18 how to build active campaigns

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This chapter is focused on building actions and campaigns that are about empowerment, self management and mutual aid – doing it themselves. Whilst most campaigns also depend a great deal on spontaneity, creativity and large amounts of luck, this guide is designed to explore some of the key aspects to consider in creating and running an effective campaign. The material for this chapter has come from a variety of sources and draws on aspects of different campaigns which have built effective resistance.

why are you passionate about it?

Outrage, indignation, 'fire in your belly', a desire to see change are just some of the reasons that people feel motivated to start a campaign. The outbreak of unjust wars, a government introducing an unpopular policy, a company quarrying a local park, a supermarket building on a street full of local shops, school children not having a safe place to cross the road, unfair working conditions?

Defining your aims and objectives is vitally important for communicating and being sure about your campaign and, depending on the issue, there will different points to consider in developing them. The Raccon Society (2003) suggests a few options:

- To announce: To bring to light some scandal or shocking event.
- To reinforce: People can be aware of something, reinforcing is reminding them of something that they know already.
- To punctuate: There might be an event that needs remembering or to remind people that an issue has not gone away.
- To escalate: There might be a need to raise the stakes on an issue that is getting more pressing.
- To increase morale: A group might be ebbing low and needs a boost through taking action.
Box 12.1 100 ways to resist


What are your aims?

It is important to have a target audience in mind and design the messages, slogans, publicity and campaign approach accordingly. In any action or campaign it is important to focus on a few concrete demands and think about how achievable
they are. Some groups start small aiming for victories which give confidence, others start with bigger objectives and less chance of victory, but are more radical and far reaching in their aims. If you’re going to start something new, concentrate on positive things, things that can build up people’s strength and limit the risk of demoralising people. Once there is trust in the group you can try and tackle the difficult stuff that takes a long time to make progress on. Working out how best to achieve your aims can be a real challenge.

Box 15.2 Aims of two groups mentioned in the previous chapter

Trident Ploughshares is a campaign to disarm the UK Trident nuclear weapons system in a non-violent, open, peaceful and fully accountable manner by taking direct action against installations and equipment involved in the Trident system. By doing so we aim to inflict significant damage and disruption on these installations and when arrested we take full responsibility for our actions. Our defence in the courts is generally based on the primacy of international law. We do what we can to publicise our actions and the response of the authorities so that public awareness of the UK’s indefensible nuclear weapons policy is increased and more and more people either become disenchanted with or actively support the movement in a whole variety of ways.” (Trident Ploughshares, www.tridentploughshares.org, May 2000)

If working on a community campaign your aims could be to develop:

- strong and vibrant local communities throughout every corner of our towns;
- local solidarity and mutual aid, increasing residents’ self-activity and their interest and involvement in community affairs;
- a safe, pleasant and green local environment including many residential streets;
- a wide range of publicly accountable community facilities;
- decent and affordable housing for all;
- a situation where people are effectively able to challenge, influence and eventually make all the decisions which affect them and their communities.
Box 15.3 Ticking the Title

Ticking the Title, who provide campaigning support to activists and campaigners, suggest the following considerations:

- Communication: What information or messages do you need to communicate and to whom? (e.g. if working for refugees, the main message you might want to convey is "these are people just like us"). What means of communication do you have?
- Persuasion: What would persuade your opponents to make the change you want? Do they listen to and take seriously? What methods could you use to communicate to them directly or indirectly?
- Coercion: If your opponents are not persuaded, what kind of pressures, non-cooperation or action would make them decide to change? What would you achieve this? Is there a need for direct action?

How are you going to resource your campaign?

Making a campaign happen or taking action doesn’t cost the earth. But you do need some resources and skills. Here are some useful things to take into consideration:

- Fund raising: You’re going to need some money for lots of things – leaflets, photocopying, travel, petrol, food, banner making material. One way to make some money quickly is a benefit gig. Book a cheap community centre, a social centre or back room of a pub. Find a band or DJ to play some music, sort out food and drinks, and charge a few pounds or ask for donations on the door (see the resources section in this chapter for further ideas).
- People: an effective campaign needs people who are committed to work together and show solidarity. Never underestimate your collective potential.
- Publicity: This is essential and there’s lots of creative ways to do it. It could be your key resource.
- Press contacts: If you decide to use the media, try and build up trust with sympathetic journalists and send them regular information. Make a list for press releases. Don’t bombard people though, and make sure what you send is clear and well written (see below).
Knowing your issue

You need to do some research to give yourself and others a greater understanding of the issues at stake. There are many ways to do this, through websites, campaign groups, holding information meetings or talking to other groups. You can present this information in a variety of material including press releases, leaflets, websites, dossiers, newsletters, radio shows and emails, and don't forget to have the right information when talking to people on the streets or at meetings.

Find out about the legal implications of what you plan, although it's important not to let this distract you from focusing on the real issues. Even if something is 'illegal' on paper, it still may well be the best and most efficient course of action to win your demands. For example blocking a road is illegal, but at the end of the day, it might secure a victory and only mean small fines or small and temporary legal charges. Keep a record of any conflicts or disputes to use later.

This checklist of questions may help when planning:

- When is the best date for the action?
- Are there any visits or events worth coinciding with or avoiding?
- What time of day would be best?
- Were there previous actions and what happened?
- What about public opinion - how can you tie your message in or challenge assumptions?

Getting people involved and organised

There are countless ways of getting people involved. It is best to start small and build up. Arrange a meeting in your home or in the pub with a few people and bounce some ideas around. The key is achieving the balance between having time for people to explore and discuss the issues and not losing people by sitting around rather than getting on with things. Limit meetings to two hours and bring along food and drink. Below are some examples.

So what's the plan?

There is almost a limitless range of actions and campaigns that you can get involved in. Think creatively but do learn from what's gone before. Are there groups to link up with or who have made their
resources available on the internet or as guides? You’ve basically got lots of choices to make. Here are some issues you might want to consider:

- Do you plan a sustained or a one-off campaign?
- Are actions most effective if they are open or covert, large or small, in one place or many?
- Do you want the press there?
- Who in the group is willing to risk arrest? What are your limits and guidelines?

Here are some examples of actions that may be useful to your campaign.
Banner drops

Hanging a banner can be a great way of getting a message across to a huge range of people. It's a good way of getting people together to organise a banner painting session in your garage, community or school art space. You'll need lots of bed sheets or material. Try simple, large slogans like 'Support Our Troops, Bring Them Home' or 'No war on the moon'. Try and make it funny or connect it with local issues. Brainstorm short and simple slogans, which will be inspiring to a wide audience, and sketch them out before you paint. Always use water-based paints. Make good holes in each corner and reinforce with eyelets. Cut holes throughout so the wind can pass through. Pick a good location where lots of people will see them and where it's also difficult for the police or curious locals to remove. The best time to hang the banners is early morning so you catch the morning rush hour. Once the banner is up take photos, write a report, post on Indymedia and send a press release.

Direct action in the workplace

Strike! A timed and strategic strike, e.g. 'sit-downs' when everyone just stops work or everybody leaves work to go the boss' office to discuss some matter of importance can be best. For longer strikes to be successful it is vital that the work is not simply done elsewhere. Blockading the workplace, leafleting shop labour temp agencies, making links with other sites of the same work so that they know what is happening when they are asked to sort mail and taking phone calls are vital to the success of the strike. Everyone calling ill sick on the same day can also be used.

Working to rule  Following your instructions to the letter and nothing extra can result in the workplace becoming chaotic and it is hard for management to discipline you for this. Doing your job, just very slowly and carefully. You can also take direct action by not using equipment if it is unsafe, not wearing name badges, not sitting in newly allocated seating arrangements and taking the breaks allotted to you in your contract even if the boss says you can't.

Good work strikes  Providing better or cheaper service, at the boss' expense can make your struggle popular. For example, workers at Mercy Hospital in France refused to file the billing slips for drugs, laboratory tests, treatments and therapy. The patients got better care, the hospital's income was cut in half and panic-stricken administrators gave in to all of the workers' demands after three days (see http://libcom.org/organise/goods-work-strike). In 1968, Lisbon bus and train workers gave free rides to all passengers to protest a denial of wage increases. In New York City, restaurant workers,
after losing a strike, won some of their demands by "piling up the plates, giving them double helpings, and figuring the checks on the low side."

Pie-ing

I am used to the custard pies. I am even beginning to like the taste of them. (Bono, *Independent*, 16 May 2006)

Putting a big fresh pie in the face of someone responsible for something that has annoyed a lot of people is an easy, effective and often hilarious way to take direct action. Aim for someone who's rich and famous and culpable — Clive Short for his policies on international development, Mark Moody Stuart for his tribulations as head of Shell, and Milton Friedman for championing free market economics. Choose a good, wet pie with lots of fruit and cream in it. Dress the part especially if you are to do it at a hotel. Your pie can be concealed in a brown paper bag or briefcase. Blend into the crowd and adopt a pleasant, civilised demeanour. It's difficult to both throw a pie and document the action to get an extra pair of hands to grab a photograph or video footage. Some pie assassins work in teams, others prefer to work solo. As you hold the creamy pastry into the face of your prey, a quickgulp can highlight your action. Afterwards, expect shock and chaos and get out of there quickly. Realise that you may be arrested or detained.

Blockading

Blockading means to either put your body or an object in the way to prevent something or someone entering or leaving. From farmers driving tractors into position to determine where people will be standing on the streets, it's always been a popular choice and there's lots of ways to do it:

- Arm linking: You won't last long but if there are a few of you it can take a while. Once you have been dragged off remember that being totally relaxed and going floppy you become a dead weight and more people will be needed to carry you.
- Arm tubes: Tubes made from plastic or metal piping, the diameter of a clothed arm, are a versatile tool. They need to be the length of two arms, ideally with a strong metal pin welded in the middle. You need to link your arms together inside the tubes, either with handcuffs, loops of strong cord or climbing tape with karabiners encircling the object. Be aware that if you lock on with handcuffs, you won't be able to release yourself. Arm tubes have been used to blockade gateways, roads and even airport runways. To remove you, the tube must be cut using hacksaws or angle grinders.
- Bicycle D-locks: They fit neatly around pieces of machinery, gates and your neck. It is worth working in pairs when trying to lock on. If locking on to a machine, someone must let the driver of it know. It is important that anything you lock on to cannot be removed or unscrewed.
- Handcuffs: These are particularly good underneath machines if you can find inaccessible bits to lock yourself to. Loops of strong cord or tape can often be just as effective and are cheaper.
- Tripods: These have successfully been used as a mobile, easily erected blockade. They are made from easily obtainable materials, such as scaffold poles from building sites or long, straight tree trunks.

**Figure 18.1** Karabiner hand lock on
Source: Kim Bryan and Paul Chaterton

**Figure 18.2** Tripod
Source: Kim Bryan and Paul Chaterton
Street party

1. Get together with some like-minded people. Work on a plan of action. Sort out different roles, jobs and time scales. Imagine. What’s possible?
2. Decide on a date. Give yourselves enough time. Not too much – a ‘deadline’ is a great motivator – but enough to sort out the practical issues, such as materials, construction, etc. You may need money.
3. Choose the location. Your street, the town centre, a busy road or roundabout, a motorway! A separate meeting place is good – people like mystery and it works as a decoy.
4. Publicise! Use word of mouth, leaflets, posters, email, carrier pigeon. Make sure everyone knows where and when to meet. Posters and paste go well on walls, billboards and phone boxes. Leaflet shops, clubs, pubs – everyone, and your mum.
5. Sort out your sound system. A party needs music – live powered sound systems, rave, plugged-in, acoustic, yodelling – go for diversity. Invite jugglers and clowns, poets, prophets and performers of all kinds. Ask campaign groups to come along and set up a stall in the middle of the road.
6. How will you transform the space? Huge banners with a message of your choice, colourful murals, bouncy castle, a ton of sand, paddling pool for the kids, carpets, armchairs. The materials and money from earlier may come in useful here. Print up an explanation for this ‘collective dream’ to give to participants and passers-by on the day.
7. For opening the street – or rather stopping it being reclaimed by the traffic – ribbons and scissors are not enough. A large scaffold tripod structure with a person suspended from the top has been found to be useful. Practice in your local park. Block the road with a car or other barricade that can then be dismantled.
8. Have a street party! Enjoy the clean air and colourful surroundings, the conversation and the community. Bring out the free food, dance, laugh and set off the fire hydrants. Some boys in blue may get irate. Calm them down with clear instructions.

using the media

Whether you communicate with the media depends on the type of action you are doing. Although you can’t control what they write or broadcast, it can help to get a message across, raise awareness and encourage more people to get involved. Talking to the media can be fairly scary. To help build peoples’ confidence in talking to the media create lists of FAQs and role play the answers, watch and review other peoples’
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interviews – all are good ways of ongoing media training. There are some great resources about how to deal with journalists and give good interviews that can be found online, such as the Media Toolbox, which outlines how to write press releases and deal with interviews (see www.gdrc.org/ngo/media/index.html).

organising on the day

Don’t forget that if you are planning a day of action then you need to make sure you do some preparations to make it run smoothly. Think of key aspects, such as:

- Legal support: If you are doing actions which will infringe certain laws then you need to be prepared – inform yourself, inform others of the risks, be prepared to deal with arrests and the police, sort out support for those arrested.
- Stewards: You might want to have people who can identify themselves to help with traffic, media and police liaison, and any stressful or emergency situations.
- Food and water: Make sure people are well fed and don’t become dehydrated.
- Communication: If there’s a large group it’s worth having some walkie talkies or mobile phones. Other techniques can be used like identifying group leaders with flags or flowers, or having runners between delegates.
- Transport: How will people get there? There may be a few of you going to a remote location.

campaigning problems

There are a number of common problems to watch out for in sustained campaigns that can cause tensions and rifts in groups. Active campaigning, as well as being rewarding, can at times be very hard.

There are inevitably hierarchies of experience within horizontal projects working towards social change, which can lead to newcomers feeling inadequate and hence reluctant to get involved. These hierarchies develop totally unintentionally but can lead to imbalance and bitterness within a group. It is important that any group working horizontally spends time working on the personal dynamics of the group and that macho or controlling behaviour is confronted in a positive way that is ultimately a learning and beneficial experience for the group. Campaigning can be physically and emotionally demanding and fears about the implications of breaking the law can create further
Box 13.5 Writing a press release

Good press releases are a useful tool in a campaign — remember that news desks receive hundreds a day, so they have to grab their attention.

- Make NEWS RELEASE clearly at the top — add your campaign name, phone number and logo.
- Next, write the date of issue and mark FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE unless it is embargoed until the date of the action. An embargo is a note at the top of the press release telling journalists not to leak or print the story before a particular deadline. However, never treat the press to keep them when publicising an event, make sure the press release is out well in advance.
- Use a catchy headline — this should capture the reader’s attention. Limit to eight words.
- Some ideas for creating catchy headlines:
  (a) Use abbreviations (you don’t need to explain them)
  (b) Use analogies (More like a circus than a riot)
  (c) Off tips (9 ways to avoid the worst effects of Climate Change)
- Include a summary in the first paragraph, including WHAT is happening, WHERE, WHEN, WHY and WHO. It needs to immediately grab an editor’s attention or will be ignored.
- The press release should be short, factual and well written. Avoid sensationalism and jargon.
- Use short paragraph and simple sentences. Keep to one, or two at most, pages.
- Use a quote by an identified person to tell your side of the story.
- Use pseudonyms if you do not want your name in the paper.
- Write ENDS at the foot of the press release. Ensure that there is a reliable contact with phone number on the release. This could include an email, mobile phone number. If you use the contact details printed in newspapers it could be in the main body of the text.
- If your press release is for an event, press conference or photo opportunity, include a map or directions.
- If you do not want to go into excessive detail on an issue in the main body of the text but think it is of interest, include a noted to editors section at the end of the press release.
- Follow the press release up with a phone call to make sure that it was received.
barriers to taking action. Training, skills sharing and information nights are excellent ways to overcome these difficulties so people can develop confidence together.

The adrenaline of actions can also be addictive and many come to feel they are indispensable fearing that if they stop the whole campaign, camp or mobilisation could fall apart. In this context, burn out through overwork is a serious mental and physical problem. In many cases, people have had to withdraw for several years to recover from stress as a result of not looking after themselves. The sort of tunnel vision required to fight a campaign over time can leave people out of touch with ‘normality’. Specialisation can mean that engagement with anything not directly related to the cause is avoided and objectivity is lost. Increasingly, activists are taking emotional issues a lot more seriously and are making sure that actions are backed up with solid support – both emotionally and practically.

The issues mentioned above all affect the health of a campaign. Make sure you have good support, clear aims, openness, regular skill sharing events, clearly defined roles, transparent finances, and time to have fun and relax with each other as well as do all the serious stuff.

**evaluation and what next?**

It's important not to let a campaign fizzle out or lose momentum after an action. Holding an evaluation or debriefing is a good way to learn from the experience, recognise successes and weaknesses, and move on together. Decide on the scope and level of evaluation. It's often a good idea to get someone who is sympathetic but was not involved to facilitate.

Turning things around does not necessarily come quickly or immediately. The techniques of organising campaigns used in this chapter have been taken from a myriad of inspirational groups and networks that use their strengths and often limited resources to change the status quo. Their actions have raised questions, stimulated debate, inspired people and formed part of a global network that is building just, fairer and more equitable societies.

Kim Bryan and Paul Chatterton are longstanding campaigners involved in direct action and campaigning around issues such as genetically modified foods, climate change, anti road and runway building, anti privatisation struggles and developing anti-capitalist networks. Additional material gratefully received from Dave Morris of Haringey Solidarity Group, Greenbelt, Seeds for Change, Turning the Tide, the Rucksack Society, Blockading for Beginners, the Biotic Taking Brigade and Reclaim the Streets.
resources

Books
T. Ahonen, M. Forsmen, T. Tikkonen, and U. Vehalanen. 163–75. (in Finnish.)
how to build active campaigns

Websites

Campaign resources/networks
- Anarchists Black Cross www.abcl.org
- Anarchists Against the Wall www.squat.net/antitwall
- Biotic Balancing Brigade www.bioticbalancingbrigade.org
- Corporate Watch UK www.corporate-watch.org.uk
- Corporate Watch USA www.corporate-watch.org
- Delia Smith’s Basic Blockading www.talktoodelia
- Dissent www.dissent.co.uk
- Earth First! UK www.earthfirst.org.uk
- Earth First! USA www.earthfirst.org
- Genetic Snowball www.dna.org.uk/qs
- Global Calendar of Actions, Protests and Gatherings www.protest.net
- International Workers Association www.iwa-int.org
- International Workers of the World www.iwwo.org
- Landworkers for Justice www.landworkers.org/property/landworkers
- Landwatch www.landwatch.org.uk
- Peoples Global Action www.pga.org
- Platform www.platformlondon.org
- Rising Tide www.risingtide.co.uk
- Road Raging for Beginners www.co-action.org/trv/
- Roadblock www.roadblock.org.uk
- School Students Against the War www.ssaw.co.uk
- Seeds for Change http://seedsforchange.org.uk/free/resources (Resources for funding, planning campaigns, media, legal, training and publicity)
- Shell to Sea http://www.shelltosea.com
- Smash Edo www.smashedo.org.uk
- Subverting www.subverters.org
- The Land is Ours www.the-land-is.org.uk
- Trident Ploughshares www.tridentploughshares.org
- Turning the Tide www.turning-the-tide.org
- Women in Black www.womeninblack.net