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**Towards a non-violent society:  
a position paper on anarchism,  
social change and Food Not Bombs**

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# Contents

What the hell is so important to discuss? .....	3
For Anarchism .....	4
Anarchism and Consensus .....	5
Anarchism and Vegetarianism .....	6
Anarchism and Non-Violence .....	6
But anarchism is so unpopular, and misunderstood .....	10

The origins and purpose of this position paper:

This paper was originally written 11.29.95. as a result of discussions that we were having in San Francisco Food Not Bombs about our politics and how we represent our politics in literature. In a meeting on 11.09.95. we embarked on a rather in-depth and thought provoking discussion about anarchism and FNB. Most of us at the meeting strongly believed that FNB in its structure and goals was and always had been anarchist in orientation. However, there were several people who raised concerns about anarchist politics and the principles of FNB.

This position paper was originally a proposal put before the group which addressed those concerns and to push for anarchist politics in the group. The proposal was distributed at meetings and many discussions, both informal and formal, took place over the course of about a year before the proposal passed consensus by the group. Soon after anarchism became a formal element of FNB politics and a vision statement was assembled that clearly expressed the larger politics of the group and put our daily actions into a radical political context. The vision statement, which is included at the end of this paper covered everything from our dedication to anti-sexist struggle to community gardening and composting as actions moving towards an ecologically sustainable society.

This paper moved from being a proposal in San Francisco Food Not Bombs to become a position paper on FNB politics for the larger FNB community and activist movement. It is hoped that this paper will open up discussion about the political future of FNB as a transnational movement working to confront global corporate domination and world poverty while simultaneously working for fundamental social change. It is also hoped that this paper will help others in the larger social justice movement understand FNB's actions and politics. It is the radical politics of Food Not Bombs that make our servings meaningful, that give energy and vitality to our daily efforts — no matter how insignificant they may appear to be at times. When we see our own daily activism as being connected to a much larger movement working for social and economic justice, it helps give us the inspiration and motivation needed to keep on choppin' those vegetables, or deal with that slimy compost, or wake up super early and get coffee and bagels to the picket line. Radical social change is made day by day and knowing that you're a part of something much bigger than yourself, just might help you get through that day.

## **What the hell is so important to discuss?**

It is crucial for a group and movement to have a clear understanding of what it stands for and what it's vision of a better world looks like. While FNB has three

clearly defined principles, it is the larger political context that we place these principles in that give them their true meaning.

We believe in consensus, non-violence, and vegetarianism. By themselves these concepts are rather ambiguous and open for wide interpretation. While it is good that our principles are flexible and inclusive, it is also important that we prevent our ideas from being co-opted. It is the way that FNB has put these principles into action, and the way we have come to define them, that has given these ideas their true meaning and value. We combine these ideas with decentralization, collective and personal empowerment, feminism, and non-hierarchical organizing strategies. We have rejected the concept of charity that usually defines free food give aways. We believe that charity fails to address the causes of hunger and poverty, and attempts to band-aid the crisis without challenging the institutional structures that create inequality. We attempt to confront and dismantle the power structures of patriarchy, white supremacy, and other forms of domination — in society, in our organizations, and in our own consciousness. These are ideas and beliefs that have been expressed in meetings, written about in our literature, and incorporated into the way we organize our own groups and in the solidarity we try to build with other groups and struggles.

It is our, often, unspoken politics that replace ambiguity with a vision of a better world; a world that we are attempting to build now. This is why this discussion is important.

## For Anarchism

There have been various concerns raised about FNB and anarchism within San Francisco and also in other FNB groups around the United States that I am aware of. The argument for anarchism address not only the concerns that have been raised, but also tries to demonstrate the inherent connections between anarchism and FNB.

The first concerns about anarchism usually revolve around the popular misconceptions of anarchism as nothing more than chaos and violence. Professor Howard Zinn, author of the *People's History of the United States* and long-time supporter of FNB, describes anarchism in his book *Declarations of Independence* as following: “Anarchists, I discovered, did not believe in anarchy as it is usually defined — disorder, disorganization, chaos, confusion, and everyone doing as they like. On the contrary, they believed that society should be organized in a thousand different ways, that people had to cooperate in work and in play, to create a good society. But anarchists insisted, any organization must avoid hierarchy and

command from the top; it must be democratic, consensual, reaching decisions through constant discussion and argument.”

He continues, “What attracted me to anarchism was its rejection of any bullying authority — the authority of the state, of the church, or the employer. Anarchism believes that if we can create an egalitarian society without extremes of poverty and wealth, and join hands across all national boundaries, we will not need police forces, prisons, armies, or war, because the underlying causes of these will be gone.” Howard Zinn wrote the forward to the Food Not Bombs books, and has consistently spoken out against police attacks and city harassment of FNB groups in San Francisco and most recently in Worcester, Massachusetts. In a recent newspaper article about the city harassment of Worcester FNB, Howard Zinn is quoted in the *Worcester Phoenix*.

His statement reads as following: “Food Not Bombs protests a system which fails to give people basic necessities in life” says Zinn, adding that prior movements faded because they couldn’t cope with “conditions of economic distribution in the country.”

Anarchism is movement for a society in which the violence of racism, sexism, homophobia, capitalism, and coercion are removed from our daily lives. Anarchism is the belief in a world without war and economic poverty. Anarchism is a philosophy and movement working to build cooperative, egalitarian human relationships and social structures that promote mutual aid, radical democratic control of political and economic decisions, and ecological sustainability. So how does this apply directly to FNB?

## **Anarchism and Consensus**

Consensus is a form of making decisions which is based on anarchist principles. Consensus is a decision making process that seeks to empower people to be able to participate in the shaping of and implementation of decisions made by the group. Consensus aims to create a non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian, cooperative group structure that decentralizes power and encourages collective participation and responsibility. Part of the struggle to create non-hierarchical organizations is to confront and eradicate racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression and domination which privilege certain people, while keeping most people powerless and voiceless. Because we seek to create organizations — and eventually communities and societies — that empower people and create equality we must work against hierarchy. Anarchism and consensus go together like hot vegan soup and a good day-old bagel.

## Anarchism and Vegetarianism

Food Not Bombs groups serve all vegetarian and vegan food as a political act against the meat and dairy industries and to promote ecological sustainability, equal distribution of food and resources throughout the world, human health, and animal liberation. The commitment of FNB groups to these issues has led to long lasting coalitions with groups like Earth First, the Save Ward Valley Coalition, the Save Headwaters Forest Coalition, and many other environmental groups as well as animal liberation groups. Anarchism challenges the exploitation and domination of the earth that is characteristic of capitalist expansion. Anarchism attempts to not only change the relationships of humans to each other, but also of humans to the earth and environment.

## Anarchism and Non-Violence

There have been many concerns raised about whether or not anarchism and non-violence are compatible. We argue that anarchism and non-violence are inseparable.

First, let us look at the historic role of the state. Christopher Day, of the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, writes: “The state — by which we mean the police, the army, the prisons, the courts, the various government bureaucracies, legislative and executive bodies — is the enforcer and regulator of authoritarian rule. The state maintains a monopoly on organized legal violence.” Day writes further, “The state has always been an instrument of war. It is impossible to conceive of a society without war in a society still dominated by states.”

In the Food Not Bombs book *Feeding the Hungry and Building Community*, it is explained that, “The name Food Not Bombs states our most fundamental principle; society needs to promote life, not death. Our society condones, and even promotes violence and domination. Authority and power are derived from the threat and use of violence.”

The state and correspondingly capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy, concentrate power into the hands of the few, which systematically denies power to the majority of humanity. The denial of power over ones own life contributes to the violence that permeates day to day life. Violence happens in hundreds of different ways, everyday, as a result of this system of inequality. Whether it comes through rent, food with pesticides and price tags that hide the damages done to workers, taxes, jobs working to make someone else rich, malnutrition, police sweeps of homeless people, forced sterilization of women of color, social exclusion of poor people, and the list goes on.

So what is the connection between anarchism and non-violence? We must recover the long history of anarchist resistance and movement that has existed, and we will find that in fact anarchism and the struggle for a non-violent world have a long history.

In her study *Native[born] American Anarchism*, written in 1932, Eunice Schuster discusses the profound influence Henry David Thoreau had on the development of civil disobedience, calling him, “not only an anarchist in thought, but also in action.” Thoreau’s act of civil disobedience during the US war with Mexico has forever influenced the theory and practice of non-violence.

Leo Tolstoy took notice of Thoreau, and was developing his own ideas of non-violence. Robert L. Holmes, in his book *Non-Violence In Theory and Practice*, writes, “Tolstoy pursued this understanding of Christianity to what he saw as its logical conclusion: the rejection not only of the organized violence of war but also of the institutionalized violence of government itself, which makes war possible.”

In the introduction of the book, *Government is Violence: essays on Anarchism and Pacifism* by Leo Tolstoy, it is written, “Tolstoy’s suggested means of attaining anarchy were those that have now become well known as civil disobedience and non-violent direct action. . . Tolstoy advocates unbending moral resistance to authority.”

Gandhi writes of Tolstoy in his autobiography, “It was forty years ago, when I was passing through a severe crisis of skepticism and doubt that I came across Tolstoy’s book, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and was deeply impressed by it. I was at that time a believer in violence. Its reading cured me of my skepticism and made me a firm believer in ahimsa(non-violence). . . He was the greatest apostle of non-violence that the present age has produced”.

Anarchist ideas also influenced Gandhi’s ideas about the future society. In the book *Gandhi Today*, Mark Shepard explains, “India could become strong and healthy, Gandhi insisted, only by revitalizing its villages, where over four-fifths of its people lived — a figure that still applies today. He envisioned a society of strong villages, each one politically autonomous and economically self-reliant. In fact, Gandhi may be this century’s greatest proponent of decentralism — basing economic and political power at the local level.”

After Gandhi was assassinated, the person who was known as “Gandhi’s spiritual heir”, Vinoba Bhave led several major campaigns to reclaim land for the poor. In 1951 Bhave and the many workers from Sarva Seva Sangh (Society for the Service of All), started the Bhoodon (land gift) movement. Many felt that Bhave was a saint in the Hindu tradition, and so when he began walking across the country asking for acres of land from landowners, he received land gifts, which were then given to the poor. One and one third million acres, according to Shepard, were actual reclaimed by the poor (far more than had been managed by the land reform

programs of India's government). Bhave was involved with other projects and campaigns to bring about the "non-violent revolution". Bhave was an anarchist.

The United States has a long tradition of non-violent anarchism. One of the first groups was the New England Non-Resistance Society that denounced government, capital punishment, war, and inequality as inconsistent with Christian teachings. The Society, that included William Lloyd Garrison, was heavily involved with the abolitionist movement that struggled to end slavery in the United States.

When the United States entered World War I, anarchists were at the forefront of the anti-war movement. In 1916 Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and others organized the No Conscription League. They organized rallies, protests, and marches. They issued a manifesto which read, "The No Conscription League has been formed for the purpose of encouraging conscientious objectors to affirm their liberty of conscience and to make their objection to human slaughter effective by refusing to participate in the killing of their fellow men". Berkman and Goldman were arrested for violating the Selective Draft Act. One of the first prosecutions under the Espionage Act, passed in 1918 making anti-war literature illegal, was against a group of five anarchists, including Mollie Steimer. The group had been distributing newspapers by stuffing them in mailboxes at night, and had written up leaflets against the draft. One of the defendants, Jacob Schwartz never made it to trial. He had been beaten so badly by the police during interrogations, that he had to be taken to the hospital, where he died. The group were all found guilty, and were eventually deported to Russia in 1921 for their anti-war activities.

There were others protesting the war, one of them was Dorothy Day. Day along with Peter Maurin, founded the Catholic Worker movement. Nancy Roberts, in the anthology *American Radical*, writes of the CW, "[it] had a three point plan for radical social action based on Christian values. Maurin envisioned a lay, communitarian, anarchist movement offering round table discussions, forums, and lectures for 'clarification of thought,' houses of hospitality in every urban parish to feed and shelter the poor and homeless, and farming communes which would break down 'acquisitive' industrial society into manageable, organic units where worker and scholar would live and learn in a community."

Ultimately some 200 houses of hospitality were established — no one is sure exactly how many — across the world, mostly in the US. The idea behind the hospitality houses is explained by Walter Brueggeman as following: "Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt [of poverty and hunger] is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition of humanness." Therefore hospitality in a society structured around profit margins and individualism constituted not only resistance but also offered an alternative. On May 1<sup>st</sup> 1933, Day helped launch the *Catholic Worker* newspaper, which sold for a penny a



copy (and is still sold for a penny). The paper always linked peace with social justice, and covered that many acts of non-violent civil disobedience committed by Catholic Worker activists and other radical to end militarism. In James Farrell's *The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism*, he writes that in the "*Catholic Worker* [newspaper] pacifism, personalism, and anarchism were front-page news, and the paper conscientiously promoted its revolution by ideas." Farrell writes that within a few years the newspapers circulation topped 100,000 and that by 1938, the print run was up to 190,000. During World War II, Day and the *Catholic Worker* were denounced for their pacifist stance, some activists were beaten in the street while distributing the paper.

For over fifty years Day committed her life to peace, social justice, and non-violent revolution. In their 1983 pastoral letter, US Catholic bishops indicated a historic shift in their teachings about war and peace when they wrote that pacifism is an acceptable moral and political choice for Catholics. Day was singled out along with Martin Luther King, Jr. as one who had provided "non-violent witness" that had "had a profound impact upon the life of the church in the United States."

Dorothy Day, who was once affectionately called the "Head Anarch" by an editor of the *Catholic Worker*, has been called the "First Lady of American Catholicism", and some are petitioning the Vatican to have her declared a saint. Anarchism in Day's words was "increased responsibility of one person to another, of the individual to the community along with a much lessened sense of obligation to or dependence on the 'distant and centralized state'".

One of the movements that has had the most impact on the United States in recent history, has been the Civil Rights movement. One of the key groups of that movement was the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. The group was born out of the sit-in movement that swept across the South in 1960 protesting the apartheid segregation system of Jim Crow Laws. While SNCC never formally considered itself to be an anarchist group, it was structured on an anti-authoritarian, decentralized, radically democratic model and they used direct action in their struggle for an egalitarian society. SNCC played a crucial role in the Freedom Rides, the 1964 Freedom Summer campaign, the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that challenged the racism of the Democratic Party, and they have left a legacy of radical activism and organizing that is of paramount importance to everyone working for social change. Their style of community organizing, their emphasis on empowerment and their non-violent direct action tactics have much to offer FNB groups.

Ella Baker was the person who helped bring SNCC together and off its feet. Ella Baker had been an organizer for years with the NAACP and helped initiate and build the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of which Martin Luther King Jr. was the president. Ella Baker believed in the need for direct action

and participatory democracy. She believed that successful groups must develop leadership that comes from the group, rather than groups coming around a leader: strong people don't need strong leaders. In the book, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers*, Carol Mueller includes a chapter on Ella Baker and the development of participatory democracy. Mueller identifies Baker's ideas on participatory democracy as follows: 1. an appeal for grass roots involvement of people throughout society in the decisions that control their lives; 2. the minimization of hierarchy and the associated emphasis on expertise and professionalism as a basis for leadership and 3. a call for direct action as an answer to fear, alienation, and intellectual detachment." The experimentation of participatory democracy in SNCC influenced a broad range of social movements. Mueller writes that "participatory democracy and consensus decision-making ranged from the early voter registration projects of SNCC in Mississippi and Georgia, to the ERAP projects of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) in the slums of Northern cities in the mid -1960s, to the consciousness raising groups of women's liberation in the late 60s and early 70s, to the affinity groups associated with the antinuclear and peace movement of the late 70s and early 80s".

In the introduction to the book, *Memories of the Southern Civil Rights Movement*, former SNCC member Julian Bond, looking back, writes of the group, "SNCC's young people were organized anarchists, railing against both the segregated system and the slow-but-sure legal tactics used by older organizations to bring it down . . . (they were rebels) against unthinking order and despotic authority."

Anarchism and a truly non-violent world are more than just compatible, they are inseparable. While this section has discussed but a handful of people, groups, and movements, the examples from history are endless, and must be reclaimed and remembered as they offer us insight and inspiration in the struggle for a new world, today. I want to mention that I do not deny the violent moments in the history of anarchism, but they are overshadowed by the examples of revolutionary non-violent direct action; and furthermore these acts of violence must be put into the context of the time and situation so that we can understand them in relation to the institutional violence of systems that profit from human misery. We will never see peace, so long as people are denied power over their own lives.

## **But anarchism is so unpopular, and misunderstood**

Yes it is unpopular and most often misunderstood, but remaining silent about our politics will do nothing but strengthen the power structure. When people opposed slavery, when people have demanded equality for women and people of color, when people have organized against war, when people have struggled for

better working conditions and pay, when people have stood up for their rights as human beings they have been opposed, denounced, ridiculed, attacked, slandered, imprisoned, and even murdered (as they are trying to do to Mumia Abu-Jamal now).

When we allow others to set the standard for acceptability, then it becomes unacceptable to oppose power and privilege (who do define what is acceptable). The Democrats and Republicans, the mainstream media, the corporations, and the state bombard us daily with their standards of acceptability; standards which cause suffering and misery for the bulk of humanity. Popularity by these standards is not what we should be seeking. We must break out of this straightjacketing of ideas and politics. We must define and express ourselves — with defiance for this system of oppression, and with hope for the world we long to see.

In his book, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*, Lorenzo Ervin writes, “As a practical matter, Anarchist-Communists believe that we should start to build the new society now, as well as fight to crush the old Capitalist one. They wish to create non-authoritarian mutual aid organizations (for food, clothing, housing, funding for community projects and others), neighborhood assemblies and cooperatives, not affiliated with either government or business corporations, and not run for profit, but for social need. Such organizations, if built now, will provide their members with practical experience in self-management and self-sufficiency, and will decrease the dependency of people on welfare agencies and employers. In short, we can begin now to build the infrastructure for the communal society, so that people can see what they are fighting for, not just the ideas in someone’s head. That is the way to freedom.”

We can make the ideas of cooperation, mutual aid, solidarity, egalitarianism, and a non-violent society popular, but only through the actions we take and the politics we advance. We can win.

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