

# Small Town Guide to People's General Assemblies

## *Democracy in Action!*

*This guide was prepared for the Rural Organizing Project by Chris Borte. Chris is a proud father of two and learned everything he knows about rural organizing from his spouse Amy Dudley. He helped initiate the direct action to shut down the WTO in 1999 and recently worked with creating democracy to organize the People's Movement Assembly in Portland and the Movement Building Conversation Series. For over 6 years he has been a long time friend, great "thinker" and volunteer with the Rural Organizing Project.*

### ***"This is what democracy looks like!"***

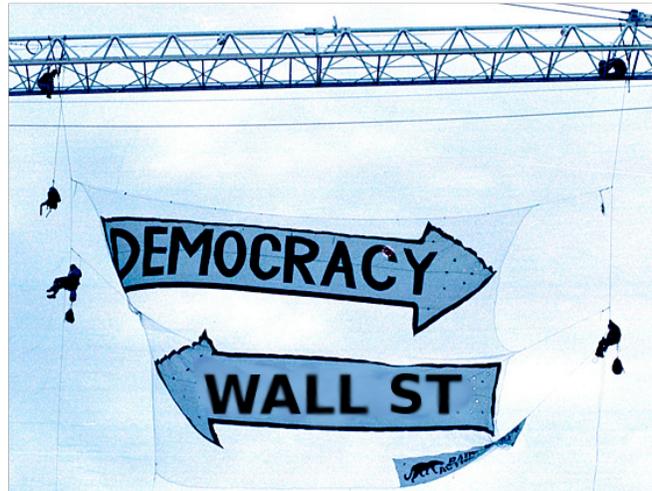
The first time I heard those words was at a moment very much like today. Democrat in the white house, people rising up democratically opposing massive financial interests, and when no one would predict success... we shut down the WTO!

The similarities do not end there: consensus, people's mic, non-violent direct action and the re-emergence of Spokescouncils. What ROPers may not know is that the origin one of the most common chants of the occupy movement began in the Key Lime cluster that our own Cara Shufelt (ROP Director) helped organize.

It was an amazingly well planned intersection occupation that incorporated spoken word and, if you can believe it, a mural with graffiti writers at the center. The intersection was held using a consensus process in the street with over 200 strong. One of the graffiti writers wrote on the mural for all to see, "This is What Democracy Looks Like" and the spoken word took that phrase, repeated it and gave it the cadence that you hear today around the world.

### ***General Assemblies, People's Movement Assemblies, and Spokescouncils: A Brief History***

The occupations spreading like a global prairie fire did not start in a vacuum. The **General Assembly** model that forms the center of leadership at Occupy Wall Street comes from the May 15 democratic uprising in Spain, which was inspired by democratic uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia. The General Assembly process was designed for the hundreds to thousands at gatherings where there is no pretense of every voice being heard, but aims to create space for masses to engage in collective decision making.



There have been several other approaches tried in the last decade to create a movement infrastructure for mass, democratic decision making. In 2010, ROP participated in one of the nearly 100 **People's Movement Assemblies (PMAs)** that took place across the country in coordination with the US Social Forum in Detroit. PMAs passed resolutions and sent them onto Detroit.

**Spokescouncils** were used in Seattle in 1999 as the decision making body for the direct actions that led to the shutdown of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Prior to WTO organizing, Spokescouncils were used to stop the construction of over 60 nuclear power plants across the United States. This model organizes people into groups and each group sends a representative to the Spokescouncil Meeting.

General Assemblies, People's Movement Assemblies and Spokescouncils have differences, but they are more alike than they are different. They all use consensus and all try to address the question of trying to scale small group direct democracy to large groups. What sets them apart from other processes is that they value the concerns, the participation and the leadership of everyone. **True horizontal leadership and true democratic practice.** With these processes, we are all leaders that shape the direction of our movement and organizing. What gives the occupy movement power is that when we make decisions and take action together we are FAR stronger than when we merely follow.

### ***Why Hold a People's General Assembly in Your Town?***

**Prepare for a shift in momentum:** New leaders and activists are popping out of the woodwork right now, hungry to be engaged in this growing movement. Human dignity groups are finding new friends, partnering with new people and developing new relationships. As our initial actions wind down, people will be hungry to figure out next steps. They are hungry to ***be a part of the process***. A People's General Assembly is a chance to sincerely engage folks in deciding what is next, rather than all of us waiting around to be told what to do. Now is when new people will show up eager to be a part of the process. **Now is the moment to plan for your People's General Assembly.**

**Engage new leaders:** If you are a leader in your town, you may not be aware of what it feels like on the outside. People may agree with our ideas, but not know how to find our meetings, they may not speak our activist jargon or they may not yet have the confidence to speak up. Large-scale public decision making is powerful because it provides an opportunity to critically engage EVERYONE who comes out. We try to be engaging with all our events, **but there is something unique about being immediately part of the leadership.** This is a less-recognized fuel that has fed the Occupy flame.