

INDYPENDENT READER

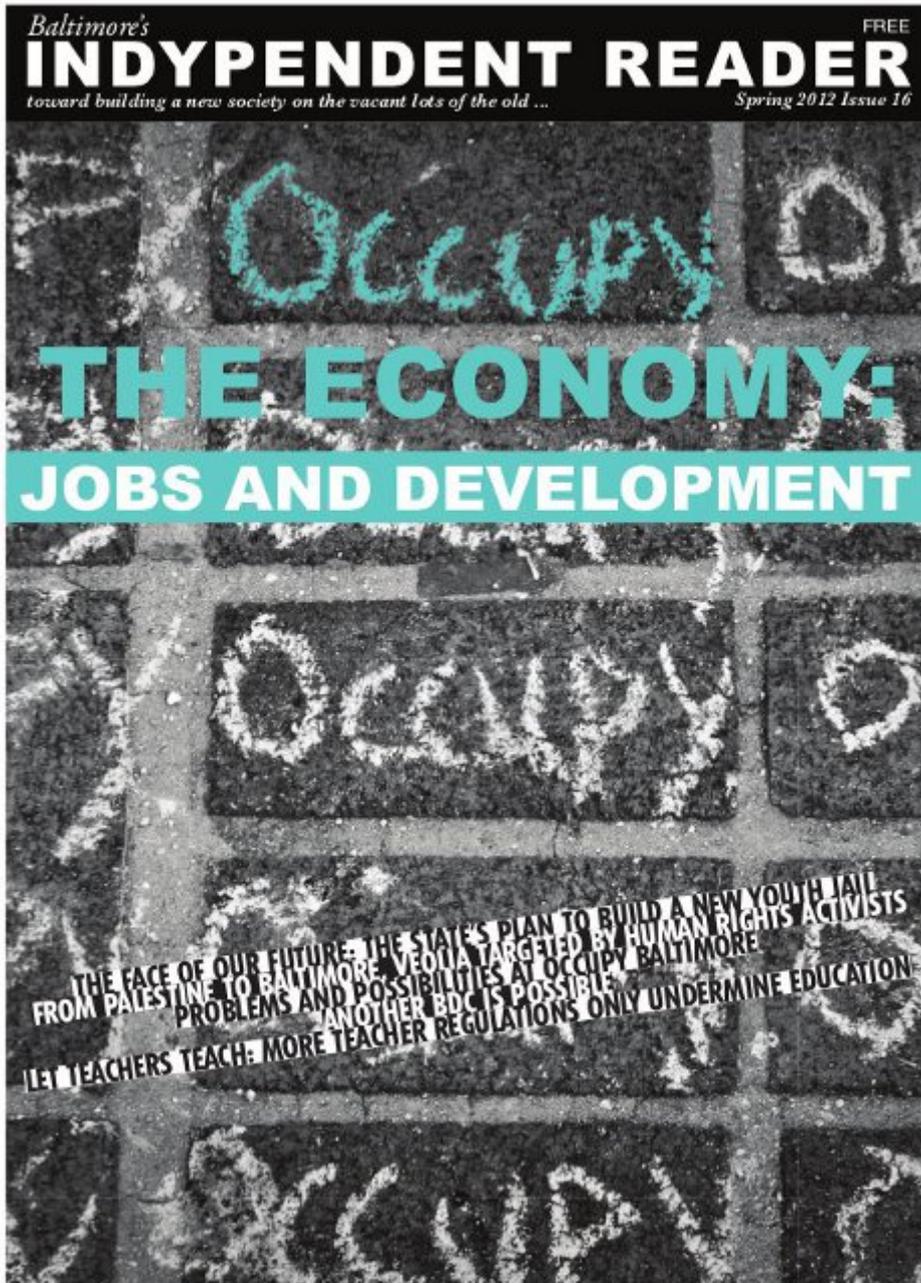
toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .

Published on *Independent Reader* (<https://indyreader.org>)

Home > Spring 2012 - Issue 16: Occupy the Economy

Spring 2012 - Issue 16: Occupy the Economy

Submitted by creidy on May 9, 2012 - 21:31



Introduction:

After Occupy Wall Street claimed Manhattan's Zuccotti Park in mid-September 2011, Occupy encampments spread rapidly throughout the country and beyond. The efforts of dedicated and courageous individuals involved in the movement—both long-time activists and newly

active—have had an impact. Dominant institutions like the mainstream mass media have been forced to give a glance towards the extreme rise in income and wealth inequality over the last thirty years and the corporate domination of the US political-economic system. This is by no means a slight achievement. The prospects for more meaningful achievements will be greatly improved if the evolving Occupy movement becomes more deeply rooted in local communities and connected in solidarity with struggles abroad.

As illustrated by the Occupy movement's impact on the mass media, progressive social movements are crucial in drawing popular attention to systemic neglect, exploitation, and oppression. In current times, this ultimately means elevating to the level of popular consciousness the long-standing occupation of the economic, political, and social life of American society and its pernicious transformation since the mid-1970s. This occupation has been carried out by two dominant institutions: the nation-state and multinational corporations. Linguist and intellectual, Noam Chomsky, has appropriately called this order, which by now is thoroughly globalized, the "state-corporate complex."

THEIR OCCUPATION: THE NEOLIBERAL VERSION

Starting more than thirty years ago, the socio-economic policies pushed through the US state-corporate complex have caused a qualitative shift in the nation's political-economic system. The trajectory from the end of WWII to the early 1970s was one of unprecedented economic growth and overall development for the majority population. Progress was not uniform; nor was it a gift from those in power. Rather, it was to a significant extent the achievements of popular struggles—like the labor, civil rights, and other progressive movements—that were able to influence state policy. Progress has continued on some fronts. On two fronts, however, there has been a sharp reversal: namely, socio-economic development and political democracy.

Since the 2008 financial collapse, the US has had the highest unemployment rates since the Great Depression. The current jobs crisis, as well as the financial crisis that created it, is a symptom of a more than three decade-long assault on economic development. The economic paradigm advanced during this period is commonly referred to as "neoliberalism." While the Carter administration initiated the transformation, the Reagan administration carried it forward with far greater force and zeal.

The major reforms implemented were deregulation of business and the financial sector, slashing taxes for corporations and the rich, intensified assault on unions and collective bargaining, greater reliance on temporary and part-time workers, reduction in state spending, and privatization of government services. Deregulation created the conditions for the spectacular rise to dominance of the financial sector ("Wall Street") over the US economy. This phenomenon, the "financialization of the economy," has been accompanied by another structural change: de-industrialization, in which the country's manufacturing sector was gutted. The consequences of these reforms and the structural changes they produced have been devastating for working people and families.

During the current neoliberal era, real wages for the majority population have stagnated or declined, while work hours and household debt have increased sharply. Meanwhile, there has been a dramatic increase in income and wealth inequality—so much that economist, Robin Hahnel, has credited this period as being "the most dramatic increase in economic inequality in world history." This development is a dramatic departure from the general trajectory during the

immediate post-WWII period (1945 to mid-1970s), when the gains of economic growth were distributed progressively so that society overall was equalizing.

Political institutions have concurrently become increasingly dominated by corporate interests, largely as a result of the skyrocketing costs of elections. And it continues to worsen, especially since the Supreme Court's 2010 ruling in Citizens United, which broke with century-long legal precedent and removed the meager restrictions on financing of elections. The costs of the 2012 elections are almost certain to break record highs, exceeding \$6 billion according to some accounts. In short, political servitude on the basis of wealth and power as opposed to popular will has been thoroughly institutionalized.

We see the effects of corporate-dominated politics in the Bush and Obama administrations' handling of the financial crisis. The financial institutions responsible received massive taxpayer bailouts with few strings attached. Citizens, on the other hand, have been subject to the harsh realities of markets, such as foreclosures and un- and under-employment. Meanwhile, these same institutions, which have made record profits since 2008, have rallied their political servants to protect their low tax rates and maintain a regulation-light environment. Now, some of the major culprits of the crisis, like the global financial firm, Goldman Sachs, are bigger and more powerful now than they were before the crisis and still engaging in the same practices that caused it.

With the onset of the economic crisis taking place amid the long-standing assault on economic development and political democracy, the majority population has been exposed to heightened levels of economic insecurity. In de-industrialized zones like Baltimore, the pain is particularly severe. Once a booming industrial center, Baltimore consistently ranks near the top of Maryland jurisdictions for the highest unemployment rate. In September, the US Census Bureau estimated that about one in four Baltimore residents is living in poverty, a one-year increase of over 20 percent. As put by Susan J. Roll, an assistant professor at the University of Maryland School of Social Work, "The poor are everywhere." We can add to the list of what is "everywhere" the estimated 40,000 vacant properties that "pockmark" the city's neighborhoods, as well as the homeless population, which increased almost twenty percent during the past two years.

This is just a glimpse of the domestic front of the occupation administered through the US state-corporate complex.

OUR OCCUPATION: A THREAT TO THEIRS

It is instructive to reflect on the responses to our counter-occupations. For the elites occupying the state-corporate complex, the actions of individuals involved in the Occupy movement (and all progressive movements) contrast sharply with their ideal of the "model citizen": a passive, obedient, and apathetic individual, who is disconnected from others in any truly democratic sense, engrossed with consumerist pursuits, and content with deteriorating well-being and democratic voice. This much is made clear from the official responses to the Occupy movement throughout the country, especially in cities like New York and Oakland where local governments met peaceful protesters with massive police force and brutality. Even in cities where the official response was more subdued, as in Baltimore, the ideal is well demonstrated.

In Baltimore, hundreds of individuals took their cue from Occupy Wall Street and in early October 2011, set up an encampment at McKeldin Square in the Inner Harbor. The response from the

Mayor's office indicates that the local movement is viewed as a threat. Never engaging the movement positively, the Mayor's office monitored it very closely while communicating with local business elites—like Brian C. Rogers, chairman of the financial management giant, T. Rowe Price—over the mutual threat.

According to the Baltimore Sun's Justin Fenton, Rogers, "whose \$7 million annual income places him solidly in the top 1 percent," "was among a handful of business executives who lobbied for the protesters' eviction during their stay at the harbor." Andy Freeman of the Swirnow Capital Management Co. was another among this handful. Calling the encampment a "refugee/homeless camp," he urged the Mayor to "do what Mayor Bloomberg did in NY" and remove the blight from the Inner Harbor with force.

The Mayor's office acted on their calls over the objections of unions, religious groups, and citizens who supported Occupy Baltimore. It sent a clear message: outrage and indignation at the over three decade-long assault on economic development and political democracy should be contained "within the currently established guidelines," which preclude over-night protest at city parks. Since the city government shut down the encampment in December, a heavy police presence has been maintained at Occupy Baltimore and its affinity groups' actions.

This response is in perfect accord with the state-corporate complex and its occupation of the economic, political, and social life of American society.

WHERE WE STAND

So how does the Independent Reader relate to the progressive movements that oppose this occupation and, in doing so, struggle to establish their own occupation, one based on equality, liberty, democracy, ecological sustainability, and other social justice values?

We start from the premise that it is simply not possible to remove ourselves from history and report and analyze its unfolding in a so-called unbiased, impartial, and objective manner. This does not mean that we reject good journalistic standards. Indeed, we hold dear standards like reporting facts and perspectives with utmost honesty and accuracy, and being transparent with respect to a writer's relationship to her subject matter. Rather than feigning impartiality (often a sure sign of obedience to political and economic elites), we employ these standards with purpose. And our purpose can be succinctly described as follows: "toward building a new society on the vacant lots of old . . ." Ultimately, it is our belief that in order to build a new, more decent society, the economy, along with the other spheres of social life, must be occupied.

This issue of Independent Reader, "Occupy the Economy: Jobs and Development," follows our past issues in raising local voices involved in this ongoing struggle. Here, they investigate and analyze the contours of their occupation and the challenges and promise of ours.

Stephen Roblin is a member of the independent Reader collective. His an independent researcher, focusing on the US domestic economy and US/Horn of Africa relations, with a special focus on Somalia. For a copy of the introduction with full citations, contact him at stephenroblin@gmail.com [1].

Subject Area:

Economic Justice [2]

PDF version:

 [indyreader16.pdf](#) [3]

Blurb:

Youth Jail, Baltimore Development Corporation, Veolia, Occupy Baltimore, and more!

Articles:

Occupations: Theirs and Ours, An Introduction to the Issue [4]

Let Teachers Teach: More Teacher Regulations Only Undermine Education [5]

The Face of Our Future: The State's Plan to Build a New Youth Jail and the Campaign to Defeat It [6]

The Indyreader Talks To: Another BDC Is Possible [7]

Problems and Possibilities at Occupy Baltimore [8]

Time to Demilitarize: Vets and Civilians are Done with War [9]

The Indyreader Talks To: Local Union Organizer Cory McCray [10]

Maryland's 2013 Budget and the Need for Progressive Taxation [11]

Looking Backward, Walking Forward: A Brief Analysis of Occupy Baltimore [12]

Reflections on Occupy Baltimore and the Fight Against the Youth Jail [13]

Cooperation Without Capital: An Introduction [14]

Jobs Without Growth: Why It's Possible and Necessary [15]

Feminism & Development Zones: A Preview to the Three-Part Indyreader Web-Essay [16]

Divide & Conquer: The Real Deal with Immigrants and American Jobs [17]

From Palestine to Baltimore, Veolia Targeted By Human Rights Activists [18]

Cooperative Lingo [19]

Economic Development 101 [20]

Source URL: <https://indyreader.org/issues/spring-2012-issue-16-occupy-economy>

Links:

[1] <mailto:stephenroblin@gmail.com>

[2] <https://indyreader.org/category/subject-area/economic-justice>

[3] <https://indyreader.org/files/indyreader16.pdf>

[4] <https://indyreader.org/content/occupations-theirs-and-ours-introduction-issue>

[5] <https://indyreader.org/content/let-teachers-teach-more-teacher-regulations-only-undermine-education-0>

[6] <https://indyreader.org/content/face-our-future-states-plan-build-new-youth-jail-and-campaign-defeat-it>

[7] <https://indyreader.org/content/indyreader-talks-another-bdc-possible>

[8] <https://indyreader.org/content/problems-and-possibilities-occupy-baltimore>

[9] <https://indyreader.org/content/time-demilitarize-vets-and-civilians-are-done-war>

[10] <https://indyreader.org/content/indyreader-talks-local-union-organizer-cory-mccray>

[11] <https://indyreader.org/content/marylands-2013-budget-and-need-progressive-taxation>

[12] <https://indyreader.org/content/looking-backward-walking-forward-brief-analysis-occupy-baltimore>

[13] <https://indyreader.org/content/reflections-occupy-baltimore-and-fight-against-youth-jail>

[14] <https://indyreader.org/content/cooperation-without-capital-introduction>

[15] <https://indyreader.org/content/jobs-without-growth-why-its-possible-and-necessary>

[16] <https://indyreader.org/content/feminism-development-zones-preview-three-part-indyreader-web-essay>

[17] <https://indyreader.org/content/divide-conquer-real-deal-immigrants-and-american-jobs>

[18] <https://indyreader.org/content/palestine-baltimore-veolia-targeted-human-rights-activists>

[19] <https://indyreader.org/content/cooperative-lingo>

[20] <https://indyreader.org/content/economic-development-101>