

**Direct action campaigning today:  
Tips for organizers  
George Lakey, WNV, 7/23/17**

Movement manuals can be useful. Marty Oppenheimer and I found that out in 1964 when civil rights leaders were too busy to write a manual but wanted one. We wrote *A Manual for Direct Action* just in time for Mississippi Freedom Summer. Bayard Rustin wrote the Forward. Some organizers in the South told me jokingly it was their “first aid handbook -- what to do until Dr. King comes.” It was also picked up by the growing movement against the Vietnam War.

For the past year I’ve been book touring to over 60 cities and towns across the U.S. and have been asked repeatedly for a direct action manual that addresses challenges we face now. The requests come from people concerned about a variety of issues. While each situation is in some ways unique, organizers in multiple movements face some similar problems in both organization and action.

This manual is different from that of the ‘60s. Then, movements operated in a robust empire that was used to winning its wars. The government was fairly stable and held great legitimacy in the eyes of the majority. Most organizers chose not to address deeper questions of class conflict and the role of the major parties in doing the will of the 1 percent. Racial and economic injustice and even the war could be presented mainly as problems to be solved by a government that was willing to solve problems.

Now, the U.S. empire is faltering and the legitimacy of governing structures is shredding. Economic inequality skyrockets and both major parties are caught in their own versions of society-wide polarization.

Organizers need movement-building approaches that don’t ignore what animated many of the supporters of both Sanders and Trump: a demand for major rather than incrementalist change. On the other hand, movements will also need the many who still hope against hope that the middle school civics textbooks are right: the American way to change is through movements for very limited reform.

Today's believers in limited reform can be tomorrow's cheerleaders for major change if we craft a relationship with them while the empire continues to unravel and politicians' credibility declines. All this means that to build a movement that seeks to force change requires fancier dancing than "back in the day."

One thing is easier now: to create virtually instant mass protests, as was done by the admirable Women's Protest the day after Trump's Inauguration. If one-off protests could produce major changes in society we would simply focus on that, but I know of no country that has undergone major change (including ours) through one-off protests. Contesting with opponents to win major demands requires more staying power than protests provide. One-off protests do not comprise a strategy, they are simply a repetitive tactic.

Fortunately, we can learn something about strategy from the U.S. southern civil rights movement. What did work for them in facing an almost overwhelming array of forces was a particular technique known as the escalating nonviolent direct action campaign. Some might call the technique an art form instead, because effective campaigning is more than mechanical.

Since that 1955-65 decade we've learned much more about how powerful campaigns build powerful movements leading to major change. Some of those lessons are here.

**Name this political moment.** Acknowledge that the U.S. has not seen this degree of political polarization in half a century. Polarization shakes things up. Shake-up means increased opportunity for positive change, as demonstrated in many historical situations. Starting an initiative while running scared of polarization will lead to many strategic and organizational mistakes, because fear ignores the opportunity given by polarization. <http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/the-hopeful-thing-about-our-ugly-painful-polarization-20161113/>

One way to correct such fear is by encouraging those you're talking with to see your initiative in a larger strategic framework. That's what Swedes and Norwegians did a century ago, when they decided to

abandon an economy that was failing them in favor of one that now stands as one of the most successful models for delivering equality. What kind of strategic framework might Americans follow? Here is one example. The following is an example.

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/stop-trump-10-point-strategy/>

**Clarify with your co-initiators specifically why you've chosen to build a direct action campaign.** Even veteran activists may not see the difference between protests and campaigns; neither schools nor mass media bother to enlighten Americans about the craft of direct action campaigning. This article explains advantages of campaigns:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/election-campaigns-one-off-protests/>

**Assemble the core members of your campaigning group.** The people you draw together to start your campaign hugely influence your chance of success. Simply putting out a call and assuming that whoever shows up is the winning combination is a set-up for disappointment. It's fine to make the general call, but ahead of time make sure that you have the ingredients for a strong group that is up for the task. This article explains how to do that: <https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/how-to-start-a-direct-action-group-to-make-mlk-proud/>.

Some people might want to join because of pre-existing friendships, but direct action campaigning isn't actually their best contribution to the cause. To sort that out and prevent later disappointment, it helps to use this clarifying explanation:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/bill-moyer-four-roles-of-social-change/>.

The following brief article offers tips you can use initially and later, as well. <https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/get-beyond-your-friends/>

**Be aware of the need for a larger vision.** There is debate about how important it is to "front-load" the vision, beginning with an educational process that gains unity. I've seen groups de-rail themselves by becoming study groups, forgetting that we also "learn by doing," so depending on the group it may make sense to discuss vision one-on-one and in more gradual ways.

Consider the people you are reaching to and what they need most urgently: to launch their campaign and make progress, experiencing political discussion along the way while they are countering their despair through action, or to do educational work ahead of the first action. Either way, a new and valuable resource for vision work is the product of the Movement for Black Lives:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/a-vision-for-black-lives-is-a-vision-for-everyone/>.

**Choose your issue.** The issue needs to be one that people care a lot about and has something about it you can win on. Winning matters in the current context because so many people feel hopeless and helpless these days. That psychological ambivalence limits our ability to make a difference. Most people therefore need a win to develop self-confidence and be able to access fully their own power.

Historically, movements that have pulled off macro-level major change have usually started with campaigns with more short-run goals, such as black students demanding a cup of coffee!

My analysis of the U.S. peace movement is sobering, but offers a valuable lesson about how to choose the issue. Many people care deeply about peace – the cumulative suffering associated with war is enormous, not to mention the use of militarism to tax working and middle class people to benefit the owners of the military-industrial complex. A majority of Americans, after the initial hype dies down, usually opposes whatever war the U.S. is fighting, but the peace movement rarely knows how to use that fact for mobilizing.

So how to mobilize people to build the movement? Larry Scott successfully confronted that question in the 1950s when the nuclear arms race was spiraling out of control. Some of his peace activist friends wanted to campaign against nuclear weapons, but Larry knew such a campaign would not only lose but also, in the long run, discourage peace advocates. He therefore initiated a campaign against atmospheric nuclear testing, which, highlighted by nonviolent direct action, gained enough traction to force President Kennedy to the negotiating table with Soviet Premier Khrushchev.

The campaign won its demand, propelling into action a whole new generation of activists and putting the arms race on the larger public agenda. Other peace organizers went back to tackling the unwinnable, and the peace movement went into decline. Fortunately, some organizers “got” the strategy lesson of winning the atmospheric nuclear testing treaty, and went on to win victories for other winnable demands.

Sometimes it pays to frame the issue as defense of a widely-shared value, like fresh water (Standing Rock), but it’s important to remember the folk wisdom that “the best defense is an offense.” To walk your group through the complexity of a framing that is different from your strategy, read: <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/defend-yourself-go-on-the-offensive/>.

**Double-check to see if this issue is really viable.** Sometimes the power-holders try to stop campaigns before they start by claiming that something is a “done deal” – when the deal could actually be reversed. In this article you’ll find both a local and a national example where the power-holders’ claim was wrong, and the campaigners gained a victory.

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/un-done-deal-strategy-soul/>.

At other times you might conclude that you might win but are more likely to lose. You might still want to initiate the campaign because of the larger strategic context. Will Lawrence describes in this article an example of this, where in the fight against nuclear power plants a number of local campaigns failed to prevent their reactor from being built but enough other campaigns did win so that the movement as a whole forced a moratorium of nuclear power in the U.S. The nuclear industry’s goal of a thousand nuclear plants was foiled, thanks to the grassroots movement. Will’s article shows how that worked:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/4-lessons-for-climate-organizers-from-the-anti-nuclear-movement/>.

**Analyze the target carefully.** The “target” is the decider who can yield to your demand, for example a bank’s CEO and board executive committee that decides whether to stop financing a pipeline. Who is the decider when it comes to police shooting unarmed suspects with

impunity? What will your campaigners need to do to get change? Here are two articles that will you're your group think about targets:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/should-we-bother-trying-to-change-our-opponents-hearts/>.

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/targets-matter-small-action-group-took-mighty-bank-won/>

**Track your key allies, opponents, and “neutrals.”** Here's a participatory tool that your growing group can use at six-month intervals. <https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/know-your-allies-your-opponents-and-everyone-in-between/>

**As your campaign implements its series of actions, make strategy choices that move you forward.**

The strategy debates you have in your group may be helped by bringing in a friendly outsider with facilitative skills, and exposing your group to concrete examples of strategic turning points in the campaigns of others. Here are two convenient articles:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/using-momentum-to-build-a-stronger-movement/>

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/small-quaker-group-forced-pnc-bank-stop-financing-mountaintop-removal/>

Nonviolence is sometimes used as ritual, or conflict-avoidance.

Shouldn't we be open to “diversity of tactics?” This question continues to be debated in some American groups. One consideration is whether you believe your campaign needs to include larger numbers:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/a-diversity-of-tactics-a-paucity-of-participants/>. *(Be sure to read my responses to critical comments at the bottom of this article.)* The following brief article compares two different choices on

property destruction made by the same movement in two different countries: <https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/suffragette-raises-question-property-destruction-effectiveness/>.

**What if you get attacked?** I expect polarization to get worse in the U.S., so even if violent attack on your group might be unlikely, preparation might be useful. This article offers five things you can do about violence:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/5-ways-movements-can-handle-threats-attacks/>.

Some Americans worry about a larger trend toward fascism – even a dictatorship on a national level. This article, based on empirical historical research, responds to that worry:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/violent-repression-cant-stop-us-anywhere-in-the-world/>.

**Training and leadership development can make your campaign more effective.** In addition to the brief trainings useful in preparing for each of your campaign's actions, empowerment happens through these methods:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/8-skills-of-a-well-trained-activist/>.

Because people learn by doing, this helps with leadership development: <https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/one-proven-way-accelerate-movement-skills-trump-era/>.

Your group's decision-making gets easier if your members learn this insight: <https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/building-power-through-joining-and-differentiating/>.

**Your organizational culture matters for your short-run success and for the movement's wider goals.** Handling rank and privilege can influence solidarity. This article abandons one-size-fits-all anti-oppression rules, and suggests more subtle guidance to behaviors that work: <https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/get-real-about-privilege-become-an-ally/>.

Evidence is accumulating that professional middle class activists often bring baggage to their groups that is better left at the door. These two articles bring good news in that regard:

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/break-out-of-your-class-bubble-get-training-and-win/>. <https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/building-our-muscles-for-conflict/>.

**The big picture will continue to influence your chances for success.**

Here are two ways you can increase the chance for your campaign and the campaigns of others to win.

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/get-militant-but-get-backup/>.

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/how-to-create-a-multi-level-movement-for-climate-justice/>.

**Additional resources:**

Daniel Hunter's action manual is a fine resource for tactics. It is a companion to Michelle Alexander's book *The New Jim Crow*:  
<http://www.newjimcroworganizing.org>

The Global Nonviolent Action Database can be accessed through the Internet. It includes over 1400 direct action campaigns drawn from almost 200 countries, covering a wide variety of issues. By using the Advanced Search function you can find other campaigns that have fought on a similar issue or faced a similar opponent, or campaigns that used methods of action you are considering, or campaigns that won or lost while dealing with similar opponents. Each case includes a narrative that shows the ebb and flow of the conflict, as well as the data points you want to check out.  
<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu>.