The Politics of Austerity, Occupy and the 2012 Elections

a contribution to the discussion

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A Solidarity Pamphlet

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The Politics of Austerity, Occupy

At this moment, the central issue facing our society is how to respond to the deepest crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s. Unfortunately, we won’t be hearing a substantive debate about this in the 2012 elections. The Democratic and Republican parties both favor austerity— in short, making working-class people pay to bail out the corporations and get capitalism back on its feet. Austerity means sacrificing the wealth and the rights of the working class (i.e. jobs, wages, pensions, housing and public services) in order to preserve the wealth and the rights of banks, large corporations, and those few families who live off profits and interest (i.e. capital).

More than that, austerity asks us to lower our hopes and expectations of a decent life for our families and communities. And it seeks to transform political and economic institutions in order to be sure that workers and governments will remain “disciplined” into the future.

Those of us who would prioritize human needs and democracy over capitalist profit and corporate power do not have a political party capable of mounting a serious challenge to austerity in the electoral arena. Yet the dramatic emergence of the Occupy movement proves that there is widespread opposition to austerity, as well as deep frustration with the narrow “choices” offered by our legislative and electoral system.

The Occupy movement transformed the political landscape. Young people rejected rising inequality and the bipartisan consensus on bailouts for bankers, proclaiming “We are the 99%.” And Occupiers have refused to be coopted by the Democratic Party or confined by the boundaries of conventional legislative politics. Occupy struck a powerful chord, bringing hope that inequality and corporate power can be checked by a rising mass movement.

Along with the Occupy movement, we’ve seen the magnificent actions of young immigrants, proclaiming themselves “Undocumented, Unafraid and Unapologetic” in the face of the Obama administration’s escalation of deportations beyond the horrible levels that occurred under George W. Bush.

The racist murder of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed African-American teenager, by a vigilante “neighborhood watch coordinator” who wasn’t immediately arrested, has created a mass outpouring of anger and demands for justice, not only in Florida but across the United States and even internationally.

As November looms closer, however, activists in unions, Occupy and social justice movements will face intense pressure to devote their collective political energies to the reelection of president Obama and to Democratic Party electoral campaigns.

In this pamphlet, we argue against falling in behind the Democrats. As socialists, we suggest that the main task facing Occupiers, union militants and social justice activists is not to elect Democrats but rather to sustain and intensify Occupy’s bold challenge to the bi-partisan consensus behind austerity.

We are not going to focus here on how individuals...
choose to vote in November. We are concerned, rather, with how activists in a wide range of movements can most effectively channel their energies to challenge austerity and the corporate-dominated two-party system.

We believe it is possible for the movements to build on the success of Occupy, the heroism of immigrant youth and the rage over Trayvon Martin’s murder. It’s an opportunity to build mass actions which go beyond symbolism to directly and materially disrupt the project of austerity — and to develop forms of organization with the capacity

Democracy: Struggle and Limits

“I DON’T WANT everybody to vote. Elections are not won by a majority of people. They never have been from the beginning of our country, and they are not now. As a matter of fact, our leverage in the elections quite candidly goes up as the voting populace goes down.” Those are the words of wisdom from Paul Weyrich, founder of conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC).

In highly autocratic countries, when elections occur they are often hijacked — or are basically staged mobilizations to legitimize a pre-determined result. In the United States, the formalities of democracy may be held sacred, but the substance is crumbling and even the voting franchise for millions of people is under attack. Democratic rights under capitalism are limited and always a product of struggle — they expanded under the impact of the labor and Black and women’s liberation movements, and they’re threatened now under the corporate austerity drive.

The attack occurs on multiple fronts. The average cost of winning a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2008 stood at $1.4 million and for the U.S. Senate $8.5 million; during that campaign cycle, then-candidate Barack Obama raised $745 million. For the 2012 presidential race alone, it is estimated that total TV advertising will amount to two billion dollars. Two 2010 U.S Supreme Court decisions referred to as Citizens United v. FEC, eliminating restrictions on campaign funding for corporations, unions and wealthy individuals, have accelerated the trend.

Then there’s the right-wing drive to whittle down the number of voters. Already, according to The Pew Center on the States, the registration system the individual states use is “inaccurate, costly and inefficient,” with at least 51 million eligible voters remaining unregistered. In the 2008 general election alone, 2.2 million votes were lost because of registration-related problems. Instead of addressing these issues, a variety of reactionary state laws are being passed making it more difficult to register or to vote.

We have seen 1,000 bills introduced into 46 state legislatures over the past decade in the name of preventing non-existent fraud. Although more than 21 million people eligible to vote (11%) do not have government-issued photo identification, 15 states require it. These include four southern states (Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina and Mississippi), which are awaiting clearance under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act before their laws take effect. Those without photo ID are the homeless, the poor and the elderly, most often people of color. The Brennan Center for Justice estimates that as many as 5.5 million African Americans lack the required documentation.

Recently five states have limited early voting, two states have ended “same day” registration, three have limited voter registration drives. In Florida the League of Women Voters suspended their registration drives because the new law was intimidating and punitive toward volunteer registrars. Some states have reduced the number of polling places, Wisconsin even reduced the number of motor vehicle offices.

The Electoral College has always been America’s “peculiar institution” in presidential elections. Today, with the use of modern sophisticated polling techniques and technology, critical “swing states” can be identified and just enough votes stolen through undetectable electronic voting machine fraud, “Voter ID” laws and the like to steal the whole election. As we saw in Florida 2000, robbing just a few thousand votes can make the difference.

Another set of laws that disproportionately affects the African-American and Latino communities is the denial of voting rights by all states except Maine and Vermont — either permanently or temporarily — to those convicted of felonies. African-American men have been convicted at seven times the national average and African-American women at four times the rate, often for nonviolent drug-related convictions under which crack cocaine was treated 100 times more severely than other drug offenses. (Although this disparity has been modified, those previously sentenced under these draconian laws aren’t entitled to relief.)

The United States is the only country in the world where this disenfranchise ment is routine. Some 4.7 million Americans, more than 2% of the adult population, have been stripped of their voting rights. This, of course, has an impact beyond the individual — it weakens the power of the communities where these ex-prisoners live.

Then there’s the redistricting in states every decade, when the new census figures are released. Following the 2010 election results, where Republicans increased their size in a number of state legislatures, the redrawing has become a systematic drive to dilute minority voting rights by packing Black and Latino voters into gerrymandered districts. In other cases legislators divide a Black or Latino community so that their chance at political representation is minimized. Civil rights organizations have sued some of these practices under the Voting Rights Act.

A vibrant political democracy would be interested in expanding voter rights. Even before women won suffrage on the national level, women were often voting at local and state levels. Why not have all residents involved in voting at least at the local level of government? But that’s not what democracy looks like according to the Paul Weyrichs and corporate powers of America.

Resources:


Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law: http://www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/testimony_at_house_hearing_on_restrictive_voting_laws


The Pew Center on the States reports: www.pewcenteronthestates.org/elec tions


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to put the corporations and the far right on the defensive, whatever the outcome of the elections.

In our view, this will require not only building the Occupy movement but also taking its spirit and approach, and the audacity of immigrant youth who are coming out of the shadows, into the multitude of organizations, networks and communities that collectively provide a base for the radical transformation of American politics.

The Context in the 2012 Election

The corporate consensus for austerity (“belt tightening”) has moved the so-called “political mainstream” sharply rightward. At the same time, blatant lies and racist vitriol coming from the Republican Right will frighten many people, including on the left, who will likely back the President in the belief that it is necessary to defeat a racist wave that smacks of neo-fascism.

By the middle of April Mitt Romney had put a stranglehold on the Republican nomination. Will he now jettison much of his party’s extreme right-wing baggage, and move in tandem with President Obama toward “the center” (i.e. towards each other) for the general election? Although that’s what happened many times in the past, we don’t see that as likely this time around.

In 1996 — the last time a Democratic president ran for reelection — Bill Clinton shored up his corporate centrist image by passing “welfare reform” and the Effective Death Penalty Act. Republican nominee Bob Dole tried unsuccessfully to cast himself as the true corporate centrist. The result was that the positions of the two candidates were difficult to distinguish by Election Day. Similarly, despite their divergent paths after the elections, Al Gore and George W. Bush appeared so close to each other in 2000 that Ralph Nader’s left-wing third party candidacy captured a great deal of energy and 3% of the national vote (historic in the modern era).

Tea Party Tempest and Gridlock

The Tea Party at its inception had the appearance of an angry grassroots insurgency against big-government overreach, excessive spending and intrusion into ordinary people’s lives.

While some of that posturing struck a responsive chord, it soon emerged that the Tea Party was essentially another of those “Astroturf movements” — funded by the Koch brothers and other corporate powers to protect themselves from the deadly dangers of taxation, regulation, health care reform and restrictions on their sacred rights to pollute and exploit.

The Tea Party has been built on the twin pillars of billionaire funding and irrationalist trashing of science, evolution, the global warming threat and 75 years of modern economic analysis. It is also the most vicious in its hatred of immigrants and Muslims.

The Tea Party’s most favored candidates — Michelle Bachmann, Rick Perry, Herman Cain — successively disappeared as they proved to be too ridiculous for prime time. But there’s been a double irony in the rise and decline of the Tea Party. The first was that, after President Obama saved Wall Street’s butt with the banking and auto bailouts, corporate America kicked him in the teeth to derail his legislative reform programs, as modest and business-friendly as those were.

The second irony was that the Tea Party fuelled the Republican ascendance in the 2010 midterm elections, but afterward has become a weight threatening the party’s national prospects in 2012.

Fear of the Tea Party prevents Republican legislators from engaging in the normal dealing that characterizes bourgeois politics — as dirty as that dealing often is (as the German imperial statesman Bismarck put it, the making of sausages and laws should not be too closely observed). That’s why Congress has been tied up in knots over the budget and routine votes to raise the statutory debt ceiling.

This so-called “gridlock” prevents the Obama administration from doing much of anything to assist the weak economic recovery, but it also alienates millions of ordinary voters who identify as “independents.” The obscene sexist ravings of Rush Limbaugh drive away millions more.

The damage that the Tea Party and other far-right forces such as ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council) have done is most visible at the level of state legislatures. A tsunami of vicious laws — attacking workers’ right to collectively bargain and union organizing, stripping women’s right to abortion and even contraception, cutting off immigrant students’ right to education and other barbaric measures — has swept the country, not only in traditionally reactionary states but making inroads in the industrial heartlands (Ohio, Indiana and Michigan among others).

State legislatures have also redrawn Congressional districts in the most blatant gerrymandering fashion, gutting Black and Latino representation — to say nothing of “voter ID” laws that make a mockery of civil and voting rights laws, on the lying pretext of stopping fraud. These outrages are beginning to stimulate resistance as well.

In the national Republican party where Mitt Romney is the now certain presidential nominee, the Tea Party wing will extract concessions, whether in extreme rightwing party platform planks or in the selection of the vice-presidential candidate. To preserve party unity in some form, the Republican campaign will have to escalate its anti-Obama hatefest to new levels of absurdity and racist bigotry — quite likely turning off even more of the electorate.

The Republicans are corporate America’s preferred party of savage budget-cutting and union-bashing, but the influence of the Tea Party perversely may have caused the Republicans to “peak too early” for their own good. Fortunately for the one percent, the Democrats are all too available whenever needed to do the dirty work for capital.
This year may be different. While Romney is likely to modify some of his social views in order to counter the widening gender gap, there is one question on which he will have little room to maneuver: race. President Obama’s commanding 2008 victory was a product of a generalized revulsion toward George W. Bush, a negative referendum on the state of the economy and enthusiasm around the possibility of electing the first African-American president. However, these conjunctural factors masked a deeper trend.

Demographic changes, Latino immigration in particular, and urbanization in states such as North Carolina and Virginia, is providing the Democratic Party with a growing structural advantage. And the Latino share of eligible voters has increased significantly since 2008. By some estimates the 2012 Latino vote will be 26% greater than it was four years ago. While much of this growth appears in safe states for one party or the other — California and Texas — much also appears in the swing states of Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado. Even in North Carolina, the still small Latino population has grown by 18% since 2008.

So far the Republican Party has proven slow to adapt to the changing electorate. Rather than support the pro-business guest worker program championed by both Presidents Bush and Obama, the Republican candidates have engaged in explicitly racist immigrant-bashing and have associated themselves with horrific legislation in Arizona, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. Mainstream commentators have noted the extent to which the GOP has become whiter, more southern, more male.

Party speeches have become increasingly racist. The use of “socialism” as an anti-Obama epithet, something Republicans had rarely used against Democrats since the height of the Cold War, is an appeal more to white racism than to anti-Marxist fears. Republicans use the word “socialism” to appeal to white stereotypes of African Americans, whom they envision as wanting to live on government handouts funded by white taxpayers.

Republican policies and rhetoric risk making Republican politicians uncompetitive among Latino voters. A recent Fox News poll found Obama beating Romney among likely Latino voters by a margin of 70-14. If Romney attempts to close that margin by flip flopping on immigration reform and the DREAM Act, he will alienate his angry white voter base and possibly reduce Republican turnout in November. His most likely course of action, therefore, will be to double-down on covert appeals to white racism in the hopes of revving up white male turnout. Whether this might succeed in winning Romney the presidency is difficult to predict. However, this election will be as vicious and racist as any in recent times.

The despicable slurs and personal attacks on president Obama will actually re-energize many of his disappointed supporters to support him once again. Black voters, in particular, will also see the fight to reelect the first African-American president as a defense against the assaults on their community — including the attempts to suppress their vote. It’s important to recognize and respect this sentiment, but also to clearly understand that president Obama, every bit as much as Mitt Romney, is a candidate of the Wall Street bankers, hedge funds and corporate capital.

**Occupy’s Voice**

Last September Occupy Wall Street (OWS) began with the march of a few thousand to New York’s Financial District and the overnight occupation by a couple hundred people of a small private park owned by a commercial real estate company. The following Saturday, as protestors marched uptown, police beat them, pepper spraying some of the young women, and arresting eighty. As the direct result of this unprovoked violence, hundred went to the park to find out what was happening, staying to take part of the General Assemblies and the flowering of working groups around specific issues. The following Saturday, 5,000 marched on the Brooklyn Bridge to protest police repression. The police seemed to be directing them on to the road, but actually trapped and arrested 700.

Popular disgust with the NYPD’s mass arrests at Brooklyn Bridge pushed city unions to support OWS. This was particularly true for the Transport Workers Union whose members came to the park from the first day of the occupation. Their contract was about to expire and management was demanding another round of concessions. But also present were striking telecommunication workers, healthcare workers and construction workers. By early
October they organized a support march, and students from some of the largest New York campuses organized a walkout of over 2,000 and joined.

The media seemed to mock the occupiers because they lacked a list of demands. In fact, their refusal to restrict themselves to such a list challenged the neoliberal agenda. They demanded the right to create a public and open community where fundamental issues about how we take care of ourselves are discussed. They challenged the rhetoric of austerity by proclaiming “We are the 99%.”

OWS dramatically turned the spotlight onto the reason for the economic crisis: The drive to restructure government on the back of its workforce and strip communities of services and resources. It is not that the 99% has been living beyond our means, but that the 1% has used its power to increase economic and political dominance.

The Occupy movement spread across the country as occupations mushroomed in cities, towns and colleges last fall, seeing itself as part of a response to the death culture of neoliberalism. Within six weeks more than 200 Occupies carried out actions on October 15, linking up with the international day of action that “indignados” had initiated in Spain and Greece. As demonstrators in Egypt returned to Tahrir Square to oppose the tricks of the military regime and its repression, defending their revolutionary process, Occupy identified with their struggle.

Occupy’s message also resonated beyond public parks and college campuses. Groups sprang up in poor urban neighborhoods throughout the country in a movement to “Occupy the Hood,” and in mainly immigrant communities to “Occupy the Barrio” or “Decolonize the Barrio.”

In contrast to the often largely white park occupations, Occupy the Hood and Decolonize the Barrio has successfully mobilized in communities of color to fight back against an epidemic of unjust foreclosures and police brutality. These movements have bought many things to the table, including hip-hop picket lines, health clinics, and working towards self-care for communities.

Occupy Wall Street didn’t emerge from thin air. It was preceded internationally by the general strikes in Greece and the Arab Spring. Even its first tactic of occupying space was launched in the United States by the 2008-09 struggles of University of California students, who opposed the tripling of fees over the past decade.

In February 2011, a mass occupation broke out in Madison, Wisconsin in response to the impending imposition of draconian legislation by the governor and state legislature. AFSCME’s lobby day was transformed when hundreds of students and workers from the University of Wisconsin, accompanied by public school teachers, decided to spend the night in the state Capitol, and then stayed on.

Once in the building they needed to feed and organize themselves — and they did, even receiving pizzas ordered in by supporters as far away as Tahrir Square! They set up work stations to meet their daily needs for information, food, health and child care. The Capitol occupation, lasting roughly six weeks, showed the potential for self-organization and the use of space to express a vision for a different society.
STATE LEGISLATURES ARE on a rampage to pass laws restricting women’s ability to control their reproductive lives — each one more outrageous than the last. Over the last two years a wave of health-related laws affecting women have been introduced in various states. Two years ago 950 bills reducing women’s access to reproductive rights in one way or another, and 89 were enacted. Last year 1,100 were introduced and a whooping 135 passing.

These range from limiting comprehensive sex education classes in schools and cutting funding for contraceptives to blocking women’s right to abortion — mandating procedures that are costly, unnecessary and humiliating, such as waiting periods, ultrasounds and even physical invasion of the woman’s body. In the case of Texas, the ultrasound requirement for all women seeking abortions means, for a first trimester procedure, a probe inserted into the woman’s vagina. No wonder it was labeled the state “rape law”!

Thirty years ago there were approximately 3000 of these clinics providing abortion services; today there are fewer than 1800, and in a number of states, none or practically none. Clinics are being shut down by requirements that they have hospital-like facilities and hallways irrelevant to their purpose. In Texas, health clinics for poor women have been defunded and shut down as collateral damage of the right-wing’s war against Planned Parenthood, even though they perform no abortions and aren’t connected with the organization.

Since the passage of the Hyde Amendment in 1976, with bipartisan cooperation, poor women covered under Medicaid can only apply for abortion in case of rape, incest or medical condition. Only 17 states and the District of Columbia continue to fund their abortions.

In 2010 more than a quarter of the laws passed state legislatures restricted abortions, the percentage rose to 68% last year. Laws include banning abortion beyond the 20th week (although more than 90% of all abortions are performed within the first 12 weeks) and requiring a waiting period — usually 24 hours — between counseling and the procedure (difficult and more costly for women who live in counties where there are no abortion providers). Some of the counseling provides with women inaccurate information (seven states point to a risk of developing breast cancer when no such link exists, and eight require listing possible negative consequences from having an abortion but don’t point out the consequences of continuing the pregnancy).

After making headway in restricting coverage for abortion under the federal health care bill, the radical right has moved their fight to the state level. Seven states now prohibit private health insurance providers from covering abortion and 15 prohibit insurance exchanges from doing so. Unless the federal government revisits this issue, more state legislators will pass these restrictions and insurance companies will make their decision based on what they perceive as in their business interests. Although these latest laws are the work of the extreme right, the blue dog Democrats were vocal in the Affordable Health Care Act debate over isolating abortion as fundamentally different from other medical services.

The strategy of those opposed to reproductive justice is to divorce the variety of health services women need over the course of their lives and focus on a narrow range. Then they portray women as selfish or naive, needing to be properly counseled into making the right decision. Meanwhile they portray themselves as moral agents with the First Amendment right to insist that women accept their vision.

Generally speaking, rightwingers focus their anger on clinic providers and doctors and portray women as “victims.” Yet there are state laws on the books ostensibly to protect fetuses, and a few women who have delivered babies while addicted to drugs or alcohol and unable to kick their habit have been charged with fetal abuse. Most people recognized that this issue was a public health problem, and this legislation has languished.

However in Indiana two years ago Bei Bil Shuai, a depressed and pregnant woman, attempted to kill herself. Rescued by friends, she did everything to ensure her baby survived, including undergoing Cesarean surgery, but her newborn died shortly after birth. She was arrested, charged and has been in jail for the past year under the state’s murder statute (with the death penalty or a sentence of 45 years to life) and attempted feticide statute (with a sentence of up to 20 years).

Each year three million U.S. women will have an unintended pregnancy; almost half will have an abortion. Others will have problems during their pregnancy and all who deliver a baby will need a range of services. But the climate of right-wing hatred of women’s rights in an era of cutbacks will have a devastating effect on health clinics, well baby centers and child care centers. These will not be considered “core services” and will be on the chopping block.

Rush Limbaugh has performed a service by putting the brutal assault on women’s rights on Front Street, out of the alleys of state legislature where the worst crimes are committed. Women and all supporters of human rights have been resilient in fighting back — and the battle continues.
A few months later, as Mayor Bloomberg (the 12th richest man in the United States!) launched another round of austerity in New York City, a network of unions, community organizations and political groups started an occupation near City Hall called “Bloombergville.” Becoming a focal point of opposition to the cuts, in many of its organizing methods it prefigured OWS, but was unable to launch a larger movement and packed up once the budget was adopted.

By the spring of 2012 most Occupations have left the parks. Some, like OWS, were violently repressed. Others, like Occupy Chicago, were prevented by the police from ever establishing a camp. Many, in the face of the winter and under attack from city officials, chose to leave for indoor spaces where working groups and General Assemblies continue to meet.

Occupy is not just a physical space, but also an approach to community life. Most Occupies are involved in organizing teach-ins against austerity, standing with people whose homes face foreclosure, mike-checking the corporate elite at their business luncheons, defending community programs and supporting workers’ struggles. Some of these actions involve tensions between unions and organizations tied to the Democratic Party — as to be expected with a model that is non-hierarchical and not inclined toward compromise.

The Occupy movement is driven by a notion of direct democracy, transparency and a notion of a society not based on profit but on meeting people’s diverse needs. Above all, the Occupy movement has altered the political discussion — an important and lasting contribution in and of itself.

The Unions and Austerity

Unions, with all their flaws, remain a critical arena of working-class collective capacity — a perennial thorn in the side of capital, and a potential resource for resisting or reversing austerity.
However, labor leaders’ continued commitment to Democratic Party electoral efforts above all threatens to squander the potential for unions to serve as centers of working-class resistance.

Every election year, unions spend millions on political contributions, direct mail and advertising, while enlisting their staff and rank-and-file activists for nightly phone banks, weekend door-belling, and worksite leafleting.

Unions and their PACs spent an estimated $400 million in 2008 on campaign contributions and independent expenditures, plus many thousands of paid and volunteer hours, aimed mainly at electing Democrats.

The Democrats took the White House and the Congress. But instead of the Employee Free Choice Act (labor’s top legislative priority in 2009) and the $9.50 minimum wage that Obama trumpeted during his campaign, we ended up with a pro-corporate health care reform and more “free trade” agreements.

Most importantly, perhaps, we got Obama’s centrist version of austerity, complete with a wage-slashing auto bailout, attacks on teacher unions, bank bailouts that left working-class debtors in the lurch, a Deficit Commission and an overdose of rhetoric about shared sacrifice. It is true that Republicans have taken to union-busting as a general principle. For them, the economic crisis presents an opportunity to wipe out what remains of unions’ institutional capacity and legal rights.

Centrists, including Obama, have chosen a different path, working to incorporate union leaders as partners in implementing austerity. The objective here is to minimize opposition to the core project of austerity while holding the Democratic electoral coalition together.

Union leaders have focused their energies on beating back the most direct (usually Republican) attacks on bargaining and organizing rights. This resistance to direct attacks on unions as institutions has, however, gone hand-in-hand with rhetorical and material concessions to the larger project of austerity.

In this respect, the role of President Obama and the Democratic Party has been crucial. Playing the “good cops” to the Republican “bad cops,” the Democrats have been able to present their version of austerity as the only reasonable alternative for frightened union leaders.

Obama has been explicit in calling upon union leaders to discipline their members to the requirements of austerity. In doing so, he has even drawn strength from the divisive rhetoric of the far right.

At a 2011 town hall meeting in Deborah, Iowa, Obama argued that unionized public sector workers must accept concessions in order to avoid a “natural backlash” by those who have seen their wages and pensions slashed in recent years.\(^1\)

Referring to teachers’ unions, Obama said “If there’s a feeling that unions aren’t partners in reform processes in things like education, then they’re going to end up being an easy target.” Meanwhile, Obama’s Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and his former Chief of Staff, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, have made attacks on teachers unions the centerpiece of their education reforms.\(^2\)

Like every “good cop,” Obama needs a bad cop, in this case the Republican Right. Teachers have not been alone in feeling the pressure. Public workers and services have suffered mightily in the crisis.

Over the last two years, federal workers have given back $60 billion through pay freezes imposed by the Democrat in the White House, and a change to federal pensions passed by the Democrat-controlled Senate will cut new hires’ retirement pay by 41%\(^3\).

From January 2009 to December 2011, the number of state and local government employees declined by 583,000, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data. From 2008 to 2011 local school districts alone cut 278,000 jobs.\(^4\)

The Obama Administration’s bailout of GM and Chrysler applied the centrist approach to austerity in the private sector. As a condition of the bailout, the Obama Administration mandated that unionized auto workers accept “parity” in wages and benefits with non-union auto workers.
In the end, the union agreed to a 50% wage cut for all new hires and replaced their defined benefit pension with a 401K. Further, the UAW allowed General Motors and Chrysler to reduce their previous commitments for payments toward retiree health care, which was already underfunded. As a consequence, the Department of the Treasury ordered fund trustees to immediately cut retiree health care benefits, which they did. The UAW also gave up its right to strike in 2011 contract negotiations.

Ironically, the auto bailout is trumpeted as evidence of Obama’s support for workers and unions. By playing the “good cops” the Democrats have arguably been more
effective at implementing austerity than the clumsy, over-reaching and increasingly rabid Republican right.

Yes, there are differences between Democrats and Republicans when it comes to issues of concern to workers. The point we want to emphasize is that Obama and the Democratic establishment are fully committed to the core project of austerity, and using fear of the Republican Right to divide workers and rally union support.

Should workers put their energy behind the “good cop” of austerity in the 2012 elections? We think it would be a better bet to develop effective extra-electoral tools to defend unions’ historic achievements and challenge the bipartisan consensus around austerity.

In our view, the moment is ripe for the rise of an independent political movement to challenge austerity. In fact, the most important missing ingredient in the construction of such a movement right now is probably a full commitment from organized labor. Subordinating union political energy and “messaging” to Democratic electoral campaigns will make such a commitment impossible. Unions cannot hope to build on the Occupy movement’s successful efforts to “change the conversation” while campaigning for pro-austerity politicians.

The Occupy movement resonated so strongly with large sections of the American people because it gave expression to the widespread anti-austerity sentiment that has no home in the capitalist parties. The big question for union militants now is how to direct the organizational capacities of the labor movement toward mass mobilization for direct action against austerity, and for constructing a new, democratic, independent, anti-capitalist, political force that embodies the sentiments and the spirit aroused by the uprisings in Ohio and Wisconsin and the Occupy movement.

Around the country, many union members (and some unions) have begun building bottom-up coalitions, using direct action, and cooperating with Occupiers in locally-focused but nationally linked campaigns against home foreclosures, school privatization, and anti-democratic legislation intended to advance austerity.

The Occupy movement, driven by a small cadre of thousands of dedicated activists, was able to change the national conversation by daring to challenge Wall Street directly. We have no doubt that sustained labor movement initiatives along these lines could radically alter the political map of the country to an even greater degree.

Beginning Resistance

After accepting round after round of concessions, last year working people began to resist. When Wisconsin working people’s month-long action didn’t stop Governor Walker’s legislation, they turned to recalling legislators, successfully replacing two. Now they have gathered a million signatures to recall Walker, and the governor finds himself on the fundraising trail.

A number of other Midwest governors had the same agenda. Ohio’s Governor John Kasich pushed through a similar bill that limited about 400,000 public sector workers from collective bargaining, collecting dues or striking. Demonstrators then gathered 1.29 million signatures to put Senate Bill 5 on the November 2011 ballot, where it went down to defeat. In Michigan Governor Rick Snyder rushed through Public Act 4, the Emergency Manager bill. More than 225,000 have signed a petition demanding that the law be submitted as a referendum issue on the 2012 ballot.
In all three cases demonstrations and rallies preceded the work on recall and referendum. Many saw the campaigns as a chance to fan out and talk to coworkers, relatives and neighbors about the vicious legislation. They were determined to refute the myth that they were lazy and inefficient workers.

**Workers and Occupy Fight Back**

Summer and early fall 2011 saw a number of other workers organizing strategic campaigns to win decent contracts in the face of the employers’ demands for more givebacks. First, Verizon workers set up mobile pickets that followed managers functioning as scabs and organized noisy picket lines at wireless stores, turning customers and suppliers away. Although the two-week strike was cut short, the company accumulated a backlog of 100,000 orders.

The most dramatic case was the longshore workers in Longview, Washington. Last summer they began protesting the opening of a state-of-the-art grain terminal whose managers refused to negotiate a contract with the union. By early September they escalated their tactics and massed on the railroad tracks to physically block trains, opening the hoppers and dumping out the grain. The next day ports in nearby Tacoma and Seattle were shut down by wildcats as the longshore workers headed to Longview, where they invaded the terminal. Of course they were met by police, who arrested hundreds, but neither the arrests nor a temporary restraining order banning picketing that blocked the trains convinced the International Longshore and Warehouse Union to back down.

Yet it was the Occupy movement — initiated by a handful in a small park near Wall Street — that captured mainstream media with its message of “We are the 99%.” The movement has now successfully defended people’s homes against eviction, marched and rallied in defense of city services, called for the cancellation of a trillion dollars’ worth of student debt and supported workers’ struggles ranging from the locked-out Sotheby workers in New York City to the Longview struggle.

To be sure, there have been tensions in the alliances that formed between Occupiers and the unions, and of course the resistance itself is uneven. Anti-immigrant, anti-women’s reproductive rights and anti-union legislation such as Indiana’s right-to-work-for-less bill continue to be passed. Politicians continue to rant against the rights and dignity of poor people, working people, gays and lesbians, immigrants and women. Employers continue their

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**The Capitalist State**

OUR SOCIALIST VISION for changing society begins from the notion that “the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.” That argument, advanced by Marx and Engels long ago in The Communist Manifesto, resonates with the language of today’s militant activists: “We are the 99%,” and “We are the leaders we have been waiting for.”

Whatever political label one attaches to these ideas, they reflect the shared conclusion that the overwhelming majority has an interest and a need to deepen democracy. In our view, deepening democracy is about much more than changing the personnel who run the government or reining in corporate influence through political spending.

Ultimately, deepening democracy requires challenging the underlying foundation of corporate power — the private ownership of productive resources. Let’s be blunt: capitalism gives corporate CEOs and investment bankers’ dictatorial powers over the fate of our government, our workplaces, and our communities. No matter how much of our sweat and blood went into producing it, they own the capital, and they make the decisions about what to do with it.

Still, even CEOs and bankers are not exactly free to disregard the number one imperative of survival under capitalism: to maximize profits by any means necessary. And they work hard to instill this imperative in all of us. We are told over and over that our political and economic choices must conform to the needs of the “economy,” that we must be “competitive” and “live within our means.” These seemingly common-sense phrases have the effect of subordinating democracy — collective decision-making about what kind of society we want to have — to the profit-maximizing imperatives of capital.

Around the world and in the United States, people are rebelling against a system where the state is politically dominated by the 1% and materially dependent on capitalist profit-making. Millions understand intuitively that democracy won’t mean much unless it gives the 99% real power to collectively determine political and economic priorities — to decide what to do with our social wealth, or even how to deal with scarcity and crisis. Looked at this way, it is clear that just voting in the more “liberal” or “moderate” capitalist party won’t change the character of the state.

In our view, the job facing socialists today is to build social movements that can make structural demands to challenge a profit-driven system. That means building alternative politics and organizational structures. We need to create spaces where the 99% can come together and discuss our problems and devise solutions. These spaces can be unions, social movements, block clubs, schools — places where there is some capacity for continuity and ongoing discussion.

We do think it is important to challenge the political system through an independent party that can articulate the needs, desires and will of a massive movement. Such a party of the 99% might win reforms and even take office at the local, state or federal level — but this would not transform the state. A revolutionary transformation would involve dissolving the existing forms of the state, based on the market and the power of capital, and structuring new governmental forms based on workers’ control of investment and production, and democratic, collective self-management.
Occupy the Ballot? What Are the Options?

FOUR YEARS AGO, tens of millions of people of all races and nationalities were delighted to vote for Barack Obama for president. They knew it would be an historic blow against racist ideology for an African American to be elected to the presidency.

Many also believed that Obama’s calls for “hope and change” meant that he would rally the American people for reforms such as a higher minimum wage, more rights for workers, a jobs program, the development of renewable energy, a prompt end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the closure of Guantanamo, and an end to the brutal raids and deportations of immigrants. In the end, none of this happened.

The change Obama brought to the presidency proved to be more style than substance. In the face of the right-wing offensive and blatant racist attacks on president Obama, however, many people understandably blame Obama’s disappointing record on the financial meltdown he inherited and the Republican obstructionism he faced. In our view, this denies the deeper realities at work.

In the first place, candidate Obama depended heavily on key sections of the corporate elite, and during the campaign he privately assured his corporate backers that he would not govern from the left. Once in office, most of his promises for “change we can believe in” were bound to fall by the wayside.

Secondly, however, there is a more structural dimension to the disappointments of the Obama presidency. The deepest crisis of global capitalism since the 1930s has posed a stark choice to capitalist governments everywhere. This is the choice between austerity measures that seek to resolve the crisis by preserving and increasing the wealth of capital at the expense of the 99%, and a program of radical reforms that begins to challenge the very logic of capitalism in order to prioritize the needs of the 99% for housing, education, income and health care.

The crisis itself leaves little room for the kind of reforms that might have allowed Obama to adopt a more populist mantle while remaining within the acceptable margins of capitalist politics.

Obama has implicitly staked his presidency on two ideas: 1) austerity (so-called “shared sacrifice”) is the necessary, if bitter, medicine to cure an ailing capitalism, and 2) he knows best how to administer the medicine.

Occupy, on the other hand, has inspired millions to consider the possibility that austerity (and perhaps even capitalism) is incompatible with our desire for a more democratic, equal, peaceful, and environmentally responsible society.

When it comes to voting for President and Congress, many activists will understandably use their vote as an opportunity to register disgust with the racist, sexist and national-ist demagoguery of the Republican right. We, too, reject the right-wing demagoguery and racist attacks against President Obama. But we draw a somewhat different conclusion about the kind of collective actions which will allow us to both challenge austerity and defeat the far right.

To our way of thinking, the most important element in the 2012 is the existence of the Occupy movement — not the election campaign which will feature lying attack ads, phony debating postures and endless falsifications, papering over the strong commonalities between the two opponents. As socialists, we argue for massive resistance to the policies and parties of corporate America.

In that sense, “our party” is Occupy, even though this movement doesn’t have an electoral representation.

Of course, there will be genuinely important questions on the ballot in various states — to repeal the infamous Emergency Manager law in Michigan, to defend gay and lesbian rights, to support public worker collective bargaining, to demand a verifiable transition to renewable energy among other important issues — and those campaigns are worthy serious energy.

There are also independent national, statewide and local campaigns — most notably those organized by the Green Party or the Socialist Party — although they face enormous challenges in getting on the ballot and being able to reach out to a significant number of voters without having massive funding and media access. Casting a vote for these campaigns won’t change the outcome of the 2012 election, but it is a gesture for a political alternative. We believe that independent electoral campaigns can be a positive force in 2012, to the extent that they tie their efforts in with the wider process of movement building that is going on.

In the end, however, we know that one of the parties of austerity will win in 2012. At this moment, then, voting for candidates can’t be seen as the primary form of struggle for those of us who see austerity as the defining issue. So let’s get on with the work that matters most, building the struggles that will lead to more than symbolic options.
aggressive tactics, including locking out workers. Unions have continued to sell the need for concessions to their members, and members have reluctantly gone along.

Resistance has not stopped the attack. Yet the newfound energy is amazing. We are beginning to fight and realize that turning around a country based on inequality and injustice is not an easy task. It’s too easy to believe we aren’t having much of an impact. Two months before the scheduled G8 meeting in Chicago, President Obama announced the meeting would be transferred to Camp David. That is a direct result of the movement’s plans to be in Chicago.

As a movement of resistance to austerity, social justice activists have a better sense of who are our allies and who opposes us. We have begun to discuss a range of collective tactics and decide which to use on various occasions. We have shown creativity in our signs and democracy in our decision-making. So we are further than we were a year ago because we have rejected the politicians’ rhetoric of divide and rule, because we have built a broad unity and because we realize that the way to be taken seriously is to disrupt business as usual. As a sign in Wisconsin summarized it, “Walk like an Egyptian.”

Notes

Solidarity is a socialist, feminist, anti-racist organization. We are activists in many grassroots formations including Occupy and unions. We work for human rights, and for a world in which political and economic decision-making will be democratic from the ground up. We oppose the two-tierization of workers and support union rights. We support rank-and-file activists fighting for democratic rights within the union. We work for reproductive rights, we oppose U.S. imperialism. We believe no one is illegal. We seek an ecosocialist world. We support the struggle of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. We are internationalists and support the self-determination of all people. If you are interested in learning more about Solidarity, check out our website: http://www solidarity-us.org, write us at info@solidarity-us.org or give us a call at 313.841.0160.
AGAINST THE CURRENT is a bimonthly magazine featuring articles, discussions and reviews by activists and politically engaged scholars.

The May/June issue features a Marxist reflection on patriotism and flag fetishism by Bertell Ollman. Malik Miah’s Race and Class column takes up the murder of Trayvon Martin; James Clark discusses the Occupy movement; Bill Balderston and Claudette Begin lay out the problems and potential around the California Millionaires Tax campaign. Dianne Feeley describes the state takeover of Motor City — a takeover that will demand the layoff of 25% of city workers, and privatization or outsourcing of vital services.

International coverage includes an interview with Carl Finamore on Egypt’s revolution, Alexei Gusev’s perspectives on the politics of Putin’s Russia, and Joana Mortágua from Portugal’s Left Bloc on the fight against austerity after the country’s third general strike.

The March/April issue featured René Rojas on Chile: Student Uprising Shakes Regime, Esther Vivas on women’s crucial role in food security, and Adaner Usmani on the U.S.-Pakistan dysfunctional co-dependency.

The January/February issue featured more than a dozen activist reports on Occupy and the battles to come.

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