

FUNDAMENTALS OF ANARCHISM >

WHAT IS DIRECT ACTION

"Direct Action" is the distinctive contribution of Anarchists in the realm of political method. Ideally, Anarchist political activity promotes Anarchism and attempts to create an Anarchist society. It seeks to establish a society without Capitalism, the State or Patriarchy where people govern themselves democratically without domination or hierarchy. This is an activity which is inescapably revolutionary in nature and which is best carried out collectively in an organization dedicated to that purpose. Anarchist show that their methods and ways of organizing work by practicing them. The best advertisement for Anarchism is the intelligence of the contributions of our activists and the success of our methods. Anarchists strive to provide living examples of Anarchism in action. Direct Action is one of the best possible ways of doing this.

Do-It-Yourself

Direct Action aims to achieve our goals through our own activity rather than through the actions of others. It is about people taking power for themselves. In this it is distinguished from most other forms of political action such as voting, lobbying, attempting to exert political pressure through industrial action or through the media. All of these activities are based on the falsehood that we are incapable of improving our own lives and must rely on others to achieve our goals for us. They concede our power to existing institutions which work to prevent us from acting ourselves to change the status quo. Direct Action repudiates such acceptance of the existing order and suggests that we have both the right and the power to change the world. It demonstrates this by doing it. Examples of Direct Action include blockades, pickets, sabotage, squatting, tree spiking, lockouts, occupations, rolling strikes, slow downs, the revolutionary general strike. In the community it involves, amongst other things, establishing our own organizations such as food co-ops and community access radio and TV to provide for our social needs, blocking the freeway developments which divide and poison our communities and taking and squatting the houses that we need to live in. In the forests, Direct Action interposes our bodies, our will and our ingenuity between wilderness and those who would destroy it and acts against the profits of the organizations which direct the exploitation of nature and against those organizations themselves. In industry and in the workplace direct action aims either to extend workers control or to directly attack the profits of the employers. Sabotage and work slow-downs are time-honored and popular techniques to deny employers the profits from their exploitation of their wage-slaves. Rolling and "wildcat" strikes are forms of open industrial struggle which strike directly at the profits of the employers.

As the examples of Direct Action in the community above suggest, there is more to Direct Action than responding to injustices or threats by the state. Direct Action is not only a method of protest but also a way of "building the future now". Any situation where people organize to extend control over their own circumstances without recourse to capital or state constitutes direct action. "Doing it ourselves" is the essence of Direct Action and it does not matter whether what we are doing is resisting injustice or attempting to create a better world now by organizing to meet our own social needs. Direct Action of this sort, because it is self-directed rather than a response to the activities of Capital or State, offers far more opportunities for continuing action and also for success. We can define our own goals and achieve them through our own efforts. One of the most important aspects of Direct Action is the organization involved in order for it to be successful. By organizing to achieve our goals ourselves we learn valuable skills and discover that organization without hierarchy is possible. Where it succeeds, Direct Action shows that people can control their own lives - in effect, that an Anarchist society is possible. We can see here that Direct Action and Anarchist organization are in fact two sides of the same coin. When we demonstrate the success of one we demonstrate the reality of the other.

Ends and Means

Anarchists don't ask if the ends justify the means. We believe that the means used to achieve our goals affect the ends that are ultimately achieved. Our methods and objectives are compatible. History proves that a free society cannot be built with authoritarian methods. This is why we have historically opposed terrorism and other forms of random violence, even though the capitalist media sometimes tries to label them as "Anarchy." Anarchist politics offer people genuine hope and success in their struggle for a better world because they focus on people achieving what they desire through their own efforts. Direct Action is a crucial component of such a politics. Direct Action is also a way we demonstrate that Anarchist organization and methods are an effective means of constructive social change. We demonstrate this by applying our efforts to the political and economic realities of the society we live in. We don't want to lead a revolution, we want to create it ourselves. We call discovering what we are capable of by doing it ourselves "capacitation" and demonstrating to others the possibilities of what can be done by what we ourselves do "propaganda by the deed."

Beyond Protest

Direct Action must be distinguished from symbolic actions. Its purpose is to exercise power and control over our own lives rather than merely voice resentment over things we don't like. Direct Action is bolting a gate rather than tying a yellow ribbon around it. This distinguishes it from actions like the "banner drops" often staged in by Greenpeace, that look militant but aren't. These actions do not directly attack the injustices they highlight, but attempt to persuade politicians to act by playing to the media and hoping to shape public opinion. They discount the independent political and economic interests of these institutions and may put activists in the ridiculous role of begging their exploiters to support changes contrary to their interests. Direct Action must also be distinguished from moral action. It is not *moral* protest. By moral protest I mean protest which seeks to change the behavior of an institution by challenging the morality of its conduct or demonstrating that an injustice has been done by it. Moral protest usually takes the form of a boycott of a product or refusal to participate in some institution. Moral protests are based on the myth that corporations and governments can be reformed by persuading them to change their conduct. Anarchists realize that nothing really changes unless we change it ourselves. Direct Action has an immediate effect on the problem in question and does not rely on affecting the behavior of others. Our own action should have such an effect that we can point it out to others as an example of how they can change - and not just protest - those things which concern them.

Dealing With the Cops

The first implication of the politics of Direct Action with regards to our relations with the police is that, wherever possible, we should disregard the authority of the police. Direct Action is action which acknowledges our own power and right to exercise it. To the same extent that we recognize the authority of the police and obey their instructions we are relinquishing our own right and power to act as we would wish to. So it is actually essential to direct action that we do not concede the right of the representatives of the state to restrict our activities. Of course, for tactical reasons, we may have to acknowledge the consequences that may occur when we ignore the law and may even have to negotiate with police in the attempt to minimize these. But it is important that, in doing so, we remember at all times that although they have the means to do so, they have no right to restrict us in our liberty. Any strategy of dealing with the police must take account of their role as a political - and ultimately a class - force. The police force exists to defend the status quo and the interests of the ruling class. Once we recognize the police force as a political institution and that its members therefore necessarily stand in a certain political relation to us then a number of things become clear. Firstly, any attempt to "win over" the police, one by one, is doomed. We can win the cooperation of the police for precisely as long as we fail to genuinely threaten the existing social order. As soon as our activities begin to threaten the interests of the state or the profits of the ruling class the police will move to disperse/arrest/beat us, as sure as night follows day. They exist to defend all that we wish to destroy. In their defense of private property and the state, the police are backed up by the armed force of the state. Behind the police lies the military who, as numerous historical examples illustrate, are ready to step in and restore "order" if the civilian population becomes too unruly.

Secondly, the fact that the police are ultimately backed by the armed force of the state determines that any attempt to resist or overcome the police through violence will ultimately fail. While the state and ruling class are secure politically and can succeed in maintaining the passivity of the majority of the population, they can defeat any attempt to threaten them through violent means. The state has more repressive force at its command than we can ever hope to muster. This is *not* a pacifist position. We have every *right* to employ force in the attempt to resist the violence of the state. Where a specific act of violence against the state will achieve a particular tactical objective, without provoking crippling repression or a disastrous political backlash, then we would be justified in committing it. But as a political *strategy*, in a non-revolutionary period, attempting to overcome the state through force is doomed. There may be tactical advantages to not antagonizing the police. But in our care to avoid creating unnecessary trouble for ourselves we must remember that the source of the confrontation and violence which sometimes occurs around the police is the police themselves in their attempts to protect an unjust - and ultimately itself violent - social order.

Dealing With the Media

Anarchists should neither ignore the media or perform for it. Instead we should remain true to our own politics and seek to achieve our ends through our own efforts. While we do so we should welcome media attention which might spread news of our activities and so help build an Anarchist movement. When we cooperate with the media we should do so without compromising the integrity of our own politics and without distorting either ourselves or our message. We must also remember that the capitalist media represent multinational corporations with their own political agenda which often "black out" or "spin" (manipulate, distort, censor, etc.) the news to influence public opinion. Rather than relying on them to communicate our message to the people we should do it ourselves. Community papers, zines, tabling projects, free radio (micropower radio) and low watt community television broadcasting are themselves examples of Direct Action in the media.

This flier is based on an essay by Rob Sparrow from the Rebel Worker Group in Australia.