

# A Call for a Nonviolent Strategy of the Global Peace & Justice Movement

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**We live in a historical time of social change. While the economy, state regimes and wars are being globalized, the social forces of people's movements are as well. At least 15 millions demonstrated worldwide against the war in Iraq 2003. The gathering of "the global movement of movements" at the World Social Forum continues to grow, the latest in Brazil with 150 000 participants. This global peace & justice movement has drawn the conclusions of earlier strategies of reform through national parties and elections and revolution through armed rebellion, and is searching for a nonviolent strategy of social change. We need to explore how to bring the knowledge and experience of the more than one century old nonviolent resistance tradition into the present global movement. War Resisters' International is calling for a mobilization of nonviolent activists, trainers, organizers and scholars in order to build a long term plan. A major occasion to discuss this is the Triennial in Germany, July 2006 ([www.wri-irg.org](http://www.wri-irg.org)).**

Since at least the early 1990ies there has been a growing global networking among local uprisings in the south, international counter-conferences and campaigns targeting the world regimes of the alphabet soup (WTO, WB, IMF etc). With Seattle 1999 – N30 – a momentous symbolic movement victory was created by the cooperation of "teamsters and turtles" and other critical movements while using an elaborated nonviolent resistance strategy of closing the WTO meeting. Since then an unparalleled global movement has arisen. The protest of February 15 2003 against the Iraq war plans – agreed upon by participants of the European Social Forum in Florence, Italy – was arguably the biggest ever in world history. Somewhere between 15 and 30 million people protested in cooperation with each other through a combination of existing networks and Internet, without any centralized world coordination. The three latest World Social Forum gatherings converged each astonishingly 100 000 participants: Brazil 2003, India 2004 and again Brazil 2005. More than a thousand different organizations and movements from more than 120 countries interacted in more than a thousand workshops and seminars at each of these latest gatherings of the network of movements that are the closest ever to a truly global peace & justice movement. And, importantly, there is no sign of decrease in the global networking, only in media cover (of course). But on the other hand, there is a political and strategic unclarity, which in the long run might make this hopeful challenge to oppression, exploitation and violence dissolve.

Besides having problems in finding a common ground on political demands, broad enough to mobilize globally, yet limited enough in order to allow heterogeneity – there is a lack of coherent strategy. Current global confrontations like Prague (with the World Bank), Gothenburg (with EU) or Genoa (with G8) exhibit a twin problem: violent riots and ineffective nonviolent resistance. These and other protests have also failed to organize effective nonviolent confrontations and new coherent strategies of nonviolent engagement with global powers. The development of The Battle of Seattle has not been possible since the police are learning new tactics quicker than activists.

This twin problem: violent riots and ineffective nonviolent resistance is a problem arising in part from a lack of skilled nonviolence within the movement. Very few people with knowledge of nonviolent theory and movement practice have taken an organizing part within the movement (with some exceptions in USA). Within the International Council (which is the steering body of

WSF) there are more than 120 different movement organizations participating, but not even one peace organization from a nonviolent resistance tradition (e.g. War Resisters' International, Nonviolence International, Network of Engaged Buddhism or International Fellowship of Reconciliation) – despite the global peace demonstration of 15 February 2003.

It is already clear that this global movement is not a simple spontaneous outburst of mobilization, but an ongoing mobilization. It might even be a similar historic mobilization as the modern movements of peace, anti-slavery, feminism and workers 150 years ago which profoundly changed our societies. Like the rebellions of 1968 it develops from a fundamental criticism of electoral politics of nation states, but unlike radicals of the 70ies it is not looking for a solution by “new” left parties or “peoples” armed struggles. The WSF is explicitly searching for a non-armed and non-electoral politics (see the WSF charter at [www.forumsocialmundial.org](http://www.forumsocialmundial.org)) – a kind of “non-violent social resistance” – while not outlining what that really means.

On 18<sup>th</sup> January 2004, when the fourth World Social Forum started in India, the world famous author and Narmada anti-dam activist Arundhati Roy in an article (simultaneously published in several countries, see [www.infochangeindia.org](http://www.infochangeindia.org)) calls for a nonviolent resistance that goes further than “holiday protests [which] don't stop wars”. “We must not allow non-violent resistance to atrophy into ineffectual, feel-good, political theatre”, she says. She calls on us to understand that we are part of a war and that our resistance needs to make a difference, even materially, for the political economic elite. “What we need urgently to discuss is strategies of resistance” – which is exactly the call War Resisters' International want to answer. On that line WRI has already launched a Campaign against War Profiteers which will be developed further during the Triennial.

The present global movement is in my understanding a movement ready for adopting nonviolent resistance strategy as its approach to politics and social change. The language of nonviolence already exists within numerous workshops, declarations and organizations: affinity groups, disobedience, peaceful, dialogue, guidelines etc.

But since no nonviolent strategy has been adopted so far there is now an ongoing discussion on moving away from global confrontations. The confrontations are seen as unproductive and too much of symbolic bashing of the logos of present world order (Bush, WTO, G8 etc.) – in favor of making alternatives visible and creating local resistance. Naomi Klein – the author of “No Logo” – is one of the opponents of present “McProtest”. The emphasis on constructive alternatives is great – as a matter of fact a central part of the kind of nonviolent strategy Gandhi did suggest – while the problem is a lack of resistance approach.

In my understanding what obviously lacks is the knowledge and skills developed by historic nonviolent movements and its relevance for the present resistance. In the movement and WSF leadership there does not seem to exist enough understanding what it means to choose a non-party and non-armed political struggle which challenge power relations.

The wheel is invented once again since we fail to learn from each other. E.g. the emphasis on affinity groups was not invented in Seattle but grew out of a frustration with the power hierarchies of the civil rights movement, a need to encourage grassroots' participation and to control riot makers. The break through came with Seabrook 1976 (inspired by site occupations in Germany) when thousands made creative actions together based on a decentralized network of affinity groups and guidelines. This experience is all forgotten within the new global movement – except in Seattle 1999, which is why we want to reclaim Seattle! Seattle was a victory of a confrontative and pragmatic nonviolent strategy, not of legal demonstrations or violent riot making. When nonviolence is tried – as in Prague 2000 – it is done without the people that have learnt the lessons from experimenting with the action form since 1976, and the result is violent riots with the images of burning cars and police cabled all over the world...

**The Role of Nonviolent Resistance:** The strength of any global movement of radical social change is arguably the truly interlinked cooperation between a multitude of local everyday

struggles around the world. In my understanding there exist not a choice between either converging global confrontations of power relations or local alternative building; instead it is a difficult matter of a necessary combination of the NO and the YES of the movements, locally and globally. The unique contribution of nonviolent resistance is as Barbara Deming and others have framed it – the two hands of nonviolence – the respectful care of the opponent as a person and the absolute rejection of the evil acts of that very same opponent. We can only comprehend of such a truly transformative movement through the application of a strategic blend of nonviolent resistance of some sort; but likely not the specific kinds of nonviolence we ourselves have been practicing in our previous local, national or partially transnational struggles around single issues. This time we are engaging a movement of movements, one which is transcending not only the local/global levels of politics, but as well the very idea of politics confined into areas of certain areas (e.g. militarism, economics, cultural or environmental) or subjects (e.g. nuclear weapons, conscription, genetically modified crops and agribusiness or thousands of other subjects of the evil effects of present world systems). This is a movement of the full fledged heterogeneity that social life is about, and the diversity of tactics needed in protecting that life. What that means for nonviolent resistance is difficult to comprehend, but clearly something different. We are in need of a comprehensive strategic framework which is adoptable for various contexts and needs.

So, the global movements need a nonviolent strategy and the historical nonviolent movements have that knowledge and skills, but not the appropriate global repertoire needed. This is a challenge for nonviolent activists and scholars to develop something new from past experiences.

Power critical approaches (as feminism or anarchism) and nonviolent resistance have normally been marginal to “mainstream oppositional politics”, today it does not seem necessarily so. At least it seems like there is a greater need for approaches that not only critically engage with oppression and violence of all kinds, but that also have the practical tools built from centuries of experiences. It is my firm belief that the global movements need to be offered the choice of a comprehensive alternative to the usual political traditions present. If the coming struggles of global confrontations are not built on the (limited but yet well founded) historical experiences of nonviolent movements, then this fragile movement of movements in the making might be less effective and even might lose its momentum of mobilization and its capacity for lasting change.

There are already of course major attempts by various other political traditions, prominently Trotskyism, Black Bloc (militant and violence prepared anarchists) and social democrat parties, all trying to influence the development of global movement politics.

But it is not only the global movement that lacks understanding of nonviolent strategy, we that are since long time working with nonviolence, are lacking a global understanding of nonviolence.

**Globalization and new conditions of nonviolent action:** Earlier and present understanding of nonviolent action is suffering from two major flaws: the focus on *state/national-regime change*, despite living in an increasing global and market-dominated world, and the focus on *state organized wars*, despite that this kind of war is disappearing. None of these areas are unimportant, but they are less important problems in our contemporary world. The globalization of the nation state changes the conditions of nonviolent action in all states of the world, in some more than in others. The new wars are tormenting only some states but are on some level present in most states in their political-economical marginalized areas - e.g. in poor areas of New York, London or Berlin. This one-sided kind of focus on the state arises from problems dominating societies during early modernity and suits older theories developed in accordance with these problems.

Contemporary power relations and violence dynamics calls for the development of a new set of questions, theories and methodologies which take into account the specific possibilities and constraints of transnational and local nonviolent action directed against various non-state actors, e.g. transnational companies.

Basically globalization is shown by among others Manuel Castells to fundamentally change the role of the nation state and the capitalist market. The state is since the creation of the international system in the mid 1700-century based on mutual recognition of the sovereignty of each individual state. States makes since then *international* agreements, i.e. between independent states. Now *transnational* processes of a multidimensional kind (ecological, financial, criminal, informational, trade, technical, political, tourism, refugees etc) pass borders beyond the sovereign control of the state. The state is not necessary disappearing – some collapse while others find an amplified role as a broker within global power networks – but its role is definitely changing. Much will depend on the relative economical, administrative and cultural strength of the individual state. But even the global superpower – USA – show frustration because of its lacking control of global processes.

In this global social change we have received new institutions of politics, so called “global regimes” (WTO, IMF, The World Bank, The International Criminal Court) which together makes up a patch-work of non-elected “governance without government”. We have also got a new kind of capitalism, flexible network capitalism as Castells says, a kind of borderless market expansion. This market expansion is of course geographical in using the new possibilities created by the disappearance of the Cold War, but the expansion is a lot more borderless than so – it happens within the former contained and bureaucratic mega companies, within the former private areas of the family, within the former public areas of civil society and even within the socialization of personality (through the entertainment industry and needs-constructing media factories). The precarious conditions of work through wide spread flexibility of production creates a new social category of the “precariat” as Hardt & Negri says, replacing the central role of the industrial proletariat. We become part of a consumer culture and temporary employed servants of the exploiting social factory called “society”, or kept grounded in the wasteland, the not yet profitable deserts, e.g. in sub-Saharan Africa. The new capitalism is basically the opposite to the earlier mass production industry of mega-companies like Ford, which produced for the mass consumption where everyone where supposed to buy the same car, fridge and TV as everyone else. Now the creativity of production is targeting individual/group choice and temporary consumer trends of today, even within e.g. oppositional cultures of youth in black suburbs or anti-consumer cultures in global movements. Today the protest of Seattle is answered by fashion shows in Paris displaying the chic riot-gear and Che Guevara t-shirts. Karl Marx would have been astonished to learn of the limitlessness of contemporary profit-creativity. Today the profits are made from immaterial production, knowledge and communication networks, and – importantly – the limitless exploitation of our identities and personal needs. Drink Revolution Soda and Just Do It!

But globalization also creates new kinds of social movements of contention. Movements of relevance for research on nonviolent action are today less preoccupied with the national state politics of political parties or trade unions. They are increasingly focusing on transnational relations, individual life-style and social life forms of local context. They have recognized that the contemporary battles are happening on new arenas and in new front-lines. The parliament is no longer the central place of politics.

We can't afford to miss the new kinds of global/local nonviolent action being done, just because we are looking for actions against the national state apparatus. We need to try to understand both contemporary transnational and anti-capitalist nonviolent actions. The transnational movements orient their politics towards other regimes than the national state (global, regional, and local). The contemporary anti-neo-liberal actors and methods are different than the classic national trade unions and political parties, with their (in liberal democracies) now well established workers strikes and citizens voting.

**New wars and new conditions of nonviolent action:** Mary Kaldor has shown that “new wars” are not organized by the centralized state bureaucracy but rather is a result of “collapsing states”.

The new wars are basically the opposite of the traditional kind of professional, public and hierarchal “politics by other means” of the state organized military. The new wars are driven by a privatization of the military and the target of the identity driven violence is the civilian population. Instead of trying to get legitimacy from the people they get control through a politics of fear and difference. The “war economy” these actors develop makes former illegal activity as drugs, smuggling, prostitution, protection fees and theft the main sources of income, both for the sustained war, the creation of war-lords and for the daily livelihood of poor soldiers. Early important differences between war and peace or legitimacy/legality and criminality are systematically blurred. War/peace zones overlap and change constantly, well organized warlords becomes a kind of semi-authority even “after” war is ended, through their power politics and by being included in so called peace negotiations.

This has disturbing consequences for both research and praxis of nonviolent action, since most of the nonviolence research being done have focused on civilian-based defense, nonviolent action/movement or social defense in national settings and in relation to a central power administration which needs legitimacy. If this foundation of nonviolent action is changed it means that we need to look for new openings. But before we are able to work really creatively exploring avenues for new nonviolent action against contemporary wars, we need to learn more of the problems these kinds of wars are posing. The problems facing nonviolent action will sometimes be radically different from before. E.g. what point will there be to break state laws in doing nonviolent civil disobedience when the state is not the one conducting the war anyhow? Is there other power relations which the new warlords are dependent on that nonviolent activist might use in order to create pressure?

**What we aim to do:** War Resisters’ International is calling to this gathering of nonviolent resistance trainers, scholars, activists and organizers in order to explore together on how to do adopt strategic nonviolent resistance in global networks. We do not think we already have the answers of how to go about this mildly speaking gigantic task, but we know that we have to try, history is drafting us. We are all called upon to make an attempt to contribute. I do not even think that the goal is to reach an agreement among a nonviolent group of expertise – and I definitely do not think that our ultimate goal is to facilitate an agreement among the whole WSF or the global movement.

I only think, that what could and what should be done is to create a process of knowledge diffusion and experience interaction between those who have theoretical and practical know-how of nonviolent resistance and those who have not (but are open minded and interested). We believe that after a while – with this dialogue and with practical engagement with struggle within the movements – a clearer understanding will develop, and some action networks will adopt nonviolent resistance as their approach to politics, and when they do they will do it from skilful, creative and beautiful knowledge.

**Basic Action Plan so far:** The basic idea is that since this nonviolent globalization clearly is needed and yet it has not happened – the hindrances for us is to find enough skilled organizers/thinkers to commit to the project and to find the logistic solutions on resources (money, organizing, communication etc.). Thus it is logical to start of with a gathering of those feeling concerned: that is the idea behind the Triennial in Germany in July 2006. During that gathering we will find out what the problems and possibilities of globalizing nonviolence are.

My own suggestion is to make a *Global Call for Nonviolent Resistance* where we ask people to sign up to commit themselves for a common project of intervention into the global movement. We need a critical number of skilled people committed for a certain period of time.

There are a number of possible gatherings in where nonviolent strategy could be explored: European Social Forum, Asian SF, American SF, African SF, WSF and the same forums in coming years. There will as well be opportunities during other gatherings, e.g. the nonviolent

direct action oriented network Peoples Global Action (PGA) is having their own world and continental gatherings.

It would be good if we were able to run both *documentation* of nonviolent resistance and *research* of key issues we need to address in future. A book project is already launched on case studies from nonviolent resistance against corporations as well as a new handbook on nonviolent training which will acknowledge the global conditions of the various struggles. There is also a discussion to set up a network of movement researchers & activist writers.

And as always, there will be a need for *trainings, educational workshops and organizing support* for those movement organizations that show interest in strategic nonviolent resistance during these coming years.

Some also need to try to get on *the International Council* of WSF in order to promote nonviolence there as well.

But most importantly it is a matter of recognizing that current nonviolent knowledge, training forms, strategy, organizational forms and action forms (i.e. our nonviolent repertoire) need to be developed in accordance with global conditions. What specific development is needed is not yet clear but my main point is that we do *recognize that we are in a new situation*. The global movements will make us understand the new situation and, hopefully, we will then learn and contribute with our understanding of nonviolent strategy, making the global movement of movements not only challenging the present world order but effectively changing it.

Another – and nonviolent – world is possible!

#### **Web addresses (a partial & small selection of the old & new nonviolence):**

- <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br> (World Social Forum)
- <http://www.fse-esf.org/> (European Social Forum)
- <http://ruckus.org/> (The Ruckus Society)
- <http://www.starhawk.org/activism/activism.html> (Starhawk)
- <http://www.agp.org/> PGA – Peoples Global Action  
(Alternative: <http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/>)
- <http://www.indymedia.org> Independent Media Center (IMC)
- <http://www.agitprop.org/artandrevolution/> (Art & Revolution)
- <http://www.nonviolence.org/~nvweb/wrl/> (War Resisters' League)
- <http://www.nonviolence.org/~nvweb/for/> (Fellowship of reconciliation, IFOR)
- <http://www.peacebrigades.org/index.html> (Peace Brigades, PBI)
- <http://www.cais.com/agf/cwindex.htm> (Catholic Workers)
- <http://www.monde-solidaire.org/larzac-2003/uk/index.html> (Larzac gathering against globalization, 2003)