

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Occupy Education

By Dana Blanchard



THE AUTHOR AT AN OAKLAND RALLY
IN SUPPORT OF THE CHICAGO TEACHERS UNION

As I sit at my desk and begin to unpack my materials for the new school year, I come across the poster from the November 2nd General Strike in Oakland. The image is of protesters with signs and flags on top of container trucks silhouetted against the setting sun at the port of Oakland. It is an image that has come to represent the high point of the Occupy struggle in the Bay Area and served as inspiration for what has become possible in the struggle against the 1%. It reminds me of how last year at this same time I began my tenth year of teaching in California facing massive cuts to the education budget, overcrowded classes, shortages of materials and the continuation of the global economic crisis. Despite occupation and protests in Wisconsin and the inspiration of the Arab spring uprisings, the war on public education felt very much like one we were losing, sometimes without even raising a real fight. Public employees and teachers were in the crosshairs and were being blamed for an education system over which we have had almost no decision-making power. How the year began, however, was not how it ended. The entire country began to see that together we could make our voices heard. In Berkeley hundreds of teachers came out to occupy camps and protests and participated in not one but two successful port shutdowns that mobilized over 40,000 people in support of human and worker rights against the rule of Wall Street. Teachers, parents and students came out in force on March 1st and March 5th days of action for public education and demanded the rich in California pay their fair share and start putting money back into public services. The 2011-2012 school year brought hope back into the struggle for public education and teacher rights, and I am changed as an organizer by having been a part of it. The biggest ray of hope now is the model of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and their courageous strike to defend their jobs and fight for educational reforms from below. This struggle represents the culmination of our work in the Occupy movement over the past year. The Chicago teachers are demanding systemic change but taking action against the 1% in the spaces where we are most powerful: the workplace and out in the streets of our communities. I am optimistic that this example can be recreated everywhere and that we now have a new paradigm for how to make our schools better, and it is not by blaming and punishing teachers.

Just as the school year was beginning last year, Occupy Oakland was being born. It began on a rainy week in early October and grew into a small, and then much larger, tent city within a few days. At its largest the occupation space included around 180 tents. It became a place where ordinary people in Oakland could come together to have political discussions, plan events, get food, make art and music and have their children play together safely. The General Assemblies were large, larger than I had thought possible for a new movement, with hundreds of people showing up almost every day to have a say in what they wanted to see changed in the world. For a few months the Occupy space was somewhere I stopped by most nights on my way home from work. It was a part of my daily routine, a new commitment in my life. It energized me to see such diversity and gave me hope that

there were so many people out there who were as fed up as I was about how the wealthy corporations were running things. At the General Assemblies there was a small breakout group that focused on education. The group was a mix of teachers, parents and students, and we brainstormed ideas about how to get more people from the education sector and more families involved in the Occupy movement. From this group I saw the potential to unite the community and teachers in real discussion about how to change our schools for the better.

Just as things were beginning to get comfortable and settled in Frank Ogawa Plaza (renamed by Occupy as Oscar Grant Plaza to honor the young black man brutally murdered on the BART train platform), the Oakland police department and pseudo-progressive Mayor Jean Quan decided to raid the encampment. On October 25th police in riot gear brutally shut down the Occupy Oakland space, violently beat protesters and put up barricades around the space to keep people out. The next day thousands of Occupy Oakland supporters, including dozens of public school teachers, showed up to take back the camp. The ill-timed raid also led to massive general support for the General Strike already being planned for November 2nd. General Strike planning meetings had close to 1,000 people who came together in the newly reclaimed Oscar Grant plaza. We decided to take a stand against police repression and in solidarity with the union and nonunion struggles at the Port of Oakland, a space that generates over \$2 million a day in revenue for big corporations while doing little to support the poor West Oakland community around it. The November 2nd General Strike and march to the port was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. To see over 40,000 people crossing the bridge from West Oakland to the port terminals with the sunset silhouetting their banners and flags was unlike anything I had ever experienced. The image on my office wall reminds me daily of how incredible it was to participate in something that brought the people of Oakland together to say "we want and deserve more."

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Sadly, the police and the city government could not allow something like Occupy Oakland to exist on their front steps. They certainly could not let the November 2nd day of mass protest be seen as the way forward for our new movement. On November 14th the camp was raided once again, and this time the police put up impenetrable barricades and created a muddy lawn that made it impossible for protesters to reclaim the space. This could have been the end of the social experiment, but instead it helped to fuel another amazing day of protest, the December 12th west coast port shutdown. The port shutdown was organized in support of the ILWU Local 21 workers in Longview, Washington, who were fighting

against their union being busted by the newly built Electric Grain Terminal (EGT) financed by huge transnational corporations like Bunge International. The port shutdown had three demands: support for Longview workers, stopping police raids of Occupy encampments and solidarity with the port truck drivers' campaign to be unionized and have decent working conditions. Though the Occupy encampment was gone, General Assemblies and port shutdown planning meetings continued to happen in the cold damp nights at Oscar Grant Plaza. Hundreds of people came together to not only shut down the port of Oakland but also to cause disruptions simultaneously at ports up and down the west coast. When we met up on December 12th at the crack of dawn, it was inspiring to see so many people out to show solidarity with not only the Occupy movement but also the struggle of union and nonunion workers at the ports and beyond. As someone who had been part of the planning from the beginning, it was incredible to see something that was just an idea a few weeks before become an organized day of action. We did not know then that this would be the last big moment in Occupy Oakland and that political debates about confronting the police directly, organizing mass protests versus small adventurist activities and waning support from the general community in Oakland would tear apart the movement. The lessons learned, however, about the possibilities of building a mass movement against corporate greed and how to connect up different struggles against the 1% were able to be transferred into different kinds of organizing.

Out of the ashes of Occupy Oakland rose up occupations on several college campuses, like the University of California Berkeley and the Community College of San Francisco. These campus occupations came about at the same time that community occupations were being shut down and raided. The connection between the fight for public education and the Occupy movement gave rise to groups like Occupy Education in Northern California. This group brought together new forces in organizing against the massive cuts to education in our state. For the first time public school teachers from early childhood to higher education organized actions with students, families and the community. The Occupy Education meetings were a new space for us to come together and talk about how not only to save public education from budget cuts but also to share our vision for an education system that truly fulfills our ideas about what and how people should learn. The Occupy Education General Assemblies have been meeting since December 2011. The group consists of 25-100 educational activists from all sectors of education and has organized both local actions and the statewide occupation in Sacramento on March 5th. We bring different perspectives to the struggle, but we are united in trying to make change. Instead of allowing the 1% to pit our different sectors of education against one another and make us fight over the crumbs of the budget, this group has built a united struggle that sees our interests in all levels of public education as fundamentally the same: fully funded public schools for all. Our Occupy Education mission statement is grounded not only in the reality that we are in the fight of our lives to save public education but also in speaking to the idea that teachers, students and families in

California deserve much more from this system. As teachers it is critical that we engage in the discussion of what kind of education we want for our students. In the era of Common Core State Standards that set a high bar for what every student should be able to do when they leave 12th grade, we need to fight for the materials and support to make this a reality. In the Occupy Education space we have been able to engage in conversations as educators and students about what a truly liberated educational experience would look like for K-12 and higher education. Bringing in our students' cultural experiences, supporting critical thinking and letting students feel empowered in their education are goals for our long-term movement. This experience has taught me one of the key lessons of the Occupy Movement: we need to know who are our allies and who are our enemies (corporations concerned only with profit, sometimes the Democratic party) in order to organize and win reforms that will help our public schools not only survive but also thrive. Another key lesson in this work and why I believe the Occupy Movement held such an appeal for educators is the idea that what we do does matter. Many of us became teachers to make a difference in the world and then promptly became overwhelmed by the bureaucracy of public education, the stress of yearly layoffs and the heartache of seeing our students and families struggling every day against poverty and racism in our society. We are so used to accepting the status quo and trying to carve out a small piece in the vast universe of oppression where our students can feel safe and respected. What we teach and how we teach matters, but what we do beyond the classroom matters too.



OAKLAND SUNSET DURING PROTESTS

The Occupy Education work has definitely changed who I am as a teacher. At one of our meetings people were discussing the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire. The teachers and students in the room gave examples of lessons where instead of the teacher "imparting" knowledge to their students, the teachers and students constructed knowledge together in a shared learning experience. In my own classroom practice this has been reflected in a change in how I design my lessons. Every lesson now starts with a student-friendly learning objective that begins with the statement, "I will be able to" This helps focus learning in my classroom on what

students will be able to do by the end of the lesson and allows them to see the purpose of our work together. This framework compels me to ensure that my students are the center of my classroom, not the teacher, and that my goal is to facilitate learning, not tell them what to do. I am constantly evolving as a teacher; the past year has helped me bring new thinking into my work with students and other teachers as well as be an activist in campaigns beyond the classroom walls.

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One of the major campaigns of Occupy Education was around the California Millionaires' Tax initiative, a proposition that was slated to be on the November ballot that would raise money for public education and social services by taxing people making more than \$1 million in income. This was an incredibly popular initiative organized with grassroots groups like Occupy Education and the backing of my union, the California Federation of Teachers (CFT), who helped to get the ballot measure drafted in the first place. Unfortunately, the grassroots effort was not enough to keep some leaders in the union and other backers from pulling the plug on the campaign in March 2012. I learned several lessons as an organizer from this work. The first was that it is possible to link up the fight against budget cuts with the analysis that we need to tax the rich more in our state. This idea has mass appeal and builds on the ideas that began the Occupy movement nationally. The second lesson I learned was that we still have a lot of work to do in the union movement to break from the pulls of the Democratic Party. Governor Jerry Brown put a gun to our heads and said we had to get behind his tax plan or else, and our union leaders politely folded up shop and did what he asked. I think this was a critical mistake and a betrayal of those who worked so hard around the Millionaires' Tax. Within Occupy Education the defeat of the Millionaires' Tax caused some irreparable fissures in the movement.

Since mid-March the Occupy Education group has struggled to have large General Assemblies with a specific focus, that is until the Chicago Teachers' Union fight came on the scene in late spring. In June we had a general assembly of Occupy Education that was focused on our work in education unions. Members of teachers' unions, student organizers and community activists came together to get updates on local union struggles and plan solidarity actions for the fall. The main focuses of the meeting were the potential strike of the California Faculty Association (CFA) at the Cal State University system statewide, the contract battle of the San Francisco Teachers' Union and

the potential strike of the Chicago Teachers' Union. The meeting brought forward many ideas about how to broaden out the struggle in a particular union to the community at large. Having mass rallies in solidarity with teachers and bolstering CFA picket lines had a lot of support. As is often the case the best laid plans did not come to fruition. The CFA accepted a contract over the summer that headed off their potential strike. Unfortunately, the San Francisco teachers' union also accepted a contract laden with concessions and linked explicitly to funding from the Proposition 30 tax initiative put forward by Governor Jerry Brown after he effectively crushed the Millionaires' Tax initiative.

Despite these setbacks after our June organizing meeting, the winter of 2012 is still shaping up to be another significant year in the struggle for public education. Our Occupy Education work and my local union, Berkeley Federation of Teachers, decided to focus on building a solidarity campaign to support the CTU because it is the most significant struggle in public education we have seen in a long time. By winning the strike in Chicago, CTU showed that we can bring an energetic fight back into our own urban school districts, and if they can beat back the attack in Obama's hometown, we can certainly build up our own confidence to break with the stranglehold of the Democrats in our own unions.

The struggle of the Chicago Teachers' Union highlights the potential militancy that the Occupy struggles have injected into teacher union work. In Chicago the CTU has been organizing in the community to link social justice issues like the inequality in school funding and racism to the work of the union in demanding decent working conditions for teachers. At the center of their campaign has been attacking the "local 1%" in Chicago and Mayor Rahm Emanuel's agenda for privatization that involves giving control of schools in the district to private charters while at the same time starving schools of their funding in communities of color. It was crucial that teachers in the Bay Area and around the country supported the struggle in Chicago because it represented the first serious challenge from our unions against government attack in a large urban school district. Locally we were able to hold rallies in support of Chicago teachers, pass resolutions, send solidarity funds and bring out CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey to Berkeley to speak to union activists in November about how they won and how we can use these lessons in our own struggles. Teachers spontaneously wore red shirts in all of our schools and sent in photos and solidarity greetings from Berkeley teachers to our brothers and sisters on the picket lines in Chicago. Red has officially become the color of struggle again. It was amazing to see visual proof of local teachers identifying with striking teachers half a country away.

In my union, Berkeley Federation of Teachers, we are putting together materials that paint a vision for what we as teachers and the Berkeley community want to see from our public schools. In Chicago the teachers wrote a similar piece called "The Schools Chicago Students Deserve." It is clear that the right wing has dominated the dialogue of school reform for too long, and it is time that those of us in the classroom start to make our voices heard. We have

countless ideas born from a year of struggle in our community, of building alliances with other entities who share our demand that education is a right, not a privilege, and should be fully funded at all levels. BFT hosted an incredibly successful meeting featuring CTU Vice President Jesse Sharkey who came and spoke to teachers, students and families at one of our middle schools. He spoke earnestly about the need to have clear, political demands and then to be able to back them up by doing the hard work of organizing at every school site and mobilizing all members for action. The conversation with Jesse has helped to shape our own contract campaign in Berkeley and inspired us in the fight for the new money that Proposition 30 will be bringing into our district. One key message from Jesse that we often talk about is we are poised in a crucial moment in the labor movement in general and in the public sector unions in particular where if we continue to try to fight in the old way, we will be defeated. The ruling class is coming for our heads, they literally want a world without teachers' unions, and we have to fight back as if we are fighting for our lives. The past few weeks have seen an uptick in labor struggles in the Bay Area and beyond. WalMart workers, beginning in Chicago and explicitly linked with the teachers' strike, are bravely rising up around the country. Local public sector unions have had actions to demand fair contracts, in City Hall and other public spaces, embarrassing the politicians who pretend to support them. At several local hospitals the nurses who are part of the California Nurses Association have had a series of one-day strikes and media campaigns linking Wall Street greed and the decline of patient services at private hospitals. It looks to be an active year in the Bay Area labor movement. I hope that the lessons of Chicago continue to resonate throughout all these struggles.

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Looking around my desk as the boxes have finally been emptied, the pencils sharpened and the space primed for another school year to begin, I am hopeful that this will be another season of struggle and change. The past year has been a rollercoaster of activism, showing both the potential and weaknesses of our side against the ravages of the 1%. The high points were Occupy Oakland's mass protests, the promise of grassroots initiatives like the Millionaires' Tax, the new organizing space that brings

together new young faces and veterans in one room and the connections being forged between groups of oppressed and exploited people. The movement has certainly been hampered by its own political immaturity and the fact it is no longer visible in camps around the country, but this does not mean its legacy has been destroyed. It makes me think of a genie that has been let out of a bottle; once released it can never be forced to go back inside. Working people around the country have been let out and seen a glimpse of what we can do together. We may not be in visible camps any more, but we are in classrooms and schools and workplaces, and we will continue to organize. The biggest change I have seen is the renewal of our educational optimism, the idea that our lived reality, which has been so hard for a long time, is not what we have to settle for anymore. We have a lot of work ahead of us to fix the problems in public education and the inequalities in our country, but some sparks have been lit. As August Spies said in his final words before being executed in 1886 for being an anarchist union organizer, "Here you will tread upon a spark, but there, and there, and behind you and in front of you, and everywhere, flames will blaze up. It is a subterranean fire. You cannot put it out. The ground is on fire upon which you stand." I say let us fan the flames and keep fueling the people's occupation of public education.



OCCUPY OAKLAND SUPPORTING CHICAGO TEACHERS' STRIKE



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