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Contributed by:

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It's almost bedtime here in London, but Facebook is up and at it. Almost every post that appears in my news feed is about #occupywallstreet, and old and new friends have been contacting me all week asking if I will be at my home town Baltimore's own version, which began on Tuesday.

But I am still in Europe, finishing a two-month tour of 12 European countries, many of which are alive with talk about what's happening in New York.

An old friend I haven't spoken with in ten years has friend-requested me with a message wondering if I have any advice for her to “plug back in” to activism. Another friend has posted an update from a 1,000-strong “Occupy Philly” planning meeting in Philadelphia.

A friend from Sweden has asked what my thoughts are on the Wall Street protest, and a friend in Italy has messaged me to let me know about the October 15 call. “It's spreading”, she says.

Indeed, with protest camps now growing across the United States, a major call for similar

gatherings to take place starting October 15 is gaining strength across Europe and in other parts of the world.

The call, first initiated by the Indignados, the name adopted by the movement that arose in May 15 across Spain and brought hundreds of thousands of people out in the streets against austerity measures and budget cuts, is online at <http://15october.net> [2].

As the calls spread, over a hundred Indignados have just arrived after a 2 1/2 month-long march from Spain to setup camp outside of the EU summit in Brussels.

“Anti-Globalization” Comes Home

Exactly ten years ago, a “European Summer” saw massive protests in Gothenburg, Barcelona, Salzburg, and Genoa, against “neoliberalism”, the corporate economic system behind what is commonly called “globalization.” Emphasizing the privatization of public services and resources and the removal of environmental and human rights regulations deemed “barriers to trade”, neoliberal globalization has been widely recognized for exacerbating the gulf between rich and poor on a global scale.

The 2001 protests were the largest and most brutal events in the Global North of what was dubbed by the media as the “anti-globalization” movement, which first caught the public’s eyes in the Global North in Seattle at the end of 1999 when the World Trade Organization’s summit was shut-down by 50,000 people.

The European Summer would see three protesters shot by the police in Gothenburg, and in Genoa, 21 year-old Carlo Giuliani would be shot twice in the face and then run over by a police truck, killing him instantly.

The echoes of these events can still be heard throughout Europe, especially among those who experienced the traumatic police repression or served jail time over their role in the events. A few weeks ago I saw a beautiful stencil memorial to Carlo in a hallway of one of Austria’s last political squats, just one reminder that the political memory of these uprisings is very much part of the fabric of the European autonomous left.

But there’s a much louder echo being heard in Europe right now, the echo of corporate-globalization itself. And like last decade, a rage that has built up over many years is beginning to emerge in the form of a mass, loosely coordinated social movement.

In Europe, young and old alike have been facing the dissolution of what have long been considered staples of western European countries; England’s health care system is on the privatization block; the right to squat abandoned houses is being stripped in England and The Netherlands; the International Monetary Fund has tightened its grip on Greece, Ireland, and Portugal with increasing austerity measures, and tuition rates for students across the continent are rising dramatically.

Alongside these economic conditions, increasingly militarized immigration restrictions into what has been dubbed “Fortress Europe” stand as a drastic reminder that money and products, but not people, travel freely into and out of neoliberal economies.

In short, “globalization” is coming home to the countries that helped create it. The rich economies

of the global north, which long relied on the exploitation of southern peoples and economies, are coming under the same restrictions they once imposed on the rest of the world.

Though many poor people in these countries have long suffered from domestic exploitation, this wave of budget cuts threatens to expose new, harsher realities for both the poor and middle-classes.

This is where this movement comes from; from Tunis to Wisconsin and back over to Barcelona, similar economic shifts caused by integration into the “global economy” have brought millions into the streets because the economic situations facing them are threatening to put millions more into poverty.

Rise of the Indignados

It is in this climate that tensions in Europe have been brewing, so when the Arab Spring broke out across North Africa and the Middle East, the spirit quickly spread across the Mediterranean to the countries of southern Europe.

In Tunisia, a generation of young people educated in universities had found themselves with little job options. In 2008 they watched the government of Ben Ali kill protesting miners in the southern city of Gafsa, and student organizations and bloggers began publicly agitating for major changes.

Protests reached a peak at the end of last year, and when hundreds of thousands refused to stand down against the guns of the Tunisian military, the dictator Ben Ali fled the country.

Egyptians were inspired by the movement in Tunisia, and they too soon took to the streets, waging highly publicized battles for control of Cairo’s Tahrir Square. They too were suffering under the weight of an economy designed for the upper 1%.

While Egypt was roaring, students, union workers, and community members refused to leave the Capitoll building in Wisconsin. Opposed to Tea Party governor Scott Walker’s introduction of harsh legislation targeting unions, education funding, and healthcare subsidies, hundreds and at times thousands would remain inside for almost a month and build a vibrant protest community inside.

The Indignado movement in Spain arose next, bringing thousands of people out for weeks-long protests in squares across the country. They found their strongest base in Barcelona’s Plaça Catalunya.

Many people across the world watched YouTube videos of police attacking Indignados in the Plaça on May 27, which fueled international support for the movement and inspired the call for #occupywallstreet.

Visiting Barcelona last week, I talked with several Indignados and learned about their movement. I told them about my time in Madison, Wisconsin during the occupation of the Capitol there and about the ways in which that movement organized, related to political parties and how some of its participants now reflect on the events.

A friend and Indignado participant took me to the Plaça Catalunya, where hundreds of Indignados had made their homes for a month in the shadow of the old telephone exchange building used by the anarchist CNT during the war years in the late 1930s. Here she and another participant tell

me of the movement's many dynamics and of the violent police encounters that greeted their peaceful encampment.

On June 15, two weeks after bloody attacks by police, over 2000 Indignados blockaded the Catalan parliament, forcing the government to use helicopters to access the building. Four days later, hundreds of thousands marched across Spain, under the banner "We will not pay for their crisis!"

Meanwhile, neighborhood councils sprung up throughout the city and existing ones took on work related to the protests. Since then, a network has been maintained to physically defend families facing foreclosure and eviction throughout Barcelona.

Soon in Greece, coming on top of years of militant street protests, massive square occupations were launched following the Indignados model, bringing hundreds of thousands to the streets of Athens this summer. "They were opposed to all political parties and to the established unions," a Greek friend tells me, pointing out the inherent radical democracy proposed by such gathering. "They were very broad, involving both the poor and the middle classes."

Portugal too had square protests emerge after the Indignados took the Placa, and this Saturday Lisbon saw a march of up to 130,000 people against EU and IMF austerity measures. "The government pretty much does what the IMF says," a friend in Portugal explains to me upon my arrival to one of Western Europe's poorest countries.

Temporary Autonomous Zones

Though it reads like a mystical story of upheaval, to say that the protests in Europe or Wisconsin were "inspired by" the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia is only half true; they were inspired by the successful protests, but they were pushed forward by similar conditions being imposed on them by many of the same institutions.

But there can be no denying that there is a strong, energetic relationship between the Arab Spring and all of these movements that have emerged since then. But it is a relationship that mostly exists through consciousness rather than direct communication, and it has manifested as a series of movements that are globally understood to be linked, much like the "movement of movements" of the "anti-globalization" years.

Though the Indignados knew little of the Wisconsin protests, their movement bore many similarities to it in terms of organization, demands, disagreement over vague or direct purpose, size, and relations with the community.

In both Madison and Barcelona, a few hundred people remaining in a fixed location with little previous organizational connections brought hundreds of thousands of people together on multiple occasions. In both cities, a shared space became an epicenter of cultural and social change.

And in both cities, after a little over a month the protests disintegrated with a mix of success and shortcoming. In reflection, participants from both movements feel everything from celebration to confused defeat, some believing their actions did not push hard enough, others seeing them as only the early stages of future events.

Shortcomings aside, the Indignados, the movement in Wisconsin and the protests now spreading

from Wall Street expose a new, directly democratic, non-dogmatic politic, one that has been clearly inspired by movements of the last ten years but which also includes a wide variety of people with a range of political affiliations and visions.

Perhaps the main characteristic of all of these movements, and their main strength, is the creation of what author Hakim Bey termed “Temporary Autonomous Zones”, social spaces in which movements can experience fast-paced social changes and collective transformation. This is why Tahrir Square became a symbol, and why the Capitol in Wisconsin and the Placa Catalunya became sights to defend and celebrate.

Whereas many movements struggle constantly to find collective space, usually through the hosting of regular marches or demonstrations, the establishment of such autonomous zones allows for a more rapid sense of power to develop, often leading to a more horizontal arrangement of power within a movement.

Such collectively organized spaces, with their rejection of traditional leadership models and their emphasis on the empowerment of their participants, have the capacity to become key focal points of transformation for this generation.

Perhaps they will, as Egypt’s Tahrir Square has, become both the symbols and sites of global revolt against the neoliberal economies of the corporate-era.

Of course, there are still many battles ahead, and what happens next in New York may be influential throughout the world. It would be fairly accurate to say that right now, the whole world is watching.

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Links:

[1] <https://indyreader.org/contributor/ryan-harvey>

[2] <http://15october.net>