

*Peace, War and Social Conflict Section members may be interested in this reflection on our local experiences of the Occupy Wall Street Movement. PWSC member Jackie Smith has been researching the connections between local and global activism, and this piece explores some of the possibilities for strengthening these connections while also expanding social movement alliances across racial, class, and other divides.*

## **The Future of Occupy: From Occupying People's Park to Changing the System**

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The closing of Occupy camps around the country has generated some important soul-searching and strategizing by activists, and in Pittsburgh feelings are divided. On the one hand, many of the camp residents are deeply saddened by the loss of their home and the dispersal of the community that had developed there. On the other hand, many other activists feel freed up to shift their energies and attentions away from the camp—and the many dramas that tended to circulate there—and towards the work of building a more diverse and long-term movement.

The camp and the community it nurtured have advanced work for social transformation in our city and beyond. But along with many of those we've been working with, we believe it's time to step back and think more strategically about the way forward. While the encampment is gone, the issues that inspired us haven't gone away, and they will only get worse unless there is a radical redistribution of wealth and power in our society.

Although many involved in the Occupy movement are new to activism, it is important to recognize that this movement didn't begin last fall, and it didn't begin in this country. Americans are not alone in this struggle. Residents of Greece, for instance, are out in vast numbers resisting economic policies that have reduced public services and enabled corporations to expand their influence in politics and their control of the commons. In Pittsburgh, our political leaders are doing the very same things. At a time when the economy is not producing jobs and not generating the incomes people need to survive, governments are cutting back on basic necessities like transit, education, and health care. These are the very foundations of the economy, and if we don't support these somehow, there won't be an economic recovery.

The Occupy Wall Street movement's main contribution is that it has helped focus attention on the cause of the current crisis: corporate influence in politics and the emphasis on economic growth over all other social goals. Our political establishment is out of touch with the realities and needs of mainstream Americans. Most politicians don't rely on public transit, and they can afford good health insurance and private schools for their kids. So public services aren't a concern to them. But what they forget is that most people who do the work that sustains our

economy *need* these services. Education is the building block of creativity and progress, so when we deprive so many people of this resource, we are undercutting our economic and social potential. This logic might sway politicians who don't see education as a basic human right and a key to everyone's ability to realize their human potential.

Maintaining a camp in Pittsburgh's "People's Park" was an admirable first step in advancing our movement, but it required a lot of energy to defend. This kept many people from thinking about the long-term vision that connects to the needs of more diverse groups in our community. We missed an opportunity to highlight some of the many other "occupations" that are happening in this city and region to reclaim the commons for everyone's use. Reclaiming space for public and non-commercial/community use involves working with different entities in the city to find indoor spaces where people can gather to discuss our shared concerns and deliberate about policy. Occupy Pittsburgh's Outreach and Education Working Groups have been working with some great people and organizations that are reclaiming old churches, schools, theatres, and the like to make them available for community-building rather than profit-making purposes.

For instance, we held our International Human Rights day event on December 10 at the Kingsley Center in Larimer. Our most recent teach-in was at the Community Empowerment Association in Homewood, and our "Occupy your Mind" gathering was held at the Union Project in Morningside. Future events are planned for the new, community-oriented Bricolage Theatre downtown and the Pump House in Homestead, an important site of historical labor struggle. This work has reminded us that one of the problems our democratic process has had is that we've lost these common spaces where *diverse groups* of people can come together to discuss the issues that affect our lives. These spaces need to be non-commercial and devoted to serving community needs rather than turning a profit. Since politicians have been so focused on economic growth, they've lost this sense of what is the essence of community and democracy--which is not something that can be measured in dollars. More importantly, their focus on economic indicators neglects future generations.

We have to remember that the people who make up this movement differ quite a bit. The limited experience of younger activists is contrasted by the energy and creativity they have shown during the movement's early phase of development. But there are many people who have been working on these issues for a very long time, and who have worked in a variety of ways to advance change. They have learned the importance of taking time to build relationships across diverse groups. The next step will be bringing these segments together and helping people understand the very different ways this system impacts people of different races, classes, gender orientations, and nationalities. As people learn more about our different experiences of exploitation, there will be greater clarity about what the system is about and what needs to be done to transform it. While we're unlikely to come up with one clear approach to bringing change, we can take steps to develop a greater sense of who "we" are together and to create better structures for communication and coordination. By working together we will gradually develop trust and a collective sense of purpose.

We also need to remember that we've got a strong foundation of movement knowledge on which to build. The structure of the Occupy movement resembles that of previous movements that really are a foundation for this struggle. Groups resisting the World Trade Organization meeting

in Seattle in 1999 adopted similar kinds of decentralized, autonomous, networked structures to OWS, and these structures have been part of movements all around the world. Activists have been building and developing these networks through the World Social Forums—which are another key foundation for the Occupy movement. The decentralized structures are in some ways shaped by our larger economic system and the organization of labor markets. They respond to the needs of the movement for many sources of leadership, innovation, and creativity as we defend the commons and challenge the many different manifestations of oppression. We can learn from earlier movements about effective ways to use these network forms to facilitate movement building.

In a short time, we've accomplished some of our goals in changing the debate and bringing attention to the problems of inequality and corporate power. But the larger challenge of changing the system remains. Some questions that should guide the work ahead include: How we can develop new kinds of relationships that build power for the 99%? Can we overcome the tendency of our movements to reproduce patriarchy and other forms of hierarchy and exclusion? How can build a society based in solidarity and mutual support to replace the corporate capitalist system based in competition and exploitation? And what lessons can we draw from past struggles?