

Media ^{99%}

OWS Marks May Day With a Beatific Vision and a Big March

What will be the lasting impacts of Occupy's latest major action?

by Nathan Schneider

posted May 02, 2012



Members of the Guitarmy play on May Day.

Photo by David Bledsoe

I've been attending Occupy Wall Street planning meetings for May Day since they began in New York four months ago—twice as much time as there was to plan the initial occupation itself—and I still went into the day feeling like I had no idea what would come out of it.

All along, May 1 has been talked about among Occupiers in apocalyptic, beatific terms, which was what got me so addicted to the meetings in the first place. In the process of getting my fix, I also became witness to the politics of assembling a coalition of Occupiers, labor unions, immigrants' groups and community organizations—not always pretty, though occasionally it actually was. Much the same could be said of the day itself: Come for the dream, trudge through the reality.

Occupy's ambitious calls for a general strike and mass economic noncompliance appear to have gone mostly unnoticed. The financial markets followed a trapezoidal journey over the course of the day—apparently unperturbed by the movement's threat to shut down the flow of capital with "99 Pickets" across Midtown—spiking in the morning and crashing back down to where they started by late afternoon. The mainstream press has been predictably, conspiratorially silent, which may or may not have anything to do with the morning pickets at News Corp. and the New York Times Building. But when has the U.S. media ever done justice to big days of popular protest?

While most recent Occupy Wall Street actions have been peopled by the movement's most hardened regulars, this march brought out of the true breadth of Occupy's base of support.

A few hundred people slogging their way through pickets on a rainy Midtown morning swelled into closer to a thousand filling Bryant Park at midday. There, hard-boiled eggs, first-aid and the movement's latest publications were on offer, while across the park Rage Against the Machine's Tom Morello led a rehearsal for the Occupy Guitarmy, a hundred-strong orchestra of guitars that played old protest songs, a Morello original, and a particularly hypnotic arrangement of Willie Nile's "One Guitar." By early afternoon, the Guitarmy steered the crowd at Bryant Park in a march downtown. Picking up students from the Free University being held at Madison Square Park, the first wave of marchers defied police attempts to keep them on the sidewalk

and took over Broadway before arriving at Union Square, where they were greeted by a maypole topped by a sign proclaiming, in the words of last September's Declaration of the Occupation of New York City, "All of our grievances are connected."

The May Day coalition had secured permits for actions in Union Square and the subsequent march down Broadway to the Financial District, ensuring that the whole area was surrounded by locked metal barricades, preventing bystanders from entering or marchers from exiting except at designated points. Police protected these pens with zeal and occasional arrests. They also managed to split the OWS contingent, trapping thousands of marchers in Union Square and refusing to let them enter Broadway.



May Day and the Revolution of Everyday Life
Marina Sitrin offers her take on the May Day actions in New York.

Still, it was during the permitted march that the day's numbers reached their peak of around 30,000. The unions themselves didn't seem to turn out great masses of their own, nor did they even try to mount a general strike. But, by arranging for a permit (as occupiers would never do themselves), these more institutional allies did provide the space for a considerable show of support for the Occupy movement's concerns, which Occupy itself hasn't been able to even approach since the fall. The vast majority of people came for the permitted portion of the day and left after it was over.

While most recent Occupy Wall Street actions have been peopled by the movement's most hardened regulars, this march brought out of the true breadth of Occupy's base of support. Down Broadway, I walked alongside two elder marchers—a nun and a priest—together holding a pillowcase marked with the words, "Bread Not Bombs." Beside us was a gigantic blue tarp covering a hundred or so of OWS' rowdier troops, threatening, in so far only theoretical chants, to burn banks and smash the state. Undocumented immigrants, often reluctant to take part in Occupy's usual unpermitted actions, led the way ahead of us.

The nun, no stranger to the front lines of protests, couldn't believe the level of police presence. "When did it become like this?" she kept asking. We were followed all the way by a line of NYPD scooters and watched from overhead by four NYPD helicopters. The department's taste for pageantry was on particular display downtown, where multiple rows of officers and a line of horses blocked the entrance to Wall Street. Those under the tarp shouted "Fuck the police!" and the priest thanked individual cops for their service—a diversity of tactics.

The very idea of a general strike, or comparable mass disobedience, has been unheard-of for decades in the U.S. and is increasingly being heard of now thanks to Occupy.

As dark came, occupiers' plans to hold an after-party in Battery Park were foiled by police blockades. Text-message alerts guided those who wished to stay to a Vietnam veterans' memorial tucked along the East River waterfront between buildings that house Morgan Stanley and Standard & Poor's. The memorial includes a space that served as a perfect amphitheater for a thousand-strong "people's assembly"—so named because OWS' General Assembly is currently defunct—and it became one of those moments of collective effervescence and speaking-in-one-voice that won so many discursively-inclined hearts to the movement in the fall. People of other inclinations danced to the familiar sound of the drum circle on the far side of the park.

The topic of the assembly was whether to stay, to try and occupy. At first it seemed that maybe people would.

(What better place to spend the summer than by the water?) Members of the Veterans Peace Team, a uniformed bloc of military veterans and allies, volunteered to stand at the front lines. So did two clergymen from Occupy Faith. They received cheers, but as the discussion wore on, the assembly seemed less and less inclined to stay after the park closed at 10 p.m. and repeat another sequence of beatings and arrests. Even after being told that the Occupiers would retreat back to the streets, though, the Veterans Peace Team members and the clergymen—including Episcopal Bishop George Packard, a Vietnam veteran—stayed at the memorial as an act of disobedience and were apprehended by police.

For the next two hours, the improvised after-party dissipated as police chased black-masked marchers through the area's narrow streets and clubbed some of them bloody. Mini-assemblies formed on sidewalks to plan what to do next, and were broken up, too, when discovered. All roads eventually led to Zuccotti Park, where the 200 or so people remaining assembled, and rested, and left. What might have become an occupation, or something similarly prolonged, was in the end just a day of action.

If there was value, finally, in the call for a general strike, it was in the aspiration. Like the initial call to occupy Wall Street last summer, it probably matters less whether people follow through on the proposal than how they will creatively respond to it. The very idea of a general strike, or comparable mass disobedience, has been unheard-of for decades in the U.S. and is increasingly being heard of now thanks to Occupy. In the process, occupiers are building better working relationships with labor and community organizations. Even if they're not always cozy, these relationships swell the movement's capacity to mobilize supporters, whether for a day of action or for something more serious.

"I'd say this was the best day of the year," I heard one person say in a small circle of Occupiers near Zuccotti Park, debriefing over kebab from a street vendor. "Just this year, though."

Nathan Schneider wrote this article for YES! Magazine, a national, nonprofit media organization that fuses powerful ideas with practical actions. An editor of *Waging Nonviolence*, Nathan writes about religion, reason, and violence for publications including *The Nation*, *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *Commonweal*, *Religion Dispatches*, *AlterNet*, and *Truthout*. He is also an editor at *Killing the Buddha*. Visit his website at TheRowBoat.com.

Interested?

- **Special Coverage: May Day!**
With reporting from a coalition of independent media, follow the day as it happened.
- **Why This May Day Matters**
Sarah van Gelder: This year, the day is about occupying the space and the time to create a different world.
- **PEOPLE POWER**
YES! Magazine's ongoing coverage of how "we the people" mobilize to get things done.

Like Be the first of

You won't see any commercial ads in YES!, in print or on this website.
That means, we rely on support from our readers.

|| SUBSCRIBE || GIVE A GIFT || DONATE ||
Independent. Nonprofit. Subscriber-supported.

People who love YES!



Van Jones



Amy Goodman



Danny Glover



Annie Leonard



Pete Seeger



Brett Dennen



Frances Moore
Lappé



Raffi



Terry Tempest
Williams



Colin Beavan

They all subscribe to YES! Magazine.

FIND OUT WHY ... SUBSCRIBE TODAY! – Just \$15 + Free Issue



NONPROFIT. INDEPENDENT. SUBSCRIBER-SUPPORTED.