

Populism Isn't Dead, It's Marching

by Ashley Sanders

Not so long ago, Americans witnessed the beginning of a mass democratic uprising. Thousands of average people, disgusted by greedy elites and corporate control of government, launched a movement that spread to almost every state in the nation. They did it to reject debt. They did it to fight foreclosures. They did it to topple a world where the one percent determined life for the other 99. And they did all of it against incredible odds, with a self-respect that stymied critics.

The year? 1877. The people? Dirt-poor farmers who would come to be known as Populists. Now it's 2012, and the People are stirring again. It's been months since a few hundred dreamers pitched their tents in Zuccotti Park and stayed. These people were not Populists, but they had the same complaints. They couldn't make rent. They had no future. They lived in a nation with one price for the rich and another for the poor. And they knew that whatever anyone said, that they didn't have real democracy.

The Populists did not confuse action with aimlessness; they were radicals with a plan. Being destitute, they understood the need to create economic alternatives that immediately relieved other poor people and brought them into broader struggle. They created the Farmers Alliance Exchange, a cotton co-op that pooled resources to buy equipment, market the harvest, and sell in bulk to foreign and domestic buyers. This system allowed the farmers to depend less on the merchant for credit, and to sell their crops at better prices. It also served as a powerful recruitment tool: the co-op attracted recruits and showed them through their own experience how and why the dominant economic system failed them. Participating in the co-ops gave average farmers a sense of dignity, greater economic independence, class consciousness, and experience solving complicated problems together.

Right now, Occupy may represent the 99 percent, but in reality we're our least favorite number: the one percent. To really get people involved, we can't ask people to come to us. We have to come to them. We have to diligently and deliberately reach out to those most affected by our rapacious financial system: people of color, the poor, immigrants and women. And we should do this by working with established community groups and individuals, radically listening to what folks really want and need. Some Occupies have done a great job reaching out to unions, community groups and regular folks. The rest of us are trying. It takes planning and dogged determination. It takes humility and a

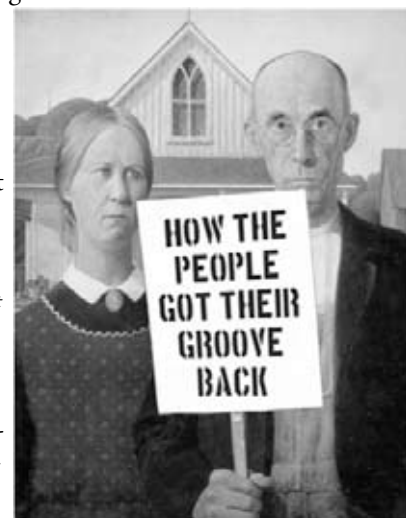
high tolerance for discomfort. And it takes realizing that most people are busy trying to survive and need solutions that will tangibly improve their lives. There is magic to any movement — that soul that makes it sing — but in organizing, no rabbits pop out of hats. If you want to reach the people, you have to reach out, one hand in welcome and the other in offering. You do this door by door, neighborhood by neighborhood, church by church, until you've not just imagined the 99 percent: you've met them.

- Practice democracy fairly. Hold ongoing teach-ins on racism, classism, and patriarchy developed by those most oppressed and supported by their allies.
- Practice democracy fully. Most of us weren't taught how to make decisions together, so we need to learn. Invite professional facilitators to do trainings on true consensus. Pinpoint places where democracy is breaking down and find solutions.
- Know your neighbor. Set up a storytelling tent. Talk to people about why they are here, what they're angry about, who they are, what solutions they have.
- Heal. We're all coming to this with emotion and history. Some of us are new, and impatient. Some of us are old, and can not bear to fail again. A lot of infighting is the result of unspoken despair and disillusionment. The "real" world silences those emotions, but Occupy is an opportunity for voice.
- Strategize. Challenge cavalier assumptions about what does and does not work. Merge this into a multi-day, consensus-based visioning session and come up with concrete goals and strategies for your local Occupy.

Democracy is not an idea, a monument or a building. Democracy is nothing short of being fully alive and defending the fully living. Populism isn't dead: it's marching.

Ashley Sanders worked as a youth spokesperson for Ralph Nader and continued the fight against corporate rule on the steering committee at Democracy Unlimited, where she helped to launch Move to Amend. Ashley currently works for Peaceful Uprising, agitating for an end to corporate-induced environmental destruction and advocating for both individual and municipal civil disobedience. She also serves on the planning committee for the October 2011 Freedom Plaza occupation in DC.

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What a Bunch of Farmers Can Teach a Bunch of Occupiers About How to Keep on Going