

Occupy and Labor: Introduction

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LABOR UNIONS HAVE TRADITIONALLY claimed to speak for the American working class. Occupy claims to speak for the 99%, for the working class and then some. The claim by both the unions and Occupy to speak for working people simultaneously lays the basis for cooperation and sets the stage for conflict. The two forces could not be more different. The labor unions are powerful institutions highly integrated into the economy, involved in relationships with private employers and government, constrained by the law and the courts, and linked to political parties and the state. Occupy is a social movement fighting the economic system, rejecting involvement in politics, challenging the law, and repudiating the systems economic and social inequalities. The intersection of the two, the historic organization of the workers' movement, its institutions and its leaders, so weighed down by commitments to the status quo, and the radical new movement so disdainful of the established order, and so alive with the sense that confrontation and even conflict can create change, poses the question: Can Occupy help to inspire in the labor unions the desire to fight for a different kind of economy, society and polity?

Since the very beginning in September, 2011, union activists have been involved in the Occupy movement. The relationship between Occupy and the unions has been a complicated and sometimes conflicted affair as the new movement has challenged the unions that claimed to represent the working class. While the unions came out to defend Occupy Wall Street, and while Occupy has mobilized in support of unions in Chicago, the relationship between Occupy and the unions has been more conflictive on the West Coast. Occupy Oakland's two port shutdowns in November and December of 2011, and its intervention in the ILWU contract struggle with EGT Corporation in Longview, Washington, led not only to strong difference of opinion, but to a physical attack on Occupiers and rank-and-file ILWU members by some ILWU union leaders.

As some Occupy Oakland activists have argued, Occupy speaks for the 99% while the unions have for years spoken only for the 11 percent of organized workers. Occupy's challenge to the labor union leadership happens to coincide with the beginning of the election season, as the unions attempt to mobilize their members to work for the Democrats. As we write (in mid-April 2012), throughout the country there is a struggle between Occupy's attempt to regroup and mobilize its members in direct actions against the 1% and the labor union officials and the Democratic Party's desire to channel all the energy they can into the Barack Obama campaign.

We offer here a survey of the relations between Occupy and the labor unions in three major cities: New York, Chicago, and Oakland. Amy Muldoon, an Occupier and Communications Workers of America member, writes a personal essay discussing the impact of Occupy on her union and its members in New York. Susan Dirr, a Chicago Occupy activist, discusses the complicated relations between Occupy and the unions in the nation's "Second City." Bill Balderston, a teacher, Oakland Education Association member and Occupy activist, examines the relations between Occupy and the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and Bay Area unions. All three articles raise the questions: what does Occupy mean for the unions? and how will the unions and their members respond to Occupy?

Footnotes