

We Are the 99%

Global occupation reaches Lansing, MI

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On Sept. 17, an estimated 1,000 people flooded Wall Street in what would become the first in a series of peaceful demonstrations touching over 900 cities in 82 countries. The movement, dubbed Occupy Wall Street, models itself on the Arab Spring, a wave of demonstrations marked by revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya with civil uprisings and protests occurring in at least fifteen other countries in the Arab world. Thanks to social media, Occupy Wall Street rapidly spread to major U.S. cities such as Boston and Austin, and on Oct. 15, Occupy Lansing, an initiative organized by the Lansing Workers' Center (LWC), carried 300 citizens into the Capitol streets in what some hope will be just the first step in a series of continuing protests and rallies.

When asked why the LWC organized the occupation, LWC member Pietrick said, "It wasn't voted on at a meeting or anything. It just seemed obvious." Pietrick is also a senior at MSU in Political Theory and Constitutional Democracy. Juggling a white poster which read "DEMOCRATIZE EVERYTHING" and numerous phone calls, Pietrick added that he sees the "main benefit" of the Lansing movement is its power as a "unifying force for people from different groups who are all on the same 'Screw Wall Street' page."

About a week before Occupy Lansing, somewhere between six and ten people set up tents and began occupying Reutter Park, which later became known as "the camp."

Located two blocks from the Capitol, the group decided to merge with the LWC movement and by Oct. 15, the number of tents had swelled to fourteen, including one for first aid. Signs designed using pieces of cardboard boxes and markers noted which jugs of water were for washing and which van was “Media.” Others were hung on a clothesline between two trees. One sign hammered home the general sentiment of the crowd, “I voted for Obama but the banks got elected instead.” An open-air tent labeled “Donated in Honor of Motherhood” loosely contained piles of boxed and canned food. Police, who were present at the LWC planning meeting on Oct. 12, had authorized portable toilets to be brought in and were allowing people to stay overnight.

Laura Lannen, 53, studied fashion design at a now-defunct art school across the street from the Lansing Capitol twenty years ago. She drove in from Ann Arbor to stand on the Capitol steps, holding a white fabric flag which read, “Democracy, not Plutocracy. getmoneyout.com.” Like many of the 99 percent—those who do not belong to the one percent of hyper-wealthy citizens symbolized by Wall Street—she worked her way up the middle class ladder until one day what she calls the “perfect storm” hit: her husband, who works for the University of Michigan, got cancer; their \$400,000 home was suddenly worth less than half its value; their equity evaporated; and Lannen, who worked in real estate, was out of a career.

“The root of the problem is that public money is being used to fund campaigns,” said Lannen, who explained that billionaires such as the Koch brothers of Koch Industries—who are, perhaps appropriately, the major producers of toilet paper in the U.S.—pressure members of the House of Representatives to vote in their favor. If they don’t, the brothers pump millions of dollars into a campaign for another candidate within the same

party, who then unseats the dissenting representative. “We need a constitutional amendment which will keep public money out.”

But the one percent has more than one way of controlling forty percent of our nation’s income.

“For me it’s about over the last thirty years it’s been death by a thousand little costs. It isn’t that they’re trying to keep up profits, it’s that they’re trying to become wealthier,” Lannen adds. “Corporations and financial institutions have raped this country in the past thirty years and it’s just obscene.”

She explains that an incremental rise in the cost of everything from insurance co-pay to gasoline, coupled with a decrease in pensions and “flat-lined” wages, has allowed a small coterie to suck money out of the American people. “All the money of the middle class is still here. It’s just floated up.” She added, “It’s not like we’re trying to take it [their money] away; they just need to give it back.”

Ken Groom, an elderly gas turbine engineer who is responsible for supplying power to 2.5 million people in Westland, shed further insight into the consequences of tax cuts for the wealthy. “Businesses tried to stay in the 90% income bracket so that they wouldn’t be taxed by the government. It was a choice between spending the money or giving it to the government. So they would reinvest money into their business: create more jobs for people, give them benefits. You take away the taxes and there’s no incentive to hire more people because that money just goes to the bottom line.” In other words, into the pockets of the one percent.

While few people could afford to actually occupy the Capitol—family obligations, work, and dinner with the wife being a few reasons—people drove in from

Kalamazoo, Flint, and Ashton to demonstrate. Some buses even brought groups of people in from other cities, and senior citizens circled the Capitol with petitions, one of which was to restore collective bargaining rights to Michigan teachers. Perhaps one of the most shocking aspects of this movement is the demographic: while still largely white, the age, gender, sexuality, and occupation of participants varied greatly.

“This is a diverse crowd,” said undeclared Lansing Community College student Alexander Baker, who spent six years working in the National Guard, one of which was in Iraq, but is still struggling to make ends meet and get an education. He works almost thirty hours a week as a security guard and this semester, he enrolled full time at LCC. “But I still don’t see the mainstream public involved. They’re at home, watching the [MSU-UofM] football game, or doing family things, but whatever they’re doing they aren’t here. They aren’t protesting. They aren’t trying to get things changed.”

Further dissent was generated by the fact that the first speaker of the ten a.m. rally was Mayor Virg Bernero, with an emcee who, according to Pietrick, “basically said how great Virg is and how we’re going to take politics back from the Republicans.” But while politics will never cease to interfere there is an astounding unity to the movement. A website called “The99PercentDeclaration” aims to elect a Working Group that will present a list of demands at the National General Assembly in Philadelphia on July 4, 2012. And as the second General Assembly in Lansing began at five o’clock, hundreds of people stood at the steps of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, fresh-faced from their first day of the London Stock Exchange occupation.