

Supporting Dissent versus Being Dissent

by Steven Toff & Jamie McCallum

When the Occupy Wall Street movement (OWS) began on September 17th 2011, few could have predicted the wave of occupations that would soon sweep the rest of the country and indeed much of the world in what has been referred to as the *American Fall*.¹ While it remains to be seen how this inchoate movement will mature, it has so far exceeded everyone's calculations—it is the first time since the 1999 anti-WTO demonstrations in Seattle that tens of thousands in the US are taking to the street for economic reasons. Average Americans, many of whom have long understood the moral and economic turpitude at the root of Wall Street, are now expanding that stance to make a wholesale critique of neoliberalism and questioning some of the most foundational principles of capitalism. Despite its occasional penchant for protest and militant action, and its position as nearly the sole organization comprised of the US working class, the labor movement has been unable to mobilize itself or recruit others in the cause against rising income inequality and the erosion of democratic protections for workers. Now that the OWS movement has raised the issue, built a movement base, and reached out to labor, there remains a looming question: how will unions respond to the call?

Enterprise Bargaining & Moving the Labor Movement

For many of our international comrades, the question has been "What took you so long?" Despite labor's best intentions and goals, neither unions nor traditional left organizations have driven this movement. For those familiar with the idiosyncrasies of US unions, their peripheral role in the occupy movement is no surprise. In many countries, unions are seen—and more importantly, see themselves—as representing the interests of all working people. By contrast, as a consequence of legislation that legitimized trade union activity in this country in the midst of the Great Depression, nearly all unions have fallen into the role of advocating solely on behalf of their members, a constituency that has been declining rather steadily toward extinction and political apathy for the last five decades.

Fast forward to September of this year, and we see an almost spontaneous uprising of mostly non-unionized working and poor people, unemployed youth and students, taking the very message that labor should have been championing directly into the seat of power. These events were as shocking for labor as they were for everyone else, though for unions, the surprise has been accompanied by at least slight embarrassment. As one US labor activist remarked, "There is a sense that they [the occupy movement] beat us at our own game."

The Present Role of Unions in the Occupy Movement

On October 5th 2011, AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka announced that US unions "support the protesters," remarking that he was "proud that today on Wall Street, bus drivers, painters, nurses and utility workers are joining students and homeowners, the unemployed and the underemployed to call for fundamental change."² SEIU, the largest union within the Change to Win federation, likewise declared, "Occupy Wall Street: We've Got Your Back."³ These are welcome pronouncements of support for direct action, but they do not constitute a comprehensive response. There is a difference between *supporting* dissent and *being* dissent. There has not recently been a more opportune moment for labor to forge a new course; as labor activists, we join a growing chorus within the union movement that feels the occupy movement is labor's movement too.

There are isolated examples of this. Unions have turned out thousands for specific rallies in New York as well as throughout the country for different marches and days of actions. This adds a substantial dose of legitimacy to the protests within the national media. National Nurses United (NNU) has joined the actual occupations in a number of cities, setting up 'Nurses Stations' at the encampments, sleeping in the camps, and even being arrested with the occupiers. On numerous occasions in New York, Massachusetts, California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Vermont and elsewhere, unions have joined marches and rallies. They have worked alongside the occupy movement to draw attention to some of their otherwise insulated contract fights, such as those at Verizon and Sotheby's Auction House.⁴ By and large, unions have followed through on the pledge made by Richard Trumka to "open our union halls and community centers as well as our arms and our hearts to those with the courage to stand up and demand a better America". But nowhere has the prospect of a labor-community coalition been more of an issue than in Oakland, California.

Oakland's General Strike

On November 2nd, in response to brutally repressive police tactics and in an effort to escalate the campaign, Occupy Oakland called for a city-wide general strike, the first one in the US since 1946.⁵ On October 26th, a general assembly drew close to 2,000 people who voted almost unanimously for a general strike one week later. This extraordinary process sheds much light on the present state of affairs in each movement.

Although a number of unions did endorse the action,⁶ none actually mobilized their members to strike. One reason has to do, again, with the legal structure that has ensnared the labor movement. US unions have almost without exception traded away or lost their right to strike during the duration of a contract with management. It is a supreme irony of US unionism that the few strikes that do occur today are usually directed at winning a contract, the same mechanism that binds them to quiescence. But unions have broken the law before, and there are other factors that discouraged labor from mobilizing its base as well—a lack of will, a bureaucratic structure that renders decision-making difficult, a membership base unaccustomed to militancy, a political perspective that blames “greedy” individuals instead of economic systems, etc.

While the action may have been smaller than general strikes in the past, and short-lived, it was a clear success. The Port of Oakland was shut down, businesses that had advertised their hostility to the occupy movement were threatened into closing for the day, and mainstream and independent media were largely sympathetic. Although unions were peripheral participants, with the notable exception of the ILWU, individual rank and file members took to the streets together with broad swaths of radicals in what was so far the most powerful display of working class solidarity the occupy movement has yet produced. “Our members couldn’t strike, but we still brought people out,” said a California union organizer.

Labor and Occupation: Past, Present, Future

It was labor that pioneered occupation as a tactic within American social movements. The workers who took over the automobile plants in the American Midwest in the 1930s transformed the labor movement and the social fabric of industrial life. Recently, this tactic made a brief but spirited comeback during the Republic Windows and Doors sit-in in Chicago, which targeted Bank of America as much as the local employer, and the occupation of the capital in Madison Wisconsin by a group of students, workers, unionists, and community activists. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s unions made common cause with domestic and transnational social movements against NAFTA, the WTO, the IMF, and World Bank. Moreover, in addition to actual instances of labor-OWS collaboration, we also see recent events shifting the ideological and discursive orientation of some large unions today, as they replace the rhetoric of “saving the middle class” with the new vernacular of the 99%. It would therefore be a mistake to suggest that labor’s “bit actor” status within the occupy movement is structurally pre-ordained or historically unprecedented.

Moreover, the student and community movements have been increasingly keen to couch their actions in the language of labor. The Oakland general strike is just one example; other student *strikes* and community *pickets* are now being proposed. This opens up an even wider possibility for

labor’s participation.

There has historically been an uneasy peace between unions and broader movements. Political maneuvering of elites, outright deception, and a perceived conflict of interest has divided coalitions of labor and social movements in many recent upsurges: Europe and the US in 1968, Seattle 1999,⁷ the Arab Spring in Egypt, in Madison Wisconsin, and already there are reports prefiguring a similar dynamic within the occupy movement.⁸ The current moment bears a certain likeness with the past, but the occupy movement’s insistent focus on so many themes central to those taken up by labor is nonetheless cause for hope.

Writing in the midst of the explosive revolts in Paris, 1968, Henri Lefebvre said, “Events belie forecasts. To the extent that events upset calculations, they are historic.”⁹ In this respect, OWS is already historic, as it has defied the unsympathetic and pessimistic predictions of both the Left and the Right. But the biggest question now regards its future. The recent evictions of occupy encampments in New York City, Oakland, and Burlington suggest that democratic governments are not allies, and that the movement will need to be innovative to remain relevant. Indeed labor has found itself in this position for a long time. Therefore, our Eleventh Thesis should be: labor leaders and workers have long recognized the need for an opportunity to forge a new future; the point now is to take it.

- 1 Mohyeldin, Ayman. “From the Arab Spring to the American Fall?”. Time. Oct. 12, 2011; (<http://ideas.time.com/2011/10/12/from-the-arab-spring-to-the-american-fall/>) (accessed Nov. 9, 2011)
- 2 AFL-CIO; (<http://www.aflcio.org/mediacenter/prspmt/pr10052011.cfm>) (accessed Nov. 9, 2011)
- 3 Change To Win; (<http://www.seiu.org/2011/10/seiu-supports-occupywallstreet.php>) (accessed Nov. 9, 2011)
- 4 Nash, Ken and Mimi Rosenberg (Producers). “Occupy Wall St. Protest – Sotheby’s Stop & Frisk, Verizon”. Building Bridges Radio. Oct. 23, 2011; (<http://www.buildingbridgesradio.blogspot.com/>) (accessed Nov. 9, 2011)
- 5 Cole, Peter. “Bay Area’s History of General Strikes”. SF Gate, Nov. 2, 2011; (http://articles.sfgate.com/2011-11-02/opinion/30353350_1_general-strike-ilwu-unions) (accessed Nov. 9, 2011)
- 6 Occupy Oakland; (<http://www.occupyoakland.org/total-general-strike/endorsements-from-organizations/>) (accessed Nov. 9, 2011).
- 7 Huber, Emily, and Jamie McCallum. “Anti-Globalization, Pro-Peace.” Mother Jones, Oct 16, 2001; (<http://motherjones.com/politics/2001/10/anti-globalization-pro-peace>) (accessed Nov. 9, 2011).
- 8 Elliot, Justin. “Keystone XL Splits Unions and Occupy Wall Street.” Salon.com, Nov 7, 2011; (http://www.salon.com/2011/11/07/keystone_xl_splits_unions_and_occupy_wall_street/singleton/) (accessed Nov. 9, 2011).
- 9 Henri Lefebvre, *The Explosion: Marxism and the French Upheaval*, (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1969), 7.

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