The Occupy-Labor Partnership in Chicago

July 1, 2012

THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT shows the potential to reinvigorate the labor movement and pull together the working class in a strong fight against the austerity measures being carried out across the country. However, the partnerships between the myriad organizations involved in fighting austerity are tested by cultural differences, divergent interests, and competing visions. In Chicago, the coalition between Occupy, labor, and community remains active on a number of fronts despite these challenges. This relative success can be traced to the media resonance of Occupy, the activist orientation of several key unions, the militancy of community organizations, and the nature of austerity in Chicago.

The participation of labor activists in the early stages of Occupy Chicago helped shape the pro-labor orientation of the movement. Throughout October, Occupy Chicago drew crowds of several hundred people for General Assemblies, rallies, and teach-ins, gaining positive media coverage and the attention of long-term organizers. Twice, the protestors attempted to secure a permanent encampment in a public park, resulting in over 300 arrests, including students, union members, socialists, community leaders, and independent activists. During the second attempt to secure an encampment, National Nurses United set up a first aid tent and, in a powerful gesture of solidarity, voted to stay after the police issued warnings to leave, resulting in the arrest of several nurses. After these unsuccessful attempts, Occupy Chicago began looking for other strategies for building power, opening up opportunities for further involvement in labor and community struggles.

During that same week, a labor-community coalition called Stand Up! Chicago organized a series of actions in downtown Chicago around jobs, homes, and schools, including a march of more than six thousand people on October 12th that involved many Occupy Chicago activists. As the largest demonstration during the fall of 2011, the success of this march helped increase the pro-union sentiment among Occupy members.

Around this time, the Occupy-labor partnership took on a more concrete form through the Occupy Chicago Labor Working Group which brought together labor leaders, staff, and rank-and-file members with Occupy Chicago activists who had little to no background in the labor movement. Labor was attracted by Occupy's ability to capture media attention and to shift the national dialogue to focus on economic inequality. For their part, Occupy activists were interested in the turnout power and resources of unions, while remaining wary of possible co-optation.

As of April, 2012, the weekly meetings of the Occupy Chicago Labor Working Group draw together 25 to 40 or more people from a variety of unions and community groups, with regular participation from members and/or staff of SEIU, AFSCME, Chicago Teachers Union, Amalgamated Transit Union, United Steelworkers, IBEW, and National Nurses United. A few of the participants attend as designated representatives of their respective union locals. More commonly, however, both staff and members attend as independent labor activists. For most of the last six months, the committee has been a place where participants share updates about ongoing struggles and ask for solidarity. These struggles include the fight to stop school closures and turnarounds, stop the privatization of health clinics, stop cuts to the public library system, and stop the corporatization of higher education and the accompanying attacks on staff and faculty contracts.

During the fall of 2012, several union locals in Chicago were well placed to develop partnerships with Occupy Chicago, which has allowed the Occupy-labor partnership in Chicago to grow where other cities have stumbled. SEIU was experimenting with community coalitions that mobilized union

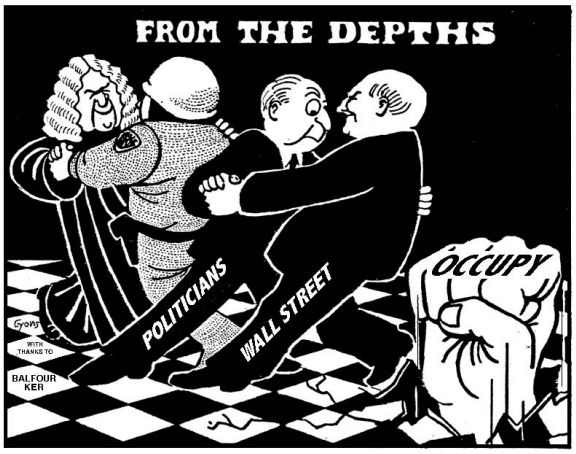
and community members for marches and direct actions. Militant members of National Nurses United were ready to staff first aid stations at Occupy actions and take arrests. The Chicago Teachers Union, led by a reform caucus, was embarking on a fight against the mayor to defend public education that would mobilize activists and working class communities. As a result, while the Occupy movement was coming together during fall, 2012, Occupy Chicago activists saw unions marching in the streets and staging direct actions. Equally important, labor activists turned up at Occupy's General Assemblies, worked in the committees, and built relationships with Occupy activists.

These relationships have thus far been able to maintain the partnership between the two groups when it has been strained by local and national dynamics. For example, Occupy Chicago activists felt deceived when union allies started endorsing Obama for the 2012 election season and strongly objected when some unions employed the 99 percent language to support the Democrats. On the other side, labor leaders and activists are wearied by national calls for a general strike and irritated when Occupy activists hand down judgements on labor's inability to organize the unorganized. Activists affiliated with both Occupy and labor often mediate these conflicts.

The partnership between Occupy Chicago and labor points toward a potential shift in public opinion regarding the role of unions in society. Corporations and conservative politicians have been waging a constant media campaign to depict unions (especially public sector unions) as greedy, corrupt, power-hungry institutions that steal your wages, drive rising deficits, and protect "bad" workers, particularly teachers. This message has made alarming inroads into the public imagination and shaped the environment within which many young Occupy activists came of age. Furthermore, these young activists have no memory of union victories, and many have never belonged to a union. Within this context, we would not necessarily expect a new movement led largely by young people to develop a strong pro-union orientation. And yet, in Chicago, that is just what has happened. As a result, a new generation of class-conscious, pro-labor activists is emerging and, through the media resonance of Occupy, providing the public with much needed images of unions fighting back for the working class.

Winning the Fight

IN THE LAST SIX MONTHS, actions in New York City, Chicago, Boston, Oakland and other urban centers have demonstrated that the Occupy-labor-community coalition is capable of waging a militant multi-issue fight back. However, mobilization is hindered by legal restrictions binding unions and non-profit organizations, low density of union membership, lack of union democracy, racism and de facto segregation, and the narrowing effect of neoliberal hegemony on our political imagination.



The limitations of the Occupy-labor-community coalition are amplified by the determination of the capitalist class to implement austerity measures as rapidly as possible. The mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emmanuel, has been relentless in pushing through legislation to restrict protests, cut social services, and bust public sector unions. His 2012 budget includes layoffs, cuts to library hours, privatization of public health clinics, and the closing of six mental health clinics. In response to complaints from aldermen, the Mayor agreed to a few minor adjustments to the library cuts, while leaving intact the overall agenda of austerity. Despite a number of protests by unions and community groups, and several months of mobilization by the Mental Health Movement, the city council passed the budget unanimously on November 16th.

The same narrative applies to a city ordinance (dubbed "Sit Down and Shut Up" by opponents) which increases restrictions on protests, increases protest-related fines, gives Rahm purchasing powers without oversight, and allows the Police Superintendent to deputize out-of-state law enforcement. Amid protests by Occupy Chicago and allies on January 18th, the city council passed the proposal 45-4.

Also in 2012, Rahm announced proposals to close seven public schools and "turnaround" ten others, meaning all teachers and staff at those ten schools will be fired. In response, parents and teachers gathered data defending their schools, submitted alternative proposals, and testified extensively at the Board of Education Meetings. As the time for the vote approached, a group of parents occupied an elementary school overnight and later that week parents and teachers led a march to Rahm’s house. A few days later, on Feb 22, 2012, the Board of Education passed all of the proposed school closures and turnarounds.

Based on this record we can only expect that if we continue fighting as we have been with marches of five hundred to one thousand people, temporary occupations or sit-ins, and protests at city hall, we will not stop the austerity measures being imposed upon our city. We will be lucky if we even slow them down.

Despite renewed energy and mobilization, the movement strategy seems to be business as usual — put forth a good effort, lose, and frame the loss as a victory. Within this logic, any action that educates the public, cultivates a spirit of resistance, and draws new people into the movement is a success, regardless of the material outcome. While this approach has been useful in maintaining momentum in the face of setbacks, we cannot continue to accept this outcome if we are serious about protecting our social services and public sector workers.

Occupy Chicago, community organizations, and unions need to have an honest conversation about our strategies for fighting the austerity measures and our level of commitment to winning this struggle. In particular, we have always known that unions became involved with community struggles and direct action this year at least in part to mobilize support for Obama. When the election season kicks into high gear it's likely that some unions will withdraw from the fight in order to focus on campaigning. While awareness of the Occupy Movement is increasing among the rank-and-file, the coalition relies largely on sympathetic staff for union turnout for actions. Therefore, in order to maintain the coalition over the long term, we should be shifting focus to build deeper and broader relationships with the rank-and-file and to support reform caucuses and other forms of worker organization within unions.

Making any headway in the fight against austerity will require mass mobilization, more militant nonviolent tactics and, most importantly I believe, the conviction that we can win this fight. While the burgeoning Occupy-labor-community coalition holds much promise, we will not be able to effectively challenge the agenda of austerity until we are willing to put all of our institutional legitimacy on the line.

Footnotes