

Occupy Wall Street. Occupy Your City. Occupy Your Campus.

Category: Left Politics

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#OccupyWallStreet has caused quite the media frenzy during the past three weeks. The protestors (this author included) who have been camping out in Liberty Plaza, formerly Zuccotti Park, are dedicated to staying and demonstrating for economic and social justice.

The mainstream media and many liberal commentators such as Nicholas Kristof have criticized #OccupyWallStreet for its lack of structure and demands. "What exactly are they protesting?" they ask coyly, "I just don't get it."

The American public, however, understands exactly why we are there. In a city where one in five people live in poverty, and in a country where the top one percent own more than fifty percent of the wealth, it is hard to see why Americans from all over have *not* taken up residence in Liberty Plaza. We are united in our dedication to economic justice, participatory democracy, and an end to racism, sexism, and heterosexism.

The #OccupyWallStreet protests, which began on September 17th, after a call from the magazine *Adbusters*, have galvanized not only the people of New York City, but have spread all over the country, arousing thousands of students, union members, and unemployed and underemployed workers to occupy public spaces in Boston, Philadelphia, Portland, Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and over 1,000 other cities worldwide.

As a student at the City University of New York (CUNY), it is very clear to me that this movement is not only inspiring and motivating, but also that it is absolutely necessary. CUNY provides me with a relevant microcosm of the rest of American society. Recently, the CUNY Board of Trustees approved tuition hikes of \$300 a year for the next five years, while the New York State Legislature eliminated the Millionaire's Tax and the Stock Transfer Tax—major sources of tax revenue. What we can see here is a sort of reverse Robin Hood practice of stealing from the poor to pay for the rich. While millionaires and large investment firms in New York State pay less and less in taxes, the working-class students of CUNY are asked to pick up the slack. Our administrators and the Board of Trustees, of course, are complicit in this, having received huge bonuses and six figure salaries (the chancellor of the CUNY Board of Trustees, Matthew Goldstein, makes over \$490,000 a year),—rewards for suppressing the working-class. This is exactly what is happening all over the United States—poor people are being forced to pay for an economic crisis they did not create, as banks and large corporations are rewarded for their malfeasance in the name of "creating jobs." Similar to our CUNY administration, the Obama administration and our representatives in Congress receive large corporate kickbacks for carrying out these classist policies while those of us who cannot afford a lobbyist are left out in the cold.

Our commitment, however, does not only extend to economic justice. One of the main reasons why these demonstrations are occurring is because of a growing sentiment of political isolation and exclusion. Americans, on the whole, feel that they are not being represented by their "representatives" in Congress or the executive branch, and are not able to fully participate in their own national governance beyond voting every few years for pre-determined candidates. If nothing else, #OccupyWallStreet gives people a place to participate in decisions that affect them, in a way that the United States government does not. If you're interested in providing food to the

#OccupyWallStreet community, you simply go and join the food committee, which will set you up with a task, and allow you input on decisions. Now, let's say the food committee needs funding for more utensils. You go to the general assembly, not some appointed funding board, and everyone, together, decides how much money should be allocated after an informed report from the finance committee. This is *real* democracy, democracy which allows us to participate in the decisions that affect us.

This is not to say, however, that #OccupyWallStreet is anywhere near a perfect movement. Yes, our consensus-based decision making process does take an extraordinary amount of time, and yes, there are some very different and some sometimes conflicting political trends within our movement. Real democracy, however, is not in any way perfect. It is, in fact, very messy, and if it's not-if you're not constantly struggling and overcoming problems of process and dissent—then it is worth re-evaluating the decision-making process being used.

I think, in terms of movements, that #OccupyWallStreet has been a success despite, and maybe as a direct result of, its so-called shortcomings. It has inspired the post-9/11 generation to return to the struggle for justice where the anti-globalization movement left off, and it has given a place for Americans, frustrated by their economic situation and political isolation, to vent their anger and to work together to get some results. We have not only grown in size from the first day, but we have also grown in political maturity. We realize that ours is not the only struggle, and that to truly succeed we must connect with other struggles going on all over the city, and beyond. From the lockout of Teamsters Local 814 at Sotheby's, to the struggle against the death penalty and clemency for Troy Davis, #OccupyWallStreet has provided a staging ground for activists to meet and act in solidarity. I think one of the most inspiring external results of #OccupyWallStreet has been the consolidation of a student movement in New York City. What was once a loose collection of student activists, has now become a solidified group acting in concert with each other. We are taking #OccupyWallStreets to our campuses, planning General Assemblies all over, with all-student assemblies every Saturday in Washington Square Park and a CUNY-wide General Assembly happening at Hunter College this Friday.

The season has changed from Arab Spring to American Fall (Get it? American *Fall*). What started as a couple of hundred people camping in a park across from Exchange Place, has now turned into a mass movement of students and labor that can produce real results.

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