

PRINCIPLE

BUILD PEOPLE POWER, THEN NEGOTIATE

While negotiation with the state can play a role in a social movement victory, that depends entirely on people's stamina and determination to keep the pressure on in the streets, far from the negotiating table.

CONTRIBUTED BY

Ivan Marovic

Ivan Marovic is an organizer, educator and social innovator from Belgrade, Serbia. He was a student activist and one of the leaders of Otpor, a resistance movement that played an important role in the downfall of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. He currently serves as the Executive Director of the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict.

"TIME IS THE GREAT EQUALIZER. IT RUNS EQUALLY FOR RICH AND POOR, FOR THE MANY AND THE FEW. IF WE UNDERSTAND THIS, TIME WILL BE ON OUR SIDE."

"The trouble is, when you say to a general 'You and whose army?', he just has to point out of the window."

—Terry Pratchett

A powerful state faced with the demands of a popular social movement may seek to enter into negotiations. Beware! While negotiations may eventually play a role in getting what you want, their success depends entirely on the social movement's stamina and determination to keep the pressure on in the streets. In other words, in a moment of popular upheaval, it's far more important to focus on building and sustaining protests in the streets than rushing into backchannel negotiations.

Student protesters in Québec, for example, managed to repeal an unpopular tuition hike in 2012 precisely because they didn't rush to the negotiating table:

"Student organizers understood that politicians holding state power would not back away from their agenda through negotiations alone. By unleashing the autonomous power of people on the streets, and prioritizing street action over political debate, organizers allowed independent political momentum to develop far outside the halls of power. This drove the politicians crazy, and in the end was integral in shaping the outcome of the strike."

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- Burmese Students' Long March
- Fees Must Fall
- #GambiaHasDecided
- Québec Student Strike
- Schools of Struggle

Tactics

- General strike
- Mass street action
- Occupation

Principles

- Build strength through repetition
- Develop an inside-outside strategy
- Escalate strategically
- Follow the lead of the most impacted
- Put your target in a decision dilemma

Movements draw their power from participation—not just the sheer number of people, but also the commitment, the passion, the energy they bring to the struggle, as well as the diversity of voices and the sectors represented. This people power is what movements need to build to ensure their demands are met, and they'll need to take care to maintain that people power during the negotiations, until the deal is reached and commitments are secured. Even then, participation should be maintained as an integral part of the implementation process.

Whenever the target of our demands wants to talk, we should wonder what has brought them to the table. Maybe the initial mobilization against the injustice was impressive. Maybe it resonated with the general public. Maybe some of their key supporters expressed dissenting views. Whatever it might have been, it was an unfavourable dynamic, an understanding that they could not maintain the status quo—that is what brought them to the table, not their good will.

And when the powerful do seek to negotiate, this doesn't mean they've given up and are ready to make concessions. Often they are just buying time, waiting for the movement to lose steam. They may explicitly demand an end to the protests that forced the negotiation before they will sit down to negotiate.

This happened to Tibetans when the Chinese government invited the Dalai Lama's envoys to a round of talks in 2002. China had won the bid to host the 2008 Olympics and wanted to mute any international criticism of their Tibet policy. During the initial rounds of the dialogue, the Chinese demanded that Dharamsala tone down protests to create a *conducive atmosphere* for negotiations. The Tibetan government-in-exile dutifully urged activists to hold off on their protests. Prime Minister Samdhong Ripoché reasoned that, once the dialogue had started, the protests would be unnecessary. But the negotiations collapsed soon after the Olympics were over. The Chinese made no concessions, and Dharamsala was left with diminished momentum and nothing to show from the negotiating table.

People power is not the only thing we have, of course. While we depend on human resources to counter the financial resources of the rich and powerful, there is one more resource we should take into consideration: time. Time is the great equalizer. It runs equally for rich and poor, for the many and the few. If we understand this, time will be on our side. Before the negotiations and during the negotiations, even after, we shouldn't allow the other side to buy time, but rather, use time to build people power.

LEARN MORE

The Tibetan Nonviolent Struggle: A Strategic and Historical Analysis

- Use organizing strategies that scale
- Would you like some structure with your momentum?

Theories

- Al faza'a (a surge of solidarity)
- Temporary autonomous zone

Methodologies

- Peel the onion
- Pillars of power

TAGS

Campaign strategy, Community building, Democracy, Dictatorship, Movement building, Street protest, Student activism

International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2015

<https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/resource/tibetan-nonviolent-struggle-strategic-historical-analysis/>

The Path of Most Resistance: A Step-by-Step Guide to Planning
Nonviolent Campaigns

International Center on Nonviolent Conflict, 2018

<https://commonslibrary.org/the-path-of-most-resistance-a-step-by-step-guide-to-planning-nonviolent-campaigns/>