

Gun control and social revolution

By Brian Martin

Gun control is typically presented as a measure to reduce the dangers of murder, suicide and accident. But it can also be interpreted as "disarming the people". After all, "gun control" takes weapons out of the hands of ordinary citizens but not out of the hands of police and soldiers.

Does gun control help or hinder social revolution, a transformation of social structures towards cooperation, equality and justice? Leninists have long seen armed struggle as an essential part of overthrowing the capitalist state. Thus, for a people's revolution to occur, the people must be armed. Gun control, which means giving power to the state to restrict the weapons people can own and use, thus seems counter-revolutionary.

This picture had some plausibility in the 1800s, before the great advances in military and police technology of the last century. If the most advanced weapon available is the rifle, then an armed population can take on military forces with some chance of success. But in any industrialised country today, the state is militarily superior to even the most well-armed insurgents. In a direct armed conflict, the military will always win hands down.

A few industrialised countries have taken the road of arming the population. Switzerland is often cited as an example of how gun ownership is compatible with a high degree of democratic control. But another example is former Yugoslavia, where a state policy of arming the people has contributed to the bloodshed after central control dissolved.

The fundamental problem is that the state has poured vast resources into developing ever more deadly weapons, and these weapons are of far greater value to state elites than to popular oppositions. As a result, armed liberation is at best a deadly process. For example, the war for Algerian independence cost a



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million lives. To imagine armed "liberation" using nuclear or biological weapons is a contradiction in terms.

In a situation where the state has an overwhelming superiority in firepower, political struggle provides the best chance for challenging state power.

It has long been the case that guerilla struggles have worked at least as much through political work as force of arms. The dilemma is that the use of violence by opponents of the state often has the effect of legitimising state violence — which usually is far more deadly — and reducing the chance that soldiers and police will defect.

A different model of social revolution is to rely entirely on non-violent methods of struggle such as rallies, marches, vigils, strikes, boycotts, work-to-rule, sit-ins and setting up alternative institutions. It is much harder for state elites to justify violence against non-violent protesters than against armed guerillas. For this reason governments often try to provoke opponents into using violence.

In the past decade there have been some prominent examples of social change brought about largely through non-violent action. In 1986, "people power" was crucial in toppling the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines. In 1989, mass rallies and emigration were part of the process of undermining the communist states in eastern and central Europe. Eleven dictatorships in Central and South America were overthrown through non-violent insurrections from 1931 to 1961, and there have been numerous successful non-violent actions in Africa in the past two decades.

So far, however, the potential of non-violent action is largely unrealised. The proponents of armed revolution can point to a long tradition of writings, systems and experiences.

By comparison, the promotion of non-violent revolution has hardly begun. It would mean, among other things, education in methods of non-violent action; development of links between movements within and between countries; simulations; development of appropriate technologies for communication and survival; and development of knowledge and practical skills in psychology, organising, tactics and strategy.

Gun control in its present form is a mixed measure. Its main value is in reducing the social legitimacy of weapons and violence as an everyday activity. Its main limitation is a neglect of military and police weapons.

As well as challenging the legitimacy of guns for the population, it is also necessary to question the need for police to be armed and to raise the idea of social defence, namely popular non-violent action as an alternative to military defence. To help bring this about, the general population needs not to be armed with weapons but with skills and resources for non-violent action. ■

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