

Los Angeles: “Being out of work for two years is being called the ‘new normal’”

Dan Conway
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Now in its second week, the Occupy LA movement continues to grow. On Saturday, between ten and fifteen thousand protesters marched from the city's downtown Pershing Square Park to the Occupy LA encampment outside of city hall.

Protesters chanted “Whose streets? Our streets.” and “We got sold out. Banks got bailed out.” A wide variety of hand-made signs were visible, including some that said “99 to 1. Those are great odds,” referring to the Occupy movement's contraposition of the interests of the wealthiest one percent of the population against that of the remaining 99 percent, and “I can't afford a politician, so I made this sign instead.”

Approximately 500 tents have been set up around the Los Angeles City Hall, with protesters removing tents to the adjoining sidewalk every night in accordance with city ordinances and returning them in the morning.

The Los Angeles Police Department, notorious for its use of heavy-handed tactics and flagrant disregard of democratic rights, has as yet made no arrests related to the protests and has occasionally provided the protesters with blankets and food.

The Los Angeles City Council, along with Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, passed a resolution last Thursday which purports to support the protests through the passage of a bill mandating the creation of a “Responsible Banking” program which creates a report card for banks operating within the city and provides additional tax incentives and loopholes to those which score highly enough.

Another portion of the bill promised to terminate relationships with lending institutions proven to have engaged in fraudulent activity. The city's financial officer quickly advised the City Council to remove that portion of the bill as it would result in the city paying tens of millions of dollars in breach of contract fines.

Last week, City Council members ventured into the tent encampment and spoke with protesters there. Mayor Villaraigosa himself passed out rain panchos to protesters last week. In neither case were these mostly Democratic politicians, who have presided over millions of dollars in cuts to social programs and laid off thousands of city workers, denounced or criticized by the protest organizers.

Nor, for that matter, has the City Council's “support” for the protests extended to denunciations of heavy handed police tactics against protesters in other California cities including the nearby city of Long Beach. Demonstrators there have been repeatedly frustrated in their attempts to set up permanent encampments with dozens of arrests made in a single two day period.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several protesters last Saturday.

Jean is a graduate student in Public Policy at the University of Southern California.

“I'm here to support all the people here today who are standing up for something and actually mean what they stand up for especially against all the corruption that's going on today. People have been kicked around for the last three years and enough is enough.

“I know some people who have been out of work for two years and this is now what's being called the 'new normal'.”

Nicolas and Cecilia attend a nearby charter high school and came to Saturday's protest to show their support. They also spoke to the WSWs about the growing attack on public education in Los Angeles.

Nicholas: “In our school there is a very high turnover rate for teachers. At the same time, the administrators and teachers do a good job making sure students know the material really well. But, we shouldn't need

charters. I live in El Sereno and right next to El Sereno is South Pasadena and they have a public high school that is amazing. The teachers teach and the kids want to learn and it's a great environment. A lot of their students go on to college and don't drop out. But in El Sereno's Wilson High School, kids are dropping out and it's over crowded. And I'm trying to find out why South Pasadena is working and Wilson is not. Why is that? We have to find the root of the problem itself and not just resort to privatizing and charters."

When asked what he thought the root of the problem was, Nicholas responded, "I think it has to do with resources that schools are given and the community that they are in. Like Nicholas said, in South Pasadena they have high property values and so they get more money than Wilson High. They get newer books and better resources."

Both Nicholas and Cecilia said there was a definite link behind the attack on public education and the dictatorship of the large banks and corporations.

Zahida and her mother Nancy came from the neighboring city of Burbank to participate in Saturday's events.

Nancy: "We're here because we're just tired of seeing our world collapsing. We feel helpless. Even though the two of us have jobs right now. This isn't just about us right now. It's about all of us."

Zahida: "I've just started temping, but I was out of work for a whole year before I started. I had just graduated college and I couldn't get anything. Meanwhile, I'm seeing my Sallie Mae bills come in and I'm thinking to myself, 'Fantastic, now I'm out of a job and have to pay \$40,000 in outstanding loans. And I'm not alone, so many people my age are leaving college with tens of thousands of dollars in debt and no prospects.'"

When asked about what she thought about Occupy Los Angeles itself, Nancy said, "I think this is a very good beginning, I only hope that they'll start having better spokespeople or at least that the movement itself has a goal. You can ask some people what are we here for or why are you here and they say, 'We're exercising our rights.' Well, you're exercising your rights for what, and a lot of times they don't say.

"The idea that there shouldn't be any demands isn't right. What about free health care? What about a jobs program?"

Zahida added, "Look at the civil rights movement. This wasn't just a bunch of people who got together because they liked each other's company. They were organized, they had demands. They wouldn't have gotten to where they got to if they didn't have a purpose and a focused agenda. We need that here too."



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