

In 2012, the attack on workers, unions and immigrants will continue. While public sector workers continue to be blamed for high pay and benefits, conservative politicians try to create support for massive cuts in social spending, cuts that favour the wealthy and a greatly reduced public sector. In reality, America's budget deficits have not been caused by excessive compensation for

The elimination of enterprise bargaining [...] may serve to dampen demand in the economy

teachers, firefighters and other public servants. The country's budgetary woes are more related to the recent economic and financial crises in the housing market and unfair tax codes. The careless financial practices on Wall Street, not the greed of our

largarten teachers, brought about the recession and its negative effects on employment and state budgets. The call for the elimination of collective bargaining and economic austerity and attacks on immigrant workers and unions will not address these root causes and will only serve to dampen demand in the economy. The use of the current fiscal crisis by politicians to strip workers of their rights and impose severe reductions in wages and benefits will create greater hardship for workers and middle-class families struggling to stand on their footing.

Notes

1. Pew Research Center national poll, 4–7 March 2011.

2. Bureau of Labor Statistics: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf> (accessed March 2012).

3. Economic Policy Institute: http://www.epi.org/publication/top_5_holds_more_than_half_of_the_countrys_income/ (accessed March 2012).

4. Shierholz and E. Gould: *The compensation penalty of "right-to-work" laws*, 17 February 2011, Washington, Economic Policy Institute, <http://www.epi.org/publication/bp299/> (accessed March 2012).

5. <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/2010/10/127.pdf> (accessed March 2012).

6. Nancy Feingold is the Director of the International Department of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). She previously directed the CIO Solidarity Center's work in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, including worker education and advocacy training, and popular methodologies to research and document the needs of women and migrant workers. She led the organization's humanitarian response to the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti.

Supporting dissent versus being dissent

Steven Toff and Jamie McCallum

When the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement began in September 2011, few anticipated the wave of occupations that would sweep the country and capture the world's imagination 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-World Trade Organization demonstrations in Seattle that tens of thousands in the United States are taking to the streets for economic reasons. Average Americans, many of whom have long understood the moral

It is the first time since [...] 1999 [...] that tens of thousands in the United States are taking to the streets for economic reasons

and economic turpitude at the root of Wall Street, are now expanding that stance to make a wholesale critique of neoliberalism and questioning the most foundational principles of capitalism. Despite its occasional penchant for protest and militant action, and its position as virtually the only organization made up of the working class of the United States, the labour 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 labour, there remains a looming question: how will unions respond to the call?

Enterprise bargaining and moving the labour movement

For many of our international comrades, the question has been "What took you so long?" Despite labour'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 2011, and we see an uprising of mostly non-unionized working and poor people, unemployed youth and students, taking the very message that labour should have been championing directly into the seat of power. These events were as shocking for labour as they were for everyone else, though for unions the surprise has been accompanied by at least light embarrassment. As one US labour activist remarked, "There is a sense that they [the occupy movement] beat us at our own game."

Unions and the occupy movement

On 5 October 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". Service Employees International Union, the largest union within the Change to Win Federation, likewise declared, "Occupy Wall Street: We've Got Your Back."² These are welcome pronouncements of support for direct action, but they do not constitute a comprehensive response. There is

no difference between supporting dissent and being dissent. There has not recently been a more opportune moment for labour to forge a new course; as labour activists, we join a growing chorus within the union movement that feels the occupy movement is labour'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 California, Massachusetts, New York, 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.³ By and large, unions have followed through on Trumka's pledge 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 labour community coalition been more of an issue than along the West Coast.

Occupy the waterfront

In an effort to escalate the occupy movement, and to draw closer connections with labour, Oakland organizers shut down the Port of Oakland on 2 November 2011 in what was billed as the first general strike since 1946. Although a number of unions did endorse the action, and trade unionists were a large portion of the crowd that day, no union actually mobilized their members to strike. One reason has to do, again, with the legal structure that has ensnared the labour movement. The unions in the United States 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; they can do it again.

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 closed, businesses that had advertised their hostility to the occupy movement were threatened into shuttering for the day, and mainstream and independent media were largely sympathetic. Although unions were peripheral participants, with the notable exception of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), individual rank and file members took to the streets together with broad swaths of radicals in what was one of the most powerful displays of working-class solidarity the occupy movement has yet produced.

In December the West Coast occupy movement and labour allies threatened a land and water blockade of a ship carrying grain in Longview, Washington, forcing the company to settle their contract with the ILWU at the port. Occupy protesters were inspired to take action by a similar blockade by port truckers earlier in the summer in Portland, Oregon. A California ILWU leader was unequivocal about the occupy movement's role in bringing the grain company to the bargaining table: "Make no mistake – the solidarity and organization between the occupy movement and the longshoremen won this contract," he said.⁴

Labour and occupation: past, present, future

It was labour 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 labour movement and the social fabric

Industrial life. Recently, this tactic made a brief but spirited comeback during 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. Today, in addition to actual instances of labour-OWS collaboration, we see the shifting ideological and discursive orientation of some unions today, as they replace the rhetoric of “saving the middle class” with the new vernacular of the 99 per cent. It would therefore be a mistake to suggest that labour’s “bit actor” status within the occupy movement is naturally pre-ordained or historically precedented.

Historically there has been an uneasy peace between unions and broader movements. Political manoeuvring of elites, outright deception and a perceived conflict of interest have often divided coalitions of labour and social movements, and already there are reports prefiguring a similar dynamic within the occupy movement.⁵ But the occupy movement’s insistent focus on so many issues central to those taken up by labour is nonetheless cause for hope. The labour movement has much to consider when joining the occupy movement – its true partner – its considerable treasury, the political orientation of its members and leadership, its political connections based on decades of participation. For these reasons, we understand labour’s ambivalence toward the occupy movement not as a stance against it, but as an unwillingness to take the necessary risks. Of course the inverse is also true – there is a risk associated with participating, which we feel has far graver consequences.

Writing in the midst of the explosive revolts in Paris, 1968, Henri Lefebvre “Events belie forecasts. To the extent that events upset calculations, they are historic.”⁶ In this respect, OWS is already historic, as it has defied the sympathetic and pessimistic predictions of both the left and the right. But the biggest question now concerns its future. The evictions of occupy encampments almost everywhere suggest that democratic governments are not allies, that the movement will need to be innovative to remain relevant. Indeed, it has found itself in this position for a long time. Therefore, our Eleventh Commandment should be: labour leaders and workers have long recognized the need for opportunity to forge a new future; the point now is to take it.

DS

John Hyland: “From the Arab Spring to the American Fall?”, in *Time* (12 October 2011, <http://ideas.time.com/2011/10/12/from-the-arab-spring-to-the-american-fall/>, accessed March 2012).

See Employees International Union: 5 October 2011, <http://www.seiu.org/2011/10/seiu-supports-wallstreet.php> (accessed March 2012).

³ K. Nash and M. Rosenberg (Producers): “Occupy Wall St. protest – Sotheby’s, Stop & Frisk, Verizon”, Building Bridges Radio, 23 October 2011, <http://www.buildingbridgesradio.blogspot.com/> (accessed March 2012).

⁴ West Coast Occupy: <http://www.occupytheegt.org/> (accessed March 2012).

⁵ J. Elliot: “Keystone XL splits unions and Occupy Wall Street”, in *Salon.com* (7 November 2011, http://www.salon.com/2011/11/07/keystone_xl_splits_unions_and_occupy_wall_street/, accessed March 2012).

⁶ H. Lefebvre: “The explosion: Marxism and the French upheaval”, in *Monthly Review Press* (1969).

Both authors are veteran staff and organizers from the labour movement in the United States. Steven Toff, a GLU alumnus, is currently studying law as a Public Interest Law Scholar at Northeastern University in Boston and Jamie McCallum is Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Middlebury College in Vermont.