What Happened to Occupy Wall Street

Arun K. Gupta

In La Pensée 2016/4 Selected Articles, pages 11 to 23
Publisher Fondation Gabriel Péri

ISSN 0031-4773
DOI 10.3917/lp.388.0011

Article available online at
https://shs.cairn.info/journal-la-pensee-2016-4-page-11?lang=en

Discover the contents of this issue, follow the journal by email, subscribe...
Scan this QR code to access the page for this issue on Cairn.info.

Electronic distribution Cairn.info for Fondation Gabriel Péri.
You are authorized to reproduce this article within the limits of the terms of use of Cairn.info or, where applicable, the terms and conditions of the license subscribed to by your institution. Details and conditions can be found at cairn.info/copyright.
Unless otherwise provided by law, the digital use of these resources for educational purposes is subject to authorization by the Publisher or, where applicable, by the collective management organization authorized for this purpose. This is particularly the case in France with the CFC, which is the approved organization in this area.

WHAT HAPPENED TO OCCUPY WALL STREET

Arun Gupta

Though no one could have ever predicted it, Occupy Wall Street makes sense in hindsight. Americans were frustrated with status quo politics, their imaginations were captured by occupations like the Arab Spring and "Movement of the Squares", and the right mix of organizations, ideas, and individuals came together to give birth to the occupation near Wall Street on September 17, 2011.

Occupy has been called a debtor's campaign, an anarchist movement, a youth revolt, a pro-democracy rebellion, and white middle-class reformism. There is truth to each position, but none indicates why the movement evolved so rapidly from a loose band of discontented people and an exhortation–Occupy!–into a history-making moment.

I covered Occupy Wall Street across the United States as a journalist, visiting 41 different Occupy camps and collectives in 27 states. It was a class-based workers' movement; while class was obvious, as captured by the twin slogans, "We are the 99%" and "the 1%," few at the time would have maintained Occupy was a movement of workers.

Seeing Occupy as a workers' movement makes sense when examining its origins, the participants, their motivations, and its legacy. One problem of interpreting Occupy is that New York City and Oakland soaked up most of the attention, which distorts its history. While these two outposts were thick with leftists, particularly anarchists, this was not true for most of the country. The form was universally anarchist, but horizontalism, consensus decision-making, and free-for-all general assemblies in occupied public plazas and parks encouraged a remarkably broad range of political opinions depending on the particularities of each city and encampment. At the same time, a few issues found widespread support, namely getting money out of politics and overturning Supreme Court rulings that define corporations as people (giving corporations constitutional rights and ability to make unlimited campaign

Fondation Gabriel Péri| Downloaded on 06/10/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.179)

donations) which is known as "corporate personhood." This openness allowed Occupy to expand beyond the usual participants in the same cities to forge a national movement that dominated media coverage in the fall of 2011 and shifted the political discourse from economic austerity to inequality.

Occupy's origins lie in the housing and economic meltdown that began in 2007, when an unemployment and underemployment rate peaked at more than 17 percent. Once in office, Obama revealed his true neoliberal colors by protecting Wall Street and bailing out capitalists, backing a stimulus insufficient to overcome the crisis, and restructuring healthcare to cut costs rather than improve medical care. Obama pursued a "grand bargain" with Republicans to cut trillions of dollars from the federal budget, mainly from healthcare, Social Security, welfare, and education. The public was also seething over declining household income and rising poverty and income inequality. Occupy would connect record corporate profits and mass suffering with the slogan, "Banks got bailed out; we got sold out."

But anger alone doesn't inspire a movement. 2011 was a year of mass uprisings led by the Arab Spring, the "Movement of the Squares," the Indignados of Spain, and the "Wisconsin Uprising." On June 14, 2011, the democratic wave washed over New York. Activists and social-justice groups under the banner of New York Against Budget Cuts started a weeks-long occupation near City Hall. Then-Mayor and ultra-billionaire Michael Bloomberg was demanding deep budget cuts and widespread layoffs, including 6,000 teachers. Dubbed "Bloombergville" by the several dozen people camped out on sidewalks, the protest was aided by a judicial ruling that sleeping on the street was considered as political speech, and thus protected under freedom of expression. It turned out to be a test run for Occupy Wall Street with non-stop protest, collective decision-making, a nightly General Assembly, an internal community and culture, and a space that supported numerous political causes and served as a staging ground for impromptu demonstrations.[1] Bloombergville's openness was also a rejection of the disempowering tactics of obtaining permits, holding rallies under control of the police, marching around in circles and chanting to little obvious effect. This style of protest dominated after the September 11 attacks as state repression was matched by timidity on the left. The lack of political imagination and courage had killed the movement against the Iraq War and activists were searching for more effective means of protest.

The same day Bloombergville kicked off, an occupation was also planned for Zuccotti Park, where Occupy would set up camp three months later. Backed by the anti-statist internet collective known as Anonymous, this occupation had received online buzz for months, but only four people showed up with the intention of camping out in the park. It showed digital activism was no substitute for real-world organizing. Also in the spring, planning began for an occupation in Washington, D.C., set for October 2011, named "Stop the Machine."

1. The two best histories of Occupy Wall Street, which this essay relies on, are Michael A. Gould-Wartofsky, *The Occupiers: The Making of the 99 Percent Movement*, Oxford University Press, 2015, and Nathan Schneider, *Thank You, Anarchy: Notes from the Occupy Apocalypse*, University of California Press, 2013.

Fondation Gabriel Péri| Downloaded on 06/10/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.179)

Fondation Gabriel Péri| Downloaded on 06/10/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.179)

On July 13, 2011, the magazine Adbusters issued a startling poster with the hashtag #OccupyWallStreet and "September 17th. Bring Tent." This call would likely have fizzled if not for concrete organizing. On August 2 the first meeting to plan the occupation of Wall Street spawned the New York City General Assembly. Organizers resisted attempts by sectarian socialists to hijack it. The NYCGA was shaped along anarchist lines and influenced by the Global Justice Movement a decade earlier, though most participants were too young to have joined in those raucous direct actions against the WTO, IMF and World Bank. The planning was aided by activists involved in the Spanish and Greece occupations and guided by organizing manuals from various global uprisings.

During NYCGA weekly sessions, Occupy's skeleton took form. Committees were established for Logistics, Outreach, Food, Internet, Process, and Students. The digital presence was assembled with a website, blogs, and social media accounts (and which would later become bitterly contested in power grabs). Initially, the most contentious issue was the decision on how to make decisions. Rather than majority vote or unanimous agreement, the General Assembly would operate by "modified consensus," requiring 90 percent approval with facilitators guiding discussions. Proposals covered everything from political action to how to spend money to where to place recycling containers.

While Occupiers said OWS was leaderless that was never true, as with any movement. Not having visible leaders was a benefit by encouraging mass participation, but those activists who had recognition, extensive social networks, or could mobilize media or money inevitably had more power to shape the movement. This became a drawback as leadership was opaque. After the evictions, projects were initiated with little accountability and sometimes with extensive opposition, but with no ability to stop them.

Although I had been skeptical of it, since it originated in a New York left notorious for infighting and anarchist politics that typically ended in power without accountability and responsibility without power, I visited the camp every day. The first night, September 17, there were perhaps 100 people, generally white, young, and male. Many had traveled hundreds or thousands of miles to sleep on concrete a stone's throw from a nerve center of global capital. They had difficulty explaining why they had come. "I just knew I had to be here" was a common refrain. The fact that people were willing to put their lives on hold for a vague idea made real the feeling of a rebellion in the making.

It almost ended before it began. Hundreds of police surrounded the park the first night, threatening to arrest everyone. At the last moment, the police commissioner called them off, perhaps thinking, not without justification, the protest would crumble by itself. This was the first mistake made by the establishment that aided OWS. It grew steadily and anti-Wall Street protests became a daily occurrence. One week after it began, a cop sprayed toxic chemicals on women standing on the sidewalk at an Occupy protest. Footage of the unprovoked attack caused the movement to explode in size.

Unions and leftists who had kept a distance out of skepticism or avoidance of radical politics jumped on the Occupy bandwagon. On October 1, the second-week anniversary,

the kettling and arrest of 700 peaceful protesters on the Brooklyn Bridge made headlines. Yet again heavy-handed policing backfired, and Occupy became a national phenomenon. Thousands of Occupy groups were founded, including some 350 camps, and an Occupy movement would eventually take hold in more than 80 countries.

Thousands at a time thronged the New York occupation. It was a top media story, attracted celebrities and public figures, and put both Wall Street and politicians on the defensive. The right labeled Occupiers dirty hippies, while Democrats like Obama struggled to acknowledge the legitimacy of the grievances while not embracing its radical politics.

Occupy was a success for many interrelated reasons. It was the first left movement against austerity. In slogans like "We are the 99%" and "the 1%," Occupy introduced a class language that resonated with the public. Anyone could join an occupation and use the microphone to tell their story of a life shattered by medical debt, unemployment, student loans, shrinking pensions, or foreclosed homes. The concept of the 99% enabled individuals to see their story as similar to others, bringing into being the legitimate community. Around them were the illegitimate, the 1% in the Financial District responsible for the global crisis and individual tragedies. Skepticism and hostility within the corporate media gave way to sympathetic coverage that helped Occupy gain support and political space. There was also plenty of drama. All politics is theater, and Occupy was riveting theater with regular skirmishes with the police, a ruling class under siege, and a broader struggle against the wealthy and powerful over who controls the economy and political process.

Occupy Wall Street's central idea was there can be no political democracy without economic democracy. Its potency was the same as the Arab Spring–liberating public space and governing it through participatory democracy. The democratic practice reinvigorated the commons, which has been colonized by shopping, entertainment, spectacle, and every other form of consumption. As a shared, non-commercial community, occupations shunned individualism and capitalism.

The politics can be divided into five overlapping and sometimes contradictory ideologies: anti-capitalists, anti-corporate, Keynesian capitalists, anti-government, and conspiracy theorists. In big cities anarchists and leftists who founded the Occupy camps were usually anti-capitalist. More frequently, the left pole was anti-corporate/multinational. Many believed breaking up big banks, eliminating corporate free-trade deals, outlawing corporate personhood, and taxing speculation was enough to usher in a more just society. Anti-corporate types often fetishized small businesses as the ideal economic form, which attracted libertarians. There were also self-identified Republicans and those who espoused traditional conservative values like self-reliance, hard work, and community, while opposing central government. A fourth group, usually older and unionized, backed Keynesian regulation and organized labor, but were not opposed to the existence of multinational corporations. Anti-government elements ranged from anarchists to libertarians. There were plenty of statists, too. Occupy's open door made it friendly for conspiracies such as 9/11 "truthers," a secret one-world government, and all sorts of sinister health- and environment-related plots.

Fondation Gabriel Péri| Downloaded on 06/10/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.179)

Fondation Gabriel Péri| Downloaded on 06/10/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.179)

The sole study of participants in Occupy found only 42 percent were women and confirmed the movement skewed young, male, white, and well-educated. But it was far from exclusive as people of color [des minorites racialisees] comprised 38 percent of participants. In some Rust-Belt cities people of color were the majority, while in New York the demographics changed in weeks as brown and Black youth and union members, who are disproportionately people of color, joined in significant numbers. The preponderance of men in the camps at least was understandable given safety issues of living in an open space.

The camps were a refuge for the homeless and unemployed as they provided a relative safe space and source of food, shelter, and community. The desire to build an ideal community rallied broader participation, and sustaining a community had a crucial class leveling effect. Unlike most left projects in America, where familiarity with social and political theory and jargon is necessary to participate, anyone who could cook, build, forage, clean, or just work hard could join an Occupy camp and feel valued. Across the country, people said they had been "sitting on the couch" or "living in the woods," but Occupy lured them back into the public. Occupy helped people overcome alienation and provided dignity, which is a core rule of organizing often forgotten on the left. Most significantly, Occupy was a strategy and not a tactic, as the space brought "the people" into being, which is a precondition for any mass politics.

At the same time, many camps were hobbled by theft, physical violence, drug abuse, and in some cases, sexual assaults. At Occupy New Orleans, a community deeply damaged by Hurricane Katrina and a disastrous federal relief effort in 2005, fist-fights occurred daily, and occupiers clustered for protection in small camps like warring medieval strongholds. At numerous camps Occupiers said cops encouraged strife by dropping off people with mental-health and addiction problems, and there were reports that police directed drug dealers there. Some camps, such as in Tampa, Florida, simply fell apart due to a lack of volunteers to keep it going.

By November 2011, politicians, usually Democratic mayors, took the offensive by violently evicting Occupy camps, arresting thousands. Among Occupiers the consensus was the movement was quashed by state violence. This argument is ahistorical and a refusal to examine Occupy's problems. Every successful movement encounters state violence, often murderous, yet some still succeed. Occupy's demise was embedded in its form and the lack of an organized left that could nurture and nurse it through rough patches. The amorphous and consensus-based structure led to lowest-common-denominator decision-making, preventing strategic planning, and enabled the state, liberals, and unions to outmaneuver Occupy. Political actions rarely extended beyond tactics like more occupations, protests, and taking over streets. The frequency and length of general assemblies, multiple times a week for hours on end, winnowed the crowd to those with the most time, which usually meant minimal political experience. After the evictions, many organizers and community activists went back to their regular political work leaving neophytes in charge.

Some camps survived to the summer of 2012. Typical was one in Little Rock, Arkansas, where Bill and Hillary Clinton began their political careers. The camp was impressive, with

well-kept living quarters, an extensive kitchen and pantry, wi-fi, solar power, a large tent for meetings and impromptu concerts, showers and toilets, even a bus to drive activists to demonstrations. But the Occupiers had no idea how to organize and their political activity was limited to printing out online petitions and soliciting signatures on street corners.

After the evictions, some Occupiers expressed relief at not having to manage daily life for hundreds of people. But the camps had glued together disparate elements as everyone shared in governing a mini-society. Robbed of space, democracy became an abstraction, disruptive individuals sapped energy, and general assemblies disintegrated. Many believed the state was dispatching provocateurs, but this was another Achilles heel. Occupiers were loathe to ban those with troublesome mental-health and socialization problems as it would betray the "We are the 99%" slogan. This is a common political fallacy, treating slogans as analysis, and it also revealed the self-defeating tendency of a left that turns collective struggle into individual therapy. Allowing disruptive individuals to remain meant more skilled organizers quit in frustration.

Some Occupy groups tried to reoccupy former camps, unused buildings, and new public spaces. The state brushed them aside with overwhelming force and crowds dwindled as supporters became afraid of the violence and arrests. A May Day general strike generated national buzz and support, but no significant work stoppage occurred in any city. Some occupiers isolated themselves further with "Fuck The Police" marches that did little more than vent rage. The one-year anniversary drew thousands in New York, but it turned out to be a reunion not a revival.

By early 2012 Occupy splintered into projects based on clusters of like-minded activists, another result of a lack of strategic cohesion. These included "Occupy our Homes," which defended homeowners under threat of foreclosure; "F the Banks," a campaign to break up banks; "Strike Debt," a debtor's movement; "Occupy the Pipeline," opposed to fracking; and numerous labor-organizing campaigns and projects around universal healthcare, climate change, and mutual aid. Despite a splashy beginning, F the Banks was short-lived because it overreached in trying to topple Bank of America, a major bank. Occupy Homes chapters in a dozen cities saved hundreds of families from foreclosure, but it was unsustainable as it required an intense time and political commitment to protect homes, face armed police, and deal with potential criminal charges. Given millions of illegal foreclosures that happened during the Great Recession, Occupy Homes was also a drop in the bucket. The situation was the same with Occupy labor groups involved in campaigns against Sotheby's auction house and Hot and Crusty, a small chain of bakeries in New York City. Occupy tipped the balance of power toward the employees, but in both cases the number of workers affected was less than 50. Strike Debt won praise for the Rolling Jubilee campaign, which raised more than $700,000 to buy personal debt for pennies on the dollar, eliminating more than $31 million of it. It shone a light in Wall Street's role in profiting off personal debt, but Rolling Jubilee could never affect trillions of dollars in student, medical, and consumer debt, and the notion of "a bailout of the people by the people" is dubious.

Fondation Gabriel Péri| Downloaded on 06/10/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.179)

Fondation Gabriel Péri| Downloaded on 06/10/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.179)

The most-celebrated post-Occupy movement was Occupy Sandy, the grassroots relief initiated after a Hurricane pummeled the New York region in late 2012. While Occupy Sandy deserves credit for filling the gaping hole in relief and emergency services left by the state's abandonment, it turned into a years-long effort that was more charity than the mutual aid declared by volunteers. Once immediate relief needs passed, much of the work involved volunteers gutting and renovating private homes and commercial sites, which had little to do with confronting Wall Street's tyranny over the economy and political system.

Without a democratic process to develop accountable leaders who could engage in deep analysis and long-term strategic planning in conjunction with a defined base, Occupy was vulnerable to co-optation. One example is the "99% Spring," the brainchild of two liberal groups, MoveOn and Rebuild the Dream, and a large labor union, the Service Employees International Union, all affiliated with the Democratic Party. They enticed thousands of Occupy activists to join protests planned before Occupy even began, and which they rebranded as the 99% Spring. The aim was to divert Occupy's energy into Obama's 2012 re-election bid. The liberals duped many activists with a plan hatched in secret with a hidden agenda and then presented it to Occupy as a participatory project. One veteran activist explained, "Groups like MoveOn can walk into any Occupy movement and engage in the discussions, but we can't participate in their strategy discussions."

This deceptive organizing has become commonplace: Liberal groups and unions with scores of paid organizers and budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars fabricate or co-opt movements and then portray them as radical grassroots action in the style of Occupy. This includes the "Fight for $15" low-wage workers campaign, funded, created, and controlled by SEIU but which it tried to pass off as a worker-led effort. The People's Climate March in 2014 was supposed to blockade the United Nations like the infamous 1999 anti-WTO protest in Seattle, but it was co-opted and defanged by Avaaz, an international "clicktivist" outfit that specializes in acquiring contacts for fundraising. In 2016 came Democracy Spring, an explicit attempt to create an Occupy-style movement, but which flopped because risk-averse liberal organizations and unions were unwilling to allow it to grow organically.

While this is the downside of Occupy, the upside is considerable. Although the direct effect is mainly ideological, it has had many indirect practical effects. Before 2011 the political establishment was committed to austerity, but Occupy flipped the debate to economic inequality. This was an outgrowth of popularizing the 99% and 1%, a very simple and defining class language. I've heard Walmart cashiers use the 1% to disparage the retail giant's hideously wealthy owners. Now, five years after Occupy, political elites have been forced to address how to redistribute income more fairly, instead of punishing workers for capitalists' crimes by cutting social spending. (The more important question of wealth redistribution, however, is not on the table.) But this ideological primacy is indicative of a left that is defined more by ideas, exhortations, and volunteerism than material structures and force. Nonetheless, for the first time since the Great Depression, Americans can talk

freely about class, neoliberalism, capitalism and socialism, subjects buried by the triumph of the United States in the Cold War.

Class terms do not mean class consciousness, however. Many leftists get excited at polls that find that more Millennials, those aged 30 or younger, approve of socialism than capitalism. But among the general public today, 36 percent say they have a positive view of socialism, which is virtually unchanged since 2010, before Occupy. Moreover, few Americans can define socialism, as in collective ownership and control of the means of production, and they conflate it with "big government." Support for socialism is also a knee-jerk response to the Tea Party criticizing everything Obama does as socialist.

Occupy also revived confrontational street protests. OWS was born blocks away from and just days after the tenth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, which led the global justice movement to collapse. For a decade the U.S. left was moribund, letting the state define its ability and scope of protest. Occupy reinvigorated the left, opening tactical and ideological space for new movements. Occupy's influences are evident in labor organizing, Black Lives Matter, the climate justice movement, and election campaigns.

Black Lives Matter is the true heir to Occupy, even if most BLM activists were not involved or are new to organizing. Like Occupy, Black Lives Matter employs militant protest, rejects the need for police-issued permits and blockades streets and bridges. BLM has occupied a police station, police union offices, and public spaces around city halls. It deftly uses new technology and social media, and has fluid leadership, like Occupy.

There are important differences. Occupy's protests against cops grew out of frustration and were symptomatic of a dying movement, whereas Black Lives Matter emerged as a cry against the routine killing of unarmed Blacks, and then linked police violence to economic violence. Opal Tometi, a leader of Black Lives Matter, says "violence that's sanctioned by the state" is more than the police. It includes poverty, "attacks on labor unions and what that has done to the standard of living, the employability of our people, the kind of wages that we are making, and the benefits." BLM also differs by traveling on the centuries-old path of the Black liberation struggle. It has a defined base, African-Americans, especially youth, and a focus on police violence in perpetuating institutional racism, which enables it to make explicit demands, unlike Occupy. It also developed a leadership structure and political platform with six main demands and highly detailed legislative and policy proposals. The first demand is "End the war on Black people," while the remaining five are concerned with economic issues like reparations and political power, which builds on Occupy's linkages. More sophisticated than Occupy, BLM has also resisted attempted co-optation, such as by the Justice League NYC, which pushed "establishment-friendly reformism" under the banner of Black Lives Matter.

A second movement influenced by Occupy is organized labor. In 2012 the Chicago Teachers Union confronted Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who served as Obama's first White House Chief of Staff and supported attacks on teachers union and public education. As mayor, Emanuel tried to force the CTU to accept a concessionary contract, but they painted him as

Fondation Gabriel Péri| Downloaded on 06/10/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.179)

Fondation Gabriel Péri| Downloaded on 06/10/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.179)

"Mayor 1%" and undertook a grueling school-by-school organizing effort that paid off with 90 percent voting in favor of a strike near the one-year anniversary of Occupy in September 2012. The CTU also build a broad community alliance and won the support of most parents and students while the political, economic, and media elites all denounced the union. The CTU used "social-movement unionism," which author Sam Gindin defines as "unionism that is militant, internally democratic, committed to social justice, attuned to class, and part of larger social and political mobilizations."[2] The influence of Occupy was evident in large public mobilizations in support of the teachers union, including widespread support from Occupy activists and the publication of a special issue of the local Occupy newspaper, *The Occupied Chicago Tribune*. Occupy had primed the public to believe militant class struggle could win. One observer noted the support unions showed for Occupy was a step forward in organized labor supporting social struggles. An important distinction between Occupy and the CTU is the strike was actively supported by two small socialist parties, the International Socialist Organization and Solidarity. Members from these parties were also active in Occupy, but their influence dissipated in the nebulous movement. In a labor campaign with a sharply defined structure, goal, and leadership, organized activists helped achieve a tangible victory that Occupy's horizontal methods were incapable of.

Since the CTU strike, reform campaigns have gained ground in municipal teachers unions, with a left-leaning slate won in Los Angeles. In Portland, Oregon, teachers used the CTU model as a template and defeated a concessionary contract in 2014. The following year teachers in Seattle organized a similar effort, went on strike, and defeated concessions. In all these cities, organized socialists are active in the teachers unions, including as leaders. The unions have resurrected the centrality of strikes, student walkouts, and community organizing.

Other workers have waded into the breach created by Occupy. Auto workers rejected a contract in 2015 backed by leaders of United Auto Workers that would have extended a two-tier wage system imposed on workers after Obama's bailout of auto companies in 2009. Then there is the SEIU-backed "Fight for $15." SEIU has made the plight of low-wage workers a national issue, and polls show 63 percent of Americans support a $15 minimum wage by 2020. But the campaign is a march on the media, not a rank-and-file movement. Its strikes are one-day protests by workers with no actual stoppage of fast-food workplaces. There is no development of worker power or building shop-floor struggle; it's a campaign designed around a media and legal strategy.

The climate-justice campaign has carried on Occupy's militancy. Activists regularly occupy construction sites for pipelines to carry fracked oil and sit in on rail tracks to impede trains carrying coal and oil. The movement is even seaborne by blocking ships involved in

2. Sam Gindin, "Beyond Social Movement Unionism", *Jacobin*, Summer 2016, https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/08/beyond-social-movement-unionism/

Arctic oil drilling. Much of the credit for this activism goes to indigenous communities at the forefront of the anti-extraction struggle in North America.

One issue Occupy agreed on, at least initially, was to avoid electoral politics. While many supported Obama in 2008, by 2011 the consensus was that elections were a dead-end or a tactical choice at most, with real change happening in the streets. Nonetheless, given the political and cultural primacy of electoral politics in America, it was inevitable this threshold would be crossed. The first instance was a small party based in Seattle, Socialist Alternative. One of its leaders, Kshama Sawant, a charismatic and quick-thinking professor of economics, came to prominence in Occupy Seattle. From there she ran for the Seattle city council in 2013 as an open socialist and won on a platform of a $15-an-hour minimum wage. While the proposal was backed by the incoming mayor, businesses and restaurant trade groups went to war to kill or dilute any bill. Socialist Alternative and Sawant, with the crucial backing of *The Stranger*, the local alternative newsweekly, fought for months, helping pass a law that raised the minimum wage to $15 an hour for all workers by 2021, with nearly half of low-wage workers reaching that benchmark by 2017. Once again, the language of the 99% and 1% figured prominently in the struggle, and it boosted SEIU's Fight for $15 campaign, with $15-an-hour state and municipal laws subsequently passing for millions of workers.

It was in Bernie Sanders bid for the Democratic Party presidential nomination where Occupy achieved significant prominence. Sanders was a long shot when he threw his hat in the ring [began his campaign] in May 2015, but he almost won. His ideas clearly reflected those of Occupy. While Donald Trump promoted white nationalism as the cure to declining economic fortunes, Sanders' response was structural, advocating policies to break up big banks, increase taxes on the 1%, pass universal healthcare, make public higher education tuition-free, and undertake an infrastructure program to create millions of jobs and address climate change by shifting to low-carbon energy sources. While many on the left promoted Sanders as a New Deal-style liberal, this was inaccurate as he did not support state economic planning or government jobs program. All the spending would still be funneled through the private sector.

Sanders campaign was a wish list for many Occupiers, and some formed "People for Bernie," claiming to represent Occupy. This was opposed by Occupiers who wanted to steer clear of electoral politics. A "People's Summit" held in June 2016, after Sanders lost the primaries, was billed as building an independent movement. Instead, it squelched any discussion of voting for or organizing a third party, in effect throwing its chips in with Clinton and the Democratic Party. (Even third parties is a narrow discussion as the American left is so weak, it needs years of diligent organizational, theoretical, and base-building work before it could seriously entertain electoral politics at just the municipal level.)

But this followed on Sanders' self-defeating politics. He put himself in a bind by campaigning for the nomination of a party that since the early 1990s has proven itself a more capable manager of capitalist globalization and the imperial apparatus than Republicans. When he entered the race, Sanders stated he would support Clinton if she was the nominee,

Fondation Gabriel Péri| Downloaded on 06/10/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.179)

meaning he supports a candidate who will institute the policies he railed against for a year. He was remarkably successful at raising money from the 99%, more than $220 million, but instead of hiring organizers, this money flowed mostly to the 1%–consultants, advertising, and media strategists. Despite saying his candidacy was building a "political revolution," little remained after he failed to secure the nomination. His movement is beset by infighting, it is focused on elections and trying to pull the Democratic Party to the left from the inside, which has proven futile historically, and it will exist mainly to enhance his status as a power broker in the U.S. Senate where he sits.

If there is a silver lining to Sanders' campaign, it's the fact that his supporters went through the process themselves of the impossibility of trying to change a political system from within rather than recognizing that radical social change first starts in workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, and the streets, and then uses that power to force concessions from elites.

This, too, is the legacy of Occupy Wall Street. Amorphous, "leaderless" networks can respond quickly to a crisis but act as quicksand to movement building. Occupiers wound up butting their heads against the state even as they opened up new paths for their successors. These new movements have had more material success than Occupy Wall Street, but the age-old challenge that Occupy put into stark relief remains: whether they will settle for reform when they came to have a revolution.

Fondation Gabriel Péri| Downloaded on 06/10/2026 from https://shs.cairn.info (IP: 216.73.216.179)