

American liberalism attempts to corral Occupy Wall Street movement for Democrats

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The Occupy Wall Street protest movement, which has spread to many US cities and beyond, has established beyond the shadow of a doubt that the great question facing American and global society is social inequality.

Moreover, the popular perception is spreading that the vast social chasm can only be ended by attacking its roots, in capitalism and the profit system.

The experiences of the last several decades have not been lost on many, many people: they understand that in contemporary America the super-rich control everything, and that the existing political system—the Democratic Party as well as the Republican—is entirely indifferent or hostile to the needs of the working population, the unemployed, the poor.

Defenders of capitalism and big business politics have been taken aback, and rightly so. But hardly silenced or defeated. Their counter-offensive against the protest movement takes a variety of forms.

The crude attacks of the ultra-right on the protests as “anti-American” will have little impact. Even police batons can only do so much. More dangerous is the embrace of those who claim to support the anti-Wall Street movement, but seek to divert it into support for the Democratic Party or—what comes to the same thing—into the orbit of the trade unions and various forms of gender and racial “identity” politics.

Such an outcome would mean bringing “the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ protests against U.S. economic inequality,” as Reuters is obliged to describe them, under control of well-heeled, establishment forces who have presided over and profited enormously from the very growth of this inequality.

The *New Republic* magazine, once a left-liberal organ, has swung so far to the right it makes no effort to conceal its hostility to the protests. An editorial bluntly and candidly asserts, “One of the core differences between liberals and radicals is that liberals are capitalists.” So much for American liberalism!

Even here, however, there are differences of opinion. John B. Judis and Jonathan Cohn, in response to that editorial, contend in the same magazine that “Liberals Should Embrace Occupy Wall Street.” Their article is significant because Judis and Cohn explicitly make the political case that finds an echo, often less openly expressed, among nearly all the liberal and fake left “supporters” of the protests: that the anti-Wall Street movement must be separated out from opposition to the Obama administration and the Democratic Party.

The co-authors write that the protesters “know that something has gone very wrong in their country and instead of blaming illegal immigrants or Barack Hussein Obama, they are pointing their finger at America’s plutocratic minority.” Judis and Cohn acknowledge that many of those demonstrating have been “sorely disappointed” with Obama and that “some of them have taken their frustration to the streets.” They conclude that the anti-Wall Street protests represent “a chance, finally, to redeem the promise of Obama’s 2008 campaign.”

The lack of clarity among the mostly youthful protesters renders them vulnerable to such formless denunciations of “plutocracy” and even

“capitalism,” which, however, leave uncriticized and untouched *the actual living, breathing political representatives of plutocracy and capitalism*—prominently among those, Obama and the Democrats. This is another pernicious consequence of the “No politics” line, which leaves existing politics intact.

It is an iron law of American politics: any prominent “left” figure who does not identify the Democratic Party by name and insist on a complete break with that party on a socialist basis, is a shill or an apologist for the Democrats.

That goes for a variety of celebrities who have visited the protest site in New York, including philosopher Slavoj Žižek (“Don’t be afraid to really want what you desire”) and activist Naomi Klein (“The system is deeply unjust and careening out of control”), who moralize about capitalism *in general* without offering any solution to the greatest obstacle facing the American working class: its continued subordination to the existing system through the Democrats. Klein endorsed Obama in 2008, a fact she failed to mention during her October 6 appearance in Zuccotti Park.

The editors and writers of the *Nation* magazine are among the most assiduous in attempting to politically eviscerate the Occupy Wall Street protest and draw it into official channels. Editor and publisher Katrina vanden Heuvel’s latest effort in the *Washington Post* (“Will Occupy Wall Street’s spark reshape our politics?”) is a tortuous attempt to justify steering the movement back to the Democrats and their environs.

If one were to decode the *Nation* editor’s reasoning, it might go something like this: “Everyone agrees that the political system is corrupt, impervious to the population and only serves the wealthy ... so let’s give it another chance!”

Vanden Heuvel begins by rehashing the “No politics” argument. She asserts that by refusing to raise political demands, the protest leaders “are bearing witness to the corruption of our politics; if they made demands to those in power, it would suggest those in power could do something about it.” But this tells us a great deal. Vanden Heuvel can only conceive of a movement within the existing political structures. Socialists turn to the working class and raise political demands *against* “those in power.”

The *Nation*’s editor then notes blithely the protesters’ “most compelling point: that our institutions and politicians serve the top 1 percent, not the other 99.” If vanden Heuvel finds the point so compelling, why does she continue to be a dedicated supporter of the Democratic Party and the rest of “our institutions and politicians”?

She claims that the thrust of the protest’s aims “has moral clarity. It wants corporate money out of politics. It wants the widening gap of income inequality to be narrowed substantially. And it wants meaningful solutions to the jobless crisis. In short, it wants a system that works for the 99 percent.”

This liberal philistine discovers, as though by magic, that the anti-Wall Street protesters have an identical outlook to hers! Of course, fortunately, *they don’t* for the most part, whatever the confusion in their ranks. The

program she outlines is entirely devoid of concrete political content, and could form part of the platform of numerous Democratic hacks running for office.

Who doesn't promise to "narrow substantially" the income gap and offer "meaningful solutions" to the jobs crisis—in words? But this can only be done *in practice* through the working class organizing itself independently of the two business parties and taking up a struggle against the present system, not by futile and reactionary efforts to make the present system "work."

Vanden Heuvel gets around to promoting the Democrats more directly later in her article. "Some in the Democratic Party," she observes, "are also paying attention [to the protests]. The Progressive Caucus endorsed the movement. So did House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi and progressive champions such as Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders and former Wisconsin senator Russ Feingold."

She retreats slightly again, "Many, if not most of the protesters are openly wary about the embrace of the progressive establishment," as though such a thing existed, before pressing forward with her agenda once more, arguing that even Sen. Harry Reid and Barack Obama are feeling the pressure of the protests.

"President Obama, too, has ramped up his rhetoric, having accepted that reasoning with the unreasonable [Republicans in Congress] is a dead end. ... As always, political leaders move to where the energy is. Now, finally, there is real, concentrated energy on the left."

The Obama administration has pursued a right-wing agenda all down the line, bailing out Wall Street, prosecuting imperialist war, slashing social spending and continuing the assault on democratic and constitutional rights. This government represents powerful sections of the financial aristocracy. Nothing could be more hopeless than the project vanden Heuvel outlines, of moving Obama to the left.

This type of political fantasy, that Obama only needs to feel pressure from below so that he might show his real progressive colors, is pervasive on the American liberal left. Amy Goodman of radio program "Democracy Now!" fame, argues along those lines in her column titled "What Occupy Wall Street can do for Barack Obama," published in the *Guardian*.

Goodman writes that the Obama presidency will be "an expansion of the Bush era, unless there is a new 'Push era,'" i.e., that when powerful Wall Street forces whisper in the president's ear, he "must see a force more powerful outside his window, whether he likes it or not, and say, 'If I do that, they will storm the Bastille.'"

For these hopelessly unserious, self-deluding, upper middle class elements, there are no such things as *objective* social phenomena: a class struggle, for example, and political parties and programs as representatives of opposing social classes.

The International Socialist Organization (ISO) works to prop up the Democratic Party primarily through its support for the AFL-CIO and "Change to Win" trade union federations and various organizations oriented toward gender and racial politics.

In other words, while the ISO criticizes Obama and the Democrats over certain policies, the organization proceeds to urge readers and supporters to place confidence in its close allies who are tied to Democratic Party and establishment politics by a thousand strings.

Again, a certain amount of decoding is necessary to make sense of the ISO's positions. In a comment, "Autonomous zone on Wall Street?", and an editorial, "Stepping up the struggle," posted October 11 and 12, respectively, the ISO conveys its unease about the Wall Street protests and its wish that they would turn in another direction.

The October 11 comment by Doug Singen takes issue with various elements in the anti-Wall Street protests whom he suggests ignore the need to raise concrete demands and instead focus on creating a utopian alternative to capitalism "here and now."

A critic of these forces essentially from the right, Singen proposes a list of mild reforms, "taxing Wall Street, regulating corporate power or defending the right of workers to form unions," and omits the central demand that any socialist would raise in such a movement: the need to establish the political independence of the working class from the Democrats on a socialist, internationalist program. The Democratic Party is not referred to in the piece.

Singen reveals his orientation when he writes of his desire to see "a vibrant, creative, caring community that empowers those who have been the victims of racism, sexism, homophobia and all other forms of oppression" and the overcoming of "the bigotries imposed by society." The struggle against social inequality and the exploitation of the working class are not on his list.

In its October 12 editorial, the ISO points to the social forces it would like to see in control of the protest movement. After charging Democrats such as former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Obama with hypocrisy for offering tepid support for the protests, *Socialist Worker* writes: "So what comes next? The Occupy movement has shone a spotlight on the greed and corruption of the Wall Street elite—and more generally on the inequalities and institutionalized injustices of U.S. society."

However, the ISO urges the protesters "to reach out to other struggles" and refers to the "Black community" and "the struggle against war and against racism, for a sustainable environment and for LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] equality." It goes on, "It is also crucial for Occupy activists to reach out to labor and offer their solidarity."

Taken at face value, the ISO is seriously arguing that the struggle against "the inequalities ... of US society," brought to the forefront by the anti-Wall Street protest, needs to be *widened* by turning to various petty bourgeois forces, African American, gay, trade union and otherwise—which would mean, in fact, ceding control of the movement to these experienced political operatives in the service of the American ruling elite.

It is preposterous to suggest that struggle against social inequality, *the struggle of struggles* in the US and around the globe, should be subordinated to any other issue. On the contrary, serious fighters against racism, anti-gay bigotry and other social injustices will recognize that the fate of every legitimate democratic cause depends on the success of a great popular uprising against the oppression of Wall Street and the corporations.

But the ISO is not a serious fighter for anything. It dislikes and distrusts the anti-Wall Street protests because any open condemnation of the profit system, even in the embryonic and politically confused form of Occupy Wall Street, makes these hardened opportunists deeply uncomfortable. Anyone who has experience with the ISO knows that the group's preferred mode of operation involves backroom maneuvers in the corridors of trade union and protest politics.

All in all, liberal and ex-left circles in the US are hostile to the emergence of a movement directed against social inequality and will do everything in their power to bring that movement into line with the existing political set-up. Exposing this reality is essential to the clarification of the most advanced forces within the youth and the working class. We promise to be unrelenting on this score.



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