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Occupation Nation Goes to Washington

Nathan Schneider | October 6, 2011

Wall Street is on notice. Since September 17, protesters have occupied a nearby park and have been protesting along the Financial District's sidewalks and around the police barricades that surround the Stock Exchange, clogging up the morning commute with chants of "We! Are! The 99 Percent!" On Wednesday, as many as 10,000 occupiers, union members, students and fed-up others marched downtown together. This latest threat that the neighborhood faces is not one of terrorism, or of another bubble bursting, but of a more moral kind of default, announced by those who no longer want to live in the kind of society that it represents. And among the growing number of people now occupying Zuccotti Park—which they've renamed Liberty Plaza, as it used to be called—no plans as yet have been made to leave.

Is Washington, DC, next?

Just as the uprising in Tunisia led to others in Egypt, Syria and Bahrain, the Wall Street occupation is sparking dozens like it around the country: in Chicago, Seattle, Los Angeles and Atlanta, and hundreds more. This protest is swelling into a full-fledged movement. It's reminding people that power, even corporate power, depends on the consent of the governed, and that injustice can be resisted by strategic, coordinated action. Probably the most promising of these is the campaign to begin an occupation at Freedom Plaza in Washington on October 6—a decade after the war in Afghanistan began. A group of seasoned activists has been planning it for months already, since before the Wall Street occupation was even proposed by *Adbusters*. And like those in Liberty Plaza, they are intent on staying as long as it takes to be heard.

Before taking to the streets, the October 6 group gained the support of such familiar mass-mobilizers as the Green Party and Veterans for Peace, as well as newer ones like Peaceful Uprising and US Uncut -- though they stress that this is a coalition of individuals above all. As individuals, they'll be having open discussions on Freedom Plaza about 15 "core issues," ranging from corporatism and militarism at the top on down to transportation.

Several of the October 6 organizers have been strolling around the Liberty Plaza encampment, watching, taking part and helping out. They have a bit of a leg up on some things that have confounded the younger Wall Street occupiers. One, Tarak Kauff, helped arrange a fiscal sponsor to handle the thousands of dollars in donations that have been coming to the plaza from around the world. Another, Code Pink founder Medea Benjamin, has helped train women for talking to the reporters who are always roving through the plaza for interviews. They're paying close attention to what's working and what isn't, and trading ideas with each other about what they should be sure to do differently in DC.

The organizers of October 6 have been trying hard to avoid the trappings typical of left-wing protests, just as those at Wall Street have, and they similarly want to see things unfold organically. But they've also thought through ahead of time a lot of the things that the Wall Street planners left to be worked out on the fly, or not at all: arranging for port-a-potties, securing a permit with the Park Police, and setting up a stage and a sound system. Key committees are already in place. More than \$30,000 has been raised.

Rather than the exuberance that is the driving force at Liberty Plaza, those in the October 6 group are working from experience. War is not an abstraction for many of them, for instance -- Thursday morning starts with a veterans' march. Then there's organizer Margaret Flowers, a pediatrician and a mother of three teenagers who fought for a single-payer healthcare bill during the recent Congressional battle. She came out feeling betrayed by a Democratic Party that, in her view, built its positions around insurance companies rather than the public good. She and her co-organizers think it's time for American democracy to get a nonviolent kick-start in the streets. While many of those at Liberty Plaza are still in youthful rebellion, Flowers is thinking more like a concerned parent.

While those who planned for September 17 were predominately under 30, most of those working on October 6 are grayed or graying. This doesn't, however, seem to divide them in any way other than style. A lot of those in Liberty Plaza learned their activism from their parents, and many of those now headed for DC say they're doing it for their kids. While the movements of the 1960s pitted the young against their elders, there seems to be a sense now that all are in it together, and that they need each other—the energy of the young, plus the know-how of those who've been around longer.

With new people coming to Liberty Plaza every day now by the hundreds, logistical tasks that before were just messy are approaching astronomical. But there is also a higher kind of order in the making as people of different ages, backgrounds and skill sets pitch in. Every day the plaza has new features: an ever-growing library, a system for washing dishes, an internal security team, a newspaper. As always, there's free food, first-aid, art and nightly meetings where anyone can participate. The occupiers are building a community that's a living contradiction to the corruption whose symbolic center is just a few blocks away on Wall Street.

One thing especially refreshing about Liberty Plaza, among students being interviewed by TV reporters and in the conversations going on around every corner, is the noticeable absence of talk about President Obama, or Iowa straw polls or super-committees. There's no patience for the candidates now grandstanding for corporate campaign contributions. Whether by lucidity or naïveté, the only politics worth the name is what happens from the bottom up.

And that's really what unites the Liberty and Freedom plazas most of all: the hope of creating a new basis for political organizing in this country, one that can oppose the overwhelming influence of corporate money and military hubris. The pithy, unified message that everyone expects from them might remain elusive, but maybe—as one occupation follows another—what these protesters are doing is more important than any particular demand they could announce: injecting the glimpse of a different world into the physical heart of the status quo, and making it spread.

There is something in the air. The Arabs had their spring, Europe had a turbulent summer and now the time has come for an American Autumn.

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