

# The Brooklyn Rail

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### Local

## "Union Square is Not For Sale" Declare Activists

by Ben Shepard

The streets and corners, alleys and parks, apartments and buildings of New York undergo constant reinvention. Go away for a week and return to find your favorite watering hole closed, signs for a building permit in front of a familiar street corner, or a fence with a "Keep Out" on a once inviting public park.

INCLUDEPICTURE "http://www.brooklynrail.org/article\_image/image/3957/local-shephard-full.jpg" \\* MERGEFORMATINET Emma Goldman at Union Square. *Photo courtesy Google Images*

Take Union Square, where fences surround the north end of the park and Pavilion. This is no regular space. Looking at it, one is reminded of Paul Robeson singing there, of Dorothy Day praying there, of Emma Goldman calling for abortion rights. The demand for an 8-hour work day came from right there. Citizens from all walks of life instinctively converged in this public space to find solace and community after the terrorist attacks of September 2001. George Washington and his exhausted Continental Army converged on the spot in 1783 when the British finally left the island. Soon though, the Pavilion is designated to be a private upscale restaurant.

Few heard about the plan to transform this public commons into a private restaurant. There was little to no room for input. Nonetheless, when Judge Jane Solomon, a New York State Supreme Court Judge, heard the number of procedural oversights, she put an indefinite stay on the development of the north end of the Square. Updating the Temporary Restraining Order (TRO) on the project, the Judge noted the Court was keeping in place a provision "prohibiting work on the restaurant and comfort station..." No one knows how long the TRO will last.

Yet, concerned New Yorkers are wasting little time to rally public opinion about the project during the stay on construction at Union Square. "The last thing we need in our parks is more private space," explained New York activist Kurt Opprecht, whose group Billionaires

for Bush has performed there.

Citizen groups have converged on Union Square for years to protest, play, advocate, inform, socialize, or even to pause to for a minute after a long work day. Today, their critique is simple: without public space, there can be no democracy. To that end, supporters have begun weekly events to raise awareness about the park, and draw people to their cause. Every Wednesday at 5 p.m., they promise to be in the park. They assemble with images of Union Square's past—Sacco and Vanzetti, Emma Goldman, and Paul Robeson—and speak out, build community, and recite the First Amendment. They have an online petition asking City Councilwoman Rosie Mendez to rescind her support for the privatization of the square.

The activists are picking up the fight where an earlier group, the Union Square Community Coalition, left off. That group, despite rallying the support of numerous elected officials, saw Bloomberg ram through plans to privatize the park in a review and approval process that felt stacked from the start. In response, the Union Square Community Coalition initiated a lawsuit that has, for now, stymied the plan. The USCC is now enlisting plaintiffs and pressing forward.

“It's not like the plan ever had community support. The Manhattan borough president even opposed the plan,” said Mark Read, a public space activist and New York University professor, “Under the radar, Bloomberg pulled the plan together with his supporters. But they got a little ahead of themselves, and now it's time to push back.”

Many opponents view the plans for Union Square as part of a larger pattern of development by the Bloomberg administration, which has demonstrated a penchant for turning over public resources to private hands. They say the mayor has no regard for the rights of the public to utilize public space and no respect for history.

“The New York City Parks Department under Mayor Bloomberg has a repeated pattern of making drastic changes to our popular city parks” with little to no concern about community sentiment, explains New York activist and blogger Cathryn Swan.

“For over a century, Union Square has provided an important forum for public gatherings and protest. Its design, with a mix of green and wide open space, and its central location have made it a key gathering point,” explains Jessica Rechtschaffer, a member of the Radical Homosexual Agenda. Her group has taken the fight to City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, who oversaw the approval of a restrictive parade permit used to control crowds and public assembly in 2006. “During the Giuliani and Bloomberg regimes, public space has repeatedly been given to private interests. At the same time, public protest has been suppressed,” she said.

The fight for Union Square is a fight for democracy. Bill Talen, a.k.a. the Reverend Billy, of the Church of Stop Shopping explains: “The only people who will bring back the

commons are the people who insist on democracy. Reclaiming our commons may sound to you like the most sensible thing to do—but the stakes are very high. The police and the courts often side with the privatizers.”

Without public space for people to bump into each other, talk, assemble, or to re-imagine life in their city, it is hard to practice democracy. Use it or lose it, activists argue. Throughout the summer, community groups promise to make sure Union Square remains a public commons.

On June 5th, at 5:00 p.m., the Union Square Partnership (who are overseeing the plan) will hold their annual dinner, off the park at the W Hotel on 17th and Park. Activists plan to hold a rally at the North West end of Union Square at 5:00 p.m.

## **About the Author**

Benjamin Shepard, PhD, is a writer and activist. Some of his most meaningful moments have taken place in Union Square.