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Stages of Escalation for a Nonviolent Campaign

When we develop and carry out a nonviolent campaign for social change, we need to go beyond publicizing and protesting injustices; refusing to cooperate with oppressors, and intervening nonviolently. We need to implement constructive programmes as well, in which we actually live the change that is our goal.

The interrelationship between confrontational action and constructive action at different stages of a campaign is displayed in the chart “Stages of Escalation of a Nonviolent Campaign”. This chart is based upon Theodor Ebert's book “Nonviolent Rebellion-Alternatives to Civil War.” In the early stages of a nonviolent campaign, the emphasis is on bringing the issue into the public sphere. A well-organised campaign will use public protest actions and will also present possible alternatives (constructive action) as a way to draw attention to the issues and to encourage change. If this does not achieve the desired results, the campaign may move to “stage 2.” In this stage, the campaign increases public pressure by staging legal forms of non-cooperation (strikes, consumer boycotts, go-slow, etc.) as well as legal innovative activities (fair trade initiatives, alternative economy structures, nonviolent intervention, etc.). The goal at this stage is to raise the stakes (societal costs) and minimize the rewards for those committing the injustices or benefiting from them. At the same time the campaign will most likely be continuing its use of actions from first stage.

This might be sufficient to reach the desired goals. But, if not, there is the possibility of using nonviolent actions that require much more risk from the activists and which also present a much more powerful statement to the public. The third stage of escalation would use nonviolent civil disobedience both as a protest (sit-ins, blockades, strikes, refusal to go to war) but also as civil usurpation, carrying out actions that exercise authority or implement a structure without a legal right to do so. Examples of this are providing sanctuary to prevent the deportation of refugees, nonviolent intervention, reverse strikes, or building an environmentally sound village on the construction site of an environmentally destructive factory.

As nonviolent campaigns develop, their strategies will escalate from one stage to the next, but they will continue to use actions from previous stages. This chart should not imply that there is a inflexible linear escalation. However, it is useful to show the interrelationship of these stages and types of actions. A campaign may consciously decide to move from one stage to another (up or down) as it chooses the most effective actions for the situation. Throughout a campaign it is important to make the effort engage in dialog with one's opponents, as one tries to find solutions that include all parties. At certain times, for example, this dialog may have an easier time getting started if the campaign temporarily reduces its public pressure. A campaign may also decide that is more effective to increase its work on constructive action and to hold back on confrontational actions, or vice versa.

To carry out a successful campaign it important to have an ongoing evaluation of the campaign's activities and their effectiveness. Your group can use the framework of this chart to track a campaign's implementation of constructive as well as confrontational actions over a period of time to help evaluate how they work together to achieve your goals.

Stages of Escalation of Nonviolent Campaigns

Stage of Escalation	Confrontational Action	Constructive Action	How it works
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Bring the issue into the public arena	Protest (demonstrations, petitions, leafleting, vigils)	Presenting alternative (teach-in lectures, show alternatives)	Publicising / Convincing
Legal actions that deal with the issue	Legal non-cooperation: (strike, consumer boycott, go slow)	Legal innovative activities (fair trade, free schools, alternative economy, ethical investments, nonviolent intervention	Raising the stakes (costs) and minimising the rewards for those committing injustice
Illegal actions that deal with the issue	Civil disobedience: (sit-in, blockade, tax resistance, strike, war resistance)	Civil usurpation: (sanctuary movement, pirate radio, reverse strike, nonviolent intervention	Redirecting power

Adapted and translated from German into English by Eric Bachman. "This chart is based upon the "Chart of escalation of nonviolent actions" on page 37 of "Gewaltfreier Aufstand - Alternative zum Bürgerkrieg (Nonviolent Rebellion - Alternatives to Civil War) by Theodor Ebert, Waldkircher Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 1978 ISBN 3-870885-030-1

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