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Social defence

The power of the military and police lies at the foundation of capitalism, as described in chapter 3. Without organised violence to protect the system of private control and to contain challenges by workers and communities, capitalism could not survive. Therefore, in examining nonviolent challenges to capitalism, it is worth examining nonviolent challenges to military and police power.

Organised nonviolent action can be used as an alternative to military defence. Instead of using weapons and troops to defend, a community would defend itself using noncooperation, rallies, strikes, boycotts, occupations and other forms of nonviolent action.[1] This is not a cheap and easy option: resources and training on a scale similar to military forces might well be involved. Preparation would include designing energy, transport, agriculture, communication and other technological systems to be resilient against attack, training in foreign languages and intercultural understanding, fostering community solidarity, building links with sympathetic groups in other countries (especially potential aggressor countries), introducing comprehensive education and training in nonviolent action, running simulations (analogous to military training exercises), and setting up decision making systems and popular "intelligence" services to assess potential threats. Such a system for defence using nonviolent action has been given various names, including nonviolent defence, social defence, civilian-based defence and defence by civil resistance.

No society has ever systematically prepared itself for social defence. In this sense, nonviolence is in an early stage of development, equivalent to violence before the introduction of armies and organised weapons production. Therefore, it can be said that a full-scale nonviolent alternative to the military is yet to be tried.

One of the key implications of promoting the capacity to use nonviolent action against aggressors is that it provides skills and ideas for communities which they can use against more local targets. In a

social defence system, it would be desirable for workers to know how to shut down production quickly and completely, without damaging equipment. A crucial piece of equipment, such as a computer chip, might be designed so that, when removed, rapid resumption of production is impossible. A replacement could be kept in a safe place such as another country. With this sort of preparation, even torture would be useless to get production going again.

If workers had this capacity to shut down production, it could be used against employers. Indeed, workers' control provides the best sort of defence against repression, since a collectively run workplace is far harder for an aggressor to control, without the managerial chain of command in which top figures can be replaced or induced to support the aggressors.

Network communication systems, including telephone, fax and electronic mail, are ideally designed for nonviolent resistance to aggression, since the aggressor cannot shut down communication by controlling a few key points, as in the case of major television and radio stations, traditionally the first targets for capture in military coups.

If communities are self-reliant in energy and food and have skills in mutual help, they are in a far stronger position to resist being incorporated into a corporate-dominated commodity culture. Thus, virtually all the measures to build the capacity for nonviolent defence of a community are equally valuable for building the capacity to resist capitalist social relations and challenge the power of the state to support capitalism.[2]

The very idea of social defence is relatively new. Gandhi pioneered the use of nonviolent action as a systematic strategy for social change, but he did not formulate a comprehensive model of a defence system based on nonviolent action. It was not until the late 1950s that a number of writers and researchers began proposing social defence as a full-fledged alternative.

As well as individual advocacy for social defence, it has been promoted by organisations in a number of countries, including Netherlands, Italy, Germany, France, United States and Australia. The political party *Die Grünen* in Germany has social defence as part of its platform. Due to efforts by proponents—Gene Sharp has been especially influential—social defence has been considered as a serious option in some newly independent states, including Slovenia and

Lithuania, though in the end military systems have been adopted. Yet while acknowledging these initiatives, overall it must be said that very little headway has been made in making social defence a realistic policy option. The military is powerfully entrenched, as might be expected given that it is the ultimate defence against overturning various systems of domination, including dictatorship, capitalism and state socialism.

Though social defence as a policy option has a low profile—this is to put it politely, given that it is hardly known among the general public—nevertheless there are some foundations being laid by nonviolent activists. The methods of nonviolent action, from petitions to parallel government, are the methods for a social defence system. So every time workers go on strike, consumers join a boycott or environmentalists blockade a polluting factory, they are practising skills and gaining insight into methods that are the foundation of social defence. People with personal experience in nonviolent action are almost invariably the most receptive to the idea of social defence. They can more readily grasp what it might involve and how it might operate.

Social defence is more than just using nonviolent action. It requires planning, preparation, training, infrastructure and network building. No one would expect an army to have much of a chance if it had no plans, no method of recruitment, no training, no communication system and relied on weapons picked up on the spur of the moment. Likewise, a social defence system that relies on spontaneous use of nonviolent action is not likely to have much of a chance. To establish a social defence system requires more than people having experience with nonviolent action: it requires preparing the society in everything from intercultural skills to emergency drills.

To promote social defence is difficult because the very idea clashes with deep-seated assumptions about defence and the necessity of meeting violence with violence. For most people, "defence" means military defence.

1. Does the campaign help to
   • undermine the violent underpinnings of capitalism, or
   • undermine the legitimacy of capitalism, or
   • build a nonviolent alternative to capitalism?

Social defence, as an alternative to the military, is a direct challenge to capitalism's violent foundation. A number of the obvious measures that would strengthen social defence, including self-reliance in energy, food, water, health, housing and transport, are highly compatible with nonviolent alternatives to capitalism. On the other hand, social defence makes little direct impact on the legitimacy of capitalism.

2. Is the campaign participatory?

Social defence can only be successful with a high level of participation. This is unlike the military option, which relies on a small number of soldiers to defend or control a much larger population.

Because social defence is such a threat to governments, it is likely that only a participatory campaign has a chance of introducing it. However, there is not enough experience with campaigning for social defence to draw a firm conclusion on this point.

3. Are the campaign's goals built in to its methods?

There are two basic ways to campaign for social defence. One is based on trying to convince political and military leaders that social defence is a logical, superior option for defending a country. This approach uses a method—rational argument aimed at elites—that is different from the goal, popular nonviolent action as a mode of defence.

A second way to campaign for social defence is through community organising and nonviolent action. This can include running social defence simulations, building decentralised energy systems designed to survive blockades or attacks, and promoting network communication systems for coordinating resistance to aggression. This approach is, in essence, using the methods of social defence in order to achieve social defence as a goal.

4. Is the campaign resistant to cooption?

Because social defence is such a fundamental challenge to the power of the state, it is highly resistant to cooption. A few governments have sponsored investigations into social defence, but not a single one has made substantial steps to introduce it.

However, cooption might become a greater possibility if campaigns for social defence were much stronger. One method of coop-

tion is for governments to introduce a small component of social defence as a complement or supplement to military defence, as in the case of Sweden's "total defence" which is primarily military but has as components economic defence, civil defence, psychological defence and social defence. The radical implications of social defence could be thwarted by a hierarchically structured nonviolent defence system, managed by government elites or perhaps contracted out to corporations.

What about cooption by capitalism? Could there be firms selling "social defence services" to local communities? It is hard to imagine. Full-scale capitalist cooption of social defence would only be possible if capitalism attained such a popular legitimacy that people would be willing to undertake nonviolent action to defend it.

On the surface, social defence may not seem to be a challenge to capitalism. As noted in chapter 2, few nonviolence theorists have even mentioned capitalism: their main focus has been systems of overt repression, such as dictatorship. Yet because capitalism relies on violence at its foundations, social defence is a deep-seated challenge: it gives people the tools to confront and replace unjust social systems of any sort. Grassroots campaigns for social defence provide the greatest challenge, since they maximise participation, build ends into means and are more resistant to cooption.

Notes

1. Anders Boserup and Andrew Mack, *War Without Weapons: Nonviolence in National Defence* (London: Frances Pinter, 1974); Robert J. Burrowes, *The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Gustaaf Geeraerts (ed.), *Possibilities of Civilian Defence in Western Europe* (Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1977); Stephen King-Hall, *Defence in the Nuclear Age* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1958); Brian Martin, *Social Defence, Social Change* (London: Freedom Press, 1993); Michael Randle, *Civil Resistance* (London: Fontana, 1994); Adam Roberts (ed.), *The Strategy of Civilian Defence: Non-violent Resistance to Aggression* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967); Gene Sharp with the assistance of Bruce Jenkins, *Civilian-Based Defense: A Post-Military Weapons System* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

2. Martin, *Social Defence, Social Change,* chapter 14.