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## **Occupy--A View from the Grassroots: “Thoughts on Diversity, Intersectionality, Strategy, and Movement Building”**

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I’ve spent the last 20 years of my life organizing for the rights of students, hotel workers, farm workers and immigrants. Two years ago I became the Executive Director of SAJE (Strategic Actions for a Just Economy), a community-based organization working to organize a grassroots economic-justice movement in South Central Los Angeles.

As I’ve watched the Occupy Wall Street movement evolve, and as I’ve spent time at Occupy Los Angeles and visited Occupy Wall Street, at different moments I’ve found myself inspired, frustrated, lost, pained, and hopeful. Occupy has captured the imagination of progressives, it has mobilized tens of thousands of people, and organized hundreds of encampments and affiliated protest actions, but on the ground I’ve found the interactions among the 99% taking part to be much more complex.

My involvement in this burgeoning movement has been a roller coaster of a ride. As I continue to try and find my place within it, I reflect on what I’ve learned from Occupy and what I hope it has learned from those of us who have taken part in it.

As a single mother of two children, one of whom suffers from ADHD and the other who is in the middle of the college application process, I have regrettably not been able to spend as much time

at Occupy as I would have liked. As a reminder of my limitations and the challenges that others must face, the first day that I made my way to Occupy, in the 2nd week of the encampment, my 7 year old son and I didn't quite make it. He had a bit of a meltdown a block from the encampment, and we had to turn around and go home.

I tried again the following week, and unfortunately my first full experience at Occupy Los Angeles was a painful one. It was the reason I didn't return to Occupy LA for another month.

It all started at that night's General Assembly. The General Assembly is meant to be a horizontal leaderless decision making body that operates on a consensus decision making process. That means that at that time--the structure has changed somewhat since then-- a hard block by anybody in the General Assembly could prevent any proposal from being adopted.

This is the story of my experience that night.

I pushed my way to the center of the circle, at 5'1 this was the only chance I would have to see and hear and to be seen and be heard. I took a deep breath added my name to the stack and waited for my turn to speak among this group made up mostly of men. The group had formed from the Occupy LA General Assembly, it consisted of people who had blocked a proposal to endorse a civil disobedience action by dozens of hotel workers. These workers had planned a protest with their union because they had been fired by a hotel in Bel Air. This small group of Occupiers now held this proposal in the palm of their hands.

The people that the Occupiers were debating whether or not to support, were hotel workers, most of them immigrants and women, veterans of the fight against corporate power. I know this because my father, who was fired from his union job as a hotel dishwasher a couple of years ago, is also one of these veterans. The fight of these veterans of struggle is a fight for dignity and respect, but also a fight for their livelihoods, and in this fight they stand toe to toe, immigrant workers against corporations.

While waiting my turn to speak, I thought of these workers, the housekeepers with their aching backs from lifting heavy beds. I thought of the dishwashers with their aching knees and fungus in their nails from working in water all day. I thought of the women hotel workers who go home to their children with worn bodies from catering to the 1%. As I stood among this group of men, I wondered quietly to myself what these workers would think of this conversation.

At times the conversation turned into a shouting match, the loudest person often won control of the floor. The men in the circle demanded to know why these workers hadn't joined Occupy LA. "Where is their union!?!?!?!?", they asked. "When is their union going to bring 35,000 people down HERE!?!?!?!?", they shouted. I felt my anger and frustration boiling and at times I shouted too, but as impatient as I was growing I decided against battling the maleness of the group on their terms. So as others yelled, I again waited.

It was getting late, and behind us 200 people were still taking part in the General Assembly discussing other proposals that had been brought to the group. In between us and them another small group had broken off from our discussion and formed around a young man who carried a

sign denouncing non violent tactics. I turned my attention back to the group and listened as a Latino man spoke, he told us that he is a union member and that he was here despite the fact that he had a young daughter waiting for him at home. I felt a connection to him, after all, I'm a single mother and I have two children at home.

When it was my turn to speak I stepped into the center of the circle and I spoke from where my spirit comes. "I speak to you today as the daughter of a hotel dishwasher, who walked the picket line with her father in his fight for dignity and respect on the job, for his right to be treated as a human instead of a dog." What would my father think about this discussion? Although he can understand some English and could hear and understand the comments being made about people like him, he would need to ask for a translator to be understood by everybody else. I imagine that he would leave frustrated and angry.

Last night, my point to that group was this: What would it mean to this movement of the 99% if women housekeepers were to march up here to join us? How powerful would that be? But the question is not why are they not here, the question is what would it require to make this space more diverse and broad? What would it require from us? What would it mean if we joined them that day, in bel air the heart of the 1% , and marched with them in their struggle against corporate America. What would it mean if we made it clear to them that this is also their space and that we are fighting for them, because they are the 99%.

There is a reason why immigrant workers were not flocking to the encampment, and it had nothing to do with whether or not they believe in the fight. As I spoke, dozens of hands waved their fingers in the air signaling agreement. I stopped speaking after I felt that I had taken up too much space. Two minutes later what I had said was forgotten among the discussions about process and another rant from the man who blocked the proposal. A short while later I left because after 8 hours of Occupy LA I had to get home and help my daughter with her essay that was due Monday morning. The man with the daughter, whom I had felt the connection with earlier, he was gone too.

As I went home after this experience, and as I thought about the potential that this movement holds, I realized that it is not held by me or anybody else occupying city hall, or Wall St., or any other city around the country. It is held by the 99%, and the 99% is much bigger than all the aforementioned people. The 99% includes the hotel housekeeper, it includes my father, it includes my neighbor in working class Montebello, it includes working class white Americans who may not yet believe in protest but do believe that they should be heard much more than any corporation, it includes my son's 2nd grade teacher, it includes my 17 year old daughter who hopes to go to college, it includes the people I work with on a daily basis who struggle to put food on their table and whose community was in an economic crisis long before the rest of America. The movement of the 99% also includes all the struggles that my father, the hotel housekeeper, and the resident of South Central LA are embroiled in.

This movement is not contained by Wall St, or Main St., or City Hall, or Portland, or Las Vegas, or any other physical space. If we try to contain it, we will kill it. We must grow it, we must link arms, we must lift all these struggles up, we must come up with new ideas and new forms of

resistance and organize for them. If we do, we will take this momentum, this moment, this movement and we will win.

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That was my experience that night, and over the next day I wrote the above with a level of hurt and pain that is difficult to explain. It was personal, not just political. It was personal because the space that had captured my imagination and that I had hoped would be open to him was not at that moment. It was personal because I wanted to make sure that the 99% that was often invisible wouldn't be again relegated to the shadows of invisibility within this movement. At least for that night, I was disappointed.

A few days later, I returned to the encampment because I heard that the hotel housekeepers were going to be there that night, that they were going to be there to personally ask Occupy Los Angeles to endorse their protest action planned for that Friday afternoon.

When I arrived, after tucking in my son into bed, four hotel workers, had just finished addressing the crowd. You could feel the tension in the air, after addressing the General Assembly, the women housekeepers stood to the side, watching as one by one those who continued to block their proposal spoke. I would guess that 99% of those there that night supported the hotel workers, but at least for the time being the process gave most of the power to the 1% who didn't. Ironic, isn't it?

Two white men were in staunch opposition, one argued that we should refer to these women as people and not workers, another argued that he would support the workers but not the union that represented them. Mind you, these hotel workers were fighting tooth and nail to keep their union jobs that provided free health care, a modest pension, living wages, and respect on the job. Never mind, that these workers were asking Occupy Los Angeles to endorse their protest in order to protect their union jobs. That night, the argument being made was that Occupy should not support their union.

One man, white and about 5'6, gestured angrily at the crowd from the middle of the circle, jumping up and down with an angry face and yelling at the top of his lungs that he did not and would not support the proposal. He then planted himself in front of the women housekeepers, who could not have been taller than 5'2, and refused to move when asked. I turned to the women housekeepers and asked they if they wanted to address the crowd again, they looked at me surprised and declined. One of them turned to me, after watching this heated and hateful argument take place and said, in Spanish, "They will never accomplish anything like this."

The proposal eventually passed that night. A few days later, in a powerful show of solidarity Occupy Los Angeles joined housekeepers in their protest at the Bel Air Hotel.

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As the movement grew, I made my way to Occupy actions planned at the Bank of America. There I met firefighters, teachers, garment workers, families from South Los Angeles, and others brought together through unions and community groups. As I joined in with the chants, and as

they erected tents inside the Bank of America headquarters, my hope surged again and I decided to again make my way back to Occupy Los Angeles.

As the threat of shrinking support and talk of eviction by the City of Los Angeles grew louder, I wrote this piece, originally published in Narco News:

Like many others, I've been drawn to Occupy Los Angeles, and I've visited the encampment on several occasions. I've looked for ways to involve the community leaders SAJE works with and help this moment grow into a lasting and successful movement. But as I look to the future, I find myself asking: Where to from here, Occupiers?

The City of Los Angeles has offered you "incentives" to vacate City Hall. They've offered you 10,000 square feet of office space, a farm to grow food, and 100 beds for the homeless. They say you'll be forcibly evicted on Monday if you don't accept the offer.

I attended the General Assembly yesterday, and it was clear that it would be impossible to obtain consensus to accept the proposal. This is of little concern, since I don't think the city's offer is worth taking in exchange for leaving the camp. But I am troubled by the inability to reach consensus on a strategic way forward that would grow popular support for the movement, create momentum, and potentially leverage a substantial victory for the 99%.

At last night's General Assembly, like in most of the Occupy General Assemblies I've attended, there were inspired moments of strategic thinking. But ideas quickly got lost in the clutter of the chant, "Whose lawn? Our lawn!"

Strategic decision-making and planning require analysis – an understanding of leverage and the dynamics of power. So let's take a moment to process the offer on the table and what it means. The city's offer is a positive sign. It means that Occupy has been able to amass enough public support and pressure that it has gained concessions. Some of this is due to the tactic of occupation and successful protest, and some of it has to do with powerful allies. Just last week, the powerful Los Angeles County Federation of Labor issued a statement calling on the city to allow the encampment to move to the Bank of America Plaza. Labor leaders, workers and community groups staged an action and subjected themselves to peaceful arrest in an attempt to move the encampment. This was impressive, to say the least.

Now imagine if Occupy formulated a demand that could leverage its power to not only protect thousands of Los Angeles residents from unjust evictions, but also force the city to take a concrete stance against the banks. What if Occupy locked arms with community groups and announced its refusal to move unless the city extends and agrees to enforce the moratorium (set to expire at year's end) on the eviction of tenants in bank-controlled foreclosed properties? Hundreds of Los Angeles residents, most of them low-income people of color – as well as the community organizations that represent them – would stand with you.

Imagine the power of this demand, not only for those who stand to benefit from such a moratorium, but for the strength and expansion of the Occupy movement. Let's play out the scenario: If the city doesn't grant your demand, it (a) is forced to evict Occupy, (b) looks

unreasonable and unfair, and © will have publicly sided with banks instead of the 99%. If it grants your demand, you will have just leveraged a victory that protected thousands of families from being thrown out on the street – and joined forces with organized community groups working in low-income communities of color.

With a well crafted strategic organizing moment, Occupy will have laid the foundation for a post-encampment organizing and movement-building campaign. And it will have done so in a way that emphasizes a fundamental goal of the movement: Shielding the 99% from predatory corporate interests, especially banks.

But such a plan requires the ability to make strategic decisions quickly. After attending several General Assemblies, I've reached the sad conclusion that this ability doesn't exist under the current structure. It's all the more disappointing because this moment presents a valuable movement-building opportunity.

How can a better decision-making structure help achieve more concrete results? Here's one example: A few weeks ago, a group of elderly African-American tenants came to SAJE for help because they had been living without electricity, heat, or water for over a month in one of South Los Angeles' many slums. Their building was infested with vermin; they had suffered rat bites, bed-bug bites, and the indignity of living without running water. Now they were in danger of being homeless.

Despite their seemingly hopeless situation, the tenants of this building organized. Together they confronted the slumlord who owned their building, applying pressure on him and on the city; they demanded and ultimately won relocation assistance. Due to their organizing efforts they will now have enough money to find new places to live, homes without rats and with running water and electricity. They won the basic right of a healthy, secure residence – a right many of us take for granted, and one withheld from thousands of Los Angeles' poorest and most vulnerable residents.

Spurred by their victory, these tenants have now joined forces with other residents of South Los Angeles, mostly immigrant families, who are organizing in support of the thousands who are losing their rented homes to foreclosure. These are the bottom 10% of the 99%, people living in poverty – and they're the first to suffer the consequences of so-called "austerity measures." Yet you would be hard-pressed to find them at the Occupy Wall Street encampments, and if they attend an action it is because community groups have mobilized them to support.

Why is this? Last night I sat down to talk with South L.A. community residents to ask them about their opinion of the Occupy movement. Their eyes lit up – after all, these are veterans of the struggle for economic justice, and I could tell that they had been thinking about this by their eagerness to respond.

One of the women turned to me and asked, "What is their goal?" I answered that Occupy was hoping to address the growing economic inequality in our country. She looked at me and said, "Yes, but what is their *goal*?" She said that Occupy would be better off with a concrete objective like overturning California's Proposition 13. Another community leader said that it seemed there

weren't many Latinos involved in the movement. I asked her why she thought this was and she said that she didn't think that people had enough information about what Occupy was trying to do or how to get involved.

These women understand power and organizing but are unclear what goals Occupy hopes to advance. Although they understand its basic message and generally agree with it, they do not yet see Occupy reflecting their values or including people like them. As was the case with the civil-rights movement, Americans need to see themselves reflected in Occupy – to see it embodying their values and ideals. When it accomplishes this, the movement will win broad public support and ultimately succeed.

Progressives and activists might disagree with me; after all, the movement is young, and Occupy has already captured the nation's attention and inspired hundreds to risk arrest in nonviolent civil disobedience. It's also fired up progressives across the country, who have dared to hope again and continue to voice outrage at the police repression leveled at Occupy encampments.

But this is not enough to win, and polls show that Occupy's popular support is at or below Tea Party levels. If we are honest with ourselves, we would admit that Tea Party status is not what any of us would have chosen to strive for. Remember when we mocked and laughed at them, with their silly misspelled signs, jumbled messages, and illogical demands? We do not want to be like them, do we? We want to be smarter, and truly challenge the system that promotes income inequality and allows corporate power to threaten our democracy.

If we're serious about winning, we must build a movement that can garner broad popular support – one that's nimble, strategic, and smart. Revolutions aren't won in a day, and the successful ones employ plans of action that build upon smaller but significant victories. We're not there yet in this new burgeoning movement called Occupy Wall Street. And if we don't focus our direction and energy, we may never get there at all.

As we endlessly engage in shouting matches at the General Assembly and postpone – or even reject – strategic decision-making, we fail to focus our energy where it's needed most. Meanwhile, the least advantaged of the 99% keep struggling to survive the everyday violence of poverty. Another family is forcibly evicted from its home, another worker loses his job, and another student drops out of college because she can't afford the tuition hikes. And as state legislatures across the country and Congress push through their "austerity measures", the 1% continues to protect and expand its immense wealth and power.

So where do we go from here? It's time to occupy a strategy, and occupy organizing and movement-building. A golden opportunity has been laid at your feet. You should take it.

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Occupy Los Angeles didn't take that opportunity. A few nights later, I stood with hundreds of others as we watched hundreds of tents torn down by 1,400 police officers. The violence of it all was disturbing and left an ineffable mark on my heart and mind. It was police violence not in the traditional rubber bullet, baton swinging, tear gas violence that the LAPD is capable of unleashing, but it was emotional violence as hundreds of police in riot gear descended on the

park without warning, pouring out of City Hall and from all four directions into the park. It was psychological violence carried out by tearing down of an encampment that had been lovingly built.

As for the four elderly tenants I spoke of in this article, they have been subjected to police violence as well. They were served with notice that their relocation assistance might be withdrawn since the owner of the building has sued the City of Los Angeles in order to prevent the City from making the payments.. These four elderly tenants were notified of the lawsuit when the owner of their building changed the locks and served them with a notice accompanied by 5 police cars and police helicopters that flew overhead. As police cars circled their home, these tenants were told that they would no longer have access to the building, and if not for the swift action of community organizations they would have been left homeless that day.

As tents were torn down at Occupy Los Angeles, emotions ran high, protesters were angry, some of them crying as they watched what had been their home for two months torn down. The police pushed protesters without warning or reason, the crowd surged with anger each time, and peacekeepers and others who were determined to honor the pledge of non violence that the General Assembly had voted on, took a collective deep breath and then settled down again in impassioned and disciplined protest.

Now as the tents have come down, as the four elderly tenants and their neighbors plan a protest action to defend their right to housing, as Occupy works with community groups on the occupation of foreclosed properties, as Occupy the Hood plans occupations in communities of color, as movement builders plan for the next phase, we are all taking a collective breath in preparation for the next surge.

There is something in the air, something many of us have been working towards for years if not decades, it is an opportunity like no other, and we can't afford to lose.