

USA: Occupy Portland Regroups

Sunday 29 January 2012, by [BRENNER Johanna](#), [RESNICK Bill](#) (Date first published: 1 January 2012).

EARLY ON A dark and freezing Monday morning, December 12, more than 800 people descended on terminals five and six at the Port of Portland. Having announced their intention to occupy and shut down the port, the demonstrators arrived to find that the Port of Portland management had beaten them to the punch and closed the two terminals over “safety concerns.”

More people came and went during the day, as pickets remained to ensure the terminals remained closed through what would have been the arrival of the second shift. At 5 pm about 400 demonstrators gathered at Terminal 4 and closed it down as well.

There was the usual Occupy chanting, drumming, dancing, and singing (a song sheet was passed out with ALL the radical verses of “Solidarity Forever”) as well as confusion and contention about whether to let trucks into the port, and whether or not to remain sitting down on the railroad tracks in front of terminal 5 (resolved by an on-the-spot General Assembly).

This action, taking place almost one month after Occupy Portland’s eviction, demonstrated that destroying an encampment has not yet, at least, destroyed the movement.

Movement Central in the Making

Occupy Portland began on October 6th when 10,000 people swarmed through the downtown streets, ignoring the terms of the march permit previously negotiated with the police, and after a march and rally, set up a large encampment. That initiated a continuous flow of political planning, education and consciousness raising, street action and calls for sweeping reforms in every system — politics, banking, health care, higher education, economic policies, environmental regulation, etc.

Occupy Portland’s profoundly productive first two months have created the potential for a new left to emerge as many organizations come together in mutual support around a powerful, small “d” democratic program. OP’s encampment became a self-governing community, filling every bit of space in two downtown parks and overflowing into a federal park across the street where an amphitheater was used for General Assemblies, meetings and performances.

Besides the tents and some shanties, the encampment featured booths for medical care; legal matters; logistics and maintenance/chores; food preparation serving 2,000 meals per day; KBOO (Pacifica-affiliated community radio) live streaming; an educational center with hourly workshops; a children’s center; a chess playing area; small tables for cooperative grass roots service organizations; and an information center for visitors and tourists. The essential thrust of the encampments was to portray a model community, organized in a democratic, horizontal structure.

OP’s food, welcoming stance and security did attract many people who were homeless, either permanently unhoused or recently discharged from jails and mental health facilities. OP created a volunteer group, including already integrated street people, to work with new entrants, explaining community standards and responsibilities.

Credible accounts describe how, within this highly nurturing atmosphere, a considerable number of people who entered the camp mumbling and unable to communicate became successfully

functioning community members, taking on chores and responsibilities and contributing to General Assemblies.

OP's General Assemblies — held every evening so that people with jobs and community supporters could attend — became the heart of a self governing community. While these were chaotic at the beginning, within a week facilitation improved and the GAs became more disciplined. Work groups developed proposals for political action that were discussed and decided upon at the GA.

At first, OP had a strange mix of politics — on the one hand, anger and outrage at the entire system of corporate economic and political power; on the other, relatively liberal solutions. But the left currents within OP quickly won support for more far-reaching proposals.

For example, the GA achieved consensus around not just reversing Citizens United (the Supreme Court ruling enabling unlimited money in politics) and ending “corporate personhood,” but supporting Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) in order to expand the space for more radical parties to contest elections. Portland's Occupiers then joined with Portland IRV advocates to meet with the local Charter Commission, a first step to putting IRV on the city ballot.

Discussions on the economic crisis began with liberal ideas like reversing the Bush tax cuts for the rich but, influenced by the working groups, the GA reached consensus on the creation of a state bank that would invest in local economic development, including worker-owned cooperatives and conversion to a green economy.

OP became Movement Central, with participation from the range of Portland left groups and others, beginning in the working groups, to develop proposals for joint action.

The GAs agreed on supporting a number of successful actions and marches, more spirited and radical with more comprehensive political goals, than any that had occurred before OP. These included a huge peace march, a big labor action targeting Verizon led by Jobs with Justice (JwJ) and SEIU; a Big Bank Day urging people to move their money to credit unions and community banks; a Portland State University walkout around tuition increases; and a tar sands protest with the Sierra Club, Rising Tide, and the Climate Justice Coalition.

All these actions, and many more, were five to ten times larger due to the excitement of OP.

After the Encampment, What Next?

On November 12, the camp was dismantled by the city under pressure from downtown business, the media, and the police who enthusiastically did the dirty work, mostly just pushing and shoving the inhabitants into the streets and with a few arrests. But OP did not miss a beat.

Attempts to reoccupy space have continued, although they have not been successful. The media tent is now housed in a church, while the GA meets three times a week, as does a newly organized spokescouncil to coordinate working groups and develop proposals to the GA. Both gather in an outdoor plaza downtown. Another church has opened its space for workshops and meetings, while also keeping safe people's belongings as they search for shelter.

Thus OP continues to initiate actions and lend support to actions organized by others. The November 17 day of action featured a sitdown and march that closed the Steel Bridge for several hours; a disruptive sit-in at the downtown Wells Fargo, protesting the bank's investment in a global company that runs immigration detention centers and has spent millions lobbying Congress for tougher anti-immigrant legislation; and leafleting at big bank branches in several neighborhoods.

A march and rally for single-payer health care followed on Saturday, November 19. The movement to stop foreclosures is ramping up with organizations forming to occupy abandoned buildings as well as helping people hold on to their homes.

Forces running the gamut of radical environmentalists, wobblies, horizontalists, fair trade organizers, Central America solidarity groups, JwJ activists, cooperative organizers, trade union militants, universal health care organizers, socialists, anarchists and other lefties are joined in a loose network working to expand OP's radical spirit.

For the moment OP remains a structure that fosters collaboration and support for a wide range of organizing and activities from "buy local for the holidays" to the December 12 effort to shut down the West Coast ports. Within that structure, the left has room to educate and organize.

In addition to new kinds of direct action, such as taking over abandoned buildings, OP is trying to develop beyond downtown through creating neighborhood assemblies that would feed into the downtown GA.

To be sure, Occupy Portland is still young and fragile. Like the alliance of Teamsters and Turtles that briefly formed in the Battle of Seattle also in November (in 1999), the Occupy movement could dissipate as groups and people pursue their own survival agendas. And the national election and its endless agony has begun, challenging the Occupy movement to "occupy" it without getting sucked into electoralism and lesser evilism.

But maybe the fragmentation and failures of the past won't repeat this time in this crisis. OP has created a context in which so many movements and struggles circulated, gained strength, radicalized, and came to work together — and Portland activists seem committed to continue that process.

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P.S.

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