Zuccotti at Work: Daydreams of a Rank and Filer

written by Amy Muldoon | July 1, 2012

THERE ISN'T A WORKING PERSON ALIVE today who hasn't idly fantasized about taking control of their lives at work. For many, this is probably just a fantasy about tossing their boss out a window or poisoning their coffee, but others have a more expansive vision of challenging the system of control that gives you an arrogant, unqualified stooge to squeeze the life out of you in the first place.

Militants and radicals in the unions are the ones who take it upon themselves to find the path between those idle dreams and reality. Not so much on the murder front (I hope) but more how to edge forward in the battle for self-control over the course of our work and our lives. The path is rough. It dead-ends, and goes over cliffs. It goes through unexpected terrain where the tools you brought are useless and improvisation is a survival skill. Sometimes the way goes pitch-black and you muddle forward by sense of smell.

Occupy Wall Street, with all its explosive force and lovely razor-clean language about the 1 percent, let the sun rise on the path forward for those of us who have been slogging away. That's not to say the road wasn't rising to our feet to some degree already, but Occupy helped us see the contours more clearly — and made them visible to other travelers.

For me personally, Occupy was the second most important thing to happen as summer climbed down into fall in 2011. Striking Verizon was number one, with a bullet. Profitable, enormous, and aggressively wound into Wall Street, the strike gave people far beyond our members a target for the dissatisfaction in their own lives. It also happened to coincide with an election in a couple of local unions here in New York. The sentiment for resistance and a fresh start permeated the strike — as seen on every YouTube video of Verizon Wireless pickets.

We were not happy to return to work without a contract. Not happy at all. Frustration with our own situation, including with our own representatives, colored everything. Predictably new leadership came in, but surprisingly it crushed outgoing incumbents, giving a sense of how much people wanted change.

Then along comes a movement that preaches (and practices) direct confrontation. Immediate action. No removed leaders giving direction. While very few of my coworkers ever went down to Zuccotti, a handful followed it closely and a much larger number were happy to see someone, anyone, stand up to the banks. As a steward said to me last week: "I didn't agree with everything that went on down there, but finally! Someone was standing up to the banks! How did [the bankers] not all go to jail for what they did?!" The moral impulse that someone must DO SOMETHING, and the obvious reality that the politicians either did nothing, or wrote checks to these criminals, makes supporting Occupy more natural than breathing.

But our movement has been challenged: We did do something, and sure, things changed — we all know that, left to the Democrats and lobbying, the political debate in this country would never stray off a comfortably, enthusiastically pro-corporate, pro-capitalist path — but we have been served a number of defeats from evictions and arrests to just the continued grind of inequality. And within our workplaces and unions we continue to press forward unsteadily. We still don't have a contract at Verizon. Now TWU Local 100, which runs the U.S.'s biggest transit system here in New

York, has been without a contract since January.

These things challenge us, but they do not deter us. While people rarely talk about Occupy explicitly anymore, there is still that sunshine illuminating the path. Sure it illuminates a path that is subject to rockslides — my chief steward was suspended without pay for a day because he raised his voice while defending a member against threatened discipline — but we move forward nonetheless.

Part of the peculiar challenge of being a rank and file organizer, different from what many occupiers experience, is that some of our obstacles are within our own forces. The strategy of the unions for decades has been top-down and deeply wedded to the Democratic Party, both things that have hollowed out the real base of power for a union — member-driven confrontation with capital. So while many members identified with Occupy, the methods the union used to build bridges often fell flat because it seemed to come out of left field instead of arising organically from the sentiment in the Locals. There is a loud minority of right-wingers in our unions and the top-down culture doesn't constructively challenge right-wing ideas, nor does the mushy lowest common-denominator email blast approach empower the militants.

Because we have been told time and again to let the negotiators/lawyers/union presidents handle it (don't take any job actions that might cause a backlash! We don't want to provoke them!) the self-activity of the members has suffered serious erosion. Yet the impulse is still there. And in a context where it is commonsense that the bosses get away with everything because the laws are written for them, by them (tax evasion? No need to evade when the laws give you rebates greater than what you paid!) the moral impulse is also still there.

We are not doing anything spectacular or particularly innovative to rebuild our power. We work for the greatest participation in the national contract campaign — leafleting, letter-writing, sticker campaigns — and we try to go further in ways that come from us. In December we had a round of rallies in each of the Locals in New York. In ours we used the People's Mic and had supporters from TWU and SEIU speak. We had no stage and no politicians. No one with a suit who didn't work for a living spoke to the crowd of 150. We've now had three rallies like this on our own initiative, the last being 300 people (in a Local of 1200). While they don't subscribe to the Occupy principle of disruption, they have increased our confidence and unity, which will make confrontation more possible down the road.

In my work location, we have union meetings at least three times a week, but more often every day. Just to tell people what's up. What management is up to, to clear up disputes between members, discuss initiatives and actions. Everyone expects to be talking about union issues daily. My chief steward gave a speech last month about jobs going overseas and the work conditions here and in China. He said: "there is a class war going on and the bosses are committing war crimes." He went on to explain our fight is not just about a contract any more, but is part of a struggle for the future of our society. You can't point to a specific Occupy Wall Street action that made him say that, but the fact that the *New York Times* ran a series of articles on labor conditions for Apple workers does have to do with the lasting effect of Occupy on consciousness.

It's also true that we had recently had a knock-down, drag-out shouting match about whether we could have won our strike and whether the population supported us, in which the winning blow was that Occupy popped up less than a month after we had returned to work, and just imagine what it would have been like if we'd been out 6 weeks when that happened. Just dream on that. That dream is inspirational.

Hope is an essential component of organizing, and Occupy brought a joy and optimism that we all desperately need. After completing a form-letter campaign to block a partnership between

Verizon and cable companies (I think for world domination), my chief steward emailed our work unit about writing our own messages to our Senators:

> I just wrote my own personal message to them both. Why wait for the National to tell you what to write? Do you not still have your own voice and your own personal message? Inasmuch as I thank all those who did write letters, I offer you another method to participate in your future and your survival… Imagine if we all did this, the kind of impact we could have on our future. I know it's wishful thinking, but just take a moment and imagine. It's quite a hopeful image!

We are on our way. The slogans and stance of the movement are magnetic for so many working class people, but we are just at the beginning of figuring out what our movement will look like where our chief enemy lives, which although in Lower Manhattan, is on West Street, not Wall Street.

Working people have a tremendous and unique power to contribute to the movement. Direct democracy in a park is dangerous for capitalism; direct democracy in the workplace is deadly. Our self-organization is absorbing everything it can for the long haul. We distill the sunshine of Occupy into solar batteries for the path ahead.

Footnotes