

REVITALISING THE PEACE MOVEMENT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

U n i t e d W e S t a n d ; D i v i d e d W e F a l l

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Introduction

In my talk today, I will explore how we can make peace activism work. Also, I will examine that instead of being passive, helpless spectator, how can we uplift our focus on hope, be an optimist for building citizen power and be bold enough to use it together for positive change and building a more peaceful world.

What is peace activism, why is it more important today than ever. When our causes are united, our movements should be too but why is it difficult. How can 21st Century peace and justice activists succeed in peace activism and unite their organisations for achieving their goals as some well known movements have done in the past and are doing now.

What is Peace Activism, Why Is it More Important Today than Ever

According to Gene Sharp (who recently passed away), an activist is a person who diligently and repeatedly tries to achieve some social, economic or political objective, especially by participation in protests, pressure, organising or resistance. Activists are at the core of most collective actions and are prepared to enter significant costs and act to achieve their goals. Sometimes they act alone, but often they seek to draw others into collection.

Activism is action that goes beyond conventional politics, typically being more energetic, passionate, innovative and committed for changing the policies of decision makers, leaders and governments or taking the destiny in your own hand to change the course of history. Although not automatically a pacifist, a peace activist chooses non-violent method to prevent or end violent conflicts, to end non democratic rule, and to organise transition processes that are as peaceful as possible. In doing so, building bridges between enemy sides is a key. Today, activism is based on using old methods of protests with the new communication technologies of today, smart or mobile phones, social media, internet based crowd-sourcing etc.

Why peace activism is important, urgent and why it is needed more today than ever? Because evil forces like populism, nationalism and militarism are rising and becoming a dominant force undermining peaceful, liberal values of democracy, freedom, civil liberties and rule of law. The world is being ripped

apart by global corporations and international government alliances who are pushing for war, environmental destruction, economic exploitation fuelled by endless capitalist greed, hateful divisive ideologies including curtailing of human rights and civil liberties.

Global rivalries are mounting between US – North Korea, Saudi Arabia – Iran, China – Japan, West – Russia a serious situation which can trigger into a major war in the near future or a Third World War with the horrendous possibility of use of nuclear weapons. The warfare is already on full display and tearing apart Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya, including mounting tensions and confrontations between Israel and Palestine.

Our causes are connected, our movements should be too

This dangerous and volatile situation we are in, it has become difficult to bring peace which has also exasperated by movements working on their own and not working together and by doing so we fail to generate momentum for change. How do we break the hierarchy of elites – military, leaders, corporations, media who have a common agenda of continuing permanent wars, hegemony, exploitation of resources. Once we confront this reality, the answer becomes clear. We need to mobilise together to bring change to stop wars and militarism. Eventually, the power of all of us working together will bring change for building a peaceful future. Change happens when people demand change.

We live in an interdependent world in which most of the global issues (poverty, wars, terrorism, human rights violations, climate change crisis etc.) are interlinked. So for us in the peace movement, we need to create global frame works and mechanisms for taking actions on interconnected global issues. We need a united , holistic and multi lateral approach in collectively dealing with the threats and challenges of today.

How to be a 21st Century peace activist

As a peace activist, how do we analyse TV's airing of CNN, BBC and Al-Jazeera displaying hourly barrages of human suffering and senseless murders coming from all corners of the globe? How do we understand political leaders and corporations of countries that need war to stay united in power and in profit.

These war profiteers seek to propagate fear and perpetuate and create existential threats, so that they get the support of government and public for the proliferation of ever more weapons and the required funds to continue permanent war agenda.

So how must a peace activist take meaningful actions to make the biggest impact of peace in the world? For this, we have to remember that firstly, the power resides in the people themselves. Government of the people can only work if they have the consent to be governed. Government requires the cooperation of the people, if the cooperation is withdrawn, the government will come to a standstill.

Secondly, the strength of non-violence is so inherently powerful that it can sometimes succeed despite a lack of strategy or even a bad strategy. How to plan and implement a non-violent strategy for our own campaign and liberation struggle is the key to success.

Gandhi used this strategy to empower individuals, community organising (to village to national level) and the application of strategic non-violent action. He used a full range of social movement approaches including structure and momentum driven organisations focusing on concrete, winnable goals.

The handbook for non-violent campaigns lists four roles – the rebel, the reformer, the citizen and the change agent as four essential roles of activism which need to be present and can work efficiently for the movement to succeed.

The rebel is one who through non-violent direct action puts the problem / issue on the political agenda. **The reformer** is the one, who in the failure of existing channels promote alternative solutions and propose reforms to consolidate the movement's success. **The citizens** make sure that the movement does not lose contact with its main constituency. It acts at the centre of society and protect against oppression. **The change agent** is the fourth and key role in any movement. They promote education and convince the majority of the society, they organise grassroots networks and promote long term strategies. While there are certainly tensions between the different roles, it is important to recognise that each has its own value within a social movement for its ultimate success.

The biggest opportunity today is to harness the potential of 1.8 billion young people in the world, to train them in non-violent techniques to ignite their potential for peace and justice. We should get youth around the world actively involved in organisations, social movements, civic initiatives for peace-building, social justice, human rights and working to address violence and conflict issues in our communities, country and internationally. By building a global solidarity and linking together, practitioners, activists, organisations and movements we can bring about fundamental shifts in how the world deals with conflicts, replacing war, ending global weapons industry with practical and effective means of overcoming them.

Some examples of peace and justice campaigns

There are countless amazing social movements who are doing exciting work in different regions of the world in the past and now that deserve to be celebrated.

To our credit, in the past, the peace movement was instrumental in ending the cold war and it had an enduring effect and a major impact in US government's decision in not using a nuclear bomb to end the Vietnam War. That was all due to strong US, UK and other European peace movements.

The most remarkable progress in 2017, was ICAN (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) being awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for its work to draw attention to the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons and for its ground-breaking efforts to achieve a treaty-based prohibition of such weapons. With a very small team of workers in Geneva, ICAN was launched in 2007 and they interact with over 468 partner organisations in 101 countries worldwide for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

In 2017, Momentum, a grassroots movement in the UK, defied the odds and brought a left candidate Jeremy Corbyn close to government. Focusing on door-to-door conversations and a sophisticated social media campaign, they substantially increased Labour's vote in the General Elections and almost ended the ruling Conservative party's majority. The movement, Momentum, made up of over 30,000 active members showed how a mobilised grassroots operation could defy massive media hostility and win seats. The movement has made the Labour Party the biggest membership party in Europe with a platform committed to bringing privatised services back under public ownership,

abolishing university tuition fees and ending fracking. Momentum is now widely recognised as the most vibrant part of the party and is advocating greater participation in the party's decision-making.

Popular movements involved in fighting the white supremacy, corporate greed and militarism that Trump regime represents, have reported a massive surge in engagement and support like the Women's march and Black Lives Matter and many more.

The 2018 Women's March held on January 20, 2018, on the anniversary of 2017 Women's March, was a protest march with coordinated mass rallies, attracting hundreds of thousands of participants, in hundreds of cities, towns and suburbs in the United States, with sister rallies in Canada, the UK, Japan, Italy and other countries. Some of the largest rallies in the United States were held in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, Dallas, Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and Atlanta.

Black Lives Matter is an international activist movement, originating in the African-American community, that campaigns against violence and systemic racism towards black people.

Recently, shooting in Florida has produced a movement 'Never Again', where high school students in Parkland, Florida are leading protests in thousands in rallies to demand gun control. I hope their authentic heroism, courage and determination, of these remarkable youth, can make a dent in the permanent militarism siege mentality.

Conclusion and way forward

Peace, anti-war, anti-nuclear, Human Rights, development, environment, world federalists and other organisations all need to work together for building a world that can end continuous violence, permanent wars and endless suffering.

Dalai Lama said, 'Each of us must learn to work not just for oneself, but one's family or nation but for the benefit for the all human kind. Universal responsibility is the key to human survival. It is the best foundation for World Peace.'

How can we make the impossible happen? By having a vision and working for it. When president John F Kennedy set the challenge of landing a man on the moon before the end of the decade in 1960's he had no idea how it could or would be done, but he had a vision. When Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life imprisonment, he believed that he and many others would one day walk free. In the beginning he had no idea how it could or would be done but he had a vision. When William Wilberforce famously committed to abolishing the slave trade, he had no idea of how it could or would be done, but he had a vision. Each took the first step without a roadmap, they committed their lives to a vision of a better world and the impossible happened and their vision became true.

We need partners between peace, human rights and environmental organisations along with leaders to solve some of the most urgent and pressing problems of eradicating poverty and inequality, mitigating climate change crisis and elimination of militarism and wars. So we need to work together with a global attitude, cooperation and partnership.

Howard Zinn once said, 'Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people can transform the world.'

Let's Work Together – Change will Come. Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much. We all here and in the wider world hold the keys to unlock a more sustainable, peaceful and prosperous future as we are innovators, change-makers of today and tomorrow. We can move mountains if we work together.

Thanks for listening.

Notes:

The following publications were consulted and excerpts have been taken from them during the writing of this article:

1. Published by War Resisters International, Handbook for non-violent campaigns,' 2014
2. Alan Axelrod, 'Gandhi CEO,' Sterling, New York, 2010
3. Vijay Mehta, Building Youth Leadership: How to inspire a new generation of peacemakers, Lecture at International Peace Youth Group, CodeNode, London, 2017
4. Lawrence S Wittner, 'Peace Activism has Stopped US Wars', 2014
5. Robert Burrows, Book Review, 'Nonviolent Revolt in the 21st Century' written by Mark Angler and Paul Angler

6. Nick Buxton, 'Ten Amazing Social Movement Struggles in 2017 that gave us reason o hope', Common Dreams, 2017
7. Allyson Scammell, 'How to be a 21st Century Peace Activist' Huffington Post, 2014
8. Vijay Mehta, 'Inaugural Peace Day Lecture' Oldham, 2017

The full version of this speech can be downloaded from:

www.unitingforpeace.com

Vijay Mehta is an author and peace activist. He is Chair of Uniting for Peace and founding Trustee of Fortune Forum Charity. His books include United Nations and its Future in the 21st Century (2005), Arms No More (2005), The Fortune Forum Code: For a Sustainable Future (2006), "The Economics of Killing" (2012) and "Peace Beyond Borders" (2016).

The Sunday Times described him as a "longstanding activist for peace, development, human rights and the environment, who along with his daughter Renu Mehta has set a precedent for striving to change the world" (**The Sunday Times, February 01, 2009**).

In 2014, Vijay Mehta's bio "**The Audacity of Dreams**" appeared in the book form "**Karma Kurry**" published by Jaico Publishing House, India with a foreword to the book by Nelson Mandela.

"Thank you for all you do Vijay – both the organisation Uniting for Peace and yourself are inspiration and give us all hope that both yourself and the organisation can bring a world without a war. Indeed it is possible, even in our own time." – **Mairead Corrigan Maguire, Nobel Peace Laureate 1976**

"This book, Peace Beyond Borders by Vijay Mehta, an astute non-European observer, uses this unprecedented, extraordinary experience as the centrepiece of a carefully crafted theory on the construction and maintenance of peace and prosperity on a global scale. It is my hope that many non-Europeans will use it as a source of inspiration as they attempt to carve out long-lasting peace in other parts of the world."

- **Jose Ramos-Horta, Nobel Peace Laureate 1996 and Former President of Timor-Leste**