

Building Real People Power: Formulating Strategy

By

Barbara Peterson

**Monograph Series
Number 1**

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Nonviolent Citizen Action

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Nonviolent Citizen Action – Mission

The mission of Nonviolent Citizen Action (NCA) is to help develop knowledge, understandings, and efficient use of nonviolent action to promote human rights, environmental sustainability, economic justice, emancipatory democracy, and human equity and liberty. This mission is advanced through educational forums and discussions, public talks, educational workshops and trainings, social media posts, and publications of books, pamphlets, scholarly articles, and newsletters. The work produced by NCA is informed by the latest theoretical literature on nonviolence and related subjects, on readings from practical experiences in nonviolent struggle, and in personal experiences of work in nonviolent resistance. NCA is a non-partisan grassroots organization that supports people seeking to redistribute power in society more equitably for the purpose of carrying out the goals stated in our mission.

About the Author

Barbara Peterson is a veteran activist and scholar for social justice. She began her activism in high school where she supported the Clamshell Alliance in their efforts to shut down work on the Seabrook, NH nuclear reactors. Throughout college, she joined protests against nuclear weapons proliferation and apartheid. In graduate school, she became interested in Gene Sharp's writings on the history, theories, and methods of nonviolent action. Most recently, she founded Nonviolent Citizen action, a grassroots organization whose mission is to help develop knowledge, understandings, and efficient use of nonviolent action to promote human rights, environmental sustainability, economic justice, emancipatory democracy, and human equity and liberty. Her scholarly work is in the area of peace education and teaching nonviolence to promote social justice and democracy. Her book, *Reclaiming Power: Building a Stronger Resistance in the Age of Trump* was published in September 2018 by Piscataqua Press. In addition, through NCA, she launched NH-CAN (New Hampshire Citizen Action News), a newsletter that profiles each issue a different grassroots group in New Hampshire that is working to promote economic justice, human rights and equality, and environmental sustainability.

Introduction

This pamphlet is the first in a series of monographs, instructional readings designed to help build the sort of people power movement that holds government officials and corporate directors accountable to the interests and needs of all individuals, particularly those most vulnerable to political, social, cultural, and economic oppression. In any system where decisional and financial authority is in the hands of a relatively few individuals, there is bound to be significant corruption that benefits the wealthy minority at the expense of the majority.

While it is nice to believe that if activists can provide ample proof that those in positions of power have committed and continue to commit acts of moral outrage, that those powerholders will change, at least for the self-serving purpose of gaining a positive public opinion which lends legitimacy to their occupying positions of such great authority. Yet, history shows that this is not the case. Those who enjoy material and political power do not give up any of it unless they are forced to do so.

Nonviolent resistance movements are most effective when they are able to take power away from the corrupt few and redistribute it more equitably throughout society. Such movements require far more than showing how harmful current powerholders are and demanding that they change. Instead, successful movements require the level of commitment, organization, and strategy employed by their opponents. If a resistance group is fighting for change at the government and structural levels, they are fighting a highly organized system willing and amply prepared to not only fight back but to win.

There is a vast and critical difference between resistance movements that engage in serial protests and movements whose actions are part of a planned-out, detailed strategy with sequenced tactics designed to escalate over time so they successfully undermine the power of corrupt political and corporate office holders. Effective nonviolent action, according to Sharp (1990), “is a means of combat, as is war. It involves the matching of forces and the waging of ‘battles,’ requires wise strategy and tactics, and demands of its ‘soldiers’ courage, discipline, and sacrifice” (p. 9). Most people know that militaries are experts in fighting an opposing party that is strong, firmly entrenched, and highly organized. Thus, we look to them to understand how one group can effectively force

another, even one that is seemingly stronger and better equipped for combat, to relinquish enough power to make it more democratically distributed among the people.

Taking lessons from the military, we learn that there are, at minimum, 8 essential steps in winning a war: intelligence gathering, articulating a vision and goals, gaining popular support, training and education, formulating a strategy, engaging in conflict, building replacement structures, and consolidating gains and making transitions. Imagine trying to win a war without the aid of the intelligence services gathering vital information on their opponents and even on their own socio-political contexts. No military has entered into a war without having a clear vision of what they are hoping to achieve. Wars are costly and require at least a minimum of support from their own people so they don't oppose it to a degree that it undermines the country's ability to engage fully in the war. Furthermore, no one would even consider going into combat without having trained and educated leaders and trained soldiers. And, imagine military leaders fighting a war without having developed a fulsome and detailed strategy. Wars also cannot be won unless soldiers fight on a continual and persistent basis, and once they win, the victors must stay and help rebuild in order to realize their initial vision. Finally, if the vision is to be sustainable, the victors must work with all sides in the battle so everyone can come together and create a plan for maintaining the changes that the vision requires.

In this monograph pamphlet, the focus is on step 5 of the 8 essential steps: formulating a strategy. Other pamphlets in this series will take on the other steps as well as important considerations to keep in mind in building people power. The hope for this *Building Real People Power* series is to educate and inform people on how they can build a movement that will force their opponents to give up enough power to have it shared more equitably among all the people and the systems, structures, and organizations they build during the movement. In short, this monograph provides a concise outline of steps one can take in formulating an effective nonviolent strategy for wielding real power.

Important Definitions

Action: The carrying out of tactics in a specific event. An example of an action is the 2017 Women's March; it's the carrying out of an applied method (a march) used in a particular manner at a specific time and place.

Areas of Concern: These are categories of grievances within movements. For example, some areas of concern within the economic movement may be fair tax policies, strong labor unions, living wages, equal pay for equal work, and green economic policies.

Campaign: The carrying out of a strategic plan to achieve a particular goal or objective within a movement is called a campaign. Various campaigns make up a movement. A particular school district's teacher strike may be one campaign with the goal of gaining living wages and respectful working conditions.

Categories of Contention: Within a resistance, there are many different grievances. These grievances can be broken down into large categories that constitute the different movements of the resistance. For example, a resistance may contain such movements as economic, environmental, human rights, and government accountability. Categories of Contention are broken down into Areas of Concern.

Goals: Each campaign has a goal, and there are many goals within each movement. Goals are often broken down into different objectives.

Methods: Methods are types of actions activists can take as part of their nonviolent arsenal. Some examples are: marches, labor strikes, bird dogging, human chains, and setting up alternative organizations.

Movement: A movement is the umbrella term for an entire resistance. It is also the name for all the different organized efforts centered around the general categories of contention. So, there is a grand movement, or movement-of-movements, and within that are general categories of contention which make up the different movements within the resistance.

Objectives: To accomplish goals, various objectives must be achieved. They are smaller goals that must be attained in order to reach the larger

goal. If an activist group has as a goal to raise workers' wages, some objectives may be to convince enough workers that they should strike, gain support from the public for the strike, and undermine the powerholders' ability to command obedience without question.

Strategy: An articulated plan of action that uses available information and resources to engage in a series of tactics sequenced deliberately to achieve one's goals.

Tactics: A method or set of methods applied for use in a specific time and place and in a particular way to achieve articulated goals or objectives.

Importance of Strategy

1. Just as one would never send soldiers into a violent battlefield without a strategy for defeating the opponent, nonviolent campaigns should not send activists into the field without a strategy to win.
2. Strategies enable a campaign to plan an effective escalation, which is needed to force authority figures to take heed of the activists' demands.
3. A series of protest actions that are not part of an overall strategy is akin to a military general sending in troops to fight randomly chosen battles against a more powerful opponent who employs high-level tactical strategic planning. The general may win a few battles, but s/he is not going to win the war.

5 Fundamental Steps in Formulating a Strategy

Step One: Examine Information from the Intelligence Gathering

1. Before planning out a strategy, it's important to have a good understanding of the mood and attitudes of the public. Nonviolent resistance movements cannot hope to win if they are not able to, over time, earn the support of the masses. Gaging the current mood and attitudes help activists develop an effective publicity campaign to persuade others of the righteousness of their cause.
2. In any endeavor to win an advantage over a powerful opponent, it's important to conduct an open-minded analysis of both the opponent's and one's own strengths and weaknesses. It would be foolhardy to believe that any group could achieve victory without knowing how to utilize one's strengths to target the opponent's weaknesses, how to undermine the opponent's strengths, and how to fortify one's own weaknesses.

3. No fight occurs in a vacuum. Instead, struggles for power occur within the context of other groups and organizations, some allies, some neutral, and some oppositional. Forming alliances with supporters and reaching out to neutral parties to eventually build alliances with them is a necessary part of winning.
4. Formulating a strong strategy means using as many nonviolent weapons as possible. To determine which methods may be most useful, it's helpful to examine other nonviolent struggles that occurred under similar circumstance. Using the Global Nonviolent Action Database (<https://nvdatabase.Swarthmore.edu>) at Swarthmore College allows one to gain insight into what tactics and strategies tend to be successful and which tend to fail in circumstances similar to one's own.
5. Activists also need to appreciate the socio-political context in which they are operating. Strategies will be different in strong democracies than in more fledgling democracies where there are far fewer NGOs that can provide a structural aid to activists' goals and actions. More authoritarian societies have very different considerations when formulating strategies; they may need to maintain a level of secrecy, particularly at first, and their need for foreign allies may be more important.
6. Finally, activists should examine a cost-benefit analysis. Knowing what the proposed changes will cost one's opponent helps activists propose a viable solution that is more likely to earn the public's support. Also, knowing the time, energy, and financial costs for the activists to win will also help the activists develop a realistic and effective strategy.

Step Two: Map Out Goals and Objectives

1. In most resistance movements, there is a shared feeling of moral outrage against a more powerful group or societal institution, usually a political group and their supporters such as corporate leaders. Typically, this outrage contains several categories of contention. These categories form the different general movements of the resistance. For example, there may be an environmental movement as well as human

rights, economic justice, health care, educational opportunity, and government accountability movements.

2. Within each general movement, there will be major areas of concern. For example, within the environmental movement, there will be concerns about deforestation, ozone depletion, clean water, clean air, etc.
3. Within each area of concern, there will be different goals. In the pursuit of clean water, one goal may be to prevent fracking; another goal may be to find alternatives to laying oil pipelines.
4. To accomplish a goal, there will need to be several objectives identified. For example, to provide clean water for a community, one objective may be to clean up an area landfill; another objective might be to stop a local fracking project. The carrying out of a strategic plan to achieve a particular goal or objective within a movement is called a campaign.
5. When beginning a campaign, it is important to map out where the goal or objective fits within the constellation of the general movement's goals and areas of concern. This helps the activists as well as the public and the opposition see how the campaign is part of a larger strategy.
6. Being aware of how an individual campaign helps achieve the broader goals of a movement is important in keeping activists motivated.
7. When the opposition is confronted by a relatively small, local action, they are not very threatened and, thus, not likely to be moved by the activists' demands. On the other hand, if the opposition knows the action is part of a larger, consciously coordinated mass movement, they will feel far more pressure to meet the activists' demands.

Step Three: Identify Targets

1. Examining the information from the Intelligence Gathering will help activists discover appropriate initial, smaller targets and later, larger targets.

2. To determine the best targets, activists need to identify the opponent's weaknesses (which will be found in the Intelligence Gathering). Often times, it's necessary to make relatively small achievements before a movement is ready to accomplish larger goals.
3. Choosing initial targets also involves selecting an individual, group, or organization that is vulnerable to a relatively short-term resistance effort. Having successes allows the movement to gain confidence, earn more followers, and train activists in essential skills in order to achieve successes against larger targets.
4. Once targets are chosen, activists can begin to more clearly identify and articulate goals and objectives for achieving their overall vision.

Step Four: Create an Outline of Sequenced Tactics

1. Using the information from Step One: Examining Information from Intelligence Gathering, begin to sketch out different methods that may be used in the 4 different stages of escalation.
2. From the sketched-out ideas of methods to be used, develop a more detailed outline of tactics to employ during the 4 different stages of escalation.

Escalation

- a. People in positions of power and privilege generally do not give up their power and privilege willingly. Thus, to redistribute power and resources more equitably throughout society so people have a far more meaningful say in the democratic decisional processes, power and privilege must be forcefully restructured.
- b. Escalation helps prepare the activists to engage in riskier tactics, and it helps prepare the public for supporting such tactics.
- c. There are 4 levels or stages of escalation: publicizing and persuading, legislative and legal lobbying, undermining power of authority figures, and seizing power.

- i. Publicizing and Persuading: The purpose here is to publicize the grievances of the activists and persuade the public to support and eventually join the resistance. Methods typically used in this stage are: marches, vigils, social media posts, artistic expressions, opinion pieces in mainstream news sources, public forums, and radio and television broadcasts.
 - ii. Legislative and Legal Lobbying: The purpose of this stage is to pressure legislators into heeding the wishes of the resisters. Some methods for this purpose are: voting, contacting legislators to try and persuade them to enact, support, or oppose certain policies, speaking at legislative hearings, bird dogging, supporting political candidates, and running for political office.
 - iii. Undermining Power of Authority Figures: The purpose of this stage is to call into question the power of those in positions of authority by showing them that their ability to command the obedience of the masses is not certain. Examples of methods often used at this stage are: workers' strikes, boycotts, foot dragging and slow-downs, and civil disobedience.
 - iv. Seizing Power: The purpose of this stage is to force those with power to give some up in order to redistribute it more equitably throughout society. Some examples of methods in this stage are: setting up alternative decision-making structures, getting support from a significant portion of law-enforcement and military personnel, massive and persistent work stoppages, and shut-down of major societal institutions or industries.
3. As actions take place, continue to refine the strategy so it reflects the changing circumstances due to the impact of one's own campaigns, that of other campaigns, and of events by those outside the resistance.
 4. Be sure to continually articulate the role the individual campaign plays in the constellation of campaigns, so everyone is reminded of the bigger picture which illustrates the coordinated massive movement.

Step Five: Write Guidelines

1. Always have written guidelines for each action.
2. These guidelines help ensure that all participants know the rules during an action.
3. Guidelines help protect the activists in the face of media and law enforcement if a small minority violates the guidelines, for example, by engaging in violence. If the guidelines are written out, activists have a way to prove what their intentions and requirements were for all participants.
4. A written set of guidelines also helps to promote the event to the public and raise awareness of the moral appropriateness of their tactics.
5. Finally, the guidelines help keep a record of actions taken, which can be shared with other activist groups.

Conclusion

Formulating Strategy is just one of several Monographs in the series Building Real People Power. There are 8 essential steps in building the sort of people's movement that can successfully seize power from corrupt, highly organized, and deeply entrenched regimes and redistribute the locus of that power more equitably throughout a newly developed emancipatory democracy. Other Monographs in this series will address the remaining 7 of the 8 essential steps. Learning all 8 steps is important if the people are to achieve their goals and to realize the vision of what their society must become for it to meet the needs and interests of every group without prejudice or privilege. Building real people power requires a movement with as much organization and strategic planning as their opponents will use against them. This Monograph series will help prepare people to develop this type of movement.

Notes:

Peterson, B. (2018) *Reclaiming Power: Building a Stronger Resistance in the Age of Trump*. Portsmouth, NH: Piscataqua Press.

Sharp, G. (1990) *The Role of Power in Nonviolent Struggle*. Boston, MA: The Albert Einstein Institution.

For more information, visit the sites:

nonviolentcitizenaction.org

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