

Convert and Disarm

Seymour Melman

Seymour Melman died on 16 December 2004 at the age of 86. His many books include The Permanent War Economy, The Demilitarised Society (available from Spokesman) and, most recently, After Capitalism: From Managerialism to Workplace Democracy. As Professor of Industrial Engineering at Columbia University in New York, he championed the conversion of arms production to peaceful ends. He maintained this commitment right up to the end of his life. Shortly before his death, he responded to the request of the Russell Foundation for an 'appropriate' piece to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Russell-Einstein Manifesto. This is what he sent.

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The Russell-Einstein Manifesto fifty years ago appealed to mankind to 'renounce war'.

Now the anti-war parts of major populations are overwhelmed, separately and jointly, by pro-war ideologues and institutions. In the United States, the scale of military expenditures exceeds the combined spending of the next twenty countries' military budgets. The military institutions of the federal government dominate every other aspect of government in scale of budgets, number of employees and scope of operations. Thus, the Pentagon now has more employees in American embassies around the world than does the State Department.

War preparation and war-making has become a major source of employment, and a tool for 'demonstrating' increases in national employment as a way of arguing the presence of a pro-employment policy by the federal government. More than 3.5 million Americans are employed in military industry while the uniformed and civilian employees of the Pentagon now exceed 2.1 million.

Our schools from the earliest grades include education programmes that continue the drumbeat favourable to the military institutions – all aspects, while federal and local legislators compete for military contracts and positioning of military institutions in their states and cities.

All this is supported by a bedrock of conviction in American society, from top to bottom, that the American economy can afford Guns And Butter.

Let's face it, in the United States the idea of eliminating war is a primary task of a scattering of poorly funded groups dispersed throughout the population. That condition is a natural by-product of the degree to which economy, politics and the content of education and mass communication media are now soaked through with militarism. Thus, candidates for high office compete for showing militarist allegiance. As I write these lines the opinion polls state that the presidential candidate who

has declared his opposition to the US government's militarised drive for world hegemony receives support only from one to four per cent of the voting population.

For about 10 years until 1995, a citizen and trade-union based Commission for Economic Conversion and Disarmament functioned in the United States. It operated political-educational efforts to advance support for federal legislation on economic conversion, and in support of local initiatives for planning conversion of military industry and military base facilities to civilian work. Initiatives along these lines stopped as the Clinton administration saw to it that American foundations and assorted donors were given to understand that 'the government doesn't want this', whereupon even minimal funding for such a national initiative disappeared. At this writing, there is no replacement for the National Commission for Economic Conversion and Disarmament.

Indeed, the reformation of such an entity, to support national and local initiatives for economic conversion and disarmament, is a proper measure of the prospective ability of American society to respond to the warning of the Russell-Einstein Manifesto.

See www.aftercapitalism.com for more of Seymour Melman's work.



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