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Dear Occupiers

A Letter from Anarchists

2011-10-08

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Dear Occupiers

A Letter from Anarchists

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Support and solidarity! We're inspired by the occupations on Wall Street and elsewhere around the country. Finally, people are taking to the streets again! The momentum around these actions has the potential to reinvigorate protest and resistance in this country. We hope these occupations will increase both in numbers and in substance, and we'll do our best to contribute to that.

Why should you listen to us? In short, because we've been at this a long time already. We've spent decades struggling against capitalism, organizing occupations, and making decisions by consensus. If this new movement doesn't learn from the mistakes of previous ones, we run the risk of repeating them. We've summarized some of our hard-won lessons here.

Occupation is nothing new. The land we stand on is already occupied territory. The United States was founded upon the extermination of indigenous peoples and the colonization of their land, not to mention centuries of slavery and exploitation. For a counter-occupation to be meaningful, it has to begin from this history. Better yet, it should embrace the history of resistance extending from indigenous self-defense and slave revolts through the

various workers' and anti-war movements right up to the recent anti-globalization movement.

The "99%" is not one social body, but many. Some occupiers have presented a narrative in which the "99%" is characterized as a homogenous mass. The faces intended to represent "ordinary people" often look suspiciously like the predominantly white, law-abiding middle-class citizens we're used to seeing on television programs, even though such people make up a minority of the general population.

It's a mistake to whitewash over our diversity. Not everyone is waking up to the injustices of capitalism for the first time now; some populations have been targeted by the power structure for years or generations. Middle-class workers who are just now losing their social standing can learn a lot from those who have been on the receiving end of injustice for much longer.

The problem isn't just a few "bad apples." The crisis is not the result of the selfishness of a few investment bankers; it is the inevitable consequence of an economic system that rewards cut-throat competition at every level of society. Capitalism is not a static way of life but a dynamic process that consumes everything, transforming the world into profit and wreckage. Now that everything has been fed into the fire, the system is collapsing, leaving even its former beneficiaries out in the cold. The answer is not to revert to some earlier stage of capitalism—to go back to the gold standard, for example; not only is that impossible, those earlier stages didn't benefit the "99%" either. To get out of this mess, we'll have to rediscover other ways of relating to each other and the world around us.

Police can't be trusted. They may be "ordinary workers," but their job is to protect the interests of the ruling class. As long as they remain employed as police, we can't count on them, however friendly they might act. Occupiers who don't know this already will learn it firsthand as soon as they threaten the imbalances of wealth and power our society is based on. Anyone who insists

that the police exist to protect and serve the common people has probably lived a privileged life, and an obedient one.

Don't fetishize obedience to the law. Laws serve to protect the privileges of the wealthy and powerful; obeying them is not necessarily morally right—it may even be immoral. Slavery was legal. The Nazis had laws too. We have to develop the strength of conscience to do what we know is best, regardless of the laws.

To have a diversity of participants, a movement must make space for a diversity of tactics. It's controlling and self-important to think you know how everyone should act in pursuit of a better world. Denouncing others only equips the authorities to delegitimize, divide, and destroy the movement as a whole. Criticism and debate propel a movement forward, but power grabs cripple it. The goal should not be to compel everyone to adopt one set of tactics, but to discover how different approaches can be mutually beneficial.

Don't assume those who break the law or confront police are agents provocateurs. A lot of people have good reason to be angry. Not everyone is resigned to legalistic pacifism; some people still remember how to stand up for themselves. Police violence isn't just meant to provoke us, it's meant to hurt and scare us into inaction. In this context, self-defense is essential.

Assuming that those at the front of clashes with the authorities are somehow in league with the authorities is not only illogical—it delegitimizes the spirit it takes to challenge the status quo, and dismisses the courage of those who are prepared to do so. This allegation is typical of privileged people who have been taught to trust the authorities and fear everyone who disobeys them.

No government—that is to say, no centralized power—will ever willingly put the needs of common people before the needs of the powerful. It's naïve to hope for this. The center of gravity in this movement has to be our freedom and autonomy, and the mutual aid that can sustain those—not the desire for an “accountable” centralized power. No such thing has ever existed;

even in 1789, the revolutionaries presided over a “democracy” with slaves, not to mention rich and poor.

That means the important thing is not just to make demands upon our rulers, but to build up the power to realize our demands ourselves. If we do this effectively, the powerful will have to take our demands seriously, if only in order to try to keep our attention and allegiance. We attain leverage by developing our own strength.

Likewise, countless past movements learned the hard way that establishing their own bureaucracy, however “democratic,” only undermined their original goals. We shouldn’t invest new leaders with authority, nor even new decision-making structures; we should find ways to defend and extend our freedom, while abolishing the inequalities that have been forced on us.

The occupations will thrive on the actions we take. We’re not just here to “speak truth to power”—when we only speak, the powerful turn a deaf ear to us. Let’s make space for autonomous initiatives and organize direct action that confronts the source of social inequalities and injustices.

Thanks for reading and scheming and acting. May your every dream come true.