

Organized Labour and the Occupations Movement

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In-depth Report: [OCCUPY WALL STREET](#)

The Occupy Wall Street (OWS) phenomenon has achieved a stature and longevity unrivaled by recent demonstrations in the United States, and has understandably struck a chord with a wide range of people dismayed by the barbaric level of inequality that is the defining feature of contemporary American society. As the small encampment in lower Manhattan has swelled and spread to cities across the country, the rallying cry of the "99%" has at least momentarily introduced the mainstream discourse to a conception of class, which is usually missing from the political theater showcased on corporate news outlets. The risks posed by an over-reliance on mass media coverage notwithstanding, the organizers' ability to attract the public eye has been impressive and is an encouraging reminder that most people are yearning for a political vision that resonates with the material anxieties they feel. As the most brutal economic crisis in over a generation grinds on for the third consecutive year, perhaps most surprising is that it has taken so long for such an upsurge to occur.



Chicago police arrest members of National Nurses United, and tear down their first aid tent at Occupy Chicago. [Photo: [National United Nurses](#).]

Staying Power?

However, while an inner-core of participants may remain for months, with time the size of the direct occupations will likely wane and media attention will slowly gravitate to more profitable ventures. The travesty that unfolded in Wisconsin over the past ten months should serve as a painful reminder of that inevitability. And though the moment's political salience may briefly persist, it will be fleeting unless anchored in something more durable than a demonstration, throwing into sharp relief the need for a level of organization that can sustain and expand upon the Occupy energy.

The slogan of the "99%" may have tremendous rhetorical currency, but history shows that there is no shortcut to the long-term, painstaking task of generating a real movement: meeting people where they are, building trust and struggling with them over the issues they're worried about, connecting those anxieties to a coherent political program, and consolidating those efforts into a force to be reckoned with. While many of the Occupy working groups may be beginning this project, most of the millions who constitute the "99%" have been unable or unwilling to participate and need to be reached by some other means. OWS can be an opportunity to start this process, but it is not a spark that will spread on its own.

Years of Struggle

Here the civil rights movement, which is often invoked in relation to OWS, is instructive. Unmentioned in most grade school lore on the subject, the struggle for racial justice grew out of a deeply rooted organizational apparatus that had been constructed through decades of diligent labour and community organizing. Rosa Parks was a seasoned activist who had been trained at the legendary leftist organizing academy, the [Highlander Folk School](#), and Martin Luther King Jr. owes his beginnings to veteran trade unionists who recruited him. No miracles initiated this historic fight; it was planned and executed by individuals and their organizations who through years of struggle in pursuit of concrete demands had cultivated powerful bases of support in specific communities.

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Only through following this long-term organizing approach can OWS begin to harness the anger and energy it has made visible and translate it into a dynamic, class-conscious movement. And only the labour movement has the experience and organizational capacity to take on the challenge. Weakened though they may be, and with all the limitations of their sedentary bureaucracies, unions are still the most democratic membership organizations in the United States, with established activists and infrastructures in cities across the country that possess the practical skills and resources necessary to carry on the fight, particularly when it becomes less visibly exciting. Though union density has precipitously declined in recent decades, still today millions of people have experienced real improvements in their lives through workplace struggles led by existing labour unions, a much larger and more representative cross-section of the population than is likely to turn out at any "Occupy" event.

It's important to remember that historically, organized labour has been the *most* effective vehicle for challenging economic inequality; it is an empirical reality that when unions are weak wealth concentrates in the hands of the few, and when they're strong it is at least a bit more evenly distributed. A recent [study](#) demonstrated that between 1973 and 2007 private sector unionization decreased by over 75 per cent and inequality increased by 40 per cent. In this spirit, OWS might best be considered as an opportunity to push the mainstream labour movement toward a more aggressive organizing strategy and, hopefully, an alternative political vision.

Rank-and-file militants in a variety of unions have engaged in this grueling project for decades, with some successes and many setbacks, and perhaps the most encouraging feature of OWS is the space it might create for more work of this sort. However, an opportunity is only as valuable as the concrete steps taken to capitalize on it, and unless the strategic thinking needed to orient and initiate that process begins in earnest, this wave of activism will likely join the recent anti-globalization and immigrants' rights demonstrations in the annals of modern left history while neoliberalism continues its plunder unscathed.

A number of unions have taken up the OWS mantle and some inspiring labour-community partnerships have grown out of it. The New York City [Transport Workers Union](#) (TWU) Local

100 was an early supporter, and even [went to court](#) to prevent police from ordering union drivers to bus arrested demonstrators to jail. The [National Nurses United](#) (NNU), one of the most progressive and militant unions, has been present at occupations around the country administering flu shots and providing basic medical assistance. And the courageous art handlers of Teamsters Local 814 who have been locked-out of Sotheby's auction house – a quintessential symbol of the “1%” – have cultivated a remarkable level of solidarity with the New York occupation, turning out bus loads to their rallies and gaining international attention in the process.

These three examples represent elements of the most dynamic and forward-looking wing of an otherwise rather glacial labour establishment that always seems to be on the defensive. The best chance OWS has to become the kind of force necessary to win a more just society lies in following their lead. •

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