on their group list to prioritize over the others. Through this process, the group that I was in ended up with three issues with the most unity: nationalized health care (their phrasing, not mine), campaign finance reform ("get money out of politics" was the refrain all day), and quality public education. Each small group then delivered their top two or three demands to the general group.

The whole process was supposed to let the best (or most unifying) points "rise to the top." From there, we announced the formation of working groups (media, inclusivity/outreach, legal, demands, and action proposals). The "demands" group is tasked with crafting a proposal like the OWS "declaration" document, which will then guide local action and next steps. There were a few big omissions from the proposed list (like war, prisons, and immigration), but the process is not over and there will be room to modify whatever is proposed. The mood was good as we adjourned the meeting. The racial composition was heavily white (90%) in a city that is 36% Black. Some of the organizers actually do have roots in the city's more diverse neighborhoods, but that hasn't translated into the involvement of that base in the "Occupy" project. That said, I think there's great potential and room to grow in size and quality. I'm looking forward to the next meeting and collectively deciding a course of action!

Dalton, GA

Someone (I still don't know who) made a Facebook group for "Occupy North Georgia"—in the span of a week, over 1,000 people joined. People used the discussion group to plan an initial meeting and this was held in Dalton, GA (my hometown and present location, right near the GA-TN state line, pop. 60,000). About 25 people came to the meeting. The facilitator guided folks toward making a short statement of common "values" that a working group would refine and propose at the next meeting. I was encouraged by the lack of right-wing libertarian points, though one woman did come with a sign that read "End the Fed" (it went unmentioned). Most participants identified as Democrats but were eager to be a part of a "non-partisan" group. All attendees were white, except

for one African-American man.

We spent most of the two-hour meeting discussing local economic issues and, to much a lesser degree, immigration policy. Dalton, GA is a global center of textile production (for real, y'all), but factory closures over the past three years have sent the official unemployment rate to about 12.6%, if I recall correctly, which is the highest in Georgia and perhaps the Southeast. This crisis is compounded in the Latino community (about half the population of Dalton) by the recent passage of HB 87, our Arizona anti-immigrant copycat legislation. Undocumented folks and their family members are leaving the city, afraid of the police roadblocks that seem to have popped up everywhere they live and work since HB 87 went into affect. Of course, this has not improved the economic standing of whites one iota.

Meeting attendees understood that immigration had to have a place in our values platform. Likewise, people understood that we couldn't use the "99%" rhetoric until our group was half Latino. Since the meeting, some of us have already been talking with a local immigrants' rights group and we are looking forward to common work—this is a very encouraging development not just for the group but for the city. Also encouraging is simply the fact that this happened in city with no "left wing" organizations. The "Occupy Together" moment yielded what might be a critical opportunity to kick start an independent, anti-corporate project in this small city—and I trust this is the case with many of the other hundreds of cities with populations under 100,000 which held meetings.

Addendum: Since the meeting, it's been announced that a local plant is closing and laying off 270 workers. It's owned by Warren Buffett, who would prefer not to be thought of as "the 1%," but he most definitely is...and there might just be a new group in town to remind him.

P.S.

* From Solidarity (USA) website.