From Occupy Wall Street to Occupy the World: The Emergence of a Mass Movement

written by Dan La Botz | January 23, 2012

THE OCCUPY MOVEMENT has changed the American political landscape. We are at the opening of a new mass movement and a radicalization that presage an era of coming social upheaval and class conflict that require the left to both analyze these developments and to develop a strategy to intervene. The left today, small, divided, and weak, must develop an approach that will make it possible for it to grow and unite so that it can influence events. The developments taking place are somewhat episodic and uneven, but they have a common character, that of a mass, populist, leftward moving force. Our task is to help that force to grow and to help its inherently radical character to fully emerge and to become self-consciously anti-capitalist and an eventually socialist movement. To do so we must respect both the movement's character and the convictions of its participants. We must share the work of the movement and enter its conversation prepared not only to share our view, but also to learn from others.

A handful of young people started Occupy Wall Street in mid-September, as a protest against the banks and corporations that have grown rich while most Americans have grown poorer. Responding to the call to occupy Wall Street by *Adbusters*, the Canadian anti-consumerism magazine, they took Zuccotti Park on September 17 and began a permanent encampment. Within weeks they had attracted hundreds and then thousands to marches and demonstration in New York City — one of them leading to the arrest of hundreds on the Brooklyn Bridge. The movement's chant "We are the 99 percent" rang out not only in the Wall Street canyon but also across the country. Soon there were scores of Occupy groups across the United States camping out in public places, marching and rallying in cities and towns against corporate greed. By mid-October the Occupy movement had spread to every continent, to dozens of countries, and to hundreds of cities.

The movement and its repression are having profound ramifications in the working class. State and local governments responded to the movement with police repression resulting in the arrest of 3,000 activists in a dozen cities in the first weeks. The police, on foot and mounted, sometimes formed in phalanxes, and wearing riot gear, have raided the Occupy encampments using pepper spray, clubs, tear gas, and stun grenades. The assault on the Oakland camp led to the shooting of Iraqi war veteran Scott Olsen. In response an Occupy Oakland meeting of 3,000 called for a general strike, a call that led to mass demonstrations, the closing of the Port of Oakland and of many schools. While many of us, myself included, had believed that a new union movement would arise from struggles in the plants and in the unions themselves, the impact of Occupy suggests that many union officials see Occupy as a social force that can strengthen the union movement and that workers responding to Occupy may be emboldened to break the stranglehold of bureaucracy as they respond to external developments.

We are witnessing the birth of the first major mass movement on the left in the United States since the decline of the leftist upsurge of the 1960s and early 1970s. While the new movement has not yet reached the proportions of the upheaval of forty years ago, when at times there were millions in the streets and hundreds of thousands of workers on strike, still it is clear that Occupy represents both a mass movement and a new radicalization. The Occupy Wall Street Declaration published on September 30 is a remarkable catalog of the grievances of the American people, touching on every issue from the economic crisis to the wars abroad, to the looming environmental catastrophe. While the movement cannot now be called anti-capitalist, not in the way that the anti-globalization protests

of the 1990s and 2000s were, nevertheless, Occupy's populist, anti-corporate politics are infused with a profound radicalism expressed in its intense moral repugnance toward the existing system.

While some of the young people have been inspired by the occupation of Tahrir Square and by the *indignados* of Spain, this is an essentially American movement about American issues. The Occupy folks are furious at the corporations and many are angry at government as well; they are generally hostile to the Republicans and disappointed in the Democrats. Occupy is not anti-capitalist, but neither is it liberal. The Occupy activists have shown little interest in liberal organizations, the Democratic Party, political candidates, or liberal nostrums. Frustrated with the economic and political situation, they want to tax the rich, they want to stop the foreclosures, they want jobs for themselves and all the other unemployed. They demand an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. They want justice, not quite sure what that would look like or how to get there, but they are committed to the goal.

While most of those down at Zuccotti Park where the occupation is taking place are from New York, others have come in ones and twos from around the country to take a stand against corporate greed. Visitors are impressed with the organization: the kitchen, the medical center, the media center, the library, the daily lectures and appearances by intellectual luminaries such as Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist of the World Bank; Jeffrey Sachs, Harvard professor and special advisor to the United Nations' secretary general; Barbara Ehrenreich, feminist and author; and philosopher and Princeton professor Cornell West. There is now also a newspaper, The *Occupied Wall Street Journal*, which is going national. Tens of thousands of dollars have been raised through small contributions by both Occupy Wall Street and the newspaper. While they may not have all of these structures, occupations in other cities have the kitchen or the library, or did until the police ran them out of the park, and most have some sort of educational program with classes on the banks, corporations and capitalism, but also on the history of social movements, and the arts and the movement.

The idealist youth who launched the movement soon found that they were occupying parks that had been occupied by the homeless for years. The encounter of professionals, workers, and students with the jobless and the homeless has given those who are somewhat better off an insight into poverty, alcoholism, and mental illness, allowed them to put a face on social misery, and it has brought about greater compassion. The movement has generally embraced the homeless. While their addictions or mental illness prevent some from participating in the Occupy movement and may even lead them to disrupt it, other homeless folk have been uplifted by the experience, joining in the debates and discussions and bringing the perspective of those who stand at the very bottom of the social heap.

"We the people . . . have found our voice." So begin many of the general assemblies throughout the country. The general assembly is the life of the occupations, scores or hundreds of participants in the movement (not all directly engaged in the encampment) meeting to discuss the group's vision, principles, strategy, and tactics. The rotation of facilitators, the open discussion, the generally amicable debate, the consensus model of decision making all reflect the movement's commitment to direct democracy. The hand signals with the wiggling fingers — up for yes, out in front for on the fence, down for no, crossed arms and fists for a moral rejection of the proposal — draw everyone into participation in the discussion. The human mic, that is, the repetition of a speaker's words because the law forbids electric amplification equipment in the parks, is a powerful tool and a striking symbol of the idea of the collective voice. People listen more carefully, and, repeating the speakers' words, really hear them, hear them twice, hear them magnified by themselves as they spread over the crowd. If the discussions are sometimes tedious, frustrating, or silly, they are at other times inspiring, and no assembly passes without some person, new to activism, standing up and giving a testimonial that reaffirms the significance of the movement.

The occupation's work is done through face-to-face and virtual committee meetings. The leaders of the leaderless movement, as it sees itself, are in most places a constantly changing constellation of activists of all ages and often of great diversity in other respects as well. Important decisions generally come back to the general assembly for approval, but autonomous actions take place initiated by small bands of occupiers.

Occupy is both a real movement of thousands on the street and a virtual movement of millions on the social media. The movement's voice and its images are posted on local Occupy websites, on Facebook pages, on YouTube, shared on Twitter. Thousands "like" the posts, or comment on them, or add their own photo or video. The activists participating in the occupations, demonstrations, and marches follow the development of their local movement and of the national movement on their smart phones or other electronic devices even as they occupy. Text messages summon up flash-mobs for quickie actions, and photos taken with cell phones immediately tell the world what happened.

Occupy Wall Street and its offspring, nearly all of which began with white youth, have grown not only larger, but also more diverse, attracting people from all walks of life and every segment of the society. They are making real their chant, "This is what democracy looks like." In Atlanta and some other cities, African Americans and Latinos have taken up the occupation. In Albuquerque — where Indians and Mexicans feel they have been occupied by imperial powers for so long — they call it (Un)occupy. But the sentiment is the same: the country's on the wrong track. Even where the participation of people of color in the occupation is not proportional and may be small, still bonds of solidarity are established that cross the lines of ethnicity, race, religion, language and culture. On the borders north and south, people cross the line to join the occupation on the other side.

Utopian and Inspiring

OCCUPY IS IN PART a coming together of activists from other movements. Watching any of the demonstrations in any city on any day one sees pass by on the t-shirts and jackets all the logos of every movement that has touched the country in the last decade: anti-war, LGBTQ, foreclosures, and civil rights activists. Walking among them are others new to the movement, blue collar and white collar workers, so far without their logos, carrying their own hand painted signs with slogans like "Create Jobs, Reform Wall Street, Tax the Wealthy More," and "The People are Too Big to Fail." One sign down at Wall Street read, "This is the First Time I've Felt Hopeful in a Very Long Time."

The movement has a utopian character. Many of those involved in it want not only to overcome the immediate effects of the economic crisis — they want a better life, a better country, a better world. The movement as such has no ideology. This is populism of a left wing sort: the people versus big business and bad government. Though there are anarchists in it and they have given it some of their style, it is not an anarchist movement. Though there are some socialists in it, the movement as a whole is by no means socialist. And while the movement is anti-corporate, it would be going too far to claim that it is anti-capitalist, at least not yet. All over the country one sees three flags flying — the American flag, the anarchist black flag, and the socialist red flag — a phenomenon expressing not so much confusion or competition as the interaction of the people who hold the various political philosophies suggested by these banners. Occupy is an endless discussion, a continuous conversation, a generally good-willed political debate. What is perhaps best and most exciting about the movement is the confluence of the many social movements with middle class and working class people and poor people who have come down to Wall Street or in some other town or city down to Main Street to say, "We've had it." The utopianism of the movement has inspired ordinary people to say, "We can live differently, we must, and we will."

The movement has imposed its own ethos and sense of decorum on the group. We see a rebirth of civility. Mutual respect is highly valued. Egotistical behavior, the pushing of personal agendas and

what are perceived as inappropriate invasions of the space are frowned upon. The group's norms have inhibited leftist organizations and activists who generally do not identify themselves as members of this or that organization and generally do not sell their newspapers and magazines at the occupations. The longstanding practice of some socialist missionaries who stood and announced that they came from a particular party that published such and such a newspaper has disappeared, except among the most hardened and irrelevant sects.

To some extent, the implicit strictures against propagandizing for socialism reflect both the anarchist and liberal strains in politics. This raises the question of how socialists should express their views, distribute their literature, and recruit to their organizations. Most socialists have found themselves principally joining in the discussion, trying to show how the ideals of Occupy find their fulfillment in an anti-capitalist and pro-socialist position. But it isn't easy. The general assembly and the human mic don't really facilitate the presentation of complex ideas and analysis, or the development of program and strategy. Leftist newspapers are distributed discreetly and potential recruits are invited off-site to talk. Virtually all the socialist organizations see Occupy as the beginning of something big, though none of us has a full-developed strategy for the movement. Nor should we; this is a movement in the making and it is as important to join in and learn from it as it is to attempt to help provide leadership for it.

The Occupy movement has done what in other countries at other times has been done by the labor unions or by labor or socialist parties: it has expressed the grievances of the people and attempted to speak for them, for the 99 percent. Occupy is a kind of a party, not a party with a formal structure, but potential peoples party in formation, the party of working people, the party of the poor, the party of the dispossessed, the oppressed, and the exploited. The Occupy movement excoriates the banks, the corporations, the economic elite, the 1 percent with their greed, and it criticizes the government for its complicity and its corruption. Occupy is the moralizing party of the people, asking the people to recognize themselves in it, to join it, and to make real its claim to represent the 99 percent.

A month or so into the Occupy movement, the labor unions began to take an interest. In New York the unions turned out thousands of their members for a major march in October. At about the same time, Richard Trumka, head of the AFL-CIO, spoke out in favor of the movement, as did leaders of various national and local unions. Yet the AFL-CIO and the Occupy movement remain wary of each other. The AFL-CIO's principal goal in the next year is to help Obama and the Democrats win the November 2012 elections, and both the AFL-CIO and the Democrats would love to figure out how to harness Occupy for their political and electoral goals. Many in the Occupy movement would love to have more workers involved, the unions involved, but they fear the labor bureaucracy's heavy hand. And, more important for some, they fear losing their political independence to union officials and Democrats.

The labor movement's formal endorsement of Occupy has made it possible for union activists in New York and some other cities to use the rise of the new movement as a way to engage with their unions and to encourage their fellow union members to take action. For example, activists from Occupy Wall Street joined Teamster Local 814 members in protesting at a Sotheby's auction because of the company lockout of 43 workers. In many cities, at least some of the labor unions and their members have come down to the occupations and marched in the demonstrations; some have lent space to the movement, made financial donations, given food. While we have no real evidence, it's hard to imagine that the Occupy movement isn't having an impact on workers' consciousness. As with the civil rights movement of the 1960s which after the long dark night of McCarthyism once again legitimated protest, so too Occupy today is legitimating social protest on the left. Once again it is okay to say that you don't like the system and disagree with the government. If the movement grows, it will become almost a moral obligation to be a dissenter.

Occupy Wall Street and Politics

OCCUPY, OF COURSE, PREOCCUPIES the politicians. The Republican Party, naturally, loathes the politics of Occupy. House Majority leader Eric Cantor referred to the Occupiers as "mobs." Alluding to President Barack Obama he said, "Some in this town condone pitting Americans against Americans." Mitt Romney, the leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination said, "I think it's dangerous, this class warfare." Whatever they may say to the media, the Republicans' real fear is that Occupy Wall Street could buoy up the Democrats, while their hope that the movement's radicalism will blow their opponents to the left, costing them votes in the center. No doubt the Republicans sense the radical character of the movement and fear it.

One of the impacts of Occupy is that it has displaced the Tea Party, at least for now. Where just a few months ago the Tea Party dominated the news, now it is Occupy Wall Street that captures the headlines and the imagination of the public. While the Tea Party had already gone into decline before Occupy emerged, it has now all but disappeared from the media and the public mind. A CBS/*New York Times* poll conducted in late October found that 43 percent of the population agrees with the Occupy Wall Street movement. At the same time, a Congressional Budget Office study confirmed Occupy's claim that the 1 percent was enriching itself at the expense of the 99 percent.

The Democratic Party Congressional Campaign Committee and the think-tank Center for American Program are trying to find a way to use Occupy Wall Street, believing that the movement could put wind in the party's sails for 2012. Other party leaders fear that the identification with the movement would move the party toward the left and away from the center where they believe the voters are. Even more important, some Democratic Party leaders sense that opposing Wall Street implicitly challenges the whole raison d'être of the Democrats as a party that binds the middle class, the working class and the poor to the corporate order. And more practically speaking, some Democratic Party leaders have argued that such an attack on Wall Street could result in fewer donations from the banks and corporations that fund the Democrats. Bernie Sanders, the only independent in the Senate who calls himself a socialist (though he caucuses with the Democrats) spoke to the Occupy movement with an op-ed piece calling upon the government to break up the banks, support small business, and stop speculation in the oil industry. That was the Progressive Party program of 1912, the traditional program of American populism, but it misses completely the radical spirit of this movement.

Some Democrats would like to see Occupy Wall Street become their Tea Party, the right wing group that brought new vitality to the Republicans. But Occupy Wall Street activists have kept their distance from the Democrats, generally declining to provide a platform for the politicians or party candidates. At the moment there seems little chance of this as the Occupy movement jealously guards its independence.

Once again, after forty years of relative political and social stagnation, we have a mass movement with a radicalizing tendency. It faces the common problem of such suddenly emerging movements, that there are not enough leaders, that there is not enough organization, there is not enough yet of a strongly held radical political ideology. The notion of the "99 percent" and the idea that "We are what democracy looks like" and declaration of the Occupy Wall Street movement are good starting points. Still, we need to have a clearer notion of what we stand for in this movement. This is not a call for a political program or a formal set of demands. At present, the movement draws its strength precisely from its moral rejection of the system and projection that another sort of society, another world is possible.

Our job on the left is to work with others on the left and in the various social movements as well as within Occupy to help develop the leadership, organizational strength, and clear ideology that can

both help to take Occupy forward toward the assertion of political independence, beyond the confining structures of the Republican and Democratic parties, so that down the road the movement can stimulate the birth of a party that actually represents the radical aspiration of the occupiers in the face of the coming crises and the even more expansive upheavals that lie ahead.

Footnotes