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Dublin: The eviction of the Occupy Dame Street camp

Last of 2011's Occupy camps in Ireland, cleared –
reportage and reflections

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A large force of Garda and council workers were deployed at 3.30am today, International Women's Day, to clear Occupy Dame Street (ODS) camp. The camp was completely demolished in the course of the eviction, campers intimidated and their personal property stolen. This was a level of force way out of proportion with the numbers in the camp (about 15 people) and stands in contrast with the lack of resources put into investigating what happened at Anglo, the collapse of which has left a debt of 26,000 Euro on every single person in the country.

The small Garda team 'investigating' what happened at Anglo only includes one forensic accountant. As far as anyone can tell they have yet to get into the computers that were encrypted and which the bank has refused to hand over the passwords for. This certainly tells us whose interests those in power protect and that the Garda will 'just follow orders' even if they are individually included amongst the 99% of us who have been screwed over.

Media coverage of the eviction suggests that it was a fairly low key affair with an overwhelming number of Garda (around 100) compared to campers (about 15) but commentary from the campers and a video interview published by the Irish Times suggests that a significant level of physical intimidation & force was used by Garda. Campers talked of pick axes being used to break into structures while they were still inside and of the seizure of mobile phones, lap tops, clothes, minutes & contact books and even bicycles that were chained on the square. This happened without warning, while people were sleeping. One of the campers said of the police that *“they came like volatile bullies & terrorists .. they behaved like animals”*

Brief history

The ODS project was always going to face significant difficulties. It arose as a semi-spontaneous gathering in reaction to Occupy Wall Street with very little advance organisation of any kind. This wasn't the first attempt at a camp style protest at the Central Bank, Real Democracy had a small gathering back in July which included a couple of token tents. But this time because of the coverage of Occupy Wall Street a couple of hundred people turned up. The gathering developed into a large speak-out but it was a couple of hours before the first tents were erected. It wasn't clear how the Garda would react to this but by nine in the evening no attempt had been made to clear the protest despite a dozen tents having been erected and an assembly of 150 people was in progress.

The Garda strategy towards the camp turned out to be to tolerate it and in fact be quite co-operative at times towards dealing with external 'trouble'. The location of the camp meant there was a lot of this trouble in the early hours of the morning as its slap bang in the middle of the late pubs and night clubs section of the city. The camp decided to be co-operative with the Central Bank and not to obstruct the entrances to the bank with tents or other structures. So there was little in the way of day to day friction with either the police or the bank.

Many of the camps elsewhere were forced to at least temporarily overcome the inevitable differences that will arise when lots of random people come together because they needed to unite to defend their space from an external enemy. And in the process of such a defense bonds of solidarity between people with quite different outlooks are often created. In Dublin though the co-operation with the Garda and the bank left no such eviction crisis and external enemy to unite against. And there was a lot of distrust and paranoia about the organised left, not all of it undeserved.

In the context of an increasingly inwards looking core camping group this left plenty of time to focus on differences within the camp and with potential allies. This, and a general lack of functional decision making mechanisms, made it impossible to develop ODS on a collective basis after the opening weeks. In the opening weeks of November this resulted in a series of fractious General Assemblies (GA) on the issue of whether or not ODS would take part in a march organised by the Dublin Council of Trade Unions. The fact that participation was blocked and the manner in which this happened meant that at the GA where the veto was deployed and in the ten of so days afterwards almost all the people with a collective approach and organisational experience walked away from ODS.

General Assemblies seemed to have stopped happening from the start of December and apart from some odd stunts and a couple of protests the camp retreated behind its fortifications on Dame street. The Garda & Central Bank were probably hoping at this stage that the harsh winter weather would drive out the last campers but with the arrival of Spring they must have been concerned that the camp might be renewed. The annual Patricks day parade was thus deployed as the excuse for why the camp had to leave, with extensive coverage of this 'request' in the media to soften up public opinion.

The camp at Occupy Dame Street last from October 2011 to March 2012, making it one of the longest running such camps in the world. Many, particularly in the US, were violently evicted,

sometimes multiple times, before the end of 2011. But leaving aside longevity after the initial buzz Occupy Dame Street did not succeed, and was even counter productive on several levels. The best things to come from it were the projects set up by people initially involved when they departed. It's worth taking some time to consider what caused this failure and what the lessons are for the future. We intend to produce a detailed article next week where the WSM members who were involved in Occupy Dame Street will attempt to do just this.

In the meantime the camp has called a General Assembly at the Central Bank for 6pm this evening to discuss 'where next.'