Occupy Movement may not agree on what it wants, but knows how to 'get it'

By Scott Johnson

OAKLAND -- Thirty-five years ago this month, the English punk band The Sex Pistols released a debut single called "Anarchy in the U.K.," in which Johnny Rotten, the group's wild-eyed, gyrating lead singer, wailed these words: "Don't know what I want, but I know how to get it."

Three decades later, the song remains a classic of the genre. And if the thousands of Occupy protests spreading across the country are any sign, the words Rotten sang back then are echoing louder now than ever before. With the Occupy movement, Rotten's song may finally have found the revolution it was looking for.

The protesters who have occupied cities across the country, and now across the world, don't always agree on what they want. But with increasing speed, technological savvy, irony and rage, they do seem to know how to "get it" -- that is, how to organize, how to spark a national debate and, above all, how to keep themselves in the spotlight.

"It's about time that the regular people, the average Joes, stood up and said something," said Eugene De Christopher, a 53-year-old part-time set designer from Richmond.

Although many Americans may sympathize with the anti-greed, humanistic vision at the core of the movement, they nevertheless question what the protesters hope to achieve. They're asking, what will it take to end the occupation?

"They're so concerned with their ideals, they haven't figured out a strategy," says Adrian Dyer, an Oakland businessman who has camped with the occupiers since the beginning and who serves on the camp's media committee. "I believe the people behind the Occupy movement realize the depth of what needs to change. And as they dig deeper, or climb higher up the pyramid, they'll discover that many of their ideals and platitudes will put them in a position where they'll either accept slavery or take action."

Capitalism connection

If it's true that every revolution has its anthem, the converse must also be true, that every anthem has its revolution. And while revolution did not break out in Britain, in 1976, when Johnny Rotten sang those words, the winds of history seem to have swept his words forward in time.

Of course, the world has become more complicated. And if the Occupy movement is anything, it is ironically self-aware of just how connected it is to the very mechanisms of corporate power it also wants to dismantle. In the past three weeks, FedEx has delivered at least three packages to the Oakland camp from Amazon.com. All were simply addressed to Occupy Oakland.
Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, digitized corporate America, are the ubiquitous tools of the movement. The tents at the tent city are from REI and Coleman. It is a social experiment in which the subjects and the doctors in lab coats are one and the same.

None of this is lost on the savviest of the protesters, many of whom recognize that their aims may seem fanciful, their goals ambitious or unworkable, but who feel all the more emboldened to fight for them. "I don't know what to make of any of this," said Josh Chavanne, a 29-year-old Web designer who eschews the concept of private property and representative democracy, but respects people with much more conservative views than his own. "I think looking at things as points of unity is much more important than what divides us."

The Occupy movement, writ large, has been heavily criticized for its leaderless, consensus-based approach, for its relative lack of engagement with the existing political parties, for its acceptance of often radical ideas that have no other home in American society. But this is to be expected, says Robert Bulman, a professor of sociology at Saint Mary's College, in Moraga, who has studied how protest movements develop in America.

"One reason the Occupy movement seems so amorphous is because it is trying to be as inclusive as possible," says Bulman. "The benefit is that everyone feels a part; the downside is that it's hard to present a focused public face."

Strategies to succeed

Bulman argues that the movement needs to have an electoral strategy, much like the tea party did, if it hopes to sustain itself through the next election cycle. If it does, he says, it will have helped place issues such as economic inequality, unemployment and the hardships of millions of Americans at the forefront of the national consciousness, and in that sense, it will have succeeded.

And, indeed, as the movement has evolved over the past several weeks in Oakland, a slow but steady accumulation of concrete proposals have arisen. Ordinary citizens have come out to express their views on what the movement could be about.

David Goodlett, the Oakland teacher, said the occupiers should organize around specific issues such as a graduated tax code in which the wealthy pay more, the dismantling of the Electoral College, and a referendum every four years in which the federal budget is put to a vote. At Thursday's special City Council meeting to address Occupy Oakland, one speaker rose up to urge the city to back a measure before Congress to tax the wealthy. "I want to see you tax Wall Street," said Craig Grant, "I know you can't do that personally, but I want to see you support the resolution before Congress."

These proposals have taken place against a backdrop of fairly remarkable organizing. In the early days, the campers in the tent city formed working groups to govern themselves. They set up committees -- some successful, some not -- to oversee cleanup, security, food, media and protocol issues. They built a website to get their message out. When they were forced out of Frank H. Ogawa Plaza in a violent clash with police, they reorganized and moved right back in. The next day they called for a general strike, which attracted more than 7,000 people from around the Bay Area to their cause and peacefully shut down the Port of Oakland.

'The right direction'

Recent polls show that many Americans remain either mildly hostile or ambivalent about the Occupy movement. Violence in places like Oakland has made it that much harder for supporters to convince people that it is a broad-based and peaceful movement.

According to a recent Quinnipiac University poll, 30
percent of those polled had a favorable view of the movement, and 39 percent did not.

This doesn't matter much to people like Chavanne, whose Utopian ideals will likely keep him motivated. "All this stuff we're doing is setting a different barometer about what's possible. They are all steps in the right direction," he said.

But for others, like Diana Danielle, a 39-year-old nurse from Antioch who has tens of thousands of dollars in unpaid school loans, utopia isn't enough.

"I'd like to see a movement that puts more direct pressure on the banking system," she said. "The middle class isn't buying into the American dream anymore, the world has shifted."

Unlike Rotten, Danielle knows what she wants, but not how to get it.

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OCCUPY AT THE POLLS

How Americans view the Occupy movement according to a recent Quinnipiac University poll:

30% Favorable view
39% Unfavorable view