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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

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## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS on

## “OCCUPY WALL STREET!”

### -Why this Rebellion Deserves our Support-

by RAY LIGHT

November-December 2011

On September 17, 2011, Occupy Wall Street (OWS), a diffuse group of mostly white middle class young people began a loosely organized protest in New York’s financial district. The group planned to camp out for some extended period in Zuccotti Park, a privately owned park in Lower Manhattan open to the public. This protest against corporate greed and social inequality and other disparities between rich and poor in the United States and around the world was fueled by their own anger and frustration at living in a country in the throes of a capitalist economic crisis where their own personal futures looked grim while the government was propping up and bailing out the super rich, the very people responsible for the crisis!

The “Modest Call to Action” issued by OccupyWallSt on September 17<sup>th</sup> was, in fact, not very modest at all. They referred to it as a “call for revolution.” They called for disrupting the system, for students and teachers to teach democracy together, for workers to “not only strike, but seize their workplaces collectively and to organize them democratically,” for the unemployed to “volunteer ... to use what skills they have to support themselves as part of the ... community,” “for the seizure and use of abandoned property,” and “for people’s assemblies in every city, every public square, every township.”

Despite very limited capitalist media coverage (for example, National Public Radio gave no coverage to the first nine days of the protest), and despite the rhetorical overreach of their call, Occupy Wall Street immediately resonated with thousands of people who share their view that, “we are the 99 percent that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1 percent.” (See OccupyWallSt.org, the group’s website)

Within a month, the New York group experienced real growth, with a few thousand marchers on certain days, even in the face of police arrests. Furthermore, sympathy demonstrations and local replica “occupation” movements have rapidly spread to cities across the USA, and solidarity actions have occurred around the world. Mass disenchantment with and disgust for capitalism is being expressed in moderate protest.

At the same time, however, the Occupy Wall Street campsite has become a tourist attraction and the fledgling “movement” has received close to a half million dollars in donations, a fund currently being used for the provision of food, laundering and dry cleaning for New York City’s camper-protesters.

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Does this rather odd, spontaneous and self-described “leaderless” movement have any real revolutionary potential? Are there any potential reactionary dangers to which this movement is vulnerable? What follows are some questions and answers dealing with the responsibility of proletarian revolutionaries in the USA (and around the world) to bring critical support to the Occupy Wall Street movement.

***Question #1: Does the “Occupy Wall Street” Movement have any specific target? Is this sufficient?***

***Answer #1:*** Indeed, the outstanding positive feature of this movement is that it targets Wall Street. As prize-winning *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman observed, “The protesters’ indictment of Wall Street as a destructive force, economically and politically, is completely right.” (*New York Times*, 10-7-11)

Krugman explains, “They’re people who got rich, by peddling complex financial schemes that, far from delivering clear benefits to the American People, helped push us into a crisis whose aftereffects continue to blight the lives of tens of millions of their fellow citizens. Yet they have paid no price. Their institutions were bailed out by taxpayers ... they continue to benefit from ... federal guarantees ...” (*New York Times*, 10-10-11) Krugman asserts that, “... we may, at long last, be seeing the rise of a populist movement that, unlike the Tea Party, is angry at the right people.” (*ibid.*, 10-7-11)



Occupy Wall Street General Assembly, Washington Square, New York City

The focus on Wall Street, while just, necessary, *and* crucial, is *not* however, sufficient. While bourgeois journalists, including Krugman, treat the U.S. economy and U.S. politics as if “never the twain shall meet,” the dialectical reality is that politics and economics are inextricably interwoven. *U.S. political-economy* is monopoly capitalist and imperialist. The U.S. government, the U.S. imperialist state, is fundamentally a servant of Wall Street. As Simon Johnson, former chief economist for the International Monetary Fund, admitted early in the current economic crisis, the U.S. government has been captured by the “financial oligarchy,” i.e. by Wall Street. To *limit* the target to “Wall Street” thus serves to seriously underestimate the power and influence of the enemy. It specifically takes our eye off of the main bulwark of world capitalism in this period, imperialism, headed by U.S. imperialism.

***Question #2: Does the “Occupy Wall Street” Movement have any specific demands or goals? Should this be a matter of concern?***

***Answer #2:*** No, they don’t. And, yes, we should be very concerned. Such just slogans and demands as the right to a decent job, universal health care, an end to U.S. imperialist wars [in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, Colombia and the Philippines], bring the troops home now, protect the planet, tax the rich, were projected by the recent October 2011 Movement in its demonstration in Washington, D.C. *against* the bipartisan “Republicrat” U.S. government’s War Abroad and its War at Home. Such concrete demands place *political* pressure on the U.S. imperialist state to meet the needs of the people or face the political consequences. The Occupy Wall Street Movement’s inability to adopt specific political demands and goals takes the heat off of U.S. imperialism. And since the “Republicrat” Congress, with its increasingly repressive and reactionary laws, and the Obama Regime, with its massive omnipresent apparatus of police and armed forces and military and civilian intelligence, are the main political servants of Wall Street, there can be no serious challenge to Wall Street without challenging the U.S. government *politically*.

***Question #3: How is “Occupy Wall Street” similar to the “Arab Spring” movements in Tunisia, Egypt and throughout the Middle East and how is it different?***

***Answer #3:*** There is no doubt that “Occupy Wall Street” drew much of its inspiration and the model for its technique of encampment in the New York financial district from the initial mass protests in Tunisia and especially in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt. Furthermore, driven by the world capitalist economic crisis, the explosive mixture of widespread and growing unemployment and underemployment among the masses simultaneous with the continued amassing of undeserved wealth by the plutocrats, the already super wealthy and privileged rulers of the society, all with no end in sight, is the fuel common to the Arab youth and the youth of the USA that has sparked these revolts.\*

\*NOTE: [This is not to deny the fact that the sharp rise in food prices in the Middle East and other economic woes as well as the youth demographic there exacerbate conditions in the Arab countries. The situation facing the people of the Middle East does remain more harsh than are the worsening conditions facing the masses of people in the USA today.]

One fundamental difference is based on the fact that behind virtually all the reactionary Arab regimes, propping them up in a thousand ways, has been U.S. imperialism. Egypt, during its decades under Mubarak, for example, received more than a billion dollars per year in direct U.S. military aid, second in the world in direct U.S. financial aid only to the settler state of Israel. This imperialist comprador and lackey role of the Arab reactionary rulers helps to explain why, in most if not all the “Arab Spring” uprisings, the goal of *toppling*, of driving out, the current reactionary political regimes was raised almost immediately as the most urgent demand of the demonstrators. In the Middle East, the Arab masses were enlightened enough to place the responsibility for their economic-social plight on their clearly compromised comprador political leaders *and they are continuing to do so*. In Tunisia and Egypt today the toiling masses and the youth press onward in the struggle for *political power*, even months *after* the toppling of Ben Ali and Mubarak.

In the USA, by contrast, the Occupy Wall Street and other new “Occupy” groups, reflecting the many years of imperialist bribery and relative privilege vis-à-vis the rest of the world, have barely mentioned any political targets at all. In fact, protecting and supporting the Obama Regime and the declining U.S. Empire remains a more likely motivation for most U.S. protesters thus far than *the toppling* of this barbaric reactionary regime, the faithful continuers of the Bush-Cheney war criminal regime.

***Question #4: Does anarchism in program, organization, and practice have the capacity to achieve the objectives first enunciated by the Occupy Wall Street Movement?***

***Answer #4:*** No. Given the predominantly white middle class composition of the Occupy protesters and their privileged recent history in relation to the international working class and the oppressed peoples as an integral part of hegemonic U.S. imperialist society, it is not surprising that there is **a strong anarchist political tendency** present among them. This is especially so now that, in the current capitalist economic crisis, many of them have recently dropped out of the

middle class into the lumpen-proletariat, having fallen upon hard times, job and income loss, homelessness, etc.

The most prominent of all anarchist thinkers, Michael Bakunin, consistently advocated that the workers and the unemployed “lumpen-proletariat” *avoid political struggle* altogether. He promoted the notion that “the triumph of humanity ... is in the conquest and accomplishment of the full freedom and full development, material, intellectual and moral, of every individual, *by the absolutely free and spontaneous organization of economic and social solidarity* as completely as possible between all human beings living on the earth.” (page 22, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, ROL emphasis) In the 1870’s, Bakunin asserted that, “... the proletariat ... is animated today by a profound distrust against what is political and against all the politicians in the world, whatever their party color, all of them having equally deceived, oppressed, exploited – the reddest Republicans just as much as the most absolutist Monarchists.” (*ibid.*, p.61)

The Occupy Wall Street movement in New York City has spent most of its time occupying a small park in the Wall Street area and has made no serious attempt to “occupy” or even interfere in a significant way with the workings of U.S. finance capital. Occupy groups in Atlanta, Georgia and elsewhere have been forcibly removed by the police from their “occupied areas” with little or no resistance. Meanwhile, both in that initial Occupy Wall Street group in New York City and in the many Occupy groups that have emerged around the USA, a tremendous amount of time and energy have been expended in procedural discussions, i.e. trying to make decisions about how to arrive at decisions (by consensus, majority vote, etc.), whether to “allow” commercial media and press to be present (even where there are no other constraints on participation), whether to have any unified demands and/or which ones, what kind of future world they envision, etc. In other words, the Occupy groups have been exercising “free speech” in their more or less spontaneous social and economic organization in their encampments in line with the anarchist credo of Bakunin.

Many of these newly politicized activists apparently believe that if they simply come up with a better socio-political system in their discussions, the U.S. monopoly capitalists and imperialists will freely adopt them without a fight. This is in keeping with Bakunin’s assertion that a better society can be reached by “anti-political power of the working masses of town and country alike, including all favorably disposed persons of the upper classes, who, breaking completely with their past, would be willing to join them and fully accept their program.” (*ibid.*, p.18 )

But the outrage that has finally propelled several thousands of protesters into the Occupy groups around the country has been occasioned, in the first place, by the obscene bailout of Wall Street *by the federal government* under both Republican President George W. Bush and then Democratic President Barack Obama. The Bush Regime was only successful in getting the \$700 billion bill passed in the House with vital support from Democratic Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi as well as from both the Republican and Democratic candidates for President, McCain and Obama. The Obama Regime got the second installment of over \$800 billion passed after Bush’s Secretary of the Treasury Paulson admitted that he used the first \$700 billion for things other than what he had said he would use it for! And none of the “Republicrats” in Washington, DC demanded to know what he had done with the money!! Obama’s Secretary of the Treasury,

Timothy Geithner, chief promoter of the Obama bailout, had been a key architect, with Paulson, his fellow alumnus of Goldman, Sachs, in getting the Republican Bush bailout passed in the first place.

Yes. Wall Street has been bailed out *by the U.S. government*, the U.S. imperialist state. Main Street has been impoverished, rendered homeless, jobless, without health care *by the U.S. government*. It was in this setting that Simon Johnson, the former chief economist for the International Monetary Fund, admitted that the *U.S. government* had been captured by the “financial oligarchy.” (See “The Quiet Coup,” May 2009 *Atlantic* magazine)

The U.S. government, the state apparatus of U.S. finance capital, of Wall Street, protects and defends the interests of Wall Street within the USA and around the world primarily through its *military might* – through the army, navy, air force, marines, national guard in hundreds of military bases strategically placed in the four corners of the earth, backed up by an army of intelligence agencies, private military contractors (mercenaries), and an army of diplomats, along with state and local police forces and sheriffs’ departments. The U.S. government military budget is greater than the combined military expenditures of all the other governments on earth.

In this setting, anarchism cannot even begin to deal seriously with the monopoly capitalist class dictatorship of Wall Street and U.S. imperialism.

***Question #5: What is the significance of the trade union support and the Democratic Party support currently being received by the Occupy Wall Street Movement?***

***Answer #5:*** There is both positive and negative significance to the Occupy movement’s involvement with organized labor. **Positive** is the fact that several major labor unions in the New York City area, including the Transport Workers Union, have begun to provide endorsements, manpower and resources to the fledgling protest movement directed against Wall Street. Even more positive has been the support of OWS folks for the Communication Workers Union (CWA)-led Verizon workers’ protests and OWS support for the Teamster workers at Sotheby’s. Perhaps most positive was the timely defense by hundreds of union workers called out by their unions to defend the OWS folks in Zuccotti Park when New York City Mayor Bloomberg threatened to bring in the police to remove the protesters. The too conservative U.S. trade union movement can surely benefit from the youthful impatience and militancy of the Occupy groups around the country. And association with the Occupy Wall Street protests can broaden, deepen and help radicalize the political perspective of the organized section of the working class in this period of economic crisis. At the same time, the new found activism and militancy of mostly white middle class youth with a smorgasbord of demands can too easily be transformed into destructive anarchistic activities. The Occupy groups can thus benefit greatly from becoming involved with the solid working class demands and campaigns and the union workers themselves in their battles with specific capitalist adversaries.\*

\*NOTE: [One of the most promising union campaigns which would perfectly suit the Occupy groups throughout the USA is the effort to defend and preserve the United States Postal Service (USPS), with its universal six day delivery and uniform rates. On the basis of a Congress-manufactured phony “postal crisis,” the USPS is currently threatened with dismantling and

privatization by Wall Street, with the connivance of the Postmaster General who is supposed to be the leader of the institution he is helping Wall Street to destroy! In a Wall Street Journal article (October 5<sup>th</sup>), Gary MacDougal, a recently retired long time director of United Parcel Service, boldly exposed the postal privatizers' real aim. He stated, "Entrepreneurs will see the demise of the USPS as an opportunity, and new companies will emerge. Indeed, this transition can be one of the badly needed bright spots in a troubled American economy." It is only because the USPS is by far the most popular government service among the people of the USA that it has not been privatized already. Widespread OWS participation in defense of the USPS would be seen in a very positive light by the people on Main Street. And at least two of the four postal unions, the American Postal Workers Union (APWU) and the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC), are virtually everywhere there are Occupy groups. It would be a great help to the more than half a million union postal workers and to the Occupy groups around the country if they reach out to each other in this popular struggle to thwart Wall Street's drive to take one more right away from the people, the right to a universal, public postal service.]

On the **negative** side is the potential for the conservative labor leadership to seduce sections of the Occupy groups into the electoral dead end of exclusive Democratic Party political activity.

In early October, the AFL-CIO's executive council expressed unanimous support for the Occupy Wall Street protest (even though most of this conservative labor leadership has "kept its distance" from the OWS folks). To some extent, these union misleaders recognize that the "Republicrats," mainstream Republicans, led by Congressman John Boehner, along with Obama and the Democrats, have been making decisions throughout this economic crisis period that provide all kinds of support for Wall Street and little for Main Street. And yet these labor apologists for U.S. imperialism, so wedded to Obama and the Democratic Party, have remained politically paralyzed and impotent, afraid to arouse and mobilize their members and unwilling to break with the Democrats. In the recent period when the Tea Party movement has pushed the "Republicrat" politicians even further into taking everything *from* Main Street and giving everything *to* Wall Street, the labor bureaucracy has been in an even more desperate political dilemma. Thus, they hope they can use the OWS movement as a counterweight to the Tea Party and to help pressure Obama and Congress to focus on job creation and provide some relief or at least a few crumbs for Main Street.

Mary Kay Henry, President of the Service Employees International Union, (SEIU), the largest union in the AFL-CIO and a notoriously bureaucratic "top down" union, in a recent *Wall Street Journal* opinion column ("Why Labor Backs 'Occupy Wall Street,'" 10-8-11) used the newly mobilized OWS movement to plead with the financial oligarchy to allow Congress to pass the American Jobs Act which would help rebuild the country's crumbling infrastructure in a Depression-era WPA type project. She concluded: "The people are finally speaking. Now it's up to our leaders and CEO's to listen and respond." SEIU President Henry is already trying to convert the OWS movement into an innocuous pressure group that will return the initiative to the very political and economic forces that have brought this country to its knees.

"God bless them for their spontaneity," said House minority leader, California Democrat Nancy Pelosi, in collaboration with the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, as she embraced the OWS movement's vulnerability. Liberal thinker Paul Krugman, can barely restrain his glee that, "Democrats are

being given what amounts to a second chance. The Obama administration squandered a lot of potential good will early on by adopting banker-friendly policies that failed to deliver economic recovery even as bankers repaid the favor by turning on the president. Now however, Mr. Obama's party has a chance for a do-over." (*New York Times*, 10-7-11)

However, as Glen Ford, executive editor of the *Black Agenda Report* (BAR), brilliantly observed, "the Occupy Wall Street movement's contribution to human welfare to date has been to call out the enemy's name and address: finance capital, Wall Street. ... But the essence of the movement requires that there be no compromise on the necessity to remove finance capital from the commanding heights of U.S. politics. Absent that fundamental focus, all coherence vanishes. Any collaboration with Obama and his corporate Democrats means the instantaneous death of the movement – and rightly so." (Glen.Ford @Black Agenda Report.com, 10-12-11)

### **SOME CONCLUSIONS:**

Occupy Wall Street and the other Occupy groups that have emerged in cities and towns throughout the USA are a breath of fresh air. Their anger and protest are well directed at Wall Street though they need to be broadened to include the U.S. imperialist state apparatus. Proletarian revolutionaries have a duty to support and join the Occupy group efforts wherever appropriate and to attempt to bring *revolutionary politics* to the struggle in the process.

One factor that makes the emergence of the Occupy movement so positive is that it follows decades of domination of right reformism within the working class, oppressed nationality, radical and revolutionary movements in the USA, rightism made even more entrenched by the plague of NGOism. The powerful influence of anarchism within this new motion is the natural response to the sins of reformism and can help change the landscape. But the proletarian revolutionary forces uniting with the OWS movement will need to struggle against ultra-left, adventurist and/or "anti-political" tactics of the anarchists that are sure to emerge. Unchecked, such actions will become the Republicrats' rationale on behalf of Wall Street for increased repression against Main Street.

The participation of the organized section of the working class, the trade union activists, with the Occupy groups can provide tremendous *cross fertilization for the socialist revolution in the USA*. But revolutionary vigilance in relation to labor conservatism is important. As Glen Ford points out in the *Black Agenda Report*, "...the Democrats are the most clear and present danger to the Occupation Movement, because their entire purpose is to negate the central message: that Wall Street controls both parties, all three branches of government and most social discourse in the United States."

The political answer to Reformism and Anarchism is Revolutionary Socialism. The socialist aim was put forward by the Philippines' genuine, militant and anti-imperialist labor center Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) in its Solidarity message supporting the efforts of the Wall Street protesters. The KMU also urged the Occupy protesters to "deepen their grasp of the roots of the current crisis, roots that lie in the system of exploitation and repression named imperialism ... [and] go beyond spontaneous protests and build a genuine progressive movement right there in the so-called 'belly of the beast.'"

The leadership of the International League of Peoples' Struggle in the USA, in its own support

statement, made the important point that “Wall Street is the Enemy of All Humanity,” underscoring the need for international solidarity.

In the absence of a powerful, organized, serious and disciplined revolutionary movement in the USA, guided by proletarian internationalism, the U.S. political-economic system is incapable of fundamental change. To meet the just demands of the Occupy Wall Street movements, we need to accumulate forces and become capable of smashing U.S. imperialism in the fight for Workers Power and a Socialist USA.