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By SAEED SHABAZZ
Staff Writer
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Occupy Wall Street: 'You cannot evict an idea!'

NEW YORK (FinalCall.com) – Bloodied but unbowed, the Occupy Wall St. movement has vowed to resist brutal assaults by police on peaceful protests calling for economic fairness and a government that serves ordinary people – not just the super-rich.

On a cold New York City afternoon, two days after an historic “Day of Action,” a few hundred protesters gathered in Zuccotti Park in lower Manhattan. A few feet from where the World Trade Center towers once stood, they talked about the way forward and heard speakers discuss topics such as the financial crisis in Italy and how it would impact ordinary Americans.
What they didn’t do was run and hide after a major crackdown on demonstrations and forced evictions of Occupy encampments around the country, where demonstrators have lived in parks, on downtown streets and near the offices of powerful institutions to show their distrust of the ruling class and their dissatisfaction with current conditions.

“We are moving forward,” Mark Bray, a media coordinator told *The Final Call*. “Many of our people are in jail, some have been injured, we know eventually some may die. But we are in the early stages of a social movement that will change this country,” Mr. Bray said.

With the two month anniversary of the Occupy Movement Nov. 17, a movement started with a few thousand young people responding to a call sparked by resentment over corporate bailouts and economic inequality has gone global.

Young people, mostly from middle-class White American families, coined the phrase “We are the 99 percent.” That cry has echoed across the country and the world capturing the plight of the masses of people left behind economically while a small ruling elite benefits handsomely on the financial and political sides.

Angela Davis, a college professor and onetime Black Panther Party revolutionary, writing Nov. 16 in the *Guardian* UK newspaper said, “This new Occupy Movement imagined itself from the beginning as the broadest possible community of resistance – the 99 percent against the 1 percent – who are the most affluent sectors of society; big banks, financial institutions and corporate executives.”

America’s political establishment answered the peaceful Occupy movement Nov. 17 with brutal assaults by police in riot gear, some likened the heavy-handedness to old school fascism. So violent was the response that some returning veterans condemned the police for using weapons and tactics not permitted by occupying U.S. troops in war torn nations.

In Los Angeles, hundreds marched through downtown and 27 people were arrested. In Portland, police blocked protesters from crossing a bridge to the financial district, arresting 25 on disorderly conduct charges. In Berkeley, Calif., police cleared out a protest camp, arresting two.

In Atlanta, 18 protesters were arrested for blocking traffic, while in Dallas, 100 police officers in riot gear cleared the Occupy camp outside of city hall, citing unsanitary conditions and safety concerns. Eighteen people were arrested. The same happened in Philadelphia where 300 tents had been placed next to city hall to house protesters.

Protests targeted for crackdown include camps and demonstrators in Las Vegas, St. Louis, Seattle, Wash., and Boston and the *Huffington Post,* on Nov. 18, showed photographs of police on the campus of the University of Calif. at Davis brandishing pepper spray canisters, some allegedly dousing students sitting on the ground in peaceful protest. But, it was New York City that became the poster child for excessive police crowd control tactics and the chilling use of force to squelch free speech, according to activists. Two hundred fifty protesters were arrested, some bloodied by police using metal batons. Some policing experts said the crowd control was aggressive, but not excessive. First Amendment experts said televised interactions between police and demonstrators can hurt the goal of protests and discourage others from joining.

"Everyone has the right to exercise First Amendment rights – if actions cross the line and threaten health and safety of others, we will respond accordingly," said New York's billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg.

"Mayor Bloomberg, who benefited from Wall St. greed, has no compunction against ruthlessly repressing those who dare exercise their constitutional rights to peaceably assemble and to petition the government for a redress of grievances that he helped to create," activists responded.

Mayor Bloomberg, the world's 30th wealthiest individual, grabbed national headlines after his police force's midnight raid Nov. 15 on the encampment at Zuccotti Park, claiming the compound was a health hazard with serious safety concerns. Protestors were allowed back in the park but not tents or sleeping bags and a court sided with the city denying protestors the right to camp out.

Anthony Batalla, 20, from the predominately White middle-class community of Astoria Queens, N.Y. told *The Final Call* he was rousted from his tent by police and beaten. He showed off scars as proof, including a large bruise to his rib section. When asked why he had returned, Mr. Batalla said, "I will not let them scare me into not standing in solidarity with others who are fighting against economic inequality."

A White House press secretary insisted Nov. 16 that the federal government was not coordinating the attacks, adding, "Every municipality has to make its own decision about how to handle their issues."

But the federal government may also have the capacity to oversee such crackdowns through information fusion centers working at local levels. Before the National Fusion Center Conference in Kansas City, Mo., which came after the 9-11 attacks, Dept. of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, on March 11, 2009, said, “Fusion centers are going to be key in how we increase our ability to protect the homeland. We have created kind of a seamless network of information-sharing not just vertically state to federal, local to state to federal, but also horizontally across the country at different levels. Fusion centers will not be run by the federal government—fusion centers are primarily a phenomenon of your locality, your local and your state, and they grow from that basis and from that recognition,” Secy. Napolitano added.
There are reportedly 72 fusion centers across the country.

The Homeland Security secretary told the National Fusion Center Coordination group that her department had given $327 million in direct funding and another $812 million for “broader information sharing” to back the fusion centers. n Nov. 16, the Partnership for Civil Justice Fund and the National Lawyers Guild Defense Committee filed a Freedom of Information Act brief with the Dept. of Justice, Dept. of Homeland Security, FBI, Central Intelligence Agency and the National Park Service, requesting any information related to any involvement of federal agencies in planning the crackdown against the Occupy Movement.

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“The banks and the super-rich are becoming very concerned about ‘Occupy Wall St.’, and so, the level of repression will escalate,” predicted Oakland civil rights attorney/activist Dan Siegel, who is also a member of the National Lawyers Guild. “The one percent won’t give up without a fight,” Mr. Siegel told *The Final Call. Mr.* Siegel resigned as an advisor to Mayor Quan after her crackdown against the Occupy Oakland encampment. “When I see all of the 20-year-olds and teenagers engaged in the movement, it gives me a great sense of optimism,” he said.
While Mr. Siegel says there are reasons to be optimistic, those who monitor the press and how the government deals with the press in America do not share his optimism. Josh Stearns, associate program director for Free Press, a media watchdog organization, told *The Final Call* that there appears to be a growing disrespect for the freedom of the press in America among government actors.
“The issue is a lot larger than covering protests. We see a growing trend in the U.S. of repression against the press; and we need to have a national debate about how to move forward,” Mr. Stearns said. Mr. Stearns’ organization documented the arrest of 13 journalists in NYC during the Day of Action – including five with press credentials issued by the NYPD. There are also reports that police pushed reporters back some five blocks before their raid on the encampment at Zuccotti Park; and news helicopters were not allowed to fly directly over the encampment.
An 84-year-old grandmother pepper sprayed while watching an encounter between police and members of Occupy Seattle compared the media lockdown in the U.S. to what was going on in Nazi Germany as she was growing up.