

An Ascending Trajectory?: Ten of the Most Important Social Conflicts in the US in 2012

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The most important American social conflict of 2012—the Chicago Teachers Union strike—suggests that the rising trajectory of social struggle in the United States that began at the beginning of 2011 may be continuing to ascend. While the United States has a much lower level of class struggle and social struggle than virtually any other industrial nation—few American workers are unionized (only 11.8%) and unionized workers engage in few strikes and those involve a very small numbers of workers—still, the economic crisis and the demand for austerity by both major political parties, Republican and Democrat, has led to increased economic and political activity and resistance by labor unions, particularly in the public sector.[1]

The crisis has also created an atmosphere in which political and verbal racist attacks on immigrants by rightwing politicians and racist organizations have increased, leading to increased mobilization in those communities. In this climate, the same sorts of rightwing groups also often scapegoat women or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Women have responded politically, mobilizing to defend women’s reproductive rights in particular and the LGBT community has taken action to promote and defend equal marriage rights. Finally, the economic crisis has had its most significant impact upon the African American and Latino communities, both of which in addition to the longstanding patterns of racial segregation and discrimination continue to deal with the continuing effects of the crisis of 2008 that brought exceptionally high rates of unemployment. These conditions have led both Latinos and Blacks to respond with defensive and sometimes proactive mobilizations.

Almost all of the significant social mobilizations of 2012 have been by labor unions, ethnic minorities, the LGBT community and women, and by liberals and groups on the left, with few rightwing organizations having mobilized their memberships to engage in social protest. Unlike the period from 2009-10 when the rightwing Tea Party movement mobilized thousands of its supporters in opposition to President Barack Obama’s health care reform bill, the right has not engaged in

popular mobilizations in 2012. This may be because the Tea Party was focused on campaigns for its many candidates who ran successfully in the primaries but were then clobbered in the elections. Nevertheless, the Republicans still control the House of Representatives and many governorships and state legislatures, political power which they have used to promote a conservative agenda on the state level in particular.[2] In any case, virtually all social mobilization and social conflict has been by the traditional forces of the left defending various sectors of society from conservative legislation and governmental action.

The Legacy of the 2011 Upheavals

The large and militant struggles of 2011—the Wisconsin public employees’ strikes accompanied by demonstrations of as many as 100,000 people, together with the occupation of the state capitol building in Madison by thousands, and then the Occupy Wall Street movement, which spread to hundreds of sites across the United States, and especially its two shut-downs of the Port of Oakland—had a powerful impact on the society. The Occupy movement in particular, which began in late 2011 but continued into 2012, affected the national discourse, raising questions not only about the financial bailout but also the enormous gap between rich and poor and the inordinate role of corporate money in politics. During 2011 and 2012, Occupy set tens of thousands in motion around the country, and though they did actually begin to challenge the economic and political system they, unfortunately, did not have the organization, focus, numbers or political clarity to carry through.

At the same time, there have been significant struggles in virtually every other sector of American society, particularly by African Americans and Latinos, but also by other social groups including environmentalists, immigrants, LGBT people, and women. An account of the major and characteristic social struggles of 2012 paints a fascinating picture of American society with its assets and liabilities and of the social movements with their own strengths and weaknesses. Some of the events are militant and angry responses to tragic events, while others are humorous protests that ridicule the bigotry and hypocrisy of those who in the name of Evangelical Christianity, Republican conservative values, or sometimes in the name of Democratic liberalism would deny workers’ rights and lower their standard of living, or take away the rights of immigrants, women, gays and lesbians. Whether with raised fists on the strike picket lines, exchanging gay and lesbian kisses, or disguised as giant vaginas, Americans protested to defend their rights, their working conditions, and their standard of living, in some cases with concern for the well-being of the society as a whole.

While none of these social conflicts reached huge proportions, several were national in scope, attained significant renown, and achieved limited victories. In the United States, where there has never been a mass national labor party, where there has not been a significant socialist party since 1916, where there has never been a nationwide general strike, and where the left only achieved a significant presence in the 1930s and again in the 1960s-70s, labor union actions and social movement protests tend to appear as sporadic and isolated events around specific issues, rather than contributing to the building of a left wing movement. Or, as frequently happens, the Democratic Party succeeds in coopting labor and social movements and smothering them in its bosom.

That being said, what do the movements of 2012 tell us? The election of Barack Obama to a second term as president, the defeat of several Republican anti-labor initiatives, and the slight improvement in the economic situation in the United States suggest that there could be even more militant social struggle in 2013. The question is: Will working people and society’s discontented feel that now is the time to act? Or will they prefer to leave it to Obama and the Democrats to do the job for them, as seemed to happen during his first term? It will be tragic if the latter road is taken: in the absence of a strong political and programmatic alternative, today’s “debate” between mainstream Democrats

and the Republicans over how much to cut entitlements will prove to be only an introduction to more radical and brutal austerity measures down the road.

What follows are descriptions of 10 social protests in the United States presented in chronological order. Of course, there many other important progressive social struggles in the United States in 2012, not all of which could be included here. These have been chosen not only for their size, but also for their broader social significance, and in order to represent the diversity of social protests and conflicts in America in 2012.

The Chicago Teachers Union Strike—October 2012

The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) strike represented a response to the continuing attack on public employees, especially on teachers. Since the opening of the new millennium, conservative political groups had increased their propaganda, organizing, and legislative initiatives intended to break or weaken teachers unions, among the most well-organized of public sector workers. The assault began much earlier. Beginning in the 1980s, conservatives pushed for the creation of charter schools (publicly funded schools only loosely accountable to the public and often without union contracts) and vouchers (giving parents public funds to send their children to private schools, including religious schools). Starting in the 1990s, states passed charter school laws and in 2001 President George W. Bush promoted and the U.S. Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Law, which established what is called standards-based educational reform using high-stakes standardized testing and test preparation to drive school policy.

Beginning in 2010, Education Secretary Arnie Duncan pushed for more charter schools and the use of standardized testing to evaluate teachers. The ideological assault on public education and teachers continued with the prize-winning and popular film “Waiting for Superman,” which blamed teachers unions for the problems of public education. At the same time wealthy individuals, foundations, the money managers who invest in charter schools, and advocacy organizations such as Stand for Children also tended to blame teachers unions.[3] The CTU strike of 2012 pitted teachers against Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, Obama’s former chief of staff. But what made the strike so significant was that it was clearly directed as well against the corporate and political forces behind the attack on teachers.

In 2010 the Congress of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), a caucus within the CTU, put forward Karen Lewis for president and a new executive board running on a program opposing privatization, demanding the restitution of art, music, and physical education classes and calling for improvements in teachers’ wages and benefits as well as protection from layoffs. Lewis and CORE won the election, pressed their demands on the city in the 2012 contract negotiations, and when no agreement could be reached, the CTU’s 29,000 teachers walked out. The CTU advocated not only for teachers’ demands, but also for wrap-around services for children, parents and the community, a model of social unionism. Teachers, with strikingly broad support from the community, parents and older students, struck from Sept. 10 to 18 when they finally reached an agreement with the city. While the CTU was only partially successful in winning its demands in the final contract, the union had stood up and fought back in the new period of crisis and austerity. In that sense, many saw the CTU strike as the first American labor union victory in a long time.[4]

Having looked at this most important event of the year, let us now turn to look chronologically at significant labor and social movements of 2012.

Occupy Wall Street—January-May, 2012

Occupy Wall Street, which began in New York in September 2011, spread quickly across the country as Occupy tent cities sprang from North to South and from coast to coast. Occupy represented the largest and most important radical social movement in the United States since the 1970s. It inspired tens of thousands to participate in protests demonstrations, marches, and most important in the occupation of public spaces. The Occupy movement joined labor demonstrations over wages and conditions, community protests over foreclosures and evictions, and organized its own protests against the banks. At least for the moment, Occupy changed the national discussion in the media from tax cuts and eliminating the federal deficit through drastic cuts to social spending to social inequality and the inordinate power of money in politics. Occupy 2011 and 2012 represented one of those few moments in American history when a social movement appears that implicitly challenged the system as a whole and suggested that another more just and more fair economic, social and political system was needed. Without a doubt, in many ways, Occupy represented the high point of recent social conflict in the United States.[5]

The most significant development was Occupy's interaction with the labor unions in New York City and particularly on the West Coast where Occupy's radicalism challenged the labor union bureaucracy with its two successful, partial shutdowns of the Port of Oakland. By November of 2011 cold weather was beginning to test the Occupy movement, and by January 2012 police repression had swept Occupy from most public spaces. Altogether there were 7,719 arrests in 122 cities in the United States between September 2011 and December 2012, one of the highest levels of repression in U.S. history.[6] Nevertheless, Occupy as a movement persevered in the larger cities engaging in May Day actions, though after that its vital signs faded and the movement became moribund, only to leap to life again in New York with Hurricane Sandy in October 2012. (See below.)

Trayvon Martin Protests—April / May 2012

On February 26, 2012, Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American boy, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a 28-year-old Neighborhood Watch coordinator of a gated community in Sanford, Florida. Zimmerman, though police dispatchers had advised him to the contrary, followed Martin, who was on an errand, informing the police that Martin appeared to be suspicious. Zimmerman then became involved in an altercation with the boy, and shot him once, killing him. Zimmerman claimed that he fired in self-defense. With public criticism of judicial inaction growing, the authorities appointed a special prosecutor who charged him with second degree murder. He currently remains free on a \$1 million bond, awaiting trial in June 2013. African Americans and others as well saw Zimmerman's killing of Martin as an unprovoked assault by a white vigilante on an unarmed black teenager. Many believed that Zimmerman had followed, implicitly threatened, provoked, and finally killed Martin. Many felt that Martin had been killed simply because he was a black boy wearing a hooded sweatshirt, the "hoody" so popular among young people. Many African American youths believed this was simply murder. Controversy swirled around the possibility that Zimmerman might invoke the state's "stand your ground" law, which permits a person facing an unlawful but nonlethal threat to stand his ground and use his firearm in self-defense. The initial failure of the authorities to take any legal action against Zimmerman, as reported by the media and discussed on TV and radio over more than a month, led to simmering anger among African Americans and finally boiled over in public protests in April and May.

African American youth, joined by older black Americans, and often by people of other races organized protests not only in Florida where Martin had been killed, but in cities from New York to Los Angeles. Tens of thousands of people participated in the demonstrations, most wearing hoodies

and often carrying signs that read, “I am Trayvon.” A Change.org petition initiated by Trayvon’s mother received 2.2 million signatures, a record number. The demonstrations, petition and widespread public anger finally succeeded in pressuring the authorities to indict Zimmerman on second degree murder charges.

Dreamers Protest at Obama Offices—June 2012

In June of 2012, a group known as “the Dreamers”—young immigrants, most of them Latino and many of them undocumented—began occupying the campaign offices of President Barack Obama in Denver, Detroit and other cities in an attempt to focus attention on the need for immigration reform and particularly seeking the passage of the Dream Act. The United States, which is estimated to have some 12 million undocumented immigrants, had seen no significant immigration reform act since the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act in 1986. The great immigrant demonstrations of millions in 2006—the largest social protests in U.S. history—failed to win immigration reform. Attempts to pass a Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act supported by President George W. Bush and by leading members of both the Republican and Democratic Parties failed in Congress in 2007. Pro-immigration reform groups then began to focus on the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act first introduced in Congress by Dick Durbin (D) and Orin Hatch (R). The Dream Act would have permitted undocumented minors who had been in the country for five years to achieve temporary residence for six years if they either completed two years of military service or four years of college. They would then have been able to pursue permanent residence and U.S. citizenship.

Young, mostly Latino immigrants supporting the DREAM Act and immigration reform generally became known in the media as the Dreamers, resonating with both the notion of the “American dream,” and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. The Dreamers movement, while never large, spread to states throughout the country, from Illinois to Georgia to California and others, and became more militant. Dreamers, taking a page from the LGBT movement, began to “come out” as undocumented immigrants during demonstrations and protests, in effect challenging Federal authorities to arrest and deport them. The startling tactic of risking arrest and deportation to demand rights for immigrants garnered them support from the large immigrant communities and from the public more generally.

When he first campaigned for the White House, President Obama promised to push immigration reform through Congress, yet after holding office for three-and-a-half years, he had done virtually nothing for immigration reform. Moreover, his administration, had by the summer of 2012 deported 1.4 undocumented million immigrants. That was a sum one and a half times more than under the George W. Bush administration’s eight years in office. Not surprisingly, the large Latino immigrant population had doubts about the president’s commitment to them. With Obama campaigning for a second term, the Dreamers, now taking a cue from the Occupy movement, began to occupy the Obama campaign offices, challenging the campaign to call the police to have them removed, which would have surely led to arrests and deportations, and perhaps then putting the Latino vote in jeopardy.[7]

Under the pressure of the militant immigrant youth movement, and hoping to secure the Latino vote, in mid-June 2012 President Obama issued an executive order providing that the Department of Homeland Security would no longer initiate the deportation of illegal immigrants under the age of thirty and with no serious criminal records who came to the United States before age 16, had lived in the United States for at least five years, and who were in school, were high school graduates or were military veterans in good standing.[8] The Dreamers had contributed to pressuring the

president to take the first significant action toward improving the status of immigrants in 25 years. A small number of immigrant youth had through their militant and highly strategic protests forced the U.S. government to carry out a major policy shift.

Anti-Fracking Protests—June 2012

Hydraulic fracturing or “fracking,” a process by which chemical fluids are pumped into layers of rock in order to produce fractures that can serve as conduits for the extraction of petroleum or natural gas, was first developed in the 1860s, but the modern methods were only perfected in 1947, and the whole business only became economically feasible in 1998. The spread of fracking in several U.S. states in the new century began to raise various environmental concerns: ground water and soil contamination, air pollution, the rise to the surface of chemicals, petroleum and gas, the handling of waste products and other issues. Fracking can cause methane leaks affecting air quality, uses large amounts of water and may contaminate the water it uses, and leaves chemical waste, some of which is toxic or carcinogenic. Workers may be exposed to silica dust. The process may also cause seismicity and small earthquakes.

All of these hazards naturally raised concerns about the health and well-being of workers, local communities, and the populations of entire regions that might be affected. Moreover, the extraction of yet more petroleum and gas for automobiles, home and business heating and industrial uses would exacerbate already high levels of atmospheric CO₂, contributing to global warming and climate change.[9] These ecological and public health issues led the environmental movement to initiate educational campaigns and social protests in the early 2000s. The spread of fracking, as oil industry “land men” brought up rights to frack on private property, was so rapid that environmental educators, lobbyists, and organizers could hardly keep up with it.

Environmental activism against fracking grew first in those states where the process was being developed on a large scale—New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Maryland and Texas—shaping up as a classic confrontation between the powerful petroleum industry and the environmental movement. Environmental organizers began to carry out protests involving small groups, sometimes hundreds accompanied by citizen lobbying and more traditional lobbying in several states. In 2010 Josh Fox’s documentary film “Gasland”—based in part on his own family’s experience of being offered \$100,000 to permit an oil company to frack for gas on their land in Pennsylvania—provided the movement with a powerful educational tool.[10]

In early 2012, the environmental group 350.org joined Fox and a number of community groups in announcing plans to carry out several days of anti-fracking education and protest in Columbus, the state capital of Ohio.[11] At about the same time, Ohio Governor John Kasich signed into law new fracking regulations that deprived the public of the right to appeal the issuing of drilling permits and did not require the industry to reveal the toxic chemicals drillers add to fracking fluids on the grounds they are considered trade secrets. The mid-June environmental school and protests culminated in a march through the city’s center and the occupation of the Ohio State Capitol on Sunday, June 17.[12] The successful school and large public protest in Ohio’s capital represented a significant step in the development of the national anti-fracking movement.

Stop-and-frisk Protests—June 2012

Thousands of demonstrators, predominantly young African Americans and Latinos, conducted a silent march down Fifth Avenue in New York City on Father’s Day, Sunday, June 17, 2012, to protest

the city's "stop-and-frisk" policies. In New York City police had stopped and frisked over 700,000 people in 2011, ostensibly to search for illegal weapons, and the use of the policy was clearly increasing. The New York Times reported that, "In 2012, the number of street stops in New York from January through March 2012 rose to 203,500 from 183,326 during the same quarter of 2011." African American and Latino men, most of them between 14 and 24 years of age, made up 87 percent of those subjected to stop-and-frisk. The American Civil Liberties Union reported that during the 10 years of the Bloomberg administration, the police had performed 4,356,927 stops.[13] In May 2012 a federal judge found that the city's own records showed that many of the stops did not meet constitutional standards for searches.[14]

The stop-and-frisk policy, which had been strongly criticized by African American and Hispanic civil rights organizations and by others, was deeply resented and strongly opposed by those communities. During 2011 and 2012, national and state organizations as well as local community groups began to organize against stop-and-frisk, leading to the June 17 silent march. Rev. Al Sharpton's National Action Network, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Local 1199 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) were the principal national organizations involved in convoking the march.[15] The march was endorsed by some 300 organizations, including labor unions, religious groups and Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Arab, and Jewish associations. The New York Times reported, "The turnout reflected the growing alliance between civil rights groups and gay and lesbian activists, who in past years have often kept each other at arm's length." The NAACP's endorsement of a same-sex marriage bill may have played a role in motivating some 28 LGBT groups to endorse the stop-and-frisk march.[16] The stop-and-frisk protest march represented a significant mobilization of African American and Latino youth and of others around an issue of enormous importance to the black and Hispanic communities.

LGBT Chick-fil-A "Kiss Day" Protest—August 2012

During his first term, Obama had only responded partially to the LGBT agenda. In July of 2011 President Obama had ended the military's "don't ask, don't tell policy" under which gay and lesbian service men and women had to keep their sexual preference secret.[17] Yet after more than three years in office, he had declined to take a stand on equal marriage rights for gays and lesbians. With the election approaching, in May 2012, Obama finally announced that he believed that gay marriage should be legal, his own change of mind coinciding with and propelled by an alteration in the opinion of the majority of the American electorate, which had come to that conclusion about a year before.[18] LGBT rights have clearly made great progress in the United States in recent years. Nevertheless LGBT rights remained a major area of contention between social liberals and conservatives, with the right particularly opposed to gay marriage rights.

The LGBT issue flared up in the summer of 2012 when Daniel Truett Cathy, a member of the family that owns the popular fast-food Chick-fil-A restaurant, made a strong statement against gay marriage. Cathy takes pride in what he calls his Christian values, for example by closing his approximately 1,675 restaurants in 38 states on Sundays. His family also funds the WinShape Foundation which supports a group of Southern Baptist ministries and which made millions of dollars in donations to political organizations that oppose LGBT rights. In a statement on a radio talk show and another published in a religious magazine, Dan Cathy came out strongly for the "Biblical definition of marriage" and against gay marriage in 2012.

Even before Cathy's 2012 statements, LGBT student groups had succeeded in making the Chick-fil-A restaurant franchise an issue on college campuses and there were attempts by LGBT groups to get toy makers to withdraw from competing for contracts in the company's kids' meals promotions. When gay rights activists launched a boycott of Chick-fil-A, Arkansas Governor and former

Republican Presidential candidate Mike Huckabee initiated a Chick-fil-A appreciation day on Facebook to which more than 600,000 people responded positively. The company's sales broke all previous records, increasing by 30 percent. At about the same time, to promote the boycott, gay rights activists organized a nationwide "kiss day" at Chick-fil-A franchises, with gay and lesbian couples kissing in front of the fast-food restaurants and then posting their smooches on YouTube. Almost 14,000 people expressed their support for the "kiss day." [19]

The Chick-fil-A "kiss day" and boycott, though their numbers were smaller than the company's supporters, proved effective. In September 2012, the Civil Rights Agenda (TCRA), which monitors LGBT rights issues, announced that Chick-fil-A had "ceased donating to organizations that promote discrimination, specifically against LGBT civil rights." The group reported that a company internal memo titled "Chick-fil-A: Who We Are," states that the company will "treat every person with honor, dignity and respect—regardless of their beliefs, race, creed, sexual orientation and gender." [20] Not long afterwards, in the national elections of November 2012, gay rights activists succeed in convincing the public to pass marriage equality laws in three states, Maine, Maryland, and Washington, and defeat an anti-same-sex marriage amendment in Minnesota—a major jump in public acceptance of gay marriage.

Women's Vagina Protest at the Republican Convention—August 2012

Since the 1970s, women have made greater economic, social and political gains than perhaps any group in our society, overcoming customs, laws, and practices that had made them second class citizens and dramatically improving their general situation, and particularly that of middle class women, that is, the upper echelons of the working class, white collar workers, and professionals. Not least of their gains were achievements in the area of reproductive rights including the right to sex education, contraception and abortion.

Yet conservatives, particularly Evangelical Christians and the rightwing of the Republican Party, have never ceased their attempt to turn back the clock and strip women of those reproductive rights and these attempts have accelerated in recent times. NARAL Pro-Choice America Foundation, which tracks women's reproductive rights, found that in 2011 states enacted 67 anti-choice measures, the highest number since the organization began tracking such laws in 1995. [21] Groups like NARAL and Planned Parenthood and feminist authors and journalists rightly accused the Republican Party of carrying out a "war on women" intended to take away their economic independence, to curb their political power, and above all to strip them of their reproductive rights. [22]

While much of the struggle over women's reproductive rights took the form of lobbying and support for pro-choice Democratic Party candidates who would support funding for Planned Parenthood and defend women's right to abortions, a small group of women protested at the Republican Convention. Members of Code Pink: Women for Peace, dressed in costumes as giant vaginas, marched and demonstrated outside the Republican Convention. [23] They were motivated to do this in part because of the remarks of Rep. Todd Akin, who regarding the question of abortion in the case of rape had remarked, "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down." Akin's remarks reflected the thought of some fundamentalist Christians whose reactionary theology and pseudo-science leads them to distinguish between "legitimate" and "illegitimate rape" and to argue that the female body will reject a rapist's sperm. [24] He was immediately supported by former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, though other Republicans such as presidential and vice-presidential candidates Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan attempted to distance themselves from his remarks. Ryan himself, however, a practicing Catholic, also agreed that women who had suffered rape should not have the legal right to an abortion.

The Code Pink protestors carried banners reading, “Can’t Say It, Don’t Legislate It,” a reference to a Michigan legislator who was barred from speaking because she had used the word vagina in a debate over reproductive rights in that state.[25] While the number of women involved was small, the Code Pink vagina protest dramatized women’s anger over the war against them, captivated the national imagination, and made news, highlighting women’s resistance to the attempt to strip them of their reproductive rights.

Occupy Sandy—October / November 2012

Hurricane Sandy, the largest Atlantic hurricane on record and one of the worst storms in U.S. history, swept up from the Caribbean through the Mid-Atlantic region and then pummeled and thrashed the Northeastern United States, devastating parts of New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut. Houses, businesses, and other property worth approximately \$35 billion were destroyed in New Jersey, as many were left homeless by the enormous and powerful storm. Similarly in New York State damage and clean-up were estimated at \$50 billion. Damage to New York City alone was estimated at \$20 billion. Tens of thousands were left homeless and 34 died. Some parts of Queens, especially Far Rockaway, and Staten Island suffered devastating damage, while throughout many parts of the city, and especially in its high-rise buildings residents—some infirm, elderly, handicapped or pregnant, and families with small children—were left without light, heat, hot water and in some cases without any water at all for as much as two weeks..

With their neighborhoods shattered by the storm, some had no way to get food from either grocery stores or restaurants. With power lines down and transportation systems limited for days, many workers found themselves either temporarily unemployed or unable to get to work. Things were more difficult for those, many of them African American or Latino, who had fewer economic resources and consequently did not have the money to leave their apartments and seek shelter in hotels or with relatives. Trapped in their apartments, they waited for help from the private power companies and from the authorities both of which were overwhelmed by the enormity of the disaster.

Occupy Wall Street, which had mobilized thousands in late 2011 and early 2012, now revived and reemerged as Occupy Sandy and sprang into action. Occupy Sandy created two bases of operation in churches in Brooklyn, established an Occupy Sandy website, created the Occupy motor pool, and dispatched Occupy Sandy volunteers with food, water, flashlights and other supplies, offering assistance to many of the city’s hardest hit neighborhoods. Occupy Sandy’s construction team helped residents carry out emergency repairs, while its medical teams offered assistance to those in need because of injuries or ill health. Occupy also used the Amazon.com wedding registry as a vehicle for receiving donations from people around the world, raising more than \$100,000. Occupy Sandy’s coordinators and volunteers found themselves working with the Federal Emergency Management Authority (FEMA), with the National Guard, and with Mayor Bloomberg’s office—this from the same mayor who had earlier driven Occupy Wall Street out of public spaces in New York City. Occupy Wall Street’s Occupy Sandy showed that the radical protesters who had challenged the system were also capable of building structures and mobilizing volunteers in ways that were as effective, or sometimes more effective, than those of the state. Occupy Sandy became another demonstration that another world—one based on cooperation and humanism—is possible.[26] Moreover, Occupy Sandy has now taken an active role in working with residents in areas distressed by Hurricane Sandy to demand that government do much more to relieve people in need—a political stance most traditional aid organizations are typically unwilling to adopt.

Walmart Worker Protests—November 2012

Walmart had become by 2012 the world's third largest corporation according to the Fortune Global 500 list, with profits of \$16 billion. With 8,500 stores in 15 countries, it is the world's largest retailer, employing two million workers.[27] Walmart is a notorious low-wage employer, typically paying its cashiers and overnight stockers less than \$9.00 per hour and its department managers only about \$11.50 per hour.[28] Staunchly anti-union, Walmart went so far as to close a store in Quebec, Canada, in the spring of 2005 in order to prevent an imminently successful unionization.[29] While its allegedly widespread bribery of officials in Mexico and the horrific fire in Bangladesh, which took the lives of 112 workers in a garment factory supplying Walmart stores, made the company notorious internationally, it was also accused in the United States of engaging in unsafe practices that put its employees in harm's way.

In 2005, the United Food and Commercial Workers created Wake Up Walmart and then more recently the Organization United for Respect or Our Walmart, bringing together some of the "associates," as Walmart calls workers, who make up the great majority of the stores' employees.[30] In 2012, Walmart workers at stores and warehouses and supporters of Walmart workers engaged in a number of actions around the country. In June, Mexican guestworkers employed at CJ's Seafood in Breau Bridge, Louisiana, a company that supplies Sam's Club, a Walmart subsidiary, walked out over abusive treatment. Then in October, Walmart workers struck two key Walmart warehouses, one in Illinois and one in California.[31] And on Black Friday, November 23, about fifty current and former Walmart workers, joined thousands of supporters on picket lines at 1,000 Walmart stores around the United States.

While the job actions of 2012 involved only a few hundred of the company's workers at most, the walkouts and picket lines represented a significant step forward in both building worker confidence, publicizing Walmart's extreme exploitation of its employees, and winning support among the public for the long-term and difficult job of forcing Walmart to improve workers' wages, conditions and benefits and to recognize unions and engage in collective bargaining.

Conclusion

The ten events described above represent significant and characteristic responses to social problems facing workers, African Americans and Latinos, women and LGBT people, immigrants and others. They do not, however, constitute any sort of unified social movement. The protests were largely sectorial and distinct. People who joined one of the protests discussed here seldom joined another. A Venn diagram would show little overlap between these activists, though there is some, and as mentioned in the case of the stop-and-frisk protest, it is growing. Lamentably, these largely isolated labor and social protests do not cohere into a social movement, have not stimulated the growth of a left party, and do not represent a focused challenge to America's capitalist system and conservative politics as a whole. Only the Occupy movement of 2011-12 suggested that the entire system needed changing.

What we do seem to see, however, particularly in the area of workers and labor unions, is a rising trajectory of defensive social struggle as workers fight to keep employers, political parties and the government from dismantling their unions and taking away the wages, conditions and benefits they won over decades. And they fight to keep the business class, from reducing their political power as expressed through the Democratic Party, principally by weakening their unions. We will have to see next year whether labor is able to defend itself, and perhaps begin to take the first steps toward offensive action, or whether labor will continue its ragged retreat or perhaps be routed from the

field. And beyond the labor movement, but ultimately tied to its revival, is the question of whether a broader left can pose an independent alternative to the politics of the deteriorating status quo in America.

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Notes (for the links, see the original)

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P.S.

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