

An open letter to the One Percent

Dear One Percenters,

Hi there. I'm writing you from down here in the 99%. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. Even though this is a young movement, I've been seeing it all over the pages of your finance magazines: Forbes, Fortune, The Economist. This whole global protest against greed thing seems to have made you quite uneasy.

I'm not in the habit of giving free advice to the corporate class. Justice is more my thing. That's the idea that the world literally belongs to everyone who lives on it (or who someday will) and not to a few private parties. From that point of view, squeezing the world and its people dry just to bloat some imaginary "net worth" seems alarmingly pathological. I much prefer dealing with coffee pickers, secretaries, street vendors, assembly workers and meatpackers; people not shackled by such strange compulsions. But then I see you with that deer-in-the-headlights look on your faces and I feel I should at least drop you a note.

Let's cut to the chase. The anti-Wall Street upsurge puts you in a pretty awkward position. If you stand by your convictions and keep refusing to pay taxes; continue wiping out workers pensions; eliminate public services and lock everyone else out of politics, the tide of anger will continue to rise like the rising temperature of the ocean. On the other hand if you make concessions on any of those issues--maybe back off on the foreclosure frenzy or the student loan bonanza or the job creation boycott--it will tell the protestors that you can be made to blink. It's like those scenes of a horse and wagon dashing through the woods with wolves close behind. If you throw meat over the side it will buy you some time but it will also embolden the wolves.

A rising chorus of voices is demanding that you pay your fair share of the costs of our society. I'm not so sure. I mean how can we talk about a "fair share" without first looking at how you ended up with most our world's wealth to begin with? I promise not to bore you with a lot of history--I know it gives you a headache. I'll just mention a few of the creative innovations that led to all this treasure hoarded in the digital coffers of the one percent: the walling of the commons (just putting up walls around communal land and posting armed guards!); the conquest of colonies (same deal but bigger: ultimately infesting 90% of Africa, 98% of Polynesia, over half of Asia, all of Australia and, ultimately, virtually all of the Americas.); the displacement or enslavement of populations and the destruction of governments that waste resources on their own people; and let's not forget the Gatling gun, the most devastating labor management advance of the nineteenth century! The cost of all that history doesn't appear on your balance sheets because you never paid it. We did. We still do.

What I'm getting at is that there are some of us out here saying much scarier things than just insisting you pay taxes. We're openly questioning your legitimacy as the unelected rulers of the world! If I were you I'd think about tossing some meat over the side pretty soon. Just as a short-term measure. (I know that long-term thinking isn't your thing. If it were, you'd have figured out that if you plunge everyone else into poverty they won't be able to buy stuff.)

Please, please, please don't misunderstand! I'm not trying to convince you to see things the way I do. I'm really not. I understand that we live in very different worlds. I figured this out this one time when I climbed to the top of the Rocky Mountains. I started in the valley, looking up through the branches at the vast sweep of the forest, rising to a thin band of tundra and the distant blaze of the snow peaks far above. I imagined that up at the summit I'd be able to see the whole world. When I reached the tundra things looked different. I was surrounded by a rocky landscape that stretched far above and below me. The forest was now a dark band near the base of the mountains and the snow a white one at the top. When at

last I stood atop the range, the forest was just a smudge of dark haze far, far beneath-- just below a band of brown rocks. I stood in a gargantuan world of massive, craggy snow peaks and cliffs, reaching to the sky, plummeting to the distant, hazy world below and marching in every direction to the horizon. The people I care about live in those valleys. They walk miles each day to collect water; they make heart-breaking decisions about whether to pay for mother's cancer treatment or child's physical therapy; they stare at the ceiling in the depth of the night, their stomachs in knots over the impending loss of their house and the hopelessness of finding a job you can live on.

The discordant sounds of life in these distant valleys don't intrude upon your pristine world of sunlit peaks and clear, blue skies. Up there you listen to the distant rumble of capital flows, the sharp crackling of currency transactions, the constant dull flashes of acquisitions and mergers and --giving it all meaning--the sweet, warm nectar of profit. You need not know that the places from which the nectar flows most quickly and smoothly are those where union organizers are found shot in their cars, where environmental protections are smothered in exchange for bribes and where villages are wiped from the forest so it can be ground into stock options. Those are stories from my world, not yours.

The pundits, strategists and politicians who work for you know about our world. They're the ones so incensed by our relentless drumbeat about the "ninety-nine percent." That message challenges the sacred compact you've had with our unions, non-profits and tribal councils for most of a century: we get to struggle for better conditions on the Titanic as long as we let you do the navigating. They keep insisting that we draft a list of demands, that we re-frame our message, that we state what improvements we want on board. But what bothers them is not that our message is unclear; it's that it is too terrifyingly clear: *it's our turn at the wheel!*.

The Economist magazine put it so sweetly the other day. After validating our rage (even though they say it's "muddled" and "unfocused," they caution, "The biggest danger is that legitimate criticisms of the excesses of finance risk turning into an unwarranted assault on the whole of globalization." They go on to reassure you that all the old myths of fantasyland are still true: if we would only remove the remaining obstacles to unfettered greed, then it would all work out. If only we'd "re-frame" our message into demands that won't threaten your power...

You must know that there are now calls to hold you "accountable"--at least for some of your more brazen criminality. I'd be content to see you in treatment. An insatiable, eternal hunger for more-more-more can't be healthy for anyone. My sister calls it a spiritual eating disorder. I don't imagine it brings you happiness. It might be more like drunk driving. Maybe you should be in jail, maybe in a clinic. The important thing, though, is to get you away from behind the steering wheel before you cause any more harm.

Just imagine! If you weren't siphoning everything away for personal gain, we could make grownup decisions about our world as a human community: we could decide that food production is for feeding people; that housing is to provide shelter and that health care is to help people be healthy. Wow! Your greatest triumph has been to make those ideas seem weird.

OK. Before I sign off, I have a confession to make. I'm not really writing this to you after all. Remember how I said I was more interested in poor and working people like me? Well, that's who this is really meant for. We're the ones who have to bring about change, after all. If we can get good with each other we'll be alright. See, we have a lot of our own baggage to deal with. One can't go through centuries of colonialism, consumerism and divide-and-conquer manipulation without having issues. Your task will be to keep us madder at each other than we are at you. When we get confused, though, we have friends in a hundred countries all beating out that same rhythm: "We are the ninety-nine percent! We are the ninety-nine percent!" It's a good reminder of our sharp, clear, powerful message. It's also a mighty powerful genie to

have let out of the bottle! Once a genie gets free, they say, there's no putting it back.

Sincerely,
Ricardo Levins Morales