

Warren who?

In the 1953 movie *The Wild One*, a group of young people occupy a small California town. Their purpose is ambiguous, but it is apparent that they disrespect authority and enjoy disturbing the established order. At one point in the film, a woman asks the group's leader, played by Marlon Brando, a question: "What are you rebelling against?" Brando replies, "What have you got."

Some have found similarities between Brando's attitude and that of the young people who have recently occupied Wall Street to protest. The comparison is understandable because the protesters' concerns include a long list of issues that seems to include anything "you have got." The list includes: corporate greed, political corruption, income inequality, unemployment, environmental degradation, foreign wars, the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, and the fairness of the tax system.

Editorialists and bloggers have pointed to the protesters' ill-defined agenda as an indication that the Occupy Wall Street movement will quickly fall apart. This may not prove true.

An eclectic agenda serves to attract more people to a protest. In the early stages of a protest movement it is more important to gather momentum than to establish consensus. The Occupy Wall Street movement is quickly building a head of steam.

The protests have spread to Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Denver, Indianapolis, Philadelphia and San Francisco. Des Moines, not commonly known as a hot bed for radicals, had a massive rally that resulted in 32 arrests.

Early this month, the Wall Street protests reached Salt Lake City with people marching on the state capital and camping in Pioneer Park. As a testament to the diverse crowds being drawn to the protests, Republican Congressman Jason Chaffetz stopped by the protesters' camp in Pioneer Park to talk with some of the protesters.

There are some similarities with the Wall Street protesters and another eclectic movement that started more than a century ago. The Progressive Movement prospered in this country from the late 1800s to the 1920s. The Progressives' agenda included:

a minimum wage, antitrust enforcement, women's suffrage, an eight-hour work day, and limits on campaign contributions. Although the Progressive Party had limited success in Congressional elections and never put a candidate in the White House, the Progressives were successful in advancing a significant portion of their agenda.

It will be interesting to see if the Wall Street protests evolve into a movement that produces any meaningful change. At this point, the most pressing problem confronting the protesters isn't their expansive agenda. A more probable pitfall is the failure of some of the protesters to grasp the complexity of the issues that concern them.

As one example, the Wall Street Journal reported one of the protesters was recently asked whether he could support Warren Buffett's proposal to increase income tax rates for the wealthiest citizens. The protester, Edward Heath, said that he could not

comment because he had never heard of Buffett.

Buffett is the second wealthiest person in the United States, and he made his fortune by investing in companies traded on Wall Street. He is also one of the most ardent supporters for increasing the progressivity of the income tax.

The fact that some the protesters don't know Buffett or his position on taxes makes for a funny story. Does the story hold any significance for the Occupy Wall Street movement? I think it does.

At this point, the protesters have painted everyone in the business world with the same brush. In fact, many successful business people share some of the protesters' concerns. Buffett has decried excessive executive compensation for years. Patrick Byrne, CEO of Utah-based Overstock.com, has waged a vigorous campaign against improper practice by Wall Street firms.

If the protesters were to do a little homework, they might find some powerful allies in unlikely places. This could prove helpful if they wish to bring about some meaningful changes.

Top of Utah Voices



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Commentary