



# Nuclear disarmament is not enough

**BRIAN MARTIN** discusses the dangers of the peace movement concentrating on nuclear disarmament as a central issue.

Nuclear disarmament is a key theme of the Australian peace movement. There are, for example, the various People for Nuclear Disarmament groups, the Nuclear Disarmament Party, and the major Nuclear Disarmament Conference held in Melbourne in August 1985. I argue that it is dangerously narrow to focus so much on nuclear weapons, and also to focus so much on disarmament.

The basic problem with focussing on nuclear weapons is that they are only one product of the war system. The history of modern warfare is one of recurrent technical innovation to increase the killing power of

weaponry. This process has been routinised in the past century through the heavy sponsorship of science and technology by the state. In effect, much of the knowledge and skills produced and used by science and technology is tied to the military aims of separate states<sup>1</sup>. It so happens that nuclear weapons are currently the most prominent of technological threats to human life. But the driving force behind the development of weapons of mass destruction is the state-technology system, not the weapons themselves.

As a potential solution to the problem of mass killing in war-

fare, the focus on nuclear weapons has several limitations:

- The killing power of conventional weapons has been increasing at a great rate for decades. A large-scale conventional war between major industrialised powers could kill many tens or even hundreds of millions of people.
- Even if all nuclear weapons were dismantled tomorrow, the capacity to produce new nuclear weapons would remain. With technological advances in uranium isotope separation, in a few years time it may be possible for small states and non-state groups to produce nuclear weapons without great difficulty or expense.
- Chemical and especially biological weapons have the potential to kill large numbers of people. Future biological weapons could

**“... the peace movement has no alternative to military defence which it can proceed to implement itself. By focussing on nuclear disarmament, the movement ties itself to a ‘see and plea’ approach of the sort which has failed time and time again.”**

easily pose as great a threat as present nuclear weapons.

Quite a few people realise that getting rid of nuclear weapons is not enough, but nevertheless think that concentrating on nuclear weapons is essential. One view is that cutting back on nuclear weapons should be seen as only the first stage of efforts against war. The problem with this is that most people, including members of peace groups, get caught up with the immediate demands. The peace movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s made the cessation of nuclear testing in the atmosphere a major demand, with the result that the Partial Test Ban Treaty in 1963 took a lot of the wind out of the movement.

Another stance is that the threat posed by nuclear weapons is so enormous and unprecedented that focussing on nuclear weapons is necessary to buy time for any other social action: if there is a nuclear war we will not be around to worry about poverty or sexism. In response I would argue that there is no automatic reason why ‘buying time’ is best achieved through a narrow concern about nuclear weapons. The effectiveness of social movements does not derive simply from the size of the threat to human life that they are protesting about, but rather from a whole range of factors, including the possibility of reforms, the bandwagon effect and the organisation of the movement.

Another argument is that a wider alliance can be built by focussing on nuclear weapons and not alienating people by bringing up other demands. The problem with that case is reliance on the lowest common denominator makes it difficult to achieve anything more than pious declarations. The heads of all the major weapons states tell us that they are in favour of ‘peace’, but that doesn’t achieve anything.

The major problem with the concentration on nuclear weapons

is that it encourages a technical fix approach such as the nuclear freeze or other agreements made by governments. The evidence is overwhelming that arms negotiations hold little potential for changing the war system, irrespective of popular pressure applied to governments<sup>2</sup>.

Quite a number of historical examples show the limitations for social movements of making demands which are too narrow. For example, the progressive movement in the United States around the turn of the century was a powerful reform movement. One of its major concerns was the abuses perpetrated by large corporations: monopoly, exploitation, etc. The focus was on *large* corporations, and the solution sought was ‘trust-busting’, in other words, using government intervention to break up the monopolies. As in the case of nuclear disarmament negotiations, there was more sound than action from politicians who took up the progressive cause. But the basic limitation of the approach was seeing the problem in the trusts rather than deeper in the capitalist system. It hardly needs mentioning that although some monopolies were broken up at the time, the size and power of US-based transnational corporations is greater than ever today.

A similar difficulty faced the first wave of the feminist movement when around the turn of the twentieth century — it made achieving the vote for women the major target. Barring women from voting was useful but — as later events showed — not essential to continued male domination. After the feminist movement achieved its immediate aim of the vote, it went into decline for decades. This is the great danger of focussing too much on ‘achievable’ reforms.

‘Disarmament’ is the other side of the central attention placed on nuclear disarmament. Disarmament is normally conceived as a

reversal of the armament process and as something that is undertaken by governments. The major limitation here, once again, is that concentrating on disarmament does not address the driving forces behind the war system. If the system of states, with each state founded on claims to a monopoly on ‘legitimate’ violence, is at the basis of the war system, then it is futile to expect to turn back the armament process by appealing to the rationality or political concerns of state elites<sup>3</sup>. And yet that is exactly what the Australian peace movement has attempted to do.

The main strategy of the Australian peace movement — inasmuch as a main strategy can be perceived — is to apply pressure to the Australian government to push for cutting free of the nuclear weapons connection. The major rallies have been largely aimed at getting as many people on the streets as possible, to impress the public and the government with the breadth of concern. Efforts to support the Democrats or the Nuclear Disarmament Party are designed to apply electoral pressure on the government to sever its links to the US nuclear system. The trouble with this is that the peace movement has no alternative to military defence which it can proceed to implement itself. By focussing on nuclear disarmament, the movement ties itself to a ‘see and plea’ approach of the sort which has failed time and time again.

Will getting millions of people into the streets force the government to take action? There were a million in the streets of New York in 1982. Furthermore, opinion polls show that a large majority of US people favour a nuclear freeze. Have the US policy-makers responded? Not in terms of the substance of their policies.

An analogy can be drawn with the movement against nuclear power. Initially the objections to nuclear power were very limited:

the hazards of nuclear reactor accidents, the environmental implications of heating up local water resources, the dangers of transportation of nuclear materials. These objections could have been answered by technical fixes, such as better safety precautions. But as a social movement developed around the world in the mid-1970s, the basis for concern broadened. It was realised that expansion of the nuclear fuel cycle could promote the proliferation of nuclear weapons, lead to attacks on civil liberties and create an entrenched political and economic system built around the nuclear industry. The campaign became one of stopping nuclear power entirely, not just making it safer.

As long as the anti-nuclear power movement was simply one of opposition, it was vulnerable to attack on the grounds that nuclear power was, or would become, an essential energy source, and also that nuclear power compared favourably with polluting alternatives such as coal. A great stride forward came with the elaboration of alternatives to nuclear power, notably the soft energy path. Energy efficiency and renewable energy sources can be promoted as a positive alternative, and activists could do much to promote them locally. At the same time, the critique of nuclear power as a 'hard energy source' was extended to other energy sources — including coal, oil and solar satellites — which are large scale, capital intensive, environmentally risky and dependent on control by experts and elites.

This experience points to the need for the peace movement to develop an alternative defence policy. In Australia, attention to alternatives has only developed in the peace movement in the past several years. Before that, a studied silence had been maintained. This avoided divisive de-

bates and also avoided coming to grips with the issues.

There have been several policy options advocated from within the peace movement. Almost all of them involve the removal of foreign military facilities from Australia, but beyond this there is little agreement. Some of the options are:

- conventional military defence with non-alignment;
- conventional military defence with neutrality (armed neutrality);
- defensive military defence (a military defence system without offensive weapons such as long-range bombers);
- guerrilla warfare defence system;
- social defence (nonviolent resistance by civilians).

The basic problem with the first three of these options is that they do not provide more than a limited challenge to the war system.

Take armed neutrality for example. Under this option, Australia would sever military ties with other countries and develop a self-sufficient military defence system in the fashion of Switzerland or Sweden<sup>4</sup>. One necessity in doing this would be a stronger and more self-reliant conventional military defence for Australia, either more expensive or more efficient than the present one. The danger would be the development of a powerful military-industrial complex in Australia. Rather than being tied to US militarism, the alternative might degenerate into an indigenous white Australian militarism. If serious external threats arose — for example the development of nuclear weapons in Indonesia — it might be difficult to resist pressure for Australian nuclear weapons.

The impact of Australian armed neutrality would be to weaken the extent of US military power, while setting up a more separate Australian military power. This

would change the configuration of global geopolitics, but would hardly threaten the state system itself and the associated drives for weapons of mass destruction at the service of states.

In spite of all these limitations and possible problems, I think armed neutrality for Australia would be a considerable improvement over the present armed subservience. But there is another problem: there is no mass constituency to bring about armed neutrality. The implementation of such a policy is something which would have to be done by the Australian government, since professional military forces would still be run by the state. Therefore, the basic way to push for armed neutrality is to argue its benefits to Australian defence policy-makers. In other words, the peace movement would only be using the standard 'see and plea' approach, this time to support armed neutrality as well as oppose nuclear weapons.

The only two defence options which can be promoted in a participative fashion are guerrilla warfare and social defence<sup>5</sup>. What 'participative' means here is that activists can go about setting up the alternative directly, rather than relying on persuasion or political pressure to get someone else — the government — to do it.

Social defence — which involves developing nonviolent methods such as strikes, boycotts, demonstrations and fraternisation to oppose aggressors, and developing links with democratic and antiwar movements within potential aggressor countries — has several advantages over guerrilla warfare as an alternative to conventional military defence.

- Social defence allows a wider section of the population to be involved in the defence. Guerilla warfare is usually dominated by young fit males.

**“The development of nonviolent resistance should not be pinned on fear of an invasion or coup, both of which are unlikely in Australia. Rather, social defence should be seen as a positive alternative to fear-mongering and reliance on government action, and as part of a wider programme to create a green society.”**

- Social defence is more compatible with the longterm goal of a nonviolent world. Many guerrilla struggles have been succeeded by conventional armies, as in Vietnam.

- Social defence involves a deeper challenge to the monopolies over violence claimed by states. It provides a means to resist not only invasions but also internal takeovers — something that none of the other alternatives do.

- Social defence can be developed without an immediate challenge to state power. Training and arming for guerrilla struggle would be severely repressed by the state.

- Social defence holds more prospects for building alliances with other social movements, such as the feminist, environmental and workers movements.

As well as arguing the case for social defence to government policy-makers, there are many things that people can do to promote it directly. They can canvass ideas for nonviolent resistance among suburban neighbourhoods, factory workers or professional groups. They can prepare inventories of resources, such as typewriters, photocopiers, short-wave radios and electrical equipment. They can organise training sessions and simulations. They can initiate demands for economic and technological restructuring, such as workers demanding machinery which every worker knows how to disable in an emergency. They can promote local self-reliance in food, energy, transport, education and health — all of which contribute to self-reliance in defence. Initiatives in these and other areas may become more attractive if, as past history would indicate, the usual activities of the peace movement produce at best limited gains.

A good way to promote social defence is in conjunction with other social campaigns, such as for worker self-management. The development of nonviolent resistance should not be pinned on fear of invasion or coup, both of which are quite unlikely in Australia. Rather, social defence should be seen as a positive alternative to fear-mongering and

reliance on government action, and as part of a wider programme to create a green society.

Less than five years ago, social defence was virtually unheard of in Australia. Indeed, for many years most discussion worldwide was by a few isolated scholars. In the past few years, the idea has gained considerable currency in Australia. The most receptive people are those who have trained for and participated in non-violent action, such as at the Franklin blockade. Support for the idea is not restricted to active members of the peace movement, and there is even some limited interest in the Department of Defence.

In many Western European peace movements, social defence is much higher on the agenda than in Australia. The West German Green Party includes social defence as part of its platform. In some countries such as the Netherlands there is some official interest. Social defence plays a small role as part of the Swedish system of 'total defence', which also includes military defence, civil defence, economic defence and psychological defence.

One of the common arguments against social defence, and indeed against any alternative to the status quo, is that it is 'unrealistic' or 'idealistic' and that 'people won't support it'. This is also the argument for sticking to the lowest common denominator, namely nuclear disarmament. There are several ways to respond to this argument.

First, I would say that the present military system is quite idealistic, insofar as its supporters believe that it holds any longterm potential for avoiding major devastating war, not to mention many current wars.

Second, positions based on minimal agreement, such as nuclear disarmament, do not necessarily build more support in the long run. Since even mild demands, such as for a nuclear freeze, depend on action by elites, the more likely prospect is disillusionment and wasting of support.

Finally, principled positions, such as the insistence on non-violence inherent in social

defence, are more likely to build commitment from supporters and respect from opponents than are compromise positions.

Many modern social movements are based much more on moral concern than on self-interest. The Australian anti-uranium movement, one of the strongest anti-nuclear power movements in the world, developed in spite of the fact that uranium mining posed no immediate threat to the health of most Australians. (Aborigines and uranium miners are the main people directly affected.) To play on the fear of nuclear war or to push for options such as armed neutrality on the parochial ground that they will protect Australians is to take too pessimistic a view of the potential for social action based on feelings of human solidarity.

Although I have concentrated on the attachment to nuclear disarmament within the Australian peace movement, there are numerous peace activists who take a much wider view. For example, the women's peace initiatives, including the actions at Pine Gap and Cockburn Sound, are based on an awareness of the connection between patriarchy and militarism. It is in such broadenings of the basis for peace action, rather than restriction to nuclear disarmament, that the best hope of the future lies. We can rely on quite a few politicians and state bureaucrats to take the narrow view. It is up to social activists to forge the wider connections.

#### Notes:

1. Maurice Pearton, *The Knowledgeable State*, Burnett Books, London, 1982.
2. Alva Myrdal, *The Game of Disarmament*, Pantheon, New York, 1976.
3. Brian Martin, *Uprooting War*, Freedom Press, London, 1984.
4. David Martin, *Armed Neutrality for Australia*, Dove Communications, Blackburn, Victoria, 1984.
5. The commonalities between guerilla and nonviolent forms of struggle are analysed by Anders Boserup and Andrew Mack, *War Without Weapons*, Frances Pinter, London, 1974.

Thanks to Phil Anderson and Gary Smith for useful comments.

Brian Martin is a lecturer in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science, University of Wollongong.