

The Civil Rights Movement's success was based on a coordinated three-prong strategy of civil disobedience, grass-roots organizing and mass boycotts. To achieve similar victories, a national "We are the 99%" movement must adopt and apply that same approach

In the coming days the Occupy Wall Street movement faces an extremely complex and difficult series of decisions about its strategy and tactics. It cannot simply repeat the initial tactic of occupying public spaces that it has employed up to now but it has not yet developed any clear alternative strategy for the future.

In debating their next steps the protesters - and the massive numbers of Americans who support them - will turn again and again to the history and example of the civil rights movement for guidance. Martin Luther King's closest advisors including Jessie Jackson and Andrew Young have noted the clear historical parallels that exist between the two protest movements and both activists and observers will urgently seek to find lessons in the struggles of the past.

The discussion, however, will be hindered by the profoundly oversimplified vision that many people today have of how the victories of the civil rights movement were actually achieved. Most Americans have little more than a series of impressionistic images of the civil rights movement - police dogs and fire hoses unleashed against the demonstrators in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, dramatic marches attacked by police in Selma, Alabama in 1965 and, across the south, sit-ins and freedom rides that rocked the region in the early years of the decade. In this vision, dramatic confrontations with the authorities appear to have been, in effect, the movement's entire "strategy."

But, in fact, behind every major campaign of the civil rights movement there was actually a very organized and coherent three-pronged strategy. To seriously seek guidance for the present in the struggles of the past, it is absolutely indispensable to understand the basic socio-political strategy that the movement employed.

The civil rights movement's three-pronged strategy combined:

- (1) *Civil disobedience*
- (2) *Grass-roots organizing and voter registration*
- (3) *Boycotts and economic withdrawal*

In every single major campaign of the civil rights movement - Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma -- these three elements of the overall strategy were employed in a coherent, mutually supporting and reinforcing way. In contrast, no part of this coordinated approach was ever successful in isolation.

Seen in this light, there are indeed reasonable comparisons between the civil rights movement and the initial phase of Occupy Wall Street. OWS represents a modern application of civil disobedience, the first component of the civil rights movement's three-pronged strategy. The essence of civil disobedience (also called "nonviolent direct action") is the use of dramatic protests

that disrupt normal activities and usually violate the law. They are designed to call attention to the existence of injustice and win public sympathy through the demonstrators willingness to risk danger and injury and to go to jail for their cause.

In the early phase of the civil rights movement the most extensive applications of civil disobedience were the freedom rides and the sit-in's, actions that directly violated the morally unjust laws enforcing segregation. As the movement's objectives turned to social and economic issues in the latter part of the 60's, the targets of civil disobedience became more abstract and symbolic, culminating in the establishment of a tent city on the national mall during the Poor People's Campaign.

But civil disobedience was only tip of the iceberg of the civil rights movements' struggle against segregation. Behind the dramatic actions that captured the headlines was a massive grass-roots organizing effort across the South that involved thousands of passionate young organizers. For every one sit-in demonstrator there were a hundred grass-roots civil rights activists who spent months and years travelling around the South to conduct "freedom schools" in church basements, restaurants, barber shops and meeting halls, gatherings that were held in even the smallest towns and rural areas. These freedom schools patiently built support for voter registration efforts and laid the foundations for later political campaigns by African-American candidates. King and his lieutenants were always absolutely clear in saying that the only long-range solution to segregation lay in Black Americans winning effective political representation.

Today it is the "We Are Ohio" movement and the Wisconsin recall campaigns, rather than Occupy Wall Street, that represent the modern equivalents of the civil rights movement's grass-roots organizing campaigns. During these recent campaigns against laws designed to eliminate the right to union representation hundreds of thousands of petitions were signed and thousands of volunteers engaged in door to door canvassing, literature distribution, the manning of tables in shopping centers and the operation of phone banks - the hard, grueling, unsung work that is indispensable for successful grass-roots campaigns. The one-on-one, face-to-face organizing techniques of the Ohio and Wisconsin movements actually displayed substantial similarities with the techniques of traditional trade union organizing as well as with the civil rights movement.

In short, comparisons between the movements of today and the civil rights movement cannot be limited to Occupy Wall Street. The "We Are Ohio" and Wisconsin recall campaigns have an equally valid claim to kinship with the earlier struggles of the civil rights era.

The third prong of the civil rights movement's strategy was boycott and economic withdrawal. In the Montgomery campaign the bus system was boycotted, in Birmingham, it was all downtown merchants. In the view of King and his associates it was economic withdrawal that was actually the most powerful single weapon in the nonviolent arsenal. It was the bus boycott that won King's first victory in Montgomery and the boycott of downtown stores that ultimately forced the business and political establishment of Birmingham to negotiate.

King himself referred to boycotts as "campaigns of economic withdrawal" and described them as "nonviolence at peak of its power". [Here is how he expressed it in 1967:](#)

In the past six months simply by refusing to purchase products from companies which do not hire Negroes in meaningful numbers and in all job categories, the Ministers of Chicago under SCLC's Operation Breadbasket have increased the income of the Negro community by more than two million dollars annually. In Atlanta the Negroes' earning power has been increased by more than twenty million dollars annually over the past three years... This is nonviolence at its peak of power.

The modern application of this strategy can now be seen in the "Move Your Money" and related

campaigns that call on people to withdraw funds from the major banks and reinvest them in credit unions and other more socially conscious institutions. There are a variety of estimates from credit unions and independent sources that suggest the campaign has already had a significant and measurable effect, but it is also clear that this is still the very earliest trial run for future economic withdrawal campaigns with potentially powerful consequences.

Beyond the current campaign aimed at the largest banks, the tactic of economic withdrawal can be applied to a wide variety of firms and issues. Such campaigns will all be united by a simple underlying concept: working people should not spend or invest their money with firms and institutions that use those same funds to bankroll conservative candidates, laws and policies that undermine those same workers' economic security, standard of living and hopes for the future.

Consumer product companies are particularly vulnerable to campaigns of economic withdrawal because the damage to their reputation and image can in many cases be more devastating than the direct economic damage itself. The quite effective campaign by People of Color to pressure the advertisers of Glen Beck's TV show in 2009 demonstrated the significant leverage consumer boycott campaigns can bring to bear in the internet age.

There are already a variety of informal linkages developing between the three social movements above -- the "Occupy Wall Street", "We are Ohio/Wisconsin recall" and "Move Your Money" campaigns. Organizations including MoveOn.org, Van Jones' American Dream Movement and the AFL-CIO/Working America federations have played a significant "behind the scenes" role in supporting the OWS, "We are Ohio" and "Move Your Money" actions and also in popularizing and promoting the broader "We are the 99%" political movement and perspective around the country.

But the critical historical lesson that can be drawn from the civil rights movement is the vital need for the three prongs of the movements' strategy - civil disobedience, grass-roots organizing/political mobilization and boycott/economic withdrawal - to be employed in a coordinated way as part of a single integrated approach. The movement's key victories in Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma all depended on this coordination.

There is currently no single leader with the immense stature of a Martin Luther King or grass-roots organizations like SCLC and SNCC to provide such coordination for a national "We Are the 99%" social movement. In the modern internet-connected world, however, more diversified and decentralized forms of organization are more likely to develop and are more likely to be effective as well.

But for a "We Are the 99%" movement to achieve substantial victories, coordination must be achieved. Neither Occupy Wall Street nor the Ohio and Wisconsin campaigns nor campaigns of economic withdrawal like "Move Your Money" can, in isolation, produce transformational victories of the scope and significance of the victories of the civil rights movement.

In coordination, on the other hand, these three tactics are immensely powerful. It was the combination of these three approaches, employed in a coherent overall strategy, that broke the back of the system of Southern segregation within a single decade and that same three-pronged strategy can profoundly transform America once again today.

Note: the analysis presented here was first formulated at a 1971 conference of The Institute for Nonviolent Social Change that included many of the leaders of the major campaigns of the civil rights movement.