

Reporter's Journal

Down With Wall Street, but Keep the Pizza Coming

By ANDREW GROSSMAN

In the 11 days since they arrived, a few hundred activists protesting American capitalism have turned a New York City park into an urban campground, with rules, routines and entertainment. *Protesting American Capitalism*

Protesters march past the New York Stock Exchange on Monday. Police broke up a march on Saturday. Andrew Smith, a 26-year-old carpenter from Portland, Maine, moderated a Monday night discussion of the group's plans that included a weather report and what to do if police cleared them out of the Lower Manhattan park. Because it is illegal to use amplified sound on city streets without a permit, he spoke through what protesters call the "people's microphone." He said a few words, then the crowd repeated them for others.

But don't call Mr. Smith a leader. "We're a horizontal organization. I was just facilitating," he told a reporter the next day. "It's important that you understand that." At the protesters' next meeting—an open forum called the General Assembly that is closest thing they have to a governing body—a young woman seemed to be running the show. Mr. Smith has been in Lower Manhattan since Sept. 17. He's part of group rallied through social media that set out to occupy Wall Street. But they were kept away by police and settled instead for a large concrete plaza called Zuccotti Park a couple of blocks north of there.

With the exception of a march Saturday that ended in more than 80 arrests and two protesters being pepper-sprayed, there haven't been any major clashes with police. The New York City Police Department said the protesters didn't have a permit for the march.

MarketWatch columnist David Weidner tells Mean Street's Evan Newmark bankers, not the protesters, are the ones who should have been arrested on Wall Street.

The park's owner, Brookfield Office Properties Inc., would rather not have them there, but so far the protesters have been allowed to stay as long as they don't set up tents.

On a normal weekday, construction workers from the nearby World Trade Center site and office workers gather at the park to eat lunch. On Tuesday, lunch was served at makeshift tables to a ragtag group of mostly youthful protesters.

Their reasons for participating in the protest—and long urban camping expedition—vary. Most express general dissatisfaction with the economy or the financial system. The actress Susan Sarandon dropped by Tuesday, and a crowd gathered to chat with her about bringing political change.

Bre Lembitz, a 21-year-old sleeping in the park and working as a medic, said she is opposed to the way investors' appetites for high profits and ever-greater returns force corporations to cut back on salaries and benefits for workers.

"You have this super-charged profit motive," said Ms. Lembitz, a student at Clark University in Massachusetts who is majoring in international relations and economics.

"You don't have the corporate accountability that you need to have."

Michael Rodriguez, a 24-year-old from the Bronx, started a conversation with a reporter by asking: "Are you a naked short-seller?" He went on to explain his concerns about the practice, which involves an investor selling a stock short—betting its price will fall—without having borrowed the shares in advance. He had learned about the practice two days ago from a passerby and had been researching it since.

Mr. Rodriguez said he doesn't have faith in government to rein in the financial industry. "If I talk to 1,000 congressmen, what's going to happen?" he said. "I want the world to know about this." He planned to bring his concerns to the protesters' direct-action committee, which he hoped would adopt it as "a specific item to fight against."

The group has been going on short marches around the neighborhood in the morning and evening. On Tuesday afternoon, some headed north to SoHo where they joined a rally of postal workers protesting cuts at the U.S. Postal Service.

Making signs and debating also take up some time, but there are more practical concerns, too.

J. Alexander Pilon, a student at the New York Conservatory for the Dramatic Arts, had a red cross made of duct tape on his shirt Tuesday. He sat in front of an array of medical supplies, all of which had been donated. Donations jumped, he said, after Saturday's clash with police, when a video circulated of a police officer using pepper spray on two women.

But there hasn't been much need for them. Ms. Lembitz, another medic, was tending to one of the most common injuries: blisters on a bongo drummer's fingers.

The only other common injuries, Mr. Pilon said, were cuts from food preparation and cases of foot fungus caught by activists who didn't change out of wet socks.

Many of those gathered in Lower Manhattan said they found out about the protest on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Since then, they have been using the Internet to solicit donations. Many such gifts come in the form of pizza deliveries.

A website set up for the protest has a link to a nearby pizzeria, Liberato's. Donors call, give the restaurant their credit card information, and a short time later a few pies—the website says the protesters prefer them without meat—show up at the area set up for food.

Protesters hope they'll be able to hold out for a while—some say forever.

"Until Wall Street crumbles," said Chris Mapp, a 20-year-old film student who lives in Harlem. "And we say that in the most peaceful way possible."

Write to Andrew Grossman at andrew.grossman@wsj.com