

From #SidiBouزيد to #OccupyWallStreet

October 7, 2011

On December 17th, 2010 Tunisian street vendor Mohammad Bouazizi lit himself on fire.

Mohammad Bouazizi was twenty-six years old. He held a university degree, but was unable to find work for himself besides selling fruits and vegetables on the streets of Sidi Bouزيد. On Wednesday, December 17th, the Tunisian police confiscated his merchandise and threatened to put him in jail for selling without a license—instead of pleading for his goods and livelihood as he had in the past, Mohammad Bouazizi doused himself in gasoline and lit himself on fire.

Then the unthinkable happened. Tunisia, once a heavily censored police state, erupted in unprecedented protests.

Tunisians poured into the streets in outrage, demanding the right to bread, education, and freedom. The Tunisians who took to the streets were not only sympathetic to Mohammad Bouazizi—in a sense they were him. At that time, two out of every five college graduates were unemployed, and the ones who were employed worked menial, unskilled jobs with inadequate salaries. Many were like Mohammad Bouazizi, informally selling goods on the streets in a last attempt to make ends meet in a desolate economy.

These protests were not originally intended to overthrow Zine El Abidine Ben Ali—although they eventually did. Originally, these protests were no more than an outcry of rage towards a corrupt, kleptocratic political system that served only the wealthiest, while depriving both what would be the middle class and the working class of any viable economic future.

Sound familiar?

It is now ten months later—Tunisia's once unfathomable revolution is embedded in history. Egypt's has been as well, and as the revolutionary fire spread throughout the Arab World, we as activists waiting with baited breath learned from our mistakes and assumptions. Unfortunately, what was once impossible and proven possible in Tunisia and Egypt was not always inevitable as many once hopeful countries became violent bloodbaths. However, what we did realize, is that when people feel that they have nothing left to lose, and no future ahead of them, their human instinct is to come together, and give every last effort to wrest the power from those who robbed it from them.

This brings us to Occupy Wall Street.

On September 17th, known by its revolutionary title #Sept17 or the US Day of Rage, hundreds of Americans came to New York City, vowing to occupy and sleep on the sidewalks of Wall Street in a massive protest against financial terrorism and the corporate takeover of politics. Although Wall Street itself was blocked off by the New York Police Department, protestors found the nearby Zuccotti Park, now renamed Liberty Plaza and home to almost five hundred protestors who regularly sleep there, along with thousands of others who come between work and other commitments in solidarity.

The mainstream media didn't take it seriously at first. However, several Tunisians wished the American protestors luck through twitter, hashtagging #Sept17, #OccupyWallStreet, and #SidiBouزيد towards a hopeful "American Spring."

At first the numbers were small; between 1,000 and 2,000 protestors took to the streets on

September 17th, and around 400 proceeded to stay the night and regularly occupy Liberty Plaza. One week later, displays of police brutality at the first major march began to draw both civilian and media attention towards the protests. One week after that, a mass arrest of over 700 protestors on the Brooklyn Bridge garnered even more attention and curiosity towards the occupation. On Wednesday, several unions across New York City officially declared their support for the movement, as public and private universities across the city organized walkouts backing the protest, resulting in over 20,000 marching through downtown Manhattan.

Overwhelmingly, the protestors—whether they are union workers, students, retirees, or simply standing in solidarity—say that they are there because they are the ninety-nine percent, living in a system that is rigged only to serve the top one percent.

On Wednesday, chants of “We Are the 99%” and “A People United Will Never Be Defeated” echoed throughout lower Manhattan.

Like the Tunisian and Egyptian protestors, many of “the ninety-nine percent” feel that they have no foreseeable future—and nothing left to lose. They have been laid off, while watching the CEOs of their companies avoid paying taxes and pocket several times their former salary. They are unemployed with no job in sight, and their unemployment ran out many months ago. They are victims of predatory lending—drowning in student debt, and unable to find a job with an adequate salary to pay them off and avoid default. They are the victims of corporate greed and financial terrorism—our version of corrupt, kleptocratic dictatorships that we hope to overthrow.

New York City is not Sidi Bouzid, and Liberty Plaza is not Tahrir Square, but many Americans are economically and psychologically closer to Mohammad Bouazizi than we would like to think.

Inspired by a global movement, they are ready to fight back.

It is unclear how to change this system—lofty demands of abolishing corporate personhood and regulating mortgage and student loans would only be the beginning. However, as in Tunisia, it is not demands or a refined agenda that is pushing people into the streets—it is rage, desperation, and the fact that this system is unsustainable for the vast majority of Americans.

Perhaps this rage will materialize into a list of strategic, attainable demands. Perhaps it will not. Right now, however, the point of the protests is not an immediate and complete overhaul of the current system. The point is to mobilize the ninety-nine percent, hoping that enough have been marginalized en masse to mobilize en masse against a corrupt and unsustainable system that privileges the top one percent at their expense.

If there is any justice left in this world, this system—somehow, some way—will be overthrown.

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