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## Immigrants Join Protest as Occupy Wall Street Movement Grows

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By **Rebecca Ellis**

Sebastian Fernandez, 25, a graduate student born in Colombia, works the Spanish information desk of the Occupy Wall Street camp on the edge of Zucotti Park. At the corner of Liberty and Broadway, flanked by hot dog vendors and police barricades, he sits at a folding table laden with Spanish-language copies of the protest's newspaper, the "Occupy Wall Street Journal".

Graduated with a double B.A. in Economics and International Studies, Fernandez is currently enrolled in a Masters program at North Carolina State. He's facing \$46,000 in debt for student loans. "It is better to invest in education and get a degree, given the current economic situation," he reasoned.

Fernandez came to the U.S. with his parents 12 years ago when his father got a job in Latin America marketing with Ingersoll-Rand. He traveled to New York just to join the hundreds of people camped out here since September 17.

"I was inspired by the websites [fixcongressfirst.org](#) and [rootsrikers.org](#) to come to the protest in New York City. These websites explain that the U.S.A. has been captured by private special interests." He said that although the protests have been widely covered by Spanish-speaking media such as Univision, Telesur, RSN and CNN en Español, Latino attendance has been sparse.

"Basically, there are not very many Hispanics involved. They are afraid of getting arrested if they're undocumented," he said. "We have to explain that the park is safe."

Javier Castaño, founder of the blog [QueensLatino.com](#), says he didn't see many "darker faces" when the movement began and agrees with Fernandez that the main reason is fear. "For those without papers, they have to be careful to not get arrested."

Castaño added that at first the only Spanish-speaking participants he ran into were Spaniards, but as the weeks went on, more and more Latin American immigrants have been showing up at the camp and marches.

Castaño sees signs of growing involvement. "Now I hear Latin music and there's the information desk in Spanish and there's also the Occupy Wall Street Journal in Spanish," he noted.

### **Diversifying Occupy Wall Street**

The first Spanish-language general assembly was held on Oct. 9, a month into the occupation of Wall Street. That day, the park filled with flags and banners in Spanish and groups like the Movement for Justice in El Barrio and other community organizations came out in force. Speakers made references to the significance of starting a Spanish-language general assembly on the day before the Columbus Day

holiday, which for Hispanics marks the beginning of the *conquista* in the Americas.

Since then, Spanish general assemblies (*asambleas generales*) have been held from 5-7 p.m. every Sunday.

Thanu Yakupitiyage, a graduate student born in Sri Lanka, has been involved in the protests for three weeks. She helped form a working group for people of color.

“As this movement is taking shape, we are trying to figure out how to bring in more immigrant and undocumented workers. It is still something that is lacking,” she said.

One of the reasons Yakupitiyage says immigrants are not participating is “because of language and how Occupy Wall Street is messaging itself—it does not have a single message.”

Unlike the immigration reform movement of 2006 that drew out tens of thousands of immigrants, the Occupy Wall Street movement addresses a wide range of related issues around the economy, war, and unemployment.

“People have trouble understanding and latching on to immigrant issues and how they tie into broader issues,” Yakupitiyage said.

### **Fear of Arrest Keeps Many Immigrants Away**

There seems to be a general consensus among protesters and organizers alike that the fear of getting arrested and deported is keeping many undocumented immigrants away from the protests.

Although Nicolas Perez, a philosophy student from Mexico, has a student visa, he only went to the protests as an observer because he was afraid of getting arrested and putting his visa at risk. “You have more to lose than a citizen. But I’m careful.” he said.

Asked why undocumented workers and immigrants have not turned out at the Occupy protests in such large numbers as they did during the 2006 immigration demonstrations, Fernandez said, “Because of new, more repressive laws against migrants.”

Much has changed since 2006, when the immigration reform protests and mass walkouts drew thousands of undocumented workers to protest the “Sensenbrenner bill” that would have legislated harsh repressive measures against migrants and tightened the U.S.-Mexican border. Since then, Arizona passed the infamous SB 1070 and seeks to approve even harsher laws to restrict businesses that hire undocumented workers, and employ an electronic system to check work authorization status. Other states, such as Alabama, are following suit. A renewed anti-immigrant offensive has targeted removing the constitutional right to citizenship at birth and proposed criminal enforcement of immigration rules.

Deportations have climbed steadily over the past decade. According to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s (ICE) data, 324,719 people have been deported this year to date. ICE statistics indicate that deportations have tripled in the past ten years, from 189,026 in 2001 to a total of 387,242 in 2010.

### **Immigrants in the 99%**

Tania Mattos, Legislative Coordinator at the New York State Youth Leadership Council, believes that the Occupy Wall Street protests are important in putting immigrant issues back on the table.

“There’s a movement going on and a lot of anti-immigrant sentiment in this country, especially in states like Alabama,” Mattos said, referring to the new state law there barring undocumented immigrants from access to services including water facilities and business transactions.

“The face of racist America is coming up again in the South. But at the same time, the immigrant rights movement is growing,” she said. “The fight in New York is relatively easy. But change has to happen in the South.”

Mattos said that the combined effect of harsh enforcement policies contributes to a national atmosphere that discourages immigrants from speaking out. She hopes that the Occupy protests will provide a forum to push for the passing of the proposed New York Dream Act. The New York Youth Leadership Council is lobbying for passage of the Act when the legislative session opens in January. She hopes that if New

York—with a 40-percent immigrant population—leads the way, a federal act could be passed in a few years.

Mattos agrees that there needs to a shift in the messaging of the protests to address immigrant rights.

“There has to be a specific strategy in the movement. All members must understand that it is still developing. We have to go down there and represent the economic issues of undocumented workers,” she said.

Yakupitiyage is helping to start an unofficial working group to plan permanent and ongoing immigrant rights protests to take place parallel to the Occupy protests. Similar to the labor march that took place on Oct.5, these protests would specifically focus on immigrant issues. She hopes they will also provide a safe space for immigrants and undocumented workers to participate without fear of arrest and possible deportation.

Mattos sums up by emphasizing the connection of immigrant issues to the Occupy Wall Street protests. She sees immigrants as making up a strong contingent of the “99%.”

“Immigrants have been victims of capitalism. We are economic refugees and we have to go through the broken American system and suffer the consequences. We don’t want to accept that,” Mattos said.

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