

First police action against Occupy Canada movement—more planned

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In the early hours of Wednesday morning, police in London, Ontario forcibly evicted several hundred supporters of the Occupy Canada movement who, two weeks ago, established a tent community in that city's Victoria Park.

The mass eviction, staged in the dead of night, was the first such police action in Canada against the Occupy movement. It came during the same week that mayors and police chiefs from municipalities across the country began to publicly issue eviction threats against the Occupy encampments that have sprung up in at least twenty cities from coast to coast.

In the hours prior to the police action, about one thousand supporters of the movement had gathered in Victoria Park to show their opposition to an eviction notice issued by the city earlier that day. Many had dispersed as the midnight hour approached, apparently assuaged by word that the city and the police were interested in discussing a compromise solution. But as the crowds thinned, police moved in and removed all structures and tents in the encampment. No arrests or injuries were reported that night but when occupiers returned to the park the next day, a man who pitched a tent was promptly arrested by police.

London Mayor Joe Fontana tried to explain the eviction by arguing that a city by-law prohibited structures from being erected in the park. He neglected to mention that the by-law cited went on to state that erecting tents is permitted "when authorized by the executive director of community services." Fontana, a former Liberal Member of Parliament, chose to deny such authorization.

A press release from the protesters stated, "We, the people of Occupy London, have peacefully assembled in Victoria Park as a community to dialogue about human issues. We come together to engage each other to attempt to formulate solutions to these problems. We invite you to take part in our discussions. Recognizing the failure of traditional political institutions, we choose direct action through direct democracy... Your suppression of Section 2(c) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms will not be tolerated."

Preparations are being made in other cities to bring an end

to the occupations. Mayors in Edmonton and Calgary, Alberta have warned the demonstrators to leave or face eviction. Protesters in Quebec City were told Monday to leave their camp, four days after the city served an eviction notice, citing health and safety concerns. Police carried out a raid that day, carrying away firewood, tarps and other equipment. Montreal officials have demanded that shelters meant to provide protection from the harsh winter be dismantled.

In Halifax, protesters made a deal with city officials to temporarily move their encampment to make way for Remembrance Day ceremonies scheduled for Friday in the occupied park. In Victoria, British Columbia city officials have gone to the provincial Supreme Court to seek endorsement of an eviction order issued earlier this week. In Regina, Saskatchewan municipal authorities confiscated the occupiers' toilet facilities and then issued threats of eviction due to unsanitary health hazards!

In two of the largest Occupy encampments—in Toronto and Vancouver—preparations are being made for a confrontation with the protesters. Toronto's right-wing Mayor Rob Ford stated on Wednesday that it was time for the protesters "to move on" and that he would be seeking a meeting with the police chief to discuss an eviction strategy.

The Toronto encampment is one of the country's largest. There are over 250 tents pitched in St. James Park. Many of them are being winterized to protect against the oncoming cold and snow. The camp feeds up to 1,000 people per day and provides medical facilities, a media centre, a library and educational services. Potentially vexing for Mayor Ford is the fact that much of the encampment lies on property that is co-owned with the Cathedral Church of St. James. Officials with the church issued a statement yesterday saying they welcome the presence of people concerned with social justice on the property.

In Vancouver, the presence of hundreds of occupiers in the downtown core has become an election issue in the mayoralty race with social-democratic NDP Mayor Gregor Robertson and his opponent agreeing on the "need" to shut

down the occupation but disputing the timing of a police operation to dismantle the camp. As in Victoria, the authorities in Vancouver have approached the provincial Supreme Court for a ruling endorsing eviction proceedings. There have already been several tense confrontations with Vancouver police. Police Chief Jim Chu this week fanned the flames by baldly stating that the camp “has been infiltrated by violent elements. We have seen the black masks and others who are intent on violence”.

When the Occupy movement swept through North American cities last month just as a second, financial crisis was unfolding globally, there came nervous and somewhat tenuous bleatings of support from establishment figures, from Finance Minister Flaherty, Bank of Canada Governor, Mark Carney through to NDP leadership hopeful Brian Topp.

But as the movement deepens in the face of renewed slump, there are now fears that it could spark a wider movement including occupations of workplaces. With the prospect of a lock-out of Toronto municipal workers this January, there is already discussion of occupation type take-overs of city run depots should Mayor Ford ram through a garbage collection privatization contract. With news of a possible city worker lockout hitting the headlines the same day as steps to end the Occupy protests, the *Globe and Mail*, the nation’s leading mouthpiece for the financial elite, nervously opined that “there is no constitutional right to occupy” and that occupation by its very nature constitutes “violence.”

Thus, municipal officials of all political stripes and the mainstream media have used the supposed threat of violence by the occupiers and the ostensible “illegality” of their actions in a shrill campaign to vilify the protesters. Others like Mayors Ford and Fontana have simply argued that their constituents are fed up with the protests. But the anti-Occupy campaign has failed to deceive the Canadian public. Despite dozens of marches and public space occupations over the past month, Occupy Canada demonstrators have remained entirely peaceful. And a recent Nanos poll showed that a significant majority of Canadians support the protest. Fifty-eight percent of those aware of the demonstrations espoused a favourable view of the Occupy movement. A whopping 73 percent of those less than 30 years of age supported the movement. Explaining the results, pollster Nanos cited growing anxiety by Canadians over job prospects, savings plans and pensions on top of unease over the undemocratic nature of the economic system.

To counter the prevailing popular opinion, over the past week newspaper and broadcast media outlets have shifted their outrage to so-called “concern” for the health and safety of both the occupiers and the citizens that use the parks and

public spaces. They have made much of a drug overdose death last week of a young woman who had recently joined the camp in Vancouver and have conducted heavily edited interviews with persons in the tent cities who have substance-abuse or mental illness issues in an attempt to show that the protesters are a disoriented and dishevelled group. In fact, if a certain proportion of the encampments are populated by “street people”, this is itself an indictment of the conditions that exist in Canada as a result of the systematic slashing of welfare, social housing and public health budgets by all the major political parties.

As the forces of the state prepare more brazen attacks on the democratic rights of the protesters, supporters of Occupy Canada must draw some conclusions. The spread of the Occupy Wall Street protests internationally has undeniable political significance. The movement that is developing is, in its essence, anti-capitalist. The protests are animated by aspirations for social equality. Their banner slogan, “We are the 99 percent,” is imbued with working-class hostility to the monopolization of society’s wealth by a tiny financial and corporate elite—the “one percent”—and its domination over political life. They are giving voice to the opposition to mass unemployment, the slashing of wages and conditions, soaring education and health costs, environmental degradation and war.

The critical issue now is to make conscious the impulses that have given rise to the Occupy movement. The fight that faces the working class and oppressed will require a worked-out political perspective of revolutionary social change on an international scale. It is essential that a thorough discussion take place on the questions of political program, strategy and tactics.



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