

# Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible

by Howard Clark

Look back at an experience of empowerment. I wonder if the experience now seems that it was just a passing feeling you had at the time. Back then, you or your group somehow gathered the strength to make a difference—or at least feel that you made a difference. You may have changed something permanently, but the feeling was ephemeral. It wore off. A sense of empowerment is something that needs to be recreated continually.

Forms of empowerment, whether types of activity, attitudes, styles, spread by contagion. But after a while we begin to look for improvement, some benchmark to surpass—an additional element, an innovation, or better results. A street action that is empowering the first time we participate soon begins to need something new—more people, a wider range of groups, more impact. When it becomes difficult to extend the level of social mobilization, it is a common mistake for many of us to confuse militancy for empowerment. People escalate the action hoping for similar results in terms of public disruption and press coverage. But this kind of militancy has its price. It often increases the marginalization that activists experience and is likely to narrow the social base for the actions. It can lead to a disempowering downward spiral, reducing the prospect for change either on the question under debate or on how social power is constructed.

In this article, I want to look at the need for strategy to achieve our goals in the context of an understanding of the power needed to oppose certain social forces. Let me begin with a brief review of the discussion about nonviolence and social empowerment. Nonviolent social empowerment does not aim to establish power-over (domination) but to strengthen people's power-to-be and power-to-do. It envisages a process—perhaps a better word would be praxis—of restructuring social power from the grassroots. It operates on three levels: power-within (personal power—the sense that each of us has when we feel centered), power-with (the power we feel when we connect and cooperate with others), and power-in-relation-to (the power to achieve our goals, to defend our values, to stop the forces of death and destruction).

## Power-for

A movement needs some assessment about what it can achieve in a certain timeframe. That assessment may be intuitive or analytical, but it is best when made explicit. Of course, any assessment needs to be revisited and reevaluated regularly. Sometimes success takes a movement by surprise and allows it to move quickly beyond its initial demands—the campaign against genetically-modified food in Europe is a recent example. Unfortunately, activists sometimes confuse symbolic power and the espoused goal, especially when movements employ direct action. An example of this confusion sometimes affects efforts to liberate space (also known today as reclaiming space). Is the space or land itself important? Or is the action's statement of taking control more important? Is the practical or the principle paramount? Confusing symbol and political goal also effects actions for environmental defense and direct disarmament.

In the great anti-technocratic revolts of 1968, the slogan "Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible" was a rallying cry against the managerialism of the times. As I write, it

warms my heart to hear the staid tones of the BBC reporting on anti-capitalist demonstrations in Washington DC. But a rallying cry is not a strategy for change.

With the anti-globalization demonstrations in Seattle in 1999 and Washington in 2000 and other cities, we have seen encouraging mobilizations representing the force of one coalition of opinion within society. Who now will make use of that force? Who offers channels for the energy now mobilized to take concrete forms? At a local level, solidarity projects and fair trade shops do their work, but are efforts underway to move beyond that? Is there anything more than a number of lobby groups with merely reformist perspectives? I ask because I don't know, but these are important questions. It often seems that the more important it is to show results, the less visionary the demands become. The point, however, is not to abandon the pursuit of the vision but to find limited steps and possible forms of activity that enhance our capacity—our power-within and our power-with. We also need to look for practical and attainable objectives matched to our strength, which will ultimately be the steps towards realizing the vision: the impossible takes a bit longer. Redefining what is possible requires a strategy in which each phase creates a base for future expansion.

### **Power-against**

At the same time, it is not enough merely to build up the strength of a movement. One also has to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the power structures we wish to challenge, looking for leverage points and particular sensitivities on the question at issue. A nonviolent attitude generally seeks to include the opponent in the outcome of a struggle, to recognize the opponent's legitimate concerns. Nevertheless, entrenched interests do have to be engaged in struggle, and, at some level, defeated.

Empowerment for social struggle must include preparation for some kind of contest in which we need to make tactical calculations about where to focus our energies. We must also be aware of the full repertoire of methods available and the different constituencies that can be mobilized. Unfortunately, many movements tend to repeat themselves—to stay with familiar methods and draw on familiar constituencies—instead of testing different methods.

Are there ways to maximize our unity while promoting divisiveness amongst our opponents? The consumer boycott against Nestlé in the 1970's and 1980's because of its marketing practices in the developing world found a way. Nestlé was not the only manufacturer conning developing world mothers that powdered baby formula was better than breast milk. If they had all been put under the spotlight, they would have coordinated efforts to present a common front—no doubt paying for scientific reports to prove that powdered baby formula is better than breast milk. But when only the biggest company came under attack, the others began to change their practices to prove that they were better than Nestlé. In the end, Nestlé itself introduced a new code of practice.

Are there weak points where a limited action can inhibit or restrain the opponent? Peace Brigades International found that the presence of a few international volunteers would give dictators and death squads pause in threatening human rights activists. They also found that they could not always assume that this would be the case—at times, the international presence could attract unwanted attention and have adverse effects. Liam Mahoney and Enrique Eguren have done an excellent analysis in their book, *Unarmed Bodyguard* (Kumarian Press, 1997).

Many movements concentrate on symbolic sites for struggle particularly the very site where a regime or company has plans to do something (build a road, site military hardware, etc). At this symbolic level we should ask: are there other mobilizing symbols closer to home that can inspire and engender connections with a wider range of people?

### **More than a contest**

There are also people's actions that the ruling power simply cannot resist. If the elite repress the people, it brings out a reactive sympathy. If they allow the people's action to go ahead, then they concede ground to the movement. What dilemmas can we pose to our opponents?

Is there anything we want that our opponents would not mind conceding? Is there anything we can offer our opponent that would help them make concessions? The decision of some of London's pioneer squatters to offer to manage houses they had saved from demolition was controversial in the movement at the time (nearly 30 years ago), but offered a win-win solution to both local councils and squatters.

The leading scholar on nonviolent action, Gene Sharp, has suggested four mechanisms by which a power structure changes in the face of a nonviolent movement: conversion (so that it accepts the movement's demands); coercion (so that it concedes); accommodation (so that it grants part of the demands); or disintegration. Most of us have probably experienced accommodation and the problem of trying to press for what we really wanted all along. Many of us have probably experienced success in converting or coercing a power structure and then faced the backlash from those who were not converted, those who felt left out of the accepted compromise. In some dramatic cases, groups have seen their society's political regime disintegrate only to fear the forces that stepped in to fill the power vacuum.

All of this suggests that nonviolent struggle is more than a contest. Power-against is just part of the third level of empowerment, power-in-relation-to.

Within every nonviolent movement that works on a particular issue, there is a deeper agenda. An agenda that includes creating societies in which people have the power to shape their own lives and strengthen a sense of social connectedness. Nonviolent social empowerment is not just a process or praxis, but a goal—replacing remote and impenetrable hierarchies with human-scale and transparent structures.