

# *A.J. Muste Memorial Institute*

339 Lafayette Street, New York, N.Y. 10012 (212) 533-4335

May 1, 1998

Dear Friends and Supporters of the Muste Memorial Institute,

Greetings on May Day, the original workers' holiday. In the past, May Day was traditionally marked by nonviolent protests by working people agitating for their rights. Much of this history has been lost or distorted over the years, giving people the impression that the labor movement was one of unabated violence and thuggery. Nonviolent action for social change has also gotten a "bum rap" in much the same way.

In a series of recent columns in New York's *Village Voice*, Nat Hentoff quotes A.J. Muste as saying: "Peaceableness does not mean trying to disturb nothing or glossing over realities. It is the most profound kind of disturbance we seek to achieve. Nonviolence is not apathy or cowardice or passivity. And the fact that we want peace does not mean that there will not be opposition, suffering and social disorder."

A.J. knew that nonviolent social change was a messy affair. There is no "neat and easy" way to create peace in the world. One of the greatest misperceptions the Muste Institute has had to confront as an organization is the idea that pacifism means trying to create change without disruption. Quite to the contrary, all change is disruptive and nonviolent change can be the most disruptive of all.

At a recent meeting of the Muste Institute's Board of Directors, we were discussing some grant requests and our conversation turned to the growing number of proposals to fund various kinds of nonviolence training and conflict resolution programs. Over the last three years the Muste Institute has become swamped with applications from groups we never heard from before: schools, community development corporations, block and community associations, social service agencies, even a few police departments! One Board member, who is a trainer himself, said he was increasingly skeptical about such trainings. All too often, he felt, the aim of these programs is to make people feel good about themselves or improve their ability to get "results" from local officials, police or school districts. There is often no direct link to any organizing work or to confronting injustices.

The Muste Institute is not a large endowed organization. As you know, we rely on your generous donations every year to sustain us. So we must carefully evaluate each part of our program to make sure that we are focusing on supporting people working for real changes. This is our bottom line: all our educational materials, grants, sponsorships and the space we provide in our building, must contribute to organizing work. We always strive to find and support those programs that seek to disturb the existing social order. While a more civil society would indeed make life better for many people, it

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