

## Oakland

We live in a time when tents have become the singular weapon of the people whom power cannot tolerate, and against whom it does not know how to defend itself. The bureaucrats are in shambles; the 'city' and its 'police' are at each other's throats; middling reformists have no idea where to position themselves. Everyone agrees: it's about to explode.

This is the situation as I write on the night before the morning of what will be the second police raid on the Occupy Oakland encampment, announced in a memo leaked this afternoon. It is a situation that devolves, primarily, from the fallout of the first eviction on 25 October. Like any important historical sequence, the story of what has happened in this city during the past two weeks is harrowing and inspiring, beautiful and unbearable.

Occupy Oakland has distinguished itself within the US occupation movement by its radicalism – its 'intransigent elements', the City Council likes to say. In defiance of city policies, it makes use of a sound system for its General Assembly and of open flame in its kitchen. Unlike the majority of occupations, and to the chagrin of civic authorities, it refuses to seek permits or to negotiate with the Mayor's Office, though it is camped directly on its doorstep outside City Hall. 'I want to remind you all', the mayor's husband has written in an email to neighbourhood organizers with whom he hopes to divide and conquer the occupation, 'that OO HAS NO NEGOTIATING TEAM. They are the only ones in the country that do not. You need to know how exasperating this has been for this type of encampment to exist in a city with a progressive mayor who is offering to help but nobody to talk to about it.' Oakland's 'progressive mayor', Jean Quan, wants to 'help' in so far as she wants to move the Occupation elsewhere, out of plain sight at the main intersection of downtown Oakland, off to some other place where it will not impinge upon the operations of business-as-usual. Suffice it to say, this is not the sort of help Occupy Oakland is seeking.

Having authorized a police raid early in the morning on 25 October, in which the camp was cleared by some 500 officers using tear gas, flash-bang grenades and rubber bullets, the mayor found herself under less literal fire on the morning of 26 October. The night

after the camp was cleared, well over a thousand protesters marched through downtown Oakland towards the former site of the Occupation, breaking through two police lines on the way. We were met by lines of riot cops determined to deter us from taking back the plaza. After a tense stand-off, the police dispersed the crowd with more tear gas, flash-bang grenades and rubber bullets – only to have to repeat these measures several more times over a long night as the growing crowd regrouped and returned. In the middle of all this, the cops managed to shoot an Iraq War veteran in the head with a tear-gas canister. As he lay bleeding in the street, they lobbed a flash-bang grenade right in his face as a group of people gathered to help him. Scott Olsen suffered a broken skull and required brain surgery. He still cannot speak as I write this.

Expecting a war the following night, thousands returned to the plaza only to find the cops nowhere in sight, with nothing but a paltry wire fence surrounding the lawn where the Occupation had been. The fence was eventually torn down, despite the incoherent hand-wringing of 'pacifists' who tried to defend physically the same police barrier they had marched against the night before. The next morning, maintenance crews would arrive to find sections of the fence transformed by the general intellect into two constructivist sculptures.

Having completely reversed her stance, the mayor now hypocritically declared 'support' for the Occupation, 'regretting' the excessive use of force by police. The OPD responded by expressing its 'confusion' and denouncing her in print. More consistent and significant positions, however, were being staked out by the regrouped General Assembly. On the night of 26 October in Oakland, 1,500 people voted to call a general strike for the following week, the first in the United States since the Oakland General Strike of 1946. Before the proposal passed, the packed amphitheatre waited for the announcement by chanting 'Long Live the Oakland Commune'. Out of disaster the night before there was now mass joy, a mass movement in a revolutionary city.

If it seemed improbable that Occupy Oakland could organize a general strike with six days' notice, then what took place on 2 November was a hugely

improbable success. Major unions supported the action and helped to organize workers. Thousands withheld their labour and flocked to Broadway and 14th throughout the day. A Children's Brigade marched from the public library to the demonstration. Flying pickets shut down banks throughout downtown. The black bloc of an anti-capitalist march destroyed the facades of Chase, Wells Fargo and Bank of America with impunity, pushing through pacifist 'peace police' to attack Whole Foods and write 'STRIKE' in massive letters across its windows with a fire extinguisher. At



4.00 p.m. a first wave of marchers headed towards the Oakland Port from downtown. At 5.00 p.m. a second wave followed. In a city of 450,000, some 20,000 to 50,000 people marched on the fifth largest port in the United States that day, completely shutting it down. This was something like a dress rehearsal for mass resource blockades to come: the US proletariat marching en masse across an overpass into the hidden abode where production meets distribution, finding its points of entry and exit, using their bodies to block its passageways.

That night, a smaller group took over a building formerly housing the Traveler's Aid Society, a non-profit centre for the homeless, which had lost its lease due to cuts in government funding. A dance party broke out inside and outside the building as a crowd gathered and a communiqué was read, renaming the building the Crisis Center. As nothing else had that day, this drew the attention of the police. Having publicly denounced the mayor for her earlier flip-flop, the cops had been on a tight leash. Now they amassed in force as occupiers responded by building barricades out of dumpsters and setting them on fire. More tear gas was fired; bricks were heaved at lines of riot police; these were answered by rubber bullets. Despite an inspiring readiness to confront the cops with concrete resistance, the crowd was eventually dispersed, a hundred arrests were made, and the building was put back under lock

and key. Meanwhile, another Iraq War veteran suffered a ruptured spleen from being beaten with batons. It seems the domestic army of the American Empire is now tasked with destroying the bodies of its imperializing counterparts the moment they come home from war, disenchanted.

Over the ten days since the general strike, tents and resources have continued to flood back into the Occupy Oakland encampment; General Assembly meetings have debated tactics and continued to refuse compromise with the city. The Oakland Commune, as it has come to be called, is now over a month old – 'three decades in commune years', a friend quips. Letters of solidarity arrive from Cairo, met by Egyptian solidarity demos in Oakland. And now the possibility and importance of occupying foreclosed properties, as the winter months approach, is percolating through the national occupation movement. On 11 November, eighty people occupied a 10,000-square-foot Chrysler Building in Chapel Hill and held it for forty-eight hours, declaring solidarity with Oakland in the first sentence of their communiqué.

This occupation was evicted by police brandishing handguns and assault rifles, loaded with live rounds and pointed straight at the bodies of occupiers. The problem for the police is that people return to the scene of the crime after being tear-gassed and shot with rubber bullets. These measures suffice to clear a space temporarily, but it seems they do not terrorize sufficiently to keep people from fighting back. The Oakland Commune is reconstructed, and a building occupied in Oakland becomes an occupied building in Chapel Hill. Perhaps, then, the solution will be to start shooting people with live rounds. But, as we've seen in Greece and elsewhere, this will only fan further the flames of insurrection. Like capital, power has to grow to sustain itself. This is also true of resistance. The tension and the movement of that contradiction are what is both terrifying and exhilarating about the twenty-first century in the United States, as the world's largest economy well and truly falls apart, as people have no choice but to resist, and as nobody knows what will happen.

As I write this, and as comrades prepare to defend the Oakland Commune later tonight, I watch a video of what happened in Portland yesterday, where thousands of people successfully defended their occupation against eviction, pushing back police lines and forcing them to retreat. In 2011, in what has not been the land of the free for more than 500 years, this is what remains of beauty.

**Nathan Brown**