

July 2, 2014

HUFF
POST POLITICS

Protests? Yes. Riots? No.

Posted: 09/20/11 10:00 AM ET

On his radio show last week, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg warned that rising unemployment and poverty in the United States are a ticking time bomb that could explode in a wave of riots.

"You have a lot of kids graduating college can't find jobs," Bloomberg said. "That's what happened in Cairo. That's what happened in Madrid." He reminded listeners about the uprising that overthrew Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak and the recent protests against the Spanish government's austerity measures. "You don't want those kinds of riots here."

Bloomberg is right. We don't want riots. But we could certainly use more protest -- the kind of non-violent civil disobedience that propelled the women's suffrage, labor, civil rights, and environmental movements throughout the 20th century.

Riots are expressions of hot anger -- outrage about social conditions -- but they are not truly political protests. They do not have a clear objective, a policy agenda, or a strategy for bringing about change. They only bring more hardship. The Los Angeles riots in April 1992 left 55 people dead and caused more than \$1 billion in property damage in inner city neighborhoods. Almost twenty years later, many of the stores and other buildings in the riot-torn area have still not been rebuilt.

Civil disobedience, in contrast, is cold anger. It is intentional, organized, and strategic. Protestors carefully select the target to raise public awareness about an issue. They accept the consequences of their actions, which could include fines and prison. They understand that their protest may be met with violence by thugs or police, but they refuse to retaliate with violence of their own.

Riots occur when people are hopeless. Civil disobedience takes place when people are hopeful -- when people believe not only that things *should* be different but also that they *can* be different.

The women's suffragists who chained themselves to the fence outside the White House in the early 1900s, the farmers who showed up at their neighbors' homes during the Depression and stopped banks from carrying out foreclosures, the auto workers who occupied the Flint, Michigan GM plant in 1937 to protest wage cuts and lay-offs, the college students who waged sit-ins at segregated lunch counters in the early 1960s, the anti-war activists who protested the Vietnam war by disrupting military induction centers and defense contractors, and the environmentalists who blocked the construction of nuclear power plants helped bring about much-needed change.

They escalated to civil disobedience after frustration with the pace of more traditional forms of political involvement, like voting and lobbying.

We need another massive wave of similar protests today. We are three years into the worst recession since the 1930s. More than 25 million Americans are either unemployed or underemployed. The average duration of joblessness now stands at a record high. A new Census Bureau report revealed that more than 46 million Americans -- over 15% of the population -- are now living in poverty, while many more are teetering on the edge of destitution. Millions of Americans have lost their homes to foreclosure and millions more are expected to face foreclosure in the next few years as a result of a combination of predatory lending, unemployment, and exorbitant health care bills. Wages have stagnated for the bottom 80 percent of the workforce. American consumers are in deep debt. They don't have enough discretionary income to consume essential goods and services. At the same time, the super-rich have seen their incomes grow. The concentration of wealth and income today is greater than at any time since 1928. Corporations are making record profits. But they are not hiring new workers and slashing the pay and benefits of existing workers.

Americans are frustrated and angry. But so far, these economic hardships have not triggered large-scale protest. Instead, people take out their frustrations in other ways -- alcohol and drug abuse, domestic violence, child abuse, suicide, and mental illness, among them. Progressives deserve some of the blame for the current predicament. When it comes to protest, most unions, community organizing groups, environmental groups, and others seem to have hit the "pause" button since Obama took office. Instead, it is the Tea Party that has captured and focused that anger in the minds of the public and politicians.

What's needed now is to focus and organize frustration and anger about an economy that isn't working for middle class and working class people into a new civil disobedience movement, led by unions, community organizations, churches, and other groups, that the media and politicians can't ignore. Only then will Congress feel the pressure and enact legislation to put Americans back to work and back in their homes.

Imagine a situation where every day, ordinary Americans show up at banks responsible for the epidemic of foreclosures, the homes of CEOs whose corporations laid off employees and slashed pensions and health care benefits while raking in huge profits, the headquarters of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and its local branches who have lobbied against ending outrageous tax breaks

for wealthy companies, and the district offices of members of Congress who vote against legislation to create jobs through public spending and tax cuts for working families.

Over the past few years, there have been sporadic protests led by unions, community, church and environmental groups, some of which have been effective at producing the intended results.

In September 2006, for example, more than 3,000 people marched outside a line of hotels near Los Angeles International Airport to raise awareness of the plight of immigrant hotel workers and to pressure the Los Angeles City Council to strengthen the city's "living wage" law to include 13 airport hotels. The march, organized by the hotel workers union, blocked traffic, causing gridlock and rush hour havoc at the busy airport. At 6 pm, as planned about 200 protesters - including several elected City Council members and state legislators -- sat down in the middle of the road outside the airport Hilton Hotel and were promptly arrested by the LAPD. The march, the civil disobedience, and the arrests made the evening news and the front pages of the next day's newspapers. As part of a months' long campaign by the union, the protest paid off. The City Council enacted the stronger "living wage" law, improving the lives of several thousand hotel employees.

Similarly, during the battle over health care reform in 2009 and 2010, activist groups, led by Health Care for America Now (HCAN), protested at the headquarters of the largest insurance and drug companies, and their powerful industry lobby groups, to draw public attention to their opposition to reform. Some showed up at the mansions of insurance company CEOs, pointing to their excessive multi-million dollar salaries and bonuses while their firms raised premiums and denied insurance to Americans with pre-existing health conditions. While most of the protestors rallied and demonstrated, a handful of activists engaged in civil disobedience, were arrested, and got their message on the evening news. The protests, which took place over several months, helped strengthen the resolve of the Democrats, including President Obama, not to cave in to industry pressure to abandon even modest reform.

Over the past year, a coalition of community organizing groups -- including National People's Action, PICO National Network, the Alliance for a Just Society, and the Industrial Areas Foundation -- have engaged in civil disobedience at major banks around the country. They've demanded that the lenders renegotiate the terms of mortgages for families facing foreclosure. The feisty National Nurses Union has been holding actions across the U.S. this year in support of its Main Street Contract for the American People initiative. They've used civil disobedience, rallies, and other protests on Wall Street (across from the New York Stock Exchange), in front of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce headquarters in Washington, and other tactics, including sit-ins, at 60 district Congressional offices in 21 states. In recent months, the most visible protests have taken place in Wisconsin to challenge the Republicans' efforts to dismantle public sector unions and slash public services.

But converting these actions into a full-blown movement will require activist groups to coordinate their efforts as well as devote more resources to educating, training and mobilizing their members so they see each action as part of a moral crusade to both improve their lives and change the country.

Unfortunately, it often requires dissenters to disrupt business-as-usual to get the media's attention, but their appetite for covering protest is not even-handed. Let a few dozen Tea Party activists show up at a Congressman's town meeting, and the print reporters and TV cameras are there in droves. But liberal and progressive groups have a harder time getting their public actions into the news. For example, for two weeks earlier this month, environmentalists from all 50 states engaged in peaceful protest in front of the White House, urging President Obama to block the Keystone XL oil pipeline. More than a thousand protestors were arrested. But the media virtually ignored them.

Moreover, the media tend to report local Tea Party actions as part of a broader movement, but report protests by labor, community, and environmental groups as local events.

The Tea Party phenomenon underscores another key aspect of protest movements. They have cheerleaders in high places. Top Republican elected officials endorse their ideas and their actions. Fox News, the *Wall Street Journal*, and other media outlets shower the Tea Party with attention. Conservative business leaders like the Koch brothers and right-wing foundations invest in the Tea Party. This attention by high-profile public figures emboldens the Tea Party activists. They get more media attention than their numbers warrant. This makes them appear big and powerful.

But with a handful of notable exceptions, most Democratic politicians keep their distance from progressive activist groups rather than encourage them to mobilize and protest. There's no liberal newspaper or TV station that identifies with and supports unions, community organizing groups, and environmental crusaders the way their conservative counterparts champion the Tea Party. Likewise, liberal donors and foundations shy away from supporting protest groups.

When public officials support protest, it has a huge ripple effect. This dynamic unfolded a month after Obama was elected, while he was still President-elect, and his campaign message of "hope and change" and "Yes, we can" was still fresh in the air.

In December 2008, more than 200 members of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers (UE) in Chicago illegally occupied their factory after their employer, Republic Windows and Doors, abruptly told them that it was shutting down the plant. The workers peacefully took over the plant, where some had worked for decades, and demanded that the employer and the Bank of America (which had refused to extend credit to the company) find a solution.

This was not a spontaneous protest. The union leaders and organizers had gotten wind of the company's plans, had talked about it with the union members, and had prepared for it. When the company made its announcement, the union was ready.

Two days after the occupation began, at a news conference to announce a new cabinet appointment, a reporter asked Obama -- still the president-elect, what he thought about the protest in his home town. He could have said he didn't know enough to comment on the topic, but instead he responded:

"When it comes to the situation here in Chicago with the workers who are asking for their benefits and payments they have earned, I think they are absolutely right. What's happening to them is reflective of what's happening across this economy."

With that statement, Obama used his bully pulpit to endorse the protest and to put pressure on Republic's management and the Bank of America to forge a solution. Congressman Luis Gutierrez moderated the talks between the company, the bank, and the union. Another company agreed to purchase the factory, keep it open with current employees and honor the union contract. Obama's stimulus program helped create a growing demand for energy-saving building products, which guaranteed the company more consumers.

Obama's election had given the workers enough hope to try the impossible, and it worked. By quickly endorsing the workers' protest, Obama showed the kind of bold leadership that progressives had been hoping for.

Even though he was once a community organizer, no one expects Obama to encourage Americans to break the law. But as he travels around the country promoting his jobs plan, and urging people to contact their Congressmembers, he could remind people of the important role that protest has played throughout our history.

During his campaign for the White House, Obama explained what it would take to overcome the power of entrenched interests in order to pass historic legislation. Change comes about, candidate Obama said, by "imagining, and then fighting for, and then working for, what did not seem possible before."

Obama observed: "That is how workers won the right to organize against violence and intimidation. That's how women won the right to vote. That's how young people traveled south to march and to sit in and to be beaten, and some went to jail and some died for freedom's cause."

Obama and his progressive allies seem to have forgotten that lesson. Since taking office, but particularly since the Republicans took back the House last November, Obama has frustrated liberals and progressives by scaling back his agenda in order to accommodate business interests and Republicans. All presidents have to compromise, but Obama often seems ready to surrender before he's tested his own strength or rallied public support.

Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson were initially ambivalent about the protests that enveloped the nation during the Depression and the 1960s civil rights. But in time both recognized that their ability to push New Deal and Great Society legislation through Congress depended on the pressure generated by these protesters. As the protests escalated, FDR and LBJ became more vocal, using their bully pulpits to lash out at their opponents and encourage the activists. FDR once told a group of activists that he agreed with their demands, but that it was their responsibility to "go out and make me do it." LBJ embraced King's protest strategy and proclaimed "We shall overcome" during a major speech. Both came to understand that the more effectively people created a sense of urgency and crisis, the easier it would be for them to push for progressive legislation.

Obama is fond of quoting Rev. Martin Luther King, one of the great apostles of non-violent protest, whose famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail" explained why breaking the law on behalf of a just cause is a moral act of courage and conscience.

A successful protest campaign takes place over an extended period of time in multiple locations, so that the public, politicians, and the media view these activities as part of a sustained movement, not a one-time event.

The goal of a protest movement is to widen the circle of supporters, change public opinion, and pressure the targets of protest -- politicians, corporations, banks, landlords, and others - to change their policies and practices. It makes visible problems that were below the surface. It forces people to take notice and take sides. It puts new issues on the public agenda.

Three years into this economic cataclysm, filled with enormous pain and suffering, America seems to be holding its breath, trying to decide what kind of country it wants to be. Polls show that Americans are angry at the banks, the corporations, Congress, and the President. They want the government to help create more jobs, stop the epidemic of foreclosures, and guarantee that getting sick and needing health care won't leave families bankrupt.

Crafting a policy agenda to revitalize the economy, add new jobs, help families facing foreclosure, expanding the social safety net, and protecting Americans from deadly pollution and dangerous workplaces is the easy part. What's more difficult is mobilizing the political will. Nonviolent civil disobedience is only one tool in the protest arsenal. But a protest movement that includes civil disobedience -- not riots -- taps the moral energy that can transform Americans' anger, frustrations and hopes into focused public action, creating a sense of urgency equal to the crises facing the country.

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