

MIKE CHECK

Whither Oakland Commune?

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THERE HAVE BEEN QUESTIONS raised about the precise politics or lack of politics of the Occupy Oakland movement. It is still in many ways an open territory and encourages great respect for diversity of tactics. But some common threads also become visible that reveal its fundamentally progressive and increasingly anti-Capitalist nature. This is a new and young movement; its strength is precisely its organic character; in the way, through some highly self-conscious social practices, it is formulating and debating itself as it advances. There is a true dialectic of practice and thought taking place, with collective practice being collectively reflected upon in general assemblies, as well as 'mike checks' which can erupt anywhere at any time, even in the midst of action or violent attacks from the police.

When the need is felt for announcement or debate, participants shout 'mike check', and multiple people repeat the words of a given speaker to broadcast them as widely as possible. It sounds like a booming echo. Thus a debate about a tactic can take place even while the tactic is being deployed. This mix of action and deliberation might seem a little hazardous at times, but the strength of this movement is perhaps in its very fragility. But it was unproductive when on November 2, 2011 in the midst of the 'Anti-Capitalist March' around downtown Oakland which began at 2pm, a 'mike check' suggested that part of the march split off from the masked Anarchists who decided to engage in some destruction of property, mostly bank windows. The action of the ten or twenty young people was seen by some to constitute 'violent' as opposed to 'peaceful' protest, as well as an incitement to the police. While the question was never really resolved, marches just kept moving. It was obvious that a decision to split off would have been a decision to criminalize and expose a segment: the question was answered by feet moving forward on the street. This was a test. Later last night when activists spontaneously surrounded a car trying to speed through and access the docks, a 'mike check' allowed agitations to emphasize that they should not hurt any of the people in the car and instead allow them to retreat unharmed. In both cases, the 'mike check' ultimately served to calibrate and refine an action in real time and infuse it with the genius of the collective.

'Mike Checks' are not just about debating tactics, they are also about information and rumors. Thus last night during the occupation of the Port of Oakland, rumors were circulating that the Longshore Union (ILWU) had officially announced that no one would be coming to work that night. Yet others claimed it was still being negotiated and that holding ground was crucial for at least another hour or so. (People had been trickling out from the Port exhausted after a full day of action.) A "mike check" allowed agitaionists to clarify these doubts : when they were finally addressed by a representative of the union, all were able to collectively resolve the doubt and discern the reality of total victory. This is a non-bourgeois critical public.

What does the movement stand for apart from a commitment to radical forms of immediacy and direct democracy? There are some clear demands, contrary to what has been reported. The opposition to privatization is clear, as is the recognition that the society of the USA has been completely subsumed by the market, which enforces a totalitarianism of the profit motive that can generate a fascism-like control over the conditions of life and wellbeing. Wrongful imprisonment, usury, denial of health care, homelessness, and poverty are all promoted by a dictatorship of profit immune to any reckoning with the popular will. The Anarchists are especially focused on undoing such pervasive authoritarianism. The movement, however, sees beyond this immediacy to broader questioning of capitalism and its logic. The demand for jobs with a living wage is constant, as is the demand for free access to healthcare, the demand for equitable distribution of wealth, and freedom from wage and debt slavery. The essential unity of the struggle of the working class across the globe is clear to people, and the struggle feels very much like one to break out of the depoliticized and moronic market-generated mass culture that has been fed intravenously here to people .in the belly of the beast. Thus a unified opposition to imperialist war stands side by side with opposition to xenophobic attacks on and hyper-exploitation of immigrant workers in the USA. ‘Class war’ is one of the slogans, as is ‘Death to Capitalism’. The movement can clearly go in a socialist direction. The way forward historically involves a wide stride that connects people to forgotten political goals and labor militancy of a previous epoch. The Oakland General Strike of 1946 and the militant labor movement of a century ago may be being reincarnated.

The demand is for regime change, but it has become clear that the regime is that of capital. There are incoherent voices in the background—tired liberals trying to get a second mortgage on life, as well as every other shade of reformist distortion and myopic Anarchist extremism—yet the mass of the people are defined by a high degree of consciousness that is getting higher and higher: “The system is not broken. It was always like this.” □□□

[source : sanhati.com]