

Train Before You March: The Apparatus

Companion to "It's a Feint. Not a Real Fight." Part two of three. From Little Bird.

The civil rights movement did not improvise. Before John Lewis sat at a Nashville lunch counter, he spent months in James Lawson's workshops rehearsing exactly what would happen to him: role-played abuse, drilled composure, agreed rules of conduct, and removal from the line for anyone who could not hold discipline. That apparatus, the training, the rules, the roles, the schools, still exists. It has been maintained for sixty years by the people who built it and the people they certified. This guide is the map to it: the lineage, the schools that still teach it, the materials, and how to build a trained coalition where you live.

The research reason to bother, in one sentence: movements that train and sustain discipline have historically won at roughly double the rate of violent ones, and the movements failing today are the ones that mobilize crowds through social media without building this layer underneath. Training is not the accessory. Training is the mechanism.

The lineage, so you know it's real

James Lawson studied Gandhian nonviolence in India, then ran workshops in Nashville from 1959 to 1960 at local churches. His students included John Lewis, Diane Nash, Bernard LaFayette, and James Bevel, who went on to lead the Nashville sit-ins, the Freedom Rides after the first buses were burned, Birmingham, and Selma. Lawson called nonviolence a discipline, not a mood. King called Lawson the leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence in the world.

That lineage did not end. Bernard LaFayette, who trained in those Nashville workshops beside Lewis, co-developed the formal Kingian Nonviolence curriculum decades later at Dr. King's family's request and spent his life certifying trainers in it. The schools below descend directly from that work or run parallel to it. This is not reenactment. It is a living certification chain.

The schools

Verify current programs and dates on each organization's site before you commit; offerings shift. The institutions themselves are established and real.

The King Center, Atlanta (thekingcenter.org). Founded by Coretta Scott King. Runs Nonviolence365, structured training in King's philosophy and methodology, offered online and in person, for individuals and organizations. The canonical source for the Six Principles and Six Steps.

University of Rhode Island Center for Nonviolence and Peace Studies (uri.edu, search the center by name). The academic home of Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation, the LaFayette curriculum. Offers introductory trainings and the two-level trainer certification path, which is how you become qualified to train others. If your goal is to seed trainers in your own community, this is the pipeline.

Highlander Research and Education Center, New Market, Tennessee (highlandercenter.org). The movement school. Rosa Parks trained there months before Montgomery; the citizenship schools and generations of Southern organizers came through it. Still running residential workshops and organizer education. Nearly a century old.

East Point Peace Academy, Oakland (eastpointpeace.org). Kingian Nonviolence training on the LaFayette curriculum, founded by trainer Kazu Haga. Runs intensive multi-day trainings and works on a gift-economy basis so cost is not the barrier.

Pace e Bene / Campaign Nonviolence (paceebene.org). National nonviolence training organization with workshops, study programs, and an annual national week of actions. Good on-ramp for faith communities and first-timers.

Training for Change, Philadelphia (trainingforchange.org). Founded by George Lakey, who trained civil rights era activists and has been training organizers since the 1960s. Focus on direct action skills, de-escalation, and, crucially, training trainers.

Momentum (momentumcommunity.org). Trains organizers in movement structure informed by the modern civil resistance research, including how mass mobilization and disciplined organization combine. This is where the Chenoweth-era science meets practice.

International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (nonviolent-conflict.org). Free online courses, a large free library on civil resistance strategy, and the academic backbone of the field. Best free self-study starting point.

James Lawson Institute at Vanderbilt (search Vanderbilt James Lawson Institute). Founded in Lawson's name at the university where he was once expelled for organizing, dedicated to research and study of nonviolent movements. Check current public programming.

National Lawyers Guild (nlg.org). Not a nonviolence school, but the legal-support layer every trained action needs: legal observer training and jail-support infrastructure in most regions. Book them before anyone marches, not after.

The materials

Free or cheap, in a sensible study order.

1. **King's Six Principles of Nonviolence and Six Steps of Nonviolent Social Change** (The King Center, free online). The frame everything else hangs on. One page each.
2. **The Nashville workshop rules.** The sit-in code of conduct the Nashville students carried, printed rules of behavior under attack: friendly and courteous at all times, do not strike back or curse if abused, do not block entrances, refer questions to your leader. Reproduced in movement histories and archives; read it and notice it is an operations document, not a sermon.
3. **Gene Sharp, 198 Methods of Nonviolent Action** (Albert Einstein Institution, aeinstein.org, free). The full tactical menu beyond marches: strikes, boycotts, slowdowns, noncooperation, parallel institutions. Most groups use five of these. The list is one hundred ninety-eight long.
4. **Kingian Nonviolence Conflict Reconciliation curriculum**, LaFayette and Jehnsen. The formal two-day training text. Acquired through the URI center or East Point trainings.
5. **Kazu Haga, *Healing Resistance***. The modern practitioner's book on Kingian nonviolence, written for exactly this moment.
6. **Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works***. The data: 323 campaigns, why disciplined mass participation wins, why it has been failing lately and what restores it.
7. **Documentaries for the group nights: *Eyes on the Prize* and *A Force More Powerful***. The first is the American record; the second is the global mechanism. Watching Nashville and Birmingham with your circle is itself a training session.

Build your own coalition: the protocol

You do not need permission and you do not need a national organization. You need a core, a discipline, roles, and reps. Spoon-fed version:

Step one: the core. Five to fifteen people who commit to training before acting. Recruit from the receipts circle (part one of this toolkit), congregations, unions, veterans groups, and the people already showing up at public meetings. Older members are an asset, not a concession: the historical movement's discipline was carried substantially by people with patience and standing in the community.

Step two: study before strategy. Four sessions, one per week: the Six Principles and Six Steps; the Nashville rules plus an *Eyes on the Prize* episode; Sharp's methods list with a highlighter, marking what fits your local fight; Chenoweth, on why discipline and sustained noncooperation beat one-off crowds.

Step three: get trained by the apparatus. Send two to four core members to a real training, King Center Nonviolence365, a URI or East Point Kingian workshop, or Training for

Change. Their assignment is to come back and train the rest. That is how the original movement scaled: Lawson trained the Nashville core, the core trained everyone else.

Step four: adopt written discipline. Before any public action, every participant signs the group's code of conduct, modeled on Nashville: no retaliation verbal or physical, follow the designated leads, if confronted go low, go silent, go limp, protect the person next to you, leave when the lead calls it. Anyone who cannot commit supports from a non-front-line role instead. This is not gatekeeping. It is the safety system and the strategy in one document, because one thrown punch hands the other side its cover story.

Step five: assign the roles. Every trained action has, at minimum: an action lead whose calls are final for the day, trained marshals or de-escalators along the line, a police liaison who is the only person who speaks to law enforcement, legal observers arranged through the NLG, a jail-support person who holds everyone's emergency contacts and stays outside the action, a medic or first-aid carrier, and a documentation person whose only job is footage. Roles are decided before, never during.

Step six: rehearse. Role-play the confrontation the way Lawson did: half the group plays hostile counter-protesters or aggressive police, the other half holds discipline, then switch. Practice going prone, practice silence, practice being screamed at. It feels absurd right up until the day it does not.

Step seven: choose tactics beyond the march. The research is blunt: demonstrations alone are the weakest tool in the box. Boycotts, strikes, coordinated non-purchasing, mass public-comment campaigns, parallel record-keeping (part one of this toolkit is itself a noncooperation tactic aimed at manufactured ignorance). Pick tactics your specific community can sustain for months, because sustained is what wins.

Step eight: debrief every action, every time. What held, what broke, who needs more training, what the footage shows. The debrief is where a crowd becomes a cadre.

Practical legal notes. Know your state's recording-consent law before filming individuals; filming officials performing public duties in public is broadly protected, but know your ground. Write the jail-support number on your arm in marker before any arrest-risk action. And book the legal observers before the action, every time.

The other side's plan depends on you being untrained: on the one thrown punch, the one burned car, the one frame of chaos that justifies everything they want to do next. Sixty years ago a room full of students in Nashville built the counter-weapon, and the schools they built are still open, still certifying, still cheap or free. Enroll. Train. Then act like people who intend to win.

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