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Obama extends support for protesters

By Shannon Bond in New York



Occupy Wall Street participants on their way to a demonstration on Times Square

Barack Obama, US president, offered more support for protesters against the global financial system after a weekend of demonstrations in cities around the world, but called on them not to “demonise” those who worked on Wall Street.

On Sunday, Mr Obama honoured Martin Luther King at a dedication to a new memorial on National Mall in Washington. Referring to protests that have spread from Wall Street to London, Rome and elsewhere, Mr Obama said: “Dr King would want us to challenge the excesses of Wall Street without demonising those who work there.” Mr Obama had previously said the protests “express the frustration” of ordinary Americans with the financial sector.

A top Republican in Washington dramatically altered his stance on protesters involved in Occupy Wall Street just one week after comparing the movement to “angry mobs”. Eric Cantor, the Republican majority leader in the House of Representatives, told Fox News on Sunday that Republicans agreed there was “too much” income disparity in the country. “More important than my use of the word [‘mobs’] is that there is a growing frustration out there across the country and it is warranted. Too many people are out of work,” he said.

Thousands took part in demonstrations this weekend around the world, many voicing their anger at the bail-out of banks and government austerity packages. “It is ridiculous the government is willing to pay out over a trillion pounds to bail out banks while at the same time cutting our pensions and benefits in the name of austerity,” offered Tai Wardallg, a protest organiser in London.

But some bankers and others in the protesters' sights sought to spread the blame. Andreas Schmitz, head of the German banking federation and chief executive of HSBC Trinkaus, told the Financial Times on Sunday that protests against banks were "a diversion from the fundamental problem: that we can no longer finance our welfare states".

In 2008 a banking crisis caused a budget crisis for governments, he said. Now "a state debt crisis [in the eurozone] is causing a banking crisis". Politicians, he warned, should not try to make the banks the "fall guys" for their mistakes.

Protesters complained about banking excesses, but the demonstrations reflect more than simple anger at financial institutions, argued a banker in London. "It's becoming apparent these are protests that aren't just about banks, it's all manner of things . . . They're talking about the number of millionaires in the cabinet and all kinds of things – it doesn't necessarily simply involve the banking sector."

Demonstrators picked the wrong target when they chose to rally at stock exchanges in New York and London, executives of some of the world's largest exchanges said. "We are the most visible symbols of the financial world so it makes exchanges an obvious destination. But I don't think it's the right target. We don't represent the financial sector," said Ron Arculli, chairman of the World Federation of Exchanges.

Others voiced sympathy for the demonstrators. Banks "just compete and stampede to make money at the expense of consumers," said Atsushi Saito, Tokyo Stock Exchange chief executive. "To some extent, I can understand the mindset of those demonstrators against Wall Street."

The rallies show Americans want a "financial system that works," said David Axelrod, chief campaign strategist for Mr Obama, on Sunday. They support financial reforms which some Republican presidential candidates have threatened to roll back, he said.

In Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, prime minister, condemned the violence in Rome by a "large group" or rioters, although the initial violence came from just small numbers of "black bloc" anarchist and far-left militants. Paolo, a researcher in molecular biology who marched in Rome, said the police had let rioting get out of hand in order to "criminalise" and discredit protesters.

Protesters' grievances remained disparate and wide-ranging, with signs in various cities condemning corporate greed, demanding an end to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and calling for student debt relief. A statement posted on an activist web site that helped organise the protests said: "United in one voice, we will let politicians, and the financial elites they serve, know it is up to us, the people, to decide our future."

It is unclear what the next step for protesters will be. In New York, where the month-long Occupy Wall Street movement has been a leading inspiration for protesters, dozens remained at their base in Zuccotti Park on Sunday. The group's agenda listed only a committee meeting and the regular nightly assembly scheduled for the evening.

Supporters of Occupy Wall Street have donated nearly \$300,000 in cash, as well as food, blankets, medical supplies and sleeping bags, spokesman Bill Dobbs told the Associated Press.

New York Police Department said at least 88 were arrested in New York on Saturday and overnight, including two dozen for trespassing at a Citibank branch and 45 in Times Square.

In London, hundreds of protesters occupying the steps of St Paul's cathedral have begun to settle in, erecting tents and setting up a kitchen, a media centre and toilets. "We will occupy this space for as long as it takes for our voices to be heard," said Adam Young, a student who was also at the Wall Street occupation. "The system is broken and it is up to us to fix it," he said.

Others stressed they were part of a global movement for justice. "First came the Arab Spring and Spain's *indignados*. Then came the Wall Street protests. In London, we are now part of this movement campaigning for a better world," said Spyro Van Leemmen.

Additional reporting by Alice Ross and Michael Stothard in London, Quentin Peel in Berlin, Guy Dinmore in Rome and Jeremy Grant in Johannesburg

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