

“WE ARE THE 99 PERCENT”

OWS and US Labour

[In order to assess the connections between the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) uprising and the US Labour Movement Farooque Chowdhury and Michael D'Yates spoke with four labour activists—Steve Early, Jon Flanders, Stephanie Luce and Jim Straub—during the first two weeks of November, 2011. Excerpts:]

Chowdhury and Yates (hereinafter C&Y): What are your impressions of the OWS Uprising?

Stephanie Luce: Occupy Wall Street is the moment we've been waiting for. It isn't perfect and it is often messy, but it somehow has become the message and movement to unite hundreds of organizations and tens of thousands of isolated individuals who have been suffering in the worsening economy and feeling alienated and demoralized.

In the past decade, labor and left leaders have been scrambling to find the thing that would catch on: national networks, new slogans, targeted campaigns. Some had limited success but nothing seemed to click. Why this?

I'd argue that one reason the OWS has flourished is precisely because it wasn't coordinated and imposed from above. There was no consultant hired to "message" the movement, no mass-produced signs and t-shirts. Those who joined the initial occupation on September 17, and probably everyone who has participated since, have felt some ownership of this movement.

Jon Flanders: The occupation movement represents both a generational shift and a beginning of much broader class consciousness in the United States.

Generational, because, for the first time, a movement has emerged that is not led by boomers of the anti-Vietnam War era. After the initial huge outpouring of opposition to the Iraq war, everything quieted down, despite the best efforts of experienced organizers who thought that history would repeat itself. Instead, it became clear that the young people did not see this war as an issue for them, partly because there was no draft, but also because they were preoccupied with getting a start in life in an increasingly difficult economy.

Class-conscious, because the realization finally sank in for the young ones that things were not going to get better, that in fact they were dealing with a corrupt and rigged political system that had no place for them, except as indentured debt slaves. The initial awakening was in Wisconsin, now it has spread countrywide, and the class genie is out of the bottle.

C&Y: Do you think that the Chicago factory occupation (United Electrical Workers) and the Wisconsin uprising were important precursors of OWS? If so, how?

Steve Early: OWS is a very worthy successor to the Wisconsin uprising (and UE's 2008 plant occupation) and will be long remembered even if it leaves no other historical footprints than its brilliant popular "framing" of the deepening class divide in this country.

Jon Flanders: Yes, they were both important, Wisconsin more so I would say. Although in the long run, perhaps the factory occupation will be more important, since to really have an impact on power, workers must weigh in. Wisconsin had more influence with capitol. A leading young trade union activist from this area went out to Madison, slept on the floor, and came back inspired. Now he is marching to NYC from Albany with a group of Communication Workers of America (CWA).

Jim Straub: I do not think the Republic Windows occupation was a precursor. Honestly I think that event was significantly overhyped by leftists who projected their own fantasies onto what was essentially a very small, marginal struggle, by a left-wing union that unfortunately has practically no members left.

Wisconsin, on the other hand, I think was a very remarkable mass uprising; I spent a month there working on the struggle for SEIU, and it was among the greatest experiences of my life. I think Wisconsin's eruption may go down in history as being the decisive thing that helped stop the Republican's attempt to essentially abolish what remains of labor unions at this moment in America. We all owe the "cheese-heads" a debt of gratitude for that.

I am not sure how much it is a precursor, though—Wisconsin is a very particular sort of state, with a deeply ingrained tradition of progressive politics, active public-sector unions, and a distinctive regional culture that values people pulling together for the common good. For instance, I often warn people that if the Republicans win the presidency next year and pass a Wisconsin-style bill nationwide, I do NOT think there would be forty-nine big eruptions in the rest of the country similar to the one in Wisconsin. In that sense, we should all thank the Republicans for making such a foolish choice of a location to have their showdown against the unions.

However, I think you could say this: the enthusiasm a large portion of the public has shown for both the Chicago Republic Windows action, and the Wisconsin uprising, is part and parcel of a sense of anger about wealth inequality and the erosion of the middle class that has been building for some time but which has not been addressed by anything in mainstream politics. That same growing sense of unease is, I think, behind the surprisingly high public support for OWS.

C&Y: Have rank-and file union participants and supporters of OWS been active in OWS as visible union members or simply as concerned citizens? Is there a difference between leadership and rank-and-file support for OWS?

Stephanie Luce: In the early days of OWS, there were a number of union members who participated. They were not representing their unions, but a number of them identify strongly as labor activists. A few of those people were members of Transport Workers Union Local 100, and they were instrumental in getting their union to come out in support of OWS a week and a half into the occupation.

As the movement has flourished, we've seen a large number of union members get involved. Some come on their own time and sit at the union table in the park. Some are in working groups. Some come to bring supplies. But when there are specific actions or marches, we also see people participating as union members, such as the October 5 rally and march, or the black/brown unity march sponsored by the Coalition of Black Trade Unions and other AFL-CIO affinity organizations. Union members showed up on the morning that Bloomberg threatened to kick out the protesters to clean the park. Union leaders and staff have been present at these events too ~ sometimes leading delegations, and occasionally there on their own.

Steve Early: During the two-week strike by 45,000 Verizon workers in August, union PR people issued leaflets urging support for their "fight to defend middle-class jobs." This characterization of strike goals enabled Verizon to run newspaper ads claiming that the \$75,000 a year or more earned by telephone technicians made them part of the "upper middle class" ~ and thus, apparently not worthy of sympathy from customers or members of the public whose jobs provide family incomes closer to the national or regional average.

By late October, telephone workers, who are part of a reform movement in CWA Local 1101, had marched through lower Manhattan in solidarity with OWS; similar linkage between occupation activity and the IBEW-CWA Verizon contract struggle occurred in Boston. Meanwhile, in upstate New York, members of CWA Local 1118 held a "corporate pig roast" several weeks ago ~ right around the corner from "Cuomoville," the OWS encampment located in downtown Albany (where vegan and vegetarian fare prevails over pork).

At this OWS-inspired and related event, Verizon workers were brandishing new contract campaign signs with a far better, more universalist message: "We are the 99 percent!"

Jim Straub: In terms of the first question, a little of both. In any active union, you have a handful of very active activists, who would be involved in left protest politics no matter what; when these folks participate in their various left activities, they often make a point of making their union membership a visible part of who they are. I would bet you have some folks like that who have been hanging out at the occupation camps, going to assemblies, etc. And then if you checked everyone sleeping over at the occupations, I'm sure you'd find a few people who are union members in their work life. But like I said, the larger portion of union member involvement has been more limited ~ going to one of the big OWS affiliate marches with their union contingent, etc.

The original New York City Wall Street occupation was planned by folks from the protest-oriented radical left, without early involvement from unions. I think most expected it to have the small, limited impact that the average left demo does (I know some of the early organizers from years back). However, social media videos of NYPD officers attacking the demonstrators gave it wider exposure, and when its message against wealth inequality and the finance industry got out there, it struck a chord with the public in general.

When this happened and the demonstration blew up, many of the more active unions got involved, to different degrees depending on the city and the union. For instance, in New York City and many other cities, the unions have mobilized thousands of members to big marches connected to the OWS; in a number of cities activists from unions have been integral part of the organization of the actual occupation camps; and in many other places, the unions provide assistance by donating food and tents and tarps or otherwise. For example, my friend Heather is helping run the food kitchen at OWS in New York, and just texted me that SEIU's big powerhouse healthcare workers' union there, 1199, donated 500 chicken dinners and brought members down to help serve. Another example is Pittsburgh, where some people I know at the SEIU local there have been using their personal time to mobilize the people at the occupation camp to do protests at various banks, and have been working to broaden the appeal of the camp beyond its mainly subcultural youth participants. The situation I know best is here in Seattle. My local, SEIU 775, has mobilized a few hundred people four times for demonstrations at the occupation; we donated a lot of ponchos and tents; and we used our good relationship with Seattle's mayor to intervene a few times and try to negotiate for him to let the tents stay up (ultimately unsuccessful). We probably have a handful of activists who've been involved at the occupation camp and general assemblies, but only just a few. One thing I would note is that while the OWS message is resonating with average working people, the occupation camps and general assemblies are much more geared to subcultural youth and hardcore leftists; I suspect, for all labor's involvement in the ways I described above, there have still been very few actual union members camping out and hanging out at the occupations.

One thing I would like to point out that isn't common knowledge: the union I work for, SEIU, is known in the United States for being one of the few unions still able to organize and grow, even in the private sector. But ironically, for the past year, we have directed a lot of the resources we normally put into new organizing into a campaign we call "The Fight for a Fair Economy." This has involved canvassing working-class neighborhoods and organizing lots of protests in lots of cities around economic issues in general. Anyway, there is some humorous irony in the fact that SEIU has been expending all this organizational resource and effort into trying to spark an upsurge of economic anger in politics, and then along comes some protesters occupying Wall Street, and they have the success SEIU was trying to generate! Anyway, we haven't been jealous or whatever and we basically have just folded our Fight For A Fair Economy protest activity into the occupations all over the country. Who knows if our own efforts were part of laying the groundwork in public sentiment for the enthusiasm over OWS? Regardless, I think you could say that it's a rare moment of unions and the radical protest left having perfectly converging goals that result in success for all.

C&Y: What role has the leadership of organized labor been playing in the OWS uprising?

Steve Early: As reported in the *New York Times* on Nov. 9, 2011, union leaders have been making regular visits to our new Lourdes - aka Zuccotti Park - and similar high-profile camping sites around the country. Earlier this year, they were jetting into Cairo-by-the Lake in Wisconsin (aka Madison) in a similar quest for an infusion of young blood and "new energy" out there. I'm

personally a little skeptical about what miraculous transformations are likely to occur among the organizationally old, blind, and lame of American labor, as a result of either pilgrimage. RWDSU president Stuart Applebaum claims that "the Occupy movement has changed unions," both in the area of membership mobilization and "messaging." See more thoughts below on OWS's helpful influence in the latter area. As for mainstream unions suddenly embracing greater direct action and militancy by their own rank and file, that kind of changes usually comes from the bottom up, not the top down.

Jim Straub: Most active, progressive-oriented unions have supported the occupation protests to varying degrees, which I think reflects the leadership's enthusiasm that finally someone has managed to put the issue of wealth inequality front and center in the public eye.

Among the rank and file, well, I think it would be difficult to generalize accurately about rank-and-file workers' view of OWS. Many I am sure are simply unaware—the US public remains deeply depoliticized, without a present-day tradition of mass struggle or collective action improving standards of living. However, opinion polls have shown that roughly a majority of respondents in the United States today have a positive view of OWS and agree with some of the message. I would strongly suspect that that percentage goes way up among poorer people, urban people, people of color, women, and progressives. And the portion of union membership that is dynamic and growing is among those demographics. So I think we can infer that, to the degree that union members are aware and interested, there is significant support for the OWS. I can tell you that in my own day-to-day work as a rep for a nursing home workers' union, two times a member has brought the topic up to me unsolicited and talked about how great they think it is. One of those times, the worker's views were that he was excited the unions were getting involved in Occupy Wall Street, so that "it didn't just look like a bunch of hippies." I think this was a very telling comment—in the United States, the public often sees left protest as being for countercultural types, rebellious college students going through a phase, etc, and when protesters seem for whatever reason to be culturally different from average working people, it plays into this stereotype and limits the ability of the protest to grow.

C&Y: How can OWS and organized labor best interact? What about selective strikes and similar actions? Do you think that rank-and-file movements in unions could be strengthened by OWS? Can unions learn anything from the way OWS is structured?

Stephanie Luce: One of the amazing things about OWS in New York has been the degree to which organized labor has come on in support, and been able to intersect some of its own organizing with that of OWS. There is a long way to go, but this level of interaction seems remarkable to me in this city where unions have been known to be insular and not good at working with others. Unions have already contributed support in a variety of ways: offering money, food, medical training, supplies, meeting space, storage space, and publicity.

And OWS has participated in ongoing labor activities, from the campaign to get a contract at Verizon, to supporting locked-out Teamsters at Sotheby's. Public-sector unions have been

fighting to extend the millionaire's tax in New York, and on October 11, 2011, the 99 percent and unions joined together for a march against the millionaires and billionaires.

The general assembly, consensus model has drawbacks. It can be used poorly in ways that allow a small minority to block consensus and control decisions. With large groups of people, it can be possible for small cliques to develop and function in non-transparent ways. But the same can be said for our other models of functioning - notably, traditional union structures.

Despite its weaknesses, the Occupy model can provide tremendous inspiration for rank-and-file unionists. It has worked so far to allow "ordinary people" to feel they are participating in democratic decision-making for the first time in their lives. They have seen how it's possible to develop an idea and run with it, working to organize with others to make their vision a reality. The horizontalist model is new for many union members, and will take some work to learn and develop, but is a tool that can strengthen movements.

OWS provides another important lesson for unions, which I think expands on the UE fight at Republic Windows and Doors and the fight-back in Wisconsin. The lesson is that we should not be afraid of "the public." Unions have been spending millions of dollars on consultants, polls, and focus groups to craft a careful message that will play with the public. But the messages that come out of these tends to be ones that people have been hearing in the media and from politicians. They tend to be conservative, backward-looking messages, and not ones that push people to new ideas and greater possibilities.

No focus group would have come up with the "message" of a plant take-over in Chicago. And no poll would have predicted that a mass teacher walkout and citizen takeover of the Capitol building in Madison, Wisconsin was a wise public relations strategy.

Instead, the labor movement has been trying to frame itself as "reasonable." Top union leaders in Wisconsin stated emphatically that they were "only asking for the right to collective bargaining." The same is true with the Verizon strike in August, where union leaders said they were on strike "for the right to bargain." Unions and labor coalitions declare that they are just trying to save the middle class or reclaim the American Dream: nothing radical, nothing confrontational.

OWS turns that idea on its head, and within a few weeks, with no consultants and no polling, asserts a very bold and expansive "message": we are the 99 percent, we are in a class war against the 1 percent, we demand public space, we demand the right to protest, we want another world. OWS uses images that link its fight with the Arab Spring, suggesting that our fight is a fundamental struggle for democracy and basic human rights. These are bold, visionary demands, and ones that ignite the public imagination.

Steve Early: See Verizon-related examples of positive interaction at the rank-and-file level above. Yes, the model of more democratic decision-making, direct action, civil disobedience is very helpful. It shows how collective activity can be organized differently from staff and full-time

officials running everything - or trying to. Real challenge will be transferring OWS approach to the traditional arena of union struggle.

I think one labor leader quoted in the *New York Times* really nailed that challenge well. Said Los Angeles Central Labor Council's Elena Durazo:

The question is: can the labor movement or the occupy movement move its message about inequality down to the workplace, where workers confront low wages, low benefits, and little power? Can we use it organize workers where it really matters, in the workplace, to help their everyday life?

Jim Straub: I think the interaction has been pretty good. About strikes, we should remember that, given the extreme weakness of US unions, most unions can't win a strike in defense of their own immediate needs, much less leverage their strike power to advance larger political goals. Given that unions now represent something like 12 percent of the workforce, and are having extreme trouble in a good portion of that 12 percent, I think it would be a silly and potentially disastrous miscalculation for us to try to use strikes to advance political goals. Strikes are inherently divisive both among members and the public in general, and give an opponent aid in tarnishing your reputation and even legal grounds to dissolve your formal collective bargaining status. Labor needs to rebuild to something like 25, 30 percent before it can start using mass strikes as a useful political weapon again.

In terms of unions learning from the OWS structure, I guess it depends on what you mean by OWS structure. If you mean the large group assemblies, using some version of modified consensus to make decisions and "mic check" and all that, I would say, definitely not. I spent many years in such meetings when I was an activist in various left groups, and I can say from my experience it is the worst, most counterproductive form of decision-making or organization-building in the world.

Jon Flanders: Both OWS and labor need each other. OWS needs labor's muscle; labor needs the creativity and energy of OWS youth. And, of course, mutual aid works; witness the labor mobilization that kept Mayor Bloomberg from shutting down OWS, and the aforementioned solidarity actions by OWS with locked-out Teamsters.

I think a real test in New York City will come around a possible transit strike. The president of TWU 100 has said they will make no concessions if New York does not re-instate the millionaire's tax. Cuomo will not back down on this, so some kind of confrontation seems inevitable. Here we will have the confluence of a workers' struggle very much tied to the OWS agenda vis-a-vis Wall Street. We can only imagine the scenes that might unfold in NYC if the subways and buses stop running and people are forced to walk to work. There will be plenty of chances for workers and OWS activists to interact and work on targets of opportunity.

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(Note that the interviewees were able to choose which of the questions they answered. So each question has not been answered by each interviewee.)