

Secretary/Treasurer's Report

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Plenty of questions have arisen regarding the emerging phenomenon known as Occupy Wall Street. Does the movement help or hurt the cause of organized labor? What is the purpose of the Occupy movement and how is it similar and different from the purpose of Organized Labor? Are we natural allies with similar goals, or are we on completely different trajectories?

The answers to these questions are not easily understood due to the short history of the Occupy movement, the lack of a coordinated and identifiable leadership within the movement, mixed messages regarding its goals, its questionable sustainability over the long term, and its inability to restrain a small minority of the radical “fringe” who have sullied the image of the movement by resorting to violence and vandalism rather than adopting the movement’s ideals of peaceful protest and resistance.

However, these challenges aside, the Occupy movement is making an important social and political impact and it continues to grow. What motivates the Occupy movement is not dissimilar to what motivates Organized Labor: a desire to reverse the growing gap in income inequality, a desire for good jobs with living wages and benefits, and a desire to preserve the middle class and the American dream.

It is not a coincidence that the majority of Occupiers are young adults. Nationwide, the unemployment rate is stuck at a stubborn nine percent. However, the employment rate for young adults age 16-29 is only 55 percent, meaning that 45 percent of this age group is currently not employed. Recent college graduates, many saddled with the crushing debt of student loans, cannot find work in virtually any field, let alone their field of study. And those without college degrees are even worse off due to the slump in construction jobs and the continued export of American manufacturing jobs. Adding to the problem for young Americans is a financial/banking system that has severely curtailed lending and increased the cost of credit for those who need it most.

Today, nearly 6 million Americans age 25-34 currently live with their parents due to the lack of jobs and no opportunity for upward mobility. But it’s not only student and other young adults that are affected by the jobs crisis. Recently, hundreds of Afghanistan and Iraq war veterans across the nation have joined the Occupy movement to protest the lack of jobs and opportunity for returning war veterans.

The Occupy movement refers to themselves as the 99 percent. This is because the top one percent of the wealthiest American households control a disproportionate amount of our nation’s wealth. Whether or not you empathize with the Occupy movement, BMWED members, and all rail workers, are economically among the 99 percent struggling to make ends meet in a nation increasingly made up of haves and have-nots. From an economic standpoint, we have a lot in common with the students, senior citizens, and veterans who are protesting as part of the Occupy movement.

While the rich get richer and corporations hoard cash, the poverty rate in the U.S. continues to rise. According to the recent Census Bureau Report titled "Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the U.S.:2010," the number of American's living in poverty rose for the third year in a row. According to the report, the poverty rate in the U.S. is now over 15 percent. Real median household income declined by 2.3 percent between 2009 and 2010, and the number of Americans without health insurance is now almost 50 million.

As working people, Labor can empathize with the economic issues of the Occupy protesters. Organized Labor has been fighting these battles on behalf of the middle class for over 100 years. We have been able to sustain this fight because we are organized, because we have democratically elected leadership, and because we have structure and the financial and organizational support of our membership. The longevity of our movement, or any movement, is rooted in organization. Organization is what allows us to make and implement strategic plans. Organization is what gives us the ability to educate and mobilize our membership in support of working family values. And organization is what has allowed us to sustain and be part of the union movement since our founding as a Brotherhood in 1887.

Yes, I have been inspired by the tenacity and "people power" demonstrated by those participating in the Occupy protests. The issues of the Labor movement and Occupy movement overlap quite a bit and we seem to have a number of issues in common. But tenacity and people power alone are not enough to sustain the Occupy movement over the long haul. They will need organization and structure to survive over the long term and keep their movement from being usurped by the radical fringe.

Of course, I wish the Occupy movement well and welcome them as an ally in the fight for jobs and economic justice. The best advice I can offer the Occupy movement is also Labor's rallying cry: Organize, Organize, Organize.

