

# We Took The Park. Now What?

Thoughts On The Movement By a Participant, # 2 Oct 20, 2011 6:20 pm

(Is this the last one of these I write? Maybe. If I get a job I'll keep it up and keep printing them if people say they like it)

(Read about the eviction law firm that dresses up as homeless people for Halloween! <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/29/opinion/what-the-costumes-reveal.html>)

It has been a busy month. We've got our movement up and running, and we are responding to our first instances of repression and political attack. What we have to do is figure out what the park is and what its plan is, as well as how to coordinate a broader movement. I am a seasonal worker currently living out my car trying to find housing and a job in the Salt Lake / Wasatch Front area. I am also very pissed off at the political system that keeps trying to destroy my life by laying me off and making me spend all my savings on gas money. I have a slum lord trying to screw up my credit years after he stole my security deposit in 2007 and I have a truck lease I am trying to pay off. I am very angry at the system and I have spent a lot of the past two weeks trying to fight it here at Occupy SLC.

I am glad Pioneer Park got occupied and held. It has provided me with a place to stay and cook and eat in safety without being chased around like a rat every time a light is shined on me. It's fed me sometimes. And it has allowed me to be part of making some political protest of my condition. So I like it. But where is it going? We have to figure out what the next step is. The following is my thoughts on the subject.

I believe the two things the movement needs to do are to try and figure out how to:

**1) Remove power from the hands of the one percent and transfer it to "the people" as a whole.**

**2) Demand and fight for specific reforms that will ameliorate the effects of the humanitarian and economic disaster the decisions of the one percent have created among the unemployed, the working poor, and the declining middle classes.**

How does that relate to Occupying a park? Where does that strategy fit in? This issue explores that.

1.

## THE GOAL OF THE HOMELESS IS TO STOP BEING HOMELESS

(not to convince the entire working and middle classes of why they should be homeless too! The foreclosure banks, lawfirms, and the evicting sheriff's offices are doing enough of that already!)

What we at the park have done so far has been mostly to provide services of food and housing for the transient and unemployed and long term homeless. We've done this by taking direct action to turn a park into a "Grapes of Wrath" style tent colony of actually unemployed and homeless people. The park is that. In itself it is an act of defiance that radically asserts our humanity and the value of our lives and our rights to food and shelter.

We are that much more than we are just political activists who came to camp to make a statement. Most of the people who started doing this occupation for political reasons alone three weeks ago left because when they showed up they got scared of the drugs and attitudes of the long term homeless who live here. As they should have been. Because it is fucking scary. In America, as many people already knew and as many people more are finding out, when you are homeless, or semi homeless, suddenly the presence of drugs, drug users, and bad attitudes start to become part of your reality. They are there whether you like it or not. As long as there is a system like this one running things that does not value human life many people who are beaten down will choose to turn to drugs and the related petty crime out of despair and survival. That is just how it is. Those of us still here working at the park know this and we aren't afraid of it. We are here putting in a lot of time to keep the park working because we don't have a choice. This is the last refuge open to us and we are taking our stand.

Most of the people camping here are here because they need shelter. Not because they are **choosing** to come camping in the cold to make some kind of political statement.

We've come here and we are surviving. But is the goal to stay here forever? I think it isn't. No movement of the unemployed or homeless in the past has ever made the right to camp indefinitely in a public park through the cold winter a political demand. The political demands have always been for adequate housing, and "work or wages" as the unemployed often wrote on their signs in the 1930s.

The other day I made a great friend in the city who supports our "movement of the 99%" and who her self is living in a car, staying on friends' couches, and who has a job making \$10 an hour but who with it cannot afford a place to live where she and her 6 kids could stay. What am I supposed to say to this person? Do I WANT her to stay in the park with her 6 kids? Hell no! I want her kids somewhere warm and safe! This is not a safe place for kids! Is this where you'd like your kids to be living? If your kids are here it is probably because you have no other choice but to take them here. That is fine and I will be part of doing what I can to work for you but surely, you'd prefer they be staying for the next 6 months of blizzards and sub-freezing temperatures somewhere with heating and running water!!

In the world I want to build, people freezing in a park all winter wouldn't happen. People would be housed. And today much housing stands vacant while people are thrown out into the cold! The speculators have built more homes than they can sell! They kicked us out of our houses to foreclose them and many of them sit idle. There is housing, and people need houses. This occupation is a temporary measure for me, because I am going to fight to find somewhere better to spend my winter because staying here and sleeping on my truck sucks! I will do that by trying to find a permanent place with water and electricity to park my small camper, or by finding someone with an extra room I can rent out cheap. If I have trouble with that I will be looking at every type of shelter and social service our overstretched social safety net can help me with. And short of that, I will perhaps be forced to occupy something else, like an abandoned building, as a squat. I won't stay in the park all winter because staying in a park when you are homeless sucks. I like the fact that I can stay here now, but it is a stop gap, emergency measure. I will fight along with all of you to be able to stay here as long as you can, but I believe, like intelligent animals that we are who recognize that indoor plumbing and central heating is preferable to winter camping, that *our park should work together to make itself unnecessary*. We should work to get ourselves into better places to live.

We need to fight the system, take on the banks and politicians, form alternate political organizations, form unions at our jobs and schools and be willing to have sit ins and strikes and occupations of *political* and *economic* targets for the purposes of disrupting their operations. I can do that a lot more effectively when I can get a good nights' rest, when I can actually date or marry someone and have a place for us to live happily. When I am thus in a good mood. When I am warm and I can have both a refrigerator and a freezer to cook food that I want to cook, and not just a cooler that is a freezer and a fridge at different times in the same day. Having that stability would make me a lot more, sustainable and effective of an activist than I am in my present operation. Because right now I am more concerned about immediate survival than anything else.

So what operational conclusions do we draw from this? I believe our goal should be to quit being homeless as soon as possible. We could start trying to link individuals up with programs to move them into transitional and permanent housing. For those who remain and can not be helped by these programs, we could continue the occupation with THE SPECIFIC FOCUS of DEMANDING from the city adequate housing. We will never live adequately in tents with no security or heating in a park with heavy drug traffic. We could demand that the city locate an unused building that has central heating and running water and allows us to turn it into a permanent "transient" housing location. We could demand that they get a real kitchen that serves three square meals a day with city bought food and paid employees. That would be a really great thing for the city to have. There would be different locations to make it more manageable. That would put us into the property management business, and eventually the whole program could be turned over to professional paid management. We could also have that "office of transience" give loans or grants, which are paid directly to landlords, not to applicants, to get people into apartments

How to make something like that run, and how to deal with the questions of drug treatment, and how to made it fraud free, is hard. There could be "family" locations that have stricter tolerance for drugs. Maybe we could have specific places where people who are addicted to drugs could do them without freezing to death, but where they were monitored for their safety and kept away from families and non-users they might otherwise threaten. Bureaucrats and charities here and in other countries have been thinking about these issues for a long time. Their budgets are low and the "war on drugs" has perpetuated homelessness by treating addicts as worthless criminals, rather than as people's sons and daughters and fathers and mothers who have FOR WHATEVER REASON gotten involved with something nasty that they need HELP surviving through, and eventually leaving. There is a history of ideas and attempts to do this kind of stuff that we could look at. I see a movement for this as one potential direction for us to take. It would take a lot of work and research to focus on developing specific and workable proposals for. But it is something we should do. What do you think? Do you have better ideas? Tell me them!

*Occupying is a tactic. But just occupying a park won't cure the ills of society. The revolution takes a lot more than good camping skills. Let's not "Fetishize a tactic"*

Coming together to help feed ourselves and secure for us housing via our direct action of taking the park was an important victory for us, and one that we are benefiting from. Figuring out our own next steps is difficult because we are half providing these direct food and shelter services, and half being part of making political statements, holding signs, etc. Though very few of us seeking shelter at the park are actually holding the signs! That itself is because many of us at the park just there to survive, and we have a lot of personal issues and health problems we are dealing with that make "activism" difficult.

**I don't know what the next step or the right plan is either, but I look forward to working with all of you to figure it out.**

"Occupying something" is a tactic, not a solution itself. And a lot of people are dreaming that the occupation itself will become the nucleus of a new society. Yet that conflicts with the most basic working class / unemployed needs and demands for housing, food, shelter, etc. The struggle isn't to get the single working mother of 6 to live in a sketchy park with her kids all winter. The struggle is to get her into a warm house with running water and a refrigerator. The park occupation is a stop gap temporary optional measure, albeit one with a political character. But the new society I want to live in is not one of people living in parks. It's people living in houses. And parks being nice places to hang out and enjoy during the day time, or maybe at night around Christmas with happy kids eating roasted chestnuts.

What we need To Solve The Bigger Problems is a broad, political movement that puts demands on the political system and wins the appropriation of resources for people who need them, rather than using our resources for bank bailouts, military contractors, etc. Where the self help direct action of taking over a park to have a place to live and cook ends, and the movement to fight for political demands begins, is a gray and fuzzy line. Different occupations have different character, different balances between unemployed and transient people needing a place to stay and activists camping as a political statement. So exact steps forward need to be figured out locally.

However, the danger is to limit ourselves to the occupying strategy, to \*fetishizing\* it as THE tactic to be done to "win". The power structure doesn't need to repress us like they did in Oakland. Eventually people will get tired and leave if they can, because it is getting colder out. And then the homeless and people living in their cars not as a political statement but because they have to will be left alone and on their own like they were before. So we can't pretend that just staying in a park is the one thing we are trying to get everyone in society to do. People camping in the winter in a snowy park with overworked toilets and little no personal space and burritos with no meat in them is not the society I want to live in. It's a product of the society I am trying to overthrow.

What we need is to take a hard look at reality. See exactly what we are, what we have, what we can do, and where we should be going. We can't just allow ourselves to be trapped into one tactic that many people have excitedly adopted, but which itself does not offer the ultimate solution of transforming our system into something more responsive and accountable.

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## 2.

**Things are disorganized and our best activists are suffering. It impossible to be an effective long term activist if you are always devoting your energy trying to keep a camp like this up and running. Working Groups are not optional. They are necessary. All of our leading activists are right now on the very edge of burning themselves out and disappearing because of overcommitment.**

Right now I am tired. I don't get enough sleep or food because I go to a lot of meetings. And you know what ? A lot of those meetings are a waste of my

time. People stay for 30 minutes, say some things, and then leave. People constantly interrupt each other. People come late to a meeting and start talking about whatever they want to talk about. It is rare in a meeting just to win an agenda. Every meeting that every business leadership and every political body in the world has starts with an agenda. And you know what? They get stuff DONE. The Pentagon gets stuff done with great efficiency. So does the G20 and the IMF. They get evil stuff done, but they get it done. Because they know how to run a meeting.

Several people at the last GA said they would do some things and then they did not do it. People voted to have a working meeting yesterday at 5pm and NONE of them showed up but me. A person from the last town hall said they'd email me a list of people who signed up to be part of a "street team" that they said they need and that I volunteered to help to organize. He never did. Then I emailed him about it and he never got back to me. N\_\_\_ from the last town hall got all the emails of people interested in working on "outreach" together and said he would get us all in touch and have us become a committee. I've heard nothing from N\_\_\_, and after I wrote him he never wrote me back either, though on Thursday he seemed very enthusiastic about taking on lots of responsibility! Someone else from the outreach working group of the town hall said they'd make a "general flyer". A two sided one with very limited text, and which is twice as expensive to print than a one sided flyer, was brought to the march yesterday. But there is no link to it on the website.

I have better things to do with my time than to hang out with people who want to complain about the system, but who are themselves **not interested** in organizing themselves efficiently. This is very frustrating, especially when right now is such a key time for our movement.

We urgently need to develop better organization and sustainable routines that can make use of our many volunteers. I listed about just a FEW examples of dysfunction. Instead of coming together to FIX it, at the present time just a few people have put themselves forward to do the great majority of the work to pull the movement together and to organize the logistics of the occupied camps. They are substituting their own super-human efforts for *the movement's* collective inability to develop working structures. If they keep doing this they will burn themselves out, and they will disappear from the movement, leaving it to wither and collapse.

**We must balance our involvement over the next week or two to a sustainable level.**

**For work to happen we must make our working groups serious things that are real and actually meet and don't waste time.**

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### **3. A Light Hearted Story With Humorous Analogies About the Limits of "Consensus" and "Leadership"**

Guess what? I don't believe in consensus! I believe in voting! I think it is FINE to have differences on what we believe because we all have differences on what we believe. I like when there are two ideas that each side argues its point, and then we all vote on what to do, and then we all do it, and then we assess it to see whether or not it was worth doing. 2/3s majority or simple majority. I don't care. But I think voting is a great way to made decisions. It's fine to argue your point and be outvoted. But it is childish to "block" a group's activity, or to say if they don't all agree with what you want, that you are going to pack up your toys and go home. That's manipulative and lame. I'd much rather be outvoted and obligated to try out something that the majority wants and I wasn't sure about, than I would prefer to "block" something.

I also think leadership is a real thing and it needs to be recognized! I am a leader because I have been showing up and writing flyers and printing them with my own money and I talked to passers by at the march on the 29<sup>th</sup> and I and gave out 100 flyers and I stood on the corner of 400 S and 300 W with signs at rush hour and I've been to the Fed and I wash my own and other people's dishes. Seth is a leader because he's been the "fire extinguisher" and chief organizer of camp doing things there is not enough space on this page to list. Alonso and Lionel are wonderful leaders who got a kitchen running and up to code from scratch. Jesse is leading our Internet and donations. That guy at the Fed is leading our presence at the Fed. The other Jesse is leading up having street theater actions. Leaders exist. You become a leader. You can just start being one. Leaders can be elected or recalled, which is great. If you just rely on a "self selected leader" who is not "officially" in any position because you are afraid of organizational structure you may very quickly find yourself with a "self unselected leader" who feels he can step back as easily as he stepped up, leaving your movement hanging.

There is a very simple cure for the belief that consensus based decision making is "superior" to voting and electing people to do things, and that we can ignore the importance of people with experience, courage, initiative, and leadership skills acting in an official capacity where we all depend on them to lead. Here it is. I can get a raft and some paddles and a permit and I will drive any of you to the put it for Westwater Canyon of the Colorado River. I'll let you all try to take "consensus" on what direction to point your momentum when you're going over Funnel Falls, or when to start paddling when you're being pushed into a giant hole, a sheer wall of rock, or a whirlpool at Skull Rapid. One of you in the front can decide to stop paddling and "block" at the key moment in Sock-It-To-Me where you're being sucked and flipped on the Magnetic Wall. When all of you finally drown in the ensuing mayhem because you didn't want to elect an official captain to head up the "steering" working group of the raft, there will at long last be no one left to advocate the superiority of consensus.

Though I do not believe in consensus, I have been using it without complaint! I facilitated the last GA at Pioneer Park and we made decisions via consensus. I am fine with that. I didn't try and ruffle feathers by putting in my own ideas of "voting" rather than "taking consensus". Why is that? It is because I DON'T CARE how we make decisions. Getting work done is more important to me than fighting over how to do work. But do you know what bothers me? It is when people say they care about consensus, and they know all about this allegedly great new way to make decisions that is somehow better than the way decisions get made by *every democratic country in the world*, and then, after all that decision making gets made, THEY STILL DON'T DO WHAT THEY SAY THEY ARE GOING TO DO, AND THE NEXT DAY THEY DON'T SHOW UP WHERE THEY SAY THEY WERE GOING TO SHOW UP, AND THEY IGNORE MY EMAIL ASKING THEM WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED!

Serious, cooperative people can take any awkward decision making structure and make it work to accomplish what they need! Make decisions however you want! But I'll say this: what we are up against is the richest and most well armed ruling class in the history of the world. They spent the last three years showing us that they'd rather have us thrown out into the street when their speculation crashes the economy than they would have their tax dollars (money they didn't earn, but money that was stolen from the labor of heavily exploited people who work for them) go to pay for relief. If you want the "99%" of the population to take you seriously and join you, and if you want your occupations and movements to be sustainable, you are going to have to stop talking about what great things you are going to accomplish "being the change you want to see" and you are going to have to start showing up on time and doing the things you say you are going to do. //////////////////////////////////////Sincerely, - ME