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

By Stellan Vinthagen

We live in a historical time of social change. While the economy, state regimes and wars are being globalised, the social forces of people’s movements are as well. At least 15 million 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 15,0000 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.

Twin problem

Current global confrontations like Prague (with the World Bank), Gothenburg (with EU) or Genoa (with G8) exhibit a twin problem due to lack of a coherent strategy of nonviolent resistance. These and other protests have also failed to organise effective nonviolent confrontations and new coherent strategies of nonviolent engagement with global powers. This twin problem is a problem arising in part from a lack of skilled nonviolence within the movement. Very few people have knowledge of nonviolent theory and movement practice have taken an organising part within the movement (with some exceptions in US).

It is already clear that this global movement is not a simple spontaneous outburst of mobilisation, but an ongoing mobilisation. The WSF is explicitly searching for a non-armed and non-electoral politics (see the WSF charter at www.forumsocialmundial.org) – a kind of “non-violent social resistance” – while not outlining what that really means. 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 symbolicashing of the logos of the present world order (Bush, WTO, G8 etc.) – in favor of making alternatives visible and creating local resistance. 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, the present global movement is a movement ready for adopting a nonviolent resistance strategy as its approach to politics and social change. The language of nonviolence already exists within numerous workshops, declarations and organisations: affinity groups, disobedience, peaceful, dialogue, guidelines etc. Organisations like War Resisters’ International have the potential to contribute to this development of a nonviolent strategy. However, it is not only the global movement that lacks an understanding of nonviolent strategy, we who work with nonviolence are lacking a global understanding of nonviolence, and need to develop a global repertoire of nonviolent resistance together with the global peace and justice movement. This is a challenge for nonviolent activists and scholars to develop something new from past experiences.

Transcending traditional politics

The movement of movements is transcending both the local/globalevels of politics, and the very idea of politics confined to certain areas (e.g. militarism, economics, cultural or environmental) or subjects (e.g. nuclear weapons, conscription, genetically modified crops) and agrobusiness 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 adaptable for various contexts and needs. Traditionally power critical approaches (such as feminism or anarchism) and nonviolent resistance have been marginal to “mainstream oppositional politics”, but today it does not have to be so. There seems to be a greater need for approaches that not only critically engage with oppression and violence of all kinds, but also have the practical tools from centuries of experiences to create change. It is my firm belief that the global movements need to be offered the choice of a comprehensive alternative to the usual political traditions. 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 loose its momentum of mobilisation and its capacity for creating lasting change.

What we aim to do: War Resisters’ International is calling on nonviolent resistance trainers, scholars, activists and organisers to participate in the conference “Globalising Nonviolence” in order to explore together how we can 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.

The most important matter is to recognise that current nonviolent knowledge, training forms, strategy, organisational 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 we know that this issue of The Broken Rifle encourages you to join us in this debate – either by joining us at the conference, and/or on the Wiki at http://www.wri-irg.org/wiki/index.php/Globalising_Nonviolence.

Another world – a nonviolent world – is possible.

Andreas Speck

The Broken Rifle

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Alternative Social Forum in Caracas


Howard Clark

The World Social Forum is the latest – and one of the more attractive attempts – to provide an international process to strengthen cooperation between a wide range of related movements of social resistance based on more or less common values. After five years, this process shows sign of institutionalisation – it’s popular enough for some governments (national governments such as that of Chavez in Venezuela or the regional government of Catalunya) to want to be seen as supportive. Yet at the same time the process remains open enough to clarify and update its analysis, for instance last year adopting a statement from Women Living Under Militarism offering a feminist critique of so-called anti-war movements that align themselves with patriarchal religious fundamentalism.

I imagine that at every Social Forum – be it regional or global – there have been activists present in some way associated with the WRI. I say “imagine” because we are rather a loose network. Sometimes like a club, other times like a party, at other times we are rather a loose network. Sometimes like a club, other times like a party, at other times like an individual. Anything that did not seem very different from consumerism, just as a “leftist” variant, with hundreds listening to supposedly intelligent speeches but with little space to really participate.

The alternative forum was also a place of critique of what had been denounced as “counterproductive” – that were left out of the official forum – militancy in Venezuela (quite obviously an issue that is not welcome in a country where the president is a military), the social and ecological consequences of Venezuela’s oil and coal, the threat to the “world market”, human rights in Venezuela or anarchism in Cuba, to mention but a few. More important than that, the alternative forum engaged in a real debate, unlike the format often found at the official forum, which did not seem very different from consumerism, just in a “leftist” variant, with hundreds listening to supposedly intelligent speeches but with little space to really participate.

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World Social Forum – Forum for Nonviolence?

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A Call for a Nonviolent Strategy

do recognise 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!

Stellan Vinthagen, WRI Triennial Committee, and Department of Peace & Development Research, Göteborg University, Sweden

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This article is a very short version of an article published by War Resisters' International in a series of articles leading up to the International Triennial Conference in July 2006 in Germany. In the original version of the article (go to war.org/int2006/en/news/mov/ msg00011.html) you can read an analysis of what consequences globalisation has for contemporary politics and a detailed action plan for developing a nonviolent strategy within the global peace and justice movement.

War cannot exist as an isolated organisation – we have to be part of our place among those social movements whose goals we share. That is our sphere of action. There are times, when we feel marginal – and certainly it is not appropriate for WRI to be seen at the recent alternative social forum in Caracas than cheering towards the Chavez government – but there are times when we connect with vital issues and impulses which, organisationally, we otherwise have to put to one side as being beyond our limited resources.

Right from the beginning WRI has posed a radical social analysis – an analysis far more wide-reaching than our organisational programme can be. Also we promote values, values to practise not just within the organisation but in our daily lives and reflect a much wider consciousness than bald anti-war action. Together, these put us firmly among the “movement of movements” that gravitate towards the Social Forums.

However, there is something else we have, and that for all the controversy over nonviolence – has been welcomed when we have offered. This is a record of careful preparation and honest, critical evaluation of nonviolent action. These are the actions organised by or in the name of WRI or its affiliates, but actions in which our members have participated, which we have discussed and which have given us ideas to apply in our own situations. From outside, sometimes people view us as being like a “club for the nonviolent”. One of the challenges we face is to show that ours is not exclusive nonviolence, nor a nonviolence fixed in time or part of a particular culture – but is continually re-creating itself in fresh contexts. Our continued revitalising nonviolent society should be an important step in this direction.

Howard Clark has recently helped April Carter and Michael Randle to compile People Power and Protest since 1945 – a bibliography of nonviolent action to be published by Housmans in June. (Sorry, but it only covers publications in English.)

The Story of the War Resisters' International

Published by: War Resisters' International

Jochen Stay

Jochen Stay, who was active in civil disobedience campaigns against the deployment of Pershing-II nuclear missiles in Mutlangen in Germany in the 1980s, and later in the campaigns against nuclear waste shipments in the 1990s and early 2000s, reflects on his experience with mass civil disobedience. In the present situation, he says: "It is clear that courageous action is again necessary, but he asks: Is civil disobedience the participation of thousands of people an appropriate perspective for the peace movement today?"

It is evident - and the many failed attempts prove - that not just any issue, nor in just any political context, and nor with just any political approach can hundreds of people be attracted to take part in civil disobedience. Some political conditions have to be met for it to work. I will give ten points, which can be found in Mutlangen and with "X-thousands in the way", but I don't claim to be able to offer a recipe for success:

1. The issue at hand is perceived by many people as a real threat. Being affected by a person is also seen by many people as a real threat. The movement has been able to escalate the conflict at one concrete place - Mutlangen, Gorleben - so that the place itself gets a large symbolic meaning and embodies the identity of the movement.

2. The movement has been able to focus on highly visible, controversial, or symbolic part of a big, general, and highly complex issue, and to generate a conflict around this part, which symbolises the issue as a whole.

3. The movement has been able to block the machinery and ritual. For me, rituals are not negative, as long as they are filled with life.

4. The mobilisation for the actions asks for a personal commitment from participants, for instance via pledges.

5. Participants have the opportunity to prepare themselves well. A lot of effort is put into creating of the machinery and ritual. For me, rituals are not negative, as long as they are filled with life.

6. The campaign for civil disobedience is carried by a circle of activists, who for years put all their energy and time (almost full-time) into the campaign and the fulfillment of their vision.

7. A form of civil disobedience is devised whose consequences are neither too heavy nor too light. This means through limited violation of the law and through the preparedness to confront the consequences public awareness is created. But also that many people are prepared to wage civil disobedience, because the legal and physical consequences are limited and costs can be calculated.

8. The actions develop into a good mixture of effective disruption of the machinery and ritual. For me, rituals are not negative, as long as they are filled with life.

9. The mobilisation for the actions asks for a personal commitment from participants, for instance via pledges.

10. Participants have the opportunity to prepare themselves well. A lot of effort is put into creating of the machinery and ritual. For me, rituals are not negative, as long as they are filled with life.

Those are some commonalities. But there are also differences, factors that have changed since. I want to name some of those too. (...) The use of and preparation of civil disobedience is now seen from a more pragmatic perspective. In Mutlangen there was a long and deep debate why civil disobedience is justified in times of the nuclear arms race. Nowadays, many see civil disobedience as one normal form of action, which is able to get more public attention than a normal demonstration. But it is also attractive because it provides the opportunity to put your own body as a spanner into the works.

► "X-thousands in the way" works less with existing groups. Though they still exist and form the core of the action, most activists join as individuals or in small groups, and only form affinity groups on arrival. Therefore one or two days of preparation are needed before an action, to turn a chaotic mess into a community ready and able to act. And even this community is little more than an expanded core of participants. Most activists join spontaneously and without preparation, and the action has to be planned in a way that makes this possible:

► The actions are a bit more "military style". Because the police try to prevent any action in advance, using bans on demonstrations and deploying huge amounts of police, often getting to the action can be the most difficult part. Watching an action of "X-thousands in the way", we can see how thousands walk almost like a route column to the action, where thousands of police wait, reminiscent of images from the Napoleonic wars. The difference becomes obvious when shortly before the confrontation we fan out and calmly but determined walk through the police lines.

► What changed too is the reception of success. Our aims in Mutlangen were set high too, but the individual activist was aware that the action itself wouldn't stop the arms race. Nowadays many are more ambitious and want short-term success.

This is an abstract from a longer presentation by Jochen Stay at the conference “with new energy for peace”, 7 December 2002, Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany. The full version has been published (in German) in gewaltfreie aktion no 138/139, 1st/2nd quarter 2004, and a translation will be posted on the WRI web page.

Blockading in a nuclear waste train in Germany: how do you get people onto the tracks? Photo: WRI archives

Preconditions and social-political factors for mass civil disobedience

Jochen Stay

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The movement has been able to escalate the conflict at one concrete place - Mutlangen, Gorleben - so that the place itself gets a large symbolic meaning and embodies the identity of the movement.

The campaign gains energy from a social vision which goes far beyond the political aim, and which is reflected within the campaign, in the way people relate to each other. I only want to mention grassroots democracy, consensus decision making, affinity groups and spokes councils. The campaign for civil disobedience is carried by a circle of activists, who for years put all their energy and time (almost full-time) into the campaign and the fulfillment of their vision.

A form of civil disobedience is devised whose consequences are neither too heavy nor too light. This means through limited violation of the law and through the preparedness to confront the consequences public awareness is created. But also that many people are prepared to wage civil disobedience, because the legal and physical consequences are limited and costs can be calculated.

The actions develop into a good mixture of effective disruption of the machinery and ritual. For me, rituals are not negative, as long as they are filled with life. The mobilisation for the actions asks for a personal commitment from participants, for instance via pledges.

Participants have the opportunity to prepare themselves well. A lot of effort is put into creating of the organisational framework that allows the individual activist to focus on the act of blockading itself.

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Globalising Nonviolence

War Resisters’ International Conference

Schloss Eringerfeld
Paderborn, Germany
23-27 July 2006

Conference fees

Participation in the conference costs 200€ (registration, accommodation and meals) for individual participants. The fee for representatives of organisations is 250€. There are cheaper options (bring your own tent/caravan) available, if you cannot afford the full fee. Please check the registration form, either online or download the PDF version from the conference website.

Travel information

The venue is Schloss Eringerfeld, near Paderborn, Westphalia. Further travel information will shortly be available on the website.

Visa requirements

Please check visa requirements on the website of the German Foreign office at http://www.auswaertigesamt.de/wer/wir/allkommunatue/n8a.html. If you need a visa to come to Germany, please contact WRI after registration for the conference. We will provide you with an invitation after payment for participation in the conference has been received.

Registration information

War Resisters’ International, 5 Caledonian Road, London N1 9DX, Britain

Tel: +44 20 72764040 registration@globalisingnonviolence.org

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…”
Globalising Nonviolence will be a great opportunity to meet activists from all over the world, to get to know what makes them tick, and to see how you can help each make another world possible. Around the world, a movement of movements is converging. This movement seeks to counterpose the perspective and values of people's power to those of global financial institutions, transnational corporations or governments. This is a movement of globalisation from below. WRI believes that nonviolence has a major role to play in this globalisation from below. Hence the theme of our upcoming international conference - Globalising Nonviolence.

Conference discussions will:

- Analyse the contemporary situation of economic, cultural and political globalisation. How are capital and middle-class globalisers exploiting the situation?
- Develop strategies for nonviolent resistance towards the unjust aspects of globalisation. How do we create nonviolent social change?
- Bring together people from the globalisation critical movement and WRI's network of pacifists and anti-militarists for the exchange of ideas on nonviolent opportunities for resistance.
- Strengthen networks and create new links between activists from all over the world.

Conference structure

Each day of the conference will begin with a short plenary session on the day's plenary topic. Then workshops will divide into theme and activity groups, where participants will work together against the trade/traffic in small arms. The evening plenary will concentrate on the strategies pursued by the movements involved in globalisation from below to support citizens' peace processes in Palestine as a specific case study.

4. For a nonviolent strategic framework

What does a nonviolent strategy have to contribute to the movement for globalisation from below? What does involvement in the movement for globalisation from below have to contribute to a nonviolent antimilitarist strategy?

5. From protest to social change

Discussing alliances and goals, and reviewing the plans and ideas developed during the conference.

Theme and Activity Groups

Military in a global economy

Military industries tend to be privatised, diversified, and globalised, and yet still compared to other industries - privileged. This group will analyse the strategy and the practice of the global military-industrial complex.

Military presence

The military has a profound impact on society and culture through processes of militarisation. It occupies space, both physical and cultural. This group will examine possible nonviolent strategies for demilitarising society.

Nonviolent citizens' interventions

Nonviolent citizens' interventions is a practical example of globalisation from below, making links globally and supporting peace building and resistance to oppression in other parts of the world.

War Resisters' International

The Conference will be held by and organised in cooperation with all WRI's German affiliates, participating in the WRI-Föderation as a legal framework:

- Deutsche Friedensgesell- schaft - Vereinigte Kriegs- dienstgegnerinnen (DGF-VK)
- Deutsche Friedensgesell- schaft - Internationale der Kriegsdienstgegner (DGF-IkD)
- Deutsche Friedensgesell- schaft - Vereinigte Kriegsdienstgegnerinnen (DGF-VkD)
- Internationale der Kriegsdienstgegnerinnen (iDk) Berlin
- Institut für Frieden und Gewaltfreie Konfliktbearbeitung (IFGK)
- Archiv Aktiv
- Grassurzeltrevolution
- Antikriegsmuseum Berlin