

Why We Left Occupy Ottawa

(joint statement from University of Ottawa Marxist Student Association [uOMSA] and PCR-RCP Ottawa)

Throughout the following statement, we'll do our best to keep things short and concise. It's been a tumultuous few days and even now piecing together a narrative out of the events that transpired is difficult. Nonetheless we'll try and do the following: 1) give a background to our own involvement in Occupy Ottawa; 2) give a narrative of the difficulties we faced; and 3) offer constructive suggestions as to what needs to be fixed in the camp.

We went into Occupy Ottawa knowing that this was not going to be the movement that ended capitalism. What we hoped was that out of this, movements that could end capitalism would emerge. We also came with a handful of critiques about consensus, the rhetoric of the 99%, the class composition of the movement, and other aspects. We later on developed these critiques more fully into pamphlets and extended the critique to the hidden leadership that was forming. But believing that critique without action is useless, we threw ourselves into the movement with the intentions of sticking it out to the end. Our "agenda" was two-fold: 1) we wanted to bring students into the Marxist's student's association (MSA); and 2) we wanted to see if we could start a Proletarian Revolutionary Action Committee (PRAC), modeled after the one in Toronto.

In terms of involvement, we camped out at Occupy Ottawa from the first day of the occupation. We held meetings on the site. We attempted to run seminars on topics like "Socialism and the Occupation", and "What is capitalism?". We were involved in a number of nuts-and-bolts committees like the food committee and the medic committee, but we made a conscious decision to not get involved in the leadership of the camp. As such, we were not involved in any of the leadership committees (media, facilitation, infrastructure, etc.) nor were we part of the hidden leadership.

Our difficulties began one week into the occupation, and centred largely around two individuals. For anonymity's sake, we'll call them Individual #1 and Individual #2. Individual #1 is a member of the hidden leadership, and is on the infrastructure committee. He identifies as an anarcho-pacifist and a Buddhist. Individual #2 is someone who has spent a lot of time in the camp; we do not believe that they are part of the hidden leadership.

After getting our own infrastructure together over the course of the first week, we finally decided to set up a tent from which we could conduct propaganda. We also decided to hold a meeting around the statement of the

PCR-RCP Canada surrounding the occupations (it can be found here: <http://www.pcr-rcp.ca/en/>). As such, we handed out the statement as well as invitations to a discussion that was to be held the next day.

We had the misfortune of handing an invitation to Individual #1. After making a laborious show about suffering the indignation of being given a piece of paper from Maoists, he proceeded to spend a good chunk of the evening mocking us, from a distance of course. In and of itself this is not particularly damning; lots of people aren't Maoists, and we have no illusions as to our own popularity in Canada. His actions, however, set the baseline for what would be a constantly escalating anti-communist campaign.

On the next day, we finally put up our propaganda tent. Before we had even finished setting out a literature table, we were approached by someone on safety committee who requested we take down our tent, move it away from the central walkway, or make it less visible. We adamantly refused; there had been nothing decided at a GA which would limit our ability to conduct propaganda, and therefore we found it absolutely nonsensical for us to abide by an arbitrary decision. Heated comments were exchanged over the next few hours between us and members of the hidden leadership. It needs to be stated, in the interests of fairness, that the individual who initially told us to move our tent would later be incredibly helpful and fair in dealing with other situations as they arose.

Eventually we came to an informal agreement that we would designate one side of the main walkway as a political area where anyone could come and conduct propaganda. We were thrilled with this; political debate in the interests of unity can never be anything but helpful. We agreed to take this to the GA. However, at the GA, the infrastructure committee put forward a counter-proposal that would have had us relegated to an area at the back of the camp; an effective ghettoisation of politics. We believe Individual #1 to have been involved in this derailment. We of course blocked the counter-proposal, and eventually there was a vote of no confidence in the facilitators and as such the GA was shut down. (This is a simplified version of events; there were actually three proposals put forward. We can go into more detail elsewhere for those who are interested in procedure, but it isn't particularly relevant to the narrative of events.)

It's worth noting that in the lead-up to the GA, Individual #1 was heard going around to others in the camp and

agitating against us. He told people that (some of whom happened to be our friends), to paraphrase, “Historically communists only join movements to split them”. This was of course without ever talking to us about our politics or our intentions; Individual #1 prefers to act in a sneaky manner rather than having political disagreements in the open. We believe Individual #1 contributed in the creation of an atmosphere which encouraged violence toward us.

What followed the disastrous GA was altogether positive. Many of the hidden rifts in the camp were forced open, and there was plenty of political discussion. Some of the hidden leadership began questioning the consensus and GA structure that we had adopted at Occupy Ottawa. By the next morning things seemed to have calmed down quite a bit; our tent existed in a weird space of non-officiality, but nobody (it seemed) was questioning our right to be there and conduct propaganda work.

The next night everything changed. During the half hour or so that we had left the camp to grab coffee, Individual #1 decided to it would be funny to hang a feces, urine, and blood covered blanket over our tent. Despite promoting the leaderless nature of this movement, he had someone carry this action out. After initially denying involvement in this act, he later said he suggested it as a “joke”. It’s worth noting that he stated to others that he said he intended to do it but only for a short time where we couldn’t see it because he thought it would be funny. He also alleged that he thought that there was only urine on the blanket, as if that makes things any better.

Individual #1 speaks out of both sides of his mouth; it really isn’t relevant what justification he gives at any given moment or to any given party. What is relevant is that Individual #1 thought it would be a good idea to hang a urine, blood, and feces soaked blanket on our tent. It was later revealed to us that the blood on the blanket belonged to an individual who may be infected with a communicable blood disease. This was an incredibly violent act on the part of Individual #1, which put all of us in danger.

(As a brief aside, we want to point out that we don’t hold any grudges against the individual whose blood was on the blanket. Many people have different diseases for a multitude of reasons; it’s up to us to build structures and communities that can properly care for all people. This being said, the fact that the blood was diseased complicated matters for us.)

Because the blanket had blood on it, it was decided that our tent be put under quarantine for 16 hours; the amount of time the communicable blood disease takes to break down outside of the human body. In order to maintain the quarantine, we watched the tent until 4:30AM at which point the medic committee was to take over. During the

quarantine process, Individual #2 continually used old-fashioned HIV scare tactics to suggest that the tent should just be torn down. During the night, someone approached the tent to tear it down, and when they were stopped, they said that someone had given them drugs to do so. Sometime between 4:30AM and 9:00AM Individual #2 tore down the tent using his bare hands. When questioned that morning by someone not involved with us, he replied “These people need to go. They are going to divide this movement.”

We returned to the camp that morning in an effort to get Individual #1 expelled for his actions. This still has not been done; we were told by a member of the hidden leadership that Individual #1 “does too much work to leave.”

Later that day, the spot that the tent formerly had been (which should have still been under quarantine), was taken over by another tent. Individual #2 claimed that the community had come to a consensus that we had to go, that the location was too good to allow us to use, and that we had failed the community by not enforcing the quarantine throughout the night. By failing to enforce the quarantine after 4:30AM, we were told that we had passed our problem onto the community that that this was unacceptable. All of this was decided, he told us, at a secret morning meeting that we had been invited to but had failed to show up at. Throughout the entire conversation Individual #2 was attempting to physically intimidate us. Everything Individual #2 had said was of course false; there had been no decision beyond the one at the GA two nights earlier that allowed us to conduct propaganda work. We discovered this after talking to people around the camp. Let it also be known that at no time did Individual #2 attempt to tear down the media tent, where the blanket had also been hanging for some time.

The tent had been disposed of in a location that we are still unaware of. All of our propaganda materials – pamphlets, books, flags, banners, etc.– were left in a pile with the contaminated materials. As of now we have still not been compensated for either the tent or the materials.

Evaluating the safety of our situation, and the relative effort and resources we were putting into the movement VS gain we were getting out of it, we decided to leave. We decided to have one final conversation with Individual #1 and Individual #2 to try and get a more coherent picture of what happened. The conversation with Individual #1 ended with Individual #1 running away and screaming “Fascists!” at us, a statement he maintains is fact. The conversation with Individual #2 ended with more physical intimidation, threats of violence directed at us, and Individual #2 screaming “The communists are

taking over!” It shouldn’t need to be stated that we are neither fascists, nor were we trying to take over.

It was these last interactions that confirmed for us that the attacks we had been facing were targeted and political in nature. For a movement that claims to be inclusive and non-violent, we faced both ostracisation and violence. On the part of the hidden leadership, there was no willingness to create a space that was safe for us.

Since we left we have heard reports of Neo-Nazis setting up in the camp. One of our friends was threatened by them, with the Neo-Nazis not only threatening to cover her in urine, but also following her home (away from the camp) for a short time. This is unacceptable.

We would like to underline that some of the experiences at the camp were positive, and some of the people we met and conversations we had were fantastic. However, until these issues are dealt with, we cannot in good conscience return to the camp. To this end, here are a series of suggestions that could have prevented this from happening, and they are the bare minimum required for our return:

1) The lack of involvement of much of the left hurt this movement. While no individual should feel obligated to challenge things like racism, sexism, etc. the left as a whole does have a duty to do this. Many on the left

refused to engage in the movement, and because of that, right wing and anti-social politics were allowed to manifest themselves in the movement. A chorus of “shit’s fucked up” is not helpful; what is helpful, is people on the ground making changes.

2) Individual #1 and Individual #2 need to be removed from the camp. We cannot feel safe in this camp until they are gone.

3) Occupy Ottawa needs to have some form of organized force in order to remove anti-social elements like the fascists.

4) Drug and alcohol use should be controlled within the camp. This should be done in a way that recognizes that many homeless people use Confederation Park as a place for drug and alcohol use, and by no means should they be prevented to do so or kicked out. Those on active duty within the camp (medic, safety, legal, etc.) should be sober.

Until these actions are taken, we will not involve ourselves with this movement anymore. Here’s hoping the real decision makers at Occupy Ottawa are willing and listening.

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