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Protest movement's 'saying what we've been saying for decades'

Occupy Wall Street

On a fall day in November, students and Occupy Wall Street activists at the University of California - Davis staged a peaceful protest. They linked arms, forming a human chain. They chanted. They sang. And then police arrived in riot gear.

What happened next became a YouTube stream and front-page photo showing police unloading cans of pepper spray at point-blank range on the activists. The crowd is drowning in a sea of orange smoke.

UAW Local 2865 member Geoffrey Wildanger was there that day - and a pepper spray victim.

But Wildanger isn't discouraged.

"My professor and friend saw the riot police before they entered the quad and [they] joined the protest, linking arms in the circle," Wildanger said. "Just being here is so important. We have demands, and our demands are important."

Sadly, this type of police brutality is nothing new to the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) activists. In fact, these events have galvanized the growing movement, and they have revealed a tell-tale sign: This movement is relevant and they aren't going away.

And the public is starting to pay attention.

Maida Rosenstein, UAW Local 2110 president in New York, believes that OWS must be doing something right and has touched a nerve.

"It's a testament of how afraid the 1 percent is of the protesters to oppress and squelch the voice of the occupiers like they do on a daily basis," said Rosenstein. "OWS is saying what we have been saying for decades. The timing was right for this movement. It built on what is going on around the country. There is a place for everyone in this movement. It's refreshing."

According to Thomas Good of UAW Local 1981, police have been less likely to be aggressive at OWS actions where there is a heavy labor presence.

"Everybody deserves a say in their life. Participatory democracy is everyone's right. We want the Occupiers to know that, we, the UAW, are here to stand with you. We have your backs," said Good, a free-lance journalist.

"We've supported the OWS movement from day one. These activists are a voice of today's inequities and this inequality is no longer sustainable and cannot be tolerated," said Julie Kushner, director of UAW Region 9A, which covers eastern New York (including the New York City metropolitan area, Hudson Valley and Capital District area), six other northeast states and Puerto Rico.

In St. Louis, Mike Melson, CAP committee chair, and other members of UAW Local 2250 stand with OWS activists because it gives relevance to what labor has been fighting for since inception: equality in every sense of the word, for everyone. According to Melson, labor's role is to get plugged in and join the fight.

"We have to build a collaborative relationship with the movement - sitting face to face and being on the ground in the fight ... so we stand taller and stronger together," Melson said.

In Seattle, UAW Local 4121 President David Parsons said part of the solution to fixing underfunded social programs and the broken economy is asking big banks and corporations to pay their fair share in taxes.

"The leaderless movement works because it influences the public discourse; that plus their willingness to take direct action. Those are some components that have made it so successful and energize our own base," Parsons said. "OWS resonates with such a huge portion of the population."



In top photo, a police officer in riot gear unloads a can of pepper spray at point-blank range to move Occupy protesters at the University of California - Davis on Nov. 18. In bottom photo, activists with the Occupy Wall Street movement carrying American flags march for jobs and economic justice in New York City in December.

ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOS

UAW Region 5 Director Jim Wells said the Occupy movement is “giving a voice to the voiceless.”

“We stand alongside these activists because, like so much of what we fight for, we care about the livelihood of all members of society. The wealth gap is one we must conquer in order to survive and thrive,” added Wells, whose region covers 17 states in the western and southwestern United States, including Missouri, California and Washington state.

The Occupiers are here to stay.

They are the 99 percent, and they demand change. They are us.

Gwynne Marie Cobb

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