

Activism after nuclear war?

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In the event of nuclear war, as well as death and destruction there will be serious political consequences. Social activists should be prepared.

The confrontation between Indian and Pakistani governments earlier this year showed that military use of nuclear weapons is quite possible. There are other plausible scenarios. A US military attack against Iraq could lead Saddam Hussein to release chemical or biological weapons, providing a trigger for a US nuclear strike. Israeli nuclear weapons might also be unleashed. Another possibility is accidental nuclear war.

Paul Rogers in his book *Losing Control* says that the risk of nuclear war has increased due to proliferation, increased emphasis on nuclear war-fighting, reduced commitment to arms control (especially by the US government) and Russian reliance on nuclear arms as its conventional forces disintegrate.

A major nuclear war could kill hundreds of millions of people. But less catastrophic outcomes are possible. A limited exchange might kill "only" tens or hundreds of thousands of people. Use of nuclear "bunker-busters" might lead to an immediate death toll in the thousands or less.

Nuclear war would also lead to increased political repression. Martial law might be declared. Activists would be targeted for surveillance or arrest. Dissent would become even riskier. War always brings restraints on civil liberties.

The political aftermath of September 11 - increased powers for police forces and spy agencies, increased intolerance of and controls over political dissent - is just a taste of what would be in store in the aftermath of nuclear war.

Being prepared for nuclear war is not defeatism but realism. Indeed, being prepared may make nuclear war less likely, as I argued 20 years ago in an article titled "How the peace movement should be preparing for nuclear war". Many of the points I made then are just as relevant today.

Groups should have contingency plans in case of emergency. It is worth asking, for example, "What should we do if key members are arrested?" Planning for such possibilities can be useful even if there is no nuclear crisis, since the group could come under attack for other reasons. Various scenarios should be considered, such as intensive surveillance, disruption, infiltration and public discrediting. Brian Glick's book *War at Home* is a valuable manual on this topic.

Resources could come under attack: offices destroyed, computers stolen, websites removed. This points to the value of having back-up copies of key information. The same applies to skills: if a knowledgeable person, such as a web designer, is not around, can someone else do the job?

Communication networks are absolutely essential in a crisis. Being able to obtain reliable information and consult with others is vital for taking action. Activists should have plans for maintaining communication links in the face of interruption and disruption. If the phones are taken out, for example, what other system can be used? Schweik Action Wollongong developed some exercises for strengthening communication in groups.

In a crisis, individuals and groups may need to act on their own. This could be due to arrest of movement leaders or to interruption of communication. When local groups have autonomy and many people have leadership skills, then it is easier to act effectively in a crisis. Generally speaking, decentralisation and self-reliance are an advantage.

If worst comes to worst and nuclear weapons cause physical effects close to home, then survival becomes a priority. It makes sense to know the basics about the effects of nuclear war - blast, heat, radiation - and how to protect. Knowing basic first aid is important too. There is plenty of information on what to do in the event of nuclear war, but most social activists have avoided even thinking about it on the grounds that preparation makes nuclear war more likely. I disagree. If activists are seen to be ready, this makes nuclear war less likely.

Nuclear weapons are severely stigmatised largely due to the efforts of peace activists. Governments have been reluctant to use nuclear weapons because they realise there will be an enormous political backlash. From the 1940s on, US leaders have considered using nuclear weapons on quite a number of occasions - such as during the Vietnam war - but always refrained, largely due to the fear of a backlash.

If, despite this, nuclear weapons are used, it is vital that social activists capitalise on the widespread revulsion that will occur. To do this, activists need to be prepared. Otherwise, the next nuclear war will be only the beginning of a series of nuclear wars.

A further implication is that activists need to be psychologically prepared for nuclear war. For decades, many people have thought of nuclear war as "the end": as extinction or the end of civilisation. But limited nuclear war has always been possible and even a major nuclear war could leave billions of people alive. Therefore it makes sense to think through the implications and make suitable preparations.

Nuclear war is almost bound to be a disaster, not only in human and environmental terms but as well in terms of political prospects for achieving a better world. Activists are doing what they can to prevent nuclear war, but they are not the ones who design and produce the weapons and prepare to use them. Given that nuclear weapons may be used despite the best efforts of peace activists, it makes sense to be prepared for the aftermath. That means preparing organisationally and psychologically.

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