

# Grassroots Action for Peace

by Brian Martin

**In formulating strategies for challenging and replacing the war system, it is not adequate to specify only what *should* be done. It is relatively easy to list desirable objectives and developments. For example, it would be nice to have stronger disarmament treaties, better measures for restraining the proliferation of nuclear weapons capabilities, more education of decision-makers and citizens about peace, counteraction of cultural glorification of violence and aggression, and more movement towards world economic justice and political freedom. But these goals will remain only hopes unless significant social and political forces can be mobilised to bring about radical changes in existing institutions which provide the basis for the threat of war.**

So not only is it necessary to envisage the sort of things that should be done, but also to assess the groups that are likely to take action. A look at history can quickly dispel illusions about some methods often proposed to end the threat of war.

History shows that decision-makers will not lead the way to disarmament. Their own positions are too closely tied to institutional relations which have spawned the threat of war. Convincing the decision-makers of the folly of nuclear war is not a politically realistic avenue for ending the nuclear threat.

Likewise, using the force of public opinion to implement disarmament is insufficient, since opinions by themselves do not fundamentally challenge the institutions which created and thrive on the threat of war and nuclear disaster. Public opinion may restrain aggressive tendencies, but has proved ineffectual in restraining the general progression of arms races. To be really effective, opinion must be transformed into action to challenge existing institutions and to build alternative ones. Furthermore, public opinion is readily manipulated through the media,

through education in national chauvinism, and through largesse from the military.

Also inadequate by itself to end the threat of war is the use of nonviolent action to protest against war. Such protest has a long but seldom publicised history, and includes methods such as meetings, talks and other educational efforts, demonstrations, marches, draft resistance, hunger strikes and entering nuclear test zones and blocking nuclear vessels. Such efforts undoubtedly have been valuable. But thus far they have had a relatively limited effect on the course of arms races. This is primarily because nonviolent anti-war actions have not been linked with strategies able to mobilise large segments of the

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populace. Protest provides an appeal to the public's moral concern about war but by itself does not challenge the institutional roots of the war system.

The inadequacies of the above approaches lie in their reliance on the power of knowledge and logic—knowledge of the danger of war and the rationality of departing from arms races—to lead to measures to avoid war. To have real impact, knowledge and logic must be linked with widespread grassroots political action.

The inadequacies of past efforts suggest that a movement to eliminate war should be based on a combination of theory and practice which provides a direct threat to vested interests in the war system. Such a threat would need to include direct means for overthrowing or transforming major war-based institutions, including arms manufacture, military establishments and national security apparatuses, and for creating alternative peace-based institutions. Only if such a transformation were a serious option would decision-makers contemplate taking real steps to dismantle the material and organisational basis for war.

This can be seen by looking at some past struggles for major social change, such as feminism, movements to end slavery and ethnic discrimination, and workers' movements. Rights for women, ethnic groups and workers came only after massive struggles which to a greater or lesser degree seriously challenged existing power structures. The basis for a peace movement is somewhat different than these previous struggles. Nearly everyone subscribes in principle to the ideal of peace. At the same time there is no special constituency that is disproportionately disadvantaged by war. But it has been natural constituencies—for example women, ethnic groups and workers—who have been most active in struggles for social justice. Some of the activists in these struggles could contribute strongly to efforts for peace if there were strong links—organisational links and links between campaigns—between a mass movement for peace and, for example, the feminist, ethnic rights, worker self-management, environmental and anti-nuclear power movements.

Knowledge and logic may be insufficient to eliminate the threat of war, but they are still necessary. It will remain vital to present arguments to decision-makers, undertake peace education and research, expose the ideologies of war and violence, and make approaches to workers, the media and scientists. Non-violent protest against war, although also insufficient to eliminate the threat of war, is also absolutely essential and

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warrants much more efforts. But to repeat, such efforts, in as much as they are based around disseminating information and exerting moral pressure, cannot succeed alone. They need to be underpinned by direct challenges to existing structures and collective efforts to create new ones.

### *Organisation and action*

The techniques and campaigns used to mount a challenge against war-linked institutions should be resilient against repression, cooption, infiltration, crisis and war itself. Centralised and hierarchical organisations and methods are highly susceptible to each of these threats. By comparison, decentralised grassroots organisational structures can provide a strong base for fundamentally challenging war-linked structures and for building peace-linked structures. Decentralised organisations can offer wide participation and face-to-face democracy in decision-making. When members of local groups understand the issues and participate in policy formation, the groups are less easily thwarted by loss or compromise of leaders or by the presence of infiltrators. The ability to take local initiatives and not be restrained by central directives gives strength against repression, and the ability and preparedness for taking initiatives in a crisis. Decentralised organisational forms allow for rapid expansion when the opportunity arises.

A foundation stone of activities by grassroots organisations is nonviolent action. The methods of nonviolent action have the advantage that they can be practised by all members of society, that they foster solidarity among the groups using them and that they reflect the sort of society being aimed for. Nonviolent action has been the official or unofficial basis for the bulk of the campaigns that challenged—successfully at least in part—slavery and the exploitation of women, minorities and workers. The techniques of nonviolent action include strikes, sit-ins, refusals to

obey and the creation of parallel institutions. They provide ample tools for fundamentally challenging the war system.

Decentralised grassroots organisations and nonviolent action should not be seen as designed solely for the purpose of social change activism. The success of organisations and methods for social change is intimately tied up with the internal dynamics of groups and communities and the personal growth of those involved. For example, it is important that these groups be enjoyable to work in and be caring and supportive of members. The form of the new society must be reflected, as much as possible, in the organisational forms and methods which are used to bring it about: in building community support networks, in group decisionmaking, in resolving conflicts, and in maintaining a balance between action for change in society and for change in the individual.

Next I will outline five components which I consider important in a strategy for peace: social defence, peace conversion, and struggles against economic exploitation, political repression and hierarchies. The focus of each of these components is initially in terms of challenging and transforming war-linked institutions. The other necessary side to each of these components is the building of alternative institutions for social order, economic production and distribution, and social decision-making.

### *Social defence*

An essential requirement for a strategy for peace is a means for responding to the threat of attack. The possibility of such an attack provides the ideological and psychological justification for the war system. In the case of nuclear weapons, it is no use advocating a stance of minimum deterrence: this does not eliminate the threat of nuclear war. What is required is deterrence or defence based on *no* nuclear weapons.

In social changes now considered progressive, the changes have been in the *direction* of democratising rights and prerogatives once held exclusively by elite groups in society. Work was partially democratised by the end of slavery; knowledge was partially democratised through mass literacy; political decision-making was somewhat democratised through the franchise; economic decision-making can be partially democratised through workers' self-management. How then can defence be democratised?

The nonviolent alternative to military defence is social defence (also called non-military defence, nonviolent

defence or civilian defence). Social defence is based on pre-planned and organised nonviolent resistance by a community to invaders or repressive rulers, again using tactics such as strikes, refusals to obey, demonstrations, and winning over members of the opponents. The potential of social defence has been demonstrated in a number of past circumstances, such as the collapse of the Kapp Putsch in Germany in 1920 and the resistance of the Czechoslovaks to the Soviet invasion of 1968. With greater planning and preparation in advance, the effectiveness of social defence would be greatly enhanced.

Social defence provides both an actual and a psychological alternative to military defence. To achieve maximum effectiveness as a part of wider changes involving the end of the war system, social defence needs to be organised on a local community level rather than on a national level, and to be built around decentralised grassroots organisational structures like those used to challenge the war system. Social defence also has the advantage of being based on the methods of nonviolent action. Groups which planned and practised for social defence would be able to use the same techniques for other social struggles. In this way social defence can help link together the struggle for peace with other struggles such as feminism or environmentalism which themselves can help to challenge the institutions which must be transformed to eliminate war.

Social defence normally is seen as a purely defensive measure, to be used solely against invasions or military takeovers to maintain what is desirable about present society. But in a wide-ranging transition to a nonviolent world, a broader interpretation is required. The techniques and organisational forms for social defence can be readily adapted to serve as a transitional method for social justice in a world only partially converted to nonviolent structures: boycotts, strikes, sit-ins and other nonviolent interventions can be used—as they often have been used—to pursue equality and freedom. It is because the fundamental requirements for social defence—namely, broad community participation and solidarity, and nonviolent action—reflect a desirable human society that social defence, unlike violent defence, can serve as a tool for creating a better society as well as defending aspects of the present one.

Finally, in a world largely based on nonviolence, preparation for social defence might well be necessary to protect against reversion to violent methods, or

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the creation of new systems of privilege and exploitation. Thus social defence should be developed with an eye towards its role not only in defending current desirable social values but also in forging and maintaining an equitable and nonviolent society.

The introduction of social defence cannot be attained by convincing government and military leaders of its rationality, which has been the approach most commonly adopted. These leaders have little interest in an alternative which will undercut the basis for their power and prerogatives. The introduction of social defence will require widespread action at the grassroots to broaden understanding and involvement in the alternative approach.

### *Peace conversion*

Another area of nonviolent struggle which is crucial in transforming war-linked institutions is the conversion of present military and other socially harmful and wasteful production to production for human needs. Existing production systems, and the commitment to them by economic and political elites as well as workers and local communities, are a key component of the arms race. These facilities cannot be transformed overnight. But peace conversion is not a problem that arises only after decision-makers decide that disarmament will take place. Conversion campaigns and initiatives are an essential component of a total strategy for peace, providing a strong push for disarmament as well as the knowledge and social base for implementing it. Conversion plans and campaigns, such as the Lucas Aerospace workers' initiatives, link together action for worker self-management, benefit to disadvantaged groups, protection of employment and consumer consciousness. Such campaigns can be linked with nonviolent action campaigns by workers and community groups.

So far, conversion campaigns and initiatives largely have focussed on ex-

posing priorities of existing production, developing plans for conversion and mobilising worker and community support for change. These valuable efforts need to be supplemented by efforts to develop the abilities of workers and communities to actively intervene to convert war-related production. People need to know how to dismantle weapons—including nuclear weapons—and weapons production systems, and to develop and manage socially useful production. Campaigns and training to intervene in production, incorporating such knowledge, could then become part of a wide process of social transformation towards a nonviolent society. In this, the building up of alternative production—including products and methods of production—is vitally important, to provide the basis for a self-reliant, nonviolent world. Changing *what* is produced is not enough, since industrial structures embody social relations such as hierarchy, fragmentation of tasks, and orientation to profit and social control rather than social use. As conversion of *what* is produced proceeds, so must conversion of *how* things are produced proceed.

### *Struggles for equity and freedom*

Another major area of social struggle linked with challenges to the war system is the struggle to end the exploitation of the poor and the poor countries. Such struggles challenge leading institutions in the superpowers. Once again, nonviolent action by grassroots organisations provides a base for such struggle which at the same time helps to challenge the rationale for armaments. Violent liberation struggles can lead to the ending of exploitation built on enormous institutionalised violence, but they also can help to justify the use of military force by neocolonialist powers. A wider use of nonviolent strategies by movements for the ending of injustice and exploitation would help undercut the support for violent means of social control in the superpowers, and so contribute to anti-militarist strength in the superpowers.

Another major area of social struggle of importance to the future of war is opposition to political repression. This includes campaigns to enable free speech and organising, opposition to intelligence and security organisations, redirection of the legal system to focus on abuses by policy-makers in business and government, and opposition to repression by police, prison warders, state-sponsored vigilantes and the military itself. These sources of political repression serve to stifle dissent in both communist and capitalist societies.

Besides the use of nonviolent methods, there are several other characteristics vital to campaigns to challenge political repression, in particular internal democracy and, so far as possible, openness. Again, a movement for social change desirably needs to embody within itself the characteristics of the future society being strived for. Since armaments are closely linked with repressive legislation and the ready use of infiltration, spying, and police and military repression of dissenters, campaigns against political repression are a key area in the struggle to change the institutions that create the conditions for war.

### *Challenges to hierarchy*

A final area of social struggle vital to the challenge to the war system is the fundamental one of ending hierarchies of formal political, economic and social power. Military arms races have not been the product of open decision-making by the populations of the arming countries. The key decisions have been made by a relatively small group of powerful people in a few countries.

It seems likely that a nuclear arms race could never have been initiated without the enormous disparities in political and economic power within and between different societies, which provide the basis for making key decisions and mobilising a sufficient degree of high-level and popular support for the decisions. From the dropping of the Hiroshima bomb to the present day, the control over the use of nuclear weapons has rested in a very few hands indeed. As long as such a concentration of vital political power remains, serious threats to human life and freedom will remain. Therefore, the challenge to power hierarchies in human society is a key component in a struggle to eliminate the threat of nuclear war.

The most important structure implicated in the war system is the nation state itself, whether organised along capitalist or communist political and economic principles. Struggles against the war system will need to confront the state, to challenge its existence and to promote alternative political and economic structures. World government is not such an alternative, since it merely recreates the hierarchical and repressive characteristics of existing states on a larger scale.

Even the threat of nuclear destruction might remain under world government, since rebel groups could develop nuclear weapons to use for bargaining purposes, and the central government

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might be pressured to be prepared to respond in kind. In the long term the only sustainable disarmament is one carried out not from the top but by popular involvement and enforced through popular inspection and vigilance. Alternatives which avoid these problems of the state system lie in the direction of local autonomy and democracy, self-reliance and self-management, with interaction through overlapping networks and through federations.

Nonviolent action by grassroots organisations also provides a sound basis for struggles against power hierarchies. Unlike much violent struggle, nonviolent action is premised on democratic involvement in deciding on strategies and methods and on broad participation in actions. Within a nonviolent grassroots movement, individuals can exert influence only through moral or persuasive means, not by the exercise of political or economic force. A nonviolent movement contains much less formal and enforced hierarchy than organisations based on the use of violence, epitomised by the armed forces.

Participation in grassroots organisations and nonviolent action also provide direct experience which challenges the psychology of obedience which is a key element in hierarchical organisations and the military in particular. Movements which provide challenges to present hierarchies and provide non-hierarchical alternatives—such as workers' self-management and community self-management—therefore can play a vital role in laying the basis for a society in which centralised political power and centralised military power are eliminated.

It should be clear that the strategy for peace outlined here cannot succeed without fundamental transformation of existing political and economic insti-

tutions, including the nation state. The assumption behind the strategy is that peace cannot be attained by merely reforming present institutions, since they themselves are the root cause of war. The alternative is institutional transformation: not the prevalent idea of revolution as a change at the top or dictated from the top by an elite group which uses violence to obtain and maintain power, but rather a revolutionary change in institutional arrangements attained by grassroots nonviolent action. On the stage of world history, the actors that will lead the way to peace are not nation states, but people.

I have described five areas—social defence, peace conversion, social justice for poor peoples, ending of political repression, and ending of power hierarchies—in which social struggles can contribute to the transformation of the institutions of the war system. Underpinning each of these struggles are the organising principles of decentralisation, participation, openness and democracy, and the use of non-violent action. Also vital to these struggles are focusses on challenging and changing structures in society rather than individuals or policies, on building alternative democratic and non-hierarchical institutions as well as opposing existing repressive ones, and on addressing down-to-earth issues which concern people in their everyday lives.

Groups pursuing these goals exist today in many parts of the world. Their members are relatively small, and their activities receive comparatively little media and public attention. Yet there is no automatic reason to believe that such groups are not the nucleus—spiritual if not organisational—for major challenges to the war system. A look at previous social struggles over slavery, feminism and the like shows that small citizen action groups cannot simply be written off as ineffectual. Once the historical conditions become suitable—such as the economic and technological changes which reduced the advantages of slavery to most of the population—it becomes possible for significant social changes to occur. It still usually requires a long struggle by people's movements to overcome vested interests opposing the change. Since large-scale violent warfare no longer seems functional even to many ruling groups, the historical opportunity for eliminating large-scale war may already exist. It will still require an enormous struggle to bring an end to the war system.

To aid this struggle, individuals and groups today can take action in any of the many areas such as those mentioned above, for example by promoting

social defence or opposing power hierarchies in schools, at work, in political parties or in military forces.

By using nonviolent tactics and approaches which mobilise rather than alienate potential sympathisers—who in principle are the vast majority of the people—a movement against war can grow very rapidly, as recent events in Europe have shown. This will especially be the case in a period of crisis when old certainties are toppled. The anti-war movement can aid this process by pursuing allies while not compromising essential principles such as nonviolence and internal democracy. Such allies could include many large groups with no special interest in war, such as farmers, churches and many corporations. It is absolutely vital to try to win at least a portion of the armed forces for a strategy of social transformation, especially since the military is often used as a last defence by political and economic elites against loss of their power and privilege.

To pursue allies is not to submerge one's cause or identity in other groups. Peace groups can probably be most effective as independent prods for social change, providing pressure from the outside on groups such as social democratic or socialist political parties, trade unions and churches, and supporting sympathetic activists working within these groups. Even if, for example, a social democratic party with a strong anti-war platform were elected to office, it would still require intense community pressure to counteract pro-military political forces. So while it is vital to take account of the full range of political groups when developing peace campaigns, the strategy outlined here is founded on grassroots involvement and action.

As well as seeking allies within each particular country, peace movements clearly must encourage and learn from parallel efforts in other parts of the world. A major social transformation eliminating the war system in a country or region, if it is to be emulated elsewhere and not attacked by outside forces, must be based on principles universally understood as basic. Non-violence, democracy, political freedom and social justice provide a platform that is widely accepted as desirable and hence likely to be contagious.

The adoption of sound principles, and continual communication with the public and with like-minded groups around the world, also provides protection against attempts by antagonistic groups to 'stamp out' a local grassroots

movement for peace. An attempt at repression, even if successful locally, could well create much greater activity elsewhere.

As well as liaising with peace groups in other countries, peace activists need to direct their efforts against all war structures, including those on the 'other side', whether capitalist or communist. One way this can be done is by communicating between individuals and local groups about methods and initiatives for attaining peace and social change. For example, western peace activists can make information about nonviolent methods for defence and social change available to citizens in eastern bloc countries. Just as military and political elites in antagonistic countries are each others' supporters against fundamental institutional change, so are grassroots organisations each others' supporters in attaining such change.

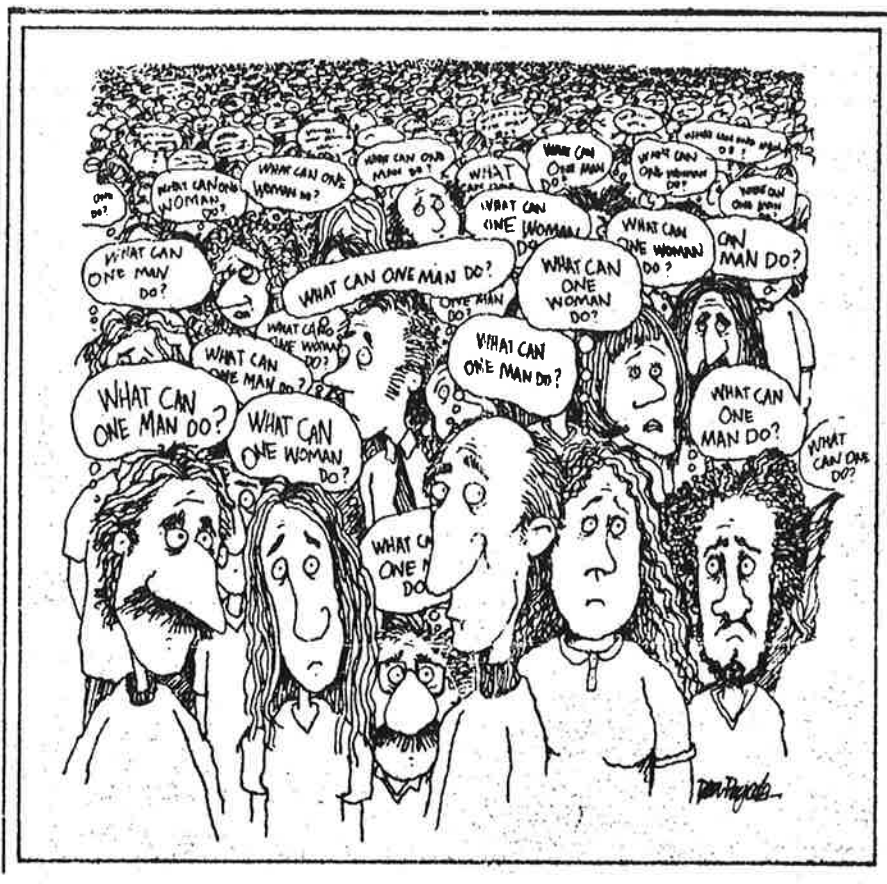
### A scenario

The effect of the above possibilities can be illustrated in a hypothetical scenario for the elimination of nuclear weapons. This scenario suggests a possible way, but by no means the only or the most likely path to peace. But it seems more likely than the possibility

that world leaders, agreeing that war is terrible, will actually dismantle weapons arsenals. A scenario is necessarily an exercise in speculation, but to try to achieve peace it is necessary to try to imagine how it might come about.

As technological developments in the 1980s and 1990s increased the likelihood of nuclear war, a greatly enhanced citizen protest movement arose in western countries. This was closely linked with campaigns against nuclear power, with struggles for political and economic independence in many smaller nations (such as in the Pacific region) and with increased assertiveness and questioning of existing social goals by workers and consumers. These struggles placed heavy burdens on governments in the superpowers and their close allies to maintain the legitimacy of massive spending and aggressive stances. These governments tended to become more overtly authoritarian, reflecting a breakdown in the usual ideological means for social control.

These challenges were augmented by a number of major crises over a period of years, including military confrontations, which generated awareness of the immense dangers inherent in nuclear technology. Along with growing challenges to hierarchical power structures, these crises showed the fragility in the conventional means for decision-making.



During one of these crises a major breakthrough occurred in Britain—though it might have been elsewhere in eastern or western Europe, or even in the US or Soviet Union. In the face of massive disaffection, initiatives by workers and citizens demanding socially useful production and social justice and local self-management, and a widespread peace and anti-nuclear movement, a reform government was elected which in turn was forced to act by further decentralising power. One of the key actions by the government was to dismantle Britain's nuclear weapons arsenal; already widespread action had been taken throughout the country to propagate understanding and involvement with social defence and peace conversion. As in all such changes there was considerable violence, mainly on the part of police and other state functionaries. But due to the widespread support for the changes and the organisational and nonviolent discipline of the activists, there was considerable sympathy for the changes within the military and, hence, a coup was averted.

This breakthrough was not an isolated event, nor did it happen overnight. It occurred in a period in which massive challenges to the military/violence approach were being made in countries around the world. The British experience provided added stimulus to these challenges, including changes in education and media coverage, movement of information and nonviolent action training throughout the world, setting up of sympathetic groups, a large increase in the use of nonviolent techniques, the formulation of large-scale strategies for nonviolent revolutionary social change, and the collapse of many dictatorial regimes in South America, the Middle East, Africa and East Asia.

With the threat of massive changes in existing power structures, elite groups in the major political and economic powers increased their efforts to discredit and subvert the nonviolent action movements. But at the same time significant fractions of ruling establishments took moves to coopt efforts for change by actually moving towards nuclear disarmament. In this way the pace of social change was slowed in some countries.

Generally this was the way massive institutional change or the threat of it led to disarmament in the Soviet Union, China, France, US and other countries. This by no means meant the end of social struggle. Inequalities and injustice and power hierarchies remained. But the continuing struggle was waged for the most part non-violently: ideologically, economically, politically and socially, but not militarily. The military approach eventually came to be rejected as being inhuman, rather as slavery had been rejected earlier.

These changes did not happen quickly or uniformly, and were punctuated by periods of activity and quiescence and by areas of

progressive developments and pockets of resistance. It was perhaps surprising that no major nuclear war occurred during this period.

This scenario may seem unrealistic. Perhaps it is, but consider first that there has been hardly a single encouraging move towards real disarmament for several decades, in spite of relentless efforts at convincing or influencing decision-makers. Apparent advances, such as the ban on nuclear tests in the atmosphere and arms control agreements, have served mainly either to dampen public concern or regulate arms buildups. On the other hand, consider phenomena such as the rise of the black civil rights movement in the US, movements towards less authoritarian socialism in countries such as Chile and Tanzania, the uprisings in France and elsewhere in May 1968, the rise of vigorous feminist, environmental and anti-nuclear power movements around the world, the self-management initiatives of workers at Lucas Aerospace and other industries, the early stages of the revolution in Iran and the rise of the Polish free trade union movement. These developments have not always been ideal or ended well, but they each point to the potential for social change embedded in grassroots nonviolent action. That they have largely been unforeseen by conventional political commentators and analysts merely shows the narrowness brought about by looking at things from the point of view of elites. To expect further related developments coming from the grassroots is not only realistic but is essential for those who want to join in changing society for the better.

To bring about a lasting social transformation which lays the basis for the elimination of war will require many decades or centuries. During this time arms races may well continue and nuclear war may occur. But it is not the number of weapons that provides the resistance to efforts for peace, but the vested interests built into political, economic and military institutions. It is through challenging and eroding these institutions, both gradually and in spurts, and the building of new institutions, that the path to a war-free world lies. The path is not guaranteed, nor will it be easy. But the direction of the path is clear for those who want to start along it.

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#### Notes and References

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