

EXPANDING THE CAPACITY OF NONVIOLENT STRUGGLE

by Gene Sharp

These are Gene Sharp's notes for a presentation at a Round Table Meeting at the United Nations on October 2, 2007, the anniversary of Mohandas Gandhi's birthday. This was the first observance of the annual International Day of Non-violence, established by a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly on June 15, 2007, Sixty-first Session of the General Assembly, resolution 61/271 "International Day of Non-Violence." There were seven panelists. The resolution was piloted by India and co-sponsored by 142 countries.

Gandhi's thought and work are of great political relevance today and they will continue to be at least throughout the twenty-first century and beyond.

In order to have a wide impact Gandhi had to operate on the political level with many people who would never accept belief in individual nonviolence. He chose, therefore, to operate socially and politically, with both political leaders and many people in struggles to uplift the masses in order to advance social justice and to achieve India's independence.

In South Africa, Gandhi learned from earlier cases in that country, conducted by Hindus, Muslims, and Africans. He already possessed knowledge of Irish peasant resistance.

He was inspired by the tax and ecclesiastical resistance of English individuals. He learned from Tolstoy's writings and studied legal theory in London.¹

¹ See Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist*, pp. 23-41. Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, 1979, and New Delhi: Gandhi Media Centre, 1999.

He learned from the Russian 1905 Revolution, especially the Great October Strike. “We, too, can resort to the Russian remedy against tyranny.”² Gandhi was familiar with the boycott movement in Bengal against partition, and the Chinese boycott of American goods, “We must admit that our people have learned these tactics from China.”³

Later, as part of the Indian National Congress, Gandhi took on the largest empire in the world.

All these conflicts had major international consequences, including in Africa, in weakening European imperialism, and in making nonviolent struggle better known throughout the world.

We often forget that Gandhi was tough and realistic. He fully recognized the role of power in political conflicts.

In the January 23, 1930 issue of his journal *Young India*, Gandhi wrote: “The British people must realize that the Empire is to come to an end. This they will not realize unless we in India have generated power within to enforce our will.”⁴ Gandhi wrote in 1930: “The English Nation responds only to force . . .”⁵

Gandhi insisted that this force could be provided by nonviolent weapons, if employed skillfully through strategic planning and disciplined action. He was a shrewd political analyst and a brilliant intuitive strategist.

We are now at a new stage of the world-wide development and application of nonviolent struggle. Although it can be argued that the

² *ibid.*, p. 29.

³ *ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵ *ibid.* p. 50.

twentieth century and early twenty-first century have been the most violent in human history, that is not the whole reality. There has also been a great spread of nonviolent struggle as a practical way to achieve liberation from oppression.

Such conflicts have been waged in many countries. They include not only the Indian struggles for independence and justice but also major additional ones elsewhere, some before and some after the Indian conflicts. These occurred in Russia, Finland, Germany, El Salvador, Guatemala, Ghana, Nigeria, Norway, the Netherlands, the Philippines, China, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, the United States (the civil rights movement), the Soviet Union (in prison camps and against the hard-line coup), South Africa, and many more.

Not all of these were successful and none produced ideal societies. However, some of these struggles produced significant successes against great odds, and in every case the results were superior to what was possible by violent uprisings.

This spread of the knowledge of nonviolent liberation will continue. There is great international demand for translations of literature about this realistic alternative, despite (or because of) the great capacity of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes for violent combat and repression.

We can now prepare for more effective nonviolent struggles in place of both violence and passivity to deal with major problems that we need to confront. The relevant purposes include:

- Dismantling dictatorships;

- Blocking new coups d'état (thereby preventing new dictatorships);
- Defending against foreign aggression and occupations;
- Lifting social and economic injustices;
- Developing, preserving and extending democratic practices and human rights;
- Incorporating additional nonviolent means into democratic societies; and
- Preserving the existence and ways of life of indigenous peoples.

In order to meet Gandhi's challenge to the twenty-first century with its acute conflicts, a great deal of research, analysis, policy development, and planning is required to explore and expand the potential of nonviolent action.

How far we will succeed in replacing violent power with nonviolent power will, to a very high degree, be determined by the extent to which we can develop effective nonviolent substitutes for violent action for those purposes.

It is important that Gandhi's contributions to the development of strategy in nonviolent struggle continue to be extended by others in order to improve the effectiveness of this technique.

Carefully focused research needs to be continued on nonviolent struggle. Pioneering policy studies need to be conducted on the future applications of nonviolent struggle. Realistic nonviolent options need to be developed for people who need to wage serious conflicts.

Efforts to expand the capacity of nonviolent struggle to replace violence in acute conflicts are a fitting tribute to Gandhiji.
