

Occupy Wall Street: FAQ

Nathan Schneider | September 29, 2011

Q: I hear that Adbusters organized Occupy Wall Street? Or Anonymous? Or US Day of Rage? Just who put this together anyway?

A: All of the above, and more. Adbusters made the initial call in mid-July, and also produced a very sexy poster with a ballerina posed atop the Charging Bull statue and riot police in the background. US Day of Rage, the mainly internet-based creation of IT strategist Alexa O'Brien, got involved too and did a lot of the early legwork and tweeting. Anonymous—in its various and multiform visages—joined in late August. On the ground in New York, though, most of the planning was done by people involved in the NYC General Assembly, a collection of activists, artists and students first convened by folks who had been involved in New Yorkers Against Budget Cuts. That coalition of students and union workers had just finished a three-week occupation near City Hall called Bloombergville protesting the mayor's plans for budget cuts and layoffs. They had learned from the experience and were itching to do it again, this time with the hope of having a bigger impact. But no one person or group is running the Wall Street occupation entirely.

Q: So nobody is in charge? How do decisions get made?

A: The General Assembly has become the de facto decision-making body for the occupation at Liberty Plaza, just a few blocks north of Wall Street. (That was Zuccotti Park's name before 2006, when the space was rebuilt by Brookfield Properties and renamed after its chairman, John Zuccotti.) Get ready for jargon: the General Assembly is a horizontal, autonomous, leaderless, modified-consensus-based system with roots in anarchist thought, and it's akin to the assemblies that have been driving recent social movements around the world, in places like Argentina, Egypt's Tahrir Square, Madrid's Puerta del Sol and so on. Working toward consensus is really hard, frustrating and slow. But the occupiers are taking their time. When they finally get to consensus on some issue, often after days and days of trying, the feeling is quite incredible. A mighty cheer fills the plaza. It's hard to describe the experience of being among hundreds of passionate, rebellious, creative people who are all in agreement about something.

Fortunately, though, they don't need to come to consensus about everything. Working alongside the General Assembly are an ever-growing number of committees and working groups—from Food and Media to Direct Action and Sanitation. Anyone is welcome to join one, and they each do their own thing, working in tacit coordination with the General Assembly as a whole. In the end, the hope is that every individual is empowered to make decisions and act as her or himself, for the good of the group.

Q: What are the demands of the protesters?

A: Ugh—the zillion-dollar question. Again, the original Adbusters call asked, "What is our one demand?" Technically, there isn't one yet. In the weeks leading up to September 17, the NYC General Assembly seemed to be veering away from the language of "demands" in the first place, largely because government institutions are already so shot through with corporate money that making specific demands would be pointless until the movement grew stronger politically. Instead, to begin with, they opted to make their demand the occupation itself—and the direct democracy taking place there—which in turn may or may not come up with some specific demand. When you think about it, this act is actually a pretty powerful statement against the corruption that Wall Street has come to represent. But since thinking is often too much to ask of the American mass media, the question of demands has turned into a massive PR challenge.

The General Assembly is currently in the midst of determining how it will come to consensus about unifying demands. It's a really messy and interesting discussion. But don't hold your breath.

Everyone in the plaza comes with their own way of thinking about what they'd like to see happen, of course. Along the north end of the plaza, there's a collage of hundreds of cardboard signs people have made with slogans and demands on them. Bystanders stop and look at them, transfixed, all day long. The messages are all over the place, to be sure, but there's also a certain coherence to them. That old standby, "People before Profits," seems to capture the gist fairly well. But also under discussion are a variety of other issues, ranging from ending the death penalty, to dismantling the military-industrial complex, to affordable health care, to more welcoming immigration policies. And more. It can be confusing, but then again these issues are all at some level interconnected.

Q: Some news reports have been painting the protesters as unfocused, or worse, as hopelessly confused and uninformed. Is there any truth to that?

A: Sure. In a world as complex as ours, we're all uninformed about most things, even if we know about a few. I remember a police officer remarking of the protesters on the first or second day, "They think they know everything!" That's how young people generally are. But in this case, noticing the over-concentration of wealth around Wall Street and its outsized influence in politics does not require a detailed grasp of what a hedge fund does or the current selling price of Apple stock. One thing that distinguishes these protesters is precisely their hope that a better world is possible. I might add that, for many Americans, such nonviolent direct action is the only chance of having a political voice, and it deserves to be taken seriously by those of us in the press.

Q: How many people have responded to the Adbusters call? How large is the group? And how large has it ever been?

A: The original Adbusters call envisioned 20,000 people flooding the Financial District on September 17. A tenth of that probably ended up being there that day. Despite a massive Anonymous-powered online social media blitz, lots of people simply didn't know about it, and traditional progressive organizations like labor unions and peace groups were uncomfortable signing on to so amorphous an action. Over the course of a difficult first week, with arrests happening just about every day, new faces kept coming, as others filtered out to take a break. The media coverage after last weekend's mass arrests and alleged police brutality has brought many more. Now, during the day and into the night, one finds 500 or more people in the plaza, and maybe half that sleeping over. At any given time, several thousand people around the world are watching [the occupation's 24/7 livestream](#) [1] [online](#).

Rather than a mass movement from the outset, this occupation has ended up depending on a relatively small number of highly-determined, courageous young activists willing to sleep outside and confront police intimidation. But that is changing. As word spreads about it, the crowd has been getting older,

more diverse. Already, though, this tactic of a somewhat rowdy occupation has garnered influence far greater than a traditional march would. After all, 20,000 marched on Wall Street on May 12—protesting bank bailouts and budget cuts for state employees—and who remembers that?

Q: What would a "win" look like for the occupation?

A: Again, that depends on whom you ask. As September 17 approached, the NYC General Assembly really saw its goal, again, not so much as to pass some piece of legislation or start a revolution as to build a new kind of movement. It wanted to foment similar, like-minded assemblies around the city and around the world, which would be a new basis for political organizing in this country, against the overwhelming influence of corporate money. That is starting to happen, as similar occupations are cropping up in dozens of other cities. Another big occupation has been in the making for months, slated to begin on October 6 at Freedom Plaza in Washington, D.C., and the organizers of that have been visiting Liberty Plaza on and off, learning all they can from its successes and mistakes.

I've heard some people saying, when Liberty Plaza was swamped with TV news cameras, "We've already won!" Others think they've hardly begun. Both, in some sense, are true.

Q: Are there cops all over the square? How bad has the police brutality been? If I came there, what are the risks?

A: The police presence is nonstop, and there have been some very scary encounters with them—which also gave occasion for tremendous acts of courage by protesters. The worst incident was last Saturday, of course, but there has been very little trouble since then. A large contingent of protesters has no intention of getting arrested, and almost nobody is interested in taking pointless risks or instigating violence against people or property. The more that ordinary people join the cause—together with celebrity visitors like Susan Sarandon, Cornel West, and Michael Moore—the less likely the police will probably be to try to suppress it. As one sign along Broadway says, "Safety in Numbers! Join Us!"

Nonetheless, challenging the powers that be—and doing so impolitely, outside the bounds of a permit—is never going to be 100 percent safe. To the extent that this movement is effective, it will also carry risks. If you take part, it's not a bad idea to keep the National Lawyers Guild's phone number written on your arm, just in case.

Q: If I can't come to Wall Street, what else can I do?

A: A lot of people are already taking part in important ways from afar -- this is the magic of decentralization. Online, you can watch the livestream, make [donations](#) ^[2], retweet on Twitter and encourage your friends to get interested. People with relevant skills have been volunteering to help maintain the movement's websites and edit video -- coordinating through IRC chat rooms and other social media. Soon, the formal discussions about demands will be happening online as well as in the plaza. Offline, you can join the numerous similar occupations that are [starting up around the country](#) ^[3] or start your own.

Finally, you can always take the advice that has become one of the several mantras of the movement, expressed this way by one woman at Tuesday night's General Assembly meeting: "Occupy your own heart," she said, "not with fear but with love."

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Links:

[1] <http://www.livestream.com/globalrevolution>

[2] <http://nycga.cc/donate/>

[3] <http://occupytogether.org/>