

Handout:
The Power of Nonviolent Action, a.k.a. People Power

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. promoted nonviolent action to fight the oppressive and unjust systems that perpetuated racism in the United States of the 1950s and 1960s. Inspired mostly by Gandhi, he argued that it was important to oppose and dismantle racism at a systemic level using nonviolent action. He argued that this was a way that ordinary people could exert their power.

Of course, people had tried to address racial injustice before. Many had previously gone to court to fight institutionalized segregation. But it proved difficult or impossible to use a racist legal system to fight racism. The courts did not provide the results people were looking for. Segregation persisted, which is why people turned to other means. King helped build organizations (including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Council), and joined with other organizations and activists. Together, they motivated ordinary people to organize themselves and their resources into collective power. Thousands of people gained knowledge and got trained in the methods of nonviolent action to exercise their power from the bottom up.

Traditionally power is seen as flowing from the top down. Those at the top are seen as having power over those at lower levels of institutions. Take a school district. Students report to their teachers, who report to their principals, who in turn report to their superintendents, who report to the mayor. There are checks along the way, including from unions that represent school staff, parent organizations, watchdog organizations, and oversight from state and federal education officials.

Most institutions in society are structured this way: the person or persons at the top are the ones who hold power. Corporations have CEOs at their top making decisions. Cities have mayors running things. The military has the Secretary of Defense who reports to the President, the Commander in Chief. In theory, it might seem that those at lower levels of these institutions would have to do as they're told or face the consequences—consequences like being suspended, expelled, fired, demoted, fined, having to pay a restitution, or possibly going to jail.

But this isn't the only way power works. Power can also flow up, especially when people recognize and start to use their power strategically and collectively. People can use legal action to challenge those in power. They can also form unions; by banding together, workers can more evenly match the power of their employers. Through strategic, nonviolent action, they can apply pressure on those in power. But people can use nonviolent action even in the absence of an organization like a union.

According to Gene Sharp, who has been called the father of nonviolent struggle:

“By themselves, rulers cannot collect taxes, enforce repressive laws and regulations, keep trains running on time, prepare national budgets, direct traffic, manage ports, print money, repair roads, keep food supplied to the markets, make steel, build rockets, train the police and the army, issue postage stamps or even milk a cow. People provide these services to the ruler through a variety of organizations and institutions. If people would stop providing these skills, the ruler could not rule.”
(from *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*)

The nonviolent actions promoted during the Civil Rights Movement employ this form of power—power from the bottom up, a.k.a. people power, to oppose and resist the racist and oppressive nature of American institutions. By pushing back on the system or by withdrawing power (through disobeying orders, economic noncooperation and boycotts, strikes and protests), the system's weaknesses can be exposed. People recognize they can shift the balance of power in society.