

Planning for Peace in New Haven

An interview with Tom Holahan, chair of the New Haven City Peace Commission.

LAST NOVEMBER NEW HAVEN VOTERS MADE IT CLEAR: THEY want cuts in the military budget and they want the savings directed to the nation's cities (MFP, Winter 1989-90). The referendum they approved, by a 5-to-1 margin, also called on the federal government to "guarantee conversion from military to civilian production without loss of jobs or income."

The referendum was proposed, and support for it was organized, by the New Haven City Peace Commission, an official city agency established by ordinance in 1987. David Adams spoke with Tom Holahan, the Commission chair. Holahan is a school teacher and former member of the New Haven Board of Aldermen.

What do you see as the importance of the referendum results?

First, it unified the community by expressing the broad consensus, already documented by polls, that the Cold War should be ended and that the enormous resources previously squandered on weaponry should be used to solve our escalating social problems. There was practically no organized opposition to the referendum and support came from all sectors of the city.

Second, the referendum called attention to the importance of economic conversion. We cannot move toward peace until guarantees are provided that the dismantling of the military-industrial complex will not result in widespread unemployment and lowered incomes.

Third, it focused on the federal budget which is the key to the crisis we face. This is an economic crisis comparable to the Great Depression. And it will require government initiatives as great as those in the '30s. We are emerging, as people did from the '20s, from an era that denied the important role of the federal government in our national life.

Is a city peace commission essential to the success of such a referendum?

No, but it helps. Legally, any group could have petitioned the Board of Aldermen to start the process. But the Commission helped legitimize the proposal. It's an official municipal agency representing not only traditional peace and solidarity activists, but also elected officials, trade unionists, students, ministers, journalists, and social service providers. We work with the school system on an annual Youth March for Peace and teacher training on peace issues. We're also involved with sister initiatives — one with

Nicaragua and one proposed with the Soviet Union.

That history gave us a base to start from. And the referendum process goes hand-in-hand with the City Peace Commission's work as part of a broader process — the institutionalization of peace. The results of our referendum will not be forgotten but will become the basis of a municipal policy toward budget-making.

What do you mean by "the institutionalization of peace"?

War has its own institutions, like the military-industrial complex. Now we must create institutions to manage peace. For peace activists, that means a radical change in attitudes and tactics. The Vietnam protest and the Freeze movement were defined by and limited to the activity they opposed. Success was defined by ending the war or the arms build-up.

This new kind of peace movement requires the development of institutions to plan and manage peace, rather than just saying somebody else should manage it. It's a commitment that is more long-range. And it demands a sophisticated definition of goals, roles and involvement.

A case in point is the need for new institutions to guarantee economic conversion. At the federal level, the Weiss bill calls for alternative-use committees composed of labor and management at every major defense facility to plan for conversion. It also calls for advisory representation from the local community. This could be one of the many planning functions served by peace commissions like ours in New Haven.

What do you mean by "guarantees" for economic conversion?

First, it's clear that government at all levels must be deeply involved in planning for peace, just as it has always been involved in military production. In all likelihood, the peacetime products of former military companies will need subsidies or government agencies will have to remain the primary purchaser, at least until the companies can be weaned from government dependence. Job retraining and relocation and the provision of special unemployment benefits and job referral services will be needed. Someone has wryly, but accurately I think, called these "Veterans of the Cold War" benefits.

If all else fails, there must be the possibility, however extreme, that governments can manage companies. Public takeovers of utility companies at the state and local levels are a precedent. The process of economic conversion is simply too important to be left to chance. We need to develop and adopt a national peace policy. Failure to plan for peace would be as disastrous as failure to plan in the context of war.



Peace Commission Chair Tom Holahan

David Adams is a professor of psychology and the author of American Peace Movements: History, Causes and Future (1986) and Psychology for Peace Activists (1987). Both books are available from Adams, 256 Shore Drive, Branford, CT 06405.