

WHAT COMES NEXT?

By Jeffry Gordon

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Now the Occupy Movement is two months old. No doubt it has been an unqualified success. This primarily consists of totally breaching the stone wall of silence among politicians, in mainstream media, and in the public square about the previously hidden establishment of a corporatist governing oligarchy resulting in a massive maldistribution of our nation's incomes, resources, with the massive destruction of personal and family security, now and for the future. It has brought the agenda of economic and social justice in the context of America as one community to the fore. Its initial structure of nonviolent, open participation, and collective management is both positive and negative. Positive because it confronts power with non-violence, because it allows for open discussion and participation, because it nurtures spontaneous participation at many locations around the country without the need for structure which could impair or constrain growth or limit the social change agenda, positive because it allows participation in national protest actions such as the "move your money" day. It is also negative because it has not created a mechanism for national coordination and integration; it has not defined a mechanism for actually impacting and changing the existing political system or the oppressive corporate financial, health services, manufacturing sectors; and except for generalities it has not defined targets for social change nor a mechanism for bring this about. It is also negative because in speaking to local activists I find there is no evolving leadership that can mobilize this energy to focus it on social change, nor is there functional communication or coordination with Occupy activists elsewhere. (The internet modalities seem to share current events news rather than strategy and tactics.)

My - our - experience in San Diego has probably been typical. There is a small group of very committed, mostly younger people, who are actually occupying and living in a public space. They have established a focal point for the part time participation of a small but wider demographic of citizens who have participated in education and strategic analysis. Here this group has been outnumbered by many homeless people seeking affinity, succor, and protection. Occupy San Diego has also, as everywhere else, attracted an astonishing large contingent of ominous, uniformed, well commanded police. This frankly has explicitly defined the movement as a real threat to the status quo - not a bad thing actually. Here we have been fortunate in that their strutting power has been used relatively sparingly to break up encampments and make arrests. Elsewhere, as in Oakland and New York City, but with strategic wisdom not in Washington, D.C., local governments have used the most minor and absurd legal excuses, such as noise abatement, sanitation and public health, as well as protecting the public right of way, to mount forceful and violent confrontations with the free speech protesters. It is obvious that these actions are being well coordinated nationally among many local government entities, again without the apparent participation of the federal authorities. These attempts to constrain the protests bear striking resemblance to the early skirmishes of the civil rights, gay rights and antiwar movements of recent

memory. They also, by and large, have little effect on the energy of the participants and serve only to invigorate the movement and keep it in the public eye.

But two months is a long time for an ad hoc event and the chill of winter is bearing down on the country. The winter holidays will be a cultural diversion. So now it is time to seriously contemplate next steps and future strategy. Based on my local observations, the Occupy Movement has attracted a smattering of local, if you will – middle class or mainstream support from progressive individuals who may be also active in the Democratic Party or in unions, or various social activist groups. There has been little or no formal concrete participation by other natural constituencies such as churches and synagogues, the unemployed, the poor and minorities, people who have lost or will lose their homes, and participants in the local education system, including PTAs and university students. In other locations union workers, a rare politician, students, a churchman or two, health care workers and so forth have been ongoing active participants, but this is relatively rare. Here in San Diego, even local communication, coordination, recruitment, and mobilization has been deficient and defective. For example, the other day about 350 occupiers participated in an excellent protest at a faulty bridge over a local freeway. Later that evening Activist San Diego sponsored a talk by world renown radical journalist Greg Palast who gave an inspirational outline of his investigation of energy “vultures” to a much smaller audience that did not seem to include anyone who had been on the bridge. Thus it is certainly time to consider the next phase. I cannot believe the Occupy Movement’s fall back strategy is anarchy like the WTO protesters. There are several obvious possibilities:

The Occupy Movement must clearly proclaim its foundation on a moral basis. This is not a movement for “progressive or efficient” government; this is not a movement to create or capture a mere political party; this is not a movement to merely revise laws and legal rulings or create new ones; this is not a movement to get a different board of directors for the Bank of America, General Electric, or United Health Care. This is a movement for what is right and virtuous in a democracy - a collective community commitment to support and empower all citizens. This is a moral fight for social and economic justice. This cannot be accomplished without a responsive government. A social agenda will win only when it has the passion of moral issues behind it.

The Occupy Movement must gain strength and legitimacy in every locality by inviting and facilitating the active participation of the silent middle class as well as poor and minorities. Economic justice is a vital issue for all of them/us. This is probably best done by working through established civic institutions as well as creating new ones. Unions, religious institutions, United Ways, PTAs, student clubs, Universities, school boards must all be brought on board. The one per cent have gained ascendancy because civic society has withered in the United States. Occupy can only win by reinventing an array of new civic social and economic justice organizations (think NAACP, LWV, SNVCC, ACT UP, NOW, VVAW.)

The Occupy Movement must develop a national coordinating and leadership structure – something like a “CITIZENS’ COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL JUSTICE.” Without a focus to set priorities, targets, and actions we cannot change established institutions. We need to nurture and empower leadership to stand in the public arena beside Senators Sanders and

Wellstone, Congressman Kucinich and future Senator Elizabeth Warren to support them and to direct and articulate the necessary changes as well as mobilize support. Without the opportunity to focus on specific personalities, the possibility for sending the message in the mainstream media will be lost.

Given the total domination of the federal government – the President, the Supreme Court, and the Congress – by the 1% and the virtual complicity in all this by the previously progressive Democratic Party it may be time for the Occupy Movement to evolve into a formal third party – THE CITIZENS' PARTY or THE SOCIAL JUSTICE PARTY or the ECONOMIC JUSTICE PARTY. The political electoral system is so out of balance that we need to stand outside it to articulate and fight for the many structural changes that are needed to recreate democracy in the United States. (Hey look, this is just what the Tea Party did for the regressive forces of corporatism. We have to create the same momentum without the benefit of fat cat money.)

These four suggestions encapsulate the parameters of a bright and successful future for the Occupy Movement. The question is: Will the movement be able to mature into them and are there individuals who can seize the moment to catalyze the next steps?