

The Occupy movement, identity politics and the International Socialist Organization

By David Walsh
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The Occupy Wall Street and associated protests represent the re-emergence of social struggle at the center of American political life after an absence of thirty years or more.

With all its inevitable heterogeneity and confusion, the ongoing movement has raised *the* question of questions in American and global life, social inequality, and tapped into deep popular anger toward both big business parties in the US and their corporate backers. Polls indicate wide support for the slogans and general aims of the protests.

The appearance of the Occupy movement can only fill the political and business establishment with the greatest unease, not so much for what it is at present, but for what it prefigures: a movement of the great mass of the working population against increasingly unbearable social conditions.

One of the most disturbing features of the anti-Wall Street protests, from the point of view of the powers that be, is that they address themselves to major social questions, and not to the small change of petty bourgeois “identity politics.” The latter has become a mainstay of American political life, and the various “identity” constituencies, layers of better-off African Americans, Latinos, women, gays and others, have been central to the functioning of the Democratic Party in particular in the last several decades. A small minority has benefitted from affirmative action and other policies, even as the working class as a whole has suffered a devastating collapse in living standards.

In fact, “leftism” in the US in recent years has been almost exclusively identified with the operations of these privileged groupings, characterized by a profound hostility to any political movement of the working class that might get out from under their suffocating control.

Now, under conditions of the manifest failure of global capitalism as a social system, the hold of these retrograde “identity” movements is weakening. Large numbers of youth in particular are turning in a different, healthier direction.

This, in turn, evokes anxiety in the International Socialist Organization (ISO) and other pseudo-left tendencies, which have promoted and lived off gender and ethnic politics for decades. This is not merely an ideological question. This brand of social activity is an industry, with its associated university departments, publishing firms, magazines and other

publications, think tanks and research, etc. Many millions of dollars are at stake.

The ISO’s embrace of the Occupy movement has amounted from the beginning to attempting in a relentless manner to turn the protests toward the reactionary trade union officialdom and the identity politics milieu, in the name of “reaching out” and “broadening” the protests. The conscious aim is either to see the movement suppressed or transformed into an extension of these various wings of the Democratic Party.

This is the essential meaning of Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s “Building a multiracial Occupy movement” (November 3, 2011) at socialistworker.org, the ISO’s online publication.

After paying empty tribute to the Occupy Wall Street protests against economic inequality, Taylor asserts (and she returns to this theme several times) that this inequality “often overlaps with racial and ethnic inequality and injustice as well.” The aim of this argument is to present racial and class divisions as equal and co-existing social realities, to divide the working class and to justify the existence of a distinct constellation of minority-based organizations to represent (supposedly) the interests of blacks, Latinos and other minority groups.

This is the logic of the “race, class, gender” lens so fashionable in universities. But this lens dramatically distorts reality. Racism and other forms of discrimination and social backwardness emerge from class society and its attendant social inequality, and function to perpetuate the rule of the capitalists. Socialists fight with all their strength to *unite* all sections of the working class, regardless of race, ethnicity or gender, while the ruling elite, and its agencies continually attempt to pit workers against one another on ethnic and national lines especially. The only progressive method of fighting racism and other ideological poisons lies in the revolutionary struggle against capitalism. This is not the conception with which the ISO operates.

Taylor writes that “questions have arisen about the Occupy movement’s commitment to diversity, inclusion and anti-racism.” After rejecting the mainstream media’s criticisms along those lines, she goes on, “But Kenyon Farrow, writing for *American Prospect*, got a much wider hearing when he wrote an incendiary article on ‘Occupy Wall Street’s Race Problem’ that effectively dismissed the movement out of hand

as racist and clueless.”

After reading Farrow’s article, one is entitled to ask, “a much wider hearing” from whom? His piece is extremely right-wing and antagonistic toward the emerging popular opposition to social inequality. Farrow slanderously compares the anti-Wall Street protesters to arch-conservative Rush Limbaugh and denounces them for daring to term the enormous economic burdens of the working population a form of “slavery.” (Has he ever heard of “wage slavery,” first identified in the late 18th century?) The *American Prospect*, in which Farrow publishes his essay, is a thoroughly establishment, Democratic Party publication, launched in 1990. Two of its co-founders, Robert Kuttner and Robert Reich, have long associations with the Democratic Party (and Democratic administrations) or the mainstream media, or both.

Taylor, although she makes criticisms, lends Farrow’s foul piece credibility, proceeding as though it were a legitimate contribution to a “left” debate. She doesn’t reject his arguments out of hand, but simply counters defensively that his comments are “pretty unfair to a movement that has just existed for over a month.”

And in response to the claim that the movement is “too white,” Taylor scrambles to assert that the movement is “actively grappling with how to include all of the 99 percent.” She promotes the “Occupy the Hood” movement, a black nationalist and pro-capitalist group whose mission statement complains that “The questionable, unethical activities downtown Manhattan ... and in Corporate America directly effects our economic struggles and the future of all business and personal endeavors.”

She touts the efforts of the Occupy Movement to collaborate with “organized labor,” and notes that “Black and Latino workers are disproportionately more likely to be union members—especially in public-sector unions that are under particular attack right now.” In reality, Taylor and the ISO are worried about the fate of various black and Latino union officials, with whom they have unprincipled dealings.

Finally, Taylor gets around to advancing what she presents as issues that are “crushing communities of color.” She proposes marches on institutions “that are responsible for the conditions in Black and brown neighborhoods.” Along with marches on police precincts, she suggests marches “on the local Board of Education if it is planning ... to close more schools in Black neighborhoods, on the many banks responsible for the rash of home foreclosures in Black communities, or on the main post office in your city to protest the planned mass layoffs of postal workers, large numbers of whom are Blacks or other minorities.”

And what about everybody else? To hell with them, apparently. Or should “white” organizations propose marches on companies or institutions planning to lay off large numbers of “whites”? The logic is sinister, leading in the direction of inter-communal warfare. What if the main post office or local

board of education in question were actually to heed the proposed protests and choose to lay off workers of a different ethnicity or race, or close schools in another community? What would Taylor propose then?

This is putrid, divisive stuff, carried in a publication calling itself “socialist.” Taylor writes further that the movement “should call attention to the way that economic and racial injustice and inequality overlap by calling for affirmative action and prioritization of African American and Latino placement in higher education, jobs and housing programs.”

Not for Taylor and the ISO the notion of decent jobs and education and housing *for all*, as social rights, regardless of skin color or ethnicity! Again, this is a recipe for social disaster under the conditions of economic crisis. This organization doesn’t oppose capitalism, it wants more comfortable conditions for its own constituencies and plays with fire in the course of doing so.

When Taylor gets around to lambasting the Occupation movement for the fact that “Too often, the core organizers in many cities ... are young white men,” one simply wants to avert one’s eyes.

This is the politics of “haggling for privileges,” as Lenin described it, the effort by elite layers in the various ethnic and gender constituencies to grab a larger share of the available wealth at the expense of other groups.

Certain key words are entirely absent from Taylor’s article: Barack Obama, Democratic Party, socialism, capitalism. The omission is not accidental. Taylor and the ISO navigate within the existing political framework, in and around the Democrats and the Obama re-election campaign. Taylor pretends to be a socialist, but rejects the entire socialist tradition, as well as its principles. Her pretensions and those of the ISO as a whole need to be debunked.

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