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GOALS AND METHODS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PEACE MOVEMENT

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The peace movement in Australia has undergone a rapid resurgence since 1981, reflecting the worldwide resurgence which began mainly in Europe a year or two previously. It is time to reflect on the goals and methods of peace activists in Australia. Here I will point out what I see as some of the weaknesses of the present directions and methods in the Australian peace movement, and suggest some alternatives. Let me emphasise, to avoid any misunderstanding, that I have the greatest respect for all those who work in their own way to challenge the war system, and especially for those who struggled during the many years when public interest in peace issues was minimal. My comments are not meant to be negative criticism, but to help widen debate on goals and methods.

Goals and strategies

To begin, there does not seem to be any clearly articulated long-term goals which are widely shared within the Australian peace movement. Opposition to some things such as nuclear weapons and US military bases is pretty much agreed upon. But what is the positive goal? Unilateral disarmament? An armed (non-nuclear) socialist Australia? A neutralist national government? Support for (violent) national liberation struggles? Probably each of these and others would be subscribed to by some peace activists.

Without clear long-term goals, it is difficult to choose methods which are effective components in a long-term plan. What should be done? Organise mass rallies? Lobby the Labor Party and the trade unions? Build large organisations? Arouse public concern through information campaigns? These and other approaches have their advantages and disadvantages for attaining long-term goals. As well as their role in attaining a change in policies or practices (such as removing US bases), the methods used influence the composition and organisation of the peace movement itself.

Ideally, goals and strategies should be developed through informed debate among peace activists. At the moment such debate is the exception rather than the rule. Goals and strategies do exist, but are for the most part implicit rather than explicit, and are multiple and conflicting. Open debate about goals and strategies would be unlikely to lead to consensus, but would I believe help make peace activists more effective.

My own preference for a long-term goal is to move in the direction of an equitable, self-managed, non-hierarchical and nonviolent society, using methods with those same characteristics. This preference will be apparent in my later examples and comments.

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Methods

Much of the Australian peace movement has become accustomed to using a standard set of methods, including:

- organising periodic rallies or marches, aimed at drawing maximum numbers, with 'big name' speakers as drawcards;
- speaking, giving interviews, writing articles and leaflets, and undertaking other communication activities, usually handled by a small number of 'experts' in peace issues;
- hosting international speakers and conferences, and running large newspaper advertisements;
- expending much effort to raise funds.

Many of these activities are extremely valuable. But there are some features of those methods worth considering critically:

- the dependence on high activity by the 'big names' and 'experts' with limited opportunities for involvement by many others;
- the action-depression cycle of demonstrations, in which key organisers burn themselves out in massive efforts;
- the tendency to have regular events (visitors, rallies, etc) not tied to a long-term campaign with clear or achievable goals;
- reaction to events rather than pressing ahead with positive long-term campaigns;
- much time spent on fund-raising and keeping organisational activities going rather than on the issues themselves;
- a tendency towards exhortation rather than action, arising from the non-participative nature of many activities and an orientation towards influencing decision-makers.

An alternative approach is to choose methods of organising and action which are aimed first and foremost at broadening the level of involvement in peace issues, and planning actions as part of a long-term campaign. In Canberra an attempt has been made to make Hiroshima Day activities more participative. These moves began in 1979 and have been developed since. On 6 August 1981 a rally was held which included no speeches or 'name' personalities, but involved instead local peace activists and supporters in singing, poetry and participative street theatre. On 8 August short protests were held at seven embassies (China, USSR, France, Israel, USA, South Africa, UK), involving street theatre, poetry, a skit, a die-in and a silent vigil, and involving several different organisations. Afterwards an intimate 'peace concert' was held, with local artists, to help create a feeling of solidarity among participants. The numbers attending these activities were smaller than might have been expected had 'normal' methods been used. But the feeling of renewed hope and commitment - whether to peace or to other social issues - among those who participated was quite extraordinary. In addition, the financial cost was minimal.

Another development in Canberra and elsewhere in Australia is the increasing use of the methods of nonviolent action training in meetings, campaign planning and preparing for actions. Prior to Anzac Day 1981 in Canberra, Women Against Rape held a large number of workshops for women who were planning to try to join the Anzac Day march to protest against rape in war, to give them preparation for using nonviolent methods in response to likely confrontation situations. This preparation helped to make the Women Against Rape action one of the largest - with some 250 women - and most successful direct actions in Canberra for many years.

All this is not to say that everything is wonderful in the Canberra peace movement, nor that what I have called 'standard' methods should be scrapped. I would argue that what is needed is a wider diversity of methods, and much greater awareness of the relation of methods to goals in any social change movement.

US military bases

Possibly the most widely shared goal among peace activists is removal of US strategic military bases from Australian territory. This is reasonable, since the Pine Gap, Nurrungar and North West Cape bases in particular represent Australia's most immediate link with the continuing confrontation between the two nuclear superpowers, the US and the USSR.

How can removal of the bases be achieved? In spite of the large amount of concern expressed about the bases, I have not come across a single analysis presenting a convincing series of steps by which their removal might be achieved. Long-term strategy within the peace movement regarding the bases is not so much explicit as implicit within actual campaigns. The basic approach seems to be to convince the ALP to adopt a policy against the bases, for the ALP to be elected to federal government, and for the policy to be implemented, with widespread community opposition to the bases providing much of the pressure forcing implementation of the policy.

There are several difficulties in this picture. First, achieving an anti-base ALP policy will be a sizeable effort in itself. Second, the ALP must be elected to government. Third, and most important, the ALP must enact its policy. Since the ALP did nothing to implement its anti-bases policy when in office in 1972-1975, and has since rescinded the policy, the obstacles are considerable, to put it mildly. So long as the bases remain strategically important for the US, Australian national decision-makers are more likely to be swayed by US government and military interests - and their Australian allies in government bureaucracies - than by party or popular opinion, at least in any situation short of a potential social revolution.

A fourth difficulty is that even if the bases were forced out of Australia, they could readily (though perhaps not cheaply) be relocated elsewhere in the region. In other words, if enough pressure could be developed to force removal of the bases from Australian territory, the bases might well be imposed somewhere else where resistance was less or was more effectively contained. Also there are intermediate possibilities, such as removal of one or more bases after they have become technologically redundant or obsolete. This would provide a sop to anti-base pressures but do little for the cause of peace.

In the light of these difficulties, there is room for a lot of thinking about strategies for opposing US bases, and even for questioning whether the goal of removal is sufficient.

One alternative approach is to treat the bases as an opportunity to directly challenge US military operations. For example, leaflets could be distributed to all workers at the bases encouraging them to be prepared to leak information or, more vitally, to subvert any use of the base to promote nuclear war-fighting during a crisis. Contingency plans for cutting communications to the bases during a crisis might also be prepared, and indeed for taking over or disabling the bases in a sufficiently unstable situation. Whether anyone actually decided on subversion would perhaps be beside the point. The main objective would be to sow seeds of doubt within the US military, making the bases less of an asset.

Such an alternative faces the problem of seeming pro-Soviet rather than anti-war, and counselling subversion would quickly be labelled as traitorous. But this would raise the very point of who the bases are serving. And appealing to the workers at the bases strikes at the weakest point of any military system: the motivations and commitment of its personnel.

Disarmament

'Disarmament' is a key catch-cry of the Australian peace movement, yet its meaning in practice is far from clear. Most of the concern expressed is about world military spending, with an emphasis on US technological innovations in the arms race, such as the Trident submarine and the neutron bomb. The implications for Australia of the call for disarmament are seldom elaborated. Is the goal a fully disarmed Australia? Or a conventionally armed, socialist Australia? Or simply a minimal level of armaments, sufficient for deterrence? or, indeed, more conventional armaments to defend a neutralist Australia? Would the military forces (if any) be professionals? Or would there be a citizens' militia as in Switzerland, or perhaps guerilla forces? The lack of clear goals regarding disarmament reflects in part divided feelings about violence and nonviolence as a basis for social struggle, as well as ambivalence about Australian nationalism.

The demand for 'disarmament' has resulted in much rhetoric in Australia - indeed by many of those who fund military programmes as well as by peace activists - but few concrete steps towards actually achieving it. Without clear goals, campaigns for disarmament are likely to be sporadic rather than systematic. Furthermore, the standard generalised appeal for disarmament is unconvincing to many people who see no alternative being offered to defend against potential aggressors, whether the threat is real or imaginary. The problem is a serious one, and arises in part from the lack of a positive alternative to military defence.

One such alternative is social defence (also called non-violent defence, nonmilitary defence, and civilian defence). Social defence is nonviolent community resistance to aggression using means such as strikes, boycotts, demonstrations, noncooperation with orders, and setting up parallel institutions. It is based on the insight that no regime, however ruthless, can survive without passive support or acquiescence from most of its subjects. The potential of nonviolent resistance has been demonstrated in quite a number of instances, such as the collapse of the Kapp military government in Germany in 1920, resistance to the Nazi occupation in Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands, and the resistance by the Czechoslovak people to the Soviet invasion in 1968. Since in most cases such nonviolent resistance has been almost entirely spontaneous, preparation and training for social defence would increase its likely effectiveness, just as preparation and training improves military defence. The methods of nonviolent action training are admirably suited for such preparation and training.

As a form of deterrence, social defence works partly by increasing the costs to an aggressor (factories don't work; transport and communications cannot be commandeered). Another source of deterrence is the potential effect of the defence on the people in the aggressor country. For example, if Australia were invaded by Indonesian military forces, a nonviolent resistance coupled with strong links between community and worker groups in Australia and Indonesia might well result in severe social unrest in Indonesia. The deterrence thus would gain its strength from the potential for dissent or revolution in the aggressor country.

Social defence requires widespread participation by members of the community rather than a professional defence force. As a campaign goal, social defence requires extensive grassroots organising; provides a positive alternative to military forces; is based on participation rather than following leaders; and can be used by any group opposing authoritarian forces, including those in communist countries. Because the methods used in social defence are valuable for social action campaigns of all kinds, from feminism to workers' control, social defence provides a basis for linking campaigns for peace with other campaigns for social change in the direction of equality and self-management.

Social defence is unlikely to be implemented by government or military leaders, but instead to be developed at the grassroots by those who will do the defending. In other words, in a campaign for social defence the methods should incorporate the goals.

In a campaign for social defence, the goal is no longer disarmament but rather 'transarmament', the conversion from professional military defence to community-based nonviolent defence. Such a conversion would by its nature be part and parcel of a wider social transformation.

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I have indicated that there are problems associated with some of the goals and methods of the Australian peace movement, and suggested some alternatives in the areas of methods, US military bases and disarmament. There are several other areas where rethinking and new initiatives would be valuable, such as peace movement links with social justice struggles in Australia and overseas (so as to challenge structural as well as direct violence), peace movement stances regarding both Soviet and US militarism, and responses to a nuclear attack on Australia.

Further reading

On nonviolent action training: Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser and Christopher Moore, Resource Manual for a Living Revolution (Philadelphia: New Society Press, 1978).

On social defence: Adam Roberts (ed), The Strategy of Civilian Defense: Non-Violent Resistance to Aggression (London: Faber and Faber, 1967); Anders Boserup and Andrew Mack, War Without Weapons: Non-Violence in National Defence (London: Frances Pinter, 1974). A broadsheet on social defence is available from Canberra Peacemakers, PO Box 1875, Canberra City ACT 2601.