

TRAINING FOR CHANGE

www.TrainingForChange.org

Strategizing For A Living Revolution

Otpur (“Resistance” in Serbian) began as hundreds, then thousands, then tens of thousands of young people took to the streets to rid their country of dictator Slobadan Milosevic. Impatient with the cautious ways of many of their pro-democracy elders, the youths organized in coffee bars and schools, posted graffiti almost everywhere, and used their street actions to embarrass the regime.

Milosevic counter-attacked. His police routinely beat up the protesters, in the streets and more thoroughly in the police stations. His spies were everywhere. His monopoly of the mass media meant that the Otpur was described as hoodlums and terrorists.

In October 2000 Otpur won; joined by hundreds of thousands of workers and professionals, the young people threw Milosevic out. His party was in disarray, his police in confusion, his army was split.

From the moment Otpur began it had a strategy. The young people were immensely creative in their tactics and at the same time realized that no struggle is ever won simply by a series of actions. Otpur activists knew they could only succeed by creating a strategy that guided a largely decentralized network of groups.

Cynical outsiders were skeptical when Otpur activists claimed not to have a leader, when the young people said they were all leaders and shared responsibility for their actions and their common discipline. What the skeptics overlooked was the power of strategy as a unifying force, taking its place beside the rebel energy and the lessons of recent history that the young people shared. Otpur activists didn't need an underground commander giving them their marching orders because they shared a strategy they believed in; they were happy to improvise creatively within that strategic framework.

Bojan Zarkovic, one of the Otpur trainers, told an audience at the A-Space (anarchist coffee house) in Philadelphia about the boundless creativity of the young people. They would virtually fill a wall of newsprint with their tactical ideas, he said. Then they would choose, in light of their strategy and also their preference for humor and pranks. The result was that the media's painting of them as terrorists lost credibility. True, these young people wore black jeans, black leather jackets, and black T-shirts with a clenched fist silk-screened on the front, but their actions had humor and connected with people. Passersby who saw them (and spread the word) debunked the media portrayal. “They're our kids having fun and, you know, they're right about Milosevic!” is what they said as they spread the word.

Late '90s Serbia was different in many ways from the situation facing activists in the U.S. or other countries. Even so, Otpur's experience can stimulate our thinking. Given how many activists are tired of an endless round of protests that don't seem to add up to anything, Otpur activists' biggest gift to us might be their choice to unite around a strategy, to get creative about tactics, and to let the strategy guide which tactics make sense and which don't.

Strategy = Power

The young people who started Otpur had a clear conception of how domination works. They saw their society as a pyramid, with Milosevic and his cronies at the top, in alliance with business owners, party leaders, and generals. The direction of power was typically top-down,

and included both obvious repression (the army, police, secret police) and subtle repression like a monopoly of the media and school curricula. Here's where Otpur activists diverged from conventional wisdom about power. They noticed that each layer of domination was in fact supported by the layer below; that the orders that were given were only carried out because those below were willing to carry them out.

Rather than buy into the top-down version of power that Milosevic wanted them to believe, they decided instead to picture Serbian society as organized into pillars of support holding up the dictator. If the pillars gave way, Otpur believed that Milosevic would fall.

This alternative view of power became so central to Otpur that it was taught in all the trainings of new Otpur members. (All new Otpur members were expected to go through the training so they could understand the winning strategy.)

Since the top power-holders depend on the compliance of those beneath them to stay on top, Otpur's strategy was to weaken the compliance and finally to break it. First, Otpur needed to ask: which are the pillars of support needed by the dictatorship? Then: what are the tactics that will weaken those pillars?

Activists in other countries can follow this methodology to begin to create their strategy.

Here's just one example of how it worked in Serbia. One pillar of support for Milosevic was his police. Otpur systematically undermined that pillar. The young activists knew that fighting the police would strengthen police loyalty to Milosevic (and also support the mass media claim that the young people were hoodlums and terrorists). So they trained themselves to make nonviolent responses to police violence during protests. One of the slogans they learned during their trainings was: "It only hurts if you're scared." They took photos of their wounded. They enlarged the photos, put them on signs, and carried the signs in front of the houses of the police who hurt them. They talked to the cop's neighbors about it, took the signs to the schools of the police officers' children and talked with the children about it. After a year of this, police were plainly reluctant to beat Otpur activists even when ordered to do so, because they didn't want the negative reactions of their family, friends, neighbors.

The young people joked with the plainclothes police assigned to infiltrate them and reminded the cops that everyone would get their chance to act for democracy. Through the assertive outreach of the activists, relationships were built with the police, even into the higher ranks. When the movement ripened into a full-fledged insurgency in Belgrade, many police were sent out of the city by their commanders while other police simply watched the crowds take over the Parliament building.

It wasn't easy, as one of my Otpur friends who had been beaten repeatedly told me. It was, however, simple; the strategy guided the young activists to develop creative tactics that took away one of the key pillars of the dictator's support.

Can this alternative view of power work other places? One reason why the Otpur activists worked so efficiently at undermining the various pillars of Milosevic's support was because many knew their view of power had already worked in other places. Consider what had happened within the lifetime of Otpur teenagers: the Philippine dictator Marcos had been overthrown by what was called "people power" in 1986; Communist dictatorships had been overthrown by people power in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland in 1989; commanders in the KGB, army, and Communist Party were prevented by people power from establishing a coup in Russia in 1991; a mass nonviolent uprising in Thailand prevented a top military general from consolidating his power in 1993; the South African whites' monopoly political rule was

broken in 1994 after a decade of largely nonviolent struggle. In all these places the power-holders found their power slipping away because those they depended on refused any longer to follow the script.

When I was trying as a young man to puzzle out this alternative view of power, so different from what is usually taught in school, I encountered Bernard Lafayette, who was then a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) staffer from the deep South. He explained it to me with a metaphor. Bernard said that a society is like a house. The foundation is the cooperation or compliance of the people. The roof is the state and its repressive apparatus. He asked me what happens to the house if the foundation gives way. He went on to ask: "How will it change what happens if more weapons are put on the roof, bigger tanks, more fancy technology? What will happen to the house then, if the foundation gives way?"

I then realized why this alternative view isn't promoted in school. What power holders would want us to know that the power is in fact in our hands? That instead of being intimidated by police, military, corporate leaders, media tycoons, and politicians, the people were to find out that we give away our power through compliance, and we can take it back again through noncooperation?

Of course the power holders want us to believe that power is top-down, that we must be passive, that violence is the most powerful force. Don't look for them to declare a national holiday dedicated to People Power!

And they don't need to. The use of nonviolent tactics to force change has a deep track record which is reaching critical mass. For example, hundreds of thousands of people of color have used nonviolent direct action in campaigns for over a century in the U.S. alone. (In 1876 in St. Louis African Americans were doing freedom rides against discrimination on trolley cars, to take one of thousands of examples.) In any given week there are community-based organizations of people of color, all across the U.S., who are engaged in nonviolent action: marches, sit-ins, street blockades, boycotts, civil disobedience, and the like. Books could be written just about the unions of people of color, like the hospital workers, hotel workers, and janitors, who go out on strike as well as use other tactics. While names of people of color most easily leap to mind when we think of nonviolent action, like Martin Luther King and Cesar Chavez, and a higher proportion of blacks than whites participate in nonviolent struggles, it's still not just "a black thing." Whites in the U.S., especially working class whites, also have a long track record of using nonviolent tactics to struggle for their goals. The challenge is not so much encouraging diverse peoples to engage in nonviolent struggle when they are up against it; the challenge is to link short-run struggles to more far-ranging goals.

Noncooperation is Not Enough

My friends in Otpur would be the first to admit that a mass insurgency that brings down a dictator is not enough—not enough to establish full democracy, respect for diversity, economic institutions in harmony with the earth, or other parts of their vision. It's one thing to open up a power vacuum through noncooperation (and that is a great and honorable achievement). It's another thing firmly to establish the democratic community we deserve.

For that, the strategy must go deeper. We need to go beyond what has been done plenty of times in history—to overthrow unjust governments through nonviolent struggle—and create a strategy that builds at the same time as it destroys. We need a strategy that validates alternatives, supports the experience of freedom, and expands the skills of cooperation. We need a political strategy that is at the same time a community strategy, one that says "yes" to

creative innovation in the here and now and links today's creativity to the new society that lies beyond a power shift.

With the help and feedback of many activists from a number of countries I've created a strategic framework that aims to support today's activists, something like the way Otpur activists were supported by their strategy. I call it a strategy for a **living revolution**.

The strategy not only encourages creating new tactics and more boldness in using the best of the old, but it also helps activists sort out which tactics will be most effective. Finally, the strategy brings in the dimension of time. It suggests that some tactics that are ineffective at one moment will be just right at another. It offers an organic, developmental framework of stages over time.

Time matters. Activists from other countries have been heard to laugh at U.S. activists because we notoriously lack a sense of history. This strategy framework supports us to overcome our cultural limitation and learn to think like the historical beings that we actually are.

The strategy framework has five stages:

- Cultural preparation
- Organization-building
- Confrontation
- Mass political and economic noncooperation
- Parallel institutions

The stages are in sequence, with lots of overlap. Like any model, this one is over-simplified in order to be more easily learned and worked with. One of my favorite ways to complexify the model is to picture society as a cluster of sub-societies that respond to these stages at different rates, which means that activists might go through the first several stages over and over. In reality we may end up more in cyclical motion than in linear progression. But that's for later. Right now, I'll present the five stages in a linear way, and be happy for readers who get from it a sense of movement over time.

STAGE ONE: CULTURAL PREPARATION Some people call this politicization or consciousness-raising; some Latin Americans call it “conscientizacion.” I put it first because for revolutionary change we need new culture. We can't get rid of hierarchies of domination “out there” if we are still playing domination games in our heads. As Gandhi said, we need to be the change we want to see, and that's not just an individual process, it's a collective and cultural shift.

Culture workers of all kinds get to challenge and support us all-out as we together build a culture of resistance. It's a great time for support groups that assist us to unlearn racism, sexism, religious bigotry, and the like. Oppressed groups have enormous work to do to deal with the internalized messages that limit them. As a gay man, for example, I have internalized homophobia that continues to reduce my effectiveness and my ability to connect with others. One of the ways that U.S. activists are particularly limited as compared with activists in most parts of the world is in understanding of class. Classism is one of the most invisible oppressions in the U.S., and is therefore an area of cluelessness among many activists. How many times I've heard activists who would never use slurs in referring to transsexuals or Puerto Ricans joke about “rednecks” and “white trash!” Classism goes well beyond language, however; activists unconsciously joining the mainstream's oppression of poor and working class people influences

everything from tactics to communication style to the difficulty in forming coalitions or even meeting people on the street. If the Otpur young people had carried so strong a burden of classism, Milosevic would still be in power! Getting a grip on unconscious classism will make a huge difference in the ability of U.S. activists to work for justice.⁸

The juice in this stage is vision. The primary task of every revolutionary movement is to create a vision of what activists want instead of the status quo. Vision inspires people to want to join us because they can contrast it with the consumerist hat tricks which the power holders use to distract from planetary crisis. Vision inspires us, because it not only clarifies what we want but reminds us why we want it. Vision reduces co-optation, because its integrity is a rebuke against meaningless compromise. Vision builds unity, because tactical disagreements and personality clashes are smaller in the perspective of our goals.

The container in this stage is strategy. Without a container, it's very hard to hold the juice. Many activists will refuse to create vision because of their hopelessness—if I have no strategy for making a difference, why even bother with vision? Strategy is therefore linked to vision. Otpur had a clear and limited vision that could be achieved by its strategy. When they pasted the black and white posters all over the country that proclaimed “He's finished!” everyone knew (a) who “he” was, and (b) that it was now only a matter of time.

For those of us with a vision that goes beyond removal of powerholders to fundamental transformation, a bigger strategy is needed. The more we study and participate in large-scale people power, the bigger our strategy will become and the more we will notice many of its aspects already alive in the body politic. Big strategy counters despair. Big strategy fosters vision. Vision informs strategy. We need the juice and the container.

By George Lakey

Reprinted by permission from David Solnit, editor of the anthology in which it appears: *Globalize Liberation: How to Uproot the System and Build a Better World*, City Lights Books, 2004.

Lakey's essay is excerpted from his 300-page book recently republished as *Toward a Living Revolution*, Peace News Press, 2012. He continues to elaborate on the framework in this essay in his ongoing column at WagingNonviolence.org.

To read the rest of this article,

visit <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/lakeylivrev.html>