

Nonviolent Struggle and Social Defence

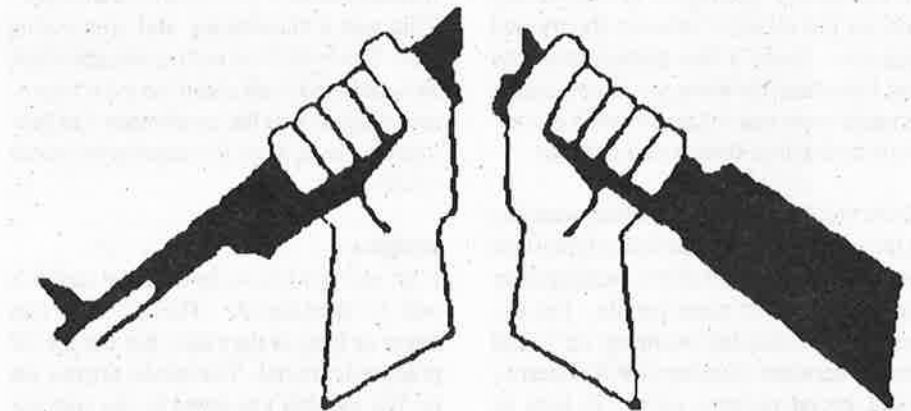
3-7 April 1990, Bradford, England

Conference report (1 of 2)

When I first heard about the conference on "Nonviolent struggle and social defence" to be held at Bradford in 1990, it seemed just the thing I had been waiting for. Most of the social defence conferences over the years have been oriented to academics or policy makers. The Bradford conference was first and foremost for activists, but with theorists participating. That was just what I wanted.

The conference was organised by War Resisters International, a group with an uncompromising antiwar stance and a radical analysis of the war system. It was hosted by the Bradford University School of Peace Studies, which has an excellent reputation. I expected to be able to meet several people with whom I had long corresponded about social defence, but never met.

My expectations about the conference were more than amply fulfilled. In fact, the five days were not nearly enough to benefit fully from the opportunities offered. There were more than 100 participants from nearly thirty countries, including nearly every Western European country, several Eastern European countries, the United States, Canada, Mexico, Palestine, South Africa, India, Philippines Hong Kong and Fiji. The largest contingents were from Britain, West Germany, Netherlands, East Germany, Spain and Belgium. Jerry Smith and I were there from Australia. Skilled interpreters, who offered their services free, interpreted in English, German and French. The sessions were held and meals served at a residence hall at the University of Bradford where many participants stayed, allowing nonstop conferencing throughout.



What then was the substance of the conference? A major resource was the experiences of many participants in nonviolent struggles in their countries. Most prominent were the dramatic transformations in Eastern Europe. The conference even allowed many participants from these countries to meet each other for the first time. There were also rich experiences reported from Ireland, Palestine, South Africa, Fiji, China and the Philippines.

The lessons were varied. In some situations, nonviolent struggle was in the flush of success, notably in Eastern Europe. In some places, as in Palestine, nonviolent struggle continues in a difficult situation. In yet other places, such as the Philippines, the apparent success of nonviolent struggle actually hides deeper, ongoing problems. It is unwise to

offer case studies in the success of nonviolent struggle without knowing a lot about the local situation. Another important message was the great difference between the political and economic context of the rich, industrialised 'first world' and the poor 'third world'.

The reports of concrete experiences of nonviolent struggle were, for some, the most important feature of the conference. But others were frustrated by experiences that were not comprehended by the use of theory. This issue came to the fore on the third day with Gene Sharp's presentation on civilian-based defence. Sharp uses the 'narrow' definition of social defence (which he calls civilian-based defence), namely as a functional replacement for military defence. He also thinks promotion of civilian-based defence should be separated from social movements and

'ideological' doctrines. This view sharply conflicts with a common view in Europe, which is to conceive of social defence as nonviolent defence by people of their way of life and their self-determination against a variety of threats, military or otherwise. (My own preference is to use the narrow definition of social defence but to link the promotion of social defence to broad social struggles. This cuts across the usual lines of debate.)

The issue of the conception of social defence was not resolved, but the discussion was valuable in focussing attention on the issue of getting rid of the military and on the relation between theory and practice. Quite a few participants who had been heavily involved in nonviolent struggle were not so familiar with discussions and action over social defence.

There were a number of plenary sessions at the conference, but the bulk of time was spent in various workshops, ranging from three to thirty or more people. For example, on Saturday morning we could choose between (1) education for international social defence units, (2) how to 'open' people to the idea of social defence, (3) disentangling from NATO, (4) spreading the idea of social defence in a Latin American context, (5), developing an international network to oppose coups, and (6) discussing the most feasible ways to keep each other informed of new thinking and news about social defence internationally.

There was considerable interest in activities in Australia. Although there is a high level of awareness of social defence within peace movement and green circles in many European countries, there is not as much experience with the practicalities of promoting and implementing social defence as might be expected. The booklet *Capital Defence: Social Defence for Canberra*, published by Canberra Peacemakers in 1986, has the desired practical touch. It has been translated into Italian and Dutch. Schweik Action Wollongong's project on communications and social defence also attracted interest. I came away from the conference much more convinced of the value of projects that reach out into the community and

encourage others to think about how they could use their special knowledge and skills to act against an invasion or coup. Material of a practical slant will find a ready audience in several countries.

It is always discouraging to work in relative isolation. The conference gave me a stronger feeling of the network of people interested in social defence, who will be a worldwide audience for our work here in Australia.

The organisers scheduled me to give a 30-minute talk at the end of the conference, intended to be a 'provocative summary'. This was a challenging and stimulating task. It provided me with an excuse to ask several individuals about the most important insights that the conference had provided to them. Here is a summary of some of them.

Insights

- No one yet knows how social defence will be introduced. The theorists can argue as long as they like, but the test of practice is crucial. The results are not yet in. We shouldn't be awed by the task nor by those who supposedly know better how to proceed. We are all learners in this enterprise.

- In nonviolent struggle, there are no pure situations where right and wrong are obvious and unquestionable. There are always complexities. For example, in the Philippines, nonviolent action was used to defend a general and a police chief who had been responsible for bloody repression under Marcos. There are even some cases where it is not appropriate to defend military deserters: they may, for example, oppose conscription into the Soviet army, but prefer to be soldiers in a fascist army.

The implication is that nonviolent action must always take account of the political circumstances. There are no simple, iron laws for its application.

- Closely related to this is the point that nonviolent action doesn't carry its own politics: it is a method, not a goal. What this means is that simply because you use nonviolent methods doesn't mean that

you automatically make the world a better place. Nonviolence can be used, intentionally or inadvertently, to support tyranny. The message here is that the use of nonviolent action must be accompanied by a careful social and moral analysis.

- A number of activists have found that there is a great deal of latent support for social defence among the general population. But this is seldom manifested in an overt way. The challenge is to tap this support, to unleash it to develop the alternative. It is not so much a matter of convincing people that social defence is worth developing, but of stimulating them to proceed with the job.

- Social defence won't come about in a single massive action. Instead, social defence is a process. Those who are promoting social defence are part of this process.

- Political parties may not be a useful way to achieve social defence. This seems to be the experience with the Green Party in West Germany. Political parties, after all, try to obtain mass support to get elected and exercise the power of the state — and military power underpins state power. Can political parties successfully strive for state power while promising to undermine it?

- The peace movement may not be the only or even the main vehicle for achieving social defence. The peace movement has its own agendas, bureaucracies and limitations, which should be recognised. The peace movement is certainly a good place to promote social defence, but there may be other places that are just as good or better.

- Different definitions of social defence serve different purposes. The narrow definition, calling social defence a substitute for the military, has the advantage of precision. The broad definition, calling social defence virtually any nonviolent action that defends vital aspects of 'society', has the advantage of calling attention to the wider struggles and power structures that must be addressed in changing the use of organised violence in society.

No insights

There were several areas which were not highlighted at the conference. I call these areas where there were 'no insights'. These are warnings about issues that shouldn't be overlooked. There are, no doubt, other such areas!

- The general mood at the conference was optimism: about the events in Eastern Europe, about the potential of nonviolent action, about the prospects for social defence. This is only to be expected. Activists can hardly expect to remain motivated if they look mainly at the gloomy side of things. Yet, what if there were to be a major war, even a nuclear war? What if there were to be a turn toward even more repressive regimes around the world? These possibilities cannot be dismissed. As well as optimistic plans for developing and expanding the social defence movement, it may be worthwhile thinking occasionally about what to do if things get much worse.

- The general assumption by participants was that the gains made in Europe and elsewhere are largely due to the efforts of movements for peace and democracy. But what if there are other reasonable explanations? For example, what if the gains could be traced to processes of economic and technological development? This possibility should not be rejected out of hand. Investigation into the effectiveness of nonviolent action needs to be tough-minded, willing to show, if necessary, the limitations or irrelevance of nonviolent action. A solid strategy can't be built on self-delusion.

- There were several views on how the military might be abolished. One is a planned, staged process of transarmament, after the population and policymakers are convinced of the rationality of social defence. This scenario - the Gene Sharp model - can be criticised as not taking sufficient account of the power of vested interests in military systems.

Another model is abolition of the army through referendum. The startling success of the campaign by Switzerland Without an Army in gaining more than one-third of the votes in the recent referendum has stimulated people in other countries to organise similar campaigns. Yet would the Swiss government have obligingly abolished the army if a large majority of the population had voted for it? I suspect that incredible pressures would have been brought to bear to prevent this happening. This scenario has its difficulties.

Finally, there is a model of introduction of social defence in a revolutionary situation, for example following a war or social upheaval. This scenario can be questioned too; plans for revolutions have, historically, often gone astray.

All this suggests that innovative thinking and action is needed to explore the possible ways in which abolition of the military could actually come about.

- Is now the historical opportunity to promote and introduce social defence? Many participants believed that it is. But there are no guarantees. Perhaps even with the greatest efforts, real progress

toward social defence cannot be achieved in the present world situation. The implication is that strategies must be for the long term as well as the short term. When the historical opportunity does appear, it would be nice to be ready!

Experiences

Like any conference, there were highlights and lowlights. The most enthusiastic reports from any activity came from participants at a feminist workshop (for women and men). On the other hand, there were plenty of boring talks; both at plenary sessions and workshops. The only difference is that the boring talks at plenaries bored more people at one time. As usual, the most fruitful dialogue occurred outside the formal sessions. The organisers hoped and planned that the agenda wouldn't get in the way of the conference. They were largely successful.

One of the key experiences from the conference was disagreement. There wasn't even agreement about defining social defence. This disagreement was stimulating, but it has its worrying aspect. If social defence activists can't agree about the basics, what about the rest of the population? Or is diversity a virtue in this case?

Enthusiasm was rampant at the conference. Many plans and promises were made. The real test will be whether this enthusiasm survives the conference. Promoting social defence is not easy, and the struggle can be demoralising.

The conference itself can be seen as part of the process of social defence. There was an enormous amount of sharing information and ideas, setting up of networks and making of plans. If there had been a military coup just after the conference in any of the represented countries, we would have been better prepared to act against it.

The final question presented to every participant was, what do I do next? That is the ongoing question facing every activist. There is no easy answer.

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