

Direct action - an introduction



libcom.org's brief introduction to direct action and why we prefer it to other forms of political activity.

Many people today are worried about the direction that the world is heading in. Whether it's about their [working conditions](#) or [unemployment](#), [the environment](#), [housing](#), [war](#) or any number of other problems, it's certain that millions (even billions?) of people at some point look for some form of political action to solve their problem.

Why direct action?

There are loads of different methods which people use to try and change the world, too many to mention here. Often, however, we think that we can look for help from various 'specialists' like politicians, union leaders, legal experts and the like.

In reality, this isn't the case. Politicians and union leaders have interests different from our own, like basically anyone earning six-figure salaries or even those bumbling around £80-90,000 a year. And trying to find protection behind the law can leave us equally at sea, as the laws that protect us today can simply be changed tomorrow - assuming they're even enforced in the first place!

At the same time, we sometimes decide that at least we can decide to not 'take part' in the worst parts of [capitalism](#). We can choose not to buy from certain 'unethical' companies or even grow our own food.

However, the problem with this is that it makes resistance to capitalism an individual lifestyle choice, and one that not all people can make. For instance, 'fair trade' and organic products are often more expensive than food which is neither.

More seriously though, it makes social problems about individual companies or governments which behave 'badly' rather than a problem with society as a whole. And it still leaves us to face them alone, through our consumer choices. Business as usual continues, just for different businesses. Exploitation continues and there's no amount of fair trade cashew nuts that's gonna change that!

This is why we favour direct action: because it relies on our collective strength to stop 'business as usual' rather than our individual lifestyle choices or appeals to political and union leaders. And because at the end of the day, it means relying each other – the others who share

our situation – rather than on so-called 'experts' who ultimately won't have to live with our problems.

What is direct action?

Put simply, direct action is when people take action to further their goals, without the interference of a third party. This means the rejection of lobbying politicians or appealing to our employers' generosity to improve our conditions. Ultimately, it's not even just that they don't care – it's that they profit from making our conditions worse. *For more on this, read our [introduction to class and class struggle](#).*

So we take action ourselves to force improvements to our conditions. In doing so, we empower ourselves by taking control of and responsibility for our actions. So, fundamental to direct action is the idea that we can only depend on each other to achieve our goals

Direct action takes place at the point where we experience the sharp end of capitalism. Often this will mean where we work, as our bosses try to sack us or make us work harder, for less money. Or it can be where we live, as local politicians try to cut spending by getting rid of public services.

Direct action in the workplace

Direct action at work is basically any action that interferes with the bosses' ability to manage, forcing them to cave in to their staff's demands.

The best-known form of direct action at work is the [strike](#), where workers walk off the job until they get what they want. However, strike action can sometimes be limited by union bureaucrats and anti-strike laws. That said, workers often successfully ignore these limits and hold [unofficial, or 'wildcat', strikes](#) which return a lot of the impact of strike action.

Though there are too many to mention here, some other [direct action tactics](#) used by workers are:

- [occupations](#); where workers lock bosses out of a workplace, effectively striking but not letting the boss replace them with strike-breakers (also known as 'scabs').
- Go-slows; where workers work much slower than usual so as to ensure that less work is done (and so less profit made).
- Work-to-rules, another form of [on-the-job action](#), where workers follow every little rule to the letter, again so as to slow down the pace of work.

There are many examples of these kinds of tactics being used successfully. In 1999, [London Underground](#) workers [engaged in a 'piss strike' against not being allowed to go home once their work was finished](#). Instead of pissing by the tracks as usual, they would insist on being accompanied to a toilet by the safety supervisor, who had to bring the rest of the team with them (for safety). On their return, someone else would 'realise' they had to go as well, effectively stopping any work happening!

[In Brighton in 2009](#), refuse workers held a successful wildcat strike over management bullying while the same year saw [Visteon workers in London and Belfast occupy their factories against redundancies](#).

Direct action in the workplace has often been used for political ends as well. For instance, in 2008, [South African dockers refused to unload arms that were to be taken to Zimbabwe](#).

However, it is possible for successful direct action to take place outside of the workplace as well, over a variety of issues.

Direct action in the community

The [2003 Iraq war](#) saw huge demonstrations, including the biggest in British history in London on February 15th where over a million people got really wet marching to Hyde Park. This was unsurprisingly ignored by politicians, who didn't really care about how wet, cold or numerous we were. But direct action outside the workplace and [in the community](#) can be effective.

The most famous example in recent British history is the [Poll Tax](#). When Margaret Thatcher attempted to bring in the unpopular tax in 1989, up to 17 million working class people across the country refused to pay it. Non-payment groups spread through communities all over the UK and people set up local anti-eviction networks to confront bailiffs. By 1990, Margaret Thatcher and the Poll Tax had both been beaten. She was also later filmed crying on telly.

Similar non-payment campaigns successfully beat [increasing water charges \(1993-1996\)](#) and [bin taxes \(2003-2004\)](#) in Ireland. In 2011, working people in Greece began the 'We Won't Pay' campaign against rising prices, with people refusing to pay motorway tolls, public transport tickets and some doctors even refusing to charge patients for their treatment.

Mainland Europe has also seen the spread of '[economic blockades](#)'. Often used by students or workers where strike action has not been hugely effective, they involve participants blocking major roads or transport hubs. The idea is that by stopping people getting to work or slowing the transportation of goods and services, the protesters block the economy in much the same way as a strike would.

Hundreds of thousands of people have been involved in tactics like these, breaking out from government-approved (and ineffective) tactics such as lobbying and A-to-B marches.

Rejecting 'powerlessness'

Direct action is a rejection of the idea that we are powerless to change our conditions. Improvements to our lives are not handed down from above. They must be (and have always been) fought for.

We are always told about how people fought for the vote. Rarely, however, is it mentioned how workers fought for the welfare state, for decent housing, health care, wages, decent working hours, safe working conditions and pensions.

But direct action is more than just an effective means for defending or improving conditions. It is also, as anarcho-syndicalist [Rudolf Rucker](#) said, the "[school of socialism](#)", preparing us for the free society many of us strive to create.

Like former Liverpool manager Bill Shankley's approach to life and football, direct action involves collective effort, everyone working for each other and helping each other for a common end. By using direct action, even when we make mistakes, we learn from experience that we don't need to leave things to 'experts' or professional politicians. This course offers us nothing but betrayal and broken promises as well as that long-felt sense of powerlessness.

Direct action teaches us to control our own struggles. To build a culture of resistance that links with other workers in their struggles.

And as our confidence grows in the strength of our solidarity, so too does our confidence in our ability to change the world. And as this grows, the focus moves from controlling our own struggles to controlling our entire lives.

Based on/stolen from [What is Direct Action? by Organise! Ireland](#).

More information

- [Direct action - Emile Pouget](#) - Classic Emile Pouget essay on direct action in working class struggle.
- [Direct Action? Who Cares!](#) - Article from April 2011 issue of the Industrial Worker that explains that direct action isn't solely used for its effect on 'bread and butter' issues.
- [Anarcho-syndicalist methods](#) - A text from the French CNT-AIT written in March 2006, covering direct action tactics and strategy.
- [Libcom.org workplace organising guides](#) - A set of tips and advice guides for organising in your workplace from getting started to making demands and taking action.