

Following-Up Gandhi

Strategic Nonviolence

by Dave Lewit

Was Mahatma Gandhi a spiritual leader who made a political mess of India, ignored by a world that took war for granted? After all, close to a million Indians—Hindu and Muslim—were killed by one another when in 1947 Gandhi reached his goal of getting Britain to quit India. And after that, armed conflict continued unabated—Korea, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Chechnya, Colombia, Somalia, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iraq, Lebanon... Is this the nonviolence that Gandhi had worked so hard to achieve?

As peace education expands, more and more people have come to realize that strategic nonviolence—groups from a large nonviolent base withdrawing cooperation with oppressors over a period of years—gets results with far less loss of life than with armed rebellion. Further, the organizing that makes this possible also makes possible a popular democratic state or system of governance with less wasteful and painful jockeying for individual or factional power.

To wake folks up to the power of strategic nonviolence, we at the Boston-Cambridge AfD sorted through much history and came up with a 45-minute script—a group reading—called Gandhi Circles. We tried it out on September 20—one hundred years after Gandhi's stirring, no-nonsense speech to 3000 Indian settlers in South Africa who were about to undergo racist restrictions by the British colonial government. His speech in Johannesburg pledged a critical mass of oppressed people to defy those laws consistently—*satyagraha*—Truth-Force—and after eight years the British negotiated with the Indians and withdrew the laws.

This is the first part of our Gandhi Circle readings. Then comes a review of Gandhi's decisive Salt March in India in 1930. The readings go on to recount illustrative nonviolent struggles in Denmark under the Nazis, Alabama under segregation, South Africa under apartheid, Poland under communist rule, and Bolivia under feudal-capitalist authoritarianism. All this is knit together with narrative introduction and passages which also touch on other nonviolent conflicts.

The packet of readings—from strategists and scholars such as Gene Sharp, Peter Ackerman, Brian Martin, and Jorgen Johansen—contains our sample set of discussion questions which participants reviewed during the break before discussion. But never mind! Our dozen participants came up with their own questions and comments during a very lively discussion relating what they had read (one paragraph per person through 28 paragraphs, round-robin style) to our own situation today in

the US and the world. One hour proved too little—participants want to continue this discussion in the weeks ahead. Here are some concerns raised:

- Is there a role for violence, at least in small doses, or defensively, or symbolically?
- How to overcome fear of being hurt or jailed, which stopped me at Selma?
- How to choose a boycott target, and who gets hurt?
- Does nonviolence provoke violence?
- After a coup, as in Chile, does the struggle continue underground?
- With Gene Sharp's 198 nonviolent methods—which methods are better, and when?
- Mexicans in Oaxaca are rebelling, nonviolently taking over city halls and radio stations. What can make that happen here?
- Is property damage "violence"?
- Can a nonviolent movement work without TV?
- Why didn't massive, worldwide protests stop the Iraq invasion?

Boston-Cambridge Alliance hopes that we can have dozens of civic, church, and school organizations doing Gandhi Circles soon in dozens of cities and towns across the nation. Your help is needed. A worldwide understanding and harnessing of strategic nonviolence may be necessary to stop corporate domination and to nurture community-based regional development.

The entire packet with narration, questions, and appendix can be copied from
NewEnglandAlliance.org.

Dave Lewit is Co-Chair of the AfD Corporate Globalization/Positive Alternatives Campaign, 617-266-8687, boston@



graphic: i madonnari festival

Talking with Gene Sharp

Venerable nonviolent struggle historian and theorist Gene Sharp shared these thoughts.

I have concentrated on the nature of nonviolent struggle so people could know they could do something rather than being passive. There are acute conflicts with very serious issues at stake which you feel you can not compromise on—issues in which the conflict has to be fought out. You have to think rationally and strategically and plan how a struggle can be done skillfully and effectively. You can do this with lots of thinking and analysis and knowing what has been happening in other struggles.

You have to analyze the nature of your situation. What is wrong? Why it is wrong? Where the weaknesses are in the system. How the victims of the present situation can become empowered and how to mobilize their latent power capacity into real power so that they can stand up and change things.

Nonviolent struggle is collective stubbornness. It is people that stop cooperating in something they think is wrong where their cooperation is needed. Sometimes they intervene in the system or disrupt things.

When your opponent's moral authority or legitimacy, human resources, economic resources and sanctions and punishments are restricted and do not provide a source of power, then the power in the government is weakened and eventually it can be brought down, not by overthrow, but by disintegration and weakening.