

USA: Occupy and Detroit's Crisis

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WHAT'S THE NEW center of gravity on the political landscape? Author Dan La Botz has provocatively remarked that Occupy Oakland's November 2 shutdown of the Port of Oakland — one of the largest recent labor actions — was initiated from outside union structures. Earlier, in New York City, on the morning Mayor Bloomberg dispatched police to expel Occupiers from Liberty Park, 5,000 people — many city workers, transit workers and teachers — turned out, forcing him to back off. TWU Local 100 endorsed Occupy Wall Street early on, but their members were present from day one.

Pushed by its membership, organized labor has been drawn into the country's Occupations in complex ways. Here in Detroit, labor organized a march from the riverside labor monument to the occupied park, bringing food, blankets and checks. In the broadest sense, these actions, coloring outside the lines (or drawing new lines) offer new initiatives for labor/community action.

Shortly before Thanksgiving the Detroit encampment was dismantled, peacefully, after getting a one week extension to transition out of the park. The next phase has begun, "occupying" and moreover defending the homes of those about to be foreclosed.

On December 6 more than 100 supporters gathered in front of Kyra Williams' home on the east side. She had been "renting to purchase," but after the bank foreclosed on the landlord two years ago she received an eviction notice. Originally designed as a rally in support of her fight to remain in the home and negotiate with the bank, the rally became celebratory as Williams' attorney, Vanessa Fluker, announced the bank's agreement to work with her.

In planning this action, Occupy Detroit worked with other organizations, including Moratorium Now! and People Before Banks, a coalition backed by Southeast Michigan Jobs with Justice and the UAW. Following the rally, Occupy Detroit held its General Assembly in front of the Williams house.

There was more national media attention around another foreclosure that same day, in Southgate, a working-class suburb south of the city. In that case, the Henry family became unable to continue making mortgage payments when Debbie Henry became disabled and was unable to continue working. Rob and Debbie Henry were initially able to modify their loan, but were subsequently counseled to sign an agreement to move out January 2. Now they want to fight their eviction and are clear about asking for support.

One of the first Occupy Detroit marches, on the Bank of America, resulted in the prevention of a foreclosure of another Detroit family — even though that hadn't been the march's direct aim.

The bank assumed the march was in support of a particular family who had been working with Moratorium Now! to keep their home. When the B of A management saw a few hundred noisy marchers on their doorstep they called the family's attorney and renegotiated the mortgage before the march ended.

The foreclosure defense strategy is obviously a strong one, particularly in Detroit where 40% of the buildings stand vacant. Even though directly supporting the handful of families unwilling to be

shamed into quietly leaving when the foreclosure order has been issued, these direct actions at both the banks and at the foreclosed homes challenge the banks' ability to evict families and destabilize communities.

Foreclosure defense has the potential to change the debate on income/power inequality. It also reveals the role government agencies play in supporting the banks rather than the community.

Occupy Detroit, along with other occupations around the state, still faces the question of how to build political action outside of electoral politics. The question is especially relevant given that Occupy is truly a coalition, including newly radicalized youth, anarchists, revolutionaries and supporters of the Democratic Party.

In addition, the Republican governor and legislature are the authors of recent draconian legislation. The horizontal structure of Occupy may complicate the quest for strategic direction.

The Statewide and City Context

Like a number of other Midwest states, Michigan is facing severe cutbacks. These are not just the result of the current economic crisis: Michigan has been losing jobs and its tax base for more than a decade. With aid to cities and townships cut by a third, more than 100 face deficits.

To add to the distress, Governor Rick Snyder and the legislature have enacted a series of laws to provide further tax breaks to the elite — supposedly so they will hire more workers — while enacting rules that throw families off welfare after four years — supposedly to give women the extra push necessary to get out and find a job. Legislators also lowered the weeks of unemployment and began taxing pensions.

But the crowning legislation of 2011 was the enactment of Public Act 4, which allows the government the right to appoint an Emergency Manager over a city, township or school district, with the power of a dictator, who can modify or tear up union contracts, privatize services, and sell off assets. So far the legislation has only been used in majority "minority" population, including Benton Harbor, Ecorse, Flint, Hamtramck, Highland Park, Pontiac and the Detroit and Inkster public schools.

With Detroit facing a \$45 million cash shortage next spring and a deficit of more than \$200 million, Mayor Bing proposed another round of union concessions and the layoff of another 1,000 city workers. The City Council countered with a suggestion that the layoffs needed to be in the range of 2,300. Then Governor Rick Snyder moved in and announced on December 2 that the state would begin a preliminary review of the city's finances, the first step toward the appointment of an emergency manager. If Detroit is taken over, 50% of all African Americans in Michigan will be living under the authority of unelected managers. Thousands of others will lose their rights too.

Currently more than 155,000 signatures have been gathered to put the bill on the 2012 ballot, with the hope of overturning the act. Meanwhile legislators in Lansing are already debating how to best nullify the referendum: Plan A is to challenge every petition, every signature in a costly war; Plan B is to bypass the signatures through new legislation.

Detroit's financial crisis may be indeed the most severe since the Cleveland bankruptcy of the 1970s.

The "B" word has been bandied about these parts in the last little while, and the city's prospects in the coming months are ominous. The resultant cut in already less than nominal services could provide Occupy a springboard if it can propose or represent an alternative. The other side of that opportunity is that the movement could be swallowed up in the negative narrative.

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P.S.

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