

Unions, left-wing groups join Occupy Wall Street

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Upstaged organizations and celebs hope to lend support, advance their causes as protest becomes 'too big to ignore'; Working Families Party, Michael Moore, Coalition for the Homeless follow the crowd.

It's been a tough run lately for local unions and left-wing interest groups. Despite their usual rallies, lobbying and advocacy campaigns, they have failed to get an extension of the millionaire's tax and have been battered by layoffs, budget cuts and concession bargaining.

Meanwhile, a ragtag collection of no-name protesters is generating a media avalanche and worldwide buzz with a leaderless, ad hoc "occupancy" of Wall Street.

The city's experienced agitators have taken notice. They are preparing to join the Occupy Wall Street protest this week, sensing an opportunity to advance causes like the millionaire's tax, a labor-friendly contract for Verizon workers and mortgage modifications for distressed homeowners.

Their challenge is to tap into the electricity without taking away from the spontaneity and spirit that have brought the protest, now in its third week, international attention.

"We're not trying to grab the steering wheel or to control it," said Michael Kink, executive director of Strong Economy For All, a labor and community coalition fighting to extend the state income tax surcharge on high earners, among other goals. "We're looking to find common cause and support the effort. It's the right fight at the right time, and we want to be part of it."

A loose coalition of labor and community groups said last week that they will march from City Hall to Zuccotti Park on Wednesday, where they will join a protest that is threatening to turn their playbook upside down.

"It's a responsibility for the progressive organizations in town to show their support and connect Occupy Wall Street to some of the struggles that are real in the city today," said Jon Kest, executive director of New York Communities for Change, which is helping to organize the march. "They're speaking about issues we're trying to speak about."

Initial reluctance

Yet the city's established left wing did not initially embrace the protest, which began Sept. 17 and has consisted mostly of young people angry about income inequality, the growing influence of money on politics, and police brutality, among other issues.

"Nobody knew what to expect or what would happen," said Robert Master, legislative and political director of the Communications Workers of America and a co-chair of the Working Families Party.

Unions and community groups are now eager to jump on board. They are motivated by a sense of solidarity and a desire not to miss out on the movement's growing appeal, but undoubtedly by something else, too: embarrassment that a random assembly of young people using Twitter and Facebook has drawn attention to progressive causes in a way the organizations haven't been able to in years.

The protesters have transformed Zuccotti Park into a village of sorts, complete with a community kitchen, a library, a concert stage, an arts and crafts center, and a media hub. All of that has enabled them not just to sustain the action but also to build momentum, with celebrities Michael Moore, Susan Sarandon, Russell Simmons and Cornel West joining the action. The protest's growth essentially compelled the city's traditional rabble-rousers to follow the crowd.

"It's become too big to ignore," said one political consultant.

Some of the biggest players in organized labor are involved in planning for Wednesday's demonstration, either directly or through coalitions. The United Federation of Teachers, 32BJ SEIU, 1199 SEIU, Workers United, Transport Workers Union Local 100 and the Communications Workers of America are all expected to participate. The Working Families Party is helping to organize the march, and MoveOn.org is expected to mobilize its extensive online regional networks to drum up support.

"We're getting involved because the crisis was caused by the excesses of Wall Street, and the consequences have fallen hardest on workers," a spokesman for TWU Local 100 said.

Community groups including Make the Road New York, the Coalition for the Homeless, the Alliance for Quality Education and Community Voices Heard are also organizing for Wednesday's action, and the labor and community coalitions United New York and Strong Economy For All are helping to coordinate it.

Businesses targeted

The unions' backing could help the Occupy Wall Street protesters expand their ranks and shed the perception, fair or not, that they lack focus and a message. And unions could garner support for their own campaigns. Already, Occupy Wall Street protesters have joined with Teamsters at actions against Sotheby's, which has locked out art handlers for two months, and Verizon, which is in tense negotiations for a contract covering 45,000 workers.

"What's so great about it is they've managed to capture a feeling that's out there that decisions are being made that aren't helping 99% of society," said Jason Ide, president of Teamsters Local 814. "We are all being left out. It's something labor should have been saying for a long time."

Even with the city's new-wave activists and old-school leftists joining forces, it remains to be seen whether the protests will have a lasting impact.

"The challenge is, how do you transfer protest into power?" the CWA's Mr. Master said. "At the end of the day, you have to figure out a way to take this energy and turn it into legislation that really changes people's lives."

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P.S.

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