

NONVIOLENCE

by Ed Hedemann

There are four standard responses to a conflict situation: ignore it and not become involved; give in and beg for mercy; get the hell out of there; and fight back violently.

There is a fifth response, often ignored and little understood: nonviolence. Nonviolence excludes neutrality, excludes capitulation, excludes flight, and excludes fighting violently.

Because nonviolence has the power to make fundamental changes without personal threat or sacrificing militancy, because nonviolence contrasts dramatically with the methods of the powers-that-be, and because nonviolence is so often misunderstood, this organizer's manual would be incomplete if the nuts and bolts of organizing contained herein were not put in the context of a broader vision of social change.

Standard Perceptions of Nonviolence

Most people understand "nonviolence" to be passive or that which is not violent. At the same time some of these people will often perceive a nonviolent action as being violent. A 1969 survey revealed that 58% of American males viewed draft card burnings as violent, while 57% felt that police shooting looters was not violent.

Most movement people are able to see beyond these misunderstandings of violence and nonviolence. But they often identify nonviolence with a number of other myths, which frequently prevents adequate experimentation and exploration of effective ways to achieve fundamental social change.

Myths About Nonviolence

Passive

Passivity - a form of violence - is the opposite of nonviolence. The use of nonviolence does not mean avoidance of conflict, but a different approach to conflict, through militant nonviolent struggle if necessary.

Reformist

Many feel nonviolence is simply prayerful action and petitioning to what is assumed to be responsive and benevolent authorities, thereby reinforcing and strengthening the oppressors.

Nonviolence at its most creative seeks to "make radical changes in society", altering even the methods of overcoming oppression and achieving justice.

A Way To Avoid Harm

Though likely to result in fewer casualties, nonviolence does not guarantee no one will be hurt. Those primarily interested in personal safety should stay home. As Barbara Deming said, "Nonviolent battle is still battle . . . people do get hurt."

Suicidal

A common view of nonviolent struggle is that it is suicidal: "relying on nonviolence means being defenseless-sheep being led to slaughter."

Adopting a nonviolent discipline will generally result in fewer casualties, in the long run, since opponents cannot as easily justify the use of violence against people who

are not physically threatening them.

Just a Tactic

On a purely mechanical or tactical level, nonviolence can be of considerable value. However, its greatest effectiveness comes when it is persistently clung to, even in the face of violent repression. It is not a method of the weak or cowardly. Nonviolence is also not a substitute method to punish, harass, or seek vengeance over an opponent. It is a way to achieve justice through seeking to change, rather than conquer, the antagonist.

If it is seen as only a tactic, then it may well be discarded when the going gets rough, rather than carried to a logical conclusion

"A nonviolent revolution is not a program of seizure of power. It is a program of transformation of relationships, ending in a peaceful transfer of power. "

–M.K. Gandhi

"Nonviolence to be a potent force must begin with the mind. Nonviolence of the mere body without cooperation of the mind is nonviolence of the weak or cowardly and therefore has no potency. If we bear malice and hatred in our bosoms and pretend not to retaliate, it must recoil upon us and lead to our destruction.

–M.K. Gandhi

History of Mass Nonviolent Action

The use of nonviolence is as old as, or older than, recorded history-and so is violence. There have been numerous instances of people who have courageously and nonviolently refused to cooperate with injustice.

However, what is relatively new in the history of nonviolent action is the fusion of nonviolence with mass struggle. Organized warfare is 30 centuries old, but organized mass nonviolent action as we know it is less than one century old. The synthesis of mass struggle with nonviolence was developed largely by Mohandas Gandhi beginning with the onset of the South African campaign for Indian rights in 1906.

Gandhi continued to experiment and develop mass nonviolence in the 28-year struggle for Indian independence from the most powerful nation on the face of the earth, Great Britain. From the beginning of the first nationwide civil disobedience campaign in 1919 to independence in 1947, India was transformed from a splintered, downtrodden mass of people to a unified, self-respecting society largely through nonviolent action. This was not without incredible suffering at the hands of the British imperialists: 300,000 jailed (100,000 alone in the yearlong Salt campaign); hundreds killed; many more beaten, injured, and abused; and property confiscated.

Since 1906, mass nonviolent struggle was used successfully in many different social and political situations. The militant campaign for women's suffrage in Britain included a variety of nonviolent tactics such as boycotts, non-cooperation, limited property destruction, civil disobedience, mass marches and demonstrations, filling the jails, hunger strikes, and disruption of public ceremonies.

The United States labor movement has used nonviolent action with great effectiveness in a number of instances, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) free speech confrontations in Spokane, San Diego, Fresno, etc; the Congress

of Industrial Organizations (CIO) sit-down strikes from 1935 through 1937 in automobile plants; the UFW grape and lettuce boycotts; and, of course, the strike.

Using mass nonviolent action, the civil rights movement changed the face of the South. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) initiated nonviolent action for civil rights with sit-ins and an interracial, interstate "freedom ride" in the 1940's. The successful 1956 Montgomery bus boycott electrified the nation. Then, the early 1960's movement exploded with nonviolent action: sit-ins at lunch counters and other facilities, organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); Freedom Rides through the South organized by CORE; the nonviolent battle against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); the 1963 March on Washington, which drew 250,000 participants; and the voting rights drives in the early sixties.

Opponents of the Vietnam War employed the use of draft card burnings, draft file destruction, mass demonstrations (such as the 500,000 who turned out in 1969 to protest the Vietnam War in Washington, D.C.), sit-ins, blocking induction centers, draft and tax resistance, and the historic 1971 May Day traffic blocking in Washington, D.C., in which 13,000 people were arrested.

Nonviolent action has also led to the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in Germany (1920), Guatemala (1944), and Iran (1979); and the creation of instability for such regimes in Saigon (1963), Russia (1917), and Norway (1942), among other countries.

Methods

The variety of nonviolent methods and tactics is about as limited as the imagination. Gene Sharp has isolated 198 distinct methods, which have been used in the past. What follows is Sharp's categorization of the types of nonviolent action:

PROTEST AND PERSUASION
leafleting, picketing, marches, teach-ins

NONCOOPERATION
Social: student strike, social boycott
Economic: tax resistance, consumer boycotts, labor strikes
Political: draft resistance, civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

INTERVENTION
civil disobedience of "neutral" laws, nonviolent blockage, sit-in, nonviolent obstruction

The Politics and Dynamics of Nonviolence

In order to use nonviolence effectively, an understanding of the basic concepts and operating dynamics is essential. What is described below represents one brief formulation of the fundamental elements of nonviolence and how it works. This formulation is derived from an analysis of power, an understanding of human nature, a study of history and politics, a theory of nonviolence, and experimentation through practice.

Ends and Means

If we wish to achieve a society without wars, violence, and injustice, then it is

counterproductive to use wars, violence, and injustice. What we do and how we do it determines what we get. Nonviolence is rooted in the understanding that ends and means are fundamentally linked, and are simply different forms of the same thing; means are ends in the making.

Separation of the Role from the Person

Nonviolence recognizes that the system or the injustice is the problem, which needs to be overcome, not the individual. An individual committing an injustice needs to be confronted and changed, not killed. Simply changing the personnel in an oppressive system, without changing the existing power relationships or structure of the system, will not end the injustice.'

Nonviolence seeks a victory over injustice, not vengeance or punishment. Opponents are more likely to change if offered a way out, rather than backed up against a wall under personal attack, so that they continue to fight violently well beyond the point of reason.

"Without a direct action expression of it, nonviolence, to my mind, is meaningless."
–M.K. Gandhi

Nature of Power

The theory of nonviolence is based on the understanding that all power depends completely on the obedience, consent, and/or cooperation of the governed. The power of governments is often so fragile that if a small but significant number of the governed were to disobey or noncooperate, the government would have to change, or collapse.

Conflict and Struggle

Recognizing that those who oppress have seldom willingly stopped their oppression, we must be willing to engage in a struggle to overcome injustice whatever its manifestation (whether that be war, sexism, racism, classism or any other *form* of violence and domination). Nonviolence seeks to resolve conflicts, not avoid them. Passivity in the face of injustice is complicity with it. To quote Barbara Deming again, "The challenge to those who believe in nonviolent struggle is to learn to be aggressive enough."

Nonviolence Is More Than a Tactic

To use nonviolence solely on a tactical basis is like saying "I'll use nonviolence at the moment, but I'll have a knife behind my back, just in case." The assumption is that violence is not nice, but more effective; and there exists a willingness to abandon nonviolence should the opportunity present itself. In order for nonviolence to be truly effective, the user must have enough confidence in it to persist in its use, especially at the point where the challenge is the toughest and the stress is the highest.

More Control

The more the real issues are dramatized and the struggle separated from the personal, the more control those in nonviolent rebellion gain over their adversary. In a violent struggle, the adversary is put on the defensive, reacting out of resentment and desperation. The violence often escalates with both sides becoming more entrapped in a scenario which neither chose. A greater pressure of defiance can be placed on opponents. If we simultaneously show a respect for their lives they are less likely to react out of fear and more likely to listen to us. Thus one major barrier in the path of change is removed.

Undercut Support of Opponent

Even if nonviolence cannot persuade an oppressor, its use will begin to erode support from the oppressor. An antagonist will find it harder to justify the use of violence. Nonviolence can move into action on our behalf those who are not naturally inclined to act for us. The more support our opponents lose, the less likely they will be able to sustain their oppression, and the more they will be forced to change. A desirable outcome of a conflict depends not only on the unity and morale of one side, but also on the morale-or lack of it-on the other side.

"At this point in our history, nonviolent action had better be taken boldly or one need hardly bother to take it at all, for one will be taking it alone. "

—Barbara Deming, 1968

Liberation Struggles

Some pacifists feel that all violence should be equally condemned no matter the ends or the circumstances which lead to the violence. Violence of the oppressed is just as reprehensible as violence of the oppressor.

However, the War Resisters League believes it is impossible to be morally neutral. Our unwavering commitment to nonviolence does not mean that we are hostile to revolutionary movements. Clearly we have to distinguish between the violence of the current regime in South Africa - which is criminal - and that of those struggling against it which, by contrast, is tragic.

Those who remain neutral are to a degree complicit with the status quo, which perpetuates violence. While we do not support the violent means used by some movements, we do support their objective in seeking liberation from oppression.

The greatest single contribution we can make to liberation movements is not by becoming entangled in the debate over whether or not such movements should use violence, but by actively working to bring an end to colonialism, imperialism, racism, and sexism. This can be accomplished by attacking the factors and social conditions which drive people towards the tragedy of violence, often seeming to exclude options they might otherwise have of nonviolent social revolution.

"We salute those people who are using nonviolent action in their struggle despite the current trends and pressures towards violence. We also salute our brothers and sisters in the various liberation movements. We will work with them when it is possible, but without yielding up our belief that the foundation of the future must be laid in the present, that a society without violence must begin with revolutionists who will not use violence."

Nonviolence Controversies

The nonviolence movement, as any other movement, contains a variety of differences and controversies. Listed below are some of the most prominent ones.

Persuasion versus Coercion

Some nonviolence advocates (particularly religious pacifists) feel that change should be attempted only through conversion of, love for, and persuasion of an opponent. Love prevents the development of fear and anger. Coercion is violent and is less

likely to bring about permanent change.

Such arguments do not recognize that nonviolent action, while more aggressive, is no more violent than persuasion. Coercion is often essential in campaigns to end oppression, which may have long been entrenched through vested interests. Persuasion may not be sufficient to get the attention of opponents, let alone change them. The use of nonviolent force in a creative manner may provide a way to break through barriers often thrown up by adversaries.

Secrecy

Some actions, particularly ones which are small in number rely heavily on surprise for their success. In totalitarian societies, it is difficult to accomplish anything with openness. Getting Jews out of Nazi Germany would have been impossible without secrecy.

On the other hand, secrecy breeds mistrust among friends, and encourages fear and government spying, sometimes leading to violence. Effective nonviolent activity can be carried out even in totalitarian countries without secrecy. Secrecy generally runs counter to our intention of building an open and honest society (means and ends).

Property Destruction

Property destruction or sabotage is likely to escalate the struggle to a level where we may lose control. In a property conscious society, such an act may be extremely provocative. It is usually not necessary to achieve our goals (eg, we can climb a fence, rather than cut it, to gain access to a site).

On the other hand, some property has no right to exist (eg, nuclear weapons, napalm, electric chairs). Other property, such as fences around nuclear power plants or military bases, while "neutral," serve only to protect facilities which are harming all of us. The concern is not their destruction, but how they are destroyed. No one has suggested blowing them up or indiscriminate property destruction, but a calm deliberate cutting of a fence with a minimum of hardware can gain entry into a site otherwise not accessible.

Anger

Anger and hatred are often the bases of violence, putting opponents on the defensive, inhibiting dialogue, and placing additional barriers in the way of constructive change. Hatred clouds thinking and does not separate the person from his or her role. It weakens the distinction between ego-tripping and social change.

On the other hand, anger and hatred can be separated. Anger can serve a good purpose if it is channeled into constructive action, and aids in motivating the desire for change.

Suffering

If there is no other choice, we must be prepared to undergo suffering (eg, fasting, being beaten) rather than inflict it on others. Suffering for a good cause can build discipline, and may also rouse considerable sympathy of friends and even opponents. All of us endure some measure of suffering, whether that of a soldier undergoing the rigors of boot camp or battle, or the discomforts many of us impose on ourselves through various disciplines or exercise to improve ourselves. This ability to accept suffering can be put to good use when an injustice is being resisted, though its main purpose should be to prevent suffering of others, rather than to draw

attention to our own suffering.

Suffering to gain sympathy can easily be seen as masochistic, if it is sought for itself rather than accepted in the course of a positive action. Deliberate self-mutilation or self-destruction is generally an act of desperation and a type of aggression turned inward, which is perceived (often rightly) as hostile and coercive, therefore having a negative effect. In extreme situations, however, such as those of the Buddhist monks in Vietnam self-destruction may appear to be the only course of action, especially if it is in the context of a cultural tradition. In general one must weigh the particular situation in trying to determine to what extent one's acceptance of suffering is necessary and effective (though the latter is not always calculable), or to what extent it may be self-serving and masochistically out of proportion to the principle for which one is demonstrating.

"Nonviolent action is a means of combat, as is war. It involves the matching of forces and the waging of 'battle,' requires wise strategy and tactics, and demands of its 'soldiers' courage, discipline, and sacrifice.

"This view of nonviolent action as a technique of active combat is diametrically opposed to the popular assumption that, at its strongest, nonviolent action relies on rational persuasion of the opponent, and more commonly it consists simply of passive submission.

"Nonviolent action is just what it says: action which is nonviolent, not inaction. This technique consists, not simply of words, but of active protest, noncooperation, and intervention.

"Overwhelmingly it is group or mass action. "

- Gene Sharp