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Reflections on Occupy Baltimore and the Fight Against the Youth Jail

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When a call went out in early October to “occupy” Baltimore, roughly 200 people gathered to discuss possible locations for an encampment. One initial proposal was to occupy the site of a proposed youth jail in East Baltimore, a facility that would cost the state \$104 million—money that could be used for an under-funded public education system and neglected recreation centers. The location was publicly proposed by high school student Shaquille Carbon, a member of the youth-led organization called the Baltimore Algebra Project (BAP), which fights for fair and just education in the city.

In its fight for better education in Baltimore, the BAP has been involved in the struggle against the youth jail for over two years, along with a coalition of over 30 different organizations. In the Fall of 2010, the BAP, along with Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle (a local progressive policy think-tank), Union Baptist Church, Kinetics Faith and Justice Network, and many other allies, held an action called Youth Justice Sunday at the proposed jail site.

Participants cut the lock to the property’s surrounding fence and then entered the site in an act of civil disobedience. They then brought books into the site to bring attention to the fact that while the City and State could find funding for a new prison, they still had yet to find the funds to save a

deteriorating school system.

Although there was a great deal of enthusiasm for occupying the proposed youth jail site, the McKeldin Square location in Baltimore's Inner Harbor was settled upon. This site, overlooked by offices of banks and corporations, followed the trend of other Occupations across the country by focusing on economic issues—this would be the beginning of Occupy Baltimore.

Reflecting on the decision, Carbon expressed frustration with being the youngest person in the room that first night and feeling like his voice was not heard. Indeed, criticism of the young Occupy Baltimore soon centered around its seeming lack of diversity and its lack of connection to local issues and struggles. Though early conversations around issues like development, as well as the youth jail, led to the creation of parallel groups which began to work on these more specific local problems, the larger Occupy Baltimore movement maintained its focus on broad issues, such as income inequality and wealth distribution. Such criticism has followed Occupy groups across the country.

As encampments were evicted nationally, the Occupy movement continued to evolve. In Baltimore, this evolution has meant a more intentional focus on the local systemic issues that activists in the city have been working on for years. This focus has allowed Occupy participants to link up with existing local movements to create space to begin dialogue, strengthen and build upon relationships, and forge new ones.

At the same time, such new coalitions and relationships have come with many challenges. As Occupy participants work to find their place among local struggles, important discussions of race and class have taken center stage in a tough dialogue.

In January, members of Occupy Baltimore teamed up with the BAP to organize a five-day occupation of the proposed youth jail site. Known as Schools Not Jails, the action started with fiery speeches from local civil rights leaders and long-time activists in front of the city's detention facility. The group then marched to the fenced-off site, while chanting "We want education, not incarceration!"

Upon arrival, a select number of participants entered the property as wood and building supplies poured over the fence from the hands of dozens of supporters. The group then built a symbolic schoolhouse to illustrate the demand that the city and state invest in education, rather than jails. The demonstrators inside were later arrested.

Despite a heavy police presence, the occupation remained peaceful. Each night throughout the week different groups held teach-ins outside the site on crucial issues: the prison-industrial complex^[1], nonviolent resistance, and systemic critiques of the modern criminal justice system and possible alternatives.

The week culminated with a demonstration at War Memorial Plaza in front of City Hall. The group turned the plaza into a temporary recreation center, with demonstrators playing games such as jump rope, football, soccer, and hula hoop. The action symbolized the demand that the city prioritize prevention rather than incarceration, as well as bring light to the city's recent plans to close and privatize recreation centers.

Occupy Baltimore's decision to take on the youth jail came several months after Shaquille Carbon's original suggestion, but not too late. Carbon, recognizing his initial disappointment at the

first Occupy meeting, expressed satisfaction in seeing the idea come to fruition five months later, as well as the action bringing national coverage to an issue that previously hadn't received the media attention it deserved.

Jay Gillen, a teacher who works with the Baltimore Algebra Project, commented:

“With the rise of the Occupy movement, Red Emma's and Occupy Baltimore have intentionally funneled media attention to support the Stop-the-Youth-Jail work. Particularly impressive has been Occupy's combination of moving the issue forward energetically, while ensuring that youth and community members most directly affected, remain at the forefront.”

Indeed, the main goal of many of the participants from Occupy Baltimore has been to take the momentum, which has been built around this global phenomenon of increased activism and revolt, and use it to highlight local struggles in Baltimore and, ultimately, to inspire increased activism around these issues.

“I am hopeful and thankful for how this multi-year campaign against the youth jail has gained traction and grown,” said Rev. Heber Brown, III, a community leader and long-time activist, who has fought against the youth jail. “It's one of the most sustained efforts I've ever been a part of in my years of activism here in Baltimore, so that is encouraging. . . This campaign against this youth jail has really invited a diverse crowd to give energy to the issue of the prison-industrial complex here in Baltimore.”

Brown went on to underscore that, even if the different groups involved with this issue can't always work together, they are still working towards a similar goal, even with the many challenges that exist:

“I cannot ignore the racial dynamics that are tied to the prison-industrial complex and to those who organize to fight against it. I have long-maintained that those who are most directly impacted by the prison-industrial complex should be the voices that provide leadership to efforts that struggle against the prison-industrial complex. And I've also maintained that people of privilege should use that privilege in responsible ways when working in concert with oppressed communities. As it relates to Occupy Baltimore, I am thankful for its focus on local issues and the space it is creating for white people of privilege to use that privilege for this cause, i.e., stopping the youth jail. I am also thankful for the possibilities of more imaginative expressions of community and activism that Occupy Baltimore has helped to nourish.”

As the evolution of the Occupy movement here in Baltimore continues, there is a shared dream that after these issues are won, the hard work of defining community, building relationships, and working together doesn't end. The momentum for systemic and democratic change that is sweeping the globe should continue to be channeled to bring attention and broaden participation in important local struggles, in addition to national and global struggles, and work towards linking movements and building unity.

[1] The prison-industrial complex refers to the rapid expansion of the US inmate population due to the political influence of private prison companies and businesses that supply goods and services to government prison agencies.

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