Direct action is an important part of political activism. But its exact definition is quite elusive, meaning to act directly to address an issue of concern. It stands in contrast to indirect or political action where elected representatives are asked to provide a remedy on our behalf. A huge array of things in this book could be considered ‘direct action’ in the wide sense of the word; it can be a philosophy for life which impacts on the way that we organise our health, our education, or the way we organise and communicate. So what makes this chapter different? Here we turn to look at campaigning for change. Direct action has been a vital catalyst in struggles for social justice and, instead of making demands of the authorities, occurs when people place their bodies and their freedom in the way of power. It is when people do not wait for electoral change; when, for example, people refuse to sit down on a plane deporting an asylum seeker; detainees go on hunger strike to demand release and an end to inhumane conditions; instead of marching against war, people occupy an oil company’s headquarters; people occupy and restore empty buildings in response to the lack of affordable housing and speculation; or people blockade a train carrying nuclear waste. Acting directly means not deferring your personal ability, power and responsibility to pre-existing structures, but doing it yourself.

It’s important to note that direct action is an emotive and controversial topic and is difficult to clearly define. For example, since it is essentially just a tactic, it can be used by many different groups (on the political left and right, both extremist and pacifist) in a variety of ways (blockading, striking, organising) for a variety of political ends (workplace change, community empowerment, uprisings). This chapter, however, concentrates on direct action as used by autonomous groups in the UK, who mainly organise horizontally, collectively and without leaders, who we wouldn’t expect to want to seize state power nor use violence against individuals to achieve their aims. In this context, we look at why we need to take direct action, at some of the successes and potentials while also attempting to deal with some of the limitations and criticisms.
why we need to take direct action

The intention is not to define what is ‘legitimate’ and ‘not legitimate’ direct action, but to explore these debates and tactics as they are used in reality.

Box 17.1 Civil disobedience or Direct action?

The two terms are often used interchangeably but there are some significant differences. Civil disobedience is the active refusal to obey certain laws, demands and commands of a government or an occupying power. It was significant in non-violent resistance movements in India in the fight against British colonialism, in South Africa in the fight against apartheid, in the American Civil Rights movement in the fight against segregation and disfranchisement, and in the anti-poll tax movement in the UK. Direct action is sometimes, but not always, a form of civil disobedience. Not all forms of direct action involve breaking a law and they are not necessarily open or public (adapted from www.wikipedia.org).

why take direct action?

If voting changed anything, they’d make it illegal. (Emma Goldman)

Historically, very few political movements have relied exclusively on legal means, most have employed a mixture of ‘direct’ and ‘political’ action to reach their goals. Reforms of law and governments can have huge effects but real systemic change and action has historically emerged from struggles from below. Many of the rights that citizens have in Western democracies now – for example the right of women to vote, the eight hour working day, the working age limit, the end of feudalism – were all forced by massive upheaval and resistance by ordinary people. The term ‘propaganda of the deed’ stems from nineteenth century anarchists and libertarians which for them meant taking direct action to change the world and inspire others to act.

Choosing to act directly is often combined with the belief that campaigning for change through representative democracy is ultimately futile. Many anarchists and social change activists believe that whether an elected government is right wing or left wing they exist in a system which is made up of entrenched positions of power and
Influence. An established order exists of landowners, legal systems, police powers, educational academies, the military and companies that control production and natural resources, which is founded on historical inequality. Lobbying governments for change is fundamentally limited therefore in what it can achieve as established power lies beyond democratic selection. In addition, many feel there are so few choices at the ballot box that people themselves must take control. The many examples of left-wing governments promising reform while in opposition and then failing to deliver when in power strengthens this rejection of parliamentary democracy. Short-term governments mean that policies to tackle long-term challenges, such as climate change where solutions are considered to be ‘unpopular’, further exacerbate notions of the democratic deficit. Power from above, from international institutions, such as the G8 and the World Trade Organisation, with national governments acting as willing partners, savagely promote global neoliberal market policies. This further reduces the likelihood of policy emerging which can deliver bold change. Examples of these policies which work against progressive change include Structural Adjustment Programmes which brought forced liberalisation and privatisation to developing

Box 17.2 The Struggle for Women’s Suffrage

In the UK, the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) or suffragettes, as they are more popularly known, fought for equality for women and the right to vote, under the slogan ‘Deeds Not Words’. From their beginnings in 1903, they were a militant organisation and their actions included burning down churches, breaking windows of shops in Oxford Street, refusing to pay their taxes and, once, even sailing up the River Thames hurling abuse at Parliament as it sat. On the face of it, the suffragette movement was a triumph for direct action as women finally achieved suffrage on the same terms as men in 1928. During World War I, women were urged into the factories so that men could be conscripted to fight. The suffragette movement split and the WSPU called a ‘ceasefire to the campaign’ for the duration of the war whilst the Women’s Suffrage Federation, opposed to the war, continued the struggle. The political movement for women’s suffrage began in earnest in 1919 and, once it became apparent that granting women the vote represented no threat to the underlying power structure, the reform was passed.
Direct action tactics can be used to various ends: to amplify voices of opposition, to prevent something from happening or to force a change in policy. There are many different types of action that have multiple aims. Some of the most high profile actions are carried...
out by large NGOs, such as Greenpeace, who use trained activists on a range of environmental campaigns from ships trying to stop whaling to disrupting trading on the London Petroleum Exchange. These are often highly mediated actions with a huge publicity budget and argue that 'if there’s no photo it didn’t happen.' Other groups are less interested in media coverage but aim to physically stop something from happening, for example, by sabotaging fox hunts or stopping anti-fascist rallies and marches. Others, such as covert acts of sabotage, are often lower profile and are not publicised but aim to challenge specific targets, such as ‘night time gardening’ (digging up genetically modified crops).

The majority stand somewhere in between – banner drops and some blockades are more symbolic and although they may cause disruption are primarily a way to raise awareness of an issue and generate debate. Street parties aim to highlight how much sustainable the world would be with fewer cars, but also bring people together

Box 17.4 Community Organising: Residents Take Over!

‘Community organising and residents groups often conjure up images of people moaning about dog-shit, broken street lights or fly-tipping – and what’s that got to do with changing the world? Fair enough questions to ask. Yet it is these small, community led discussions, exchanges and actions that are the seeds of building a new society, and spreading the ideas of mutual co-operation beyond a small clique. What I like about people involved in residents groups is, if you say to them: “we should be independent, build up community spirit, support each other and co-operate, we are all equals, we should make all the decisions about our area together, with the decisions based on our community’s real needs”, nearly everybody would agree – it’s all common sense! In fact, such common sense ideas are actually a radical basis for alternative politics, for a real counter-power and a new society if acknowledged and built on. Through residents groups people are effectively able to directly challenge, influence and eventually make all the decisions which affect them and their communities, for example to resist anti-social development schemes or cuts in local services. A community is created that is strong, supportive and empowered and people are acting on a basis of co-operation and solidarity with each other’ (Dave Morris, Haringey Solidarity Campaign www.haringey.org.uk).
why we need to take direct action

and build a sense of community. Guerrilla gardening or ‘green blocs’ actions aim to impact positively on a local area by creating gardens on land left to decay. One of the lasting effects of any given direct action is its ability to inspire and encourage others to think and take action themselves.

While campaigns often use a range of tactics, including publicity, outreach and lobbying, direct action has often worked far more quickly and effectively than indirect action. The campaign against genetically modified (GM) food in the UK is one example where direct action was used as a catalyst for a wider social movement for change. Small groups of people who began pulling up crops, both openly and covertly, and trespassing on land contaminated with GM foods not only removed the source of contamination but also attracted much media coverage. In turn, this raised public awareness and a range of campaigning tactics generated enough public pressure to eventually force the UK government and EU to impose a five year moratorium on GM crops in 1998.

Direct action is certainly not the preserve of anarchists, leftists or libertarians. Indeed, anarcho-syndicalists, who coined the term ‘direct action’ in the US labour struggles of the 1900s, considered that their bosses used direct action tactics, such as lockouts and cartels, against them and in response they turned to strikes and sabotage in the workplace. As the centre ground of politics becomes less tenable, groups right across the political spectrum are using direct action to show their power and to bring the state to the negotiating table. Recent examples include: a Countryside Alliance demonstration against the banning of fox hunting in 2004 in which 10,000 people clashed with police outside the UK Parliament while four members managed to breach security and enter the House of Commons; French lorry drivers bringing the country to a standstill in 1992 over new charges to their licenses, while their English counterparts did the same over rising fuel prices, and Fathers 4 Justice, who climbed Buckingham Palace in London dressed as Batman to highlight their demands for access rights to their children.

movements for change

This chapter now looks at three areas where direct action has been used by mainly libertarian, horizontal political groups: the anti-roads movement, workplace action and anti war protests. These examples are but a few of the huge collection of movements of resistance across the world. There are many other movements we could look at, such as the No Borders network, who oppose deportations and fight for freedom of movement, anti-capitalists, feminists, animal liberation, anti-racism and queer
groups. While the ones we look at below are all different, the lessons from them are intertwined. These contributions are included in order to give a taste of the breadth and scope of resistance and have been written by people involved within these movements.

The anti-roads movement
Margaret Thatcher’s reign of power through the 1980s and early 1990s saw the introduction of a £23 billion programme of intensive road building. In the 1990s environmentalists began to organise and use direct action tactics to campaign against these proposed roads and raise awareness of car usage and pollution in Britain. The anti-roads movement protest camps were, in part, inspired by the Earth First! movement originating in the USA, a loose network whose general principles are non-hierarchical organisation and the use of direct action ‘to confront, stop and eventually reverse the forces that are responsible for the destruction of the Earth and its inhabitants’. In 1991 the first UK road protest camp was set up in Twyford Down, Hampshire against the proposed extension of the M3, while others followed in Newbury, East London, Stanworth Valley, Pollock Park and Birmingham to name a few.

A protest camp is built to purposefully block a development before any construction can take place. Camps serve as a launch pad for actions, from digger diving to occupying offices of contractors. People living on camps provide a constant visual reminder of the protest and the issues at stake, inspiring people to take action and pride in their area.

The labels ‘eco warriors’ and ‘tree huggers’ emerged as people took part in camps and protests against the building of roads and runways across the UK, setting into action a chain of events which heavily influenced government policy making and marked public opinion. Television images of people being dragged from trees helped spread the idea and camps began appearing in countries, such as Poland, Ireland and the Netherlands.

The seeds were planted for a movement that inspired and mobilised thousands of people to take direct action in defence of mother earth who was being raped and killed by corporations and governments in favour of so-called progress. (Mik, Road Protest Campaigner 1996)

As the 1990s drew to a close a change of government and the success of the anti-roads movement meant that the road building programme was temporarily halted and 110 projects were shelved. Many of those involved with ‘eco-action’ wanted to deal with what they perceived as the root of the problem. In the late 1990s anti-capitalist protests began to overshadow ecological direct action as people began to equate road building and unsustainable developments with the wider economic
why we need to take direct action

system. One group which emerged from the anti-roads movement was ‘Reclaim the Streets’, which organised street parties and attempted to combat car culture in the cities. The largest of these was the Carnival Against Capitalism in the City of London on 18 June 1999, which an estimated 5000 people took part in and brought the City to a standstill. Countless other events took place simultaneously in 43 countries. Protest camps remain a key and crucial form of resistance to proposed developments – there are numerous ecological and peace protest camps in existence around the issues of roads, supermarket expansion, gas pipeline developments and nuclear submarine bases. The lessons and experiences from the anti-roads movement have been an inspiration for many people to join together to resist unsustainable developments in their areas.

Direct action in the workplace

As long as work and wage labour have existed there has been direct action in the workplace. Around the world, industrial developments are followed by a wave of struggle by workers, forcing wages up and capital’s search for profits on to new terrains. For example, in the 1920s the car industry’s first boom in Flint, Michigan, USA was followed by strikes and occupations which brought the whole production process to a standstill. In 2006, in the booming industrial areas near Delhi, India, strikes at Honda factories and suppliers pushed up contract workers’ wages by nearly 50 per cent in one year.

The workplace is where profit is extracted from workers, but it is also where it is vulnerable. Direct action in the workplace is not only at the forefront of a struggle for a better life, but it is a major site of struggle for an end to the entire economic system. Previously, the huge Fordist factories in the 1960s and 1970s were strongholds for co-operation.
and mobilisation amongst workers. The more complex supply chains and just-in-time production which have emerged since the Fordist era were attempts to dismantle the. But worker co-operation and struggle continues. For example, the Liverpool dockers’ strike between 1995 and 1998 not only saw massive local support, but attracted international solidarity from other longshoreman unions and days of action around the world.

Workers can self organise, challenging the role of the boss and the worker. The occupied factories in Argentina are an inspiring example. Leading up to and after the 2001 crisis, factories and businesses were closing by the dozen leaving millions unemployed. Used to being at the rough end of the global economy, many Argentinian workers have reclaimed factories and businesses ranging from 5 star hotels and pastry factories to metal works. Each factory or business has its own story, but what they have in common is that most organise using assemblies and flat structures to make decisions. In a country where 60 per cent of people live below the poverty line, reclaiming a factory or business, running it autonomously and horizontally, and everyone getting fair wages is an empowering and life improving activity. Many of the reoccupied factories are co-ordinated through two organisations: the National Movement of Recovered Factories, which has 3600 workers across 60 factories, and the National Federation of Workers’ Cooperatives in Recovered Factories, which has 1447 workers across 14 factories. Some of the most inspiring examples include Hotel Bauen a former 5 star hotel in central Buenos Aires, the Brukman Textile Factory and Zanon Ceramic in the Neuquén province.

Collective direct action in the workplace is different from appealing to any of the various mediating bodies: the unions, works councils, left-wing political parties and NGOs. Whilst they maintain the illusion of democracy, their primary interest is in their own image and survival, and so they are limited to legal struggle. The law, far from being neutral, has been carefully crafted to weaken workers’ collective power –
why we need to take direct action

for example, the laws against secondary picketing in the UK to avoid actions spreading or the recent US Homelands Security Act banning strikes in the public sector under the guise of anti-terrorism laws. Taking direct action is often much more effective and empowering. Wildcat or unofficial strikes, when workers decide to strike without the sanction of a labour union, either because the union refuses to endorse such a tactic or because the workers concerned are not unionised, are unpredictable and can force bosses to meet demands. The Hillingdon workers went on strike between 1995 and 2000 holding out against their ex-employers not to mention their own union in the struggle to win back their recently privatised hospital jobs at the same rates of pay. The strikers picketed day in and day out, enduring wind, rain and too many torrents of abuse, and it eventually became the longest strike in British history.

Temping agencies and outsourcing have come to dominate the labour market and can divide and confuse us, and make us precarious and vulnerable as we sell our labour. However, janitors in the USA worked collectively to demand wage increases although they officially worked for different agencies. In taking collective direct action in our workplaces we can not only improve our daily lives, but also learn our strengths, how to organise and co-operate together and so catch a glimpse of how life without capitalism might be.

The anti war movement

It won't be union leaders or paper sellers or 'organisers' that will stop this war. It will be ordinary, angry active people – us, you, your neighbours, and your mates – taking direct action. Stopping high streets at rush hour. Shutting down government and military buildings. Having sit down protests on marches instead of moving on whenever the police tell us to. (Schnews, 28 September 2002, 3)

After months of marches, protests and mounting despair at the prospect of the UK-US led coalition bombing of Iraq began, thousands of people around the world took direct action. The growing sense of frustration against the war led many people to a more radical analysis that it was being fought over oil and that the blood of innocent people was being split in order to keep the oil companies and US administration happy. And in exceptional times ordinary people do extraordinary things.

Ranging from thousands going on strike, refusing to attend lessons and walking out of school to disarming war machines, a huge array of actions were attempted to stop the war and express their anger, to assert that the war was 'Not in My Name'. Whilst the protests didn’t stop the war, they played an important role as one student reflected. 'We didn’t stop the war but an entire generation saw through the lies of the government and the media’ (School Students Against the War 2006).
In Brighton, UK in 2003, on the day the bombing of Iraq began, 5000 people took part in a mass act of disobedience on the main shopping street. The town hall was occupied and people refused orders to move by the police. One offshoot from Brighton anti war actions is the campaign against arms manufacturer EDO-MBM when research revealed that the company were making components of the Pathway system used in the Coalition bombing of Baghdad, ‘Operation Shock and Awe’, and also in the Occupied Territories of Palestine. The Smash EDO campaign in Brighton has persistently targeted the factory that makes components for missiles with regular noise demonstrations, blockades, weapons inspections and rooftop occupations as well as many street stalls, information nights and other campaign outreach. They have also been battling against the criminalisation of protest. In March 2006 they won a high court case which cleared them of charges of harassment. Their defence was that EDO-MBM had been ancillary to war crimes. Their victory exposed collusion between the local police and the company, and showed the way that the protesters had been targeted with ridiculous allegations, ‘because they dared to stand up and tell the truth about the arms industry and about the war crimes these arms dealers are involved in’. Their victory was significant as they were the first of 20 such cases to win and have the injunction overturned.

Many of those involved in the campaign have visited Palestine as part of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). ISM is a Palestinian-led movement committed to resisting the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land using non-violent, direct action methods and principles. ISM aims to support and strengthen the popular resistance by providing the Palestinians with international protection and a voice with which to non-violently resist an overwhelming military occupation force. Witnessing the impacts of these missiles and having direct contact with the people affected strengthened the activists’ conviction to campaign against corporations at home who profit from the war.
why we need to take direct action

It is often both morally and legally justifiable to break a law in order to prevent a worse crime happening. Therefore whilst the tactics employed by anti-war and peace movements may not always be legal, they see them as legitimate. In February 2003, five people broke into Shannon Airport and dismantled a fighter plane destined for Iraq. After three years of legal wrangling and pressure from both the US and Irish Governments to prosecute, the five were eventually found not guilty and acquitted of all ten charges against them. The Ploughshares movement is made up of people committed to peace and disarmament and who non-violently, safely, openly and accountably disable a war machine or system so that it can no longer harm people. In August 2006, there was a public trespass at Prestwick Airport in Scotland by anti-war and peace activists carrying out citizen weapons inspections, angry at the use of the airport to transport US 'bunker buster' bombs to be used by Israel in its invasion of Lebanon. As a direct result of this action all further such flights were directed to military bases elsewhere in England, while activists in Derry, Northern Ireland, smashed up computers at Raytheon, manufacturers of Patriot, Tomahawk, Cruise and Sidewinder missiles.

Imagine if the millions of people who marched against the war around the world had taken direct action. If people had blockaded arms factories, air bases, refused to transport weapons when they learned that their cargo included bombs to be used in Iraq, as two UK train drivers did recently, or conscientiously objected to serve in Iraq on the grounds that the war is illegal and immoral. How would warring governments manage that wave? It would engulf their political processes and present a huge crisis of governance. Would there still be war now?

challenges to action

Measuring effectiveness

Measuring and quantifying the outcomes of direct action is extremely hard. What initially appears a great success can soon fade away as a one-off phenomena, what starts slowly and unsurely can go on to build and achieve great things. There is no arbitrator on which tactics will work. However, it is useful to evaluate the successes and failures of actions and campaigns at short, medium and long-term intervals as campaigns work on many different levels. For example, one critique of actions by anti-capitalists that aim at dismantling institutions, such as the G8, World Trade Organisation, International Monetary Fund and World Bank, are that they are unrealistic and unachievable. This may overlook smaller intermediate steps which activists take towards achieving larger goals. For example, mass street protests to shut them down...
actually did work temporarily (for example, in Seattle in 1999, against the WTO, and Prague in 2000, against the IMF and the World Bank, where summits were seriously disrupted). Many of these global institutions are now struggling to regain their legitimacy in the face of sustained protests from global civil society. It is often the sustained pressure of actions, of repeatedly coming back, of defying, agitating and expanding that creates successes. These mobilisations brought people together, solidified networks of solidarity, allowed people the opportunity to exchange experiences and ideas, and join together on actions. It has led to the forming of what has become known as a global ‘movement of movements’ that is historically unprecedented – a loose network of groups working towards global justice which avoids the dogmas and hierarchies of Marxist-Leninist groups.

**When is direct action justified?**

It is important to talk about the morality and, therefore, legitimacy of direct action. Suicide bombings, kidnappings and firebombing are all forms of direct action, and so boycotts, sit-ins, occupations and community organising can be as well. There are a range of ethical positions that people are prepared to fight for and discussions on direct action tactics often end up being philosophical discussions on moral issues – some may be driven to act by passion and outrage towards what they see as morally indefensible actions, whilst others try to build up a wider social mandate to avoid accusations of extremism or vigilantism. It’s clear that certain forms of direct action involve different forms of violence, to yourself and to others. Some feel that violence, in some cases, is legitimate considering the violence we face everyday from an uncaring economic and political system. However, it’s clear that direct action which in any form may directly lead to the loss of life is not defensible.

In the book *Desire for Change*, the authors state: ‘Non-violence has to be understood as a guiding principle, relative to the particular political and cultural situation. Actions which are perfectly legitimate in one context can be unnecessarily violent (contributing to brutal social relations) in another’. They go on to suggest that non-violence has very different meanings in India (where it means respect for life) and in the West (where it means also respect for private property). In many liberal democracies, public displays of confrontation are often seized upon by critics and the media as a way to depict all activists as mindlessly violent. This is often seen as a device to draw attention away from the issue at hand. To choose to be specifically non-violent could be understood to not allow for a diversity of tactics or even contribute to the criminalisation of part of the movement. For example, it would imply rejecting huge parts of the history of resistance in Latin America. The violence non-violence debate continues to divide people. The question for any campaign is to decide, through discussion, on the strategic value of any action.
why we need to take direct action

Repression

Governments are all too keenly aware that when people start acting directly for social justice and against all that oppose it, the legitimacy of power structures themselves are under attack. While the direct activist group’s greatest strength is its adaptability, authorities learn about tactics and how to respond to them. Evolving movements are crucial, as political situations change, strengths and weaknesses come and go, the state brings in new laws and authorities learn new tactics. Tactics need to be constantly reviewed and adapted to different situations.

Since 9/11 and the war on terror, there has been a widespread crackdown on civil liberties. The hard won right to a fair trial, free speech and independence of the judiciary, and the global ban on torture are being challenged by the pronounced changes to the ‘rules of the game’. These changes would make those who acted in solidarity with historical figures, such as Nelson Mandela or the suffragettes, culpable for glorifying terror. A UK example includes the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act which makes the entire square mile around Westminster, and anywhere else that the government chooses, to be a protest free zone.

These are just some of the challenges that campaigning and direct action throw up. There are also considerations about the impacts on individuals and the emotional health impacts, which are looked at in the next chapter. The answers and responses to them depend on the framework and principles of individuals, groups and networks involved. Formulating responses and finding answers to some of the challenges can be achieved by evaluating, debating and discussing, and constantly looking for new and innovative ways to make ideas more accessible.

making ripples, creating waves

So where does this leave us? Sceptics may ask what’s the point in shutting down one small factory or stopping a road being built? The company could just move elsewhere, the road can be relocated. What difference does it make if you shut down a petrol station to protest against climate change? It will be open tomorrow and only a few people may hear about it. But it is by joining together and resisting that a community finds a voice, informs people of its existence and proves that it is possible to stand up and challenge injustice. It’s impossible to gauge the size of the wave you create from an action and building resistance – a wave could gather momentum, cross seas and borders, ripple down through generations and across oceans. Actions have inspired many and in their own small ways contributed to the building of more tolerant and just societies. Taking action involves stepping on the side of risk, spontaneity, possibility and creativity.
and requires being willing to observe, explore and experiment. It is important to recognise the potential risks to personal liberty and safety, but history teaches us that the ability to create change exists when ordinary people stand up and act together for their beliefs. When people come together they start feeling that there are ways of changing the world and supporting each other based on principles different from profit and power. Whether it’s about challenging the decision to knock down the public swimming pool to build luxury flats, occupying land to grow vegetables, blockade a summit of global leaders or going on strike against unfair treatment at work, taking direct action asserts a right to challenge inequality, corruption and unjust laws, and takes us a step closer to having control over our lives.

Kim Bryan and Alice Cutler are active campaigners who have been involved in direct action and campaigning around issues such as genetically modified foods, climate change, anti road and runway building, and building anti-capitalist networks against the G8 and the World Bank. Other contributors to the chapter include Lady Stardust based in the Escanda community in Spain who is a political activist and writer, writing for a number of publications, such as Prol position and Wildcat, and Mark Brown who works with London Rising Tide, a campaign group focusing on taking action on the root causes of climate change. Other information has been gratefully received from Haringey Solidarity Group, London Rising Tide, and the Brighton based Smash Edo Campaign in the UK. This chapter draws upon the actions of thousands and many reflections and conversations from people who are too many and unknown to name here.