

The Nation, ISO seek to channel Wall Street protests back to the Democratic Party

By David Walsh
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The Occupy Wall Street movement has struck a chord with millions of people. The wide support for the protests reveals the true state of public opinion in the US and elsewhere: opposition to the profit system has deepened and broadened enormously over the past several years. “Capitalism” is increasingly a dirty word, synonymous with great wealth for a handful and unbearable conditions for the vast majority.

Will this movement develop into conscious socialist opposition to the economic foundations of the present order, turning to the working class as the only force that can bring about revolutionary change? Or will it be brought under the control of the existing parties and institutions in the US, above all, the Democratic Party, and become a further means of accommodating the population to its own oppression?

Great numbers of young people in particular are hostile to what exists, but through no fault of their own, their knowledge of history, the social process, and the role of various political parties and tendencies is limited. Experience will provide the most critical education, but one of the first things that many will learn is that not all “friends” of the current protest are friends at all.

The implications of the growing anti-capitalist movement are threatening to the status quo. It is inevitable that all the cunning and cynicism of the ruling elite, its vast political experience, should be put to use in the effort to suffocate this movement, to see it flow harmlessly back into the official channels, i.e., support for the Democrats and Barack Obama in particular.

That reactionary effort has its liberal or pseudo-left face as well, in the form of publications and organizations which declare sympathy for the protests, but insist that the movement must not *at any cost* break with the big business two-party system and those institutions, including the trade unions, which ardently defend it. *The Nation* magazine and the International Socialist Organization (ISO) play prominent parts in this regard.

The Nation is a house organ of the Democratic Party, with a long and discreditable history. During the 1930s, in alliance with the Stalinists of the Communist Party, the weekly magazine’s editors defended Franklin D. Roosevelt against the socialist left, helping to keep an insurgent working class under the thumb of the Democrats. It has supported and apologized for every Democratic administration, including the present one. *The Nation* is put out by affluent and complacent upper middle class types, who possess more than a small stake in the stock market and corporate America.

It should not be forgotten that in November 2008, *Nation* editor, publisher and part-owner Katrina vanden Heuvel described herself and her fellow editors and writers as “all jubilant about the new era of

possibility opened up by Barack Obama’s victory,” asserting further that “Obama’s election marks a remarkable moment in our country’s history ... a victory for the forces of decency, diversity and tolerance.” In fact, contrary to the hopes and wishes of millions who voted for Obama, the 2008 election has proven a victory for the forces of wealth, political reaction and militarism.

Now, the *Nation* proclaims its support for the Wall Street protests. Any participant or supporter, beware! In an editorial posted October 5, the magazine seeks to bring the movement safely within the sphere of respectable and thoroughly establishment politics.

After playing up to the “young protesters” in a manner that would embarrass any honest participant (“The kids are alright! ... Yes, they’re angry, but they are also searching and optimistic and, above all, they have taken matters into their own hands”), the *Nation* editors get down to the business at hand.

“But what does Occupy Wall Street want? Whether with condescension or curiosity, that is the question being posed to the young people whose brilliant act of symbolic politics has landed them in the spotlight. Wisely, they are taking their time answering it.”

The *Nation* praises the one statement issued by protest leaders, which criticizes corporations for placing profits over people, then engages in this transparent sleight of hand: “The fact is, we on the left don’t have a scarcity of policy ideas. We’ve staged big rallies with detailed demands. We’ve called for a financial transactions tax and abolishing the carried-interest tax loophole, which benefits Wall Streeters. But we have lacked the power to put our ideas into practice.”

Who is this “we on the left” identified with the miserable and futile proposal to institute a “financial transactions tax,” supported by billionaires Warren Buffett, George Soros and Bill Gates and right-wing French president Nicolas Sarkozy? Vanden Heuvel and the *Nation* pretend that everyone participating in the protests is as cowardly and satisfied with a slightly reorganized version of capitalism as they are.

There is much confusion in the Occupy Wall Street movement, but increasing numbers are not committing themselves to the protests, and making considerable sacrifices, so that rapacious billionaires will see their wealth drop by what amounts to no more than small change. The most serious elements already desire—and more and more will come to see the necessity for such far-reaching measures—an end to the corporate stranglehold entirely, through the overthrow of existing social relations and the establishment of rational, democratically organized socialism.

The *Nation* defends the “No politics” line of some of those leading the current protests. In the headline of her article posted October 3,

Nation writer Betsy Reed, for example, asks “Why So Many Demands anticipate the large, sharp knife stuck in one’s back.

for Demands?” Reed writes that “their failure to present demands is the most frequently heard criticism of the OWS [Occupy Wall Street] protesters, not just in the mainstream press but from veteran leftists as well,” as though she were defending the movement against impurity and corruption.

This is a fraud. Reed and the *Nation* are here counting on the inexperience of the youthful forces they flatter so excessively. A profound disgust with the existing politics in America, a disgust felt almost universally, should not be mixed up with a rejection of politics as such. Politics is the form through which the great social questions are concentrated and fought out, above all, the questions of wealth and property relations: in other words, *which class will run society?* Politics today means the antipodes of the working class and socialism, at one pole, and capitalist wealth and its apologists, at the other.

The slogan of “No politics,” ironically, is the way in which existing politics and social structures find a defense. The *rejection of oppositional, socialist politics*, in practice, means the preservation of existing politics, Democratic Party politics, rotten, pro-capitalist politics. As the *Nation* editorial concludes hopefully, “Perhaps the outrage embodied by Occupy Wall Street will find an outlet at the ballot box or in legislation one day.” The *Nation*’s most fervent wish is to see the Wall Street protest movement corralled into a campaign of support for Obama’s re-election in 2012, which would mean that movement’s ignominious demise.

The International Socialist Organization (ISO) represents that flank of the Democratic Party and its environs which decorates its pro-capitalist politics with socialist phrases. In the present situation, the ISO is attempting to stifle the protest movement by helping to bring it under the control of the AFL-CIO and the rest of the trade union apparatus. This is a politically criminal policy. Through their nationalism, class collaboration and subordination of the working class to the Democrats, the trade unions are centrally responsible for the situation in which masses of people in America now find themselves.

The AFL-CIO has not opposed any of the attacks on the working class: factory closures, destruction of social programs, the assault on democratic rights, policies of endless war in the Middle East and Central Asia. Well-paid union officials in the auto industry and elsewhere have helped impose savage cuts in wages and benefits while not losing a penny in income themselves.

The ISO/*Socialist Worker* editorial posted October 5, “Making common cause against Wall Street,” welcomes the fact that “Organized labor is weighing in on the side of the Occupy Wall Street protests. ... The entry of major unions ... points to the potential for the Occupy movement to deepen its social roots.” This last claim is entirely false. The American “unions” today are business organizations, operated by well-heeled officials and dedicated to the defense of the corporations and the wealthy. Their participation is not a deepening of the movement’s “social roots,” but an attempt to rip those roots out of the ground.

The ISO statement celebrates the AFL-CIO and the existing unions. It praises various unions and union officials around the US for endorsing the Wall Street protests, including Leo Gerard, president of the Steelworkers union, a longtime bastion of red-baiting and anticommunism, and an organization that has imposed massive cuts and concessions on its members over the course of the past 30 years. When Gerard declares that his union leadership “stands in solidarity with and strongly supports Occupy Wall Street,” it is necessary to

Remarkably, an article posted at the ISO’s socialistworker.org October 6 (“A show of solidarity on Wall Street”), cites the speech by Bob Master, District 1 Legislative/Political Director of the Communications Workers of America (CWA), relatively fresh from the brazen and unprecedented betrayal of the Verizon strikers, who told those demonstrators who were listening to him to “Look around you. This is what democracy looks like.”

In August, the Associated Press quoted Master’s defense of the return-to-work surrender by the CWA at Verizon, commenting that union members were “overwhelmingly pleased to be going back.” Imposing concessions and job cuts on a hostile membership is what “democracy looks like” at the CWA.

The ISO is in the business of providing “left” credibility for and rehabilitating these discredited and treacherous figures.

The unions are intervening in the Wall Street protests because they fear above all the emergence of a mass movement independent of the Democratic Party and their own moribund structures.

The AFL-CIO website carries articles endorsing the protests, without a mention of the Democratic Party, Obama or capitalism. AFL-CIO president Richard Trumka is quoted as saying, “Occupy Wall Street has captured the imagination and passion of millions of Americans who have lost hope that our nation’s policymakers are speaking for them. We support the protesters in their determination to hold Wall Street accountable and create good jobs.”

This statement commits Trumka to absolutely nothing. It in no way represents a break with the unions’ policy of supporting Obama and the Democrats. The AFL-CIO interprets the fight to “create good jobs” as the whipping up of national chauvinism against China and other rivals of US capitalism and outdoing those rivals in imposing the lowest wages so that jobs will “stay in America.”

Sorting out one’s true allies and friends from fakers and impostors is a critical and ongoing task in political life. The intervention of the *Nation* and the ISO in the Wall Street protest movement is aimed at cutting its potentially revolutionary heart out.

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