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The Occupy Movement Needs a Good Fight

by Shamus Cooke

11/6/2011

"Power concedes nothing without a demand." - Frederick Douglass

In a movement based on general anger about inequality and the domination of big banks, it becomes difficult to focus the rage into something concrete. For many Occupiers, being concrete is a mere distraction, meant to shift the movement into something 'less radical,' since their targets — big banks and inequality — are at the root of the problem. Why mess with the tree when you could go for the roots?

But, as any tree-removal worker will tell you, the tree comes first, then the roots. The roots cannot be the immediate goal of the Occupy movement because pulling them out would require tens of millions of hands, and the vast majority of working people are not yet directly involved in the movement, though many of them are giving approving nods from a distance. Bringing these more distant people into the movement requires they be given a good reason to join. And although a general anti-1% sentiment sounds appealing to the 99%, a struggle to win worker-friendly demands can help pull these people into the streets.

Thus far the Occupy movement has successfully held a series of actions and protests, with different issues being highlighted on different days in different cities, with a national "bank divestment" day (Occupy friendly people transferring their money from big banks to small ones) on November 5th. The big banks will be left standing, however, since they still have the immense wealth of the 1%, not to mention a never-ending bailout fund from the politicians of the

1%. Most working people will recognize bank divestment as a positive symbolic gesture, but they would prefer action accompanied by victory.

Action in this case means the dirty work of organizing working people, based on the issues that they care most about. Organizing a new union is a perfect example — on a smaller scale — of what needs to happen in the Occupy movement nationwide. When organizers come to a work site to form a union, they do not simply pass out pro-union propaganda in the parking lot until workers decide to join up. Instead, organizers use agitation based on the key problems of the work site — low wages, no rights, etc. — to spur the workplace to action. Only when workers are motivated in this way and united to achieve their common demands do they feel empowered enough to take on the boss and form a union, transforming themselves and their workplaces in the process.

This is what Occupy is missing. There is plenty of good anti-1% propaganda about inequality and against the banks, but so far there has not been a serious effort to agitate for the majority of working people to wage a united fight over specific issues. Only the most progressive 5% is directly fighting for Occupy now, the rest of the population will be won over or turned away by how the Occupy Movement relates to them.

One way not to relate to working people is to ignore their issues while "escalating" the struggle. Escalating the Occupy Movement without having engaged working people with their most pressing issues will amount to strangling it (imagine a battlefield where the calvary charges and the infantry stays put, unable to back-up those mounting the advance). The real organizing still needs to be done, but the activists' impatience is fast becoming a threat. This weakness has its roots in the left's inability to link their "more radical" ideas to the needs and current consciousness of the broader population.

This impatience pushes some activists to create change "now" — the urge to harvest the crops without having first plowed and sown the field. Working people soon get dismissed as being "not radical enough," and the most progressive participants become further isolated. No social movement can survive with this dynamic; in fact, many have died from this disease.

For example, in the late 60s the Students for a Democratic Society became a massive organization with real movement potential, until they started to suffer from impatience and split into two; a more radical isolated group (the Weathermen) who left control of the group to the more Conservative liberals. Both factions killed the movement. The liberals drove the group into the movement-killing Democratic Party. The radicals isolated themselves from the working class. The SDS's sad end was due to its inability to wage a fight that engaged the broader population into struggle, since without the wider population's participation, winning demands becomes impossible. This inability to "win" demoralizes activists and drives them to desperation via sectarian radicalism or its opposite — compromise with the establishment.

To prevent the Occupy Movement from experiencing a similar tragedy, the 99% must be engaged in concrete fight. There are a few key demands that can galvanize the broader population to fight at this time; they are similar to the demands fought for during the Great Depression: Jobs Not Cuts and Tax the Rich. If the national Occupy Movement fought for a

massive public jobs program and against cuts to social programs — including Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, extended unemployment insurance, education, etc. — by massively taxing the wealthy and corporations, the vast majority of working people would join the movement until it was capable of actually winning these demands.

The two political parties would reel under this pressure and would either make concessions or be quickly pushed aside. During the struggle, working people would be transformed by their experience, learning firsthand who their friends and enemies are while also being won over to more radical ideas in the process. Fighting for demands and winning them in a united fashion pushes the movement forward and hardens it, because each victory serves to embolden the movement and encourages it to reach for even more. This society-wide process of mass radicalization and action would be a real revolutionary movement.

The Occupy Movement has the potential to catapult its power into a truly massive movement that can challenge the domination of the two major political parties of the 1%. But potential is not always actualized. Its life can be strangled prematurely by ignoring the demands of the 99% and fighting instead for a number of fragmented progressive causes that are not yet able to unite the majority.

The Occupy movement should also reach out to organized labor, which has already been raising the key demands around creating jobs and opposing cuts. Uniting the 99% in concrete struggle is the issue of the day, but time is short. The Occupy Movement has the nation's attention now, but working people's attention is conditional; they will stay focused on Occupy if Occupy is focused on them.