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## Review of Revolutionary Nonviolence: Organizing for Freedom

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***Revolutionary Nonviolence: Organizing for Freedom.* James Lawson, Jr. with Michael K. Honey and Kent Wong. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022. Hardcover, 140 pp., ISBN:978-0-520-38784-3.**

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In this short and lovely volume, readers will encounter basic teachings on the philosophy and practice of nonviolent action from the Civil Rights Movement's most preeminent and beloved teacher of nonviolence, Rev. James M. Lawson, Jr. Editors Michael K. Honey, distinguished historian at the University of Washington, and Kent Wong, director of the UCLA Labor Center, bring together transcripts of Lawson's talks and interviews, selected with his assistance and edited in the style of oral history. The result is a manuscript that reads as if Lawson himself were speaking to his readers. Engaging and educational, this text provides a clear and practical introduction to Lawson's approach to direct action for social change.

The Foreword by Angela Davis praises Lawson's role in "the great nonviolent contestation of white supremacist political, economic, and social structures" (p. vii) that was the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Civil Rights Movement. Emphasizing the ways in which Lawson's words can enlighten us about the connections among race, racism, "color-evasiveness", and nonviolence, Davis encourages readers to heed his call to "always remember that a nonviolent society can never be created with violent means" (p. ix). The ensuing Introduction by editor Honey includes an overview of Rev. Lawson's life and experiences with nonviolent activism, which builds context for his teachings, along with a brief summary of the rest of the book's contents.

Chapters 1-3 explicate Lawson's philosophy and teachings on nonviolent action, which are then, in chapter 4, illustrated in a series of detailed examples of the kinds of social change this work has produced. Chapter 5 uses Dr. King's famous question, "Where Do We Go From Here?" to point toward contemporary and future applications of Lawson's approach. And Chapter 6 rounds things off with a wonderful dialogue between Rev. Lawson and Equal Justice Initiative founder Bryan Stevenson, in which they explain the importance of teaching and learning the truth about U.S. history as a foundation for real social change. The book's final chapter, a biography of Rev. Lawson written by his colleague Kent Wong, provides a deeper and more detailed context for understanding Lawson's teachings, and will be especially interesting to readers unfamiliar with his profound contributions to the history of nonviolence in the United States.

Lawson's nonviolent method is built on four key steps he learned from Gandhi: (1) focus: conducting a thorough investigation of the issue at hand; (2) negotiation: putting pressure on those who have the power to influence the situation; (3) direct action: starting small and escalating into a protracted struggle for change; and (4) follow-up: regrouping, reacting, and healing. Throughout the book, he explains how this systematic approach helped win victories at Montgomery, Nashville, Birmingham and other sites of civil rights struggle in the southern U.S., as well as in international locations, such as apartheid-era South Africa and Communist Poland. He shares details of the tactical planning that went into each campaign in order to highlight the need for disciplined, strategic organizing, rather than simplistic assumptions that a protest march will do

the trick. On the contrary, Lawson argues, marching may be the weakest tactic for achieving justice, one that creates catharsis, spending excess energy and excitement, rather than making actual change. Like his colleague, Dr. King, Rev. Lawson is also a skillful rhetorician, describing nonviolent action as the act of “resisting the venom in our society with a quiet no” (p. 83) and explaining how “concerted grassroots effort chips away at the system until change becomes the mainstream” (p. 95). His imagery translates abstract concepts into tangible forms, making nonviolent action appear both more real and more manageable for those who are new to the practice.

As a short collection of transcribed talks, rather than a planned and cohesive manuscript, this book works better as an introduction to Rev. Lawson’s teachings on nonviolence; it is not a complete course of study. In these pages we encounter the lead trainer of the Nashville sit-in campaigns, who made nonviolent action a compelling choice for young people not otherwise committed to Gandhian practices. Readers will not walk away from this volume with a blueprint for nonviolent revolution in hand, but will come to understand the basics of how a revolution could be fought without weapons and a belief that they could and should be part of such an undertaking. In an era in which democratic institutions face many challenges around the world, this text should be required reading for all.