

The establishment politics of the May 1 Occupy protests

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On May 1, the Occupy Wall Street movement organized a series of demonstrations in cities throughout the US. The day's protests were for the most part fairly small, and to the extent that they expressed any definite political conceptions, they posed no threat to the parties of big business. Rather, they combined the unserious play-acting of anarchist groups with the thoroughly practiced and reactionary posturing of the trade unions.

The demonstrations were called under the heading of a "general strike," but were nothing of the sort. In Washington DC, for example, the Anarchist Alliance DC Network and the Occupy DC Labor Committee joined forces with the AFL-CIO and the Amalgamated Transit Union for "an afternoon of carnival games, live music, theater, workshops and picnicking followed by a bike tour, rally, and march," according to the Occupy DC web site.

The language of the Occupy protests, and the movement itself, have been, within little over six months, integrated into the general framework of the political establishment. What remains is being organized into something that is little more radical than an adjunct of the reelection campaign of Barack Obama.

The most overt form of this process is the so-called "99% Spring," a group set up by the pro-Democratic Party Moveon.org, with the participation of all the major trade unions and liberal outfits. The umbrella group has recruited many of its operatives from the ranks of those participating in occupations last fall.

99% Spring's list of supporters includes Richard Trumka, head of the AFL-CIO; Bob King of the United Auto Workers, Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers; and many others. The group has been organizing "civil disobedience" workshops to

prepare protests at corporate board rooms and other stunts in the run-up to the November elections.

The May 1 "general strike" was promoted heavily by liberal publications like *The Nation* magazine, which is working feverishly for the reelection of Obama. The protests received generally favorable coverage in the media.

How is this process to be explained? When the Occupy protests first emerged last September, they quickly gained broad support. The slogans pitting the "99 percent" against the top 1 percent resonated in a general way with the immense popular hatred of inequality and the domination of Wall Street over American economic and political life. At times, the protests attracted the participation of significant sections of workers and students, as in the aftermath of the pepper spraying of students at the University of California, Davis in November.

The political establishment and its various auxiliary organizations—including the trade unions, liberal publications, and pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization—responded by quite consciously seeking to take control of the protests, to appropriate the language, deprive it of any oppositional content and make it entirely compatible with political support for the Democratic Party.

The outlook of those involved in organizing the Occupy protests lent itself quite easily to being appropriated for this purpose. The slogans of "no politics" and "no leadership," repeated endlessly by those dominating the Occupy groups, were in fact entirely compatible with the establishment politics of the Democratic Party and the trade union apparatus. What they really meant was no *independent* politics, and no *independent* leadership.

The social and political outlook of those at the core of

the protests quickly emerged. Whatever radical phraseology was employed, ultimately what was driving the protests was dissatisfaction with the distribution of wealth at the top of society, not any struggle for the radical reorganization of economic life as a whole. The slogan of the “99 percent” pointed to this fact, as it obscured the deep divide between the vast majority of the population, the working class, and the more privileged sections of the upper middle class—the top 10 percent or top 5 percent.

Pervading the politics of the Occupy organizers is a deep hostility to the working class, which they blame for its own oppression. The one thing they are sure they don’t want to see is an independent political movement of the working class.

The experience contains important lessons. Many who were initially attracted to the Occupy protests because they were looking for a way to fight against inequality and the domination of the corporate and financial elite failed to find it. They are now confronted with the fact that a real oppositional movement must be developed on an entirely different basis—through the independent political mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system.

The degeneration of the Occupy protests takes place under conditions of a deepening economic and social crisis facing the broad mass of working people. The extremely weak “recovery”—which did not produce any real gains for the vast majority—is giving way to another downturn.

The ruling class is enforcing a drastic assault on the most basic rights of the working class. Whoever wins in the November elections, Obama or Romney, will implement a redoubled attack on health care and other social programs. At the same time, political representatives of the corporate and financial elite are planning new wars of aggression and an assault on the most basic democratic rights.

To counter this attack, the working class needs its own independent leadership and program. Not the complacent and conformist politics of the Occupy protests, but a program of revolutionary socialism—based on the understanding that the working class can realize its interests only by taking political power, in the United States and internationally, and reorganizing society rationally and democratically, on the principle of social need, not private profit.

The only organization fighting for this program is the Socialist Equality Party, and it is for this purpose that we are running in the 2012 elections. We urge all workers and young people looking for a way forward to support our campaign and take up the fight for socialism.

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