

The Way Forward for Occupy Portland

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Theme: [History](#)

In-depth Report: [OCCUPY WALL STREET](#)

In Portland, Oregon, all the promise and pitfalls of the Occupy Movement are on public display. Portland is second only to New York when it comes to sustained Occupy power, but in a newly born social movement strength is not something to take for granted. The vast amounts of public support in Portland, earned through large demonstrations and strategic outreach, can be frittered away by the internal contradictions of the movement.

Portland began its occupation with a 10,000-person rally that shook the city's foundation and disorientated the Mayor, who had no choice but to "allow" the occupation to stay at the park they had taken without asking. There has since been several large Portland rallies and marches that have proven the wider population's support: On October 26 a labor union-led Occupy march turned out thousands of union members with ecstatic morale; the same week showcased a "This Land is Our Land" Occupy rally by Portland band Pink Martini, which attracted nearly 10,000 people.

But the speeches of the Pink Martini rally were hardly Occupy worthy, since they showcased two members of Oregon's Congressional House of Representatives, politicians of the political establishment that the Occupy movement rose up against. As Representative Earl Blumenauer spoke, a group of activists chanted "This is what hypocrisy looks like," in response to his voting in favor for the recently passed pro-corporate free trade agreements.

If Portland's Occupy movement had a strong list of demands — or even a firm statement of principles — the Democrats in Oregon would be unable to associate with Occupy, since the Democrats' objectives would so obviously clash with those of the anti-corporate movement. But for now "99%" is vague enough for political impostors to enter the fray and inject ideas from the wealthiest 1%.

Portland's 1% has been chipping away at the Occupy movement through their control of the local media; a steady stream of negative editorials and slanted reporting has focused on the minority of internal problems of the Occupation spot, blasting headlines of drug abuse and assaults while ignoring the larger aspirations of the protesters.

Thus far, Portland's 1% has been unable to establish the "rule of law" and evict the protesters because of the wider backlash that would ensue; the media have been pushing the Mayor to create a "timeline" for the protesters to leave. Thus far the Mayor remains too jarred to act, leaving the initiative to the protesters.

But initiative is something easily lost. There are sections of Occupiers who are impatient and want more "direct action," including an expansion of the occupation to other parks. This

would not be such a bad thing if masses of people were aggressively behind the action. Instead, on October 30th in the wee hours of the morning, the “new” occupation spot had only a couple dozen protesters who were promptly arrested, giving the police and Mayor an easy victory and the Occupy movement a small but bitter defeat. The illusion of the Mayor having “control” was upheld while the message of the protesters was muzzled.

Some protesters will argue that the arrests were a victory, but civil disobedience must be looked at from a strategic lens that is most effective with masses of people involved and specific goals in mind. The era of tiny protests and limited results belongs to the past. This movement has large scale potential, and the larger 99% will feel impelled to join if they see a strong, mass movement capable of winning demands.

Another way that Occupy Portland could lose mass support is through political disunity. There are different committees and working groups within Occupy Portland trying to build some political cohesiveness to broadcast to the wider community. The movement’s long-term objectives and immediate demands remain unclear; indeed the two are being confused. There is an urge for many people to demand the end to “corporate personhood,” an increasingly popular demand on the political left that remains mostly unknown to the larger 99%.

This is precisely the problem. The Occupy movement claims to speak for the 99%, but the main leaders/organizers are students, recent graduates, or long-time members of the activist left. These groups have come into the movement with ready-made ideas in mind, many of them good. But the left has been plagued by issue-based divisiveness for years, where the many different groups are pushing their individual issues into a movement that began by appealing to the 99% at large. It is healthy for left groups to advocate the end of animal cruelty, corporate personhood, and police brutality, but these are not the immediate demands that will spur the 99% to actively join the movement.

What will get people in the streets? The 99% supports the Occupy Movement because of the economic crisis that has directly affected them, not because they have ideological problems with capitalism (at the moment), or want to take legal rights from corporations. The most progressive 5% cannot impose their demands on the larger 99%, since the majority of the 99% already have demands of their own.

What are these demands? The Washington Post explains: “How many times does this message have to be delivered? In poll after poll, Americans have said their top concern is the jobs crisis.” (August 11, 2011).

Poll after poll has also declared mass opposition to cutting Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security and other social programs, while declaring mass support for taxing the rich to solve these national problems.

And these issues have even greater potential to galvanize the 99% because of their centrality to organized labor. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka recently declared the cuts to Social Security, Medicare or to Medicaid, which have been proposed by the bipartisan “Super Committee,” are unacceptable. The proposed cuts, Trumka says, prove why people around the country “are raising their voices in protest because they’re fed up with a system that is stacked in favor of the richest one percent of Americans – at the expense of the other 99 percent of us.”

The Occupy Movement will grow or die based on its ability to relate to these demands of the larger 99%. It is these issues that reflect the most urgent needs held in common by the vast majority and that affect working people on a city, state, and national level. No long-term demands — like ending corporate personhood — can be won outside of a mass movement, and no mass movement can grow without the focus on immediate, basic demands; these demands must come before the former.

There is plenty of time for the Occupy Movement to work out the details of its long-term mission, but there is no time to waste to fight for the most popular demands of working people. The Occupy Movement is still struggling for existence, and its life cannot be maintained in a political environment unattractive to the broader 99%. If the Occupy Movement demanded that the wealthy and corporations be taxed to create jobs and prevent cuts to social programs, the 99% would see a movement built in its own image, and working people would fight for themselves while learning to fight alongside each other for the good of all working people.

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