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Living on the Frontlines of Resistance

An Interview with Medea Benjamin

In a world dominated by militarism and neoliberalism, activist and writer Medea Benjamin has been at the forefront of the fight for peace and justice. She discusses her experience and vision with Tellus Senior Fellow Allen White.

Your activism goes back to Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s. What first drew you to politics, and how did your time with SDS influence your subsequent work?

Through SDS, I saw the importance of synthesizing anti-war activism and community activism. Besides protesting the Vietnam War, my chapter of SDS operated both a breakfast program and an afterschool program for children in poor neighborhoods. My foreign policy activism and community activism share that common thread: a belief that, in a humane society, we need to care for each other at home and around the world. Citizens must work to prevent our governments from doing both domestic and global harm. Early on, I realized that sitting in a university lecture hall was no substitute for real world experience working with ordinary people in the US and abroad.

How did your work with UN agencies shape your emerging critique of corporate globalization?

In my work in developing countries, I saw poverty and suffering everywhere. After years of encountering such deprivation, I enrolled in graduate school to pursue studies in public health and nutrition, followed by a stint with several UN agencies. I found this experience bureaucratic and deeply deficient in terms of achieving concrete, on-the-ground social change. So many of the issues with which I was dealing were much larger than public health, because poor health was rooted in political-economic structures that denied people basic services.

When I was living in Mozambique in the 1980s, Samora Machel had recently become president following the end of Portuguese colonialism. The apartheid South African government, with the help of the US-funded opposition groups, was seeking to overthrow him for his socialist politics. This experience made me realize that my work was a mere Band-Aid on an open wound and that

far more systemic work was needed. I decided to return to graduate study, this time in political economy, to understand why my government and US corporations were perpetuating the very systems that produced the deprivation that persists around the world.

To be clear, international humanitarian organizations may be deficient, but they are the best we have. I strongly support multilateralism and global institutions that address everything from poverty alleviation to nonviolent conflict resolution. At the same time, I support major reforms such as ending the permanent veto power of a single member in the Security Council, and I object to the degree of influence by the US and other countries as major donors. Saudi Arabia, which is creating a humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, used its resources to bully the UN into removing it from the list of nations abusing children, and the US has repeatedly used its veto power to shield Israel from condemnation for its treatment of Palestinians. Such decisions damage the integrity and effectiveness of the UN system overall.

You co-founded the fair trade advocacy group Global Exchange in 1988. Tell us about its origin, strategy, and campaigns. What do you see as its most noteworthy successes?

My travels revealed firsthand how globalization fuels a race to the bottom. We created Global Exchange in part to expose how US policies and institutions affect the lives of millions. Our “Reality Tours” enabled people to witness these impacts firsthand and to reflect on how our government and US companies harm people throughout the world. We sought to galvanize interest in forging greater accountability among US corporations as well as creating a new system of fair trade whereby farmers growing coffee, tea, cacao, and other commodities could be paid decently for their products.

Over the years, Global Exchange has exposed sweatshops, suing The Gap and sixteen other companies for worker abuse, such as China’s failure to pay overtime wages and to provide humane living quarters. We also confronted shoe companies, like Nike, that exposed workers to toxic chemicals in their factories in Indonesia, Vietnam, and China, and advocated for those workers’ rights to organize. To deepen the connection between Americans and such workers, we brought some of them to the US to tell their stories and thereby shame the companies. We campaigned against Starbucks to get them to procure fair trade coffee. These campaigns have had a positive impact on thousands of workers and farmers worldwide.

Although we alleviated several of the most egregious abuses, the corporate business model has not changed. Workers performing the hardest labor in farm and factory are still the lowest paid and suffer the most difficult conditions. The drive for profit maximization and shareholder value remains strong. Some coffee cooperatives pursue a different model, but these businesses tend to be smaller enterprises.

In 2002, in the context of George W. Bush’s “war on terror,” you co-founded CODEPINK: Women for Peace. Is there a special role for women in the peace movement? Sixteen years out, where does the peace movement stand?

I think anybody who cares about the world’s future should be involved in peacemaking. We

founded CODEPINK in a particularly toxic atmosphere dominated by strong, ego-driven men, including Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, and George W. Bush. It was an urgent moment to raise women's voices, to protest: "This is not the kind of world we want to live in." CODEPINK was created at a time when peace-loving women needed a strong voice.

With Donald Trump in the White House, the need for women's leadership is especially great. On the other hand, so is the challenge. We don't have the vibrant peace movement of the Bush years, when CODEPINK was part of large coalitions capable of organizing hundreds of thousands of people in the streets to oppose US policy, particularly around the invasion of Iraq. Today, US policy continues to cause immense harm overseas—for example, our involvement through the Saudis in the destruction of Yemen—yet we cannot mobilize even a thousand people to protest. So while the need is very much present, our capacity to mobilize is much diminished.

The imminent invasion of Iraq and its disastrous consequences were clear to people at that time. The situation gave rise to a strong global movement, a coalition across many countries. Today, it's harder to mobilize around foreign policy issues for several reasons. First, most contemporary conflicts are a continuation of Bush-era wars, as in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, which creates a sense of apathy or fatigue. Second, US participation in new wars is often less direct, involving drones or Special Forces instead of US troops, and is thus more hidden from public view. Third, the complexity of some of the conflicts scrambles traditional alliances. The war in Syria, for instance, divides the peace movement, some supporting Assad against outside intervention and others seeing him as a vicious dictator. Finally, a multitude of other issues already crowd the agenda of likely participants in the peace movement, such as immigrants' rights, climate change, gender equality, and racial justice.

Was CODEPINK's anti-war focus a pivot for you, or do you see it, along with fair trade, as part of building an overarching social justice movement?

In high school, as an anti-war activist, I focused on Vietnam; later, on activism against the wars in Central America and against apartheid in the 70s and 80s. At the same time, I was engaged in economic justice work with clearer impacts. These two currents converged in the 1999 shutdown of the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, where so many organizations came together to say, "We don't want these global institutions to dictate how the world runs."

So, in some ways, CODEPINK has combined my anti-war activism and economic justice work. While we started out as an anti-war group, over time, CODEPINK has broadened its purview to include the peace economy. In that sense, I have come full circle. We have launched a new campaign, "Divest from the War Machine," to show people how they can move their cities, universities, and pension funds away from investing in violence at home and abroad. If massive divestment occurs, how can we channel the freed resources toward a peace economy? We have allied with groups around the country and around the world that advocate for alternative economic models, thereby building a bridge between the peace and economic justice movements.

Such bridge-building is exemplified by the work of Reverend Barber in the Poor People's Campaign. Fifty years after Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign, Barber again brought the issues of racism, poverty, environmental degradation, and militarism under one umbrella. I think this convergence is a potentially powerful force attracting progressives into a multi-issue, integrated movement. When we talk about the need for universal health care, free college education, a green economy, and modern infrastructure, we must talk about how the massive US military budget is sucking up our resources. We must build an economy that shifts from manufacturing weapons to manufacturing for the needs of people and the planet.

From Gaza to Guantanamo and Washington to Pakistan, you have never shied away from confrontation, including interrupting a 2013 speech by President Obama. At the same time, you have questioned the “stone-throwing anarchist” wing of the anti-globalization movement. When is militant action justified as a complement to day-to-day grassroots organizing?

I look at this question from the standpoint of what is effective in today's world. I don't criticize people for stone-throwing because I understand their sense of desperation. And I don't have a particular problem with property destruction. But is it effective? Does it move us forward? Nonviolent action can be more effective. We have done die-ins, pouring fake blood on ourselves and lying down in congressional offices, which have been very effective. We have projected the images of people killed by our wars on the homes of those responsible, shaming them for their actions. We have interrupted congressional hearings, press conferences, shareholder meetings, think tank panels, and national conventions—nonviolently— with positive responses from the press and the public. Creativity, art, and confrontation can enhance effectiveness without resorting to actions like property destruction or actions that can cause personal injury.

Your recent book, *Kingdom of the Unjust: Behind the US-Saudi Connection*, spotlights the US alliance with Saudi Arabia. What were the key findings?

The US-Saudi alliance is one of the most pernicious relationships our government sustains. The Saudi government is an absolute monarchy, a kingdom run by one family since it was founded in 1932. Its recent public relations campaigns notwithstanding, Saudi Arabia remains a highly repressive state. Further, it is deeply destructive in its international relations, whether in neighboring Yemen, where it has caused a horrendous human catastrophe, or through the spread of a perverted form of Islam, Wahhabism, that has turned tolerant societies into intolerant ones.

Yet the US continues to sell weapons to Saudi Arabia, the number one purchaser of US arms in the world. I wrote the book to help educate Americans about how repressive and destructive the Saudi government is and how wrong it is for the United States to so closely ally with the Saudi regime. Several members of Congress have told me that the book changed how they view US policy on Saudi Arabia.

The 2016 US presidential election brought seemingly contradictory surprises: Bernie Sanders's mainstreaming of democratic socialism and Trump's unleashing of extreme right-wing populism. What are the implications for building a peace and justice movement?

The 2016 election sent a powerful signal of discontent from people on both the left and the right. The Bernie Sanders campaign far surpassed my most optimistic forecast. While Trump and his supporters are trying to return the nation to a bygone era of white supremacy, it is ironic that Bernie Sanders, an older white man himself, helped usher in a new generation of political activism among young people of color, with democratic socialism as its foundation. That's why, assuming we can avoid the worst of the Trump administration, I'm excited about the future.

Many in the younger generation, both in the US and around the world, see a system not working for them, and they understand that rectifying this situation requires more than tinkering with the status quo. Yes, it is good to be involved in electoral politics because we can't allow the kind of destruction that we have been seeing under the Trump administration. At the same time, we must recognize that the Democratic Party is not our savior and that the impetus for real transformation begins with a broad base of citizens prepared to demand and work for fundamental change in our political system.

The Trump phenomenon is being played out in one version or another of authoritarian populism in countries such as Turkey, Poland, and Hungary, as well as parts of Latin America and Asia. What are the connections?

The global migrant crisis has led to a substantial conservative backlash. But what are the root causes that drive people to abandon their homes, communities, and families in search of a better life? One driver is war—whether in the Middle East, where the US has been directly involved for more than a decade, or in Central America, where the consequences of past wars linger to this day. Further, US economic policies, including NAFTA, enabled by the broader effects of economic globalization, have impoverished many Mexicans and Central Americans.

The drug war, another driver of migration, is fueled by US consumption of drugs and domestic policies that often criminalize certain relatively benign drugs. And, of course, climate change disrupts the livelihoods of the poor worldwide and is exacerbated by the regressive policies of the Trump administration.

All these demonstrate the link between US policy and massive migration flows which, in turn, have empowered the white supremacy movement and, more broadly, anti-immigrant sentiment. It is a moment for the progressive movement to ask how we can create a more humane immigration policy that keeps families together, offers expeditious due process for asylum seekers, and, most importantly for the long term, reverses economic and military policies that fuel migration in the first place.

The Great Transition Initiative emphasizes the need for a “global citizens movement” to bring about a decent planetary civilization. How can we harmonize disparate social movements into a plural and unified force for transformative change?

The need for Americans and all people to think and act beyond our borders has never been greater. Transnational learning is essential to mobilizing for a just, livable future. Only at the global level can we address the voracious capitalist system that has led to multiple ecological, economic, and social crises. As global citizens, we need to demand systemic change commensurate with the systemic crises that afflict the lives of billions of people and the well-being of the global biosphere. To do this, we must monitor and learn from the successes and failures beyond our border. The issues at the heart of the US progressive movement are faced globally by all concerned citizens. Contact with people abroad, both inside and outside of government, is a source of both inspiration and ideas for affecting change, perhaps now especially at home.

It is time for us Americans to take greater responsibility for the global future, to grasp how the actions of our government and corporations affect the world, and to mobilize to redirect the global trajectory from violence, war, and environmental chaos toward a sustainable, equitable, and thriving future.

About the Interviewee



Medea Benjamin is the co-founder of the women-led peace group CODEPINK and the human rights group Global Exchange. An advocate for social justice for more than forty years, she is the recipient of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Peace Prize from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Peace Prize by the US Peace Memorial, the Gandhi Peace Award, and the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation Award. She is the author of ten books, including *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control*, *Kingdom of the Unjust: Behind the US-Saudi Connection*, and, most recently, *Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran*.

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