

MAGAZINE

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LYNDA DRUMM goes in search of the peace marchers and finds the movement is being held together by a new breed of business-like activists.

Holding the front for peace

A PLASTIC GUN lies on the floor of Hamilton peace worker May Bass' River Rd sitting room, confiscated from her children.

"I explained to them the home is a war free zone — and they are beginning to come around," she says.

Confiscating war toys is just one part of the full-time effort May Bass has dedicated to the peace movement since 1981, beginning eight years after she moved from London to New Zealand.

She started working in the peace movement in Dunedin, Christchurch then Hamilton, where she became Waikato co-ordinator for United Nations International Year of Peace, 1986.

"The whole community became involved in peace issues that year, places like women's refuges and men for non-violence all joined us."

But times have changed in the peace movement. There is nothing left of the flower power days of love and peace. The movement today is a serious business which attracts professionals and business people.

National Peace Movement Aotearoa co-ordinator, Wellington's Stephen Dixon says this trend might have turned some groups away from the peace train since he set up the Victoria University peace group in 1987.

"There are a lot of highly educated people in the Peace Movement now, so we have sometimes missed the working class."

He has noticed increasing apathy towards peace issues since the movement peaked in New Zealand during the nuclear-free fight of the mid-1980s.

"We convinced 75 per cent of the population 10 years ago, but now the general feeling is people would much rather not be involved."

May Bass says public enthusiasm for the peace movement is sporadic.

"It goes in cycles — but there is still the hard core of the peace movement that is still very much there if there was a need for it."

This apathy is "part of the whole disillusionment with politics" and "general

demoralised feelings" among New Zealanders, says Stephen Dixon.

"People think they are simply not being listened to by the politicians.

"Where necessary we will wave banners, go on ships and do our marches, but the opinion is now that unless we can generate a big march — don't bother. If there are only 200 people it appears they are the only ones that care about an issue."

Results from the Government's Special Committee on Nuclear Propulsion are expected by next month, so Stephen Dixon has toured the country updating New Zealanders on today's anti-nuclear campaign.

The Government committee is charged with receiving public submissions and researching safety, environmental and technical issues relating to nuclear powered ships.

Prime Minister Jim Bolger says disclosure of confidential information would "undermine the ability of the committee to carry out its designated task in an undisturbed and orderly fashion, and thereby prejudice its ability to give the Prime Minister its best advice."

But May Bass says the Government is conducting a secret "orchestrated campaign" to reverse New Zealand's anti-nuclear policy and keeping the public in ignorance.

"They are trying very, very carefully to manipulate public opinion to bring this change about."

SHE AGREES with peace movement nuclear spokesperson Owen Wilkes that the safety of nuclear propelled ships is not the main issue.

"I feel very strongly that the New Zealand peace movement has gone in the wrong direction on this. The New Zealand Government has encouraged us to take up the safety issue, but that is only a very small part of it."

"We don't want to be part of Anzus — we don't want to be part of that whole nuclear cycle."

The peace movement, shifting away from mass protest, has learned to work smarter to get its message through.

Stephen Dixon: "We contact each MP at least half a dozen times about an issue before it comes to caucus, and we get influential people — like Owen Jennings (National Federated Farmers president) to make statements supporting us."

And more emphasis is placed on education. A travelling peace van visits New Zealand schools to "show the kids there's a way to solve things without violence".

"We would much rather be putting our time into schools and education. Instead we have to spend time holding on to what we have got."

May Bass says peace education in schools "in a non-political way" is the first step towards solving international conflict.

She sees New Zealand with a vital international role in the future as an expert in conflict resolution and with an increased role in the United Nations.

But even May Bass is planning to move away from the movement.

She has given up her responsibility as editor of nationwide peace magazine Peacelink, not because of growing apathy in the region but because the peace worker has had enough.

Peacelink will now be based in Wellington — and, as originally planned, will move to different centres around New Zealand every few years.

"After 5½ years you get stale and are no use to anybody — I felt that I really needed a change."

She is instead looking towards working for the environment, conservation, and art promotion issues.

"I am looking for something totally outside of the area I have worked in but where I can still deal with important issues and concerns."

"I have always seen art as a positive force. The (peace) movement was sometimes quite negative in saying what we didn't want. Artists see what we could be."