

SICK-IN

The Sick-In is a good way to strike without striking. The idea is to cripple your workplace by having all or most of the workers call in sick on the same day or days. Unlike the formal walkout, it can be used effectively by single departments and work areas, and can often be successfully used even without a formal union organization. It is the traditional method of direct action for public employee unions, which are legally prevented from striking.

At a New England mental hospital, just the thought of a Sick-In got results. A shop steward, talking to a supervisor about a fired union member, casually mentioned that there was a lot of flu going around, and wouldn't it be too bad if there weren't enough healthy people to staff the wards. At the same time -- completely by coincidence, of course -- dozens of people were calling the personnel office to see how much sick time they had left. The supervisor got the message, and the union member was rehired.

DUAL POWER (IGNORING THE BOSS)

The best way to get something done is to simply organize and do it ourselves. Rather than wait for the boss to give in to our demands and institute long-sought change, we often have the power to institute those changes on our own, without the boss' approval.

The owner of a San Francisco coffeehouse was a poor money manager, and one week the paychecks didn't arrive. The manager kept assuring the workers that the checks would be coming soon, but eventually the workers took things into their own hands. They began to pay themselves on a day-to-day basis straight out of the cash register, leaving receipts for the amounts advanced so that everything was on the up-and-up. An uproar ensued, but the checks always arrived on time after that.

In a small printing shop in San Francisco's financial district, an old decrepit offset press was finally removed from service and pushed to the side of the press room. It was replaced with a brand new machine, and the manager stated his intention to use the old press "for envelopes only." It began to be cannibalized for spare parts by the press operators, though, just to keep some of the other presses running. Soon enough, it was obvious to everyone but the manager that this press would never see service again.

At the turn of the century, a gang of section men working on a railroad in Indiana were notified of a cut in their wages. The workers immediately took their shovels to the blacksmith shop and cut two inches from the scoops. Returning to work they told the boss "short pay, short shovels."

Or imagine this. BART train operators are allowed to ask for "10-501s" (bathroom breaks) anywhere along the mainline, and Central Control cannot deny them. In reality, this rarely happens. But what would management do if suddenly every train operator began taking extended 10-501s on each trip they made across the Bay?

WORK TO RULE

Almost every job is covered by a maze of rules, regulations, standing orders, and so on, many of them completely unworkable and generally ignored. Workers often violate orders, resort to their own techniques of doing things, and disregard lines of authority simply to meet the goals of the company. There is often a tacit understanding, even by the managers whose job it is to enforce the rules, that these shortcuts must be taken in order to meet production quotas on time.

But what would happen if each of these rules and regulations were followed to the letter? Confusion would result -- production and morale would plummet. And best of all, the workers can't get in trouble with this tactic because they are, after all, "just following the rules."

Under nationalization, French railroad strikes were forbidden. Nonetheless, railroad workers found other ways of expressing their grievances. One French law requires the engineer to assure the safety of any bridge over which the train must pass. If after a personal examination he is still doubtful, then he must consult other members of the train crew. Of course, every bridge was so inspected, every crew was so consulted, and none of the trains ran on time.

In order to gain certain demands without losing their jobs, the Austrian postal workers strictly observed the rule that all mail must be weighed to see if the proper postage was affixed. Formerly they had passed without weighing all those letters and parcels which were clearly underweight, thus living up to the spirit of the regulation but not to its exact wording. By taking each separate piece of mail to the scales, carefully weighing it, and then returning it to its proper place, the postal workers had the office congested with unweighed mail on the second day.

GOOD WORK STRIKE

One of the biggest problems for service industry workers is that many forms of direct action, such as Slowdowns, end up hurting the consumer (mostly fellow workers) more than the boss. One way around this is to provide better or cheaper service -- at the boss' expense, of course.

Workers at Mercy Hospital in France, who were afraid that patients would go untreated if they went on strike, instead refused to file the billing slips for drugs, lab tests, treatments, and therapy. As a result, the patients got better care (since time was being spent caring for them instead of doing paperwork), for free. The hospital's income was cut in half, and panic-stricken administrators gave in to all of the workers' demands after three days.

In 1968, Lisbon bus and train workers gave free rides to all passengers to protest a denial of wage increases. Conductors and drivers arrived for work as usual, but the conductors did not pick up their money satchels. Needless to say, public support was solidly behind these take-no-fare strikers.

In New York City, I.W.W. restaurant workers, after losing a strike, won some of their demands by heeding the advice of I.W.W. organizers to "pile up the plates, give 'em double helpings, and figure the checks on the low side."

SITDOWN STRIKES

A strike doesn't have to be long to be effective. Timed and executed right, a strike can be won in minutes. Such strikes are "sitdowns" when everyone just stops work and sits tight, or "mass grievances" when everybody leaves work to go to the boss' office to discuss some matter of importance.

The Detroit I.W.W. employed the Sitdown to good effect at the Hudson Motor Car Company between 1932 and 1934. "Sit down and watch your pay go up" was the message that rolled down the assembly line on stickers that had been fastened to pieces of work. The steady practice of the sitdown raised wages 100% (from \$.75 an hour to \$1.50) in the middle of a depression.

I.W.W. theater extras, facing a 50% pay cut, waited for the right time to strike. The play had 150 extras dressed as Roman soldiers to carry the Queen on and off the stage. When the cue for the Queen's entrance

came, the extras surrounded the Queen and refused to budge until the pay was not only restored, but tripled.

Sitdown occupations are still powerful weapons. In 1980, the KKR Corporation announced that it was going to close its Houdaille plant in Ontario and move it to South Carolina. The workers responded by occupying the plant for two weeks. KKR was forced to negotiate fair terms for the plant closing, including full pensions, severance pay, and payment towards health insurance premiums.

SELECTIVE STRIKES

Unpredictability is a great weapon in the hands of the workers. Pennsylvania teachers used the Selective Strike to great effect in 1991, when they walked a picketline on Monday and Tuesday, reported for work on Wednesday, struck again on Thursday, and reported for work on Friday and Monday.

This on-again, off-again tactic not only prevented the administrators from hiring scabs to replace the teachers, but also forced administrators who hadn't been in a classroom for years to staff the schools while the teachers were out. The tactic was so effective that the Pennsylvania legislature promptly introduced bills that would outlaw selective strikes.

WHISTLE BLOWING (THE OPEN MOUTH)

Sometimes simply telling people the truth about what goes on at work can put a lot of pressure on the boss. Consumer industries like restaurants and packing plants are the most vulnerable. And again, as in the case of the Good Work Strike, you'll be gaining the support of the public, whose patronage can make or break a business.

Whistle Blowing can be as simple as a face-to-face conversation with a customer, or it can be as dramatic as the P.G.&E. engineer who revealed that the blueprints to the Diablo Canyon nuclear reactor had been reversed. Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* blew the lid off the scandalous health standards and working conditions of the meatpacking industry when it was published earlier this century.

Waiters can tell their restaurant clients about the various shortcuts and substitutions that go into creating the faux-haute cuisine being served to them. Just as Work to Rule puts an end to the usual relaxation of standards, Whistle Blowing reveals it for all to know.

