

# 130

OCTOBER  
2011

## OCCUPY WALL STREET AND THE FIGHT FOR ECONOMIC FAIRNESS

**By Nick Charles** New Media Analyst, New York  
**With Jennifer Vento** of PDF (Personal Democracy Forum)

**A** month on, what started as a few hundred protesters in a manicured, private park near America's and the world's financial nerve center is morphing into a national, nay, an international movement. Placing it in a global context, the movement has its moral antecedents in the Arab Spring uprisings and the "indignados" movement in Spain. "Occupy Wall Street" (#OWS) can no longer be dismissed simply as a collection of hygiene-challenged, youthful, modern day hippies. It's a miss-characterization to label the mushrooming movement the left-leaning, liberal version of the noxious Tea Party. The latter is now vowing to combat #OWS. Yet efforts to taint the growing numbers of participants as anarchists and an un-employed rabble, as Republican Presidential Candidate Herman Cain and others have, seem ahistorical and petulant at best and desperate at worst. If #OWS were to paraphrase a slogan from the early Gay Rights organization, Queer Nation, it would be: "We're Pissed! We're Here! Get Used to It!"

On a recent Friday evening, thousands were encamped in Zuccotti Park, formerly known as Liberty Plaza, which is serving as ground zero, pun intended, for a collective bereft of bold-faced name leaders or deep-pocket financial support. Despite the ragged appearance of many occupiers, life in the park-turned-campsite is surprisingly well-organized and staffed with volunteers. From daily trash collection to distributing food at mealtimes, life happens on a schedule. On one end of the park, which sits but a stone's throw away from the World Trade Center memorial and the Stock Exchange, a ceaseless drumming circle was taking place. At the other end, was a "General Assembly" meeting. Flitting around are members of the Fourth Estate: the press. While many of the larger name news organizations, be they broadcast, Internet-based or legacy print media, have been slow in covering the occupation and its adherents, the independent press, bloggers, Tweeters and the like are on hand in full force. The methodology and atmosphere harkens back to the dynamic put in place by the Spanish "indignados" who earlier this year occupied the central squares of the country's two capital cities, Madrid (plaza del Sol) and Barcelona (plaza de Catalunya).

Encircling all of this is an at times heavy-handed New York City police presence. The department, headed by Commissioner Ray Kelley and Mayor Michael Bloomberg are hoping to avoid the ugly incidents that occurred in the first

blush of the protest, one in particular where a police Lieutenant was caught on videotape pepper spraying four young women. An internal investigation into that has been launched. But as the protests have spread across the country, there have been more confrontations with police. Only this week, hundreds were arrested in a clash with Boston police. In this sense and building on the Spanish experience, avoiding the sparks of violence is a central issue. Though, at the beginning, violent police intervention might engender a wave of sympathy among the general public, more aggressive actions by the movement, like blocking the access of the Catalan parliament for example, caused a backlash and helps delegitimize otherwise peaceful mobilizations.

One question that supporters and detractors alike have asked of the grassroots movement is, exactly what do the protesters want? Yes, income equality, corporate greed and political gridlock are the most obvious issues that it/they/us want addressed. As of this point, there has not been an articulation of demands, but rather both a "declaration of the occupation of New York City" and a living document, updated regularly, outlining the "principles of solidarity" of #OWS – among them, advocating for transparency, exercising personal and collective responsibility, and embracing open-source tools. Demands or not, there seems to be an ethos of total fedupness that is permeating the movement. The slogan "We are the 99 percent," ostensibly oppressed by the 1 percent who disproportionately control a significant portion of the wealth, is the bedrock from which all springs. This is what gives it its potency and makes it dangerous. What this challenges the notion of a system, undergirded by a "dream," that anyone in America can rise like a Phoenix by dint of education and hard work to a comfortable level of prosperity. Tell that to the millions who are out of work and have very little prospects of ever finding a job again. Tell that to the millions who have lost their home and have joined the swelling ranks of the homeless. In fact, more than 1,000 U.S. residents have shared their personal stories on a blog archiving the trials of the 99 percent.

Naysayers are predicting that once the weather turns to rain, sleet and or snow and temperatures drop, the protesters will scatter like so much grain in the wind. That happened anyway in the Spanish squares without the intervention of an adverse weather. Endless assemblies in the absence of a clear agenda and poor results following an initial wave of genuine sympathy are a challenge that must be addressed. But others are being much more cautious. President Barack Obama, far from condemning the group, has said he understands why they are upset. The Democratic Party for its part has been edging closer to actually embracing it as a movement inform by the party's principles. Even trade unions, long Democratic Party partners, are lending vocal and resource support to those at many of the hundreds of locations across the country when demonstrations have sprouted. The challenge for #OWS is not to let the movement be co-opted by long-time politically charged organizations that view it as vehicle they can ride all the way through to 2012's Presidential Election.

Should the occupiers abandon the park as winter nears, that does not mean that the movement is in any way left for dead. In fact, the online momentum of #OWS dwarfs that of the nationwide occupations. There is a strong link between those on the ground in Zuccotti Park and those participating from afar – through a Kickstarter-funded media center, protesters have implemented wifi hotspots, charging stations, and even a live stream channel with thousands of concurrent users at any given time, the occupiers exist - and organize - in cyberspace. And that may be the logical gathering point for continuing to build momentum once the movement reaches critical mass, as gathering online will certainly make the movement more accessible, complemented by specific global physical mobilizations like the one taking place on October 15, #15O.

This might be bigger and more important than any one election or election cycle. This is a battle for the soul of a nation long bankrupt of ideals and ideas, beyond those that service the rich and well heeled. This is a political battle that has to be fought at the local level and on a global scale, as coming out of this crisis is not within reach of a single nation, even if that nation is United States of America.