

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Laurence Cox  
Building an antiwar movement  
October 2001

Retrieved on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2021 from [struggle.ws](http://struggle.ws)  
Laurence Cox (Dublin) has been involved in social movements for nearly 20 years, including opposing the Falklands War, the nuclear arms race and the second Gulf War. He's an academic specialist in social movements research, currently studying working-class community politics in Ireland.

[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)

## Building an antiwar movement

Laurence Cox

October 2001

**It's easy to feel despair, isolation and frustration at what's presented to us as an inevitable drive into an indefinitely long war. The key ingredients of success in building a successful anti-war movement are confidence in ordinary people's potential, solidarity with each other and a long-term view: we have not been able to prevent the first bombs falling, but over time we can reverse the dynamic and stop the war.**

Historical experience — desertion and mutinies at the end of World War I, the international movement against the war in Vietnam, the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s — shows that movements can stop or divert even large-scale processes of militarisation, but only when large numbers of ordinary people are actively involved. The experience of active involvement in turn gives people more confidence in their own capacities to think and act for themselves, which is an important element in building a better world. This means:

1. Making space for a diversity of voices within the movement. To insist on expressing only the most radical line will isolate

activists at the very time when many ordinary people are looking for a way out. To insist on being as “mainstream” as possible will stop the movement developing and restrict participation to a small section of the population. So a good “platform” will include as wide a range of anti-war voices as possible. This enables the movement to speak to different people and is part of learning from each other.

2. Making sure that the movement emphasises activities which everyone can take part in. It’s important to remember that most actions don’t have an immediate chance of stopping the war; but if they give people a chance to learn how to become active, to gain confidence and to develop their own understanding, they can help build a movement that does have a chance.
3. Taking care that the movement isn’t run by a handful of experienced people to the exclusion of everyone else. While activists may have particular skills, their job is to share them and pass them on. Stopping this war is likely to be a long campaign, so we will need to develop everyone’s ability to take part at every level.

In terms of strategy, it’s important for people to mobilise within their own everyday contexts, both to root the movement in the real world and to change the existing social relationships that ultimately give rise to war. While the movement will also need to reach out into public space and develop a “political” face, this shouldn’t become separate from the rest of the movement. The point is for ordinary people to politicise themselves, not to develop a separate political élite. In practice, what we need to do is:

1. Start by talking to other people at work, in the shops, at home, on the bus, in school, online — anywhere where people already know us. This may seem challenging at times, but

it's becoming clear that far more people are uneasy about the prospect of war than the media leads us to think. By opening up this new space for communication, we undermine some of the usual power relationships and creating space for new kinds of solidarity and friendship.

2. Offer people immediate, practical things to do: signing something, going on a march, coming to a meeting, putting up posters, circulating a letter. We're trying to "push people's boundaries" enough so that they feel they are becoming active, but not so much that they see activism as beyond their reach.
3. Encourage people to take the next step, and support them if they don't yet know how: ask them to speak at meetings or write leaflets, help them to put press releases or websites together, show them how to organise a public meeting or a march. Be careful of patronising people: the trick is to be confident that they can do whatever they set their mind to, and make sure they have the backup they need to do it. The second time somebody does something, we should leave them to it!
4. Educate ourselves: this movement is likely to last a long time, and most of us are going to have to find out more about all kinds of issues, from foreign policy to Islam to international law. This also gives us a chance to build connections by inviting speakers from other groups, from local Muslim associations to college lecturers to development organisations.
5. Make links: although (almost) anyone who opposes war should be welcomed, we should work and argue for making links to other issues, most importantly foreign policy, "development" and world economics, racism and intolerance,

and civil liberties. To stop the war and leave the system ready for another war tomorrow is not enough.

6. Try to spread the movement, rather than build little empires. Encourage people to take independent action (and support them when they do); work to create networks between different groups and initiatives, without imposing a single “line” that everyone has to follow.

This war may run for years in various forms, and a movement that can stop it will need to include many different social groups. So there’s space for all sorts of different action, and it’s important to respect this, because it’s how new people will both find their way to the movement and how other people can contribute something we might not have thought of. Different actions also have different purposes (though some overlap):

- Convincing ordinary people: meetings, posters, demos, street theatre, leaflets, videos, etc.
- Building the movement: newsletters, mailing lists, teach-ins, websites, gatherings, benefit gigs, etc.
- “Stopping the machine in its tracks”: 5-minute strikes for peace, occupations, peace observers, supporting deserters, blockades, etc.
- Influencing governments or the media: petitions, vigils, press releases, photo opportunities, etc.

We learn as movements, not just as individuals, and the dialogue between us is important. There is no book that can tell us authoritatively how we are going to stop this war; it’s something we will work out together in practice. We can certainly learn from other movements and past history (several campaigns have produced excellent “how-to” guides that are a real goldmine of ideas), but at the

end of the day none of us knows exactly what will work, and we won’t know until we’ve managed to stop the war (if then!) In the process, though, we are also learning something else of immense value: how to treat each other as equals, how to cooperate and communicate without bosses and laws, and how to build the kind of world that we want to live in.