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Victory! Transforming Occupy Wall Street From a Moment to a Movement

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The protesters challenging the big banks and the super-rich won a dramatic victory in Los Angeles on Thursday, as I describe below. OneWest Bank, the biggest bank based in Southern California, and Fannie Mae, [stopped their foreclosure and eviction](#) against Rose Gudiel, a working class homeowner, in response to a brilliantly executed protest movement by community and union activists.

The question facing the activists is this: Is the Occupy Wall Street phenomenon a moment of protest or a movement for sustained change? Will Rose Gudiel become the [Rosa Parks](#) of a new economic justice movement?

As I write in *The Nation* (in the October 24 issue, now on-line), "If the Occupy Wall Street activists join forces with the unions and community groups, they could catalyze a massive nationwide movement to resist foreclosures and block evictions. They could also put pressure on local and state lawmakers to pass tougher legislation. And they could inject the foreclosure crisis -- and the banking industry's culpability for the recession -- into the presidential and Congressional elections."

It appears that this convergence of Occupy Wall Street (which has now spread to dozens of cities) and the unions and community organizing groups -- that have been working for years to spark a movement like this -- may be happening. They now face the dilemma confronted by the American Left for years: Can they bring together visionary calls for radical change with specific demands for immediate reform?

Today, participating in a rally and march in downtown LA, cosponsored by Occupy LA and union/community/faith coalition led by ACCE and SEIU, that attracted several thousand people, Gudiel announced the following:

"I'd like to announce that the bank called me today to arrange a meeting, to discuss a modification proposal from Fannie Mae. I have also learned that my eviction has been canceled. We are very happy that they have finally come to the table, and I hope they are serious about negotiating a reasonable modification, which is what I have been requesting for over two years. And I hope that they will change their policies to stop taking the homes the thousands of hardworking families facing preventable foreclosure. Thank you."
So....

- Imagine 25, 50, 100, 500, or 1000 homeowners like Rose Gudiel, facing foreclosure -- victims of banking abuses and economic crisis throughout greater Los Angeles -- following Gudiel's example!
- Imagine the Occupy Wall Street activists and their counterparts in LA, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, San Francisco, and elsewhere linking arms with members of community groups and unions to block evictions all over the country!
- Imagine, as they join forces to stop banks and sheriffs from evicting the victims of Wall Street-induced recession, that the combined forces of the union/community groups and the Occupy Wall Street activists showed up at the homes and offices of Republican Senators and House members, demanding that they pass Obama's jobs bill, confirm Richard Cordray (Obama's nominee to head the Consumer Protection Finance Bureau, whom the GOP is opposing), and toughen regulations on banks.
- Imagine if these same folks worked to push Congress to pass a recent proposal by the National Labor Relations Board that would make it easier for workers to organize unions, and which is being ferociously opposed by the US Chamber of Commerce, the Koch brothers, and the National Association of Manufacturers, as Gordon Lafer writes about in the current (October 10) issue of *The Nation*.
- Imagine if the Occupy Wall Street activists and their counterparts got involved in the grunt work (voter registration, phone banking, door-knocking) required to help elect Elizabeth Warren to the U.S. Senate from Massachusetts as well as helped elect other liberal and progressive Democrats, including President Obama, next November.

A scenario like the one described in the bullet points above is possible. Many activists and analysts, like the [Washington Post's Harold Meyerson](#), are exploring these ideas.

In the past week alone, the Occupy Wall Street crusade has not only spread to dozens of cities and (after being ignored for several weeks) generated increasingly respectful media coverage, but it has now won the support of the labor movement, MoveOn, key members of Congress, the Los Angeles City Council, and others. After [being grilled by Sen. Bernie Sanders two days ago](#), Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke reluctantly expressed his agreement with the grievances of the Occupy Wall Street folks. This is a great example of why it is important to have strong allies like Sanders in Congress.

Meyerson and many others are wondering how to keep the momentum going so that the spark lit by the Occupy Wall Street activists doesn't fizzle out. Eventually, the mainstream media will grow tired of covering daily demonstrations and marches in the streets of major cities (and all but the hard core of activists will grow tired of camping out and marching) unless the Occupy Wall Street campaign begins to make specific demands that can help win specific victories.

Protest and civil disobedience -- like the sit-down strikes at auto factories in the 1930s and the lunch counter sit-ins in the 1960s -- succeed when its participants and its sympathizers are fighting for something specific, and their victories become stepping-stones to more and more bold, radical reforms.

The best thing that could happen to the Occupy Wall Street activists in NYC and elsewhere is to join forces with homeowners fighting foreclosures and evictions. During the Depression, radicals organized rural farmers and urban tenants to resist foreclosures and evictions by banks, sheriffs, judges, and landlords. Progressives within FDR's inner circle -- like Henry Wallace and Frances Perkins -- along with progressives and liberals in Congress used this upsurge of radical protest to push for New Deal legislation that helped farmers, workers, and the unemployed.

If this idea seems far-fetched in the current political climate, take a look at what has happened in Los Angeles in the past week. Today activists there won an important, heartening victory by using protest and civil disobedience to stop a bank from foreclosing and evicting on a working-class family victimized by greedy banks and the economic crisis.

Rose Gudiel, who juggles two jobs and lives with her parents and brother in a working-class suburb of Los Angeles, has become the public face of a burgeoning crusade to defend homeowners from unfair evictions. The 35-year old Gudiel belongs to the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE, a group formed after the collapse of ACORN in California) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), organizations that have led the fight for bank reform in California. Their protests are rooted in the specific grievances of their mostly low-income and working-class members, who have been laid off, ripped off and evicted by banks engaged in predatory lending.

ACCE, SEIU and other California unions and community groups have been mobilizing homeowners since the beginning of the economic crisis. They've organized meetings with bank officials to try to get them to modify loans rather than foreclose on homeowners. When negotiations break down, the activists have resorted to protests and civil disobedience to draw attention to abusive practices and the banks' failure to deal with homeowners in good faith.

Two years ago the Gudiel family missed one mortgage payment after her brother was killed and the family lost his income and Rose, a state government employee, lost some income because of state furloughs due to the state's fiscal crisis. The family quickly recovered and wanted to resume making its mortgage payments, but OneWest Bank quickly began foreclosure proceedings rather than help modify the family's mortgage.

Facing the possibility of eviction, Gudiel, her neighbors, co-workers and supporters from the ACCE and SEIU last week began a round-the-clock vigil at her house. They pledged to risk arrest if the LA County sheriff tried to evict them from her home after Fannie Mae and OneWest Bank issued a foreclosure notice. Gudiel's story caught the imagination of the [local news media](#) and her allies showed remarkable courage and defiance, as indicated in this [video](#).

On Tuesday of this week, ACCE, SEIU, and other supporters [protested](#) at the \$26 million Bel Air mansion of Steve Mnuchin, the CEO of OneWest Bank, based in Pasadena. I wrote about the disparity between Mnuchin's wealth and Gudiel's plight in [Huffington Post three days ago](#). Mnuchin's bank claimed that it no longer owned Gudiel's mortgage but was simply servicing it on behalf of Fannie Mae.

So on Wednesday, ACCE, SEIU and Gudiel and other supporters [occupied the Fannie Mae office](#) in Pasadena. Gudiel and six others were [arrested](#).

All this protest and publicity put LA County Sheriff Lee Baca in a bind. He obviously did not want to have to evict Gudiel and her family, including her disabled mother and her father (a warehouse worker). The prospect of his deputies hauling off Gudiel's wheelchair-bound mother to jail didn't sit well with the county's top law enforcer. So he stalled for time, contacted OneWest and Fannie Mae, hoping these giant institutions would do the right thing and modify Gudiel's mortgage so her family could stay in their home.

Now it appears that the Gudiel family will get their house back -- and they owe their victory to the solidarity shown by their friends and neighbors, the months of hard work of ACCE, SEIU and their allies (particularly ACCE organizer Peter Kuhns), and the shifting political climate triggered by the new Occupy Wall Street activists.

In between marches and protests, I encourage the Occupy Wall Street folks to read Cohen's book, *Nothing to Fear*. Here's what they'll learn:

When FDR was elected in November 1932, and even after he took office in March 1933, his ideas about what to do were very unclear. He promised Americans a "new deal" but he had very few specifics. In fact, FDR was in many ways a cautious, even conservative, politician. The one clear idea he had in mind when he took office was to cut the federal budget, and the person he hired to do that job was his budget director, a conservative Congressman from Arizona named Lewis Douglas. He was also, initially, reluctant to use the power of government to regulate business practices, to create jobs, to support union organizing, or to support struggling farmers.

Cohen describes an ongoing battle that went on for FDR's heart and mind. It was a battle that went on inside the White House and outside the White House.

Inside the White House, it was a battle between FDR's progressives advisors and cabinet members like Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, Harry Hopkins, Henry Wallace, and Rexford Tugwell and more moderate and even conservative advisors.

Outside the White House, it was a battle between grassroots organizations and business groups. The grassroots groups included labor unions, community organizing groups, and organized small family farmers, including a radical group called the National Farmers Union. The business groups included banks, manufacturers, the real estate industry, and corporate farmers. These business groups were split between right-wing reactionary business leaders and more moderate groups -- and even a handful of liberal business leaders -- who recognized the need for reform.

FDR, as well as members of Congress, were influenced by the rising tide of protest taking place all over America. The nation was three years into the Depression -- 1932 -- before there were large-scale protest. It had been simmering under the surface. But at first, people were afraid, paralyzed, blamed themselves, felt ashamed, not sure what to do -- or if there was anything to do at all.

Workers, and farmers, and community groups were organizing people, but it didn't surface publicly until those feelings of shame, fear and paralysis were pushed aside.

Cohen tells a story that is pretty scary, but which also reveals the depths of desperation that many Americans felt at the time.

Almost half of all Americans made their living directly or indirectly from agriculture. Between 1929 and 1932, when FDR took office, farm income had fallen by two-thirds. Farm foreclosures were happening at a record pace. Farming communities were emptying out, as family farmers and sharecroppers abandoned the land looking for jobs elsewhere, like the situation portrayed in Steinbeck's novel, and the film, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

As Cohen recounts:

Farmers who stayed on the land were responding to their bleak circumstances with extreme politics and lawlessness. In January (1932), in Pilger, Nebraska, a crowd of hundreds had shown up to disrupt a foreclosure sale. At a foreclosure sale the same month in Le Mars, Iowa, a crowd had dragged a lawyer from New York Life Insurance Company down the courthouse steps. His life in danger, the lawyer... telegraphed his employer and asked for permission to bid the full amount the farmer was asking.

"In May 1932, 2000 farmers descended on the state fairgrounds in Des Moines to form the Farmers' Holiday Association." The group urged farmers to declare a "holiday" from farming, under the slogan, "Stay at Home - Buy Nothing - Sell Nothing." In effect, they were urging farmers to go on strike - to withhold their corn, beef, pork, and milk, until the government addressed their problems. They threatened to call a national farmers strike if Congress did not provide farmers with "legislative justice.

In Sioux City Iowa, farmers put wooden planks with nails on the highways to block agricultural deliveries. In Nebraska, one group of farmers showed up at a foreclosure sale and saw to it that every item that had been seized from a farmer's widow sold for 5 cents, leaving the bank with a total settlement of just \$5.35. This tactics quickly spread throughout the farm belt.

Perhaps the most scary example of farmers' anger boiling over took place on April 27, 1932 in Le Mars, Iowa. There, a group of farmers "pulled Judge Charles Bradley off the bench while he was hearing foreclosure cases. They carried him out of the courthouse and, when he refused to swear not to sign any more foreclosures, threw him into a farm truck and drove him to the outskirts of town. The mob pulled down his pants and put a noose around his neck. The farmers stopped short of a lynching...and simply left him dazed by the side of the road."

Farmers were becoming more radicalized by the day. Edward O'Neal, president of the Farm Bureau Federation, warned Congress that 'unless something is done for the American farmer we will have a revolution in this country within less than twelve months.'

According to Cohen, these protests by farmers, "increased the sense of urgency in Washington." Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace and progressive Democrats in Congress kept FDR aware of these protests, which helped them out-maneuver their more moderate colleagues. This combination of outside protest and inside maneuvering soon led to passage of the Agricultural Adjustment Act and the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act that "radically changed the economics of farming."

This same dynamic played out in the big cities, among veterans, tenants, among the unemployed, and among workers. In the spring and summer of 1932, protest erupted among veterans of World War One, many of them out of work and hungry. More than 20,000 of them from across the country joined a Bonus Army march on Washington. The veterans were holding government bonus certificates for their military service, which were due more than a dozen years in the future. They demanded that Congress pay off on them now, when they desperately needed the money. Most of them camped across the Potomac River from the Capitol on Anacostia Flats, in make-shift huts.

The bill to pay off on the bonus passed the House, but was defeated in the Senate, and some veterans, discouraged, left. Most stayed -- some encamped in government buildings near the Capitol, the rest on Anacostia Flats. President Hoover ordered the army to evict them. They used horses, tear gas, and machine guns. This led to a bloody scene, and two veterans were killed.

But the Bonus Army didn't give up, especially after FDR was elected. They returned to Washington to lobby "for an immediate payment of their bonuses and to protest the keep cuts" that FDR was making to their benefits as part of his budget-cutting plan.

FDR wanted to avoid another bloody riot with veterans that had hurt Hoover's reputation. In contrast to Hoover, FDR invited the Bonus Marchers to camp at a nearby army fort and provided them with meals, medical care and entertainment by the Navy band. One of FDR's progressive aides suggested that Eleanor Roosevelt go visit the veterans, and she spent time with them, listening to their complaints. One of the veterans said: "Hoover sent the Army. Roosevelt sent his wife."

More importantly, FDR acted to respond to their protests. He didn't restore their army bonuses, but he did issue an executive order setting aside 25,000 places for veterans in the Civilian Conservation Corps, the first of the New Deal public works programs.

In the 1930s, America was primarily a nation of renters, and during the Depression, there were huge waves of evictions, because they didn't have the income to pay rent. Utility companies shut off electricity and heat.

As Howard Zinn recounts in *A People's History of the United States*, a renter in New York City wrote a letter to Congressman Fiorello LaGuardia, a progressive politician who represented a poor district in Harlem:

You know my condition is bad... It is now nearly seven months I am out of work. I hope you will try to do something for me... I have four children who are in need of clothes and food... My daughter who is eight is very ill and not recovering. My rent is due two months and I am afraid of being put out.

Many tenants went beyond these pleas for help. In many big cities, when word spread that a family was being evicted, often a crowd would gather -- sometimes 10 people, sometimes a few hundred people. The police would remove the furniture from the house, put it out in the street, and the crowd would bring the furniture back. This happened so often that some police officers would refuse to evict or arrest people. These actions were organized by radicals - Communists and Socialists -- but they attracted a large following of people who weren't radicals but were desperate, angry, and willing to take action.

These protests set the stage for the New Deal's public housing programs, the first time that the federal government provided subsidies to create affordable housing.

In January 1933, several hundred jobless surrounded a restaurant just off Union Square in New York demanding they be fed without charge. In Seattle in February 1933, about 5,000 unemployed people occupied the County-City Building demanding jobs or relief. These and similar protests around the country set the stage for the nation's first cash assistance program for struggling families.

Through the 1930s, workers engaged in massive and illegal strikes and sit-down protests in factories throughout the country. A million and a half workers in different industries went on strike in 1934, including longshoremen, teamsters, factory workers, and retail clerks. In San Francisco, 130,000 workers joined a general strike.

In Michigan -- where workers had taken over a number of auto plants -- a sympathetic governor, Democrat Frank Murphy, refused to allow the National Guard to eject the protestors even after they had defied an injunction to evacuate the factories. His mediating role helped end the strike on terms that provided a victory for the workers and their union.

President Roosevelt soon recognized that his ability to push New Deal legislation through Congress depended on the pressure generated by protestors. As the protests escalated throughout the country, Roosevelt became more vocal, using his bully pulpit to lash out at big business for their greed and selfishness. He used his speeches, and his "fireside chats" on the radio, to explain his New Deal agenda and to encourage people to contact their congressmembers to promote workers' rights and to labor organizers felt confident in proclaiming, "FDR wants you to join the union."

With Roosevelt setting the tone, with his progressive aides like Frances Perkins and Henry Wallace maneuvering within the administration, and with allies like Senator Robert Wagner maneuvering in Congress, labor protests helped win legislation guaranteeing workers' right to organize, the minimum wage, and the 40-hour week.

The economic and political conditions in America right now aren't the same as in the Depression, but the protests of the past few weeks indicate that Americans are angry and frustrated.

The Tea Party doesn't have the answers to address these deep-rooted problems. Perhaps the Occupy Wall Street moment will turn into a progressive movement like America witnessed in the Depression.

Been to Occupy Wall Street?

If you've been to an Occupy Wall Street event anywhere in the country, we'd like to hear from you. Send OfftheBus your photos, links to videos or first-hand accounts of what you've seen for possible inclusion in The Huffington Post's coverage.

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