CATHOLIC WORKER

December, 2011

More Than A Mere Protest

Vol. LXXVIII, No. 7

By NATHAN SCHNEIDER

There was this moment, while I was standing on the steps of the New York County Supreme Court building overlooking Foley Square, when things came together. Literally. It was mid-afternoon on October 5, the day of the first big march when organized labor turned out in support of Occupy Wall Street, then two and a half weeks old. A few thousand union members, students and allies were rallying in the square when a few thousand more marchers who had come from occupied Liberty Plaza—officially, Zuccotti Park—poured in from the north end onto Worth Street. They kept coming, and it seemed like they'd never stop.

In the union crowd, people held mainly matching, printed signs. Among the occupiers, on the other hand, the signs were mainly hand-scrawled on cardboard, often on the pizza boxes that are so plentiful in the plaza. Leading the way was a big banner that I'd seen arrive fresh from the printer the night before: "OCCUPY EVERYTHING," it said.

I can't say exactly how long I've been wait-



Afghanistan's Affliction

Price 1¢

By KATHY KELLY

In Kabul, Afghanistan's beleaguered capital city, a young woman befriended me in December of 2010. She was eager to talk about her views, help us better understand the history of her country, and form some lasting relationships. Now, she is too frightened to return a phone call from visiting westerners. The last time I saw her, during the spring of 2011, she was extremely anxious because, weeks earlier, her brother-inlaw had been arrested by US Joint Special Operations commandos (JSOC). The family has no idea how to find him. Once, someone working for the International Commission of the Red Cross called the family to say that he was still alive and in the custody of the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF). Numerous families in Afghanistan experience similar misery and fear after night raids that effectively "disappear" family members who are held incommunicado and sometimes turned over to Afghan National Police or the dreaded National Directorate of Security.

An October 11, 2011 New York Times

feels like forever. There's a memory I have of being a little kid—sitting on one of those orange seats on the Metro in DC, I think—and wondering, "What will my generation do?" Then came the protests against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. I was eighteen, a freshman in college. It was as if, over the course of those few months, our generation's whole allotment of political energy was spent, and then exhausted, with little hope of actually preventing that disaster. Most of us who had been paying enough attention to care thereafter took refuge in irony and distance.

By the middle of this summer, I started to get the sense that maybe the winds were about to change. As an editor of the blog, Waging Nonviolence, I'd noticed a few separate efforts brewing to turn this year's Arab Spring and restless European Summer into an American Autumn. I started going to planning meetings for an effort to occupy Freedom Plaza in DC (which in fact began on October 6). I think it was at one of those that I first heard about the idea for September 17, which was still little more than a Twitter hashtag: #occupywallstreet. Soon, though, I also started going to the messy, thrilling planning meetings for the Wall Street occupation on Saturday evenings in Tompkins Square Park. I listened, made friends, and took notes. Nobody had any idea what would come of it, but just enough people stuck around to find out.

In between the periods of fear during that first week after September 17, when the New York Police Department seemed ready to round everyone up any minute, this feeling began to creep in that we were on holy ground. You could say it was, or was like, being constantly in the presence of God, even though that name went mostly unspoken. If for some reason I left Liberty Plaza, the whole rest of the city would seem unreal to me, and the people in it, most of whom still had no idea about our little revolution brewing downtown, seemed asleep.

Whether they knew it or not, the occupiers were busy getting an education. The plaza was a school. They had to provide for themselves, to build the rudiments of a village that could stand in joyful contradiction to the corruption



John Bischof

and costly extravagance all around them. And they had to learn how to reason together—in long general assemblies, by the ancient method of consensus, learned this time from a cadre of very articulate anarchists.

People new to this, and sometimes veterans too, couldn't resist the temptation at first to get up in a meeting and make some daring but completely off-topic speech about what is wrong with the world and what can be done to correct it. For most, this was the first time they'd ever had their political voices heard in any meaningful way—face to face, at least, and off the internet. But the novelty wore off and those same people learned how to get down to business, to work and think more in tune with each other because there was no alternative. The meetings got smoother, at least until the next batch of new people joined.

I've watched this learning curve happen again and again at Occupy Wall Street, as well as at the two occupations going on now in DC. People come in, usually, with ideas about "demands," and about how the occupation could fit in their existing political frames—how this could help the Democrats, or somesuch. It might take a few hours, or a few days, or even a few weeks, but their old frames eventually fall away. They rediscover democracy, democracy like they've never really known it before, by practicing it in a sea of people, any of whom has the right to speak and be heard like any other. They work out the kinks in the process, those vestiges of corruption and prejudice and indifference from the world outside that we can't help smuggling in with us. Then they realize that what they do or say in the plaza actually matters less than what they bring back to their own communities and teach others in turn.

Now, my work requires me to spend more time writing and speaking about the occupation than actually being there. When I go back to check on it, I look through the mul-

titudes of new occupiers for the few familiar ones from the first days, and I ask them how they're doing. For the most part, they're dealing with growing pains, working to adapt the organization to accommodate all the new comrades, reporters, ideas, and problems. But they also tell me they're learning to step back, to reject the temptations of ego and privilege, to pass their leadership roles over to others. It's a spiritual task. If this movement is to be better than a mere protest, they know it has to cultivate the hope in people for something better than more of the same, something better suited to living in healthy communities. And, after a few weeks of sleeping on granite under the constant gaze of TV cameras and tourists, they need a rest.

This movement has a long way to go. I was reminded of that a few minutes before the march to Foley Square began, when I ran into ninety-year-old Dan Berrigan and some fellow Jesuits on Liberty Plaza, all in plainclothes. This was a wonderful surprise the plaza was overflowing with new faces that day, and I was happy to see some familiar ones, and so unexpectedly. I felt, also, like I could stand a little taller around them than I ever had before. Finally, here was some evidence that my generation could take a stand the way theirs had, against injustices we're victims of and injustices we're complicit in. Best of all, as daily life at the plaza showed, we were taking our stand in the form of a carnival—what Dan's friend William Stringfellow might have called, as he called the circus, "a parable of the eschaton." It's a sideways glimpse of the world to come.

After I cajoled those obliging Jesuits into posing for a picture with me, we were approached by a man who introduced himself as a TV reporter from Greece. True to form, he had a cameraman waiting a few paces behind him. (Liberty Plaza has become essentially

(continued on page 7)

who interviewed 324 Afghans detained by security forces, found that half of those who were in detention sites run by the National Directorate of Security told of torture which included beatings, twisting of genitals, stress positions, suspension and threatened sexual assault. Of the 324 interviewed, eighty-nine had been handed over to the Afghan intelligence service or the police by US/NATO international military forces.

Even though high officials in the ranks of the US JSOC acknowledge that 50% of the time the night raids and drone attacks "get" the wrong person (Washington Post, September 3, 2011), the US war planners have steadily escalated the use of these tactics.

Consider the killing of three brothers in the Nemati family who lived in Sayyidabad village in Afghanistan's Wardak province. Ismail, age twenty-five, and Buranullah, age twenty-three, had returned from their studies in Kabul to celebrate the start of Ramadan with their family in August of 2010. With their brother Faridullah, age seventeen, they went to the family guest room to study for exams. They were joined by their younger brother, Wahidullah, age thirteen.

An initial US military press release on August 12th indicated that US forces had captured an important Taliban figure nearby and had taken fire from the Nemati home where they believed Taliban fighters were being hosted as guests. Indeed, two Taliban fighters had stopped at the home two days earlier, asking for food. Fearful of repercussions if they didn't feed them, the family had given them food.

According to a report from McClatchy News (August 20, 2010), the youngest brother, Wahidullah, said that US soldiers burst through the guest room door around 1:30 am and started firing. As Buranullah and Faridullah lay bleeding to death. Ismail tried to speak with the soldiers in English. Wahidullah says Ismail was still alive as the assault force led him out of the room, but he wasn't sure whether all three brothers had been hit during the initial shooting.

Photographs, which the family provided (continued on page 5)

and 4.): 900 (660); f. Total Distribution (Sum of 15c and 15e): 24,951 (24,750); g. Copies not distributed: 2,334 (2,250); h. Total (Sum of 15f and 15g): 27,285 (27,000); i. Percent Paid and/or Requested Circulation (15c/15f x 100): 96% (97%).

16. This Statement of Ownership will be printed in the December, 2011 issue of this publication.

17. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete.

Joanne Kennedy, Managing Editor



Daniel Nichols

organization of a continue continue of a co branch of al Queda. In some ways it isn't organized at all, yet it is well organized as you will see if you make a visit to Zuccotti Park. There is a place to go for medical help, for food, for communications. This strange demonstration has been organized by cell phones and the internet. These are the forms of communication which have played such havoc in the Middle East. Free communication is the threat that rigid societies, such as North Korea, or Saudi Arabia, most fear, and try to monitor and control.

The media have, correctly, noted that the youth do not seem to have an agreed set of demands and are not sure how long they will continue to remain in the Wall Street area. The media are disturbed by this because they do not understand it. Movements must have a clear set of demands—and the folks at Zuccotti Park don't. None of the clarity of Lenin's "Bread, Land, Peace" in 1917. So what?

it fade like an autumn leaf when the temperature drops? What does it mean that the trade unions have joined in the demonstrations? I

the same the same that the same the same that the same tha

tionaries? Those who opposed all change? Bayard looked at me and said:

"Ah, they are the most essential of all. For it is in a situation of social disaster where radicals are demanding the abolition of the old order, and liberals are demanding at least some regulations, and conservatives are conceding that at least one or two changes might be wise, that the reactionary says 'Let them eat cake,' and it is then that the people move."

In the "Zuccotti case," it was when the police officer who squirted mace into the faces of unresisting and unoffending young women, arousing the fury of almost everyone in New York City, that the media finally turned their full attention to events. That officer did such a great favor to those of us who have watched the banks make a disaster area of working and middle class US Americans, while those at the top not only remain in the President's inner circle, but walk away with I have no idea where this will all go. Will increasing profits. Masses out of work, millions fearful of losing their homes, students burdened with impossible debts, but the small elite of great wealth have in their employ this police officer who has foolishly done them more harm than they yet realize.

Fourth, what is behind this gentle assembly? It is because the usual process of social change no longer works. I do not hate President Obama. I feel rather sorry for him. I had not voted for him, but like more than half the country I was glad he was elected. I knew, even then, that he was "of the Establishment"—no one is able to run for that office with a chance of winning, who has not been vetted by the real center of power— Wall Street. But I had hoped Guantánamo would be closed. I had hoped the last troops would long since have been withdrawn from Iraq, and that we had not replaced them with "contract killers." I had known President Obama would continue the war in Afghanistan, but had no idea he would not, much sooner, have realized we must withdraw. I could not imagine he would authorize the murder of two American citizens in Yemen without a trial or any due process.

And when the great economic disaster

ALLE TALLES CALLES COLLECTION CALLED ALLES TO DO DO DEC had been arrested trying to cross the Brookyn Bridge toward Zuccotti Park.

More Than a Mere Protest

(continued from page 1) a never-ending press conference.) I nodded a hello, but he went straight for Dan.

"Can I interview you?" he asked. "I'd like to show the world that it isn't just a bunch of radicals here."

What he was referring to, of course, was the perception in the media that the occupation was just a bunch of young, dirty, feisty rebels without a clear idea of what they wanted. (Early on, this was mostly true. Who else would hold a space like that through rain, discomfort, and police intimidation?) Clearly, though, the reporter had no idea to whom he was talking, that this elderly man was possibly the most radical person on the whole plaza, as one who has spent a whole lifetime in peaceful resistance and who had served years in prison—not just a few hours in a holding cell—for his trouble.

By that point, Occupy Wall Street had taken fewer than a thousand arrests, plus a well-publicized use of pepper spray. (A few more arrests would come that evening, along with billy clubs and more pepper spray.) Sacrifices had only begun to be made, and the powers that be had only begun to feel the least bit threatened, if they did at all. This proto-movement still could have faded away

with little harm done.

To me, and to most of the young people there who were doing this for more or less the first time, these had been among the longest, best, and most sleep-deprived twoand-a-half weeks of our lives. But seeing Dan Berrigan there put those weeks in perspective. As people liked to chant in the early days of the occupation, when it seemed liable to be shut down at any moment, "This is just a practice"—this is just the beginning. ...

FRIDAY NIGHT MEETINGS

In keeping with Peter Maurin's recognition of the need for ongoing clarification of thought, we invite you to join us for our weekly Friday Night Meetings. The meetings are held at Maryhouse—55 East Third St., (212) 777-9617. Feel welcome to call and confirm the schedule. Maryhouse is located between First and Second Avenues (2nd Ave. stop on the F train).

Dec. 2Justice and The Generals—Documentary on the Murders of the Four US Churchwomen in El Salvador (31st Anniversary).

Dec. 9Reading St. Paul's Romans—(Roundtable).

Dec. 23No Meeting—Merry Christmas! Dec. 30No Meeting—Happy New Year!

Jan. 13Nathan Schneider: The Ballerina & The Charging Bull—Wall St. Occupation.

Jan. 20Joe Gower: Orestes Brownson & Isaac Hecker-A NY Catholic Story.

Jan. 27Joanne Kennedy Explains Michael Moores' The Big One (Film & Talk).

MEETINGS BEGIN AT 7:45 PM