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| The USC4P&J Occasional Papers  are a series of ad hoc publications on the themes of peace and justice. The series comprises informal  essays, declarations, papers in progress, and talks or contributions to meetings and assemblies. |

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| English version of the invited talk given by **Lucas Alden**, in Italian, to the annual festival of the  Socialist political party CARC. (Alden is not affiliated with CARC.) The festival brought together activists from many diverse groups as well as the current Mayor of Naples, Luigi De Magistris. Naples, Italy – 7/29/2016 |

**Occupy Wall Street and its Ongoing Significance**

It is no exaggeration to say that there has been a real reawakening in the US in recent years of political consciousness and critique of power which both gave rise to the Occupy Movement and others such as BLM, but also in turn has since been inspired by Occupy. Occupy’s imagery of the “99% vs the 1%”punctured the popular lexicon from day 1 and remains to this day. This imagery’s introduction should not be underestimated, especially in the US, where there has been unrelenting ONE-SIDED class war on the part of the business class over the last century. The vast majority of the “working class” - a term disallowed and replaced in the US by the term “middle class” – has also been under another century old assault of an unrelenting nature which takes the form of media propaganda. Propaganda of the business class fed to us through mass, corporate media, and also governments, schools, churches, which led John Steinbeck, great author of the Grapes of Wrath (Furore) to conclude that even many communists considered themselves “temporarily embarrassed capitalists,” or author Ronald Wright to state that “Socialism never took root in America because the poor see themselves not as an exploited proletariat but as temporarily embarrassed millionaires.”

Indeed, the 99% imagery brought back into the popular discourse not only a political consciousness but importantly a CLASS consciousness on the part of the broader public not seen since the 1930s and the imagery evoked by Steinbeck in his novels on vagabond workers and labor strikes brought on by the Great Depression. Again this cannot be underestimated. With the global balance of power so extraordinarily tilted towards US military power, much of what can and must be changed hinges unfortunately on a greatly indoctrinated US public – and European public – coming out of its near century long hibernation and regaining this class consciousness. Occupy took nothing less than an extraordinary and historic step of breaking us all out of our stupor. And not only the stupor of the broad public. Pham Binh, author and socialist activist in the US, noted in a fine article in December of 2011 that, “OWS mobilized more workers and oppressed people in 4 weeks than the entire socialist left combined has in 4 decades.” All of us on the left who consider ourselves activists I believe would be wise to take careful consideration of this and face it going forward if we are interested in taking concrete steps to transforming consciousness and the economic system. If we’re going to change anything we can’t go on speaking amongst ourselves – we have to get it out into the public. And the good news now, thanks to Occupy, is that our message of fundamentally altering the economy and politics does not have to be compromised. The public is ready for it. Polls over the last two years, including Gallup and Yougov, show that millennials look upon socialism more favorably than capitalism – and that socialism has 51% favorability among the population as a whole. Socialism is also one of the most looked up words over the last few years. The Occupy movement frightened the establishment precisely because it hadn’t been put into motion or sustained by established fringe communist or socialist parties in the US. It was led by young working and middle class students and graduates who found themselves in debt servitude and no prospect of well-paid and fruitful work, meaning not only no healthcare but no future. It took a long time but a public – and to a lesser degree a European public – bought off after a century of consumerism had now finally come to understand that the vast majority of us were pawns in a game of financial manipulation and had now officially become a “precariat “ – a term now commonly used to define an entire class of people not only shackled into a lifetime of debt but now constrained to accept non-unionized low wage labor with no benefits and no future. Financial capital’s 50 year wet dream of transforming the global work force into a kind of neo-feudal bondage has finally provoked a reaction.

Those also showing up at Occupy on weekends over those few months were white middle class suburban families, pushing their kids in strollers. This frightened the establishment and consequently led to the federally coordinated destruction of the encampments in December of 2011. It may be easy to vilify and physically attack occupations carried out by supposed radical militant groups but when the corporate state knows how fragile its power is – and how Occupy’s popular appeal was gaining day by day – it had to be physically destroyed.

There were, to be sure, socialist and communists groups from the organized left which participated in Occupy. The movement’s nature however, in terms of its initiation, lack of hierarchy and “modified consensus” decision making process was unmistakably and deeply anarchist. This allowed it to keep the tactic and the movement as open as possible and attract more and more support. According to Louis Proyect, Marxist commentator and former Columbia University professor, the small organized left parties from democratic socialists to socialists to communists simply “saw it as an opportunity to pick up members,” and were “hamstrung by conceptions of ‘democratic centralism’ which entail caucusing beforehand and bloc voting to support the party line.” He added, “They’ve been trained for generations to see the mass movement (Occupy) as a sphere to operate in rather than an end in itself.” Proyect, and many others, maintain that left parties failed to develop organic ties to Occupy’s direct action, direct democracy, consensus and horizontalism.

The young well-informed organizers and supporters of Occupy neither saw any great representation from the major unions of AFL-CIO (though the unions praised the movement and provided a few speakers at rallies). Individuals with secure, high benefit and high paying jobs in these unions who are preoccupied with families were unwilling to risk arrest or firing by showing up. This unfortunately has been true of leftist movements since WW II.

I agree with Chomsky in that the most significant breakthrough of Occupy, not often recognized, is that it began to break through the appalling level of atomization which exists in US society, fostered by a century and a half of capitalists’ “divide and conquer strategy”. An alternative way of successfully organizing society is possible – and direly needed. We can form our own bonds outside any establishment structures and they can work. The US seriously lacks what sociologists call “secondary associations” – any group associations outside of the family. Occupy maintained food facilities, medical facilities, media outreach groups, community outreach groups, libraries, IT groups, funding systems, garbage collection and most importantly, the General Assembly at OWS.

Ok….BLM

While BLM is similar in composition to OWS in that it is made up mostly of working class youth and students, its immediate scope and objectives are infinitely more limited in nature: they’d like not to be killed by police for no valid reason. They wish to be respected as any decent human being should be.

It may be hard for some people in other nations, and even for many in the US, to comprehend that in 2016 African Americans are being forced to ask kindly not to be killed by police. The 2 sec version of their history in much of North America goes like this: In 400 years since being dragged over as slaves, the majority have had about 2 to 3 decades of relative “freedom.” After centuries of slavery they were subjugated to decades of fascist Jim Crow laws in the south after the civil war, when black life was essentially and effectively criminalized. This continued up to WW II when wartime industry needed cheap labor. From this point up till the 1970s, a large proportion of blacks, despite vicious, systemic racism, could get unionized jobs, buy a house, buy a car. When global capitalism was financialized in the 1970s, all of the western working class began a precipitous 40 year decline, particularly in the US with its already weak welfare state – and the population hit the hardest were African Americans, the weakest. While all of the working class have lost jobs to offshoring, have had wages stagnate or decline, have had benefits reduced or cut and have been forced to live on credit to get by even with now both parents working full time, black were thrown increasingly in prison. African Americans since emancipation have always been considered a superfluous population but never more so than in this last 40 year period. There are simply no jobs for them. This period has also seen the rise, consequently, of the prison-industrial complex where slavery has been reinstituted. An unemployed or vastly underemployed individual’s surplus or redundant labor, particularly that of black men, is now worth much more to society in prison. There they can generate $40 to 50 thousand annually for multi-nationals who collude with private prisons to exploit prison labor.(essentially returning to their original role in society as slaves providing a free work force to private capital). After the global capitalist crash in 2008, African Americans have been the sector of the population hit the hardest, losing 40 to 50% of their wealth.

As superfluous as ever, and as irrationally feared as ever, police do not hesitate to gun down blacks at routine traffic stops. When African American Eric Garner was strangled to death on the streets of NYC in the summer of 2014 his last words were, “I can’t breathe” – an unbelievably tragic yet poignant description of an entire minority population, an indeed a whole working class of all races whose tensions and frustrations have reached a tipping point because they cannot be squeezed anymore by a capitalism which is on the brink of imploding.

We on any part of the left interested in radically altering the nature of an economy which causes obscene inequality – in January of this year Oxfam reported that 62 people had as much wealth as the bottom half of the world population and 1% own more wealth than the rest of the world – which starts catastrophic wars for resources and global control, the destruction of the climate, exacerbates racial and national tensions and pits workers all over the world against each other in a neo-feudal race to the bottom, would do well to keep in mind that the original core idea at the root of socialism was that workers should control their own work and run their own workplaces collectively. I believe this is still just under the surface of people’s consciences, despite a century of a doctrinal system trying to drive it out of our heads. Factory girls – as they were called – at the dawn of industrialization in Massachusetts in 1836, said that those who work in the mills ought to own them. This was pre – Marx. The belief that wage labor was chattel slavery was such a popular belief in the 19th century that the Republican Party had it as one of its slogans around the time of Civil War. Until workplaces are taken over by workers and communities and democratized, we can expect more of the same. As mainstream American social philosopher John Dewey noted in 1931, until this happens, politics will remain “the shadow cast over society by big business. “ For democracy to work on a large scale it first needs to work on a small scale. Worker-run enterprises give people experience in democracy.

Occupy has opened up avenues not only for movements like BLM, Fight for 15, resistance to privatization of education, resistance to student debt and all debt peonage and to global trade deals and allowed for the enormously successful campaigns of Bernie Sanders and now Jill Stein, (the former, in particular, who could have never conceivably gained the traction without the consciousness which Occupy raised), it has also produced great popular interest in great thinkers like Gar Alperovitz and Richard Wolff, the latter a Marxist, both who have been preaching the same gospel for decades and decades yet have only had the exposure they’ve had since Occupy and its imagery of the 99% vs the 1%. They’re proponents of democratizing community wealth and workplaces and outline very freshly and concretely a post-capitalist future which we are in dire need of and which seems to be drawing nearer and nearer.