

“Occupy Wall Street” action - 700 arrested on Brooklyn Bridge after protest

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It all has the feel of a classic street protest with one exception: It’s unclear exactly what the demonstrators want.

“When all the bailout money was spent on bonuses and stuff everyone was outraged, but no one did anything because no one feels like they can,” protester Jesse Wilson, 22, said this week when asked to articulate the cause. “It’s time for us to come together to realize we are the masses, and we can make things happen.”

But he couldn’t say what, exactly, he wanted to happen. Handmade signs carried by some of the demonstrators Å “Less is More” and “Capitalism is evil” Å hardly make it clearer.

On Saturday, the group shut down part of the Brooklyn Bridge when they spilled onto the roadway from Manhattan in one of their many marches. Police arrested dozens while trying to clear the road and reopen for traffic.

But does it matter that the protest is vague?

Academics and longtime activists give varying opinions.

“A lot of this revolves around economic justice, who gets what in this society, who has a safety net, who doesn’t and how much corporate influence exists in Washington,” said Bill Dobbs, an activist involved in the 2004 demonstrations at the Republican National Convention, and many others.

Dobbs and others say the group’s lack of specificity serves a purpose because it invites outrage over a full spectrum of societal grievances. Indeed, some demonstrators say they are against Wall Street greed, others say they are protesting global warming and still others say they are protesting “the man.”

The modern protester also expects an immediate response, thanks in part to technology, said Gabriella Coleman, a New York University professor of media, culture and communication who has studied some of the groups affiliated with the protest.

“We are in a cultural moment where people think the dictator will topple tomorrow, after four days of protests, and also the media is going to jump to pay attention,” Coleman said.

There has been a growing swell of coverage in mainstream media, but there has been loud complaining the cause hasn’t been championed fast enough Å or in the way protesters want.

Newspapers, The Associated Press and television stations have covered the protests, and editorials have both poked fun and lauded the effort downtown. National Public Radio, which hasn’t aired stories, has fielded angry communiques demanding coverage.

“The recent protests on Wall Street did not involve large numbers of people, prominent people, a

great disruption or an especially clear objective,” Dick Meyer, executive editor for news, explained on NPR’s website.

But observers say the approach can be difficult for media – and the average person – to digest.

“You should have a clear and convincing message, and know who is going to deliver it,” said the Rev. Herbert Daughtry, a longtime civil rights activist who has participated in protests for decades. “One of the reasons to get attention is to deliver the message.”

Misinformation has added to the confusion. For instance, a rumor sprang up on Twitter that the New York Police Department wanted to use tear gas on protesters – a crowd-control tactic the department doesn’t use. The organizing group that calls itself Occupy Wall Street retracted the claim, one of several such retractions over the past several days. On Friday, it sent out a message that Radiohead would be performing in solidarity for the cause. (The band’s management said it wasn’t playing.)

Clashes with police have resulted in about 100 arrests. Most were for disorderly conduct. Many were the subject of homemade videos posted online.

One video surfaced of a group of girls shot with pepper spray by NYPD Deputy Inspector Anthony Bologna. The woman claimed they were abused and demanded the officer resign, and the video has been the subject of several news articles and commentary. Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly said internal affairs would look into whether Bologna acted improperly and has also said the video doesn’t show “tumultuous” behavior by the protesters. The Civilian Complaint Review Board is also investigating.

A group affiliated with protest, Anonymous, later posted Bologna’s personal details, including where his kids go to school. He has received threatening e-mails, said a police union spokesman, Roy Richter.

“Posting the information about a family police officer – that’s egregious and over the line,” Richter said.

Coleman explained the move was likely the work of one or two individuals not acting on behalf of the entire movement, since the handle Anonymous is not a collective group that makes decisions together on how to act.

“A tactic like that has been received anywhere from controversy to celebration, because someone took action to the police’s action,” she said.

A real estate firm that owns Zuccotti Park, the private plaza off Broadway occupied by the protesters, has expressed concerns about conditions there, saying in a statement that it hopes to work with the city to restore the park “to its intended purpose.” But it’s not clear whether legal action will be taken, and police say there are no plans to try to remove anyone.

“We see it as our job to make certain that people can demonstrate peacefully,” Kelly said.

Mostly, the protests have been peaceful, and the movement has shown no signs of losing steam. Celebrities like Michael Moore and Susan Sarandon even made recent stops downtown to encourage the group.

Seasoned activists said the ad-hoc protest could prove to be a training ground for future organizers of larger and more cohesive demonstrations, or motivate those on the sidelines to speak out against

injustices.

“You may not get much, or any of these things on the first go-around,” Daughtry said. “But it’s the long haul that matters.”

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* From the Associated Press and USA Today.