

WRL in the History of Nonviolent Struggle

Since our founding in 1923, we've opposed and resisted all wars and their root causes including white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. We've done so through strategic nonviolence, from trainings to direct actions. Here are a few moments we've played key roles in sparking, supporting, and sustaining nonviolent people's movements.

1943

Danbury Prison Strike



COs to WW2 were imprisoned at the Danbury prison, where WRL staff members Ralph DiGia and Jim Peck organized a 135 day hunger and work strike to desegregate the dining hall.

1947

Journey of Reconciliation



The Freedom Rides in the South included many WRL members such as organizer and trainer Bayard Rustin, who later coordinated the March on Washington in 1963.

1967

Resisting the Draft



During the Vietnam War, we led resistance to the war and draft in all its forms, including the mass public burnings of draft cards and supporting conscientious objectors.

1976

The Continental Walk



Coordinated by WRL, The Continental Walk for Disarmament and Social Justice was a 9 month project to focus attention on the intersections of militarism, racism, sexism, and capitalism.

1978

Sit-In for Survival



We spearheaded the Sit-In for Survival at the UN where 400 were arrested. Three months later, we simultaneously unfurled banners at the White House and Moscow's Red Square.

1980

Gender Justice



WRL organizers and trainers took part in the Women's Pentagon Actions, the Seneca Women's Peace Camps, and the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights throughout the 80s.

1982

The UN Mission



Following the actions of 1978, WRL initiated a demonstration against nuclear weapons to blockade the bombmakers at the UN missions. The nonviolent direct action resulted in nearly 2000 people being arrested.

2004

Days of Direct Action



WRL organized a procession of 1000 from Ground Zero to the Republican National Convention to protest Bush's policies. NYPD stopped the walk, arresting 227 protesters. Over 1800 were arrested that week.

2017

Police Militarization



Since 2011, our No SWAT Zone campaign has been organizing against police militarization, seeding grassroots cross-community coalitions against SWAT trainings and weapons expos across the country.

NONVIOLENCE

The thing about nonviolence is that it spreads.

When you get people to participate in nonviolent action - whether it's a fast, a march, a boycott, or a picket line - people hear you, people see you, people are learning from that action.

DOLORES HUERTA

References/resources: Ella Baker Center for Human Rights; Global Nonviolent Action Database; Statement of Principles, War Resisters' International; WRI Handbook for Nonviolent Campaigns; WRL Handbook for Nonviolent Action; WRL Peace Calendar [1968] Days of Gandhi, edited by Mark Morris; WRL Peace Calendar [2002] 52 Stories of Nonviolent Success, edited by Geov Parrish + Tom Hastings; WRL Organizer's Manual, edited by Ed Hedemann; WRL Perpetual Calendar [2013] 90 Years of Revolutionary Nonviolence, edited by Joanne Sheehan; Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict [2011] by Erica Chenoweth + Maria J. Stephan. Design by Raul X. Ramos.

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Basics of Radical Nonviolence

Ends and means

Nonviolence is rooted in the understanding that ends and means are fundamentally linked and inseparable. We cannot use war, violence, and injustice to achieve a world without war, violence, and injustice.

Systems, not individuals

Nonviolence recognizes that systems, institutions, and injustice must be overcome, not individuals. Individuals committing injustice need to be confronted, held accountable, and compelled to change, but harming individuals only perpetuates the cycle of violence.

Nature of power

Top-down power depends on obedience, consent, and cooperation. The power of governments is often so fragile that when even a small number (3.5%) of people disobey or refuse to cooperate, the government may be forced to change.

Conflict and struggle

Those who most benefit from systems of power are often unwilling to give up privilege without a struggle. Nonviolent activists struggle against systems of oppression within ourselves and our communities, and within and among nation states.

Strengthening Campaigns

Among participants

In environments based on trust and solidarity, participants tap into their own power to affect change. Nonviolence is most effective when actively engaging large numbers of people instead of relying on a few charismatic leaders.

In relation to an opponent

Nonviolence aims either to prevent the violence of an opponent or to ensure that violent repression will “backfire” against them. It creates possibilities for opponents to rethink their allegiances (eg: encouraging soldiers to refuse to serve for reasons of conscience).

In relation to others

Nonviolence seeks to ignite the imagination of observers who are potential allies.

Revolutionary Nonviolent Action Works

History is filled with examples of the strategic effectiveness of nonviolent action from local campus and workplace protests to dozens of successful nonviolent revolutions around the world.

In their struggle against British colonialism, Gandhi and other Indian organizers used non-cooperation, civil disobedience actions, and alternative systems to counter British rule. The movement of nonviolent struggle became increasingly powerful. After years of violent repression, India won independence in 1947.

In 1945, the Congress of Racial Equality was the first organization to develop trainings for nonviolent civil disobedience with the goal of ending segregation. The trainings prepared activists for campaigns like the Nashville lunch counter sit-ins in 1960 and the 1961 Freedom Rides, which Diane Nash and other Nashville nonviolent activists sustained. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee organized 1964’s Mississippi Freedom Summer where nonviolence trainings prepared thousands to face violence as they registered Black voters and opened Freedom Schools.

Since the 1960s, Palestinian activists and allies have resisted the Israeli occupation of Palestine. In Hebron and other cities, groups like “Youth Against Settlements” participate in continuous nonviolent direct actions against the creation and expansion of illegal Israeli settlements. Palestinians have launched repeated hunger strikes inside Israeli prisons, winning immediate demands and fixing the Palestinian struggle on the solidarity map. In 2005, 170 Palestinian civil society organizations called for an international campaign of boycotts, divestments, and sanctions (BDS) targeting Israel and the institutions and companies complicit in its oppressive policies towards Palestinians until it complies with international law.

In 1965, Dolores Huerta and Cesar Chavez joined with Mexican and Filipino farmworkers to oppose unjust working conditions on California’s farms. Using strikes, sit-ins, fasts, and marches (while enduring beatings and arrests), they forced growers to recognize workers’ demands. The grassroots organizing of the United Farm Workers resulted in nationwide boycotts of grapes, wine, and lettuce and led to growers’ recognition of the union in 1970.

In 1969, more than 70 young Native Americans from across Turtle Island, organizing under the name Indians of All Tribes (IOTA), reclaimed Alcatraz Island on occupied Ohlone territory. In the face of repeated government attempts to infiltrate and sabotage the encampment, IOTA held the longest re-occupation of a federal facility by Indian peoples. The 19-month occupation brought international attention to Indigenous peoples’ resistance of U.S. settler colonialism and calls for self determination. IOTA inspired more than 200 acts of civil disobedience.

During the 1970s–1990s, global activists and organizers supported the anti-Apartheid struggle led by Black South Africans that ended the white supremacist political system. In South Africa, tactics included labor strikes, mass demonstrations, court appeals, civil disobedience, and creating alternative schools. They also called on the international community to boycott South African products and engage in punitive sanctions against the government.

Beginning in 1938, the US Navy occupied the Puerto Rican Island of Vieques for live-fire practice and military maneuvers. A 1970s campaign to remove them failed. In the early 1990s, after decades of contamination of the island and its inhabitants, protests sparked again. After a 500-pound bomb killed a civilian guard in 1999, protest camps and creative actions were organized, spreading across the U.S. and Puerto Rico. Continued nonviolent direct action caused the military to leave Vieques in May 2003, but Puerto Rico remains a colonial property.

In 2015, in the context of a burgeoning Movement for Black Lives across the US and 10 days after a white supremacist murdered 9 Black men and women after they welcomed him to bible study, Bree Newsome climbed a flagpole at South Carolina’s State Capitol, removing the Confederate flag, a symbol of white supremacy and a celebration of slavery that built the foundation of the US. The flag was officially removed just over a month later. In 2017, continued action and pressure has seen the removal of Confederate monuments.

What is nonviolence?

Revolutionary nonviolence is an active form of resistance to systems of privilege and domination. It’s not simply the absence of violence, and it’s certainly not passive. Nonviolence is a philosophy for liberation, an approach to movement building, a tactic of non-cooperation and defense. It is a willingness to break unjust laws and take action. It’s a powerful practice we employ to resist and transform our world. People all over the world have effectively used nonviolence in their work for peace and justice.

Nonviolent action does require good organizing and collective vision, but it does not require charismatic leadership. Organizers such as Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. may have popularized nonviolent resistance, but anyone can use it. Groups like War Resisters League (WRL) engage in nonviolent revolutionary struggle as a source of social empowerment – both as a practice and a vision that cultivates the long-term collective leadership needed to create the world we know is possible.

"The major job was getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening and how group action could counter violence..."

Ella Baker
Black Liberation Activist