Occupy Oakland and the Labor Movement

written by Bill Balderston | July 1, 2012

THE RELATIONSHIP between the Occupy movement and segments of organized labor, in their varied institutional and ideological forms, has been a source of much speculation on the left. While there have been strong linkages created in other cities such as New York, many see this interaction as most focused in the East Bay (Oakland, Berkeley) of California. This article is a personal account of the growing dialogue between the labor movement and the Occupy organizing as seen by someone heavily involved in attempting to build these linkages. The dance of these partners is not without tension and contradiction, but while considering the criticisms of those both supportive and hostile to both labor and Occupy, I believe it has great potential.

This article is divided into three segments reflecting this interaction. The first deals with the events of the "general strike" of November 2nd, 2011, in Oakland and the related shutdown of the Port of Oakland on December 12. The second focuses on the campaign in support of the longshore workers in Longview, Washington. The third reflects on other efforts by Occupy Oakland Labor Solidarity Committee following these more spectacular actions, and leads to some conclusions about the lessons learned from these experiences.

Part I. The Oakland Port Shutdowns

THE BEGINNING OF THE TRAJECTORY between both labor and Occupy in the East Bay goes back at least to the response to the heavy-handed action by hundreds of police on the night of October 24, removing the Occupy Oakland (OO) encampment participants. That was followed by a massive police assault the following evening, involving tear gas and flash grenades. The Alameda Central Labor Council (CLC) leaders mobilized quickly in protest and followed this shortly with a statement condemning the police action and the local Oakland political leadership, who were relegated to "being on the wrong side of history."

All this began to provoke much more discussion within the ranks of unions about the clout of Occupy and was immediately followed up on the 26th with a motion brought to the OO General Assembly (GA) for a "general strike" on November 2. This call, initiated by labor activists, was voted on by a gathering of over a thousand participants and ratified by a 95 percent approval. It reverberated immediately within labor circles and a number of key unions came out in support, including SEIU 1021, California Nurses Association (CNA) and my own union, the Oakland Education Association (OEA), which planned a satellite rally and march to protest education cuts and school closures. But the key to this mobilization was the involvement of ILWU Local 10, representing the dockworkers at the Port (the largest employer in Oakland). The day involved mass actions varying from major bank protests to a march targeting the notoriously anti-union Whole Foods outlet. The culmination was a set of marches involving 30,000 activists, including countless union members (over 400 from the OEA) who helped shut down the Port.

The euphoria over this action continued to ripple within many unions, despite the problems created that night by a confrontation between police and hard line militants (especially those advocating the "black block" tactics). Within two days there was a gathering of labor and Occupy representatives who planned a mobilization and a march for November 19th.

This event involved more bank actions and a protest gathering at one of the schools scheduled for closure; it was planned jointly by people from OO and key unions. As part of the initial rally, several labor leaders spoke, including Betty Olson-Jones, president of the OEA, and Dan Coffman,

head of ILWU Local 21 of Longview, Washington. Coffman spoke of the dire circumstances the grain dockworkers are facing in Longview and of the fact that any militant action here and along the coast would boost their struggle.

Coincidentally, the day before the OO General Assembly had discussed and supported a proposal from Occupy Los Angeles in solidarity with an action called to defend the largely non-union immigrant, low wage, port truck drivers who had been victimized with threats of denial of work. Thus, the direction was set and a variety of ILWU and other union activists rallied around the call to shut down ports along the entire coast. This was problematic for ILWU leaders and some activists, since the union was facing major legal constraints, including injunctions and massive fines resulting from earlier actions in support of the workers at Longview.

While initial efforts were not attuned to all the realities, often blaming obstacles simply on the "bureaucracy" as undemocratic, rather than reflecting on Occupy Oakland's limited ability to involve more rank-and-file activists, the OO Labor Solidarity Committee did undertake to work with ILWU members, spending much time at the Port leafleting and discussing. Equally important, OO activists with the help of Teamsters, reached out to the non-union truckers. These two issues became the center of unity, along with protesting the repression facing the Occupy movement, for the December 12th call.

There were a variety of forums for workers to discuss this action, including the large December 2 mobilization in San Francisco in opposition to Federal cuts in social programs and corporate rip-offs of taxpayers. . More important was the discussion at the Alameda Central Labor Council the next Monday, where delegates, including those from the OEA who had endorsed the action, debated for over an hour the key political issues around the relationship of labor and Occupy as reflected in this mass action. Finally, Richard Mead brought a motion, to table the proposal from the CLC exec board for "no endorsement" of the Port shutdown. In his remarks, Mead stated that any blow against EGT (owner of the new Longview terminal) and their corporate allies was an act in support of the ILWU. Further, he bluntly stated that the ILWU was in a fight for its very existence. His proposal passed by a 3 to 1 ratio, despite the opposition of the CLC leadership (including an ILWU trustee).

The following week solidified the preparations for the Port Shutdown action, despite massive fear mongering in the local media and doubts by many within the labor left and progressive Bay Area community. While the November "General Strike" had not pushed many activists out of their comfort zone, this action did. Union militants had to decide whether this would strengthen the upsurge represented by Occupy or not. Those distant from the organizing missed the practical dynamism that was growing and failed to see the political maturity that was developing. Those who simply wanted to make the labor bureaucracy the principal issue or who wanted slogans around a "permanent general strike" became marginalized. At the same time the strategic discussions around the importance of a labor bastion like the ILWU and the victimization of immigrant truck drivers came front and center, as did the question of ports as critical chokeholds in the capitalist system.

The clear success of the day's action, with over 1,500 people shutting the docks in the early morning and over 5,000 converging to reinforce the Port shutdown in the afternoon, was not only based on good organizing but also supported by thousands of young activists with this Occupy-labor alliance. It was a combination of effective organizing and the fear of deepening this insurgency which stayed the hand of the state's repression. And the coordination of the Occupy groupings along the coast, from Portland to LA, Hilo to Seattle, Bellingham to Longview attests to the efforts to spread exponentially this militancy around working class issues.

There is no question that some criticisms of Occupy were accurate, especially those concerning poor communication with labor and misunderstanding union democracy where a majority of union

members vote to support particular proposals, but the growing sense of worker solidarity within Occupy and beyond was the great gain for the Shutdown.

Part II. The Battle of Longview

THE ACTIONS OF NOVEMBER and especially December led to a more concerted focus on solidarity by Occupy Oakland with the longshore workers in Longview. This labor battle involved questions around jobs, pensions and automation, as well as the massive expansion of commerce in agricultural goods. The Portland-based transnational grain exporter EGT is a creation of a trio of multinational corporations: the St. Louis-based Bunge North America, the Japanese firm Itochu, and the Korean shipper Pan Ocean STX. These corporations joined together to link up shipping ports in such diverse locations as Vietnam and the Ukraine, primarily to ship grain to China and the East Asian market.

The operation of the $200 million Longview terminal was initially posed in the context of a struggle in which the ILWU — whose strength is especially tied to its longshore worker base and whose members have worked the grain trade in the Northwest for eight decades — was confronting further automation, a concern that the union has battled over since the 1950s. EGT wished to impose new work rules, especially around the length of shifts (12 hours long) which ran counter to ILWU past practices and would have eliminated some jobs. Clearly, the immediate question was not around short-term profit rates, since savings to EGT amount to barely over a million dollars — mere chump change. The economic impact for ILWU members was more serious, since the grain work accounts for 20 percent of the financing of its pension and welfare funds, which are already seriously underfunded).

Yet, the real issues were around strategic and class questions. The ILWU has demonstrated historically its power to take concerted action around economic issues, community issues, and around issues of international solidarity. The ILWU has engaged in strikes or job actions around causes ranging from South Africa and Palestine, to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the case of Mumia abu Jamal and issues of police brutality, as well as the action that ILWU members took during the Port of Oakland shutdowns. The position of the union at critical chokeholds in international trade gives them leverage. When negotiations broke off, EGT and its corporate sponsors and allies saw a golden opportunity to deal a blow to what is regarded by many activists on the West Coast as the bellwether of union militancy. This was an attack at the overall coastwide ILWU pattern agreements, not the grain contract with EGT in one part.

Over one thousand Local 21 (in Longview) and other ILWU members and supporters in the Pacific Northwest responded with a dynamic campaign, dating back to July when a number of grain-loaded trains were blocked and later in September when hundreds of union activists gathered to dump large amounts of grain, and de facto shut down virtually all the ports in the region in an effort to bring EGT back to negotiations. EGT countered by going to court and succeeded in having over $300,000 in fines levied on Local 21, with other charges targeting the union leadership. At the same time, EGT attempted to break the ILWU's hold on the West Coast grain terminals by signing an agreement with Operating Engineers Local 701 to represent the port's workers. All the regional labor bodies condemned the Operating Engineers for becoming involved in the ILWU's jurisdiction.

Into this difficult situation came the forces of the Occupy Movement, especially the Occupy Oakland Labor Solidarity Committee. While there had already been a Defend the ILWU Committee established in the Bay Area, largely through the efforts of several senior Local 10 members, to build support for the Longview campaign, including sending people to the port when the first ships arrive at the new terminal, it was the infusion of energy from Occupy Oakland which altered the whole dynamic. The December 12 mobilization described earlier was truly the turning point in the organizing campaign, demonstrating not only the ability for coordinated Occupy action, but gaining

a response from ILWU members (not only Locals 21 and 10, but in Portland, Seattle and elsewhere), despite a statement from ILWU President Bob McEllrath, distancing the union from the December 12 actions, and identifying Occupy Oakland as a "third party," an unwanted interloper.

The linkage between Local 21 and the Occupy movement, as well as the Defend the ILWU committee, continued to be very strong. The joint campaign was supported by a number of unions and labor councils in the Bay Area that began to mobilize to greet the grain ship scheduled to arrive in Longview. There was also further co-ordination amongst Occupy groups along the coast, including the one in Longview, and even with Occupy groups in the Midwest, where protests occurred at the Bunge offices in St. Louis. As this organizing was taking place, new tensions surfaced when some ILWU local union leaders and thugs broke up a meeting on January 6 involving Occupy activists and Local 10 members, who were speaking in Seattle.

A new element in the battle was the growing involvement of the Federal Government, not only threatening Local 21 members with the revocation of their Transport Worker Identification cards issued under Homeland Security, but in mid-January announcing that Coast Guard vessels would accompany the scab grain ship going to Longview. This was the first time the federal military was used against organized labor in the United States since military air traffic controllers were called out during the crushing of PATCO in 1981.

Shortly afterwards, the Coast Guard did escort a vessel seemingly destined for Longview just as news broke that negotiations had resumed between EGT and the ILWU on January 23. Initially only legal matters were discussed, and shortly after, the Local 21 picket lines came down. Then, the ILWU was again recognized as the bargaining agent in Longview and workers began unloading a ship there on February 7, and finally, on Thursday, February 9, members of Local 21 voted to ratify the contract, despite their having had little or no input into the negotiations.

What became evident was that the organizing efforts of ILWU Local 21 and of Occupy led to some resolution of this struggle. The fact that Governor Gregoire of Washington expressed major concern over the proposed Occupy mobilization, led Clarence Thomas, long-time militant in Local 10 from Oakland, to state, "When the Governor intervened a year ago, nothing was settled. It wasn't until the rank and file and Occupy planned a mass convergence to blockade the ship that EGT suddenly had the impetus to negotiate. … Labor can no longer win victories against the employers without the community."

Part III. More Recent Labor Organizing for Occupy Oakland

WHILE THE POST-LONGVIEW PERIOD has not been as dramatic for Occupy Oakland Labor Solidarity, the group is still actively functioning. It took several weeks to evaluate what impact we had had and to refocus energy that had been nearly exclusively aimed at preparing for people to descend on Longview. During those activities, other connections had been made. One was the connection with the port truckers, who employers claimed were independent contractors and therefore not workers with the right to organize. The Occupy Oakland Labor Solidarity Committee has a number of Teamster activists who helped make connections with this largely-immigrant workforce.

There were also other efforts to prioritize immigrant labor battles. One involved workers at the American Licorice Company in Union City who struck over healthcare. Some of those workers, who are represented by the bakery union, had been coming to Labor Solidarity Committee meetings to present their needs. Occupy sent members to strengthen their picket lines. Similar involvement occurred with a larger struggle of members of HERE/UNITE Local 2850 who have been locked out for over two years by the elite Castlewood Country Club in Pleasanton. These workers too were immigrants and were fighting over a dramatic increase in their payments for health benefits. A third

such struggle involved workers at the Pacific Steel plant in Richmond where not only were there contractual issues, but where many union members were being threatened by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

While the American Licorice battle ended after several weeks, there was not an adequate balance sheet concerning Occupy's efforts, which to some extent conflicted with the local union leadership's tactics over the question of blocking entrances to the plant. The Pacific Steel Workers, somewhat similarly, divided over how to relate to Occupy. There was a more positive assessment of the work around the Castlewood solidarity, but there has not been follow-up after one significant mobilization called by the union.

Occupy Oakland has also sought to support workers in the public sector, building something of an alliance with Oakland City workers, mainly represented by members of SEIU Local 1021. We have met in their hall and have sent representatives to a major rally they organized, but not much has occurred beyond this. There are now efforts to take actions in solidarity with postal workers. A rally organized by Occupy Oakland Labor helped build the April 17th protests at the main post office in Oakland. There has also been cooperation with Occupy Education NorCal, which is composed not only of student groups and activists, but also education workers unions, mainly from higher ed, such as the Union of Professional and Technical Workers and the graduate student United Auto Workers Local 2865 (both at the University of California), as well as the Peralta Federation of Teachers and the Oakland Education Association (the teachers union in Oakland of which I am a member). This led to support for the big mobilization of students and education workers in Sacramento on March 5th, calling for no cuts to public education, free access to college, and support for the late-lamented Millionaires Tax initiative, which has recently been withdrawn (although this latter demand was one not embraced by Occupy Oakland Labor Solidarity)

The most recent actions are focused on an upcoming Workers Assembly, meeting at the California Nurses Association offices in Oakland next week, attempting to bring workers from different sectors, including those who are unorganized and/or in contingent jobs, to share work and organizing experiences. There is also involvement in May Day activities including an immigrant rights/workers march in East Oakland and direct action in support of Golden Gate toll workers facing layoffs. This latter struggle involves a coalition of seventeen unions.

Part IV. Conclusions

THERE ARE A NUMBER of contradictory organizational and analytical conclusions one can draw from all these Occupy projects and this activism. The Occupy Oakland Labor Solidarity Committee has had difficulty developing a longer-term strategic perspective.

There is also some truth in the accusations of substitutionism in the Longview battle as well as in some of the support for local labor struggles, not because of a negative view of the workers involved, but rather because Occupy Oakland labor actions sometimes grew out of pre-conceived goals rather than out of such processes within unions or in collaboration between the unions and Occupy. There has also been a tendency to simply cheerlead for other actions called by the union leadership. In both cases, there is an impatience to take action at the expense of patient, organic linking with the rank and file. This is superimposed on a desire to find the "one, big battle" to alter class power.

On the positive side, activists in OO Labor Solidarity have demonstrated not only great energy, but also a growing maturity in organizing techniques. We have also been able at times to bring the full mobilzation of the broader Occupy movement to bear, as with the Port shutdowns in November and December. There is an ongoing orientation to grassroots organizing and democracy and there continue to be efforts at drawing linkages between contractual and more traditional union struggles,

as well as a wide range of anti-corporate and anti-authoritarian themes.

The Occupy Oakland Labor Solidarity Committee has insisted on its independence vis-à-vis the Democratic Party, but has been less consistent in its relations to the labor bureaucracy. While trying to grapple with larger strategic questions, the experience of Occupy Oakland Labor Solidarity is one which has emboldened not only its participants, but also a broad layer of the local labor movement, as evidenced by debates and discussions in the Alameda Central Labor Council and other union bodies. The real question will be how we help encourage the average worker to fight back and learn the lesson of the necessity to replace this for-profit system with an egalitarian society.

Footnotes