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# Walk Beginnings

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April 1975 closed an era of tremendous outpourings of anti-war energies, an era often characterized by mass demonstrations, civil disobedience actions, draft resistance and desertions. The Indochina War had created a vast number of activists, many of whose lives became virtually absorbed in opposition to that war.

For most, these had been first identifications with the movement; prior knowledge of the movement had been tenuous and insubstantial; and opposition was largely to the conflict in Vietnam rather than to wars as such. As a consequence that long struggle, though engendering strong personal commitment and momentum, left somewhat dangling the question, "what next?" The corollary question, "what had the movement been doing before the Vietnam War?" had a somewhat clearer answer, but again, for many insufficient to give adequate directions to individual energies.

It was abundantly clear, however, that much remained to be done; "peace" in Vietnam did not mean an end to the threat, of either active militarism or the arms race.

With this in mind, the War Resisters League, at its 1974 conference, set up a task force, which was later joined by other groups, to develop a major project on disarmament and militarism. At a January, 1975 meeting, Jack Travers of the FOR suggested that there be marches in each state to the respective capitols. Ed Hedemann of WRL proposed that instead of having several marches simultaneously all over the country, they be linked sequentially across the country and called the Continental Walk. The basic route and timetable of the historic San Francisco to Moscow Walk for unilateral disarmament organized by the Committee for Nonviolent Action in 1960-61 was taken as a guideline from which to work.

The tradition of using walking as a vehicle to reach the larger public with a political and/or moral statement has a rich and varied history. To follow such projects as the Freedom Rides, the Food for Europe pilgrimages, and the S.F. to Moscow trek, with a "Continental Walk" was to carry on the goal of social change in the spirit of nonviolence.

The steering committee undertook first to draft the "call" to the Continental Walk which would announce the project, briefly explain the politics, and recruit organizers, supporters and walkers. Aside from enlisting more organizations to co-sponsor, the committee developed a list of "prominent" individuals who would sign the "call," to encourage people to organize, walk, contribute, etc. The Call was officially issued on August 6, 1975—the 30th anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima.

Even before the Call was issued, people from all over the country began writing for information, some expressing interest in walking the whole way. Long distance walking had not originally been considered,

as the concept of the Walk had been to link communities by separate walks laid out sequentially. However, we saw the need for long distance walkers to provide continuity in the unorganized or barren areas of the country (particularly the Southwest). There also was interest in developing branches to the main route of the Walk, and eventually, 20 routes were formed, three of them to enter Washington independently, one from the West, one from Boston, and one from the South, organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and beginning in New Orleans. The main route of the Walk was to cover 12 states, but all the routes combined covered 34 states and 8000 miles.

At the suggestion of the WRL National Committee meeting in August 1975, the name of the walk was lengthened to the Continental Walk for Disarmament and Social Justice, to make clearer our emphasis on the relationship between militarism and social needs. The Walk was to leave on January 31 from San Francisco and reach Washington, DC on October 16, which meant an average of less than 15 miles per day, without rest days, or 17 miles per day with rest days.

By the summer of 1975, plans had begun to be developed internationally for other walks. The International Fellowship of Reconciliation and the War Resisters International were making plans for an international anti-militarism march across France; Italian war resisters were going to walk through Italy and Sicily; Swedish anti-nuclear power activists were planning a walk; and West Germans were arranging a relay of car caravans and rallies during the spring of 1976.

The most significant international development occurred in December when representatives of the Japanese peace movement announced plans to join the Continental Walk. Japan Buddha Sangha and Gensuikyo both became sponsors of the Walk, and in addition made plans for a walk of their own that would cover all parts of Japan. Representatives from Japan Buddha Sangha participated in all three primary routes of the Walk as well as three of the branches.

The basic tasks of the Walk national office were to find organizers at all points along the route, put them in touch with each other and keep them informed of the latest events; coordinate the joining of the routes by setting up a rough time table; contact the national media; set up a training program for long distance walkers and aid them financially; develop material and literature (the Call, leaflets, organizers' manual, buttons, bumperstickers, posters, etc.); raise funds; and organize national events in Washington.

Local organizers were responsible for the particular political emphasis in their area, generating local publicity, organizing demonstrations and meetings, finding housing and food for long distance walkers, raising funds, establishing the exact route and time table, contacting police and other appropriate

authorities about the route (to minimize possible harassment from them), mobilizing their community support, and insuring the Walk's proper connection with the next region.

December and January, 1976, were months of mad scrambling to develop literature and arrange for long distance walker training. Gail Pressberg of the AFSC flew out to San Francisco to prepare for and facilitate the training of those who expressed interest in long distance walking, beginning from San Francisco. San Francisco organizers spent long, difficult hours organizing for the Walk's send off from their area. And, finally, though organizers felt much was still left to be done, the Walk began. A car caravan began at the Canadian border above Seattle on January 1, and arrived three weeks later in Ukiah, California, where the walking actually began. On January 23, the first public Bay Area event of the Walk—a women's festival—drew 400 people and was enthusiastically received. The Walk left San Francisco on January 31, 1976 with 800 people.

The political goals of the Walk fell into the following four basic categories:

**Education.** We regard the arms race and a world-pervading militarism as humankind's most critically urgent problem. Therefore, we viewed the Walk as an opportunity for education about the nature of militarism and corporate economics, and about the inter-connections between militarism and social injustice. We will not get true justice until we disarm, and we cannot disarm without dealing with the causes of war and armaments—causes which are based on economics, sexism, racism, nationalism, etc.

**Organizing.** The Walk was also seen as a project which might serve to stimulate local organizing. The combined energy of the Walk's own momentum, long distance walkers' expertise and commitment, and the chance to plug local issues into a broadly focused and nation-wide project were all seen as advantages for a project seeking to re-energize local organizing. Local people in isolated areas, especially, would benefit by the connection with other organizers from more populated areas working towards similar goals.

**Unity.** The Walk was a step towards developing a unity among those forces working for fundamental social and political change. Since only through such unity can we ever hope to attain the strength necessary to achieve those changes that we seek.

**Outreach.** By its very nature the Walk went into areas of the country not normally exposed to the issues which the Walk was addressing. This also allowed those walking and organizing to hear from people with whom they are not usually in contact, thereby learning grievances of people around the country.

The pages that follow can better express than mere words and politics, the spirit, energy, and excitement the Walk generated during its nine month journey across America.

—Ed Hedemann



San Francisco to Moscow walk arriving in Red Square, 1961.

Brad Lyttle



Freedom Rides: En route to Marks, Mississippi from Memphis, Tennessee.

Diana Davies



Food for Europe pilgrimage to protest U.S. refusal to ship food and clothing to Belgium and the Netherlands to prevent widespread starvation and suffering.

Oren Lane