

A New Generation Against the Bomb

What the burgeoning youth-led fight against gun violence can learn from the global antinuclear movement.

By [Ray Acheson](#) April 27, 2018



Students raise their fists during a moment of silence for gun-violence victims during the National School Walkout in Los Angeles on April 20, 2018. (Photo by Sipa USA via AP Images / NurPhoto / Ronen Tivony)

“I’m not old enough to vote but I’m old enough to get shot,” say the students [agitating for gun control in the United States](#). The same, of course, can be said about nuclear weapons. We are old enough to be incinerated by an atomic bomb.

There are quite a few similarities between the struggle against guns and the struggle against the bomb. The [violent, militarized masculinities associated with gun violence](#) are the [same associated with the acquisition, use, and threats of use of nuclear weapons](#). The privileging of “gun rights” above the rights of human beings to live in safety and security is similar to the privileging of the possession and [modernization](#) of nuclear weapons above the lived experience of those who have suffered from the use and testing of nuclear weapons and the reality of the impacts any future use of nuclear weapons will have on our bodies, our cities, our societies, and our planet. The NRA’s favored line that “the only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun” is pretty similar to the claim by supporters of nuclear-deterrence theory that nuclear weapons “in the right hands” are meant to stop others from acquiring or using nuclear weapons. The outrageous responses to gun violence and the threat of nuclear war are pretty much the same, too. Instead of gun control, let’s arm teachers and prepare kids with active-shooter drills. Instead of nuclear disarmament, let’s build bomb shelters and practice duck and cover.

The main difference between guns and nuclear weapons, other than the scale of destruction that one weapon can cause, is that, across the country, students are bleeding and dying in their schools right now from gun violence. This lived experience has no parallels. Even with the current president’s threats of “fire and fury,” the fear of nuclear war is not nearly as resonant as it was for preceding generations of the atomic age. But this could change in a heartbeat.

The good news is that, as the United States celebrates youth leadership in the movement to end gun violence in the nation, there is a global anti-weapons movement that has nurtured youth leadership for far longer, from which we all can learn a great deal.

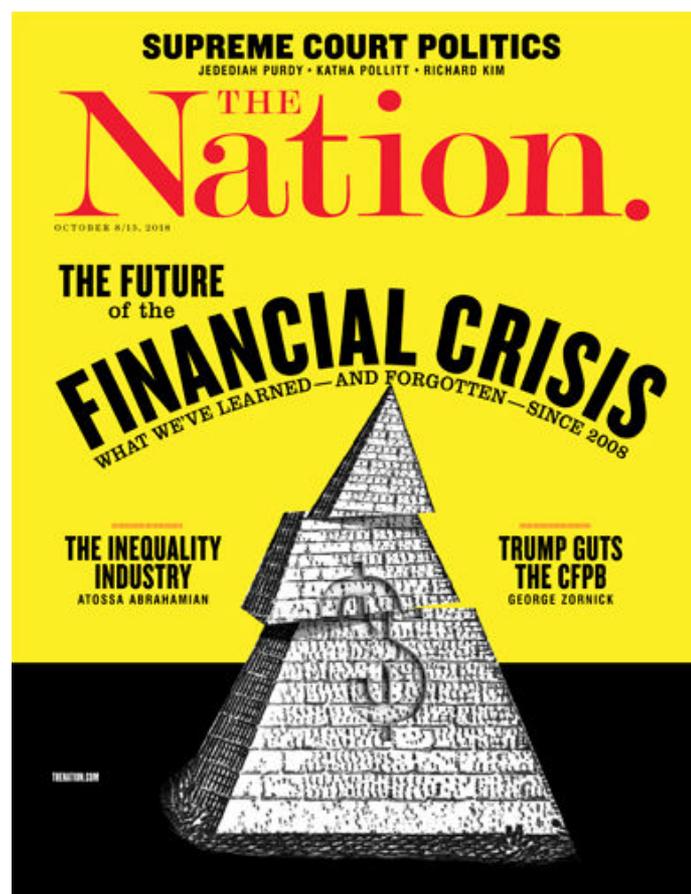
The value of intergenerational efforts

The antinuclear movement has a rich, creative history, with which youth have always been involved. Lately, it may not be a mass movement of students

hitting the streets, but there has been critical engagement from young people in the [work to have non-nuclear-armed states negotiate a treaty banning nuclear weapons](#). This is in large part due to the deliberate efforts of the [International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons \(ICAN\)](#) to build and sustain an intergenerational, transnational network of activists advocating and agitating for the ban.

Since its founding in Melbourne, Australia, in 2007, ICAN has encouraged and accepted contributions from every person of every age. “ICAN is not a youth organization,” explains Tim Wright, ICAN’s very first volunteer. “We’re an intergenerational campaign. Indeed, that’s one of our greatest strengths. We have octogenarians working alongside school students. No one is too young or too old to contribute to a world free of nuclear weapons.”

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For Thea Katrin Mjelstad, from Norway, this was part of what drew her to ICAN. “For us new ones with no experience, only with a lot of enthusiasm and engagement for this cause, ICAN was really a place where we were allowed to be a part, contribute with what we could and learn, and develop a lot,” she explains. “It didn’t matter if you had done this work for six months or 60 years, everyone was welcome.”

The power of social justice

Both Tim and Thea joined ICAN in their early 20s. But Tim was only 10 years old when he first became an antinuclear activist. “I remember learning about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and being horrified. How could such acts be committed?”

Injustice is a powerful motivator for youth engagement in political causes. In

large part, this is [because of the context in which today's youth are growing up](#). Globalization, neoliberal capitalism, rising costs of education, and increasingly precarious employment conditions make having time for activism more difficult, but also make it easier to see global and local connections and inequalities. This is certainly part of what is driving young people and students to protest gun violence today in the United States. Nuclear weapons can and have had the same effect.

It was when Clare Conboy moved to the United Kingdom from Ireland, at the age of 25, that she got involved in ICAN. It was the injustice of nuclear weapons that drove her to action. “When I moved to the UK, suddenly it was impossible for me not to have an opinion on nuclear weapons,” remarks Clare. “They were in the news, reference to ‘our deterrent’ was constant; at the same time, the UK was continuing a policy of austerity measures, where the levels of inequality were growing rapidly. In the same news program, they would cover the exponential growth of people needing food banks and then the hundreds of millions of pounds that the government was, at that time, hoping to put into Trident.”

Similarly, three medical students in the United States from one of ICAN's partner organizations have recently been [compelled](#) to antinuclear activism, seeing it as “part of our generation's progressive movement for an equitable, livable future.” They argue that efforts to eliminate nuclear weapons are “enmeshed in a larger international movement for racial, economic, and social justice.”

It's clear from student and youth activism against both guns and nuclear weapons, as well as climate change and other critical issues, that young people care about the world they're growing up in and want to do something about it. But many don't feel they have a way to change things. Young people around the world often [view their current political systems as broken](#). In some cases, these systems are [set up to discount young people's experiences and contributions](#).

In this context, it's not easy to figure out how to get involved or make change. But many youth do anyway—particularly when there are alternatives available to them, such as organizations or campaigns that will welcome and even encourage their contributions and give them a chance to challenge the structures and attitudes that prevent their involvement in more traditional spheres of political action.

It took a while, Clare says, but she eventually realized that “if I was willing to contribute and could figure out how best to do that, then my contribution would actually make a difference.” Clare was involved in ICAN’s digital campaigning, and remembers as a highlight of her work filming Hiroshima survivor Setsuko Thurlow deliver ICAN’s closing statement after the [nuclear-ban treaty was adopted on July 7, 2017](#).

Valuing lived experience and creative contributions

The participation of survivors and others with lived experiences of the bomb was a crucial, life-changing experience for many young people engaging with ICAN. The campaign included survivors from the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, as well as of nuclear testing in Australia, the Pacific, and Kazakhstan, as part of its delegation to the nuclear-ban negotiations.

[Hibakusha Stories](#), an ICAN partner in New York, has for years brought atomic-bomb survivors into New York City high schools. Hearing the testimony of those who have suffered because of the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has had an impact on many students’ lives. A [student from Queens](#) said that before hearing from a survivor, the atomic bombings were just something that happened in World War II. “They didn’t really mean anything to me. When you can put a face to the story, it really changes your perspective.”

The prominence of lived experience in antinuclear activism has been one of the virtues of the movement, long before ICAN. But the combination of youth and survivor participation has been important for opening up space for new

strategies as well as new styles of engagement. “Young people...engage in political participation and learn about and practice citizenship through a variety of creative, informal practices in their everyday lives,” argues Lesley Pruitt in a study of [young people, citizenship, and political participation](#). Many of these practices involve new technologies, or new ways of connecting with people across borders and experiences.

Leo Hoffmann-Axthelm, raised in Venice and Berlin, got involved in antinuclear work in his early 20s. A friend of his in Germany, Jacob Romer, had started a project to educate young people about nuclear weapons through video interviews. “We prepped each other on nuclear policy via DIY workshops on the weekends,” Leo recollects. Once he had a taste of the issue, he wanted to get further involved, and was drawn to ICAN’s demand for a ban on nuclear weapons, seeing it as a “refreshing” idea.

Creativity and accessibility were always a big part of the campaign, together with relentless hope and optimism. From its beginning, ICAN has sought to stigmatize nuclear weapons using “[humor, horror, and hope](#)”. While the horror of nuclear weapons is important to convey the urgency of the situation, hope is essential to drive people to action.

Community and collective action

The promise of collective action in a supportive, relatively flat structure has also brought many young people to ICAN. Building community and interconnectedness are a big part of engaging youth in activism, suggest several [studies of youth participation](#). With the [pressures of school and even work](#) at an earlier age, most young people engaging in political work [do so because it is part of their social life](#).

Building community and networks across borders is something that antinuclear activism has always offered. In the 1980s, protesters in Western Europe and North America were connected in their opposition and even in many of their actions. ICAN has sought to reinforce the transnational

character of this work—and to include activists from countries that traditionally hadn't been very active in antinuclear work.

Linnet Ngayu, from Kenya, says she was drawn to the “synergy and complementarity among campaigners” in ICAN. She was encouraged by the “unity in diversity and accord amongst campaigners of different ages, nationalities, religious or political affiliations,” to which she attributes keeping “the momentum of the campaign alive.”

Similarly, Willem Staes, from Belgium, highlights the “amazing experience” of working closely with fellow ICAN campaigners from around the world. “The level of energy, passion, friendship, and knowledge in the ICAN family is something I've never experienced before. Being able to establish such close relationships and knowing that you can always fall back on others if you need some particular is really great.”

Making information accessible

Though drawn to the same culture of community within the campaign, Willem and Linnet had different entry points to antinuclear activism. Willem was 23 when he organized a direct action against the US nuclear weapons stationed in Belgium. It marked the 30th anniversary of 400,000 Belgians marching against the deployment of US cruise missiles in their country, he explains. “Learning about this past, but at the same time realizing that not much has really changed since, triggered my involvement in the antinukes movement.”

Linnet got involved when she was 29 years old, after she read for the first time about the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in preparation for a project at her new job at the African Council of Religious Leaders—Religions for Peace. “It made a lasting impression,” she says.

Their experiences indicate that the challenge to becoming engaged in antinuclear work isn't lack of interest but lack of exposure to information.

The same can be said about US students today. What information are they receiving about nuclear weapons? What kind of access do they have to media that contextualizes within their lives the current arsenal buildups or threats to use these weapons?

The level of knowledge and experience of gun violence, and of the influence of the NRA as the key obstacle to changing gun laws, vastly outweighs the knowledge or experience of nuclear violence and of the structures and systems sustaining nuclear weapons. Even when students are active on related issues—such as gun control or climate change—they do not necessarily have a context to relate those issues to nuclear weapons or nuclear-weapons cultures.

There is great potential for alliance and learning between the antinuclear and the climate-change movements in particular. The environmental impacts of nuclear weapons, including nuclear winter and global famine, should be a mutual issue of grave concern. But we need to do much more to ensure that young activists can connect with the information, and that it resonates with their lives, provides community, and allows their creative agency to flourish.

Making activism accessible

In addition to making information about nuclear weapons accessible, interesting, and engaging, we also need to make activism itself more accessible.

ICAN has done well as a transnational, intergenerational advocacy network, but it cannot claim to have mobilized millions for the cause. To sustain and grow this network will require careful attention to the gender, race, class, and age dimensions of activism.

This means creating spaces that are safe from sexual harassment, assault, and abuse and developing reliable mechanisms to safely report and confront any such behavior.

It means making sure that youth from lower-income situations can participate actively. Whether it's attending meetings or participating in direct actions, all activism has financial costs. Arrests can affect employment. Advocacy can require nice clothes or travel or time off work. How can we ensure that activism is accessible for all?

It means ensuring that everyone's contributions are respected equally, regardless of race, religion, or background. There is a [rich history of black organizing against nuclear weapons](#) in the United States, just as there has been against gun violence. But these contributions have not been recognized in the same way. Unlike the students of Parkland, the teenagers protesting against gun violence in Ferguson or other sites of police violence against black youth were not given the same positive coverage by the mainstream media

These are challenges for any movement, not just the antinuclear one. But in movements against weapons and for peace, it's crucial that we reflect the principles for which we're campaigning. Otherwise, we are just a bunch of hypocrites—[and we know what the youth think about that.](#)