

## **Non-Violent Direct Action/ Civil Disobedience**

### **The DAC**

The Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War (DAC) was formed in 1958 in response to the British H-bomb tests that were being carried out. Its purpose was 'to assist the conducting of non-violent direct action to obtain the total renunciation of nuclear war and its weapons by Britain and all other countries as a first step in disarmament'.

After the formation of the CND in 1958, the DAC effectively became its non-violent direct action wing. Bertrand Russell, the President of the CND, was a supporter of non-violent direct action, and DAC member Pat Arrowsmith was appointed assistant secretary of the CND after the first Aldermaston March.

The formation in 1960 of the Committee of 100, a mass civil disobedience movement against nuclear weapons, plus considerable financial difficulties, led to the decision in June 1961 to wind down the DAC. Most of its members were active in the Committee of 100.

### **The Aldermaston March**

The DAC organised the first Aldermaston March on Easter 1958. It consisted of a 52-mile walk from London to the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment at Aldermaston. 10,000 people marched. A 'nuclear disarmament' symbol was created for the march by artist Gerald Holtom. It was based on semaphore alphabet symbols for the letters N ('nuclear') and D ('disarmament'). Holtom did not copyright his design and it is now known the world over as the peace symbol. The Aldermaston march became a huge, highly publicised event for the CND and so was repeated annually until 1963.

### **Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp**

In August 1981, supporters from the group 'Women for Life on Earth' marched 110 miles from Cardiff to Greenham common (the US air-force base) in Berkshire. This initial march consisted of 36 women, 4 men and several toddlers in pushchairs. The group demanded a debate with the British government. When this didn't happen they marched and camped outside the base's main gates. This action inspired women around the world and soon there were camps at 16 other bases in Britain and others across Europe. Greenham Common Women's Peace camp lasted for 19 years. During this time, many women were arrested for civil disobedience. This was due to their 'non-violent direct action' tactics such as cutting down parts of the fence or chaining themselves to it. Because of this they would often be arrested for 'criminal damage' to property. The camp became a world-famous symbol of women's resistance to the whole military industrial system and challenged society's perceptions of women's roles.

One of the most famous events that took place there was the 'Embrace the Base' event on 12th December 1982 (the date of the decision to bring in American cruise missiles). The event was organised by chain letter and 30,000 women took part, linking arms so that they entirely surrounded the nine miles of perimeter fence. They brought things that were important to them and that represented life, e.g. wedding dresses, pictures of babies and flowers.

The American cruise missiles were removed from Greenham common in 1991 but the peace camps and protests continued until 2000, mainly due to opposition to the UK Trident missile programme. Since 1998 Greenham common has been the only British Nuclear weapon system in service.

## **The 'Stand Together' Event**

This event called for a human chain linking the American airbase at Greenham common, the nuclear research centre at Aldermaston and the the ordinance factory at Burghfield (where ammunition was made). The route was dubbed the 'Nuclear Valley' by protesters. The event took place on the 1st April 1983. The chain was 14 miles long and consisted of about 70,000 protesters.

## **The Committee of 100**

In 1960 Bertrand Russell resigned as president of the CND in order to form the committee of 100, a group designed to organise non-violent, civil disobedience. It was launched at a meeting in London on 22 October with a hundred signatures. Russell explained his reasons for leading the group in the *New Statesman*.

"The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament has done and is doing valuable and very successful work to make known the facts, but the press is becoming used to its doings and beginning to doubt their news value. It has therefore seemed to some of us necessary to supplement its campaign by such actions as the press is sure to report. There is another, and perhaps more important reason for the practice of civil disobedience in this time of utmost peril. There is a very widespread feeling that however bad their policies may be, there is nothing that private people can do about it. This is a complete mistake. If all those who disapprove of government policy were to join massive demonstrations of civil disobedience they could render government folly impossible and compel the so-called statesmen to acquiesce in measures that would make human survival possible. Such a vast movement, inspired by outraged public opinion is possible, perhaps it is imminent. If you join it you will be doing something important to preserve your family, compatriots and the world."

The CND and the Committee of 100 sometimes clashed in their views. However, while the CND wanted to steer away from any illegal activity, they did not want to be seen by the press as being in conflict with Russell, who was one of their most prominent supporters. The Committee arranged huge non-violent demonstrations, such as sit-ins in Trafalgar Square. They would send advice out to those protesting on what to do if arrested and reminding them that 'it is absolutely imperative that no violence whatsoever should take place'. They also arranged other types of non-violent direct-action, such a 48 hour fast to commemorate the 18th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and to highlight the fact that millions of pounds were being spent on weaponry while half the world's population was starving.

Russell believed that campaigning through political routes would be futile. He wrote:

'I do not believe we shall get anywhere by traditional means. We can pass resolutions at branch meetings, we can even win Labour Party Conferences, and they will put our resolutions into the waste paper basket. The peril is too great and too immediate to leave to Labour Party and Trade Union leaders. It was a Labour Government which first manufacture the British Bomb. It was trade union leaders who supported it.'

He goes on to write.

'When transitional methods have been exhausted in an industrial dispute, workers take direct industrial action. We have tried the traditional methods in the struggle against the Bomb, and we have exhausted them. It is time for each one of us to consider how best to take DIRECT ACTION'.

The founding belief of the Committee of 100 was that the people could create change themselves through mass civil-disobedience, rather than by relying on politicians. Russell wrote:

"The men in control of Washington and Moscow care very little for our wishes, our hopes, and our fears. But they rely on those who build and transport their bombs and aircraft and instruments.

They rely on those who unload their ships and those who provide goods for the bases and food for the men who will drop the bombs. WHEN ORDINARY PEOPLE IN THEIR MILLIONS REFUSE TO HELP THEM IN THEIR MAD POLICIES THEY WILL BE FORCED TO STOP”

The method of the Committee of 100 was to convince ordinary people to take power and responsibility in their own hands. They provided evidence that the Government was aware that the majority of the people were opposed to nuclear weapons and yet carried on testing and increasing their arms. They implored the people:

‘let us show government they cannot lightly disregard the opinions of ordinary people’.

They claimed that:

“The important thing is to find increasing numbers of people who are capable of initiative and who are not present political leaders, who are not compromised in any way and who can actually begin immediately to practice unilateral non-violence in communicating directly with ‘the other side’.”

and that:

“industrial action is the most powerful form of protest and the most effective.”

Before the Committee of 100 came on the scene, civil disobedience on this scale was basically unknown in Britain. The Committee of 100, and comparable movements outside the UK made it a common method of social action, now familiar in environmental, animal rights and peace protests. However, the Committee's strict insistence on nonviolence is rare. The Committee also popularised a new method of organisation derived from anarchism, which was unfamiliar to those in traditional political parties: without formal membership and based on decentralisation and autonomous, self-selected ‘working groups’ rather than elected executive committees.