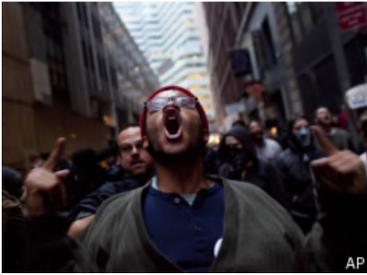


# Occupy Toronto: An Inside Look At The Movement That Has Activists Hopeful, Business Leaders Worried





It's just before 5:30 p.m. on Thursday, and about 100 people have gathered on the patch of grass next to Toronto's busy Bloor Street. As they greet each other with smiles and embraces, they chat casually about why they are here: to get involved in this city's version of the "Occupy" movement, which is set to stage a series of simultaneous demonstrations across Canada on Saturday.

While the theme of inequality -- expressed in the "we are the 99 per cent" slogan -- is a common source of motivation, their specific bent are diverse.

"I'm an environmentalist and I see that our environment and our health is being destroyed by the big companies," Lela Gary of the Air Pollution Coalition of Ontario told The Huffington Post. "I'm here to protest against the one per cent -- the oil industry, nuclear industry and automobile industry that have really destroyed our environment."

The majority of those in attendance are young people. But there is a sense that "Occupy Toronto" -- inspired by Occupy Wall Street, which has for weeks seen thousands of demonstrators jam lower Manhattan to protest what they see as the injustices of capitalism -- is gaining traction with more than just the university kids and dread-locked set one might expect to take up the mantle.

As the meeting gets underway, a middle-aged man in a blue Steelworkers jacket is among those who repeats the words of the volunteer facilitators replicating the "human microphone" system that has been used throughout Occupy Wall Street. Meanwhile, when an enthusiastic twentysomething circulates a box of doughnuts, a bespectacled senior is among the first to accept.

It's a scene that is playing out in major urban centres across Canada, as demonstrators prepare to descend on downtown cores everywhere from Toronto and Calgary to Vancouver and Victoria. Run by consensus, the "Occupy" movement does not have an official leadership, and has relied on social networks, online forums and "general assemblies" (such as the one held in Toronto on Thursday) to build momentum and strategy.

### **BATTENING DOWN THE HATCHES**

Though it is difficult to predict how big the demonstrations will be or how long they will last (the Facebook page that was created for Occupy Vancouver lists the end time as December 31, suggesting a willingness to stick it out for the long haul) the crowds could be significant.

It's a possibility that -- in the wake of violent protests at the G20 and the Stanley Cup riot -- has put police and businesses on alert.

In Toronto, where some 9,500 people have "liked" the "Occupy Toronto Market Exchange" Facebook page, police are divulging little about what they are anticipating.

"We have a wide range of contingency plans," says police spokesperson Mark Pugash. "The two aims, quite simply, are protecting public safety and facilitating peaceful protest."

Though Pugash would not disclose whether police in Toronto are actively communicating with protesters in advance of the event, this seems to be the approach in Vancouver, where more than 3,800 people have indicated on Facebook they will attend the demonstration planned for the Vancouver Art Gallery. Last week, the Vancouver Police Department indicated in a press release that talks with organizers had begun.

"We have already engaged in dialogue with self-identified organizers and we expect that we will communicate further with them in the coming days," Cst. Jana McGuinness said.

Though many of the businesses in Toronto's financial district, where the protest is set to kick off, are ordinarily closed on Saturdays, some are taking added precautions.

As The Globe and Mail reports, Julia Oosterman, a spokeswoman for Royal and Sun Alliance, has advised businesses to remove anything from the surrounding area -- such as bicycle racks and stones -- that could be used to do damage to buildings, and leave the lights on overnight, "in the event that things go awry."

### **CAN IT LAST?**

But perhaps the biggest question mark is whether -- and to what extent -- the movement will be able to bring about change.

In Manhattan, what started as a small group of demonstrators now seems to have widespread appeal: those camping out in Zucchotti Park have garnered support from transit workers, nurses and left-leaning politicians.

Yet according to University of Alberta sociologist Dominique Clement, the absence of a defined leadership and a strong funding base may make the momentum difficult to sustain.

"It's hard for them to be organized. It's really spontaneous. It's very grassroots," he says. "Because of the nature of these protests, they're going to be very powerful in the short term, but I would be very surprised if this is a long-term phenomenon."

In Canada, the B.C. Federation of Labour, Canadian Auto Workers, the Canadian Labour Congress and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union have endorsed the movement, which Clement says has the potential to make it more than a passing fad. But he questions whether this support will translate into concrete assistance.

“Forty years ago, organized labour would have been at the forefront of these things, they would have been running the show, providing money, volunteers. These days you don’t see them anywhere near as active as they used to be,” he says. “Labour groups might support in theory, but will they actually provide financial support? That can make the big difference between a successful movement and one that breaks down.”

In the meantime, however, groups like Occupy Toronto appear to have more immediate concerns.

The first hour of Thursday’s meeting was dominated primarily by disgruntled participants with a bone to pick about everything from the way the meeting was being run to allegations of a CSIS informant in their midst.

But the volunteer facilitators did their best to get through the items on the agenda, and keep the discussion productive.

“Already we are getting a little divisive. Let’s please remain positive and move forward,” urged Toronto photographer Kevin Konnyu, one of those leading the discussion during a particularly tense moment. “We are a young movement. May we please accept that there’s going to be a bit of stumbling?”

*Cities large and small across Canada will host "Occupy" protests on Saturday. Here's where to find -- or avoid -- some of the largest ones.*