

# The Politics of Occupy Oakland - A Marxist Viewpoint

By  
*John Reimann*



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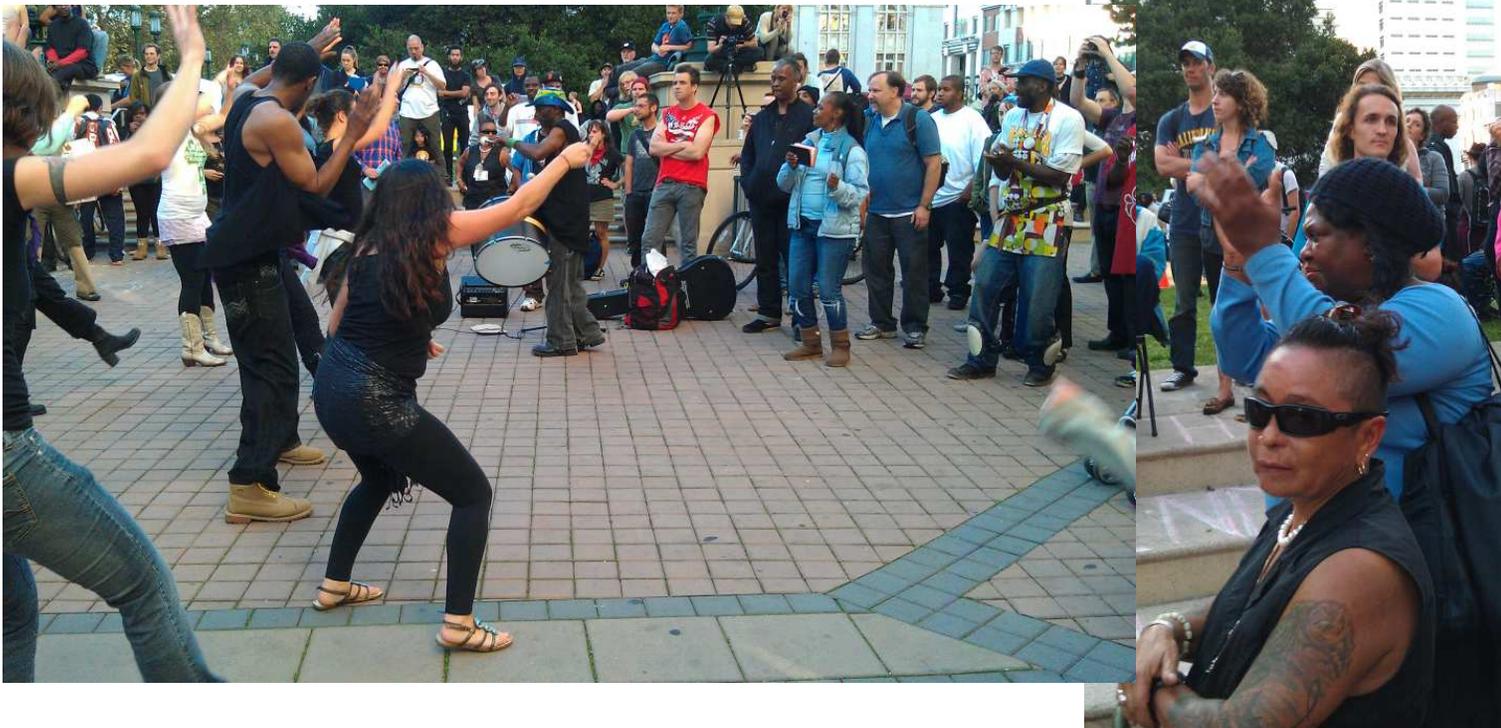
By  
John Reimann  
Feb. 1, 2012

*20 year old anarchists... aging hippies (and one or two Marxists), the homeless and the unemployed, a former union shop steward at the Oakland airport who was fired for leading a walkout and now spends most of his time hanging out in downtown Oakland, and also probably one or two police agents, one guy with the cutest little pit-bull puppy you've ever met -- this is Occupy Oakland....*

*What's happening seems to be this: the US is one of the sickest societies on Earth in my opinion.... I mean sick literally. Humans are by nature a collective animal. That's how we survived and flourished. But for decades we've been isolated from each other in the US. This has been directly connected with the absence of a mass political movement....*

*The occupation is bringing people together in the most healthy and natural way. That, in and of itself, is a... political accomplishment. It's not The Revolution nor is it a mass workers' movement, but it's a start in the right direction.*

*Which of us aging Marxists would have ever thought a movement would start like this?*  
Oct. 15, 2011



Over the last decades, Corporate America has fought a nearly one-sided class war in this country. This has been a war on two fronts: They have been attacking the wages and working conditions of US workers. They have cut jobs and cut social services. They have also put into place a series of new repressive laws in preparation for the time when a real fightback starts.

On the other hand, they have waged a propaganda offensive - a war of ideas. Only the “free” market and capitalism are possible, and this system is the “end of history” as one capitalist propagandist put it. The unions are dead and, in fact, the working class is dead, and it is futile to fight it. This has been their message.

Occupy Oakland (OO) has started to reverse much of this propaganda and this, in itself, is a major accomplishment. Together with the Occupy movement in general, it has shifted the political dialog in the US. Who, for instance, would have ever thought they would have heard the far-right politician Rick Perry call his Republican rival a “vulture

capitalist””? Occupy Oakland has also aroused a layer of Oakland workers and youth who have not been active up until now. With its message of mass defiance it has set a partial example for the mainstream labor movement and has energized many workers, including union members.

However, recently it has had a couple of set-backs and Occupy Oakland in general seems to be slowing down. It is important, therefore, to look at some of these set-backs and consider why they happened and what is needed to move forward. After all, no movement can continue purely on a series of dramatic actions; all movements also need clear ideas.

- **Most recently, Occupy Oakland failed in its bid to occupy a new space – the Kaiser auditorium.**

It was clear that the cops knew in advance that this was the target. Despite this, however, had there been the overwhelming numbers that we had on the day of the general strike, we could have overcome the police lines.

**Timeline of Events**

**Oct. 10, 2011:** *Indigenous People’s Day, also known as Columbus Day*, Ogawa Plaza is occupied by Occupy Oakland. Tents immediately set up. Over the following weeks, some 300 tents set up, a veritable tent city. Occupiers come from all walks of life, from the long-term homeless to students to West Oakland youth. Various conflicts rise and fall, but the people themselves are able to work them out. Hundreds of people are fed daily in the Occupy kitchen. Nightly meetings and many during the day also are held. A first aid station and a library are set up. As the occupation develops, some local businesses complain and the Oakland Chamber of Commerce starts to clamor for its removal. Ogawa Plaza is renamed Oscar Grant Plaza in memory of the

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### “Violence” vs. “Non-violence”

Within the Occupy movement, there has been an ongoing debate about “violence” vs. “non-violence”. This is not the real issue.

The advocates of “non-violence” are really calling for simple obedience to legality or, at best, to use passive, civil disobedience. No mass workers’ movement has ever succeeded when it confined itself to this straight-jacket. The great, militant strikes of the 1930s, for instance, physically blocked the scabs and the cops who tried to bring them in. This involved physical confrontation.

On the other hand, the other side thinks that it’s perfectly acceptable to engage in all sorts of random acting out.

The key issue is what tactics tend to inspire workers and tend to make them want to get involved? Simple passivity and legalism only tends to lead to defeat and discourages workers. On the other hand, random acts of violence and property destruction tend to be seen as futile and also drive workers away.

So Occupy Oakland needs to consider why we have not been able to actually increase our numbers and, instead, the numbers seem to be dwindling. Also, Occupy Oakland seems to be less able to mobilize a layer of Oakland working class youth and workers than it did before. Instead, a layer of middle class youth from the suburbs is getting involved in the protests, some of them seemingly more for the excitement than anything else.

### Program Needed

Instead of simply confining ourselves to a series of defiant and dramatic actions, Occupy Oakland can start real organizing campaigns. For instance, it could start a campaign to help workers in fast food to organize for better pay and conditions and for a union. It could also help City of Oakland workers organize within their union to fight against all layoffs and wage freezes. Another issue is that of home foreclosures.

In order to do this sort of organizing, though, in order to

effectively appeal to working class people, Occupy Oakland needs a program of goals or “demands” which meet the needs and consciousness of the workers Occupy Oakland is seeking to help organize. It also needs a clear strategy to present for how to accomplish those goals. In the case of the City workers, for instance, Occupy Oakland could call for an end of all layoffs, no cuts in benefits or pensions, and a \$5.00 per hour wage increase for city workers in addition to hiring additional workers to meet all the social service needs of Oakland residents. It would also have to explain where the money is (in the banks, and finance capital in general) and how to get it – by a

massive shut down of the entire city, including the Federal Building. Finally, it would have to explain why the union leadership (SEIU Local 1021) has to break with the Democrats, the team concept and its past refusal to organize such mass displays of workers’ power.

When the Oakland occupation started, it had enormous mass support from working class Oakland. However, without such a program and a strategy to take to the mass of working class people in Oakland, including the youth, Occupy Oakland is tending to simply define itself as becoming nothing but a series of disruptive actions. Inevitably, this will lose some of the support that it once had. In fact, the action on Saturday, January 28 showed this; the demographics overwhelmingly did not reflect those of Oakland itself.

To draw in and organize the masses of working class Oakland, though, clarity on the situation within the unions is needed.

- **It seems very possible**

### *Timeline (cont’d. from previous page)*

young black man murdered by the BART police.

Within a week of the Occupation’s start a meeting is held with representatives of the liberal Democratic group “Moveon.org” who had been planning a march on the plaza together with the local labor establishment. They had wanted to bring several politicians as speakers, but this is vetoed by Occupy representatives. After on-again, off-again negotiations, Moveon decides to hold the march and comply with Occupy’s demands. A welcoming speech from an Occupy speaker brings a militant and in fact revolutionary tone, calling on the labor movement to take a more confrontational approach like Occupy is doing and calls for an end to capitalism. The speech is well received by the occupiers but is met with silence by the officials.

### **October 25, 2011:**

A massive police raid ousts Occupy Oakland from Oscar Grant Plaza. Police come from many surrounding cities, all dressed in riot gear, complete with some sort of armored personnel carriers. In the protests that follow, the police shoot protester and Iraq War veteran Scot Olson in the head with a tear gas canister, fracturing his skull and nearly killing him. They then shoot bean bags and tear gas at those who come to Olson’s rescue.

A massive general assembly meets that night and tears down the chain link fence surrounding the plaza

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**that the contract between the ILWU and EGT in Longview, WA, will contain some important concessions. While the Occupy movement played an important role in forcing EGT to reenter negotiations with the ILWU, such possible concessions have to be considered.**

Some debates within OO's "Labor Outreach Committee" were revealing as far as the different views on how to relate to the mainstream unions.

### **Making Demands on Union Leaders**

A principle debate was over whether or not to place demands on the union officialdom. These demands included that the local labor leadership orchestrate a campaign aimed at the rank and file of the Operating Engineers union, explaining to them what their union leadership in Longview is doing and urging the members here to organize to raise

this issue within their union. (The officialdom of the mainstream unions have an absolute taboo against ever going to the rank and file of any other union on any issue. This is because the entire officialdom lives in perpetual dread of an informed and aroused rank and file.) The proposal also suggested that OO call on the officialdom to truly organize in a mass way to shut down the Port of Longview.

### **Operating Engineers**

The first part of this proposal – to call on the officialdom to organize a campaign against the actions of the Operating Engineers Union leadership -- was opposed on the grounds that "the fight is with EGT (the employer) in Longview, not with another union." This in effect justified the taboo mentioned above. Clearly, however, the role of the Operating Engineers leadership was critical in allowing EGT to try to weaken or break the ILWU and cannot be ignored. Moreover, by raising it in the way suggested, we would have started to raise the need for the rank and file to start to organize

### **The "Left" and the Union Officialdom**

In areas like the San Francisco Bay area, the left tends to have a certain presence within the labor movement, and therefore a wing of the union officialdom have adapted to them. This "progressive" wing tends to support "left" initiatives such as resolutions against a war, or for women's rights or against racism. They will often agree to speak at protests and rallies on these issues. This link with a layer of union officials gives the lefts who arrange this a certain authority within the movement. However, this comes at a cost:

In the first place, while these union officials may speak in opposition to some social policy such as a war, at the same time these officials support and help re-elect the very same politicians (usually Democrats) who put these policies into effect. This is never mentioned.

The other point is this: These same "progressive" union officials are refusing to organize a fight on the job to defend wages and working conditions, or to defend the jobs themselves. The "lefts" who ally themselves with these "progressive" officials never mention this and never organize within their unions to oppose these policies. This is the deal that has been worked out.. Socialists and others on the left should link up the broader social/political issues with the necessity for the unions to genuinely fight the attacks of the employers. They should be organizing rank and file caucuses to transform their unions into the fighting workers' organizations that they were built to be.

### **Timeline** *(cont'd. from previous page)*

and reoccupies it. They vote by a count of 1,484 in favor to 44 opposed with 76 abstaining to hold a general strike the following Wednesday. The only voiced opposition was from some who doubted that something like that could be organized in that short of a time period. The majority opinion, however, was that it was necessary to "strike while the iron is hot." Local Oakland radical rap artist Boots Riley explains that union members are looking for a source of inspiration and that Occupy Oakland can be that inspiration. Two long time union activists/supporters of the local mainstream "progressive" labor establishment are present and privately express doubts about the general strike unless the union officials call for it.

**Nov. 2, 2011:** In what will go down as a key moment in the history of the global Occupy movement, some 20-30,000 people descend on downtown Oakland. They completely block off the key intersection (14<sup>th</sup> and Broadway). Throughout the day, various marches are held on various places of business – banks, the "hip" shopping chain "Whole Foods" and others. Both the morning and the evening shifts at the Port of Oakland are picketed and the longshore workers refuse to cross the picket lines; the Port of Oakland is shut, in other words.

The union leaders, afraid to be left behind, bring some of their members to the event but do their best to keep them separated from the main body of

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independently of the officialdom.

**Union Leadership to Mobilize**

The second part of this proposal – to call on the officialdom to truly organize a genuine mass caravan to Longview - was opposed on two grounds: Some people said that passing this would “create antagonisms” between Occupy and the union officialdom. While we should not go out of our way to “create antagonisms” we should also recognize that those antagonisms already exist – between a large layer of the union membership and their officials. Up until now, the great bulk of the members have been somewhat demoralized and uninvolved. Occupy can help those members see more clearly what the exact problem is and how to organize to fight it.

**“Propaganda by the Deed”**

Another argument against this part of the proposal was that “the leadership isn’t going to mobilize the members; Occupy will.” While the Occupy movement should do everything it can to mobilize as many workers as possible, we can’t do so to the same effect as the official leadership. In almost all cases, that

is exactly why they are the official leadership – because they have the power to lead the union.

What lies behind this thinking is the view that all that need be done is to organize a series of dramatic, militant actions and the workers will follow. “The propaganda by the deed,” as one advocate of that view put it. (There is a long history behind this theory, and it has led to some dangerous conclusions.) Certainly today, more than ever, setting an example is needed. The partly successful attempt to block cars at the American Licorice strike, for example, not only inspired those workers; it also got grocery workers miles away buzzing. However, just like with the Longview struggle, an action like this organized by Occupy Oakland isn’t enough to prevent a setback. Even if the workers hadn’t voted to go back to work a few days later, the police would have eventually intervened.

The simple fact is that part of the task of any new, militant movement is to help workers organize, and any time workers start organizing the question of the mainstream unions comes up. It cannot be avoided. And with this question comes the issue of the role of the officialdom and the official

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the occupiers. Seeing the staying power of Occupy Oakland, in the weeks that follow, the left representatives of the union establishment start to find their way into the Occupy movement.

A grocery worker and his wife come to the strike. They support the occupation and the strike, but they are furious that their union officials sent a letter claiming to support it while they are “screwing” their members. Plans are made to start organizing amongst rank and file grocery workers. In a meeting with some union officials in the following days two business representatives report that their members have been “energized” and “electrified” by Occupy Oakland.

An article appears in the SF Chronicle quoting the executive secretary of the Alameda Central Labor Council as saying, “I absolutely see a bright future for

*the two movements working together, but there’s a lot of education that has to happen in the building of a movement. We have to take it one day at a time, listen and engage.”* The article continues to say: “Union leaders say they are content for now to watch the movement mature, and they’ve been pitching in behind the scenes all along. During Wednesday’s general strike in Oakland, for instance, members of the Service Employers International Union acted as peacemakers, calming down some of those who

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UAW President Bob King (r) shaking hands with GM CEO Dan Akerson. King is wearing a t-shirt with the UAW and GM logos together. He has commented, “The UAW seeks and expects a partnership with the employers based on mutual respect trust & common goals”

bodies – the official channels of the unions. Up until now, most on the left tend to relate to the unions strictly through these channels. But these bodies are almost always controlled by the officialdom, partly because in the main most members don't attend union meetings. So confining ourselves to relating to the unions through these bodies means simply dealing with the official leadership; it means equating "the unions" with the officialdom. On the other hand, the pretense that we can simply ignore the leadership is just that – a pretense.

### Organize Within the Unions

While we can and should inspire the membership by showing in action what the unions can accomplish, this doesn't negate the need to also help the

rank and file sit down and discuss what is wrong with their unions and how to organize to change them. (It's also why it was a mistake for some on the left to actively introduce representatives of the officialdom into the Occupy movement.) There are three main issues in general:

### "Team Concept"

First is the fact that the union leadership takes the position that the union has a common interest with "their" employers. This is the "team concept" – that workers and the employers are on the same team, competing with non-union workers. This inevitably leads to accepting cuts in wages and conditions in order to compete for who can work cheapest. But this negates the entire purpose of a union, which is to eliminate this competition.

### Mass Defiance

Second is the view of the union leadership that they must never defy the court orders, injunctions, etc. and mobilize masses to physically shut down any struck work place. In fact, it was exactly through this strategy that the unions were built back in the 1930s – through the plant occupations and mass pickets that physically confronted the scabs and the police.

### Democrats

Third is the view of the union leaders that they are bound at the hip to the Democratic Party. This tie to the Democrats helps cause the union leadership to confine its program – what it is fighting for and how it goes about fighting

*Timeline (cont'd. from previous page) wanted to break windows."* (<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2011/11/06/MN9H1LQQH7.DTL>)

In other words, along with the Oakland Chamber of Commerce and the Oakland corporate politicians, the union officials are framing the question of one of random "violence" vs. "non violence" as opposed to being willing to be co-opted into corporate, mainstream politics or not.

**November 14, 2011:** Police carry out a second raid on Oscar Grant Plaza, arresting the few who refuse to leave and confiscating all the tents and other equipment. The City then thoroughly hoses down the grassy park, transforming it into a sea of mud and making it uninhabitable. Another large protest follows later in the day, but re-occupation is not possible.

**November 19, 2011:** A joint Occupy/official labor march and rally is held. In the weeks leading up to this march, union leaders say they are content for now to watch the movement "mature", and they've been pitching in behind the scenes all along. Several secret meetings between some of the (unofficial) Occupy leaders and others new to Occupy are held with some of the top union officials. In one meeting of the committee planning for the march it is commented that they didn't want speakers who will conflict with the local union leadership. This is the majority view of this committee, which is largely composed of newcomers to Occupy Oakland.

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*When revolutionary socialists were elected to the Liverpool (England) City Council in 1984, they refused to cut jobs or pay and forced Prime Minister Thatcher to grant the city extra money.*

for it – to what is acceptable to the Democrats.

In opposing this link, though, it's necessary to propose an alternative. Simply saying "don't vote" or "ignore the politicians" is not an alternative. Like it or not, the fact is that the politicians have a lot of power. A movement can confine itself to putting pressure on these politicians and to protesting what they do, but if it lacks an alternative eventually it will end up supporting the least objectionable of the Democrats – the "lesser evil". This was what happened with the anti-Vietnam War movement, the Civil Rights movement and the unions also.

### **Workers' Representatives & a Mass Working Class People's Party**

The only realistic alternative is for this new movement to start putting forward its own candidates for office – workers' representatives on a workers' wage – and for a mass working class people's political party. This would not be "The Revolution" - it would not fully resolve the issues - because workers cannot seize power in society through the capitalist state and through capitalist elections. But one huge thing it would start to do is to completely change the political dialog.

During elections, different ideas are debated in public. Even those workers who don't vote are influenced

to some degree or another by this debate. And as the *Wall St. Journal* once wrote, "ideas matter". The problem is that the capitalist politicians and their parties have a monopoly on this debate now – to such an extent that it can hardly even be called a debate. The only issue under debate is how much should be taken away from workers and through what means (and how to disguise these attacks).

### **"Ideas Matter"**

The emergence of a mass working class people's party would transform this debate. It would tend to pose every question from the point of view of what is in the interest of working class people and how we can effect change. It would tend to push forward the fact that workers and the employers have no common interest. It would, in other words, tend to immensely heighten the class consciousness of workers in the United States.

### **Austerity and "Shared Sacrifice"**

This is unlikely to happen all at once. Where it is present, the Occupy movement can start to run candidates for local office. These candidates should start with complete opposition to all austerity or "shared sacrifice" measures – no wage cuts, no cuts in services, no layoffs. If and when the money runs out, then they will mobilize the mass

of workers in their area (and beyond) to shut down their city and the capital and demand the needed funds be provided.

### **Private Capital vs. Socialism**

But beyond this, we must recognize that privately held capital and those who hold it are

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**December 12, 2011:** The West Coast port shut down is carried off. Many ports along the coast are only partially shut down, but the Port of Oakland is completely shut down once again. Some longshore workers are apparently not happy with the shut down, but most seem to support it although almost none of them are involved in the shut down itself. While the shut down had originally been proposed by the local leadership of the Longshore union (ILWU Local 10), within a short time its International president came out in opposition, causing the local leadership to then back off also. The unofficial Occupy leadership which had been close to that local leadership was thus caught out on a limb and felt compelled to continue with the plans for the shut down. Considerable behind-the-scenes maneuvering with the local central labor council was also reported.

**December – January, 2011-12:** The "Labor Outreach Committee" becomes one of the main focal points for Occupy Oakland. It plans a caravan up to the port of Longview, Washington where a new grain shipment facility is being operated by EGT. This facility is not under ILWU contract, breaking a nearly century-long tradition of ILWU control over all the West Coast docks. At one point, ILWU members in Longview had stormed the facility, dumping tons of grain on the tracks there and cutting the brake lines of the railroad cars. Similar caravans are planned by

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*An Occupy Oakland general assembly - the idea that there are no leaders is not accurate.*

blackmailing the masses of workers and youth. Any demand for better pay or conditions, any opposition to job cuts, and any movement at all (including the Occupy movement) is met with threats to withdraw investment and cut even more jobs. This is not a hollow threat; it is real. The only answer to this is to start with complete opposition to reliance on the “free” market and private capital – for a crash public works program run by the workers and the communities themselves. And ultimately, the only way to really achieve this is to take the commanding heights of the economy under public ownership and democratically plan the economy under workers’ control and management. In other words, socialism.

### “No Leaders?”

How can such changes be discussed and decisions made? How can they be implemented?

Officially, Occupy Oakland has no leaders and no representatives. Officially, the general assembly makes all decisions. In fact, it doesn’t work that way.

Different committees are supposed to be responsible for planning different aspect of Occupy Oakland. Often, however, the plans that are made in the committee are changed afterwards. Within Occupy Oakland, a grouping of what has been called “insurrectionary anarchists” have played an important role. These comrades have contributed a lot. They were crucial in the first month or so in preventing Occupy Oakland from falling into mere reformism and keeping its defiant attitude at the core. They played a key role in warding off the influence of the liberal Democrats. However, they tended to do this in part by making decisions within their own circle and then seeing to it that these decisions were carried out. This method meant a lack of full discussion and debate. It meant that the participants in the movement were unable to really fully take part in making decisions based on being clear about the politics

involved.

In the early stages, a certain amount of such self-appointed leadership is often inevitable and can even help. Now, it is becoming an absolute hindrance. These comrades are not considering the mind set of the masses of Oakland working class people enough. They tend to operate simply on their own mind set, their own consciousness. They are able to continue because there is almost no democratic check on them.

Instead of this, there should be a clear leadership elected. This would be based on what different elements stand for and that leadership would be recallable at any time. In this way, a more open discussion and debate would develop around what is the way forward for Occupy Oakland and for the working class movement in general.

Without such an open debate, and without linking up to the masses of working class people in Oakland, Occupy Oakland runs the risk of marginalizing itself and eventually withering and dying. Whatever course it takes, however, Occupy Oakland and the Occupy movement in general is the warning of a far wider movement yet to come. As with Occupy, that wider movement will ultimately rise or fall, it will live or die, based on bold, defiant action and clear ideas. First and foremost must be opposition to capitalism itself.

### Conclusion

To move ahead now, Occupy Oakland needs to start to systematically reach out to Oakland’s working class people. This doesn’t mean simply trying to involve them in actions planned by Occupy Oakland. Instead it means going to them with the issues they feel – whether it be low wages and poor working conditions of fast food workers, wage freezes and layoffs of City workers, or home foreclosures of all working class people in Oakland. It means bringing the message of mass defiance to any

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Occupy Portland and Occupy Seattle, with the plan being to arrive there whenever the first ship arrives to be loaded.

As the ship nears, tremendous pressure is mounted by the Washington state governor, the local sheriff and chief of police, for the ILWU and EGT to arrive at a deal. Such a deal appears to have been reached, although the exact nature of the deal is kept a closely guarded secret. It seems, however, that compromises may have been made by the International union leadership over union jurisdiction, overtime and other issues. However, this is by no means certain. The caravans are postponed.

### **January 28-29, 2012:**

An Occupy Oakland “festival” and move-in is planned for this weekend, with the move in target to be the privatized and closed down Oakland auditorium. Although officially the target is kept secret, it is clear that the police knew in advance and they form a ring around the building. Some 2-3,000 marchers march on the building with some clashing with the cops. Clashes continue into the night, with the police eventually “kettling” hundreds of the marchers. Some escape as workers at the YMCA, against which the marchers were trapped, open the doors and allow some to escape a back way. Close of 400 are arrested, however.

The demographics of these protests continues to shift away from those of the people of Oakland, who are  
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campaigns around these issues. Occupy Oakland also cannot ignore electoral politics. Like it or not, these elected officials have real power in their hands, and it is a mistake to confine ourselves to simply pressuring them or protesting their actions.

In any arena, however, if it is true to its anti-establishment origins, Occupy Oakland will come into direct conflict with the hierarchy of the mainstream unions. This hierarchy is one of the main barriers to a mass workers' movement in this country and no radical, working-class based movement can ignore them. The question is how to pose an alternative.

#### **Suggested Program for the Occupy movement in Oakland and nation-wide:**

- No cuts in education or any other public services; no layoffs. Provide all the services working class people need and hire accordingly.
- For a crash public works program to build housing and infrastructure, with all jobs to be union jobs with full union pay and benefits.
- For a guaranteed job for all and a \$20 per hour minimum wage and union rights for all workers.
- For a massive and free public transit system.
- End police brutality and repression; for worker committees of public safety made up of the residents and workers in each community.
- Free Bradley Manning and all political prisoners; end state torture including solitary confinement, waterboarding, etc.
- Defend the environment; for a crash program to develop safe, clean alternatives to fossil fuel and to end pollution.
- End all US foreign wars and military attacks.
- End racism, sexism,

homophobia and all forms of special oppression and division within the working class.

- Full citizen rights for all those who live and work in the United States.
- Full citizen rights, including voting rights, for all those under court supervision and for ex-felons.
- For direct links between workers throughout the world;

for internationalism in deeds, not just words.

- For an end to an economy based private profit and the anarchy of the "free" market; for socialism based on public ownership of the commanding heights of the economy and production planned under the democratic control and management of workers themselves.

## **What is a Revolutionary Situation?**

*Note: The following piece was written for Viewpointonline.net and is relevant to these issues.*

The world today is entering a period of revolution. We see it in Northern Africa, in the continuous uprisings of workers in China, and in the mass strikes and uprisings in Greece and other EU nations. Such periods are not unique; there were revolutionary periods in the past, such as that period opened up by the American Revolution, or the period of the colonial revolutions following WW II.

### **Regime Change**

However, as the ongoing revolutionary wave in Egypt and the revolution in Tunisia show, not all revolutions result in the fundamental change that their participants seek.

All regimes establish a means of transferring power from one individual to another. Even the one person rule of North Korea had such a means; power was simply inherited by the son of the deceased ruler, or at least this is the intent. At times, however, a regime can be so weakened, its base so narrow, that the direct intervention of masses of people becomes possible, and power is transferred outside of the pre-arranged means – or so it seems.

This is what happened in Tunisia and Egypt. Those who came to power did so by riding the crest of a mass uprising, rather than through constitutional means.

### **State Apparatus and Relations of Production**

However, power does not reside in the hands of one individual head of state alone. He or she must rest on a government bureaucracy which includes the police, the judicial system, the military, etc. In addition to this apparatus of direct repression, there are all sorts of other indispensable wings of any regime, such as a wing to collect taxes, for which all sorts of record keeping is also necessary. In the capitalist world, these bureaucracies do not exist in isolation from the capitalist class. The leading military tops are directly tied in with them by a thousand threads, including social ties, positions that will be open to them after retirement from the military, etc. The same is true for the judges, and heads of the different bureaucracies. This influence then filters

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overwhelmingly working class people of color.

down through every department through opportunities for promotion – or disciplining or firing in the case of rebellious members of the bureaucracy. A most blatant example of this connection occurred recently in New York City. There, right during the height of the Occupy Wall St. movement, JP Morgan bank made a \$4.6 million donation to the New York City Police Department. It is no coincidence that within days the NYPD were attacking the protesters and that the “white shirts” - the upper echelon officers - were the most blatantly brutal towards the protesters.

So as long as these government bureaucracies remain in place, so long as only the faces at the top change, the revolution is incomplete. But for the entire state apparatus to be overturned, the class upon which it rests must also be removed from power. And for this, the relations that exist in producing the goods in society must also be revolutionized. In other words, in the capitalist world private ownership of the means of production must be eliminated.

### **Revolutionary Situation – Objective Factors**

This, of course, is not an every day event. The possibility for this to occur rarely arises. What are the conditions which make this possible? Lenin explained that there are three objective conditions necessary.

First, there must be such a massive crisis that the capitalist class can find no way out. Such a crisis can be an economic crisis, but it is not necessarily so. In the classic case of the Russian Revolution, it was a general social crisis which was brought to a head by World War I that brought about this situation. In such crises, all attempted solutions will be futile for the capitalist class, but that doesn't mean it gives up. Instead, the class becomes divided. It cannot unite around a common strategy because no successful strategy exists.

Some wings of the capitalist class will seek resolution through appeasing the working class. Other wings, however, will correctly point out that appeasement will only whet the workers' appetite for more power; it will only increase the workers' confidence. In the eyes of this wing, direct brutal repression is the solution. To this, the former wing will point out that their control over the repressive apparatus of the state is shaky at best and that any attempt to crush the working class will result in total loss of such control.

Back and forth they will argue, with this debate breaking out in the open and different capitalist politicians and political parties denouncing each other in the strongest terms. This open debate and these denunciations will only heighten the crisis.

### **“Petit Bourgeoisie”**

Such a crisis, combined with the turmoil in the ruling class,

throws the “middle class” - the small business owners, land owning farmers, etc. into turmoil. Lacking any real power themselves, they desperately seek a source of power outside their own class.

### **Working Class**

And what about the working class majority – the “proletariat”? All the years – decades and centuries - of accumulated anger start to find a way to burst to the surface. Desperate to resolve the crisis, and sensing the mortal weakness of its enemy – the capitalist class – the working class is united and ready to make the greatest sacrifices in order to resolve the crisis.

This class, the one true revolutionary class in society, is also casting about, seeking a solution, but also starting to get a sense of its true power and of its historic destiny.

### **Workers' Councils**

Inevitably in the course of such mass struggles, workers will develop organs to coordinate the struggle – committees of struggle they can be called. Or workers' councils. These committees or councils will tend to take on increased power in society. For instance, during the Seattle general strike of 1919, the general strike committee went beyond simply organizing the strike. It also decided which vital businesses – such as delivery of milk and medicines – could continue to operate. In other words, for a brief moment it started to take on the task of running society.

The committees of struggle, workers' councils, start to crowd out the functions of the state apparatus. Gradually and in an uneven fashion, the awareness of this and its implications dawns on the working class. The necessity of developing these councils as a new state – a workers' state – and crushing the old capitalist state starts to become the task of the hour. But will the masses of workers become conscious of this in time?

### **Limited Time**

These three conditions are brought about by the laws of motion of capitalism itself. Rare as they are, revolutionary situations can be compared to earthquakes, which arise by the laws of nature. No force on earth can prevent such situations from occurring from time to time.

Given indefinite time, and learning from its own experiences in the crisis, the workers would find the strategy and tactics to seize power. However, that is exactly the point – such a crisis cannot last indefinitely. Within a fairly short period of time it must be resolved one way or another. If the working class cannot find the road to power quickly enough, then large layers of that class will become demoralized. Likewise, the “middle class” - the petit bourgeoisie – will tend to look more decisively towards the capitalist class as their savior. Under these conditions, then, direct brutal repression – a counter revolution - becomes

the order of the day.

### **“Subjective” Factor**

This leads to the question of the fourth factor necessary for a successful revolution – the “subjective” factor. It is considered to be a “subjective” factor because it does not develop simply due to the laws of motion of capitalism; it requires the subjective will of workers and the allies of the working class themselves. In physics, quantum mechanics explains that in certain situations, certain outcomes are possible, but there is no way to predict which among those possible outcomes will occur. In the laws of motion of the class struggle, a similar process can be seen.

What is required is that the most conscious and most determined layer of the working class be *organized* amongst themselves and along with their revolutionary allies outside the working class (the youth, etc.) This requires an organization, a revolutionary leadership, or a revolutionary party. There is no other means through which this layer of the class can exert its influence on the working class as a whole. Lacking such a revolutionary leadership – such a *party* – this layer of the class will become somewhat fragmented and unable to systematically act and exert its influence. As a result, some layers of this sector of the class will start to become confused and demoralized.

History has proven that such a revolutionary leadership cannot just arise on the spur of the moment. It takes time for it to develop, for it to learn how to organize and for wider layers of the working class – and in fact of the middle class – to develop confidence in it.

History is full of tragedies where a revolutionary situation existed but this fourth factor, the subjective factor, was lacking. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) just such a situation existed. In Barcelona, the working class made a desperate attempt to once and for all resolve that revolutionary crisis. Lacking such a revolutionary leadership on a mass scale, they were crushed and the counter revolution went on to victory in the person of Franco. In Chile in the early 1970s a revolutionary situation existed and the working class was capable of seizing power many times over. Again, that fourth factor was lacking and the result was the military coup of Pinochet in 1973. Once more, in Iran a revolutionary situation existed when the Shah was overthrown in 1979. Again, lacking the fourth factor, the revolutionary leadership, the result was the rise

### ***About the Author***

John Reimann is a retired carpenter who has lived in Oakland for over 40 years. He was a 30 year member of the carpenters’ union, was active in that union and always opposed the policies of the union leadership. He led the 1999 San Francisco Bay area carpenters wildcat strike and was expelled from the union by the International for this strike (as well as for his previous history). He is presently a member of the Industrial Workers of the World. He has been an active participant and supporter of Occupy Oakland from its very start. He is the author of several other pamphlets including “What Happened to Our Unions?”, “The Apartheid State - The Rise of Zionism and the State of Israel,” and others on the capitalist economic crisis and the environmental crisis. He can be contacted at 1999wildcat@gmail.com. Also see: [www.worldwidesocialist.net/org](http://www.worldwidesocialist.net/org)

to power of the counter revolutionary mullahs.

### **General Process**

A true revolutionary leadership, really rooted in a significant layer of the working class, does not develop overnight. Nor does it develop in a vacuum. As the workers’ movement rises, it will tend to seek to unite beyond just the work place. Such unity tends to take the form of a mass workers’ party, a party in which and through which all issues can be posed from the class point of view. Whether it be the issue of housing, of state repression, or of the environment and global warming/climate disruption – all these issues are to be taken up by the working class and solutions from the point of view of that class can be posed through such a mass party. (Note: In the United States, some revolutionaries think that the working class can be organized strictly through the unions. They neglect to consider that workers have to and have organized far beyond the work place.)

Of course, all sorts of opportunists and charlatans will also find a base in such a party. There will also be layers of the working class who are less clear and determined. These factors combined mean that there will be debates and struggle within the party. Connected with this process, a more clear-headed and determined wing will develop. Ultimately, such a wing will have to have independence from the more reformist and opportunist wings. However, the point is that a revolutionary leadership is very unlikely to develop outside of the process of a mass workers’ party and certainly won’t develop outside of the process of a renewal of struggle of the working class in general.

### **Working Class More Powerful Than Ever**

Today, on a world scale, the working class is more powerful than ever before. It is the majority of the world population. Contained within its collective consciousness is the memory and the knowledge that springs from the memory of the lessons of world history. It is also today more globally aware than ever. This has several consequences. One is that revolutionary situations can last longer than they did in the past, because of the power of the working class. Another consequence is that it is far easier for that more conscious and determined layer of the working class to organize and spread its influence.

It still requires a conscious and systematic effort, however.