

# Minimising the Risk of Police Violence

By Robert J. Burrowes

Police may be violent at nonviolent actions for various reasons. In my experience, the most important ones are because police are directed to use violence as a form of political repression and because police are afraid of what to expect. Thus, in addition to considering the many other aspects of any nonviolent strategy, the planning process might consider ways in which any action can be made less vulnerable to police repression (or, for that matter, violence by provocateurs).

Nonviolent action can be very effective in limiting the use of violence for three interrelated reasons: its capacity to create a favourable political atmosphere (because of, for example, the way in which activist honesty builds trust); its capacity to create a non-threatening physical environment (because of the nonviolent discipline of the activists); and its capacity to alter the human psychological conditions (both innate and learned) which make the use of violence possible in the first place. This includes its capacity to reduce or eliminate police fear and its capacity to 'humanise' activists in the eyes of both opponents and the police.

Consequently, while it is never possible to eliminate the risk of police (or provocateur) violence at a nonviolent action, it is possible to minimise this risk by identifying the factors which account for the outcome and by controlling as many of these factors as possible. Failure to do so increases the risk of undesirable outcomes. In essence, minimising the risk of police violence requires the meticulous planning and implementation of any action. This should include the following.

1. Make a strategic decision that the campaign will be nonviolent, then make this commitment explicit and widely known.

2. Develop a "Code of Nonviolent Discipline" which reflects this commitment and, given the political advantages of this code, insist that any activist who wishes to participate in the nonviolent actions of the campaign sign it before doing so. Based on a study of many campaigns around the world, a typical code would include the following points:

- I will speak the truth.
- I will treat each person (including workers, police officers and media personnel) with respect.
- I will harbour no anger or hate. I will suffer the anger and assaults of my opponents.
- I will protect opponents from insults or attack.
- I will act in accordance with the decisions and planned program of the organising group and will respond promptly to requests from the action focalisers. In the event of a serious disagreement, I will withdraw from the action. I will not initiate or participate in any spontaneous action.
- I will accept responsibility for my actions; I will not use secrecy.
- If my arrest is sought, I will accept it voluntarily; if I am taken prisoner, I will behave in an exemplary manner.

- I will protect the property of my opponents.
- I will not run or use any threatening motions.
- I will not bring or use any drugs or alcohol.

3. Conduct nonviolence education programs so that activists fully understand what a commitment to nonviolent discipline entails. Within these education programs, provide opportunities for activists to share their feelings and fears in relation to any action and to discuss how the group might organise itself (in affinity groups, for example) so that each person is adequately supported to behave in a disciplined and nonviolent manner.

4. Conduct nonviolence education programs specifically designed for those activists who wish to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to be members of nonviolent peacekeeping teams.

5. Write individually to the relevant political leaders (such as the Prime Minister or the Premier, and their deputies), the Minister for Police, the Chief Commissioner of Police and any Deputy Commissioners informing them of the campaign and specifically advising them that the campaign (and the actions within it) will be explicitly nonviolent. Include a copy of the code of nonviolent discipline.

6. Issue a news release (and write letters to the editors of newspapers if necessary) which draws attention to the nonviolent commitment of the group, which advises that political leaders, the Police Minister and Police Commissioner have been informed, and which includes a copy of the code of nonviolent discipline.

7. Identify the police forces (including the federal, state, military and/or naval police) as well as any "special operations" groups which will police any actions. Liaise regularly with the senior police officers who will be responsible for the police response. Keep them fully informed of action plans and give them a personal copy of the code of nonviolent discipline. Request the opportunity to address all of the police who will be involved in policing any actions.

8. Organise members of the police liaison team to regularly visit local police stations in order to talk to individual police about the campaign and to give them a personal copy of the code of nonviolent discipline. This contact is designed to reduce police fears and to counter any ideological conditioning (such as "all protesters are long-haired dole bludgers") which has dehumanised activists in the eyes of the police.

9. Organise a group of activists (preferably ones who are not participating in the action on that day) to meet the police just prior to any action. If possible, they should speak to each police officer individually and give them a copy of the code of nonviolent discipline. If this is not possible, a member of the police liaison team should remind the police (over a public address system) of the nonviolent commitment of the activists.

10. Choose tactics which are consistent with the strategy and plan exactly where and when each action will take place, how many activists will be

involved and what level of nonviolence education and experience they will require in order to be disciplined and effective in the circumstances. Consider preparing an "action leaflet" to explain the main details of any action.

11. Plan each tactic in complete detail. For example, if the action involves some form of intervention (such as sitting in front of a bulldozer or blocking access to a work area) which increases the risk of confrontation with workers or the police, make decisions about such details as whether the activists will stand, sit or lie down; whether they will face or turn away from the workers and/or police; what posture they will adopt; whether they will sing (what?) or remain silent; and whether they will be connected in some very obvious way (tangled in a ball of wool, for example) which makes removal difficult. This detail is important because, for example, it is more difficult to baton-charge people who are sitting quietly.

12. Consider tactics which emphasise dispersion rather than concentration. The capacity for tactics involving dispersion to minimise violence has been illustrated in several campaigns. For example, during the 1930-1931 independence campaign in India, the main type of repression (imprisonment) used against people throughout India who manufactured salt was relatively mild compared with the violent beatings given to the activists who intended to occupy the Dharasana salt works. Even more effectively, the 1959 potato boycott in South Africa - to protest the use of Pass offenders being used as 'slave' labour on potato farms - could not be broken by the government, farmers and merchants combined and made repression effectively impossible.<sup>1</sup>

13. If tactics involving concentration are chosen, consider organising them in a novel way or investing a traditional practice with new meaning. For example, in circumstances in which demonstrations are banned, the action may take the form of a funeral procession or, as is frequently the case in Tibet, a religious ceremony.

14. Have a contingency plan for each tactic which may be subjected to police violence. This plan should be known by all participants in advance of the action, it may be described in an action leaflet distributed as people arrive for the action, it should be explained again by the action focalisers at the beginning of the action, and it should be capable of implementation in a matter of seconds. If appropriate, the plan should emphasise the importance of maintaining lookouts during the action in order to eliminate the possibility that activists will be caught by surprise. The plan should include the preparation of simple actions designed to counter the prospect of violence and it should include simple actions for responding to violence should it start to occur. For example, at Ixopo in South Africa in 1959, a group of protesting women was ordered to disperse. But before police could be ordered to conduct the baton charge, the highly organised women sank quietly to their knees and began to pray. In response, the police 'hung around helplessly'.<sup>2</sup>

15. Appoint two action focalisers who are competent to explain and direct the action on behalf of the organising group. Focussing includes identifying the goal of the action, indicating its nonviolent nature (and asking people to

respect this discipline or to withdraw from the action), creating the appropriate mood (for example, one of celebration or mourning), drawing attention to any action leaflet, outlining any safety precautions or contingency plan, and facilitating the action through the stages agreed upon during the planning process. This will assist people to understand the nature of the action and to resist the initiatives of individuals or groups with a competing agenda.

16. Organise marshals and peacekeeping teams (which are able to deal effectively with activist, provocateur, worker or even limited police violence) to be present at any nonviolent action where violence is a distinct possibility.

17. Arrange for independent witnesses (such as civil liberties monitors) and the media to be present at any action where there is a risk of police violence. Violent repression of nonviolent activists violates major cultural and political norms. For this reason, the police would prefer to conduct any violence in secret.

If, despite all of the above, the police are still violent, the activists should maintain their discipline so that police fears about the reaction of activists are quickly dispelled and so that the inhibitions against the use of violence are brought quickly into play. Maintaining discipline in this context requires a great deal of courage. However, by making unnecessary noise, running away or responding in kind, activists contribute to the chaos which makes a continuation of the violence more likely. This has been demonstrated historically on many occasions.

In contrast, a disciplined group which remains motionless (preferably in a pose of cultural significance, such as one of prayer or meditation) and which remains silent or perhaps hums or sings (possibly a religious hymn or a national anthem) is less likely to be attacked, and, if it is attacked, is less likely to be attacked for any length of time. In the tactical sense, disciplined action of this nature should minimise the number of casualties; in the strategic sense, it should generate the highest level of support for the nonviolent activists.

#### References

1. Albert Luthuli. *Let My People Go: An Autobiography*. London: Collins, 1962. pp. 217-219.
2. Luthuli p. 196.

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