

The Occupy London movement at the crossroads

Julie Hyland

28 November 2011

Having initially maintained their distance from the protest outside St. Paul's Cathedral in London, the political establishment now claims to share its concerns over social inequality.

Labour Party leader Ed Miliband complained that the government is only "looking after...the wealthiest one percent. It's the other 99 percent who feel desperately let down."

Liberal Democrat business secretary Vince Cable expressed his "sympathy" for the Occupy movement, while Prime Minister David Cameron said he would act against excessive bonuses at Britain's banks.

The nominally liberal press now regularly feature contributions from Occupy speakers, with the *Guardian* giving over its *Comment is free* (Cif) section to its representatives.

Britain's trade unions have also pledged their support. Members of Occupy Bristol who turned out on a picket line by workers at Capita were welcomed by Communication Workers Union (CWU) branch secretary Dave Wilshire, who saluted "their idealism and determination." In Cardiff Andy Richards, president of the Welsh Trades Union Congress, said that local campaigners were welcome to camp out and use the facilities at its HQ in the city.

None of these platitudes commits anyone to anything. The government's austerity measures go ahead, and all parties agree that cuts must be made. But so far, Occupy London has not been on the receiving end of the type of police brutality routinely meted out to its sister camps in the US, or numerous other protests in Britain by students, electricians and others.

While the City of London Corporation (CLC) that controls the capital's "Square Mile", which includes the Stock Exchange, has renewed eviction proceedings against the St. Paul's camp, the church is not participating due to the outcry against its earlier involvement. Even activists' takeover last week of an abandoned office block in Hackney, owned by investment bank UBS, launched as the "Bank of Ideas", has so far passed without police intervention.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Seamus Milne noted the courting of Occupy by the "media establishment". This and the placatory noises of Warren Buffett and other multibillionaires were a "clear sign of elite anxiety at the extent of popular anger and an attempt to co-opt the movement before demands for more fundamental change get traction," he wrote.

But co-option is not simply a one-way process. If the ruling elite feel able to make such attempts, it is because there are elements within the protest all too ready to be brought on-board and for

whom, in fact, it is their main goal.

In an observation that gave away more than he intended, Milne commented, "these occupations echo both the spirit and organisation of the anti-corporate movement that erupted in Seattle in 1999. The tactic of occupying a symbolic public space (as opposed to strikes, sit-ins and marches) can be traced back to Greenham Common in the 1980s through a string of often dubious 'colour revolutions' over the past decade."

"But it's this year's drama in Tahrir Square...that has given it such evocative power."

There is no doubt that the revolutionary turmoil in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere struck a chord with tens of millions of people around the globe. In every country, conditions of economic depression and austerity—administered by governments in hock to the financial oligarchy whose criminal and speculative actions caused the crisis—have provided the social and political impulse for the Occupy movements.

But the line connecting the Seattle protest against the World Trade Organisation and Tahrir Square is not as Milne implies.

The clashes in Seattle were an indicator of huge social tensions building up within American and world capitalism, and which have now reached the tipping point. But for the organisers of the "anti-globalisation" movement, this was not the occasion for advancing a genuine alternative to capitalism and the transnational corporations.

Instead, the petty bourgeois tendencies that made up its political leadership saw the collapse of the Soviet Union and the betrayals of the old social-democratic and trade union organisations as proof of the unviability of socialism and of the class struggle. Ideologically, they sought to promote various forms of "identity" politics based on race, gender, sexuality and ecology. Politically, they promoted protest actions entirely separated from working class struggle and aimed at pressuring governments for regulatory measures to preserve their own middle class lifestyles.

The path from Seattle has many forks—from a proliferation of well-funded non-governmental organisations and think-tanks, staffed by "left" academics, libertarians and quasi-anarchists, through to the World and European Social Forums, sponsored by the anti-globalisation Attac movement, and supported by pseudo-radical groups such as the Socialist Workers Party—not to mention various governments, including those of Brazil and France.

Whether they espouse "horizontalism", "autonomy", "people

power” or similar concepts, they share a common hostility to the development of an independent movement of the working class against capitalism.

In Egypt, the actual relationship of these tendencies to the mass movement is to collaborate with bourgeois forces like the right-wing Muslim Brotherhood and the National Alliance for Change, led by the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohammed ElBaradei, in opposition to a working class overthrow of the military junta.

In Europe, they championed a “no-politics” ban on political discussion at the *indignados* protests, which began in Spain and Greece, claiming this was the best way to build the maximum unity and make the ruling elite see sense. Their main demand has been for the various governments and institutions to undertake “audit commissions,” whose task would be to decide which part of these countries’ debts are “legitimate” and should be repaid.

The result has been to disarm workers and youth as to the social counter-revolution being prepared by the bourgeoisie, through the undemocratic imposition of “bankers” governments in Greece and Italy and victory of the formerly reviled right-wing Popular Party in Spain.

In the Occupy London movement, the proscription against “hierarchical” ideologies that might otherwise “pollute” the movement serves as a means for various professional “activists”, academics, trade union flunkies and other like-minded individuals to conceal their own political agendas—from the “social theorist” Manuel Castells, Labour MP John McDonnell to advocates of a “Green New Deal” and “Tax Justice”.

The result is that Occupy’s original “anti-capitalist” message is being increasingly replaced with one of “social responsibility”, as its spokespersons stress the need to bring “divergent views together in a spirit of open discussion, with the intention of reaching consensus.”

The central thrust of such policies was best summed up by Tanya Paton, Occupy London’s interfaith co-ordinator in the round-table discussion hosted by the *Guardian*, “Is capitalism broken and what is the world going to do to fix it?”

“[T]he problem,” she said, “is the people who are failing to address it [the economic crisis] are the very people who are keeping the system as a 1% and a 99%. And unless those people come into the dialogue, openly, transparently, and really take on board what we in the Occupy movements around this world are saying, there is going to be a revolution, a social revolution that is going to bring down everything.”

To make clear that the “consensus” is one aimed against social revolution, Occupy London announced on *Cif* the establishment of an economics working group (EWG) to “write a statement on economics”.

The EWB “comprises an ideologically broad tent—socialists rub shoulders with free marketeers and libertarians”.

“We are all here because we believe our economic system is broken, that it is not serving the 99% and we need to fix it—we just all have very different ideas about how to achieve this. We accept and welcome the differences between us as we stand united against corruption and corporate greed.”

This is absurd on its face. The “differences” between socialists

and free-marketeers regarding capitalism and the profit principle are unbridgeable since, if the terms are to have any meaningful content, the first stand for their abolition and the latter for their extension.

The problem has been resolved, however, by removing any genuinely anti-capitalist measures from the terms of debate. The “five points for exploration” set out by the EWG deal solely with how to make the banks “accountable”, credible alternatives to the current austerity measures, and how the economic system can be made “sustainable” by tax reform and “independent and effective regulation”.

The main focus of the Occupy London campaign has become its appeal for the City of London Corporation to “make itself accountable” under the Freedom of Information Act and be “more open” about its lobbying activities, combined with support for the Trades Union Congress’s November 30 “Day of Action” over cuts in public sector pensions. These demands echo the call made by Labour Party adviser Maurice Glasman, author of the “Blue Labour” policy document, which has been endorsed by Miliband. “Blue Labour” blends together anti-immigrant chauvinism and “anti-statism”—by which is meant the welfare state—with calls to regulate finance capital and establish a greater role for the trade unions, so as to achieve “civic renewal”.

The result of this orientation was expressed at the turn-out for the first national conference of Occupy Britain last weekend. Just several hundred people attended the event, at which only a handful of contributions dealt with the original impulse of opposition to social inequality.

Important lessons are contained in this experience. The broad mass of workers and youth are hostile to an economic set-up that supports a tiny clique of super-rich parasites through the systematic impoverishment of the majority of the world’s population. Opposition to social inequality for them is not an affectation, or something to be used as leverage to strike a rotten deal with the powers that be. The breakdown of capitalism, and its attendant horrors of poverty, war and dictatorship, means it is a matter of life and death.

They will not be placated with false pledges of a few crumbs. They will understand that ending inequality, oppression and injustice can only be achieved by mobilising the working class for a final settling of accounts with capitalism and its political apologists, and re-organising economic life in accordance with social needs, not private profit. This is the programme of the Socialist Equality Party.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact