

The Corporate State Will Be Broken

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By [Chris Hedges](#), [Truthdig](#) / *Op-Ed*

I spent Friday morning sitting on a wooden bench in a fourth-floor courtroom in the New York Criminal Court in Manhattan. I was waiting to be sentenced for “disturbing the peace” and “refusing to obey a lawful order” during an Occupy demonstration in front of Goldman Sachs in November.

Those sentenced before me constituted the usual fare of the court. They were poor people of color accused of mostly petty crimes—drug possession, thefts, shoplifting, trespassing because they were homeless and needed a place to sleep, inappropriate touching, grand larceny and violation of probation. They were escorted out of a backroom by a police officer, stood meekly before the judge with their hands cuffed behind them, were hastily defended by a lawyer clutching a few folders, and were sentenced. Ten days in jail. Sixty days in jail. Six months in jail. A steady stream of convictions. My sentence, by comparison, was slight. I was given an ACD, or “adjournment in contemplation of dismissal,” which means that if I am not arrested in the next six months my case is dismissed. If I am arrested during this period of informal probation the old charge will be added to the new one before I am sentenced.

The country’s most egregious criminals, the ones who had stripped some of those being sentenced of their homes, their right to a decent education and health care, their jobs, their dignity and their hope, those wallowing in tens and hundreds of millions of dollars, those who had gamed the system to enrich themselves at our expense, were doing the dirty business of speculation in the tall office towers a few blocks away. They were making money. A few of these wealthy plutocrats were with the president, who was in New York that day to attend four fundraisers that took in an estimated \$3 million. For \$15,000 you could have joined Barack Obama at Daniel, an exclusive Upper East Side restaurant. For \$35,000 you could have been at a gathering hosted by movie director Spike Lee. Most of those sentenced in that courtroom do not make that much in a year. It was a good day in New York for Barack Obama. It was a bad day for us.

Our electoral system, already hostage to corporate money and corporate lobbyists, gasped its last two years ago. It died on Jan. 21, 2010, when the Supreme Court in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* granted to corporations the right to spend unlimited amounts on independent political campaigns. The ruling turned politicians into corporate employees. If any politician steps out of line, dares to defy corporate demands, this ruling hands to our corporate overlords the ability to pump massive amounts of anonymous money into campaigns to make sure the wayward are defeated and silenced. Politicians like Obama are hostages. They jump when corporations say jump. They beg when corporations say beg. They hand corporations exemptions, subsidies, trillions in taxpayer money, no-bid contracts and massive loans with virtually no interest, and they abolish any regulations that impede profits and protect the citizen. Corporations like Goldman Sachs, because they own the system, are bailed out by federal dollars and given essentially free government loans to gamble. I am not sure what to call our economic system, but it is not capitalism. And if any elected official so much as murmurs anything that sounds like dissent, the Supreme Court ruling permits corporations to destroy him or her. And they do.

Turn off your televisions. Ignore the Newt-Mitt-Rick-Barack reality show. It is as relevant to your life as the gossip on “*Jersey Shore*.” The real debate, the debate raised by the Occupy movement about inequality, corporate malfeasance, the destruction of the ecosystem, and the security and surveillance state, is the only debate that matters. You won’t hear it on the corporate-owned airwaves and cable networks, including MSNBC, which has become to the Democratic Party what Fox News is to the lunatic fringe of the Republican Party. You won’t hear it on NPR or PBS. You won’t read about it in our major newspapers. The issues that matter are being debated, however, on “[Democracy Now!](#),” Link TV, The Real News, Occupy websites and Revolution Truth. They are being raised by journalists such as Glenn Greenwald and Matt Taibbi. You can find genuine ideas in corners of the Internet or in books by political philosophers such as [Sheldon Wolin](#). But you have to go looking for them.



A protester with the Occupy Wall Street movement waves to Auubi, a 17-month-old boy whose father was also demonstrating, on the grounds of the Capitol in Washington, on January 17, 2012. Protesters plan events in Washington throughout the week. (Photo: Doug Mills / The New York Times)

Voting will not alter the corporate systems of power. Voting is an act of political theater. Voting in the United States is as futile and sterile as in the elections I covered as a reporter in dictatorships like Syria, Iran and Iraq. There were always opposition candidates offered up by these dictatorships. Give the people the illusion of choice. Throw up the pretense of debate. Let the power elite hold public celebrations to exalt the triumph of popular will. We can vote for Romney or Obama, but Goldman Sachs and ExxonMobil and Bank of America and the defense contractors always win. There is little difference between our electoral charade and the ones endured by the Syrians and Iranians. Do we really believe that Obama has, or ever had, any intention to change the culture in Washington?

In this year's presidential election I will vote for a third-party candidate, either the Green Party candidate or [Rocky Anderson](#), assuming one of them makes it onto the ballot in New Jersey, but voting is nothing more than a brief chance to register our disgust with the corporate state. It will not alter the configurations of power. The campaign is not worth our emotional, physical or intellectual energy.

Our efforts must be directed toward acts of civil disobedience, to chipping away, through nonviolent protest, at the pillars of established, corporate power. The corporate state is so unfair, so corrupt and so rotten that the institutions tasked with holding it up—the police, the press, the banking system, the civil service and the judiciary—have become vulnerable. It is becoming harder and harder for the corporations to convince its foot soldiers to hold the system in place.

I sat a few days ago in a small Middle Eastern restaurant in Washington, D.C., with Kevin Zeese, one of the activists who [first called for the Occupy movements](#). Zeese and others, including public health care advocate Dr. Margaret Flowers, set up the Occupy encampment on Freedom Plaza in Washington, D.C. They got a four-day permit last fall and used the time to create an infrastructure—a medic tent, a kitchen, a legal station and a press center—that would be there if the permit was not extended. The National Park Service did grant them an extended permit, and Freedom Plaza is one of the encampments that has not been shut down.

"We do have a grand strategy," he said. "Nonviolent movements shift power by [attacking the columns](#) that hold the power structure in place. Those columns are the military, police, media, business, workers, youth, faith groups, NGOs and civil servants. Every time we deal with the police, we have that in mind. The goal is not to hit them, hit them, hit them and weaken them. The goal is to pull people from those columns to our side. We want the police to know that we understand they're not the 1 percent. The goal is not to get every police officer, but to get enough police so that you have a division."

"We do this with civil servants," he went on. "We do whistle-blower events. We go to different federal agencies with protesters blowing whistles and usually with an actual whistle-blower. We hand out literature to the civil servants about how to blow the whistle safely, where they can get help if they do, why they should do it. We also try to get civil servants by pulling them to our side."

"One of the beautiful things about this security state is that they always know we're coming," he said. "It's never a secret. We don't do anything as a secret. The EPA, for example, sent out a security notice to all of its employees—advertising for us [\[by warning employees about a coming protest\]](#). So you get the word out."

"[Individuals become the media](#)," he said. "An iPhone becomes a live-stream TV. The social network becomes a media outlet. If a hundred of us work together and use our social networks for the same message we can reach as many people as the second-largest newspapers in town, The Washington Examiner or The Washington Times. If a thousand of us do, we can meet the circulation of The Washington Post. We can certainly reach the circulation of most cable news TV shows. The key is to recognize this power and weaken the media structure."

"We started an Occupy house in Mount Rainier in Maryland," Zeese said. "Its focus is Occupy the Economy. This is the U.N.'s year of the co-op. We want to build on that. We want to start worker-owned co-ops and occupy our own co-ops. These co-ops will allow Occupiers to have resources so that they can continue occupying. It will allow them to get resources for the community. It will be an example to the public, a public where a high percentage of people are underemployed and unemployed although they have a lot of skills. People can band together in their community and solve a problem in the community. They can create a worker-owned collaborative of some kind. They can develop models of collective living."

"We looked at polling on seven key issues and found supermajorities of Americans—60-plus percent—were with us on issues including health care, retirement, energy, money in politics," he said. "We are more mainstream than Congress. We aren't crazy radicals. We are trying to do what the people want. This is participatory democracy versus oligarchy. It's the elites versus the people. [We stand with the majority](#)."

The Washington encampment, like many Occupy encampments, has had to deal with those the wider society has discarded—the homeless, the mentally ill, the destitute and those whose lives have been devastated by substance abuse. This created a huge burden for the organizers, who decided that they were not equipped or able to deal with these wider, societal problems. The encampment in Washington's Freedom Plaza enforces strict rules of behavior, including an insistence on sobriety, in order to endure through the winter and ensure

its own survival. Other Occupy movements will have to do the same.

“We don’t want to become a soup kitchen or a homeless shelter,” Zeese said. “We’re a political movement. These are problems beyond our ability. How do we deal with this? Let’s feed the Occupiers first, and those who are just squatting here for free get food last, so if we have enough food, we feed them. If we don’t, we can’t. We always fed people, of course. We usually have enough peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for everyone. But as we debated this issue, we stated talking about things like ‘how about a Freedom Plaza badge, or a Freedom Plaza wristband, or a Freedom Plaza card.’ None of those ideas were passed. What we ended up developing was a set of principles. Those principles included in them participation. You can’t be there because you want a [tent] or free food. You have to be there to build the community and the movement. You have to participate in the [general assemblies](#).”

“The first principles, of course, were nonviolence and non-property destruction,” he said. “We don’t accept violent language. When you’re violent you undermine everything. If the protesters in [Manhattan’s] Union Square, who [were pepper-sprayed](#), had been throwing something at the police, you would not have had the movement. It was because they were nonviolent and didn’t react when they were being pepper-sprayed that the movement grew. [At UC Davis](#), when those cops just walked down the line and sprayed, the nonviolent reaction by those kids was fantastic.”

“We constantly kept hearing in the beginning what are our demands, what are our demands, is our demand to meet with Obama?” Zeese said. “We said: ‘Oh no, that would just be a waste. If we meet with Obama he’ll just get a picture opportunity out of that. We won’t get anything.’ You don’t make demands until you have power. If you make demands too soon, you don’t demand enough and you can’t enforce the demand that you get. So if you get promised an election, you can’t enforce that the ballots are counted right, for example. We realized late into our discussions—we had six months of planning, so four months into it—‘we don’t have the power to make a demand.’ That was very hard for a lot of our people to accept.”

“Instead of making demands, we put up what we stood for, what principles we wanted to see,” he said. “The overarching demand was end corporate rule, shift power to the people. Once you make that as your demand, as your pinnacle, you can pick any [issue](#)—energy, health care, elections—and the solution becomes evident. For health care it’s get the insurance companies out from between doctors and patients; on finance it’s break up the big banks so that six banks don’t control 60 percent of the economy and break them up into community banks so that the money stays at home rather than going to Wall Street; energy is to diversify energy sources so people can build and have their own energy on their roof and become energy producers. The overarching goal was: End corporate rule, shift power to the people. We developed a slogan: ‘Human needs before corporate greed.’ After that, everything fell into place for us.”

When the congressional super committee was meeting, the Occupy Washington movement formed its own super committee. The Occupy Super Committee, which managed get its hearing aired on CSPAN, included experts on the wealth divide, fair taxation, the military budget, job creation, health care and democratizing the economy as well as giving voice to the 99 percent. “[The 99%’s Deficit Proposal](#): How to create jobs, reduce the wealth divide and control spending” resulted from the Occupy hearing. The report made evidence-based recommendations Zeese knew would not be considered by the Congress, but he saw it as foundational for the movement.

“History shows the demands made by those in revolt are never initially considered by government,” he said. “Our job is to make the politically impossible the politically inevitable.”

I do not know how long it will take to dethrone the corporate state, but I do know it is a dead and terminal system of power. As the global economy deteriorates and climate change causes greater disruptions, these corporations will be increasingly discredited. I know the iron grip of corporations over our lives will, eventually, be broken. The corporate state will, like all wounded animals, lash out with a blind fury, which is why I suspect we have been given the National Defense Authorization Act, which permits the military to arrest and hold U.S. citizens without due process. It will increase pressure to become crueler and more callous at the base of the columns it depends on for survival. And eventually it will break. No one knows how long this will take. It could be months, years, maybe even a decade, although the massive assault by the fossil fuel industry on the ecosystem will probably force a popular response sooner than we expect. The only question is how much damage these corporations will be permitted to inflict.

I attended a rally Friday night in Foley Square, a few blocks from the criminal court where I had spent the morning. It was part of the Occupy the Courts event held across the nation to protest America’s corporate coup and the Supreme Court ruling in the Citizens United case. It was cold and blustery. Snow was on the way. Many in the crowd of a couple of hundred were visibly chilled. I spoke about the movement. I spoke about [the lawsuit](#) I have brought against Barack Obama and the secretary of defense to challenge the National Defense Authorization Act. I spoke about the inevitability of the Occupy movement.

I realized, afterward, I had forgotten to say what was most important. I forgot to say thank you. Thank you for

standing up to corporate power on a cold winter's night. Thank you for making hope visible. You must never underestimate your power. I was sentenced in the day. I was exonerated in the night.



CHRIS HEDGES

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