COMMUNICATIONS IN A POLITICAL OR MILITARY CRISIS: A FOCUS ON SOCIAL ACTION

IMAGINE that another major Middle East war breaks out. US and Soviet nuclear forces are put on alert. Then, in extremity, either Israel or an Arab nation, or both, use nuclear weapons, killing a few hundred thousand people. Threats and rumours of global nuclear war abound. The US President declares a state of national emergency, suspending normal democratic procedures, 'Dissidents' are arrested; the media are censored. Similar measures are taken in the Soviet Union, and in many allied states on each side. Although the war ends fairly quickly, the repressive measures are not fully relaxed for years. Social struggles of all kinds, not only the anti-war movement, suffer an enormous setback.

Unrealistic? This is only one of many possible scenarios. Others involve limited nuclear war between the superpowers or in Europe, or nuclear terrorism. In each case the *political* aftermath of nuclear crisis or nuclear war could have more lasting and serious consequences than the immediate effects on human life and health. War and crisis tend to strengthen

Graphic by Helen Fitzgerald

centralised state power and its bedrock, the military establishment. In the long term, repression carried out in a nuclear crisis would probably increase the chance of further wars.

The ultimate crisis is global nuclear war. Even in this case, many tens of millions of people would remain alive in the US, Europe and the Soviet Union, as well as most of the rest of the world's population. Many of the elites of the nuclear weapons states, protected in their special bunkers, could well emerge and apply brutal policies to obtain economic and military recovery. Authoritarian governments, either autonomous ones or puppets of the superpowers, might well take power in relatively unscathed countries such as Australia, Japan and Spain. The stage would be set for a repeat performance in World War IV.

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For these eventualities the peace movements of the world are almost totally unprepared, as are other community action and workers' groups which would be targets for repressive state action. Yet nuclear war and nuclear crisis seem very likely to occur eventually. Proliferation of nuclear weapons capabilities continues, and will be spurred immensely once laser or other simple methods for uranium enrichment are perfected. There are no signs, despite massive public protests, that nuclear disarmament will come about very soon.
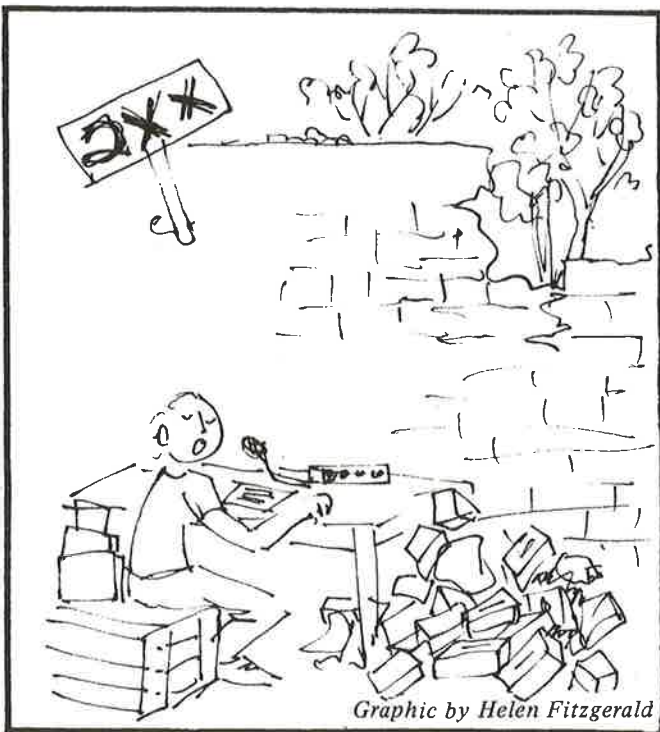
Resilient communications

To oppose repression associated with nuclear crisis and nuclear war, effective communications are absolutely vital. The key word here is resilience. In a crisis, centralised systems will be vulnerable. Not only are particular installations, such as broadcasting towers, vulnerable to physical attack. More importantly, if skills and knowledge are restricted to a select few, such as the ability to use a large printing press or a television studio, the operation will be vulnerable to the arrest or cooption of those select few, or to infiltration. A resilient communications system will not only be able to continue to function technically after destruction or removal of some of its physical parts, as in the case of a network of small presses, but will also function well after removal of key individuals.

Technological form is an important factor in assessing the compatibility of a communications mode with the potential for community and worker self-management, but hardware is not everything. In many ways a telephone system is decentralised in form — it is what Ivan Illich calls a convivial technology. But the system is vulnerable to disruption through the central exchanges and through the electrical power system. But if good relations are maintained between telephone user groups and workers in these areas, the system remains resilient against political disruption. Indeed, sympathetic workers can do much more than this. In a confrontation situation, they have the additional potential to disrupt communications between groups exercising repression and to warn targets of impending threats.

Social defence

Defence against repression in a nuclear crisis is one example of what is called social defence, which in a phrase is non-violent community resistance to aggression. It typically uses methods such as boycotts, refusals to obey, strikes, demonstrations and setting up alternative institutions. Promise of its effectiveness is given by historical examples such as the German people's resistance to the French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr in 1923, the struggle for Indian independence

under Gandhi, and non-violent resistance to the Nazi occupation in Norway and Denmark.

It is only since the 1950s that social defence has been coherently presented as an alternative to military defence, by people such as Stephen King-Hall, Johan Galtung, Adam Roberts, Gene Sharp, and Anders Boserup and Andrew Mack. Normally social defence is seen as an alternative to military defence on a national level, and is also called non-violent defence, non-military defence or civilian defence. But the same methods can also be used to resist military takeovers, as in the cases of the Kapp Putsch in Germany in 1920 and the Algerian Generals' Revolt in 1961, each of which collapsed after a few days due to massive non-violent civilian resistance.

The methods of social defence thus are applicable both to external and to internal threats. And once a social defence system is prepared and practised in advance, it would serve as a deterrent, just as military forces serve as a deterrent. But non-violent resistance has the advantage that no excuse is given to the potential adversary to arm, since non-violent techniques clearly have no military attack capability.

Communications are absolutely vital in social defence. Two keys to the non-violent resistance are unity and morale. These can be attacked by aggressors by the standard techniques of breaking contact between members of the resistance, and by creating disunity by coopting resistance leaders or breaking morale by eliminating leaders.

The role of radio was vital in the non-violent resistance of the Czechoslovak people to the Soviet invasion of August 1968. The Czechoslovak people were united in favour of the reforms to communist rule and against the invasion, to which military resistance would have been futile. The clandestine radio network played a crucial role in the spontaneous non-violent resistance. It convened the Extraordinary Fourteenth Party Congress, called strikes, gave tactical instruction on street confrontations, requested rail workers to slow the transport of Soviet jamming equipment, cautioned against rumours, and counselled non-violent resistance. According to researcher Gene Sharp, "The radio was the main means through which a politically mature and effective resistance was shaped".

The non-violent resistance was weakened when the Czechoslovak leadership adopted a more co-operative stance with the Soviets, whose promised concessions were later withdrawn. Long-term resistance to the invasion of any type would have been a near impossibility. But the radio was essential in frustrating the Soviet aim of quickly installing a pro-Soviet government in Czechoslovakia, and in unambiguously demonstrating to the rest of the world the sympathies of the Czechsolovak people.

The December 1981 military takeover in Poland also shows the importance of communications. Not only were sections of Solidarity isolated from each other by the communications blackout, but little news seeped through to the outside world. Without this shortfall in communications, internal resistance might well have been more effective, more instability caused in other Soviet bloc countries, and more effective outside protest mounted.

Communications campaigns

Although social defence has been ably promoted by at least some people as an alternative in *theory,* to my knowledge few if any grassroots campaigns have been developed around social defence. Yet there are several advantages to such a campaign. First, social defence is an alternative to military defence, and thus provides an answer to the central objection to peace activists, "What about the Soviets?" (or whoever).

The answer is that we resist and deter Soviet invasion with social defence, and promote use of social defence methods by the Soviet people to help undermine the repressive Soviet political system. Such a reply rather confounds the red-baiters. The goal of peace activists becomes transarmament (to social defence) rather than disarmament.
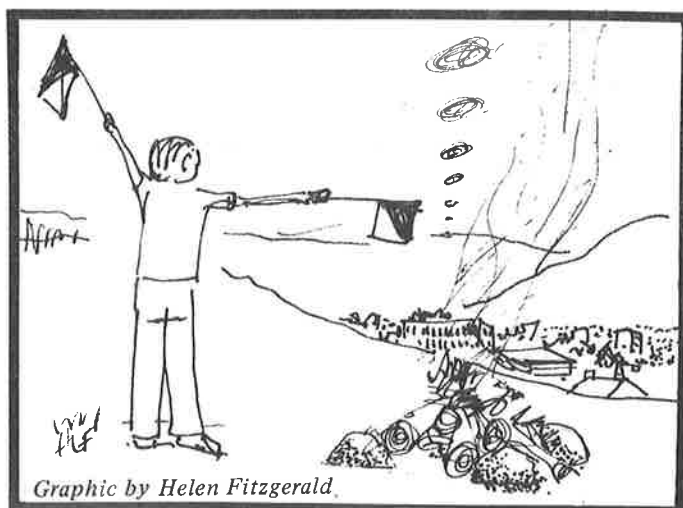
Second, social defence techniques are suited for resisting military coups as well as invasion. In many countries the military establishment is the greatest obstacle to freedom, democracy, or citizen-initiated social change. Social defence answers the question of "Who guards the guardians?" with "The people will be their own guardians, not the military".

Finally, the techniques of social defence are eminently suited for use by social change groups of all kinds, such as feminists, workers and environmentalists, in attaining their own goals. Thus, organising around social defence provides a basis for linking together grassroots struggles for peace with other like-minded social movements.

The small community action group Canberra Peacemakers is in the early stages of a campaign promoting social defence. After self-study, writing a broadsheet on social defence, and consideration of strategy, we decided to begin our campaign by approaching members of the nearby community radio 2XX. The station is run by its workers, and so we hoped to find some sympathy for the ideas of social defence, which is virtually unheard of in Australia. After talking to a number of people in 2XX over a period of time and appearing on a number of programmes, we organised a weekend of non-violent action training in December 1981. The purpose was "to design a strategy for workers at radio 2XX and supporters of 2XX in the event of a military takeover of the government or of an invasion, to write this up in leaflet form, and to design a simulation of such a situation".

The weekend went well, with some workers from 2XX attending along with members of Canberra Peacemakers. Although the chances of an invasion of Australia or of a military takeover are quite small, there are other threats worth taking seriously. Furthermore, the approaches developed in the simulation can be applied also in the event of particular threats to 2XX, such as a politically motivated attempt to close the station. Growing out of the weekend's activities was a sheet proposed to be posted in 2XX studios and circulated to 2XX workers.

Social defence is not a quick and automatic road to peace. It will require a lot of patient grassroots organising. Clearly, communications is a vital part of social defence. It is also a vital part of the organising.

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