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The "Occupy" Movement: What's it all about?

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THE “OCCUPY” MOVEMENT: WHAT’S IT ALL ABOUT?

This offering is somewhat of a departure from previous ones that have focused mainly on health and environmental issues. But perhaps it is not. There is a well-recognized relationship between income (standard of living) and state of health. The “Occupy” movement that started with the “Occupy Wall Street” event has spread throughout North America and crossed the Atlantic to Europe. Despite criticisms that it lacks clear goals, articulate leadership or organization it has nonetheless captured the attention of the press and the public. Its most oft-stated purpose is to protest the fact that the vast bulk of wealth is possessed by only one percent of the population. While this may seem to be a rather simplistic view of the complex nature of the economic reality, on closer examination it encompasses a wide spectrum of problems that has created this state of affairs.

In the United States, unemployment is around 9.5%; the highest it has been outside of the depths of a recession. People have had to sell their homes or walk away from their mortgages. The sub-prime mortgage crisis and the subsequent collapse of the U.S. banking system was the direct cause of this situation. The government’s efforts to create more jobs have been paralysed by partisan politics. Politicians are frequently reluctant to increase taxes for the wealthy for fear of offending their large campaign contributors. The result is that efforts to balance the federal budget too often focus on cutting services to the less fortunate segments of society. According to a recent financial report on TV, some hedge fund managers are only paying a 15% marginal income tax rate. Globalization has made it easier for the rich to get richer through investing in multinational corporations which can easily move jobs to developing countries where unions are weak and labour is dirt cheap. This keeps labour costs down at home and further degrades the purchasing power of the workers. The absence of an employee health insurance plan can mean that a serious illness of a family member can lead to massive debt and again, loss of the family home. Yet efforts to establish a universal health care program were again watered down by partisan politics.

No other single fact better illustrates what the Occupiers are protesting than a recent news report (e.g. L.A. Times Business, Nov.16/11) that the chief executives of Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, two financial institutions at the centre of the sub-prime mortgage crisis and subsequent recession, received \$35.4 million in 2008 and 2009 and were scheduled to receive as much as \$6 million each in 2011. Charles Haldeman Jr. and Michael Williams have been called to testify before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. Since the two housing financial giants received over \$150 billion in bailout money, the salaries of the CEOs are being paid with taxpayer dollars. The Republicans and Democrats finally found some common ground as both were outraged by this news.

While Canada’s banking system avoided the turmoil that afflicted the U.S. system due to stricter regulatory controls Canada has had its own problems. The Bank of Canada has been focused (some say obsessed) on keeping the inflation rate at 2%; a goal that some economists feel helps

to maintain price stability while others feel it stifles growth since growth never occurs without some inflationary consequences. Wages have not been keeping pace with inflation in many sections of the work force. Jim Stanford, economist for the Canadian Auto Workers, told the Commons finance committee that “monetary policy has absolutely exacerbated increasing inequality in society” (London Free Press, Nov 16/11, A8). Canada lost 54,000 jobs in October, the greatest one-month loss outside of a recession. Of what use is a 2% inflation level if one does not have a job? The unions’ support of the Occupiers goals has its roots in statistics like this.

On another front the environment, one of the concerns of the original Occupy Wall Street movement but which has become sublimated in recent weeks, has distinctly Canadian relevance. Despite widespread resistance to the Alberta tar sands development throughout North America and Europe, The Harper Conservatives have been lobbying in the U.S. to permit the TransCanada Keystone pipeline project to go ahead. It is hard to avoid the conclusion the petroleum industry has the inside track with the current government. Much noise has been made about the 20,000 jobs supposedly to be created by the construction of the pipeline. There has been no mention of the fact that most of these jobs will last only as long as the construction project. In fact, TransCanada recently announced that the contracts to construction and heavy equipment companies have already been signed. If the government really wants to create long-term jobs why not build the refineries in Canada as we are very short of refining capacity? The product could then enter the existing pipeline network.

The Royal Society of Canada was commissioned to prepare a report on the Alberta oil sands development (www.rsc.ca). Called “The report of the expert panel on environmental and health issues of Canada’s oil sands industry”, it was released in December 2010, and expressed a number of concerns including:

1. Reclamation is lagging far behind the rate of land disturbance.
2. More and better monitoring is required of human exposures to contaminants.
3. There are valid concerns about the monitoring of water quality.
4. Tailing ponds keep growing and the implementation of research on their conversion to wetlands has not occurred.
5. There is concern over the emission of nitrogen oxides and the acidification of local land and water.
6. Control of greenhouse gas emissions constitutes a major challenge and an impediment for Canada to reach its reduction goals.

While it appears that the government has made some improvements in monitoring there is little to reassure the public regarding the environmental impact of the Alberta tar sands and little has been heard about Saskatchewan’s similar deposits which are poised to follow down the same path.

Corporate greed has been another target of the Occupiers and examples of this abound. The tragic explosion of the Deep Horizon drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico is one such. As the story unfolded it became one of corrupt government inspectors, delayed or ignored safety procedures by British Petroleum and inadequate or faked documentation. All of which contributed to the explosion and fire with the resulting loss of eleven lives and widespread damage to local ecosystems.

It is too early to say how the Occupy Wall Street movement will play out. Some have compared it to the protest movements of the '60s that started out leaderless and with vague goals and gradually morphed into an antiwar movement. At the very least there has been a consciousness-raising effect and people who previously gave these issues scant attention are now discussing them. Mainstream individuals are becoming involved. One can but hope that it will all lead to a better way of doing business and a more equitable distribution of wealth.

Many of these issues are discussed in depth in the author's forthcoming text "Environmental Issues for the Twenty-first Century and Their Impact on Human Health". Bentham e-publ., *in press*.