

Occupy Albany, NY: “The people need to represent the people”

Our reporters

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On Thursday, as part of nationwide demonstrations to commemorate the two-month anniversary of Occupy Wall Street, approximately 500 people rallied near the New York state capitol building in Albany. The local Occupy Albany encampment has been in place in Academy Park, a short distance from the capitol for nearly a month.

Aside from local Occupiers and supporters, several busloads of additional demonstrators arrived from other upstate New York cities, including Buffalo, Syracuse, Rochester and Newburgh. Members of several unions, including the Public Employees Federation (PEF) and the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) participated in the demonstration.

A primary focus of the rally was a protest against Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo’s refusal to renew the state’s so-called millionaires’ tax (actually levied on those with annual incomes of more than \$200,000) which is due to expire at the end of this year. The tax has brought in approximately \$4 billion in annual revenues to the state since it was instituted in 2009. Cuomo has insisted that the tax will not be renewed even though polls show that a substantial majority of New Yorkers favor its retention to avoid further cuts to social services.

The impact of the tax’s impending expiration was brought into sharp focus by recently released budget projections for the coming fiscal year, which estimate at least a \$3.5 billion deficit. This will undoubtedly lead to layoffs, cuts in education, health, and other social services, on top of the drastic reductions being implemented to balance the current budget. Cuomo blamed the projected deficit, which is likely to grow, on reduced revenues and “uncertainty” caused by the economic crisis in Europe.

In the afternoon, the demonstrators moved from their encampment in city-owned Academy Park to rally in the adjacent Lafayette Park, which is owned by the state, and then proceeded into the capitol building for a further rally. The move into Lafayette Park emphasized the ongoing split between the Cuomo administration and the Albany city government, also Democratic, which has allowed the protesters to maintain their camp in the city park. Cuomo has insisted on enforcing an unwritten 11 p.m. curfew in the state park and has reportedly exerted significant pressure on the city to reverse its position. The governor is reportedly furious that this highly visible protest against his policies is able to be maintained within sight of the capitol.

Since last weekend a number of the Occupiers have made nightly moves into the state park to defy the enforcement of the curfew

and have repeatedly been arrested by state police. The county attorney has said that he will not prosecute those arrested. Some Republican legislators have urged Cuomo to appoint a special prosecutor to carry the cases forward. The city’s Democratic mayor Jerry Jennings is employing a strategy of “benign neglect” toward the protestors, anticipating that Albany’s oncoming harsh winter weather will eventually drive them away.

Despite the energy and determination of the participants, the confused and contradictory character of the rally was highlighted by many of the speakers. Among these was Kenneth Brynien, president of PEF, whose union recently collaborated with Governor Cuomo in ramming through a new contract with substantial cuts under the threat of nearly 3,500 layoffs. Following the membership’s initial rejection of the contract, the union leadership did everything in its power to support the governor’s use of the threatened layoffs to force workers to reverse their decision in a revote. PEF supported Cuomo in his run for the governorship last year. Brynien’s expressed sympathy for the Occupy protest is the height of hypocrisy. The attempt by various union leaders and Democratic politicians to co-opt the Occupy movement into support for the Democratic Party is only the flipside of the police attacks on Occupy encampments across the country, many of which have taken place under the direction of Democratic mayors.

The narrow focus on the millionaire’s tax issue contrasted with the statements of many of the demonstrators, who voiced much broader anger at the destruction of workers’ living standards. Among the chants was the demand for “Full equality, right now!” One of the demonstrators, Rosemary Rivera, said, “We need to educate our children, we need to maintain our public structures, we need to save our bridges. We need to put our people back to work.”

While Thursday’s protests were underway, Governor Cuomo was addressing a group of Democratic Party politicians. He made clear that no amount of protest would cause him to change his policies and explicitly rejected the division between the elite and the working class. Cuomo said that he would not allow “people” to use “anxiety” to divide the state. “I’m not going to allow them to play politics where they try to divide upstate from downstate, white from black, or rich from poor. We are New Yorkers and we are one.”

A number of Occupy Albany protesters and supporters with whom the WSWWS spoke expressed both their anger with the

economic crisis and their frustration with the limited political perspective of the movement.

Michael Hinglebine works in landscaping and is a student at Schenectady Community College. He joined Occupy Albany, he explained, “because there needs to be a lot of change in the system.” He is especially concerned with the impact of taxes on the poor. His mother is a single parent caring for three children. “She almost lost her house the other day because she had to pay the taxes and couldn’t afford it. She’s working 80 hours a week.” After taxes she makes the equivalent of only about \$15 an hour. “It’s not fair to her. It’s not fair to our family. I have to worry about her not having a house to go to at the end of the day.”

Michael described how the workforce suffered major job losses when General Electric moved most of its operations out of Schenectady in the 1970s. There was a significant increase in crime due to the lack of jobs. He doesn’t condone the crime, but, as he put it, “People need to live.” “Democrats say they’re for us but at the end of the day they haven’t done much. We’re still here. We’re still sitting in the gutter. The people need to represent the people. We need our own people in our own government, not people who aren’t going to help us or who say they are but then are going to switch their agenda once they’re in office.”

“I feel it’s big time corporations that are ruling the world, not even politicians. The corporations can pay off the politicians to say whatever they want.”

“Wall Street is one big gamble with the people’s money,” Michael added. “We’re not giving you [the banks] our money to gamble with. We’re giving you our money to hold on to, save for us, and not lose... I’d like to see fair equality between all people.”

Jalani Willis is a student at Hudson Valley Community College. She said, “I’m here for equality in all areas—political equality, economic equality, racial equality, gender equality.”

She’s been at Occupy Albany at least part of each day since the occupation began. “A lot of people are waking up and seeing that this whole system of capitalism in general is not working out for everyone. It’s not working for the people who created this country—the working class, citizens that bust their backs every day and can barely get by. The Democrats and Republicans, both parties are not doing anything. The Obama administration said he’ll do all this stuff but nothing seems to be getting done. People are getting frustrated. It’s just a matter of time before everything starts to crumble. People are waking up and opening their eyes to that.”

“Capitalism is not like they say. When you’re growing up they say if you work hard, you go to school, you do this, you do that, you’re going to get a job. Capitalism is not equal because the rich keep getting up while people can’t eat.”

Jalani’s friend Alexander (Alex) Meyers, who is a writer, was clear about his view of the Occupy movement. “There’s so much dysfunction going with this little scene with their GA [General Assembly] meetings . . . nothing actually gets done. It’s like a model of Albany [state government] itself.” He criticized the fact

that Democratic politicians have been allowed to speak at Occupy Albany events. He said that the organizers are “kissing up” to the Democrats.

“I think revolution is definitely on its way because people are feeling very disaffected in our country. It’s really reaching people who have not always just been on the bottom. It’s reaching people like us who are formerly raised middle class who cannot find jobs, who cannot find help, who are trapped in a dysfunctional system.”

Holley Newell is currently homeless. She expressed scepticism about the recent tactic of some of the Occupy Albany protesters who have been moving from city-owned Academy Park to the adjacent, state-owned Lafayette Park in order to provoke arrest by state troopers. “Ultimately I don’t think it’s going to do anything. I think it’s going to shut down Occupy Albany eventually. I think we need to look for other sources or other strategies to go about this. I think we need to find another place to go and demonstrate. A lot of folks here do it for the news coverage. Ultimately, we need to sit down and find a different strategy.”

Asked whether Cuomo would listen to their protests she said, “It’s really hard to say. Through history they usually don’t listen, they usually just take people away, putting them in the basement and locking the key and throwing it away.” Holley held out hope that if the movement grew large enough things could change.

Jeff Saunders works in building maintenance. With regard to the Democrats and Republicans he said, “I think they’re two sides of the same coin. They don’t represent the working people, only the ruling elitists. I think that’s critical. I consider myself a socialist.”

He doesn’t think that the Occupy movement by itself could lead to the necessary changes. “I think it’s a stepping stone in the right direction. But I think you definitely need a revolutionary fervor to make those changes. We definitely need a revolutionary change and we need a group of people that are willing to fight for that.”



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