



Occupy Supporters Should Reach Out to Local Economic Justice Campaigns

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by: Annette Bernhardt and Anastasia Christman, Truthout | Op-Ed

With Occupy encampments nearing endangered species status, supporters of the movement may be wondering how they can help make sure the fight for justice doesn't end here. The protesters are refining new strategies, such as the ports shutdown earlier this week, but we'd like to argue that there is a much wider range of issues and campaigns that supporters can and should engage in.

For while the Occupy movement has opened up the public arena for protest at an unimaginable scale and volume, advocates across the country have been raising the alarm about growing inequality for decades. In the factory towns of the Midwest, the tomato fields and poultry plants of the South, and the economic development battlegrounds of our coastal cities, low-income communities and communities of color have steadily laid down a bedrock of economic analysis and grassroots campaigns. The promise of the 99 percent banner is that it can link these efforts together and forge common cause among constituencies that often remain balkanized from one another - by class, race, gender, immigration status, sexual identity and politics.

But in order for that collective learning to happen, people have to get involved - all kinds of people, in all kinds of struggles. And the good news is, there's a wide and rich menu of campaigns to choose from. Here are just a few examples from the economic justice world to whet your appetite:

Minimum wage, living wage and paid sick days campaigns: With all the talk of growing income inequality, conspicuously absent has been a sustained analysis of what's happened to wages. As low-wage jobs [continue to dominate](#) the recovery, campaigns to raise the wage floor are more important than ever. Next year, at least six states already have plans for campaigns to [raise the minimum wage](#), either through legislation or ballot initiatives. And at the city level, activists are launching a new generation of living wage campaigns, [such as the New York City proposal](#) that would require companies receiving economic development subsidies to pay a living wage on the jobs they create. Other examples abound, [including many opportunities](#) on campuses; for example, University of Virginia student activists are [currently joining with community members](#) to demand a living wage for the workers who keep the campus running. And in at least a half-dozen cities and states, [activists are pushing for laws](#) like those recently enacted in Connecticut and Seattle guaranteeing paid sick days for workers.

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Wage theft campaigns: In our horrendous anti-immigrant climate, the big surprise is that immigrant workers have been organizing and scoring major victories at the state and city level. In 2010 and 2011, advocates [won a series of laws](#) cracking down on employers committing wage theft, which includes crimes like paying less than

the minimum wage or failing to pay overtime. In those cities and states, janitors, domestic workers, dishwashers, hotel maids, day laborers and many other low-wage workers now have real protections in the workplace and strong tools to [recover millions of dollars](#) in stolen wages. [New campaigns](#) stretch from Rhode Island to Los Angeles, offering Occupy supporters a slew of opportunities to get involved in what is one of the most energized, compelling grassroots movements of the 21st century.

Progressive tax campaigns: If there's one strategy that most directly taps into the core spirit of the 99 percent movement, it's taxing the rich and corporations to pay for what the rest of us need. While prospects for a federal millionaire's tax are dim to nonexistent, states are proving to be fertile ground. In early December, advocates in New York won a [major victory](#) in their battle for a fair state taxation system, netting an additional \$2 billion in annual revenue to keep teachers in the schools and fund infrastructure projects to create much-needed jobs. In a similar vein, Stand Up! Chicago, a community coalition, has [called for a transactions tax](#) on the Chicago Mercantile Exchange to fund the creation of 40,000 new jobs. And advocates in San Francisco [won a real estate transfer tax last year](#), which will generate \$30 million in new revenue to protect city services and jobs. There are [many flavors](#) of progressive tax campaigns in cities and states across the country, as well as a [national campaign](#) for a financial transactions tax.

Anti-foreclosure campaigns: Earlier this year in Seattle, a woman facing the loss of her home and small business [launched an online petition and won](#) a permanent loan modification from Bank of America. Behind her story are millions of families across the country bearing the cost of a mortgage crisis created and fed by Wall Street.

But advocates have not sat idle. For example, the Faith Action for Community Equity coalition in Hawaii fought for and won [some of the strongest foreclosure mediation language](#) in the nation. And in California, community advocates are [keeping pressure](#) on the attorney general to reject a pitifully small settlement offer from big banks accused of mortgage fraud. With the foreclosure pipeline nowhere near depleted, state and local campaigns like the [post-foreclosure eviction defense campaign](#) run by the community-building organization City Life/Vida Urbana in Massachusetts and the recent Occupy Our Homes actions will be key over the coming years to save entire communities from homelessness and economic crisis.

Green jobs campaigns: Too often, the costs of bad environmental practices are paid by poor people and people of color in the form of higher asthma rates, increased safety hazards and decreased property values. And while the green economy is growing, not enough jobs are going to impacted communities. In response, advocates are fighting to get access to green jobs and improved environmental protections. In Massachusetts for example, a coalition of community, environmental and worker advocates [won a \\$1.4 billion program](#) to fund home improvements to lower energy bills in low-income households, creating living-wage jobs at the same time. Sound like a win-win for your community? Visit the [campaign locator](#) by Green For All, a national group dedicated to creating and implementing programs that increase quality jobs and opportunities in green industries in low-income neighborhoods.

Preserving unemployment benefits: Whether you're unemployed or know someone who is, there's a major fight coming up about whether to extend federal unemployment benefits when they expire on December 31. For millions of families, these benefits are all that stand between them and a rapid descent into poverty. Every time those benefits were about to expire over the past three years, it has been the hundreds of thousands of Americans pressuring their legislators that has made the difference to keep the benefits going. This will be one of the biggest fights for the 99 percent this fall, and campaigns like the petition at [unemployedworkers.org](#) are

in full swing. *(Editor's Note: Unemployedworkers.org is a project of the National Employment Law Project, where the authors are on staff.)*

Many of the above campaigns are at the state and local level, and that's no accident. True, the ravages of the past three decades - in employment, wages, housing, education, health care, the environment - constitute a national crisis, but how that crisis hits the ground often looks very different, as do the solutions. Foreclosure relief doesn't mean much in a neighborhood that never had access to affordable housing to begin with. That's one reason why progressive change in the United States has historically been bottom-up. And right now, it's clear that opportunities to win a [recovery agenda for working families](#) are greater in states and cities than at the federal level.

Going local (at least for now) can also help on the organizing front. In our minds, the central challenge of activating the 99 percent as an effective force is that the burdens of the past 30 years have, in fact, not been equally distributed - meaning there is much work to be done in building shared critiques, shared interests and relationships of trust. Our hope is that increased participation in the locally rooted campaigns profiled above (and there are many more, on wide range of issues) can help that process of building enduring, collective power for change.

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