

Occupy Boston: Noam Chomsky speaks, but offers no way forward

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With Occupy Boston nearly a month old, protesters are maintaining their encampment of about 150 tents in the city's financial district. The protest was the target of a raid on October 12, when Boston police in riot gear cleared protesters out of an area adjacent to the original location where protesters had set up camp. A number of the 147 people arrested in the early morning raid still face charges.

In addition to those living in the tent city, students, workers and other supporters continue to visit the site to show their support. As in the protests that have spread across the country and to cities internationally, the movement is attracting growing support from people who are opposed to the vast social inequality that has come to dominate every aspect of social life.

In Boston as in other areas, while officially maintaining a position of "no politics," protest organizers have welcomed visits by representatives of the two big-business parties, as well as the support of trade union officials responsible for imposing draconian concessions on their memberships.

On October 15, protest organizers offered a tour of the Occupy Boston grounds to Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, a long-time Democratic Party operative who has presided over millions of dollars of budget cuts in the state and attacked state workers' rights. (See "Boston: Democratic governor's visit to protest prompts opposition")

This Wednesday, Boston protest will host a delegation of Verizon workers. While the Occupy Boston web site notes that "Verizon refuses to do the right thing and negotiate a fair and equitable contract with union workers," it makes no mention of the fact that the unions representing these workers—the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the Communication Workers of America—sent 45,000

Verizon workers back to work without a contract, and without a vote, after shutting down a powerful strike against the telecommunications giant.

On the evening of Saturday, October 22, Noam Chomsky spoke as part of the Free School University at the Occupy Boston encampment in Dewey Square. Chomsky spoke for about 30 minutes to an audience of more than 1,000 and then responded to questions for about 30 minutes.

Chomsky, professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is a long-time critic of American foreign policy and opponent of what he has referred to as the "gangsterism of Wall Street." He has made several statements in support of the Occupy movement.

But while his talk Saturday evening summarized historical events that contain important lessons—the sit-down strikes of the 1930s, the deindustrialization of the US economy since the 1970s—Chomsky's prescriptions, brought out mainly during the question-and-answer period, alternated between reformist measures and pessimism about the ignorance of "the population."

According to Chomsky, "the hopelessness and despair" of today are new in American history because jobs that have been moved abroad will not be coming back. However, given the spread of the Occupy movement and the outpouring of public support, Chomsky seemed to be expressing more his own sentiments rather than those of the working class.

A sense of pessimism pervaded his comments. When asked whether he would advocate a general strike, for example, he answered that "it's a possible idea at a time when the population is ready for it."

Chomsky spent much of his talk looking backwards,

wistfully. He stated that the postwar economic growth of the 1950s and 1960s was “egalitarian,” leaving one to wonder whether he would be satisfied with a reformed capitalism wherein the gap between rich and poor is controlled, but not eliminated. His speech was full of “could haves” and “might haves,” as in his reference to a failed Ohio factory in the 1970s that “could have” been worker-owned “with enough popular support.”

Similarly, he argued, the institutionalization of “corporate personhood” cannot be ended “without a large, popular, active base.” In Chomsky’s opinion, however, “the population” is too ignorant to handle these matters now, and the anger of the Occupy protests must be channeled into reformist measures.

As for “things you can do,” he told the protesters to turn the US into a leader in attempts to “mitigate” global warming, and to pressure Congress to prevent the deficit commission from dealing a “lethal blow” to the future of the US government. He argued that the US federal deficit could be eliminated with the implementation of a health care system similar to those in “other industrialized countries,” ignoring the fact that Britain and other countries are dismantling their health care systems so that capital can bleed them for profit.

While advancing these reformist solutions, Chomsky did not explain how they could be implemented or by whom. Although he has been quoted recently saying “Obama is a man of absolutely no principles,” he in fact advocated a vote for Obama in 2008, justifying this by saying, “There is nothing wrong with picking the lesser of two evils.” He similarly supported Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry in 2004.

Chomsky has long been an opponent of Marxism, with his attack focusing above all on the struggle to build an independent political party of the working class. Elsewhere, he has praised the “no leadership” position of some of those involved in the protests. Chomsky’s opposition to politics invariably translates into an adaptation to the politics of the political establishment.

The day after Chomsky’s talk, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several people at Occupy Boston. Doug Greene, a high school substitute teacher, has been trying to find a permanent teaching job in a “depressing” job market. The government, he said,

would “rather spend money on imperialist wars” than provide good jobs.

Regarding Chomsky’s speech, Doug felt that he gave a “pretty good analysis” of recent history, but that Marx was right about what needs to be done. On a personal note, Doug said that the lack of good jobs “is systemic, but sometimes you can’t help feeling it’s your fault” when out of work.

Josie is a laid-off electrical worker from IBEW local 103. She last worked in Seekonk, Mass. but has moved to Boston from Providence, Rhode Island.

Josie told the WSWs that she used to make \$38 per hour, but now skilled electricians are being forced to take jobs at \$14 to \$15 per hour. These poverty wages have to cover gas and maintenance when electricians travel in their own cars, making it even harder to earn a living.

In Providence, according to Josie, renters are being evicted from their homes because landlords often stop sending mortgage payments to the bank. She said that the “state of affairs in the country is horrible” and that when companies close, the loss of jobs “trickles down to everybody” and the problem “spreads like wildfire.”

Diane Reynolds has been coming into Dewey Square regularly from the working class city of Peabody, about 18 miles north of Boston. She’s angry about the housing crisis, and concerned that she might not be able to pay for her children’s future college education.

She told the WSWs, “I want them [the occupiers] to stay” in Dewey Square, and that she brings them donations of blankets, etc.

“We need some more justice and equity in our economic and political system,” Diane said. She’s afraid that student debt will be the next economic bubble to collapse, and that students finishing college are now faced with the “double whammy” of debt and a lack of jobs.



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