

The Australian Post Office and Social Defence

Communications are crucial in a crisis such as an invasion, coup or struggle against a repressive government. In such critical situations, aggressors regularly try to spread disinformation through the mass media, suppress news about resistance activities and practise extensive censorship.

In Czechoslovakia in 1968, the nonviolent resistance to the Soviet military invasion gained incredible strength from radio broadcasts by resisters which gave news of military and political developments, called a Communist Party Congress and advised on methods of nonviolent resistance. The Soviet military brought in jamming equipment as soon as they realized what was happening, but the resisters were able to broadcast word of this, leading to the relevant rail cars being sidetracked. Eventually the equipment was airlifted in.

In East Timor in 1975, the Indonesian invaders cut off independent communication to the outside, and in the following years did everything possible to stop such communication. In the 'emergency' in India 1975-77, government control over the media meant that massive demonstrations in one part of the country were virtually unknown elsewhere. In Poland in 1981, the military cut off telecommunications out of the country soon after the coup. In the coups in Fiji in 1987, control over communications once again played a crucial role. The military regime tried to get people to surrender their short-wave radios. In the crushing of the pro-democracy movement in China in 1989, the government tried to stop outside communication; in this case, fax machines, which were not controlled centrally, allowed messages to get through for a while.

It is not for nothing that many military coups begin with an occupation of television and radio stations, and that repres-

sive governments jealously guard their monopolies over the content of the mass media.

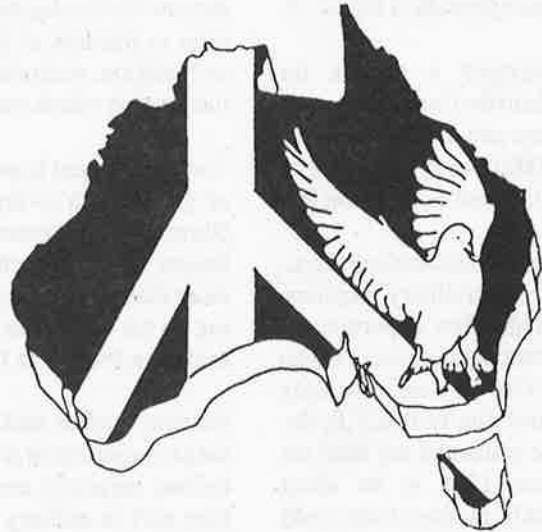
Schweik Action Wollongong is a small group devoted to studying and promoting social defence. We decided to undertake a project focusing on communications, since communications are as vital to nonviolent resistance as to a regime. Just as a regime needs to communicate with its many parts, so too does a resistance. Social defence as an ideal requires the mass involvement of many people acting against a regime in many decentralised groups. Communications are vital to the effective coordination of the resistance.

The functions of communications

For both sides, there are two basic functions of communications: mobilization and coordination. Mobilization is the process of gaining and maintaining support, both from existing sympathizers and from those less committed. Coordination

is required to make best use of those forces which are mobilized. Communications channels are crucial in this. For example, television, radio and the press shape people's perceptions to a great extent, so control over their contents plays a major role in mobilization. Coordination is aided by network communication systems, especially word-of-mouth and the telephone. Controlling channels to other countries primarily serves to prevent international mobilization of resistance; controlling channels inside a country serves both to prevent internal mobilization and to coordinate the regime's activities.

Many people have an image of a repressive regime as a totally ruthless, all-encompassing controller. This has never been the case. Usually the issues are not completely clear: many people don't know who they should support or what they should do.



There is often considerable room to resist. Newspapers may function near normally; telephones operate, largely untapped; mass meetings are held; strikes and sit-ins are carried out. True, there is usually repression in the form of arrests, sackings, new regulations or killings. But resistance does continue, including much open resistance, even under ruthless regimes such as in Chile and Argentina in the 1970's. The key in this situation is winning over uncertain people and getting those who are supportive to take effective action. For this, communications are crucial.

There are, of course, many communication channels, including television, radio, newspapers, magazines, leaflets, CB radio, short-wave radio, fax, electronic mail, word-of-mouth, speeches and graffiti. In order to start with a manageable project, we chose one particular channel: the postal system. This includes the mailing of letters, periodicals, advertising and parcels.

We approached our chosen area, the post, in two ways. First, we searched for studies of the post, especially in resisting repression. Second, we studied Australia Post, the Australian government postal authority, through documents and interviews.

Studies of the post

Today, most people in Western countries take the post for granted: it is expected to be fairly efficient and highly secure. There is censorship in wartime, to be sure, and also some programmes, for example by the US Central Intelligence Agency, to record information on the outside of mail, or even to open it. But aside from these special cases, the post is generally fairly reliable and secure. But this is a relatively recent development in the history of the post.

In the earlier eras, mail was both unreliable and subject to being opened and read. The precursors of the post were courier systems, such as runners in the service of a ruler. The early postal systems in Europe were initially designed to serve monarchs: only the business of the crown was involved. Through a gradual process

of development (in the case of England, at least), the posts were opened for commercial business and hence to commercial pressures. Protest from powerful users of the system gradually led to improved service and standards of security.

Businesses demanded a prompt and reliable service if they were to prosper. Foreign governments registered outrage if their correspondence was tampered with. The security of today's post has largely resulted from the continued complaints about abuses and poor service.

Most of the historical information that we have been able to obtain about postal systems is not directly relevant to social defence. The main relevant area is censorship, which is a government's attempt to restrict communications among its potential enemies. Even the writings on censorship are not all that revealing, since most of them are about government policies, such as which categories of mail are inspected and which types of information are censored. What would be more useful is information about the organizational structure of censorship systems, and this is hard to obtain.

The articles about censorship do reveal that complete censorship of every item cannot be implemented at will. There is always a struggle over the nature and degree of censorship, and also possible avenues within censorship systems to get around the controls.

It is these possible avenues that are of most interest. In general terms, a censorship system involves selection of certain categories of mail for examination, such as all mail going to or from a foreign address. Low level employees separate out the relevant items (and may have the opportunity to sidestep the process). Suspect items are inspected by low level censors; special cases are seen by higher level officers.

The functions of the post in a social defence situation can be divided into four categories:

- communication among resisters;
- communication within the regime;
- communications between resisters and

the regime, either openly or covertly (as through intercepted mail);

- routine business, for example, for economic purposes.

In promoting social defence, there are two interrelated goals concerning the postal system. The first goal is the practical, immediate one of seeing what can be done to help any resistance in terms of any of these four functions. The second goal is developing a postal system which, by its structure, serves the purposes of social defence.

There is one especially good way around a postal system, and that is the existence of competing postal systems. Private couriers are one possibility. So are special systems set up by the resistance. In general, the more decentralized the postal system, the better the prospects of the resistance. If all mail has to go through a central office, censorship is aided; if local sorting and delivery is possible, resisters have a better chance of avoiding it.

Australia Post

Historically, Australia Post has been a highly hierarchical organization, with a traditional line-of-command style of operation, ranging from the Managing Director at the top, through general managers and postmasters and finally to workers at the bottom. In recent years there has been some reshuffling of the hierarchy and the introduction of a new wage system. Previously, centralization meant that most letters had to pass through Redfern mail sorting centre in Sydney, Australia's largest city. This gave the Redfern workers a stranglehold over the system. Since the mail strike at Redfern in September-October 1985, Australia Post has been moving towards restructuring at all levels. The strategy involves "*bringing in much of its management from private enterprise, decentralization, regionalization, the devolution of authority and the redirection of the organization's industrial relations policy.*" (Business Review Weekly, 6 June 1988, p. 37)

Since that time, A\$80 million has been spent on moves towards decentralization and multiskilling of workers. The Red-

fern centre has been closed and eight Sydney suburban centres established. This represents a significant move towards decentralization for Australia Post. In addition, transportation of mail is also becoming decentralized with the increasing use of road and air instead of rail transport, especially for non-standard articles.

Through our interviews it became apparent that many features of Australia Post today could lend themselves to the practise of social defence if the need arose.

Mechanized sorting

The postal system, although it varies from state to state, is generally highly mechanized. Purposeful disruption or 'alteration' of machines is likely to be relatively easy. For example, the mechanized system requires envelopes to be a certain size and thickness. In addition the stamp must be on the top right hand corner. If either of these things are not the case then manual sorting is required. If postal sorters supported the resistance, they could arrange for failure of the mechanized sorting, and then use manual sorting to divert the mail appropriately.

Postcodes

A person punches in postmarks at the sorting centre. This person could easily selectively type in the wrong postcode, thus slowing down delivery or diverting selected letters.

Surveillance

In most sorting centres there is a security system of panoptic cameras on the roof. Films from these cameras are monitored by security personnel in a separate part of the building. If there were a social defence supporter amongst the security staff a blind-eye could well be turned to sorters carrying out social defence tactics. Alternatively, the cameras could be disabled.

Spoken communications

Australia Post is a truly 'multicultural' organization. There are over eighty nationalities employed in the New South Wales state system alone. If the different cultural groups were to speak their native language at work, this could negate some types of surveillance. The numerous

languages could not possibly be understood by the half dozen or so security officers at each centre.

Sabotage

Direct sabotage, such as putting sand into the tanks of delivery vehicles, would be effective in slowing deliveries and hence at hindering the regime's operations. However, this might well also disrupt mail to others and reduce support for the resistance. Sabotage would need to be very selective.

Trade Unions

Australia Post has a long history of industrial strife. If trade unions were sympathetic to the resistance, they could easily call a strike or a work-to-rule, justifying it on traditional grounds of wages, conditions or trade union coverage.

Workers and social defence organizers are likely to have common interests in increasing the autonomy of workers. On the other hand, trade union bureaucracies could well be a hindrance to social defence, since the top union officials are targets for cooption or coercion by the regime.

Lessons

Our study has been only a preliminary one, but it has been useful for us in gaining insights into how social defence might work. There are a number of things we learned from the study.

- The post is a crucial communications system, yet there are very few writings which give practical information relevant for social defence.
- A project provides a useful reason for interviewing people and talking about nonviolent resistance to aggression. They are the experts on the topic, not us, contrary to the usual role of social defence advocates.

- It can be hard to gain cooperation in undertaking a study in a sensitive area. Higher echelon individuals in Australia Post did not wish to talk with us.

- There are many specific things to do in a social defence effort, and the people in each local situation can easily think of them. The key to effective resistance is not the capability to resist, but the knowledge of what general aims are sought and the willingness to pursue them.

- A rigid hierarchy is the worst kind of organization for mobilizing resistance. A centralized bureaucracy is ideal for being taken over by an aggressor. Decentralization and devolution of power to the workers is vitally important if social defence is to work.

- Much attention needs to be given to parallel postal systems. The greater the number of separate worker-run postal and courier channels there are, the harder it is to impose censorship.

- Development of nonviolent resistance in the post office cannot be separated from social defence efforts in other parts of society, such as workers in other communications areas, industry, schools, etc.
- Social defence in the postal service in one country can be aided greatly by sympathetic actions in other countries.

We are looking forward to hearing from others about historical examples or present prospects for the use of communications against repressive regimes. We hope to broaden our project to deal with electronic communications and to link with people involved with issues such as privacy and social justice.

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