

Occupy Wall Street: Demands to End War and Cut Military Spending

By Joana Racine, International Peace Bureau secretariat, 20 Oct. 2011



The original call to Occupy Wall Street by Adbusters

The Occupy Wall Street movement has defied all those predicting its early demise, exploding from a small protest into a worldwide movement. On October 15th, protests were held from North and South America to Asia, Africa and Europe, with over 1,500 events in 82 countries. A part of these protests was directed against super-sized military budgets (particularly in the US). They called attention to the unfairness of ever-higher military spending while spending on social welfare institutions and programmes is being cut.



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However, it is difficult to define exactly what the movement's objectives are, as well as to predict its future evolution. Further complicating its interpretation is the fact that there is no leadership structure and that the movement lacks a formal set of demands. Nonetheless, it is clear what (and who) the movement is directed against: the fact that the "political economy is rigged, especially with regard to financial economy, to benefit a relatively small number of powerful people at the top of the income

distribution” ([The Economist](#)). These are the ‘1 percent’: the wealthy elite particularly from the financial sector. This 1 percent of the population is criticized for having co-opted the government to serve their own interests, to the detriment of the remaining ‘99 percent’.

Occupy Wall Street (and its ‘indignation’ equivalents in Europe and elsewhere) should be seen as a movement of dissent rather than a typical ‘protest march’. As Nathan Schneider points out: “Rather than a mass movement from the outset, this occupation has ended up depending on a relatively small number of highly determined, courageous young activists willing to sleep outside and confront police intimidation. But that is changing. As word spreads about it, the crowd has been getting older, more diverse. Already, though, this tactic of a somewhat rowdy occupation has garnered influence far greater than a traditional march would.” ([The Nation](#))

This statement has proved remarkably prescient, as protests spread across the globe and ever more people have joined in. The protests are covered prominently in the mainstream news coverage, and progressive politicians are jumping on the bandwagon. However, the larger number of participants has made it more difficult to isolate a specific set of demands, both for analysts and even for the protesters themselves. Most observers see the central points as demands for jobs, cheaper health care and education, and rage at the behaviour of the banks. But there are local variations: in Japan, for example, protests were also directed against the country’s nuclear power industry, notably the Tokyo Electric Power Company.

IPB holds that another important item should be included in the list of grievances: the fact that military budgets have been ballooning, particularly in the US, in spite of rising debt and spending cuts. Echoing IPB’s long-standing work to address the imbalance of military and developmental spending, some of the protesters’ anger is indeed directed against US wars and the unfairness of an inflated military budget and simultaneous cuts to welfare programs. US Representative Barney Frank is encouraging Occupy Wall Street to make the connection to defense cuts, stating that “Cutting military spending is really essential if we are going to accomplish some of the things the Occupy movement wants to do” ([truthout](#)).



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Several instances provide evidence that protesters are making the link between military spending and their social grievances. Many actions organised by [Code Pink](#) have military spending and war as their centerpiece. Eyewitnesses reported seeing a banner demanding “Cut Military Spending” during the short protest in the Hart Senate Office building in Washington, DC on October 11th ([Government](#)

[Executive](#)). Peter Miller of Americans United for Palestinian Human Rights argues that Occupy Wall Street is an opportunity to raise awareness of just how much money is being spent on military aid to Israel, money that could be used to support those in need in the US ([End the Occupation](#)). On October 13th, protesters disrupted a congressional hearing on US defense spending, voicing their opposition to US military action. Throughout the protests, numerous posters denounced the size of the US military budget. Others demanded that military spending be redirected to social programs.



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Despite these strong images, the movement is not primarily concerned with war and peace or military spending. Most attention is directed at the banking sector, and news coverage of the movement reflects this, rather than the criticism of military budgets. The list of demands for the US Congress currently being compiled by the New York City General Assembly so far makes no mention of military spending ([Occupy Wall Street: Proposed List of Demands](#)). Other groups in the Occupy Wall Street movement make clearer mention of the war-spending dimension. The [October 2011 Movement](#), a fusion of peace, social justice, and environmental, organizations now occupying Freedom Plaza in New York, has identified fifteen issues it says the protests should address. Number

2 is militarism, arguing that the US should end wars, weapons exports and private for-profit military contractors, and reduce the national security state.

The dissatisfaction and anger with the inflated military budget is not confined to the Occupy Wall Street movement. In the US, NGOs and a grassroots network have emerged in recent years calling for cuts to the Pentagon budget and a redirection from military to community spending. One such group, the [New Priorities Network](#), is pressuring the Congressional “Super-Committee” and Congress to end the wars and cut the Pentagon budget, instead of slashing Social Security and Medicare. [Peace Action](#), an IPB member, organized a Move the Money Campaign working to raise awareness and put pressure on the government to reduce military spending. On the [Global Day of Action on Military Spending](#) in 2011, co-organized by IPB, over 90 events took place in more than 35 countries, highlighting the importance of military spending cuts.

This activity at the organizational level is supported by popular opinion. A recent poll conducted for the Washington Post and Bloomberg News reveals that 51% of all US adults support a reduction in military spending ([Washington Post](#)). There is thus clearly potential for Occupy Wall Street to develop its public critique of military spending. It is a great encouragement to IPB’s work that the military-spending dimension of the economic crisis is at last being highlighted in the public domain.



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