Nonviolent Action and People With Disabilities

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One of the often-noted advantages of nonviolent action is that it allows just about anyone to participate. Military troops, in contrast, mostly consist of young, physically fit men. Very few women, for example, engage in front-line combat. Civilian-based defense, the nonviolent alternative to military defense, uses lots of methods - including rallies, strikes, boycotts and sit-ins - that allow full-scale participation without regard to sex, age or ability. To be specific, that means that women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities or who are physically unfit can participate along with young fit men. The advantages of such participation include better representation of diverse needs and perspectives, greater opportunities for solidarity and potential for more shared knowledge.

However, there seems to have been relatively little investigation into what this inclusiveness means in practice. Here we focus on involvement by people with disabilities in nonviolent action. There are a number of questions that can be asked.

- What capabilities do people with disabilities have to participate in different methods of nonviolent action?
- What limitations are there to participation?
- What physical, psychological and other dangers are there to participation?
- What issues of consent are involved (especially for people with intellectual disabilities)?
- What symbolic advantages and/or disadvantages are there for nonviolent action in participation by people with disabilities?
- Which involvements by people with disabilities have the

Retired autoworker Charlie White (in wheelchair) takes part in a picket line in support of striking Registered Nurses (AFSCME Local 875) in Flint MI. White's participation was a significant morale boost: he is one of the surviving participants in the 1937 sit-down strikes in Flint. ***Photo by Phil Helms, courtesy of Michigan AFSCME News.***

greatest capacity to build solidarity?

Once we begin exploring these questions, it turns out that things are not as simple as they might have seemed at first glance. Yes, people with disabilities have a greater opportunity to participate in nonviolent action than in military action, but this statement hides a number of difficulties and opportunities.

(It should also be noted that with the greater use of advanced technology by military forces, more participation by a diversity of people becomes possible. One does not need to be a young fit man to push a button to launch a nuclear missile. However, exclusion of women, children, the elderly and people

with disabilities from military forces is common even when capacity to do the work is not an issue, for reasons that are beyond the scope of this article.)

Having a disability is frequently a serious obstacle to doing ordinary things such as traveling, shopping or eating. That means that being a nonviolent activist can pose special difficulties. To participate in a strike sounds easy enough, but is irrelevant for people with disabilities who are denied jobs. Joining a vigil sounds easy enough, but requires getting to the location and having support for the task, which, for example, might involve help in toileting or taking medication.

Exactly what people with disabilities can do depends greatly on the nature of their disabilities. The first image that comes to many people's minds is of someone in a wheelchair, or perhaps a blind person with a cane. Yet impairments such as paraplegia and blindness constitute only a small proportion of the total. The majority of people with disabilities are those with intellectual disabilities. Also important are psychiatric disabilities. Those who have only physical disabilities are disproportionately visible as spokespeople for disability rights. The society at large also usually accords them a higher status than people with intellectual disabilities.

In terms of participating in nonviolent action, the issues that arise can vary considerably depending on the nature of the disability. For example, consider a vigil. For someone with only one eye, there may well be no obstacles. For someone who cannot walk, getting to and from the vigil are key considerations, requiring either adequate social supports (such as wheelchair-accessible bus services) or personal support. For someone with a profound intellectual disability, issues of informed decision making are crucial in addition to supports required.

It is often useful to distinguish between impairment and disability. An impairment is physical damage or limitation, such as brain damage or absence of a limb, whereas disability is a lack of function in society. Many people have the impairment of poor eyesight, but suffer no disability due to the availability of glasses. The important point here is that disability does not

reside solely in the person, but results from an interaction between the person and society. The way society does or does not provide for people with disabilities is crucial.

Unfortunately, there is a long history of not just lack of support but active mistreatment of people with disabilities, who have been stigmatized, blocked from opportunities and often shunted away in repressive institutions. As a result of this sort of treatment, many people with disabilities have a heightened vulnerability to further wounding. This means that the task of enabling people with disabilities to participate in nonviolent action is not just one of removing obvious barriers, but may require serious efforts to compensate for the effects of previous treatment. In short, many people with disabilities need very high levels of support and protection before participation in nonviolent action should be considered a reasonable option.

On the other hand, people with disabilities have a tremendous potential for aiding nonviolent action, by setting an example of courage, by demonstrating community solidarity and even by undertaking actions not possible to others. In some environmental nonviolent actions, protesters lock themselves to machinery as a means of restraining its use until they are laboriously cut free. To hurt a person in such a vulnerable situation would be seen as cruel and could backfire against the perpetrator. Some people with disabilities would be, in suitable circumstances, equivalent to "locked down": their removal would require special care and any harm done to them would be especially counterproductive for the perpetrator. On the other hand, the protesters could be accused of using people with disabilities as cannon fodder to get sympathy for the cause.

More generally, a disability for other purposes does not necessarily translate into a disability for nonviolent action. In fact, some of the most serious drawbacks for nonviolent action are participants who cannot resist using or inciting violence, who are unreliable and who lie. People with disabilities are no more susceptible to these problems than anyone else.

In December 1999 a workshop was held in Wollongong, Australia to discuss nonviolent action and people with

disabilities. Participants included nonviolent activists and disability activists, with some individuals who had been involved in both arenas. The aim was to raise key issues rather than reach final agreement about any of them. We now turn to some of the points raised in the workshop.

Capabilities and actions

Can people with disabilities take part in nonviolent action? Are there particular actions suited to their involvement? Experience by and with people with disabilities suggests that, given sufficient support, they are generally able to participate across the full range of activities. It may be better to identify the most appropriate tasks needing to be undertaken at least as much as considering the abilities, skills and talents of those willing to act.

As a general principle, social movements should look to encourage people to utilize their capabilities and expertise and should be prepared to help them gain new skills and increased confidence about their various abilities. The situation seems identical for people with disabilities as for others.

Nevertheless, specific tasks can be identified that are uniquely appropriate for some people with disabilities, such as wheelchair park-ins. Wheelchairs are also particularly useful in blockades and can be highly effective in slowing down processes where that is the purpose of the nonviolent action. Some forms of noncooperation and protest may be well suited to some people with disabilities, such as turning off hearing aids so as to not even be able to hear orders let alone obey them. Two varying classifications of opportunities arise, one to do with intrinsic capabilities and the other to do with extrinsic limitations.

While the actions of people with disabilities may be identical to those of others, they may invoke different responses. People with disabilities may have very obvious needs which oppressors must either meet or ignore. If the oppressors choose not to meet these needs or do not allow them to be met, then their inhumanity will be highlighted. If they choose to meet them, on the other hand, then the oppressors' efforts are partially taken

up with responding to these needs. In an emergency situation, as could be expected in circumstances where nonviolent action is called for, this would be a distraction to the oppressors and a drain on their resources. But it is also beneficial for the social activists if the oppressor connects with people humanely, even if forced to do so. In any case, it presents the oppressor with a dilemma.

Participation in forms of action should be generally self-selected. It would be difficult for some people whose disabilities included fragile health, for instance, to go on a hunger strike. However, one of the aims of nonviolent movements should be to work towards the type of mutual support which enables activists to be aware of their own skills, talents, limitations and any dangers they face and to be capable of choosing actions accordingly.

Limitations are largely structural and tied to social and often economic deprivation, as well as varying degrees of institutionalization, both formal and informal, which can make people with disabilities feel more vulnerable. The vulnerability may be more than perceived. Institutions that provide funding, support and other resources have considerable scope for retribution against individuals they perceive to be "trouble makers."

Many of the physical limitations could be overcome if there were fewer structural limitations and different attitudes towards people with disabilities. Communication limitations also exist, especially for some groups, but these, once more, can usually be overcome, given adequate support.

The costs of action are not the same for all people. Because people with disabilities are more dependent on existing services, which are often inadequate, the costs of protest, as well as the dangers, can be far greater and may even have serious implications for health. For instance, for some spinal-injured people, a day devoted to an action without proper bladder care may result in bladder infections with serious complications. Pressure sores can result from lying on the ground or being jailed.

People "without disabilities" need to be aware of and sensitive to everyday issues faced by people with disabilities such as accessible space and transport needs, as well as to these greater risks that they face. In the face of insufficient resources and other forms of support, people with disabilities concentrate much of their energy on trying to meet basic survival needs, thus skewing the amount of energy they may have left for joining nonviolent action.

Moreover, due to their marginalization, they may also have less practice at being active participants in public protest. It is a case of doing what one can in the amounts one can, which must be the case for all activists, many of whom have personal and external commitments which limit the time and energy they can devote to social action.

However, there are strengths as well as limitations. Due to their life experience and emotional resilience, some people with disabilities can have enhanced skills as role models and mentors. Often they have had to learn to be resourceful and creative in the face of difficulties and emergency situations, and these abilities are very useful in nonviolent action. They may understand and more readily accept that support is an essential part of human life and, for this reason, can be excellent sources of support and adept proponents of where and how support should be provided.

As well as a plethora of individual and varied strengths, there are collective strengths as well. People with disabilities already have established networks and organizations and have tasted oppression first-hand, all of which can be used to make important links with other social activists.

Diversity strengthens nonviolent action through broadening people's understanding, experience and respect. The more inclusive nonviolent action is, the more representative it can be of the wider community.

Symbolism

The symbolic impacts of people with disabilities being involved in nonviolent action provide both advantages and

disadvantages. On one hand, it can be empowering for non-activist observers to see people with disabilities taking their part in social action. They may have a sense that, if those people can take a stand, then surely they themselves can. People with obvious disabilities can easily slip into hero roles, seeming all the more like martyrs because they already have so much to contend with.

There is a problem with this, in that it is an image that stems first from their disability rather than from them as people. Therefore it is an image that many people with disabilities would eschew. Similarly, people in wheelchairs might be the focus of the media when taking part in nonviolent action whereas in other forms of media such as in commercials, drama and televised sport, they are under-reported at best but more commonly ignored.

This heightened symbolism may itself exploit stereotypes, relying on notions that it is not "normal" for a person with disabilities to be so involved in social issues, especially those that are not specifically disability issues. Yet at the same time as these images, as portrayed by the media, play on stereotypes, they also challenge them, giving rise to questions about why people with disabilities should not participate in all forms of life.

Where people with disabilities participate in nonviolent actions, there is the danger that they will be seen by observers as being used or exploited by the activist movement for media promotion and as protection against attack. However, perceptions of outsiders should be secondary to the internal decision-making process within preparation for nonviolent action. Activists with disabilities must feel comfortable themselves with the roles they play and must feel safe from exploitation by those they participate alongside. This can be fostered by open discussion of the issues at meetings and self-exploration by all activists of their feelings and possible prejudices.

Informed decision making

In relation to those with intellectual disabilities, the issues are more complex and contentious. As mentioned, the question

of informed decision making is most important. While some see it as unethical to involve people with intellectual disabilities (especially those with severe or profound disabilities), doubting their capacity to understand the full implications of their participation and fearing that they can be very easily coerced, others feel it would be unfair to deny them the opportunity to become involved. Having information and freedom to explore all the ramifications is crucial and takes time, commitment and skill. There can be a delicate - and at times difficult - line between paternalism and providing as much information and emotional support as possible.

Certainly, it is very difficult for persons with severe or profound intellectual disabilities to make informed decisions about being involved in an action and to understand the repercussions of their involvement. Some think, for this reason, that people with intellectual disabilities, if involved at all, should be involved only in situations where there is no risk or cost involved to them, though others emphasize giving them every opportunity to participate. Consent is problematical whenever people do not fully understand the ramifications of their actions, whether the people involved have intellectual disabilities or not, so that proper planning of actions and discussions of all aspects of these actions are important both for the success of the actions and to ensure that the decision making is as democratic and sensitive to the group's and individuals' needs as possible.

However, not all coercion is intentional or even apparent. When one feels part of a group it can be more difficult to disagree or to opt out of the actions being planned. This is especially the case if a person regards the group as being of great personal importance and as one of the few sources of validation. Consent can be construed either from the point of view of the atomized individual or from the perspective of the individual embedded in a social context; the latter seems more applicable for social activism.

People with intellectual disabilities can also be at the mercy of their caregivers who may hold different opinions from them on issues of becoming involved. Those who take major responsibility for fully explaining all the issues, the actions and their implications are also charged with allowing the person with an intellectual disability to make an informed decision. They have subtle as well as overt influence and, if they have strong personal opinions, that may come across in ways which make it difficult for the cared-for person to resist.

Yet, despite these pressures and the potential for manipulation, people with intellectual disabilities often have their capacities underrated and should be afforded opportunities to participate. This requires the provision of sufficient time, resources, communication and a caring and sensitive environment within which all the issues can be adequately explored and discussed.

It is important that where there is "consent," or the expression of a willingness and desire to become involved, scope for consent should be continual so that consent may be withdrawn at any time. The issues must be understood in their complexity so that the person has a full grasp of them and not simply a skewed representation. Questions that arise will include: How much sacrifice is involved and is it deserved? Whose needs and desires are prevailing in the decision making? Also support must be ongoing, even between actions, since people with disabilities cannot necessarily "walk away" from the fallout which might come from protests and other actions.

There are costs involved in including people with disabilities, whether physical or intellectual, in nonviolent action. In the case of people with communication impairment, for example, meetings may need to be longer in order to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to hear everything that is said and to ask questions and voice their own opinions. Extra care and discussion will be needed in the case of those with intellectual disabilities. The convenience of some activists may be compromised as venues for meetings and locations for actions need to be decided on the basis of their accessibility as well as other criteria that may previously have been paramount.

There is also likely to be some cross-category politics and all activists would need to come to terms with stereotypes and

assumptions commonly held and other areas of ignorance. Furthermore, some of the questions regarding the vulnerability of people with disabilities and whether the personal benefits of their involvement outweigh the risks are not clear-cut and are far from resolved. We can expect that the answers will differ from one individual to the next.

Whenever the base of protest and social action is broadened, so is the potential for volatility. It must be part of the preparations for nonviolent action that plans are made to deal with this and to put in place mechanisms for handling conflict. The movement, as it includes more people with very specific needs, will need to address and attend to these needs but is still required to focus on external actions so will have to find a balance.

Conclusion

Participation by people with disabilities in nonviolent action should be considered normal and should be part of planning. There are various challenges involved in making this happen, some of which involve resources, logistics and costs, but the most significant are attitudes and social organization - the same things that are obstacles to people with disabilities in the rest of their lives.

The involvement, or lack of it, of people with disabilities in nonviolent action provides an excellent test case for nonviolent action, in several ways. First, since involvement is in principle supposed to be possible regardless of sex, age or ability, a test of nonviolent action in practice is whether full participation actually occurs. People with disabilities are often stigmatized, especially those with intellectual disabilities. Are they given support to be involved?

Second, people with intellectual disabilities provide a test case for informed decision making. Are they given adequate support to understand what is involved, being neither patronized nor automatically excluded? If an action group can address this, then it is likely to be able to handle other challenging decision-making issues, such as dealing with peer pressure and

involvement of people with heavy commitments in their personal life.

Third, participation by people with disabilities can provide a model for building community solidarity. By their participation, observers and opponents can observe inclusiveness in practice, which is a strength for nonviolent action. There may be costs incurred in achieving this inclusiveness, but it may lead to a greater community solidarity, something that is crucial to nonviolent action.

The more planning is involved in nonviolent action, the greater expectation there should be that people with disabilities participate both in the planning and the action. Civilian-based defense, being organized nonviolent action to replace the functions of military defense, of course requires a tremendous level of planning, so participation by people with disabilities should be built in from the start.

In this article we have focussed on how people with disabilities can contribute to nonviolent action, but there is another side to this process: how nonviolent action can support the cause of people with disabilities. These two dimensions reinforce each other. So a final test of nonviolent action is whether participation by people with disabilities leads to improvements for people with disabilities.

These tests for nonviolent action - participation, informed decision making, community solidarity and action for people with disabilities - are tough. Military forces fail every one miserably: few people with disabilities participate, those with intellectual disabilities are seldom fully informed, there is not solidarity with people with disabilities and no capacity to learn skills to support their cause. Furthermore, weapons and wars are major causes of physical, intellectual and psychiatric disabilities. Rather than making comparison with the military, nonviolent activists would be better to compare their practice with the ideal of participatory, informed, solidarity-building and skill-building action. It is a challenging goal but well worth pursuing.

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Is There a Better Defense Than War?

Art by Alan Zundel and Lyn Baum
Script by John M. Mecartney

The following four pages are sample pages for a comic book dealing with Civilian-Based Defense. The finished book was projected as 36 pages. Nonviolent Action for National Defense Institute (NANDI) planned to publish this book, but regrettably, the project has never been completed. The work was dedicated to the late Cesar Chavez, President of the United Farm Workers Union and a major advocate of nonviolent action. These sample pages are printed by permission of John Mecartney and NANDI.

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