

Comments at Occupy Seattle Rally, November 19, 2011

We must fix what's very wrong in America

by Craig Salins

Thank you. It is an honor to be here, to be part of this important, historic movement.

We are making history! It is time. It may take awhile, but we must not stop until we prevail!

Friends – something is very wrong in America.

And this movement is about **fundamental change** – to fix that, and to fix it permanently.

The Occupy movement is not just tents on a patch of land. It is a **national awakening**, a **state of mind** and a **commitment to action**, to bring about economic fairness and social justice in this land.

Occupy is growing awareness that **something is very wrong in America**, when the **top one percent take one-quarter of all national income** – more than the bottom 50 percent combined.

Something is very wrong in America when the **top one percent own more wealth than the bottom ninety percent combined** – with the enormous political power that goes with this concentration of wealth, in lobbying, campaign contributions, and owning the media.

Occupy is a demand for change when **50 million Americans still do not have health care** coverage.

Occupy is a commitment to **fight for tax fairness – so that corporations and the wealthy pay their fair share of taxes** to support the jobs and public services we need – when three of the top four "too big to fail" banks in the U.S. today are larger than they were before the Wall Street collapse, with assets of over half the GDP of the country – and when 30 major corporations paid no federal income tax in the past three years, even though they earned \$160 Billion in profits.

Occupy is citizens **demanding a publicly-owned state reserve bank** for Washington State, like they have had in North Dakota for over 90 years – so that the some \$2 Billion in state reserves that is parked overnight every night in Wall Street banks for their profit, not ours – is instead **invested in our state** for jobs, for student loans, for rebuilding bridges, roads, schools and small businesses in our communities.

It is unconscionable that we invest our state funds in Wall Street-owned banks, where *they* earn the profits for their wealthy owners and to pay obscene compensation to top CEOs – when instead We the People could use those funds for the commonwealth needs of our state and communities.

Think of this: We park our money in those too-big-to-fail banks. And then we have to pay fees and interest for *their* profit, to borrow back *our own tax dollars*, for projects we need here in Washington. This is insane.

Occupy is a movement to **demand a complete overturn and reversal** of the alarming, nutty and obscene **ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Citizens United v. FEC*** – where the Court said that corporations can spend whatever they want to influence election results.

We the People want that ruling overturned – **if necessary by amendments to the U.S. Constitution** – to clearly state that corporations are **not** people, corporate wealth is **not** protected as political speech, and they must **not** have the legal right to muck around in our democracy with their great wealth, twisting campaigns and buying election results, and using corporate profits to purchase lawmaking itself in Congress.

When the top 1% own 90% of the wealth – and then money is protected as "speech" – **that is not democracy; instead it's Plutocracy** – rule by the super-wealthy. That's what is at stake in these Supreme Court rulings – and **that is why we need these rulings overturned** – to reclaim democracy for We the People.

Here is a proposed plan:

In January – January 20th and 21st – it's the **two-year anniversary of the *Citizens United* decision.**

We should use that occasion for massive marches and rallies on the steps of federal courthouses and at the legislature in Olympia – to say: ***Overturn the Court's wrong-headed decisions.*** We want a Constitutional amendment so these insane decisions protecting corporate power and wealth can never again be visited upon the land, infecting the democracy that should belong to We the People.

Let's talk about jobs for a moment.

In America today, we have boatloads of work, crying to be done.

Roads and bridges to fix. Schools to repair and upgrade. Health and long-term care to provide. Water systems to upgrade. Research to be done.

And we have skilled workers – willing to work, begging for jobs.

Yet two, three, four or more out of every ten workers are unemployed – can't find work.

This is insane. It makes no sense. In fact, it is criminal.

It is the greatest waste of human potential since the Great Depression.

We are a wealthy nation. We are ***not broke*** – no matter what the 'debt-is-our-biggest problem' spinmeisters are saying. They don't want to admit we're ***not*** broke – because they don't want to pay their fair share of taxes to improve our schools, roads and bridges and to provide the services we need and deserve.

Since we are not broke, should there be hunger and homelessness in America? ***No!***

Should we have 50 million Americans without health care in America?

Should we tolerate crumbling bridges and roads, side-by-side with millions of workers begging for work?

Should we accept a vision of America where ***last year the top 1% received more income than the bottom 50% combined? No!***

To have this level of economic misery – this huge disparity in income and wealth, this poverty in a land of plenty – is not only unjust, it demonstrates moral bankruptcy. It should be against the law of the land.

But let's be clear about something: There are TWO fundamental problems in America:

#1. The unconscionable gap in distribution of wealth, getting worse at an exponential rate.

#2. Democracy itself has been hijacked – by money, corporate power and wealth – the 1%.

Furthermore, these problems, these conditions are linked. Each feeds the other.

We must stop it, turn it around – or we won't recognize the country we will soon be living in.

Now – let me tell you something else, something unconscionable (*which you already know*):

This situation is man-made! It is ***not*** created by the laws of the universe. It is a result of purposeful laws and public policies that were enacted in our very own Congress and the courthouses – but at the behest of the 1% – laws perhaps created when we were not looking – policies adopted to benefit the super-rich and the too-big-to-fail corporations. ***How?*** Using lobbyists, campaign cash and 'revolving doors' that promise a lucrative, cushy position at a major firm once an elected member leaves Congress – if only they will do corporate bidding while in office.

This is how democracy is hijacked! – so that lawmaking benefits primarily the super-rich.

Think about this:

How could it be, that in a country founded on so-called democratic principles, one-person, one-vote – a country that purports to spread democracy around the planet – where most of the 99% at least have the opportunity to vote, that in that democracy, we have laws and policies where most of the income and most of the wealth flows to the top one-tenth of one-percent? Where millions stand around without a job, when there is so much work to be done? Or where millions face home foreclosures and 50 million have no health care coverage?

How can that be - in a supposed democracy, "of, by and for the people"?

Think of this: Last year, **the giant GE corporation paid no federal taxes** – none.

But they were not violating the law. Do you know why? They **made** the law. They and their Wall Street corporate buddies, who also paid no federal taxes last year.

And my friends, that is why we have unemployment in America. We're not broke. We've simply been robbed. And not just robbed of wealth. **Our democracy has been stolen** – hijacked for private gain and greed.



It is time for us to bring this unholy set of rules to a halt. We can – and we must.

We are the people - the 99%. We can take back our government – take it back so that we have jobs and health care for all, education that is affordable, energy policies that benefit the earth instead of private profit, and an environment that we can proudly leave to our children and their children.

It is time for us to say to Wall Street and the 1%: Your wealth will no longer be allowed to hijack our democracy and the policies we need to survive and thrive as a total community.

It is time for us to **amend the United States Constitution**, to say: Corporations are **not** persons. Outshouting the voice of the people with bales of cash is **not** protected speech. Corporations must **not** be allowed to use their wealth to muck around in our political democracy, to buy candidates, to buy election results, to swamp lawmaking in Congress with lobbyists, with propaganda that confuses voters, and with threats to use their economic power if they don't get their way.

Did you know **the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has a multi-million dollar fund to influence the election of judges** in states that elect judges? – to create a more "pro-business" posture among our judiciary – and to fend off lawsuits that would protect the environment or workers' rights.

Did you know the right-wing **Super-PACs have amassed a war chest of over \$400 million** – to buy election results next year, through flooding the airwaves with propaganda and spin. Their strategy is fog and confusion – and to get us fighting each other over crumbs on the table – so that voters will be confused and perhaps stay home. And then Wall Street wins.



Friends – we are engaged in a political fight. Make no mistake. It's not new. It IS heating up.

Next year may be a watershed year – on the twin issues of wealth disparity, and money corruption of lawmaking and democracy itself.

But we are also the 99% – the vast majority. If we organize, **we can change the rules of the game** – so that it is WE who make the laws – not General Electric, or Bank of America, or the oil/energy conglomerates.

We must do this.

If we want full employment, jobs for all at a living wage, ***we must break the stranglehold of Big Money over lawmaking in America*** – because we can't have both.

If we want health care for all, we must break the power that the insurance and pharmaceutical industries have over health care policy in Congress – power they have only because they can buy campaigns, election results, lobbyists, and lawmaking itself.

If we want safe food, clean air and water, and sustainable energy policies – we must get Big Money to let go of lawmaking in our democracy.

And if we want an end to war – if we are tired of seeing our young men and women return from insane foreign wars with damaged limbs and damaged psyches – we must break the economic and political clout of the greedy war-profiteers, that let's them control the Congress.

We are the people. We are the 99%. We have woken up.

We can establish a **Second Bill of Rights** in the U.S. Constitution - as was proposed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1944 – sixty-seven years ago! – to guarantee jobs at a living wage, housing, health care, education, and other necessities.

We are the 99%. ***If we are thoughtful, smart and strategic – if we have stamina and focus on the outcomes we want*** – we can outshout the Big Money – to **change the rules** and re-affirm people's rights, so that Big Money and corporate power are no longer allowed to dominate our people's democracy.

For example: We can require public financing for all campaigns – with mandatory free time over the airwaves (which we own, by the way).

We can assure voting rights for all. We can make sure that all votes are counted, fairly and completely.

We can improve civic education – so that voters of all ages truly understand the issues and what is at stake, when they vote.

And then – once we've established authentic democracy (as once promised) – we can pass laws for fair taxes and essential public services, education and health care for all, affordable housing and a clean environment. This is what self-government is *supposed* to be about – *not* becoming slaves to war and debt.



We can do these things – to create the society we envision, the society we deserve – with economic opportunity and justice for all.

It may take awhile – but we have stamina, staying power - and we know what we want and deserve.

As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has said: *The arc of history may be long, but it bends toward justice.*

Let's make it happen! We are the people. We are the 99%. We can do this. We must, and we will.

Thank you!

Craig Salins, an activist in Seattle, has been executive director of Washington Public Campaigns.