

1917

“To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one’s program on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour of action arrives—these are the rules of the Fourth International.”

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Occupy, Black Bloc & Liberal Pacifism **The Politics of Confrontation**

On 6 February, Chris Hedges, a journalist, self-described Christian and prominent weathervane of the softer side of American radicalism, opined that Black Bloc anarchists were “the cancer of the Occupy movement” (www.truthdig.com). Hedges had earlier extended Occupy a hearty “welcome to the revolution,” and so his critique sparked considerable discussion.

What particularly offended Hedges’s liberal sensibilities was the 28 January “Move-In Day” march where Occupy Oakland unsuccessfully attempted to take over the long disused Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center with the intent of converting it into a community center. The peaceful protest of 2,000 was diverted in front of the Kaiser Center, with police firing tear gas, smoke and pepper bombs into the crowd, and ended with police kettling marchers in a public park and in front of a YMCA. According to Susie Cagle, a participant:

“There was a dispersal order, but no means of escape. Protesters with shields attempted to push the police line, which responded with several volleys of tear gas into the crowd, still trapped. Instead of enduring the gas, the crowd pulled down chain-link fencing that separated them from the street and safety.

“As marchers, both masked and bare faced, continued north, taking the street, they chanted powerfully, suddenly and without reservation:

“When Oakland is under attack, what do we do?”

“Stand up, fight back!”

—*Truthout*, 8 February

Cagle reported that the mass kettling prompted some demonstrators (most of whom were not Black Bloc) to break into City Hall, where they allegedly did some minor property damage. Hedges’s denunciation of these young militants as Occupy’s “cancer” was promptly echoed by the left social democrats of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), who even denounced the desecration of “Old Glory”:

“At the end of the day, a small number of people got into City Hall and ransacked parts of it, including burning an American flag while the cameras rolled. This was utterly irresponsible and ought to be condemned.”

—*Socialist Worker*, 8 February

In the Black Bloc milieu, people are connected by shared experiences, personal relationships and broadly anarchist politics (despite differences on some key issues). Black Bloc “veterans” have played important roles in the Occupy movement in many places, as David Graeber, who describes himself as “an anarchist who has participated in many Black Blocs,” commented:

“I was hardly the only Black Bloc veteran who took part in planning the initial strategy for Occupy Wall Street. In fact, anarchists like myself were the real core of the group that came up with the idea of occupying Zuccotti Park, the ‘99%’ slogan, the General Assembly process, and, in fact, who collectively decided that we would adopt a strategy of Gandhian non-violence and eschew acts of property damage. Many of us had taken part in Black Blocs. We just didn’t feel that that was an appropriate tactic for the situation we were in.”

—David Graeber, *n+1*, 9 February

Proponents of the Black Bloc insist that it “is a tactic, not a group...where activists don masks and black clothing (originally leather jackets in Germany, later, hoodies in America), as a gesture of anonymity, solidarity, and to indicate to others that they are prepared, if the situation calls for it, for militant action” (*Ibid.*). The tactic originated in:

“the early 1980s in Germany among autonomist protesters defending squatters rights and anti-nuclear activism, [and] hit America hard in the anti-globalization demonstrations of the late ‘90s, especially in the ‘Battle of Seattle,’ which resulted in heavy damage of multinational retail property in downtown.”

—Cagle, *op cit*

Graeber, in response to Hedges, asserted:

“Many of the young men and women who formed the famous Black Bloc in Seattle were in fact eco-activists who had been involved in tree-sits and forest defense lock-downs that operated on purely Gandhian principles—only to find that in the US of the 1990s, non-violent protesters could be brutalized, tortured (have pep-

per spray directly rubbed in their eyes), or even killed, without serious objection from the national media.”

—Graeber, *op cit*

Long before the “Battle of Seattle,” Earth First! was publishing instructions on industrial sabotage in their journal, including tree-spiking, a practice aimed at slowing down the timber corporations. This was, of course, not the first time that frustrated liberals felt driven to “up the ante” tactically in response to the brutality (or mere inflexibility) of the ruling class and its agents.

The Fire Last Time: New Left ‘Action Faction’

Ostensibly “leaderless” movements like Occupy that profess no formal program inevitably contain a spectrum of political tendencies which over time tend to harden into factions of various sorts. The controversies surrounding the Black Bloc bear more than a passing resemblance to those that wracked the New Left in the late 1960s. Much of what is said about the Black Bloc today was then being said about those identified as the “Action Faction” in the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), who eventually ended up as the Weather Underground.

Frustrated with the apparently overwhelming power of the ruling class and despairing of the revolutionary potential of the American working class, Weatherman set off to directly confront the armed thugs of the capitalist state. Of course they were unable to coherently explain how a handful of isolated confrontations with cops and other authority figures was supposed to change the relation of social forces and bring closer the overthrow of capitalism. Their behavior was driven by a combination of liberal guilt and anger at the crimes of American imperialism as well as an intense subjective desire to do something dramatic to express their feelings.

Former Weatherman leader Bill Ayers’s impressionistic memoir, *Fugitive Days*, captures something of the mentality that animated these militants:

“We wanted to bear witness, to put our bodies on the gears of the death machine, to stop a war and bring justice home. We wanted to intensify the action whenever possible. We would each wear a red headband and carry a small backpack with Vaseline and gloves and goggles to protect us from the anticipated tear gas, a first-aid kit, a hammer to break windows, marbles to scatter in front of any potential police cavalry charge, a bottle of water, and a sling-shot or homemade blackjack....”

Weatherman’s strategy amounted to hoping that setting a militant example would spark a rising wave of revolt in the “belly of the beast.” Predictably, the scheduled street fighting of the October 1969 Chicago “Days of Rage” failed to galvanize significant numbers of alienated radical youth and resulted in a series of legal charges which Weatherman countered by going “underground”—effectively removing themselves from public political life.

While many New Left anti-war activists were drawn into dovish George McGovern’s 1972 presidential campaign, the Weather Underground, no longer able to engage in street confrontations of the sort the Black Bloc is involved in today, redirected their activity into setting off small bombs in various high-profile symbols of American imperialism, including police stations, the U.S. Capitol and the Pentagon. After a few years, many key figures resurfaced, served brief jail sentences and emerged as “rehabilitated” left-liberals. During the 2008

presidential campaign, Barack Obama was denounced for being a “pal” of Ayers and his wife, Bernadine Dohrn, also a prominent Weather Underground leader. Having taken a more circuitous route to the same Democratic dead-end as the McGovernites, Ayers hailed Obama’s election as “an important strike against white supremacy” while hoping “we don’t become adventurous in Iran or Pakistan or Afghanistan.” Such “hopes” are just as ludicrous as the Republicans’ depiction of Obama as some sort of “socialist.”

Despite their fearsome reputation and success at making fools of the FBI and the rest of the U.S. political police for years, Dohrn and Ayers could, in the end, do no more than lead their followers on a long march from angry anti-imperialism back to the Democratic Party because, despite their subjective revolutionary impulses, their political program never transcended militant radical liberalism.

Unlike the Black Panthers, whose willingness to “pick up the gun” was defended by many white liberals, Weatherman was denounced by almost the entire left—from the reformist Stalinist Communist Party to the International Socialists and the “peaceful, legal” suit-and-tie reformists of the Socialist Workers Party. The Workers League (today the Socialist Equality Party/World Socialist Web Site) denounced the Weather Underground as a “protofascist group of declassed hoodlums” (*Bulletin*, 6 October 1969, quoted in *Spartacist* Nos.17-18, August-September 1970).

The Maoists of the Progressive Labor Party (PL—Weatherman’s chief opponent in a protracted factional struggle within SDS) were even more hostile. In the run-up to Weatherman’s “Days of Rage” in Chicago, PL denounced the organizers as “a group of police agents and hate-the-people lunatics who walked out of the SDS at the June Convention,” and claimed that “The bankers and big business men who run the country are using this clique... for two purposes. First, to divert people so they won’t fight back anymore. Second, to discredit SDS and radical ideas in general. This group’s ‘Days of Rage’ planned for Chicago, Oct. 8-11 is a police trap” (quoted in *Spartacist* Nos.17-18, August-September 1970).

‘Violence,’ Cops & Repression

While none of the cadres of the Weather Underground were in any way connected to the police, Hedges’s suggestion that “It is a safe bet that among Black Bloc groups in cities such as Oakland are *agents provocateurs* spurring them on to more mayhem” (*op cit*) may well be true. But any leftist group is a potential target for infiltration by cops. It is, of course, easier to enter amorphous formations like the Black Bloc—macho tough-guy tactics provide a favorite entry point for provocateurs, and the anonymity of the costume offers obvious opportunities for such elements. There was quite a bit of internet buzz suggesting that the vandalism of Tully’s Coffee (which had been supportive of the Occupy encampment) during the 2 November 2011 “general strike” may have been the work of police agents posing as Black Bloc.

There is no doubt that the “Homeland Security” apparatus is intent on disrupting and destroying radical opposition to the status quo. On 24 September 2010, FBI agents in the Midwest conducted simultaneous raids on seven homes and an anti-war office and subpoenaed 14 activists. The targets included the Twin Cities Anti-War Committee, the Palestine Solidarity Group, the Colombia Action Network, Students for a Democratic Society and

the Freedom Road Socialist Organization. The nationwide suppression of Occupy camps across the country in mid-November 2011 was coordinated by federal police agencies, including Homeland Security and the FBI.

Hedges's assertion that "with or without police infiltration the Black Bloc is serving the interests of the 1 percent" (*op cit*) is an expression of his liberal worldview. As one Occupier at the 2 November 2011 Oakland General Assembly commented:

"It's a lot more violent to foreclose on somebody and throw them out of a house than throw a rock through a window. And if that's how people deal with things, then that's how they get it out and we can't tell people how to live."

—quoted in Cagle, *op cit*

Hedges complained that protesters in New York who chanted "Fuck the police" and "Racist, sexist, anti-gay—NYPD go away" undermined the possibility that Occupy might "win the hearts and minds of the wider public and those within the structures of power (including the police) who are possessed of a conscience" (*op cit*).

Such liberal illusions in the police are shared by various self-proclaimed "revolutionary" organizations (including the ISO, the International Marxist Tendency and the Committee for a Workers' International) which assert that cops and screws are merely "workers in uniform." This is completely wrong—cops are not part of the workers' movement or the left but are rather the armed thugs of the capitalist exploiters.

In "This is What a Revolution Looks Like" (15 November 2011), Hedges asserted that what appeared to be an "unsuccessful attempt by the power elite to quell the unrest and discontent through physical acts of repression" against Occupy heralded the second stage of an unfolding "revolution." He continued:

"George Orwell wrote that all tyrannies rule through fraud and force, but that once the fraud is exposed they must rely exclusively on force. We have now entered the era of naked force. The vast million-person bureaucracy of the internal security and surveillance state will not be used to stop terrorism but to try and stop us.

"Despotic regimes in the end collapse internally. Once the foot soldiers who are ordered to carry out acts of repression, such as the clearing of parks or arresting or even shooting demonstrators, no longer obey orders, the old regime swiftly crumbles."

While the American ruling class is busy shredding many of the remaining civil liberties by suspending *habeas corpus*, legalizing indefinite detention without charges and even authorizing the assassination of citizens deemed enemies of the state, the primary tool of the "1%" remains fraud—usually in the form of Democratic Party "progressives."

Hedges proposes to encourage "defections" from the repressive apparatus "through a rigid adherence to nonviolence, a refusal to respond to police provocation and a verbal respect for the blue-uniformed police, no matter how awful they can be while wading into a crowd and using batons as battering rams against human bodies" (*Ibid.*). This "turn the other cheek" strategy rejects any sort of self-defense:

"Losing this moral authority, this ability to show through nonviolent protest the corruption and decadence of the corporate state, would be crippling to the movement. It would reduce us to the moral degradation of our oppressors. And that is what our oppressors want."

—Hedges, www.truthdig.com, 6 February

In motivating his policy of staking everything on appealing to the "morality" of the depraved racists who infest the Oakland police force, Hedges invokes the civil rights movement of the 1960s as a model: "Martin Luther King kept holding marches in Birmingham because he knew Public Safety Commissioner 'Bull' Connor was a thug who would overreact" (*Ibid.*). Malcolm X, whom Hedges claims to admire, denounced King's "Children's Crusade" in Birmingham, saying: "Real men don't put their children on the firing line." While Malcolm respected King's commitment to the struggle for equality, he recognized that the liberal civil rights movement was a safety-valve for the capitalist class and observed that "There's no such thing as a nonviolent revolution" (*Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*). After repeated lynchings and assassinations, many of the key figures in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) drew similar conclusions and began carrying guns (see Stokely Carmichael and Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael*, New York, 2003).

Hedges's combination of "non-violent" sermonizing from the sidelines and rabid denunciation of those who engage in more militant tactics is rationalized by references to the example of the anti-revolutionary pacifism of Mahatma Gandhi in India. The success of Gandhi's bourgeois nationalist Congress movement in keeping a lid on a turbulent mass upheaval of millions against 250 years of imperial rule ensured that the social mechanisms of class, caste and gender oppression were preserved after the British departure. The Congress Party also facilitated the imperialist-orchestrated partition of the subcontinent into Muslim Pakistan and predominantly Hindu India, which was accompanied by a grisly communalist bloodbath.

While Gandhi is no model for anyone committed to the creation of a more egalitarian social order, Graeber points out that Gandhi, unlike Hedges, refused to denounce those in the anti-colonial movement who pursued a more militant course:

"Since we are talking about Gandhian tactics here, why not consider the case of Gandhi himself?...He first began to frame his own strategy of mass non-violent civil resistance in response to a debate over the act of an Indian nationalist who walked into the office of a British official and shot him five times in the face, killing him instantly. Gandhi made it clear that while he was opposed to murder under any circumstances, he also refused to denounce the murderer. This was a man who was trying to do the right thing, to act against an historical injustice, but did it in the wrong way because he was 'drunk with a mad idea.'

"...He was regularly challenged to prove his non-violent credentials by assisting the authorities in suppressing such elements. Here Gandhi remained resolute. It is always morally superior, he insisted, to oppose injustice through non-violent means than through violent means. However, to oppose injustice through violent means is still morally superior to not doing anything to oppose injustice at all.

"And Gandhi was talking about people who were blowing up trains, or assassinating government officials. Not damaging windows or spray-painting rude things about the police."

—*Op cit*

As Marxists, we have nothing but contempt for those who seek bourgeois "respectability" by turning on youth attempt-

ing to strike blows against the oppressors. While advising against adventurism, revolutionaries nonetheless defend leftist militants (including those whose tactics are seriously mistaken) against the capitalists and their state machinery.

Some of Hedges's critics have noted that his posture of absolute "non violence" seems to be solely for domestic consumption. He has been less concerned about occasional transgressions of bourgeois law and order committed by rebellious Greeks outraged by the continuing ravages of international finance capital:

"Here's to the Greeks. They know what to do when corporations pillage and loot their country. They know what to do when Goldman Sachs and international bankers collude with their power elite to falsify economic data and then make billions betting that the Greek economy will collapse. They know what to do when they are told their pensions, benefits and jobs have to be cut to pay corporate banks, which screwed them in the first place. Call a general strike. Riot. Shut down the city centers. Toss the bastards out. Do not be afraid of the language of class warfare—the rich versus the poor, the oligarchs versus the citizens, the capitalists versus the proletariat. The Greeks, unlike most of us, get it."

—www.truthdig.com, 24 May 2010

But don't try this at home, advises Hedges, who is nonetheless prepared to invoke the spirit of the French Revolution in excoriating the American bourgeoisie:

"The rogues' gallery of Wall Street crooks, such as Lloyd Blankfein at Goldman Sachs, Howard Milstein at New York Private Bank & Trust, the media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, the Koch brothers and Jamie Dimon at JPMorgan Chase & Co., no doubt think it's over. They think it is back to the business of harvesting what is left of America to swell their personal and corporate fortunes. But they no longer have any concept of what is happening around them. They are as mystified and clueless about these uprisings as the courtiers at Versailles or in the Forbidden City who never understood until the very end that their world was collapsing. The billionaire mayor of New York, enriched by a deregulated Wall Street, is unable to grasp why people would spend two months sleeping in an open park and marching on banks."

—www.truthdig.com, 15 November 2011

Hedges compares the billionaire bankers of Wall Street to the courtiers of Versailles. Yet as soon as a few windows get broken or a flag is burned, his radical wordsmithing is revealed as little more than a cover for a frightened liberal preaching non-violent submission to the dictates of the master class.

Craven Liberalism: the Real 'Cancer' in Occupy

Hedges declares that any forceful resistance "is a gift from heaven to the security and surveillance state" while at the same time claiming that "Occupy encampments in various cities were shut down precisely because they were nonviolent" (www.truthdig.com, 6 February). In fact, the appropriate tactics in any given situation depend on a host of concrete circumstances. There are many times when the balance of forces precludes the use of physical force by protesters; and there are also situations where such attempts would be politically unwise. But those who refuse to distinguish between

the violence of the oppressors and that of their victims (however tactically inadvisable) are incapable of playing any useful role in the struggle against the multiple and manifest injustices of the decaying capitalist social order.

Hedges expresses a generalized opposition to political differentiation within the Occupy movement—particularly if it comes from his left. He is offended that some proponents of the Black Bloc dare characterize Noam Chomsky, America's leading radical liberal, as a "sellout." Chomsky has done a great deal of useful analysis and exposed many imperialist crimes, but he is also a card-carrying member of the pro-capitalist Democratic Socialists of America and advised people to vote for Obama in 2008. He can hardly be considered any sort of revolutionary.

Hedges also complained about an article published in *Green Anarchy* that criticized the Mexican Zapatistas:

"The essay declared that 'not only are those [the Zapatistas'] aims not anarchist; they are not even revolutionary.' It also denounced the indigenous movement for 'nationalist language,' for asserting the right of people to 'alter or modify their form of government' and for having the goals of 'work, land, housing, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace.' The movement, the article stated, was not worthy of support because it called for 'nothing concrete that could not be provided by capitalism.'"

—*Ibid.*

The Zapatistas do not even profess to be revolutionary, but Marxists solidarize with them against repression by the Mexican state, just as we defend Black Bloc participants—many of whom, it should be noted, are radical liberals with plenty of illusions in Chomsky and the Zapatistas.

It is at least a little hypocritical for Hedges, who is so fiercely opposed to the Black Bloc, to object to them criticizing others. But it is common for reformists to advocate the exclusion or suppression of those to their left. As Graeber observed, Hedges's "cancer" polemic has an unpleasant political logic:

"Even if you did not intend this statement as a call to violence, which I suspect you did not, how can you honestly believe that many will not read it as such?"

"In my experience, when I point this sort of thing out, the first reaction I normally get from pacifists is along the lines of 'what are you talking about? Of course I'm not in favor of attacking anyone! I am non-violent! I am merely calling for non-violently confronting such elements and excluding them from the group!' The problem is that in practice this is almost never what actually happens. Time after time, what it has actually meant in practice is either a) turning fellow activists over to the police, i.e., turning them over to people with weapons who will physically assault, shackle, and imprison them, or b) actual physical activist-on-activist assault. Such things *have* happened...."

"This situation often produces extraordinary ironies. In Seattle, the only incidents of actual physical assault by protesters on other individuals were not attacks on the police, since these did not occur at all, but attacks by 'pacifists' on Black Bloc'ers engaged in acts of property damage. Since the Black Bloc'ers had collectively agreed on a strict policy of non-violence (which they defined as never doing anything to harm another living being), they uniformly refused to strike back. In many recent occupations, self-appointed 'Peace Police' have manhandled

activists who showed up to marches in black clothing and hoodies, ripped their masks off, shoved and kicked them: always, without the victims themselves having engaged in any act of violence, always, with the victims refusing, on moral grounds, to shove or kick back.

“The kind of rhetoric you are engaging in, if it disseminates widely, will ensure this kind of violence becomes much, much more severe.”

—*Op cit*

Hedges’s complaint about “hijacking or destruction of competing movements, which is exactly what the Black Bloc contingents are attempting to do with the Occupy movement” parallels many of those arguments routinely used against left critics of liberalism. One need not endorse the Black Bloc strategy (or lack of one) to recognize that this kind of baiting by prominent “leftists” like Hedges tends to legitimate attacks on more militant protesters and undermine solidarity in the face of ongoing, organized state repression.

Hedges objects to the Black Bloc because it asserts the right to do things he disagrees with. He complains that the St. Paul’s Principles (an agreement worked out for protests outside the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota which called for a “separation of time and place” for more militant protests) “in the end opens the way for hundreds or thousands of peaceful marchers to be discredited by a handful of hooligans.” This makes it clear that he is not so much concerned about militants using pacifists as “human shields,” but more generally opposed to all those who do not promise in advance to slavishly abide by the rules laid down by the enemy, i.e., restrict themselves to impotent (and often invisible) “peaceful, legal” forms of dissent.

Hedges’s antipathy toward youthful militants is shared by the chronically opportunist ISO:

“Unfortunately, a minority of the movement today has a different approach—one that can only be called elitist. By equating clashes with the police with militancy—and asserting their right to carry out such tactics whether or not the rest of the movement agrees—they are seeking to impose their leadership on Occupy.”

—*Socialist Worker*, 8 February

The ISO can certainly not be accused of attempting to “impose their leadership” on anyone—their method is to politically adapt to whatever milieu they are currently chasing. Hedges, the ISO and other “socialist” reformist outfits do not view the Black Bloc and other proponents of “direct action” as subjective revolutionaries who should be won to a better strategy, but rather as angry misfits who can be written off.

The flip side of the ISO’s denunciation of the Black Bloc for substitutionism was its scandalous endorsement of the heavy-handed attempt of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) leadership to disrupt a 6 January public meeting at the Seattle Labor Temple in solidarity with striking Longview dockers. The thuggish attempt to break up the meeting was motivated by the bureaucrats’ fear that the sell-out contract they planned to foist on their Longview membership might be rejected. (The reaction to the ISO’s outrageous and cowardly toadying to the bureaucrats was so sharp that within a few days the group issued a partial retraction.) The reflexive identification with the labor tops against union militants and

their “community” supporters vividly illustrates the ISO’s essentially social-democratic character.

The Necessity of a Revolutionary Working-Class Perspective

There is, of course, a considerable spectrum of opinion among anarchists about how to fight the oppressors. In the Bay Area, the milieu around Occupy has a more overtly pro-union character than many other places because of a history of successful labor political actions initiated over the past several decades by class-struggle longshore militants in ILWU Local 10—beginning with the 1984 anti-apartheid boycott and continuing through the 1999 port shutdown for Mumia Abu-Jamal, the 2008 anti-war May Day strike and the 2010 day of action for Oscar Grant.

Many young militants have illusions that their own passion and commitment, amplified through drawing in fresh layers of angry youth, will provide sufficient leverage to achieve their aims, and they therefore see no particular need to develop a politicized and class-conscious base within the organized working class. Occupy has been amazingly successful in putting the issue of the grotesque inequality generated by capitalism on the political agenda and initiating discussion about the causes and possible solutions to this profound social problem. Its weakness is an organic incapacity to provide any real political leadership, precisely because it is so broad and inclusive. This is reflected in the utopian-liberal (and manifestly false) assertion that “99%” of the population have essentially similar social interests that are counterposed to the “1%” who compose the ruling elite. As we noted previously:

“The estimate that the other ‘99%’ have essentially common interests is a considerable exaggeration—because this would include millions of cops, screws, military officers, managers and others whose material interests bind them closely to the ruling elite. On a global scale the estimate of 99 percent is probably considerably closer to the mark, but in all cases the vast majority of the population has interests which are objectively counterposed to those of the ‘1%’ on top. Within this majority, however, the strategic core is composed of the workers who operate the transport, communications, manufacturing, agricultural production and everything else upon which a modern economy depends.”

—1917 No.34

The task of revolutionaries is to seek to win the most class-conscious elements of this strategic core to a program representing their own historic interest in getting rid of capitalism once and for all. This perspective is the opposite of the “blank slate” approach of the Occupy leadership, which the ISO (as well as various other “socialist” tailists) essentially endorses:

“even some sympathetic liberals—missed the point when they criticized Occupy for its lack of demands. In fact, the movement was both making a general critique of a U.S. society dominated by the 1 percent, while opening up a political space for all those organizing against the injustices of that society.”

—*Op cit*

Occupy did open up space for political organizing and discussion in Oakland and across the country. The bold response of Occupy Oakland in calling for a one-day “gen-

eral strike” to protest attacks by the city administration won the support of an impressive section of the population. Tens of thousands of working people and youth showed that they were prepared to stand up and actively resist the attack of Oakland civic authorities and their cops. While the 2 November 2011 protest was not a “general strike,” it was large enough to scare the ruling elites and certainly helped make Occupy’s subsequent pledges of mass solidarity with the embattled Longview dockers credible.

But this does not detract from the urgency of political struggle against the various strains of anarcho-liberalism that dominate Occupy and which will ultimately dissipate the energy to resist capitalist oppression that it has been able to tap. The 12 December 2011 shutdown of the Port of Oakland revealed the inherent limits of intervention from outside the union. While the action was not violently repressed by the police, and won the sympathy of many rank-and-file ILWU members, the fact that it did not originate in the union and was not led by union militants limited its scope and effectiveness. The next month the ILWU bureaucracy was able to hobble Occupy’s attempts to organize mass support for the besieged Longview local and impose the worst contract in the union’s history.

If the recent upsurge is to produce any lasting results, it will be through the injection of fresh forces in the struggle to forge new, class-struggle leadership for the unions capable of ousting the labor traitors who dominate the workers’ movement today. Only a revolutionary organization with a coherent set of ideas and a strategic orientation to the organized working class will be able to harness the anger and the willingness to take risks and make sacrifices exhibited by many of the youthful rebels (including Black Bloc participants) and transform them into effective proletarian organizers. The creation of a mass revolutionary workers’ party is the precondition to a successful struggle to expropriate the financial parasites, corporations and the rest of the “1%” and open the road to the socialist future.

Reinventing the Wheel—a Pointless Exercise

The New Left of the 1960s arose as a result of the failure of the major organizations of the Old Left (centrally the Stalinist Communist Party and the rightward-moving, formerly Trotskyist, Socialist Workers Party) to provide a plausible mass opposition to capitalism. In 1967, Leon Trotsky’s biographer, Isaac Deutscher, made the following remarks to a group of university students in Binghamton, New York:

“you call yourselves New Left not because you have a new philosophy, but because you want to be distinguished from the previous generation of Marxists...you think... that your elders have done badly and you want to make a new start. This sounds very tidy: new people make a new beginning and call themselves New Left. But in what sense are you ‘new people’? You are young? Young people can be very old if they start with very old ideas....I suggest that you have, first of all, to define what is the new idea you stand for. In what way are you opposed to your elders, and to which of their ideas are you opposed?”

—“Marxism and the New Left” in *Marxism in Our Time*, 1971

The initial explosive growth of the Occupy phenomenon was conditioned by the absence of a viable mass revolutionary party. Like many radicals of the 1960s, today’s anarcho-liberals are a reaction to the bankruptcy of tame “lesser evil” reformists whose hostility to the Black Bloc reflects their acceptance of the immutability of the existing social order.

Attacks on corporate symbols and the cops by angry youth are political actions, even if not well thought out and sometimes counterproductive (and perhaps dangerous to those who carry them out as well as other protesters). In the final analysis, the window-breakers of the Black Bloc et al are the flip side of the liberal pacifism promoted by the smug reformists of the ISO and sundry others who falsely claim the mantle of revolutionary Marxism. Without a program and a plan—i.e., a coherent strategy to awaken the revolutionary potential of the working class—they will find themselves arriving at the same liberal dead-end.

The *enragés* of the New Left, like the Black Bloc today, had no patience for the difficult and protracted commitment necessary to seriously undertake pursue working-class organizing. Instead they opted for the short-term subjective satisfaction of going up against the cops rather than pursuing a long-term strategy that can actually end capitalist tyranny and create a new egalitarian social order based on institutions of workers’ power.

A serious revolutionary Marxist party struggling for leadership of the workers’ movement and championing the rights of the oppressed and downtrodden would attract the best of the angry anarchist milieu and turn them into serious proletarian revolutionaries. A glimpse of what is possible can be seen in the influence, both direct and indirect, of a few class-conscious militants in ILWU Local 10 in helping shape the political character of Occupy in the Bay Area, and via Oakland, the entire West Coast. The basis for this influence is the series of political actions spearheaded by militants in Local 10 who were schooled in the best traditions of Trotskyist trade-union work (see “Antiwar Strike,” 1917 No.31).

As Trotsky observed: “only a great revolutionary mass movement can free the oppressed, a movement that will leave no remnant of the entire structure of class exploitation, national oppression, and racial persecution” (“For Grynszpan,” February 1939). Only a revolutionary party rooted in the unions can lead such a movement through organizing the unorganized, mobilizing against murderous police violence, as well as spearheading the fight against INS dragnets, bank foreclosures, tuition hikes, attacks on pensions and social services and other issues of vital importance to working people.

It is necessary and possible to forge such a leadership, but there are no shortcuts. We must begin from where we are, and not waste time trying to reinvent the wheel. Indeed, it is only by drawing the lessons of the history of the revolutionary experience of the past—both the successes and the failures—that it will be possible to free humanity from the dead hand of the decaying and profoundly unjust capitalist order. ■

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