

Occupy 2012: Movement Struggles To Evolve, Maintain Momentum



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- * Protesters target campaign trail
- * Unions, students hold key in 2012
- * Focus on new tech, social media tools (Changes headline, edits)

By Laird Harrison and Michelle Nichols

Oakland, Calif./New York, Jan 9 (Reuters) - It's been a long, cold winter already for Occupy Wall Street, the protest movement that burst onto the scene in September to focus national attention on income inequality and the perceived greed of the rich and powerful.

Police have cleared the signature "Occupy" encampments in New York, Los Angeles, Oakland and other major cities. Cold weather, and perhaps protest fatigue, have weakened the handful of camps that remain around the country. The lack of a coherent set of demands has made it difficult for the young movement to affect policy or otherwise score victories that might keep recruits coming.

But the movement has clearly influenced the national political conversation, with even President Barack Obama echoing some of its themes in calling for a "fair shot" and "fair share" for all.

Now, as Occupy heads into 2012, participants in the leaderless movement are developing a range of new strategies and tactics to keep what they view as the injustices of the economic system in the spotlight.

Here are some ways the Occupy movement is trying to evolve:

OCCUPY THE ELECTION

Occupy has been likened to the conservative Tea Party movement, which emerged in 2009 and helped elect dozens of Republicans. But many in the Occupy movement specifically reject electoral politics, which they see as hopelessly tainted by money. Relationships with labor unions, the natural allies of Occupy when it comes to electoral politics, have been a mixed bag, with some unions, notably National Nurses United, strongly backing the protesters while others have kept their distance.

In the current election cycles, it appears the main Occupy activities will be rallies, sit-ins, and heckling candidates on the stump. During the Iowa caucus campaign, a handful of occupiers interrupted speeches by Obama and by Republican presidential candidates Newt Gingrich and Ron Paul. Small groups also targeted New Jersey Governor Chris Christie as he campaigned for Gingrich's rival Mitt Romney, and stuck Romney himself, who got rich as a private equity investor, with the moniker "Mr. One Percent." New Hampshire campaign events have similarly been a target of small groups of protesters.

OCCUPY THE ECONOMY

The Occupy movement blames the banks for the worst U.S. recession in decades. And one of its more successful initiatives has been a campaign urging consumers to move their money from the commercial banks to not-for-profit credit unions; in a little over a month, credit unions pulled in hundreds of thousands of new customers. Bank of America also scrapped a widely criticized \$5 monthly fee for debit cards, which the Occupy movement claimed as a victory. Occupy San Francisco is planning a big demonstration in that city's Financial District on Jan 20.

Some groups of protesters are trying to come up with alternative banking systems. Others are pushing for legislation. Protesters in Oakland and San Francisco have carried placards calling for a return to the Depression-era Glass-Steagall Act, which separated investment banking and commercial banking. Occupy the SEC, a committee of Occupy Wall Street, is calling for tough implementation of the so-called Volcker Rule, which would bar U.S. banks from using depositor's funds for speculative investments.

On the West Coast, demonstrators have twice picketed at ports, shutting down shipping terminals for up to 24 hours. But truckers, stevedores and longshoremen who refused to cross picket lines lost pay, raising the question of whom the action was helping, or hurting. The International Longshore and Warehouse Union publicly opposed the Dec. 12 action that aimed to shut down ports, while the International Brotherhood of Teamsters took a neutral stance.

Judging from the history of social movements, Occupy's relationship with labor unions, as well as students, could ultimately be the key to its influence, says Robert Cohen, a professor of history and social studies at New York University.

"It has to be large-scale to continue to demonstrate force," he said. "It has to bring together more allied groups. And someone has to push this into specific policies."

OCCUPY HOUSING

In December protesters launched Occupy Our Homes, a bid to take back foreclosed homes. Occupiers took up residence in a home in Oakland, California and one in Brooklyn, New York, that day, demanding that lenders renegotiate mortgages for the homeowners. National Occupy Our Homes organizer Matt Browner Hamlin said protesters had set a goal of over 100 such "actions" around the country in the next few months.

The Atlanta group is already claiming victory; Occupy Atlanta member Tom Franzen says it forced JPMorgan Chase to offer more generous terms to homeowner Birgitte Walker, who ran into financial difficulties after being honorably discharged from the Army. Chase acknowledges that it modified Walker's loan, but spokesperson Nancy Norris said protesters had nothing to do with it. "We had been working with her for a year," she said.

Elsewhere, the Occupy Our Homes movement has run into stiff resistance. Just before New Year's Eve, police arrested squatters in an Oakland home they were holding "as collateral." It was the second time police had driven Oakland occupiers from a private residence, suggesting that squatting in homes may be just as challenging as camping in parks.

OCCUPY CYBERSPACE

The Occupy movement has been driven by social media, and activists are now moving to build on their successful use of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube with new tools and technology. The group rolled out StudioOccupy.org, which allows protesters to easily share and edit videos and other multimedia presentations online. Occupydream.org aims to collect a million "statements of dreams" in advance of a march on Washington timed for Martin Luther King's birthday on Jan. 16.

Some protesters have also begun to use "Vibe," an application for iPhones, iPads and Android that allows the user to send messages that are only visible to other users, and not to police or other outsiders. Vibe messages are anonymous, and users can control how far they are broadcast (from 150 feet to worldwide) and for how long (the messages disappear after a set time period ranging from 15 minutes to 30 days, leaving no trail).

The use of such technology enables the movement to mobilize and organize efficiently without a top-down hierarchy. Social movements in the past required a leader to put out orders to lieutenants who passed them along to the foot soldiers, but now any individual can call a protest at any time, with the crowd deciding on the spur of the moment whose call to action deserves attention.

OCCUPY REAL SPACE

Police raids on the big metropolitan camps created the appearance that all occupy camps were evicted. But tent communities have quietly persisted.

While no official count exists, Firedoglake, a news website sympathetic to the movement, counted 65 tent communities in the United States that were expected to last through the winter. Perhaps the most visible, an Occupy DC camp in Washington's McPherson Square, a couple of blocks from the White House, has weatherized its tents and obtained winter sleeping bags.

Other occupiers have moved indoors. Occupy Wall Street is renting office space in lower Manhattan, and Occupy Atlanta is in the top floor of a homeless shelter. Evicted campers have not all abandoned their former spaces either: on New Year's Eve, hundreds of people gathered at Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan, where the largest Occupy camp once stood, and 68 were arrested when they tried to remove police barricades.

Questions about physical space have stimulated a debate within the movement. Some argue that camps are essential as bases for operations, as dramatic symbols or as model egalitarian communities. Others say housekeeping and organizational challenges in the camps have drained the group's energy away from more effective tactics for social change. But most predicted that spring would find a new blooming of tent communities around the country.

OCCUPY CULTURE

The protesters' slogan "We are the 99 percent," which refers to a view that the richest 1 percent have a virtual monopoly on money, power and influence, has struck a chord across the country, and the movement's rhetoric has quickly become a part of popular culture. Occupy this, occupy that -- there are few examples of a single word jumping so quickly from the middle pages of the dictionary to the forefront of public conversation. Chants like "Whose streets? Our streets" and "banks got bailed out, we got sold out" were suddenly as familiar as snatches of Bob Dylan songs were to a previous generation of protesters.

But Occupy protesters have a much more ambitious cultural agenda. In the way they have organized their movement, by welcoming everyone, eschewing hierarchy, and allowing a voice to whoever shows up, they hope to set an example for the rest of society. (Reporting Laird Harrison and Michelle Nichols; Additional reporting by Peter Henderson and Malathi Nayak; Editing by Jonathan Weber and Christopher Wilson)