

# Occupy Wall Street and Labor: The Closest of Strangers

February 10, 2012

A sign on a lower Broadway storefront window just one block south of Wall Street reads “I can’t afford a lobbyist, so I organize.” The sign, one of many put up by Occupy Wall Street activists, sits inside a cavernous street floor space the United Federation of Teachers lent gratis to OWS for storage and coordination. The UFT, like other city unions, can afford lobbyists—subsidized by its own members through voluntary contributions. Like other city unions it operates an extensive volunteer political action arm, and massaging or muscling elected officials is seen as key to improving members’ wages and working conditions. And, like other unions in a state boasting the nation’s highest concentration of union households and home to the largest number of Fortune 500 mega-corporations and public-sector-union-averse think tankers, it also organizes aggressively.

Organizing and lobbying are tactics used by the Transport Workers, Service Employees, Communications Workers, AFSCME and Unite-Here, too—key supporters of the Occupy movement nationwide. Yet the slogan hints at outstanding contradictions between two movements that view the world—at least right now—quite differently, even as its activists are building warm relationships with each other.

What labor and Occupy share is a common enemy in corporate America. What else shared is not so clear. Much of the discussion at a recent forum on “Can the Labor Movement and Occupy Wall Street March down the Same Road,” sponsored on Jan. 27 by The Murphy Institute, a graduate labor program at City University of New York, was about fostering dialogue and the need to see things from others’ perspectives. Certainly the plague of joblessness, growing economic inequality, environmental genocide, needless military adventures and federal and state policies that reward the financial industry even after it sunk the economy are all powerful incentives for cooperation. But substantively, in my view, very little was exchanged.

Occupy Wall Street is a movement that eschews political demands. Its blogs are rife with comments that demands in themselves validate government and reinforce the social order. That sentiment, wrong on its face, embodied at least a smart tactical move, initially. It maximized participation, mainstreamed a radical slam at the rich and powerful and restated Jack London’s classic charge against business: “you have mismanaged.” In one moment, Occupy switched media attention from the growing federal deficit to the venality and homicide of corporate society. Occupy has returned a sense of “them and us” to the American psyche. It is, as panel moderator and author Steve Fraser said, a movement that is inherently “anticapitalist,” and “using liberated language.” It’s allowed,” said panelist John Samuelson, president of the city’s subway workers and bus drivers union, “labor contracts to be concluded because the other side doesn’t want job actions” in the era of Occupy.

In the same vein, Mario Dartayet-Rodriguez, organizing director for AFSCME’s District Council 37, sketched the two movements’ similarities, saying that “Despite differences over politics and the ballot box, no one else has the same view of the concentration of power,” adding that “As long as wage disparities and joblessness exist, there’s plenty of room for collaboration.”

Tammy Kim, staff attorney at the Urban Justice Center and an active member of the Occupy Wall Street Immigrant Worker Justice Working Group, gave examples of wage theft committed against immigrant workers. She reminded listeners—if indeed we needed reminding—that organized labor (or as she unfortunately put it, “Big Labor”) is just one part of the working class.

Amy Muldoon, a Verizon repair technician serving as liaison between her Communications Workers district and Occupy, and whose union donated mattresses, walkie-talkies and other supplies to the occupiers, said Occupy's attraction came from "class anger at 30 or 40 years of attacks," and how the occupation was "incredible and intoxicating for those of us who slog in the unions." She said the rage contained in OWS was effecting "a groundswell for change in unions and against organizational inertia." She even quoted German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg, about movements advancing and retreating "but always leaving a footprint."

I'll even add that culturally Occupy legitimates giving the risible finger to the invisible hand, something that is not just the bravado of a subculture but a rational and helpful political act in itself

Is any of this enough? Is any of it, well, bankable?

Samuelson, whose union was the first of many in New York to embrace the occupation, said the number one question for the day was "What can each movement learn from each other?" Fraser, whose book "Every Man a Speculator," is a withering critique of Wall Street, said that while collaboration between the two movements was crucial, activists had to be aware that the movements diverged in terms of structure, demands, political perspectives, as well as over tactics and strategies.

"These differences need to be worked on, and that's what we're doing today," said Fraser said.

A worthy goal, but it didn't happen. To me, the meeting was more an exercise in mutual validation and less an actual exchange of ideas and experiences. There was a lot of talk of "dialogue," but it was more monologues on parallel tracks.

All speakers praised Occupy's focus on horizontal organization as a replacement for what they saw as a prevailing bureaucratic mentality, but there was little recognition that labor's problem is structural and not (or not primarily) cultural. A fixation with horizontal organization as a cure-all doesn't take into account the legal and contractual strangleholds holding unions back, leaving it, instead, at attitude problems. Sure, the laws, the timed contract system, even the lack of a political party that speaks unambiguously for working people, aren't permanent roadblocks, though Samuelson admitted that getting unions to change direction "was like turning the Titanic." Certainly the top-down union structure allows leaders too much sway to cut side deals and too little incentive to empower members. But is lack of imagination really labor's Achilles' heel? Is changing the "culture" of the unions just a matter of style or substance?

And where was the recognition of Occupy's own dirty little secrets: that the General Assemblies enable one individual to stymie the will of thousands; where endless debates restrict decision making to those with the time and energy to occupy 24/7—giving the edge to those without jobs or families—and where, as in one New York case, a workgroup focusing on demands was effectively neutered not on the merits but after daring to change its own internal workings to require a 75 percent supermajority on decisions when consensus failed. Then there's the predilection for confrontation. Civil disobedience is a powerful weapon, but too many encounters with the police—at least the ones not provoked by the police high command—were done with little preparation or even sufficient legal observers present. Ouch!

OWS activists consider nonhierarchical structures and open sourcing to be the indispensable condition for good social organization if not prefigurations of the good society. With all its talk of consensus, OWS boils things down to a minimum. At its worst moments, it's a talk shop with meditation. Labor, for its part, is hierarchically structured; its message is crafted (hopefully with input from the bottom up) but its democracy is centralized. It's the leadership that speaks.

Unions—the good ones at least—see democracy as the basis for mobilizing members for a goal and training activists. Then they prize representative democracy as a good in itself, a tricky proposition no less problematic than is the participatory alternative. There's also a tendency for even the most social-justice-conscious trade unionists to give breathtaking critiques of corporate greed, yet their solution is a one-shoe-fits-all electoral involvement. Political action is at best one part of a solution.

And of course union leaders are not blameless. If they were, we wouldn't need a blog called *Talking Union*. DC 37, for one, was generous with its meeting space, allowing two separate labor-oriented workgroups to hold weekly meetings, which are still going on. But that didn't stop AFSCME's International Executive Board from endorsing President Obama for re-election with hyper-exuberant language, stretching credulity to claim this much failed president deserved re-election on the merits, rather than because the GOP is so god awful and dangerous. The February issue of Public Employee Press cites AFSCME's President Gerald McEntee as saying in pure Occupy speak, how "Obama is the only choice for the 99 percent." It quotes Lillian Roberts, the DC 37 executive director on a counterfactual, that "Obama is a proven fighter whose stand on economic, political and social issues demonstrates strong support for protecting the rights of working men and women." Gee, Lillian, wasn't McEntee's saying "we've got no choice" sad enough?

Of course, there are good things both movements can learn from each other, and dialogue should facilitate that learning, but it won't come without engaging each other, too. Right now, solidarity between the two movements is as broad as a football field and shallow as the turf. It can't be allowed to stay that way.

The possibilities of real dialogue are exciting. The OWS may be inherently anticapitalist, but it's worker-lite. The Labor Movement breathes the language of class, but is only anticapitalist in the final instance. Until then, it's all negotiable. For now, unions straddle the fence between defending labor power and selling it. OWS could give up its biblical prophet pose and talk about real solutions, while unionists could explain their legal and contractual binds and the real inhibitions on making every member an activist, including how plenty of workers vote Republican, as every political director knows. (Keeping that number below 30 percent is considered a victory). That's an exercise that could give fresh thought to ways of breaking those binds. That's a discussion that should happen soon.

Instead, OWS activists segregate themselves into work groups with little in common with the larger OWS. The two labor workgroups comprise union activists, officers and staff. It presents some interesting possibilities for joint work between elected leaders and shop-floor militants, but these can't affect the overall OWS sensibility. An exciting labor solidarity project to help locked-out union art handlers at the tony Sotheby's Auction Gallery got a lot of media play, but was done largely by unionists affiliated with OWS. For too many of the rest in OWS, it was the spectacle at Zuccotti Park that counted. That and the drumming.

*Michael Hirsch is a veteran union activist and a member of the New Politics editorial board.*