

OCCUPY YEAR II

## **In the US, after Frankenstorm: Struggles, new and old, emerge in Sandy's wake**

Sunday 9 December 2012, by [RUGH Peter](#) (Date first published: 26 November 2012).

A month after Frankenstorm Sandy struck [1], battle lines are beginning to be drawn in the wreckage along New York City's shores. The brewing struggles are taking shape amidst the popular relief effort that sprung up immediately after the storm, pitting organizers and thousands of newly-radicalized activists against the effects of ongoing crises in health care, housing and the environment. Alongside relief are the seeds of rebellion.

Veterans of the Occupy movement, calling themselves Occupy Sandy Relief [2], have been coordinating the delivery of basic necessities to those in need, filling a void where establishment first-responders — from city agencies to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Red Cross — have fallen short. Michael Premo, who began organizing with Occupy Sandy since the day of the storm, attributes the campaign's ability to spread far and wide [3] across the city to activists' commitment to developing relationships with organizations already embedded in neighborhoods where they operate.

"The focus from jump," Premo said, "has been how to identify local leadership in collaboration community structures like churches in order to build power citywide. Our lateral organizing structure has allowed us to be nimble in a really dynamic way, to spread out across the city and connect people." By rapidly turning new volunteers into volunteer organizers, they've been able to grow quickly and inexpensively. But there are some things that the Occupiers simply aren't equipped to provide.

Just a few blocks from where President Obama's helicopter touched down in Staten Island last Thursday [4], an overturned hot dog truck lay on its side at Robert Raimondi's front door, resting in sand from the beach that used to be three hundred yards away. "Nobody's touching anything," said Raimondi, "Insurance only covers foundation. They tell you to go to FEMA. FEMA tells you to fill out a small business loan. So you get nothing. You get no help other than volunteers."

On November 16, at a press conference on the steps of City Hall organized by Healthcare for the 99% and other groups, medical professionals called for city, state and federal authorities to step up relief efforts, rather than continuing to outsource it to the improvised efforts of the Occupy movement. Psychiatrist Sandra Turner with the group Physicians for a National Health Program said, "Occupy Sandy has been out there from the very beginning giving help. They've sent people out doing canvassing and trying to see what the needs are of the people." But, she made clear, this is no substitute for devoting the public resources necessary for meeting affected people's needs.

The speak-out on the steps of City Hall represents one of several pressure campaigns that have begun sprouting up alongside relief efforts.

The debate in the Occupy movement around "demands," once so heated at the fall 2011 encampment in Zuccotti Park [5], has faded amidst so many immediate and concrete demands that

Occupy Sandy now confronts daily on the front lines of the relief effort. The Occupy organizers in orange fluorescent vests rushing around the relief hub in a church at 520 Clinton Ave. in Brooklyn, or shoveling out sand from basements in the Rockaways, or going door-to-door and delivering food to elderly residents on the upper floors of the city's public housing complexes, are part of a maturing resistance movement that is growing deep roots in communities across the city. In some cases, they are even working closely with some of the same people who conducted raids on Occupy's encampment in the Financial District a year ago.

Occupy activist Yoni Miller described a recent meeting he attended in which a representative of Mayor Michael Bloomberg's office and the New York Police Department were present, along with National Guardsmen and an aide to City Council Speaker Christine Quinn. "It was really weird," said Miller. "They were succumbing to meeting with Occupiers, this group they despise so much."

In the low-lying Brooklyn neighborhood of Red Hook, Occupy Sandy helped reestablish the Adobo Family Health Center, providing generators and medical equipment to the only clinic in the area. Occupiers then had to seek the city's help to keep this medical lifeline going. City officials, Miller recalled, "were harping on the different efforts that they were doing in the Rockaways, medical-wise. But when we had very basic requests, like to have one person to supervise 30 bed-bound patients, none of these power players were able to meet that need."

A lack of basic health care for New York City residents existed before the storm, and it is not the only crisis that Sandy has exacerbated. On November 4, Mayor Bloomberg told reporters that 40,000 people have been left without shelter, nearly doubling the city's previous homeless population and compounding an existing housing shortage. "We don't have a lot of empty housing in this city," he said, "so it's really a problem to find housing when we need it."

Kendall Jackman, an organizer with Picture the Homeless, wasn't convinced. "We know there's vacant housing in the city, because here it is," Jackman said, as she stood in front of a row of city-owned properties on 129<sup>th</sup> St. in Harlem. Jackman pointed to the boarded-up doors with her cane. "They have all these buildings that people could be living in," she said, "but instead they're selling them to folks who are creating housing that we can't live in."

A study recently conducted by Picture the Homeless and Hunter College [\[6\]](#) revealed that there are enough vacant properties in the five boroughs of New York City to house 71,707 people. What's more, the study only covers one third of the city; 39 districts remain to be surveyed. If vacant lots were to be factored into the data, that would add potential housing for 199,981 more people. Picture the Homeless is calling for the city to use the current crisis as an opportunity to address the lack of basic housing that existed before the storm.

So far, according to Narlena Lunnon, the Bloomberg administration has been putting "a band-aid on a band-aid." With three grandchildren at her side, Lunnon, a resident of the city-owned development Red Hook Houses, addressed those who were crowded into a classroom at Public School 27 in Red Hook on November 14 — a meeting facilitated by Occupy activists. The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) had been largely absent throughout the ordeal, but recently representatives of the agency started to appear in the neighborhood, posting rent slips to people's doors. The people in the room were united and angry.

"Those temporary generators aren't going to do nothing," Lunnon said. "The minute everybody plugs in the appliances they really need, the lights are going to go right back out. Fire trucks are going by left and right. There are sparks everywhere. I'm smelling gas all up and down the street. Nobody will tell us nothing. *Oh, but you want your rent though!*"

After the applause died down, Lunnun continued. "I'm tired of the free blankets. I'm tired of my grandchildren going to bed cold. I'm tired of old people telling me they're hurting because they can't get up the stairs.

"If you can't get no officials down here," Lunnun told the Occupy Sandy activists facilitating the meeting, "I got to go to City Hall and keep screaming."

It is in rooms like this that a push for a people's recovery is beginning to emerge. At a follow-up meeting five days later, Red Hook residents put out a call for November's rent to be waved and began plans for a rally to pressure NYCHA into meeting their demands. While the effort is being spearheaded largely by the Red Hook community, those living in public housing across the city who lost power, heat and gas due to the storm are being encouraged to participate.

That night, at a long table on the upper floor of Occupy Sandy's distribution hub at 520 Clinton Ave., representatives of groups concerned with the environment, housing, health care and other issues sat together with people from several unions and Occupy Sandy. It was the first time that many in the room had met one another. The meeting focused both on immediate, on-the-ground needs and on laying out the basis for a recovery in which workers are paid a prevailing wage and New Yorkers' essential needs are met. The meeting was the first of its kind, but it will not be the last.

"There has to be some form of accountability," said Juan Carlos Ruiz, a community organizer and pastor at St. Jacobi Church in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, which became Occupy Sandy's first distribution center. He expressed concerns that FEMA and the Red Cross would be withdrawing from Coney Island and from other regions hit by the storm in the near future. "They have all this money and resources but haven't been meeting basic needs. We got folks out there without heat, without gas."

He raised other concerns as well, concerns which will surely be impacted by how the city responds to this crisis: "What about renewable sources of power? We can put solar panels on these roofs. We have an opportunity to implement real solutions with a long-term vision."

Back in Staten Island, Robert Raimondi would have agreed. "Lets get some solar, lets get some wind, lets get some help!" he said.

At the storm-ravaged YANA (You Are Never Alone) worker training center in Queens, Occupy Sandy has already begun implementing the long-term vision Ruiz spoke about [7]. A week after it initially opened to serve the Rockaway community, floodwaters from Sandy inundated the center's storefront structure. YANA later reopened its doors as a relief center. Now, activists have launched the "Restore YANA Project" and are rebuilding it as an example of sustainable design that could be utilized across New York and New Jersey's regions in recovery. They're treating the building for mold and laying down copper pennies on the floor to trap heat. The lights are already back on, thanks to solar power provided by Greenpeace.

Labor and environmental historian Jeremy Brecher suggests that the "social self-defense" Occupy Sandy is currently engaged in is forging "a connection between a set of values and political objectives and concrete daily life problems that ordinary folks face."

Brecher tells a parable: A group of people are walking along a stream when a drowning person floats their way. They pull him ashore and start delivering artificial respiration when another body comes bobbing by. Just as they are resuscitating that person, yet another body comes downstream. All of a sudden one guy takes off sprinting upstream. "Hey where you going?" his friends call out after him, "What if another body comes by?"

"I'm going to see who's pushing these people in," he replies.

While doing the hard work of resuscitating the city, Occupy Sandy is also heading upstream toward City Hall and Wall Street, the forces it identifies as having submerged the city in deprivation to begin with. Rather than remaining splintered by the storm, communities are coming together to support one another. These bonds forged through relief will be tested in the struggle for a revitalized city ahead.

**Peter Rugh**

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\* <http://wagingnonviolence.org/2012/11/struggles-new-and-old-emerge-in-sandys-wake/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] See on ESSF (article 26782), [USA & Sandy: How the 1 Percent conjured a monster storm.](#)

[2] <http://interoccupy.net/occupysandy/>

[3] <http://interoccupy.net/occupysandy/occupy-sandy-map/>

[4] <http://eartoearth.org/2012/11/16/after-sandy-will-obama-read-the-writing-on-the-rubble/>

[5] <http://wagingnonviolence.org/2011/09/the-demand-is-a-process/>

[6] <http://picturethehomeless.org/blog/node/315>

[7] <http://www.localflux.net/PostView.aspx?id=211>