

The Second Wind of the Worldwide Social Justice Movement

by *Immanuel Wallerstein*



During the protests in Tahrir Square in November 2011, Mohamed Ali, age 20, responded to a journalist's query as to why he was there: "We want social justice. Nothing more. That's the least that we deserve."

The first round of the movements took multiple forms across the world - the so-called Arab Spring, the Occupy movements beginning in the United States and then spreading to a large

number of countries, *Oxi* in Greece and the *indignados* in Spain, the student protests in Chile, and many others. They were a fantastic success. The degree of success may be measured by an extraordinary article written by Lawrence Summers in the *Financial Times* on November 21, with the title, "Inequality can no longer be held at bay by the usual ideas." This is not a theme for which Summers has previously been known.

In it he makes two remarkable points, considering that he has been personally one of the architects of the world economic policy in the last twenty years that has put us all in the dire crisis in which the world finds itself.

The first point is that there have been fundamental changes in world economic structures. Summers says that "the most important of these is the strong shift in the market reward for a small minority of citizens relative to the rewards available to most citizens."

The second concerns the two kinds of public reactions to this reality: that of the protesters and that of the strong anti-protesters. Summers says he is against "polarization," which is what, according to him, the protesters are engaged in doing. But then he says: "At the same time, those who are quick to label any expression of concern about rising inequality as misplaced or a product of class warfare are even further off base."

What Summers' article indicates is not that he has become an exponent of radical social change - far from it - but rather that he is worried about the political impact of the worldwide social justice movement, especially in what he calls the industrialized world. I call this success for the global social justice movement.

The response to this success has been a few minor concessions here and there, but then a growing amount of repression everywhere. In the United States and Canada, there has been a systematic clearing out of the "occupations." The virtual simultaneity of these police actions seems to indicate some high-level coordination. In Egypt, the military has been

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resisting any dilution of their power. Austerity policies have been imposed on Greece and Italy by the fiat of Germany and France.

The story, however, is far from over. The movements are developing their second wind. The protestors have reoccupied Tahrir Square and are treating Field Marshal Tantawi to the same scorn they treated Hosni Mubarak. In Portugal, the call for a one-day general strike closed down the whole transport system. An announced strike in Great Britain protesting the cut in pensions seems likely to reduce traffic in Heathrow by 50%, which will have major worldwide repercussions, given the centrality of Heathrow to the world transport system. In Greece, the government has tried to squeeze poor pensioners by putting a big property tax on their electricity bill, threatening cut-off of electricity if it's not paid. There is organized resistance. Local electricians are illegally reattaching the electricity, counting on the inability of the reduced municipal government staffs to enforce their law. It's a tactic that has been successfully used in the Johannesburg suburb of Soweto for a decade now.

In the United States and Canada, the occupation movement has spread from the downtowns of cities to the campuses. And the "occupiers" are discussing alternative places to occupy during the winter months. The Chilean student rebellion has spread to the secondary schools.

Two things should be noticed about the present situation. The first is that the trade-unions - as a part of what is happening, as a result of what is happening - have become far more militant, and far more open to the idea that they should be active participants in the worldwide social justice movement. This is true in the Arab world, in Europe, in North America, in southern Africa, even in China.

The second thing to notice is the degree to which the movements everywhere have been able to maintain their emphasis on a horizontal strategy. The movements are not bureaucratic structures but coalitions of multiple groups, organizations, sectors of the population. They are still working hard to debate on an ongoing basis their tactics and their priorities, and are resisting becoming exclusionary. Does this always work smoothly? Of course not. Does this work better than reconstructing a new vertical movement, with clear leadership and collective discipline? Up to now, it has indeed worked better.

We have to think of the world struggle as a long race, in which the runners have to use their energy wisely, in order not to become exhausted while always keeping their eye on the end goal - a different kind of world-system, far more democratic, far more egalitarian than anything we have now.