

Pushing Demands at OWS ? - A debate on Occupy Wall Street

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A DEBATE IS going on about whether Occupy Wall Street should adopt a list of demands. A number of people I know and respect have supported the Demands Working Group in New York and have called for the General Assembly to adopt their list. The draft includes great demands — there is nothing I've seen that I don't agree with, and I've worked hard for some of them for much of my life. Yet I keep thinking that pushing the list of demands is not the way to go right now.

First, I don't think the left that I tend to work with has done an adequate job of theorizing the state and how to relate to it. I think we have a good critique of the structural ways in which the state supports capitalism, and we've thought a lot about non-reformist versus reformist demands. I believe non-reformist reforms are not only possible, but necessary.

We, the left and social movements, actually won a lot of demands in the past century. But some of those demands were never even implemented, or were implemented poorly. Some of the demands were co-opted once passed. As I found in my living wage research, anti-sweatshop work and elsewhere : it takes one kind of power to get a law passed, and another kind to get it enforced. (We know this from our labor work as well — a contract is only as good as our ability to enforce it).

We as the left won space in the state (as well as in public institutions like universities and schools), and then often struggled mightily to maintain it and run it well. We faced opposition inside the state as the agencies we worked in were usually the ones underfunded or first cut in tough times. We didn't always know how to manage ourselves, each other, or our programs.

Then, when underfunded and poorly run, we sometimes further marginalized the people we meant to serve : welfare recipients, students of color, new immigrants. We alienated others who didn't have the money to get their needs met elsewhere and depended on the state for support : laid-off blue-collar workers, downsized middle managers, people struggling with a mortgage, people living in a high-crime area.

Do we have a good collective understanding of these failures ?

We fought ideological opposition that was growing quickly to take advantage of our weaknesses. While we found openings in the state to push our demands, capital found even greater openings and used those to crush us. They exploited our weaknesses and blamed it on the state itself, on the left, on "liberals," on the whole concept of collective and public space.

Do we have a reason to believe we will be more vigilant and effective in countering the right's attempts to capture the state ?

We push for institutions that take effort and time to run. We assert that people are capable of governing themselves, but then when people do not have the time because they work too much or commute too far, when they don't have the skills because they never learned them, when they don't have the energy because they feel cynical and demoralized, we didn't have great answers for how to

keep our projects up and running and democratic.

What Does Democracy Look Like ?

We chant, "Tell me what democracy looks like !" and respond, but do we actually know what it looks like ? I hate that chant because usually we are saying it while surrounded by barricades and police, and on the defensive. Yes, democracy is bringing large groups of people together to act collectively, but certainly it is more than that.

I'd like more discussion about these challenges before we rush into the next round of framing demands. I'd love a public jobs program, but I'd also love to know who will run it and how.

We know capitalism does not work well on a whole range of dimensions, and we know the world can do better. But we have also seen many supposed left models fail as well. And as far as I can tell, none of the models have done well at answering the questions of how to expand democratic self-rule, and self-governance.

Do we know how to govern ourselves within the 99%, acknowledging and dealing with all those divisions within the 99% that have historically divided our movements, understanding the way that racism and patriarchy, nationalism, and heteronormativity intersect with self-organization and self-rule ?

Second, I am just feeling humble about trying again what feels like a familiar left pattern : we frame demands (often through messy compromise, since someone's demand is always left out and we are forced to prioritize), coalesce our forces, look for leverage, build a campaign, debate about compromise, end up with something that doesn't look like we wanted in the first place, figure out how to regroup.

It seems that the model hasn't worked so well. Even where we have won, we seem to be losing the bigger picture. We've been winning small campaigns here and there but losing in terms of the material reality of everyday life for most people, and losing the hearts and minds of those who have hopes and dreams for another kind of world.

Finally, it seems to me that OWS has already put forward some demands, and is winning ! In New York they claimed a private space for the public. Here and elsewhere, they have asserted their right to protest and freedom of speech.

As my friend Catherine Sameh says, "Intentional or not, this act is more than symbolic. They have won back public space and they have fundamentally ruptured what seemed like intractable neoliberal ideology about public goods, the public good, the collective." They have demanded the right to create public and open community, to take care of one another, and have dialogue and debate about fundamental issues.

For me, the beauty of Occupy Wall Street is that it's pushed me into a new space where I have been asked to be patient and trusting, and where I focus more on process and less on immediate outcomes.

I don't want to lose this space or momentum, just like the rest of you pushing for demands. I just worry that we haven't learned enough yet from our own past, and that winning any demand without having sufficient movements and organizations to enforce it, and without a deeper understanding of democratic governance and the real and deep divisions within our 99%, could end up as a loss.

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