

The crackdown on Occupy protests and the criminalization of dissent

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Throughout the United States, city administrations are moving to break up encampments of the Occupy protests, trampling underfoot the constitutionally protected right of assembly.

Police cleared out the Occupy camp in Oakland, California in a predawn raid on Monday, resulting in 32 arrests. This followed the shutting down of the Portland, Oregon encampment, in which 50 people were arrested. Last week, police used truncheons to hit unarmed students attempting to set up a camp at the University of California, Berkeley.

According to one tally, there have been over 3,600 arrests at Occupy protests, mostly in the United States, including 943 in New York City, 370 in Tucson, 352 in Chicago, 206 in Oakland and 153 in Boston.

Many of the raids have been carried out by police in riot gear, in some cases using rubber bullets and tear gas cases, as in last month's attack on Occupy Oakland. Those arrested have been subjected to arbitrary and punitive measures, including high bail and trumped-up charges.

The violent clearing of the encampments has been carried out under trivial and false pretenses. Citing health and public safety concerns, and the enforcement of various local and municipal ordinances, the police, largely at the order of Democratic Party city administrations, are moving to deny freedom of speech.

The moves to shut down the Occupy movement are a clear demonstration of the indissoluble link between the fight for the social rights of working people and the defense of democratic rights. The expression of social and political opposition is increasingly incompatible with the structure of society in the United States, in which a tiny financial aristocracy has enriched itself through the impoverishment of the vast majority.

The past decade has seen a steady erosion of

democracy in the United States, particularly in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11. The most basic constitutional freedoms have been undermined as the government has asserted the power to spy on the population, arrest and detain people without charge, and carry out raids on political groups on the flimsiest of grounds. This has been accompanied by a vast expansion of the military-police-intelligence apparatus.

This assault on democratic rights has been justified on the grounds of the "war on terror." From the beginning of this attack, however, the *World Socialist Web Site* explained that its real target was the emergence of any opposition to the reactionary policies of the financial aristocracy that controls the political system.

The Occupy protests are only an initial expression of the opposition and anger felt by hundreds of millions of people throughout the United States—and billions throughout the world—to the growth of social inequality and the domination of the financial aristocracy. Yet the public expression of these mass sentiments is criminalized in a country whose government routinely uses democratic pretenses to bomb and invade sovereign states.

These are international questions. The police violence against protesters in the United States is part of a global crackdown on popular opposition to austerity and inequality. Last Wednesday, the city of London put into practice a plan referred to as "total policing" in response to a protest against the tripling of tuition at universities. Four thousand police were deployed—together with helicopters and ten-foot-high barricades—in response to a protest of only 8,000.

In Greece and Italy, the banks are carrying out a policy of regime change: replacing elected officials

with so-called “technocrats” who, backed by the full force of the state, will seek to implement unpopular cuts to social programs, mass layoffs and wage cuts.

The reaction of the state to popular protests makes clear that the fight for social equality and the defense of democratic rights requires a struggle against the entire political establishment and all of its institutions. In the United States, the entire political system, including both the Democrats and Republicans, is impervious to the views, demands and needs of working people and youth. It is an instrument of the corporate-financial elite and cannot be swayed simply by protest.

The Democrats have been particularly duplicitous in this regard. Jean Quan, the Democratic mayor of Oakland, has repeatedly claimed to “support” the Occupy movement, even as she has overseen police repression and intimidation against protesters.

Obama plays the same role. While posturing as a supporter of the movement’s aims, he has remained silent while thousands are arrested, tacitly endorsing the repression. Meanwhile, the policies of the administration over the past three years have ensured that the banks and financial institutions are more profitable than ever, while the vast majority of the population suffers the impact of mass unemployment, declining wages and sweeping cuts in health care, education and pensions.

The increase in police repression is part of the drive to shut down and demobilize the Occupy movement. There is a two-pronged approach: ever-greater police repression on one hand, and the deliberate attempt by the trade unions and the various middle class pseudo-left organizations to subordinate the movement to the Democratic Party.

In contrast to the claims of these organizations, which promote the mantra of “no politics” or identity politics in order to exclude socialist politics, the issues that are beginning to be raised by the Occupy movement are intrinsically revolutionary. They come into conflict with the capitalist system and all of the political institutions dedicated to the defense of this system. The immense social inequality that corrupts American society and political life did not arise from nowhere. It is the natural outcome of capitalism.

The only social force capable of leading the fight against the political dominance of the financial elite and defending democratic rights is the working class.

The fight against social inequality can find genuine expression only as an independent political movement of the working class that has as its aim the establishment of a workers government and the transformation of the economic system in the interests of social need rather than private profit—that is, on the basis of socialism.

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