

# ***OPENINGS***

*Anarchist Reflections on Occupy Grand Rapids*





This account has been a long time coming... it's been started and stopped at various times, but it continues to seem relevant, mainly for the larger questions it raises about anarchist strategy. Hopefully folks learn something from it.

It reflects the experiences of a few anarchists and their involvement in Occupy Grand Rapids. In no way do we intend to speak for all anarchists who participated in the past or continue to participate in Occupy Grand Rapids (to the extent that it still exists). We share this out of love and a desire to create a different world, as well as out of our hatred for the existing world. "We" is used consistently because those writing this identify with the anarchist project – it isn't a power grab to determine what was or wasn't anarchist in Occupy Grand Rapids or to be "the final word" or anything like that.

*On October 9, 2011, I returned to Occupy Grand Rapids' encampment in Ah Nab Awen Park to a site that I wasn't really expecting. People were spread out on the grassy hill that butts up against the bank of the Grand River. There were a variety of things going on: small groups were discussing, people were organizing the camp's supplies, and others were talking with the large crowds that saw the camp due to its proximity to Art Prize. A "Know Your Rights" workshop was taking place, complete with handouts, role plays, and really solid advice. People were enthusiastically participating and asking questions. In another corner of the park, facilitators were getting ready for the General Assembly (GA) meeting that was to take place at 6pm and were going over ideas to make the meeting run smooth and efficiently.*

*When the meeting started, there were dozens of people there. People listened respectfully, the facilitators explained the process, and there was excitement in the air. After the meeting, people went dumpster diving and cooked food, there were small group discussions, committees popped up to do security and night watch, and for a minute, it didn't really feel like Grand Rapids...*



**The First Occupy Grand Rapids G.A.**

## First Day

Anarchists here in Grand Rapids heard about Occupy Wall Street and the planned “occupation” of Grand Rapids a few days before the announced October 8 meeting. While in many ways, the Occupy Wall Street occupation in mid-September of 2011 seemed like a step backwards to us as anarchists in that it seemed to not have taken into account any of the lessons learned over the previous decade of anti-summit anarchist work (i.e. the organizers seemed to think everything could be decided on the fly once people got there and that somehow the group would be able to coalesce around one demand), when the occupations started to spread to other cities it became more interesting. There appeared to be a potential to get large numbers of people who were upset with the way things are going together to talk about how things are and how they could be different. Despite the rather tepid *Declaration of the Occupation of New York City* with its talk of taking back “our government,” “our system,” “our rights,” and other such ideas that are antithetical to the anarchist project, there seemed to be some potential.

On October 8, we really had no idea what was going to happen. An initial meeting held at a house had reasonable attendance and for the most part was made up of people that were generally new to any kind of activism. A representative from a local union inserted himself as facilitator in a sign of what would be an upcoming point of tension, but for the most part it was people that were outside the traditional activist milieu. There were terrible gender and power dynamics – a foreshadowing of the overwhelming male dominance that seemed almost embedded in the Occupy phenomenon. Despite these problems simmering under the surface, posters were going up around the town, news articles were being written, and word was spreading about the planned occupation at Calder Plaza.

As anarchists, our primary interest was in meeting new folks and promoting a deeper analysis of the situation we find

ourselves in. For us – and we'd argue many other people in Grand Rapids and beyond – it is obvious the system doesn't work for anyone. Narrow calls for more regulations on banks, the passing of this law or that law, money out of politics, or anything like that were of no interest to us. Moreover, fighting on that terrain – which is what the left and activist scene in Grand Rapids does on a daily basis – gets us nowhere. Instead, we viewed Occupy Grand Rapids as a potential opening. By seizing space and deciding how we were going to relate to each other, provide for ourselves, and interact without (or in spite of) the state – we could theoretically create a space that would be empowering and exist in conflict with the state. Past experiences had shown some of us that folks are the most excited and the most radicalized when we have these brief windows of opportunity and Occupy Grand Rapids presented one of the best potentials in years.

In practical terms, anarchists showed up on October 8<sup>th</sup> with



**Banner That Accompany Literature on the First Day**

a ton of literature. We had zines explaining what anarchy was, how-to zines that explained how to do tactical things ranging from how to wheatpaste, to work with the media, or

to do consensus. Our literature area was very popular and indeed we were really the only ones that brought anything. Additionally, we were the only ones to bring a banner “Demand Nothing, Destroy Everything.” While it was controversial to be sure – despite a leaflet that pretty clearly explained the intentions behind it – it spurred many conversations. Above our literature area we also shared “the St. Paul Principles” that called for support for a diversity of tactics, a stance of none cooperation with the police, etc. By being present and participating, we to some degree helped set the tone of the occupation.

On October 8, several hundred people showed up. After an hours long meeting which was generally hampered by the fact that nobody seemed to have given the occupation much thought, inexperienced facilitators, and contradictory positions between people (for example, some people argued that the police were “part of the 99%” while others argued that the police were the enemy). Eventually, it was decided that the group would march to Ah-Nab-Awen Park and establish an encampment. The camp came together quickly – sympathetic folks donated food and other supplies, people started discussing things, security teams were organized, etc. Initially, people were very excited about Occupy. Some people even went so far as to quit their jobs or drop classes— one even got an Occupy Grand Rapids tattoo! They were all gung-ho to be doing something different with their lives. While the camp would only last a couple of nights, it was exciting and was the high point of Occupy Grand Rapids. Everything since then was essentially trying to recapture the spirit of those early days. There were problems to be sure – but that was where it was at. Once we lost the park – in a very anti-climatic bit of non-confrontation with two cops – it was over and things would never be the same. The “camp” at Fountain Street Church never had any teeth to it and it seemed to be more about martyrdom (i.e. “who's going to sleep on the porch in the bad weather?” than anything else). That's not to say that good work wasn't done, but since that point everything was a slow decline and Occupy Grand Rapids became more about meetings than anything else.

## Anarchists in the Occupation Mix

As anarchists, we kept bringing literature down to the occupation at Ah-Nab-Awen Park and people kept



enthusiastically taking it. Folks dumpstered food, we participated in the General Assembly (GA) meetings and argued our positions, and we generally participated as equals. Even when articulating unpopular positions – such as hatred for the police – we found people who were supportive and it generally showed that when we confidently and clearly articulate our views, we can gain support and many share these ideas to begin with. This is a direct challenge to the all-too-common leftist idea that says folks need to hide their radical views in order to appeal to some mythical mass (variations of this idea manifest themselves regularly amongst “radicals” in Grand Rapids). Moreover, while we had areas of overlapping agreement that would frequently coalesce into support for various ideas, we participated as individuals; not as a bloc of people who all voiced the same opinion.

One area in which anarchists failed is that we never really proposed any actions. We did some workshops, helped with food, and did some other logistical things that we had experience with, but we never did much as far as coordinating actions. About the only action that we really pushed for was a protest outside of a fundraiser for Vice President Joe Biden. In many ways, it seemed like a test of where Occupy Grand Rapids was at: would the largely left/



liberal crowd support a protest that challenged Obama? It passed through the General Assembly with surprising ease and the protest the next day went reasonably well. People enthusiastically participated in drumming, chanting, and other such things in a way that to a limited degree forced Biden to hear the protest (the drums could be heard for blocks and many people positioned themselves right in front of the restaurant where he was speaking). It wasn't the most exciting thing for anarchists, but other people seemed to be into it. Perhaps if the camp had stayed around longer, it could have been a small step in an ongoing escalation.

Similarly, in November, anarchists argued for a stance against “police brutality” in general to be added to a solidarity march in response to brutality against Occupy Oakland. While it was a hard discussion, it showed that people were open to more radical positions. Of course, when someone inevitably showed up expressing their hatred of the police – with a sign reading “the only good cop is a dead cop” – many people at the protest wanted to ban the person from the march.

## **Occupy: A Place of Contradictions**

*One night after a not particularly exciting protest outside of a speech by Condoleezza Rice, people returned to Fountain Street Church and had one of those typical meandering discussions that seemed to characterize Occupy. People talked about all manner of different views, disagreements were had, and new understandings reached. But what stands out to me is hearing a woman who self-identified as a conservative share that she just can't figure out any way for humanity to live sustainably without returning to hunter-gather societies.*

Occupy Grand Rapids – like many Occupy camps across the country – was a strange place. It was a place where you could talk about anarchy and have many people express support, but also one where someone might attempt to vote out the anarchists a day later (someone did actually try to do this, but the vote never really materialized – instead we got to

participate in one of the nastiest “speak outs” in Occupy Grand Rapids' history when numerous people spoke in favor of excluding anarchists). People would “twinkle” in support of anarchist and other revolutionary ideas, but then a few minutes later the same people would express support for needing to make “getting money out of politics” the primary goal. It was also a place where all sorts of people with all manner of weird views more or less coexisted. People who described themselves as conservatives or libertarians tried to align themselves with anarchists against those who wanted to support the Democrats. Some people would come with serious and well-thought out ideas, while others would come with the craziest stuff you could imagine. Should Occupy Grand Rapids challenge scientific orthodoxy and declare that kangaroos evolved from dolphins? It was just one of the many bizarre debates that happened as result of Occupy being an open group that tried to be all things to everyone.

Ultimately, while such a conglomeration might make for interesting conversations – if you had the inclination, patience, and the privilege (in the sense that so much of the debating was male-dominated) – to participate, it makes it pretty hard to get anything done. After a while, the novelty wears off and you can't help but wonder why you were wasting so much of your time. Especially as participation declined, the trade-offs became less and less worthwhile.

## **No Leftists at the Start, but a Slow Leftward Drift**

One of the things that made Occupy exciting initially was that it wasn't organized by the typical leftist crowd in Grand Rapids. The traditional “activist” groups and people (we all know them) weren't the ones who initiated Occupy Grand Rapids, it was (for better or worse) a project initially undertaken by people who were for the most part unconnected with the activist scene.

Even when Occupy Grand Rapids took off, “the usual suspects” of Grand Rapids activism generally stayed away. There were some attempts to make inroads – a paid union

organizer tried to take over the group early on by trying to insert himself as a leader, a Green Party politician came by and tried to gather support for their campaign, and a few members of the International Socialist Organization (ISO) showed up – but for the most part they were pretty marginalized.

In their place, Occupy picked up new people who weren't integrated into the leftist subculture in town. Most of the people – while arguably sympathetic to the ideas of what is often called “the left” hadn't gotten involved in that scene and/or had an instinctive critique of the repeated failings of that activist subculture. Most people that showed up to Occupy Grand Rapids were just generally looking for something to do after coming to the realization the gravity of the situation we face. When we interacted on those terms in the space carved out by Occupy Grand Rapids, we were able to have genuine conversations and develop affinity in ways that wasn't possible inside the traditional leftist forms. It was one of the more exciting parts of Occupy Grand Rapids.

Sadly, that period lasted only briefly and there were repeated attempts to bring Occupy Grand Rapids into the leftist umbrella. Unions tried to shift the group away from a critique of capitalism and instead pushed the group to think in terms of the “middle class,” activist groups brought statements, campaigns, and petitions for Occupy Grand Rapids to “endorse” (shudder), the International Socialist Organization (ISO) stacked the deck at a Michigan Inter-Occupy Summit to include mainly ISO-affiliated speakers (including one session billed as a discussion on “organized labor” that was just a critique of the upcoming May 1 general strike and the “ultra-left”), and the Democratic Party front-group MoveOn organized protests, film showings, and trainings under the “Occupy” banner. As time went on, Occupy Grand Rapids became like most leftist activist groups in town – debating whether or not to endorse this or that issue or campaign. The group also lost its unique approach – using occupation to open up a space for

discussion – and became a series of meetings and repeated “events” (protests, movie showings, educational events, etc) that mimicked the patterns of the left.

## **Nasty, Nasty, Nasty**

As anarchists, we've prioritized how we relate to each other. We try to remain aware of how much space we take up, our privilege, how we speak, etc. We strive to understand the many ways that domination and hierarchy manifest themselves. In general, we try to be courteous and aware. While we might sometimes chalk it up to just being a decent person, clearly it's not the way some people chose to interact with others.

In Occupy Grand Rapids, we witnessed all manner of crappy behavior. This was of course expected, but nevertheless we were floored by some of it. Most of it had to do with various people seeking control over Occupy Grand Rapids. Consequently, we saw people go behind the back of the General Assembly (the supposed decision-making body of Occupy Grand Rapids) to get their own way. Events were organized and statements were made on behalf of the group that didn't reflect the position of the group. A union organizer who had previously campaigned for various Democratic Party candidates circumvented a G.A. to have the group address the City Commission (a move that seemed designed to win him favor for bringing Occupy into the fold). People tried to pass controversial proposals when those who would be opposed weren't around. Other people created a fake Facebook profile designed to look like the “official” Occupy Grand Rapids profile and posted their own views as statements of the group (i.e. saying that the group supports police as part of the 99%). Others painted themselves as spokespeople and leaders, garnering press attention for themselves and their pet causes.

In other cases, people just didn't know how to relate with others. To be sure, we're all to some degree ruined and scarred by modern society. In a world based on alienation

and individualization, it is no surprise that these wounds would manifest themselves in Occupy Grand Rapids. However, what tended to happen more reflected some participant's desire to control and regulate behavior, actions, and ideas for what they believed to be the “best interest” of the group – or in many cases, their own interests. While the use of consensus was seen as a counter-measure to this tendency, it was difficult to use in an environment where there were so many contradictory opinions, where people were outright hostile to each others ideas, and where people seemed as much interested in getting their way than participating in a process.

## **How Much Can We Take?**

Anarchist participation in Occupy Grand Rapids ran the gamut from being empowering and exciting to frustrating and infuriating. Ultimately, participating became difficult. The reasons for this were varied, but over time in became more and more obvious. We had made friends, shared some good conversations, and what not – but working within Occupy Grand Rapids was difficult.

One of the main problems with Occupy Grand Rapids was that it tried to be all things for everyone. This was true of Occupy nationally as it was for Grand Rapids. There were too many different perspectives in Occupy Grand Rapids, many of which shared nothing in common. As anarchists, we had nothing but contempt for the talk of campaign finance reform, the targeting of “big banks,” talk of changing various laws, etc. However in Occupy, all ideas are to be treated equal, so our hatred of capitalism had to exist alongside people who thought that capitalism was fine, albeit with some more regulation. Needless to say, this doesn't really work and it resulted in watered down positions to appeal to the lowest common denominator to which we could all (generally grudgingly) agree. Occupy Grand Rapids never issued any demands or statements of its politics—not so much out of principle other than the simple fact that nobody could have agreed on what to say.

After the initial occupation was evicted, people dropped out pretty steadily over time. As this happened, the group became more radical and anarchists were probably the majority. However, rather than recognizing this and transcending the limits of Occupy's politics, people embraced the worst aspect of Occupy. There was a constant toning down for no reason. For example, anti-capitalists supported a MoveOn action called "Occupy the Courts." MoveOn's position certainly wasn't reflective of the Occupy Grand Rapids, but Occupy Grand Rapids was stuck in the myth of a mass movement. People always felt the need to appeal to "the masses" and as is always the case – it was assumed these masses couldn't understand anything beyond the most middle-of-the-road positions. Moreover, the concept of "the 99%" was equally unworkable, as it could be summoned as a means of supporting almost anything. It also was invoked as a way to limit action and/or radical content, as people constantly brought up "what the 99% would think" and implored the group not to alienate the mythical 99%. Some participants would invoke "the 99%" and their opinions, suggesting that it was the job of Occupy to somehow represent everyone everywhere. Like all good advertising slogans, it was completely devoid of meaning and simply a feel-good sentiment that appealed on emotions rather than reality.

Along with the notion that all ideas are equal and that there was a need to appeal to a mythical mass, another aspect that seemed to be built into Occupy was its male dominance. Occupy Grand Rapids was overwhelming white and male. Obviously, this was problematic and it created a situation that was difficult to be in. This seemed to be the result the demographic that Occupy drew on – generally tech-savvy middle-class folks who were disappointed at their loss of privilege (job loss, increased student loans, the possibility that they might be targeted by law enforcement, etc). Moreover, Occupy created a culture – with its "speak outs" – that encouraged males to speak up and speechify. This was certainly true in Occupy Grand Rapids and it often was simply a matter of the same old males arguing about the

same old crap from meeting to meeting.

We need to work on knowing when to quit – we have to be quicker to abandon things when they are no longer working, otherwise we get stuck in the leftist morass. Occupy Grand Rapids lost its magic quickly and some of us found ourselves participating in something that resembled an activist group or coalition more than an occupation. Of course, even more important than knowing when to quit is when to start. At the best times, Occupy offered as good of a starting point as any.

## **You can't Resurrect an Idea who's Time has Come: The July 4 Re-Occupation**

Many anarchists stopped participating in Occupy back in the fall. The contradictions had gotten to be too much, it had



become ritualized protest and lengthy General Assembly meetings that never seemed to go anywhere. And not much visibly happened in Occupy Grand Rapids: there was an “OGR vs. The Big Banks” protest that fizzled (and the fact that it was just about banks not capitalism as a whole made it of little interest), some zines were produced (*Occupacalypse* and *The ABC's of Occupy*), Grand Rapids hosted a Michigan

Inter-Occupy summit that was dominated by speakers from the International Socialist Organization (ISO), and a few other events here and there.

Somewhere in the mix, Occupy Grand Rapids decided that it would be a worthwhile endeavor to “re-occupy” Grand Rapids and to do it on July 4. The problems with this date were obvious most notably the potential for patriotic imagery and the fact that summer is typically a difficult time to organize things in Grand Rapids. But, the group had also changed. It had become much more radical and more anarchist. Things that were a huge debate in the fall, such as a support for a diversity of tactics were passed with ease. There was a solid process for running meetings and if they still went long, they weren't nearly as painful as the speech-making and grandstanding that characterized the General Assembly meetings at Ah-Nab-Awen Park.

In the run-up to the re-occupation, a lot of good work was done. People came up with solid ideas to cover the infrastructure of the occupation: food, legal, medical, welcoming new people, facilitation, etc were taken. Posters and graffiti were put up all over town and advertising was done more aggressively than for any previous Occupy Grand Rapids event with the exception of the initial occupation. Serious conversations were had about the limits of what happened in the fall, the tension between revolution and reform, and other topics. Things were falling in place to make the occupation a step-up from the fall, but there was just one problem: nobody seemed to be listening. Occupy both nationally and in Grand Rapids seemed to have lost its luster. Few new people were getting involved, few people confirmed that they were coming to the re-occupation, and those bottom-lining various logistical needs were largely left to do so on their own.

It was really no surprise then that when the group gathered on July 4 at Monument Park, there were only around twenty people present. Nevertheless, the group went through with



its plans and occupied a field at 517 Monroe NW following a march led by black flags and radical cheerleaders. Numbers fluctuated throughout the day, but probably 50 people cycled in and out of the camp. There were particulars that could have been improved on – for example something needed to fill the space between the 1pm start of the occupation and the 6pm speak-out – but ultimately what happened was largely the result of the fact that people simply didn't show up (not to mention that it was hot as hell). When the police predictably told the group that they couldn't stay, there was nothing that could be done to resist. What some had seen as a way to reinvigorate the energy of the fall had instead become the last gasp of a dying phenomenon.

## **Some Final Thoughts**

Despite its problems, the first few days of Occupy Grand Rapids – while frustrating to be sure – were exciting. They were a break from the drudgery of everyday life that challenged us in many ways. We met more anarchists through Occupy that we had in a long time. Moreover, it showed us that we don't need to be scared of expressing our ideas – that we can and should articulate our views loudly and openly. It also helped exposed some of our weaknesses. If we had a stronger anarchist community in Grand Rapids, the occupation likely would have turned out much differently as it had did in Oakland, Seattle, St. Louis, and other places.

In many ways, Occupy Grand Rapids caught us off guard. It was an unexpected phenomenon that confused many of us – even those who participated. We need to think about what we can do to develop an anarchist theory and practice of revolt so that we aren't caught off guard when events happen and so that we can react (or even, initiate things) quickly. Other questions linger: How could we have approached Occupy differently? What can we do to be more prepared for the next time such an opportunity comes along? Because Occupy Grand Rapids turned out to be less than inspiring in the end, does that mean our participation wasn't

worthwhile? What did anarchists ultimately gain for our efforts? Could we propose an opportunity ourselves?

There are no single answers to these questions and they must ultimately be explored by those with whom we wish to act. However, perhaps the single most important thing to remember is that there are no magic formulas to follow, no blueprints, and no certainties. While we might be able to draw conclusions as to the likely outcome of this or that approach based on past experiences, we must not forget that nothing happens if we do nothing. *The secret is to really begin.*





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