

Democracy and Peace

By the Rev. Robert Moore

In my nearly 48 years of full time organizing for peace, I have found that using the classic means of democracy, what I call grassroots democracy, has been the most powerful and effective way to advance the cause of peace. A strong early example was the Nuclear Weapons Freeze Campaign, of which I was privileged to be a leader in launching in the early 1980s.

At that time, the escalating nuclear arms race between the US and the former USSR had reached a total of over 70,000 nuclear weapons. Nothing we had tried seemed to have slowed, much less reduced, the number of nuclear weapons. Instead, there was an action and reaction cycle between the two big nuclear superpowers. As one side deployed new and more dangerous nuclear weapons, the other would react by matching or exceeding the escalation of the other side.

There had been partial successes, such as with the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty that banned nuclear tests everywhere but underground. Protests, especially by mothers worried about exposure of their children to radioactive fallout from the atmospheric tests, were key to that success. But despite that restraint, the nuclear arms race just kept escalating.

In December 1979 I invited Dr. Randall Forsberg, the initiator of the Nuclear Freeze proposal—which called for freezing the testing, production, and deployment of new nuclear weapons by the US and the USSR—to a national conference I coordinated as National Secretary of Mobilization for Survival. Her speech advocating for the Nuclear Freeze was enthusiastically received by the hundreds of peace leaders from across the US.

The first democratic initiative in support of the Freeze was to have direct debates and votes on it in the purest form of democracy, town hall meetings, in Vermont; as well as a referendum in a State Senate race in Western Massachusetts. The Freeze was passed with strong support in multiple New England venues.

The next step was to gather petition signatures in support of the Freeze that we could present to elected representatives. In NJ, we gathered more than 50,000 signatures and presented them to our US Senators. Both supported the Freeze, and became co-sponsors in the US Congress.

From there, we were able to lobby the NJ legislature to put the Freeze on the ballot as the top referendum for the Fall, 1982 election. Organizers in 15 other states and a total of 60 counties and municipalities also got Freeze referenda on their ballots. On June 12, 1982, the largest demonstration in US history brought a million protestors to NYC in support of the Freeze.

With that strong momentum, the referenda passed almost everywhere it was on the ballot with an average of 60% support. In NJ, 67% of voters voted for the Freeze Referendum!

Next, in the Spring of 1983, the Nuclear Freeze had a major lobby day that brought thousands to lobby our elected representatives. From NJ we took 12 bus loads with over 600 people to Washington DC. When over 100 constituents crowded into his office, our conservative Republican Representative, Matt Rinaldo, co-sponsored the Freeze on the spot!

Up until this time, then President Ronald Reagan had opposed the Freeze, and instead cut off arms control negotiations. But he came under so much pressure—with the Freeze repeatedly as a front-page story—that he resumed those negotiations. He had to put a proposal on the table, and chose the Zero-Zero option: banning medium range nuclear weapons in Europe by both the US and the USSR. But the USSR had hundreds of such weapons, while the US had none.

At first, the then Soviet leader, Breznev, rejected that one-sided proposal. But when Gorbachev succeeded him, he accepted it—which led to the first nuclear reduction treaty in history, the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, that verifiably banned them for both sides. From there numerous other nuclear reduction treaties were negotiated and came into force, resulting in the number of nuclear warheads from 70,000 to under 13,000!

A similar dynamic emerged regarding the Iraq War in the first decade of the 21st century. When the war was launched based on the false assertion that Iraq had nuclear weapons, at first the US public supported it and had a “rally around the flag” public reaction.

But then the US peace movement held rallies, teach-ins, and other mobilizations, culminating in a massive Peace Voter Campaign that helped elect a pro-peace Congress in 2006. That succeeded in having a majority of anti-war members of Congress, and then President George W. Bush reached an agreement that would withdraw US troops from Iraq by 2011. After he was elected in 2008, President Obama fulfilled that goal.

There are just a few examples of how grass roots democracy became a powerful force for peace and disarmament. The Peace Voter Campaign exists to this day, and has a major history of educating candidates about peace issues, and mobilizing voters to be educated about which candidates take such positions.