

2011: Year of Rebellion

You Might Say We're Dreamers

Anarcho-Syndicalist Review

2012

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The past year will probably go down in history as one of the most rebellious years ever.

It started out with young street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in Tunisia immolating himself on December 17, 2010, to protest police harassment interfering with his efforts to earn a living.

That sacrificial fire ignited a blaze that swept the Arab world. First, the Ben Ali regime fell in Tunisia; then, the 18-day occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo by hundreds of thousands of Egyptians and a massive strike wave that swept the country brought down the Mubarak dictatorship. The rebellion in Libya was met by massive state repression but was rescued by the intervention of Nato, whose “humanitarian” bombing campaign helped to bring down Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi while similar repression in U.S.-allies, Yemen and Bahrain was allowed to continue. State violence in Syria continues to keep the Assad regime in power, making another “humanitarian” intervention a possibility.

The so-called Arab Spring inspired rebellion in Europe and North America as well. Popular masses in Greece and Spain in particular have emulated the Egyptians with their mass occupations of public space to protest austerity. In Spain the so-called 15-M movement (named after May 15, the date of protests and occupations that drew hundreds of thousands of people, mainly youth who face an unemployment rate of 20 percent, into the streets of 58 cities throughout the country. And Greece, of course, has witnessed numerous general strikes over the couple of years. And the “indignants” movement, which began on May 25, has brought thousands of people into the streets independently of the parties and unions.

The Arab Spring even had its echo in the United States. In February Republican Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin announced his austerity budget that not only demanded huge cuts in public spending but also threatened to effectively eliminate collective bargaining for most public employees. Workers and students in Wisconsin rose up in rebellion, occupying the state capitol and holding protest rallies of over 100,000 people. There was even serious agitation for a general strike that was, unfortunately, overwhelmed by Democratic Party-aligned union leaders who channeled the mass anger into campaigns to recall anti-union Republican lawmakers and the governor.

Attacks on collective bargaining in Ohio led to mass mobilizations but no direct action. The trade unions satisfied themselves with a successful (albeit expensive) campaign to overturn the anti-union legislation at the ballot box.

Then, out of the blue, an obscure anti-consumerist magazine from Vancouver, *Adbusters*, issued a call for an occupation of Wall Street to begin on September 17. A small group of U.S., Spanish and Greek “horizontalists” and anarchists who had been meeting for some time organized a General Assembly for August 8 to organize for the day.

On September 17 a fairly small crowd of 175–200 folks marched on Wall Street to protest increasing inequality and the on-going economic and social crisis resulting therefrom; but instead of going home, as so often happens after a demonstration, they held a General Assembly in Zuccotti Park and decided to stay in the park, changing its name to “Liberty Square” in reference to Cairo’s Tahrir Square.

The Occupy Wall Street movement began to hold almost daily protests. A week or so after September 17 police attacked some women with pepper spray during a demo. The attack was recorded and posted on YouTube. This seemingly unprovoked attack brought the attention of the media, which had until then had pretty much ignored the movement. Then on October 1, police arrested 700 people during a march on the Brooklyn Bridge. This brought national media attention and the movement started to spread from coast to coast, and internationally. On October

15 there were 950 demonstrations in solidarity with Occupy Wall Street and occupations started springing up everywhere, in big cities and small towns.

As the movement spread so did the repression. Attempts to occupy public spaces were met with mass arrests. In Chicago, 170 and 130 people were arrested on successive weekends for violating Chicago's 11:00 pm curfew when they refused to leave Grant Park. In Oakland a violent eviction of the "Oakland Commune" on October 31, during which Iraq War veteran Scott Olson was sent to the hospital with a fractured skull as a result of being hit by a tear-gas bomb, led to a mass strike on November 2 that closed businesses and shut down the Port of Oakland. By mid-November mayors in a number of major cities were holding conference calls, coordinated by the U.S. Justice Department, to decide on a strategy for clearing public spaces of occupiers followed by sometimes violent evictions of many occupations.

The violence of the authorities unleashed on an essentially non-violent movement, however, has only led to greater public sympathy and participation. Organized labor has taken an interest in the movement. Early on, in New York City, the transportation union complained about their members being forced to drive busses of arrested demonstrators and the October 15 demonstrations garnered the participation of many unions and their rank-and-file. In Chicago, on November 17, a couple thousand unionists blockaded the LaSalle Street bridge, taking dozens of arrests, before joining Occupy Chicago at their usual Board of Thieves/Federal Reserve venue.

Encouraged by the success of the November 2 "General Strike" the Occupy movement on the West Coast called for shutting down "Wall Street on the Waterfront" from San Pedro to Alaska in solidarity with embattled longshoremen in Longview, Washington, and port truck drivers in Los Angeles. The action was controversial and threatened to derail the alliance with labor as conservative labor leaders, particularly from the building trades (who else?), opposed the action. However, the ILWU did not officially oppose it and many rank-and-file workers were on board, although some longshoremen and truck drivers complained about losing a day's pay. The action succeeded in shutting down or otherwise disrupting waterfront operations all along the West Coast.

Occupy is reaching a cross-roads as repression and winter make physically occupying public spaces more difficult. New strategy and tactics are being discussed to sustain the movement during the cold winter months in hopes of perhaps reviving the occupations come spring. Supporting anti-eviction movements, supporting labor struggles and keeping the pressure on to rein in the banks are all being put forward. General Assemblies will continue to be held, perhaps with reduced participation as the public occupations recede.

The Leninist left was late to the party. While the original meeting of August 8 was called primarily by the Workers World Party, anarchists and horizontalists successfully broke away to form the first General Assembly that launched the Occupy movement. Since then some left groups have stayed aloof while others have jumped in with both feet.

Many of these leftists hope that they can either recruit elements from the movement or foist a program on it. They are working to get the General Assemblies to abandon the "modified consensus" model of decision making in favor of majority rule and to elect a formal leadership. However, it is the "we are all leaders" ambit and the consensus process, precisely those anarchistic methods so reviled by the Leninists, that has fostered the dynamism of the movement and has encouraged non-political people to get involved. Introducing voting and formal leadership may turn the Occupy movement into just another forum for competition between leftist sects and the grassroots will get bored and walk away. While there are definitely problems with con-

sensus and the “Tyranny of Structurelessness,” there are just as many problems with majority rule and formal leadership (the “Tyranny of Tyranny”). Certainly ways of holding the informal “leadership,” those who basically volunteer to do the work, accountable to General Assemblies must be found, but what would be more damaging to the movement: an informal “leadership” that is only so because they are the most energetic and whom nobody feels obliged to follow, or a formal, elected leadership who get themselves elected because they can make a good speech and then come to think that, because they were elected, the movement should defer to them in every respect?

Anarchists have been involved in the movement from the very beginning and its modus operandus has been largely anarchistic, but anarchists need to do more than promote the process. They need to highlight the actual class war that is going on, and the solution: solidarity, direct action, revolution. We have to resist the flattery of the liberal/progressive community which can only drag the movement back into the Democratic Party. We have to equally resist attempts by the Leninist left to gain control of the movement through domination of certain working groups, like labor or direct action committees.

The powers that be and their media will be looking for every opportunity to identify and exploit the natural differences that exist within such an amorphous, decentralized and “leaderless movement.” They will jump on any militant action that leads to clashes with the police, such as the occupation of non-public spaces or street blockades, to criminalize the movement and paint it as violent. They will try to promote the most conservative labor fakirs to drive a wedge between Occupy and Labor. They will use outfits like MoveOn.org and supporters like former Labor Secretary Robert Reich to drag Occupy into the orbit of the Democratic Party to get Obama re-elected.

Occupy’s populism makes it vulnerable to such co-optation. Its 99% contains within it a layer of wealthy people and exploiters of labor who haven’t quite made it into the 1%, despite all of their efforts. The core of Occupy, of course, are debt-laden students, precarious workers, and unemployed and rank-and-file union workers, but the lack of a clear class line can lead to notions that taxing the rich, better regulation of the banks or getting corporate money out of politics will bring back the American Dream. Anarchists involved in the movement need to clarify the class line and promote struggles that reveal it.

The past year has seen a storm of rebellion throughout the world. May 2012 be even stormier.
— Mike Hargis

You Might Say We’re Dreamers

In an effort to mimic the success of the right-wing Tea Party, liberals are trying to rebrand their movement as “The American Dream Movement.” A conference held in October in Washington, DC, drew liberal politicians, business union leaders, lobbyists and progressive activists around the American Dream theme of saving the shrinking American “Middle Class.” With presidential elections only a year away, their intention is to recapture Congress and pressure the Democratic Party and President Obama towards the left. This effort, while perhaps noble in intent, will fail because it is based upon false assumptions.

For one thing it assumes that there is such a thing as an American Dream. Social mobility and a rise in one’s personal prosperity is a universal aspiration. There is nothing uniquely American

about it. The Indians and the Chinese, not to mention Mexican immigrants, all want it just as badly as Americans do. The wage disparity between workers in the various countries makes it difficult for American workers to organize at the workplace and to win pay raises. Ordinary Americans cannot raise their standard of living unless the workers everywhere raise theirs.

Secondly it confuses Middle Class with the Working Class. Capitalism cannot exist without a working class that is forced into wage labor because the workers lack capital. The Middle Class are the small business owners, professionals and managers, who are neither capitalists nor members of the working class. It is the stagnating wages of the working class majority and the loss of their jobs to global outsourcing to sweatshops in other countries that has led to the vast disparity of wealth, not a decline in the number of doctors and lawyers or small shop owners. The jobless prosperity of the Clinton years was not much better than the jobless prosperity of the Bush years, as far as the working class is concerned. Both led to the current economic hard times. It is the restoration of well-being of the working class majority that must be on the agenda.

The accomplishments of liberals will fall short because their dreams fall short. If the Democratic Party of the past seemed to represent the interests of ordinary Americans and not just the wealthy it was because the party raised itself on the tide of a rebellious labor movement. Rebuild the labor movement and the capitalists will be forced to relent. However, the interests of the Middle Class are not identical to those of the Working Class, and we can no longer afford to allow them to negotiate with the capitalists on our behalf.

Our dream is of a classless society: no capitalists, no middle class, and no wage slavery. That is something worth fighting for.

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