

The indignity of working-for-a-living is well-known to anyone who ever has. Democracy, the great principle on which American society is supposedly founded, is thrown out the window as soon as we punch the time clock at work. With no say over what we produce, or how that production is organized, and with only a small portion of that product's value finding its way into our paychecks, we have every right to be pissed off at our bosses.

Ultimately, of course, we need to create a society in which working people make all the decisions about the production and distribution of goods and services. Harmful or useless industries, such as arms and chemical manufacturing, or the banking and insurance scams, would be eliminated. The real essentials, like food, shelter, and clothing, could be produced by everyone working just a few hours each week.

In the meantime, however, we need to develop strategies that both prefigure this utopia AND counteract the day to day drudgery of contemporary wageslavery. BossBusters, a project of the Bay Area Wobblies, believes that direct action in the workplace is the key to achieving both these goals. But what do we mean by direct action?

Direct action is any form of guerrilla warfare that cripples the boss' ability to make a profit and makes him/her cave in to the workers' demands. The best-known form of direct action is the strike, in which workers simply walk off their jobs and refuse to produce profits for the boss until they get what they want. This is the preferred tactic of the AFL-CIO "business unions," but is one of the least effective ways of confronting the boss.

The bosses, with their large financial reserves, are better able to withstand a long drawn-out strike than the workers. In many cases, court injunctions will freeze or confiscate the union's strike funds. And worst of all, a long walk-out only gives the boss a chance to replace striking workers with a scab (replacement) workforce.

Workers are far more effective when they take direct action while still on the job. By deliberately reducing the boss' profits while continuing to collect wages, you can cripple the boss without giving some scab the opportunity to take your job. Direct action, by definition, means those tactics workers can undertake themselves, without the help of government agencies, union bureaucrats, or high-priced lawyers. Running to the National Labor Relations Board (N.L.R.B.) for help may be appropriate in some cases, but it is NOT a form of direct action.

What follows are some of the most popular forms of direct action that workers have used to get what they wanted. Yet nearly every one of these

SOLIDARITY

The best weapon is, of course, organization. If one worker stands up and protests, the bosses will squash him or her like a bug. Squashed bugs are obviously of little use to their families, friends, and social movements in general. But if all the workers stand up together, the boss will have no choice but to take you seriously. S/he can fire any individual worker who makes a fuss, but s/he might find it difficult to fire their entire workforce.

All of the tactics discussed here depend for their success on solidarity, on the coordinated actions of a large number of workers. Individual acts of sabotage offer little more than a fleeting sense of revenge, which may admittedly be all that keeps you sane on a bad day at work. But for a real feeling of collective empowerment, there's nothing quite like direct action by a large number of disgruntled workers to make your day.

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tactics is, technically speaking, illegal. Every major victory won by Labor over the years was achieved with militant direct actions that were, in their time, illegal and subject to police repression. After all, until the 1930's, the laws surrounding labor unions were simple -- there were none. Most courts held labor unions to be illegal conspiracies in restraint of "free trade," and strikers were routinely beaten and shot by police, state militia, Federal troops, and private security goons.

The legal right of workers to organize is now officially recognized in the U.S., yet so many restrictions exist that effective action is as difficult as ever. For this reason, any worker contemplating direct action on the job -- bypassing the legal system and hitting the boss where s/he is weakest -- should be fully aware of labor law, how it is applied, and how it may be used against labor activists. At the same time, workers must realize that the struggle between the bosses and the workers is not a badminton match -- it is war. Under these circumstances, workers must use what works, whether the bosses (and their courts) like it or not.

Here, then, are the most useful forms of direct action:

SLOWDOWN

The Slowdown has a long and honorable history. In 1899, the organized dock workers of Glasgow, Scotland, demanded a 10% increase in wages, but met with refusal by the bosses and went on strike. Strikebreakers were brought in from among the agricultural workers, and the dockers had to acknowledge defeat and return to work under the old wages. But before they went back to work, they heard this from the secretary of their union:

"You are going back to work at the old wage. The employers have repeated time and again that they were delighted with the work of the agricultural laborers who have taken our place for several weeks during the strike. But we have seen them at work. We have seen that they could not even walk a vessel and that they dropped half the merchandise they carried; in short, that two of them could hardly do the work of one of us. Nevertheless, the employers have declared themselves enchanted with the work of these fellows. Well, then, there is nothing for us to do but the same. Work as the agricultural laborers worked."

This order was obeyed to the letter. After a few days the contracto)rs sent for the union secretary and begged him to tell the dockworkers to work as before, and that they were willing to grant the 10% pay increase.

The printers asked the manager to move it upstairs to the storage room, since by now it merely took up valuable space in an already crowded press room. He hemmed and hawed and never seemed to get around to it. Finally, one afternoon after the printers had punched out for the day, they got a moving dolly and wrestled the press onto the elevator to take it upstairs. The manager found them just as they got it into the elevator, and though he turned livid at this blatant usurpation of his authority, he never mentioned the incident to them. The space where the press had been was converted to an "employee lounge," with several chairs and a magazine rack.

MONKEY-WRENCHING

Monkey-wrenching is the generic term for a whole host of tricks, deviltry, and assorted nastiness that can remind the boss how much he needs his workers (and how little the workers need him/her). While all these monkey-wrenching tactics are non-violent, most of them are major social no-nos. They should be used only in the most heated of battles, where it is open wholesale class warfare between the workers and the bosses.

Disrupting magnetically-stored information (such as cassette tapes, floppy discs and poorly-shielded hard drives) can be done by exposing them to a strong magnetic field. Of course, it would be just as simple to "misplace" the discs and tapes that contain such vital information. Restaurant workers can buy a bunch of live crickets or mice at the neighborhood pet shop, and liberate them in a convenient place. For bigger laughs, give the Board of Health an anonymous tip.

One thing that always haunts a strike call is the question of scabs and strike breakers. In a railroad strike in 1886, the scab problem was solved by strikers who took "souvenirs" from work home with them. Oddly enough, the trains wouldn't run without these small, crucial pieces, and the scabs found themselves with nothing to do. Of course, nowadays, it may be safer for workers to simply hide these pieces in a secure place at the jobsite, rather than trying to smuggle them out of the plant.

Use the boss' letterhead to order a ton of unwanted office supplies and have it delivered to the office. If your company has an 800 number, have all your friends jam the phone lines with angry calls about the current situation. Be creative with your use of superglue. The possibilities are endless.

