

Direct Action in Industry



**A Direct Action Movement
Publication**



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"Knowledge is the key to be free!"

attempts at incitement, ... a fall of working discipline, technological indiscipline, disintegration of the managerial system...'

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Publication

A DAM Publication

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become the Solidarity Federation

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informal resistance, which goes on even in formally unorganised shops and sites, is what makes the difference between potential and actual production. Much of what is called 'industrial sociology' is devoted to research into reducing this gap. Informal resistance can be expressed in such methods as piecework ceilings, agreements among workers as to what constitutes a fair day's work, and in a simple refusal by workers - in a thousand small ways - to participate in their own exploitation. It is attempts by management to solve this which explains the steady and massive expansion of work-study, job evaluation, quality control, inspection, etc. All of these would be totally unnecessary in the absence of resistance. Management's second line of approach to solve this problem is to introduce 'workers participation'.

In doing this they try to motivate their employees to identify with the interests of the company. In the long term all these measures will fail, as the basic problem, boring, unpleasant and often dangerous work, will not be removed.

An example of this resistance was given in *The Renault Story* by Ken Weller. This described the experience at the small Renault assembly plant in London. In 1961 the management decided to close the factory down and to import completed cars from Belgium. But as they had a last batch of cars to complete before closure they offered the workers a deal. The workers would receive the total wages they would have earned had they worked at normal speed (43 cars a day) even if the batch to be completed was finished faster. The workers held a shop meeting and decided that as they were going to be out of a job anyway they had nothing to lose by finishing the job as soon as possible and then having a holiday. So they organised the job themselves. They increased productivity to 120 cars a day in spite of resistance by the management who felt that such an increase reflected on their ability to manage. This incident gives some idea of the scale and economic effect of resistance on the shop floor.

It has been estimated that the loss of production from such resistance is - in any given period - about equal to the volume of production itself. A good example how even unorganised workers made their feelings felt took place in 1952 at Price's Tailor's factory in Leeds. A worker was sacked by an uppity manager for allegedly sleeping on the job. The workers stopped work, forced the reinstatement of the sacked worker but failed to get the manager sacked... 'all the workers therefore booed him whenever he entered one of the workrooms'. As a result he kept out of sight and stayed in his well-heated office.

Resistance to production is not simply a Western phenomenon. Exactly the same process goes on in the 'Workers States' albeit necessary more deeply underground for obvious reasons. Following the Soviets invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1963 there was widespread industrial unrest. On the first anniversary of the attack, the official Czech Communist Party newspaper *Rude Pravo* spoke of a movement coldly calculated to achieve the disruption of the national economy. '*Daily we witness*

unofficial campaign which had startled audiences with films shown upside down, alarming noises from the sound machinery, mixed reels from other films, and films projected onto the ceiling instead of the screen

► 'Normal' strike

Even the traditional unofficial walkout can be made much more effective than it normally is. The participation of the ordinary worker is often limited to attending the occasional mass meeting. They then stay at home, in isolation, watching the progress of their own dispute on the TV.

Apart from the question of mass involvement of all strikers in activities related to their strike, there is the question of the hardship involved through loss of pay. Italian workers have been leading the way in experimenting with techniques of increasing the cost-effectiveness of strike action. Italian unions have developed a whole new armoury of activities to minimise the cost of strikes to their members and maximise the disruptive effect. There is the chessboard strike, where every other department stops; the brushfire, or articulated strike which, over a period, rolls through every key section of a works; the pay- book strike, where every worker whose cards carry an odd number is in dispute on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, while the even numbers fight it out on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays; and the rather different variety of odd-and-even strike, where the blue-collar workers down tools in the morning but return after lunch, only to find that the white-collar workers and foremen are now out, making all work impossible thus achieving a full day's stoppage for only half a day's loss of pay.

Faced with such tactics, many big and famous Italian companies have appalling times. For instance in 1971, Italsider, the northern Italian steel group was crippled for months, Alfa Romeo produced 10,000 fewer cars than its planned programme and SIT-Siemens, the main telecommunications firm, employing over 15,000 people, lost a total of 4 million working hours.

► Informal resistance

One of the greatest unsung stories of the industrial working class is that of resistance at the point of production. Work is usually not a pleasant occupation and therefore it is not surprising that many workers resent their work and working conditions. This



► Introduction

With the present Conservative government bent on curbing trade union power, strike action will become more difficult. Already secondary picketing is illegal and what future laws and regulations will do to restrict workers power remains to be seen. What is certain though is that living standards are dropping and that striking is becoming a luxury few of us can afford, One thing that is not dropping is the harassment by bosses and bad working conditions are still around. To improve one's working conditions one does not immediately have to resort to strike action. There are ways to achieve what one wants quite simply and effectively by taking 'direct action on the job', which also has the advantage of not losing one's wages while airing one's grievances!

This pamphlet then, lists several of these direct action methods. To make the most of these methods one needs good job organisation and a general consensus among the workers, that there is something to take action about. Even then, it could be possible that the chosen method does not work. In that case a prolonged strike might be the only answer.

In compiling, this pamphlet we made extensive use of the Solidarity pamphlet *Strategy for Industrial Struggle* and the IWW's *Workers Guide to Direct Action*.

► Work to rule

'If managers' orders were completely obeyed, confusion would result and production and morale would be lowered. In order to achieve the coals of the organisation workers must often violate orders, resort to their own techniques of doing things, and disregard lines of authority. Without this kind of systematic sabotage much work could not be done. This unsolicited sabotage in the form of disobedience and subterfuge is especially necessary to enable large bureaucracies to function effectively.'

J.A.C. Brown,
Social Psychology of Industry

Every industry is covered by a mass of rules, regulations and agreed corking practices, many of them archaic. If applied strictly they would make production difficult if not impossible. It is often forgotten that many of these rules were introduced to safeguard management liability in the event of industrial accidents. Managements are quite prepared to close their eyes when these rules are broken in the interests of keeping production going. In many situations the selective application of rules can be a very potent weapon in the workers hands. Even the modest overtime ban can be effective, if used critically. This is particularly so in industries which have an uneven work pattern.

How work to rule tactics have been applied in past to various industries, and can be applied nowadays is shown in the examples below.

The Antwerp Docks 1965. *'Every conceivable safety precaution is being applied, some of them dating back well into the last century, and made obsolete by port improvements. Locks have never been filled so slowly. It is many years since the levels were so minutely checked with a plumbline, or swingbridges so carefully examined lest a belated reveller be sleeping off a hangover on the turntable beneath. Lock- keepers too have unsuspected responsibilities when it comes to identifying ships and their masters or making sure that all the fire regulations are observed. Tugs are hedged in with speed and movement regulations. Priority for entry is still being given to oil tankers despite the fact that the Antwerp refineries have adequate stocks of crude oil'*

Daily Telegraph,
January 8, 1965

a small group of company men breaking up and taking over a mass meeting could never have happened.

No Committee, however devoted, however honest and however militant can substitute itself for the activity of the rank-and-file.

► Sabotage

There exists today a labour market in which wage workers sell their labour to perform certain tasks asked of them by their employers. The labour power of the workers is a commodity. In selling their energy, workers must sell themselves with it. In purchasing goods from a businessman, one gets low quality for a low price. A worker, however, is supposed to be best quality no matter what the price is. But why shouldn't the same standard apply for workers as for bosses? For low pay and bad working conditions, inefficient work.

Some kinds of sabotage are illegal, and all are considered 'wrong' by many people. Even so, working class sabotage is used more often than one would think. Although often used by frustrated individuals, it is most effective - like all direct action tactics - when all or most of the workers on a job are in on it. In his book *Strikes: A Study in Industrial Conflict* K. Knowles describes how workers used to fight the speed-up. He quotes: *'When it got over sixty, say, someone would just accidentally drop a bolt in the line and as soon as it worked its way round to the end, bang, the line would stop. Then there would be a delay and everybody would take their break.'* This quotation could almost be about Ford's at Dagenham. At one time in the early sixties, on the firm's own admission, damage to the track was costing thousands of pounds per year. The same sort of thing goes on in every industry: neglecting to maintain or lubricate machinery at the correct intervals, punching buttons on complicated electronic gear in the wrong order, putting pieces in the wrong way, running machines at the wrong speeds or feeds, dropping foreign bodies in gear boxes, 'technological indiscipline': each industry and trade has its established practices, its own traditions.

The problem is the same in America. The July issue (1970) of the business magazine *Fortune*, when describing the Motor industry, said that 'in some plants workers discontent has reached such a degree that there has been overt sabotage. Screws have been left in brake drums, tool handles have been welded into fender compartments (to cause mysterious, unfindable and eternal rattles), paint scratched, and upholstery cut.'

Sabotage has even been used as a direct bargaining counter. A New York report in the *Manchester Guardian* (March 6, 1948) stated that theatre operators and projectionists had secured a new 2-year contract and a 15% rise in wages by an

thinking. On April 13 and 14, 1971, for example, just after the 10-week major Ford dispute, an interesting situation developed in the paint shop of the Ford P.T.A. plant at Halewood. In response to the management laying off some men, 200 track workers entered the offices on 2 successive nights. On the second night a full-scale sit-in and obstruction of the Administration only just failed to materialise because of the differences of opinion amongst the stewards.

The Detroit IWW employed the sit-in to good effect at the Mudson Motor Car Company from 1932 to 1934. "Sit in and watch your pay go up" was the message that rolled down the assembly line on stickers on pieces of work. The steady practice of the sit-in raised wages 100% in the middle of a depression.

There is a fairly long record of sit-ins in Britain there have been few large-scale factory occupations such as are now common in both France and Italy. It is about time that this omission was rectified. It would be foolish to deny that the technique raises a number of problems and is certainly no cure-all. It presupposes a high level of militancy and organisation on the part of the workers concerned. It is doomed if the factory remains isolated in a sort of self-imposed ghetto. On the other hand, given the right conditions, it can be dynamite.

A good example of the pitfalls and of what should not be done was the abortive occupation at G.E.C. Liverpool, October 1969.

The fiasco was basically due to the failure of the Shop Stewards Committee to carry the workers with them. This in turn was due to a real lack of basic information among the rank-and-file as to the actual aims, objectives and methods of the planned occupation. There was wide spread confusion as to whether it was to be a symbolic affair, lasting at most 3 days, or something more serious and permanent.

There were substantial and realistic misgivings about the viability of actually running a factory in isolation within the present system - even for 3 days. And there were suspicions that the Action Committee was trying to sell them a pig in a poke. Much of the workers opposition was due to a lack of information and to justified doubts rather than to any lack of militancy. The Company and its pawns were able to capitalise on these mistakes and drive a wedge between the mass of the workers and the Action Committee.

But much more than just information was needed by the rank-and-file at G.E.C. What was needed was mass involvement. The workers should not just have been presented with a plan. The whole campaign should have been preceded by shop meetings, discussing the pros and cons, especially in the weaker shops and factories. There should have been many more leaflets, many more mass meetings, which should have been regarded as part of the process of planning. But most important, workers should not only have dominated the planning and decision-taking, but should also have directly controlled the application of any decisions taken. This should have been made absolutely clear. If this had been done, the spectacle of

French Railwaymen. *'When, under nationalisation, French strikes were forbidden, their syndicalist fellow-workers delighted to urge the railmen to carry out the strict letter of the law... One French law tells the engine driver to make sure of the safety of any bridge over which his train has to pass. If after personal examination, he is still doubtful, then he must consult the other members of the traincrew. Of course trains run late! Another law for which French railwaymen developed a sudden passion related to the ticket collectors. All tickets had to be carefully examined on both sides. The law said nothing about city rush hours!*

Tom Brown,
What's wrong with the Unions

There have been many successful work-to-rules in Britain too. Here is an account of a struggle by a group of toolmakers after their wage demand was turned down.

'The men immediately held a shop meeting and decided to "withdraw goodwill" and lock up tools. (Most skilled toolmakers are expected to supply their own tools. Those provided by the company are usually inadequate both in quantity and quality). We then witnessed the spectacle of toolmakers queuing up to use the firm's limited stock of micro- meters. We saw jobs 5/16 in dimension being tested for squareness with a 2 foot square, others a few inches long being checked with a 6 foot rule, job after job being impossible to assemble because the company's angle-plates were out of square. These and countless other happenings drastically curtailed the output of jigs and fixtures, which in turn meant huge pile-ups of work waiting for tools in the production shops. The men achieved their demands!'

The Post Office with its byzantine system of rules and practices and reliance on massive overtime working is an example where optimum conditions for working to rule seem to exist. Maybe the Telecom workers could apply some of the listed tactics below against the proposed sell off of British Telecom.

Postal Workers' Work To Rule (January 1962). *'The work to rule began at midnight January 1st. On January 4th Mr. Bevins, Postmaster General, stated that "for the time being the Post Office cannot accept any large postings of circular and advertising matter at printed paper and reduced rates..."*

On January 6th, Mr. Cyril Hears, Controller at the Mount Pleasant Sorting Station stated: "Normally at this time we have 600,000

items here. Now, after staying all night at the office, there are nearly 3,000,000. We are losing leeway at the rate of 750,000 a day!'

Evening Standard,
Jan. 6, 1962

By January 8th, mail due for sorting was being directed as far as Edinburgh, Portsmouth, Cardiff and Peterborough. This diversion of mail for the purpose of sorting created problems of its own. A union spokesman claimed that 350 bags of correspondence for Essex, diverted from Mount Pleasant to Peterborough, had been relabelled and sent back to Mount Pleasant because the Peterborough office was full! On receipt at Mount Pleasant, the postal authorities had instructed members of the UW immediately to send the 350 bags back to Peterborough.

Evening News,
Jan 10, 1962

The bureaucracy was now in firm and exclusive charge!

► **Go slow**

The distinction between work to rule and slowdown (or go-slow) is an arbitrary and often mythical one. A work to rule is usually highly selective in its application of rules and is rarely accompanied by normal working in areas where rules do not apply. An interesting struggle took place in the P.T.A. shop at Ford (Dagenham) in 1962:

'The company cited as a typical instance of restriction of effort the case of the headliners whose job it is to fit the interior roof lining in a vehicle. It had been calculated that with reasonable effort a headlining in a small car could be fitted in 22 minutes, which meant that in a normal 8 hour shift at least 20 could be fitted by each employee in a section. The company stated that the headliners had repeatedly refused to fit more than 13 heads in any one shift, saying that the management's request was unreasonable. And yet, the company's statement continued 'they had in fact fitted each headlining in less time than allowed, and spent the remainder of the time between jobs sitting down. Any attempts

and demand for lumber, this 'strike on the job' (as it was called at the time) was effective. Camp after camp gave in to the 8 hour day, and bosses seldom risked further disruption by trying to cut pay back, in areas where camp bosses tried firing "troublemakers", or even whole "troublemaking" crews, the fired workers were replaced by others just as determined to get the "troublesome" 8 hour day. Fired workers got jobs at other camps and continued to make "trouble" for the 8 hours. On May 1st the lumber bosses gave in, and the 8 hour day became the rule in the camps where it had not already been won.

The IWW loggers celebrated by starting another dual power 'strike on the job' to remove another longstanding grievance. Workers in the lumber industry had to live in isolated camps built and maintained by the lumber companies. To save money for the companies, workers were expected to provide their own bedding, usually a 'bindle' or blanket roll. The bosses provided only hard wooden double-decker bunks. Since there were no laundry facilities, the 'bindles' were always infested with insects. To make it clear that they would not put up with this any longer, the lumber workers burnt their bindles, forcing the companies to either provide beds and bedding or have no workers. By a long series of such actions, IWW lumber workers won decent food, laundry rooms, showers, single beds with mattresses and bedding provided, and an end to overcrowding in the bunkhouses.

At around the same time, a strong IWW Marine Transport Workers Union existed on trans-Atlantic shipping out of the port of Boston. One of the main grievances of the workers on these ships was the quality of the food served aboard ship. Acceptable menus were decided upon and published by the Union. The cooks and stewards, being good union members, refused to cook anything except what was on the menus - to the satisfaction of everyone except the bosses.

► **Occupations & Sit-ins**

It is rather arbitrary to distinguish between occupations and sit-ins. The terms are often used synonymously. It seems useful, however, to define sit-ins as being relatively restricted and passive in character, whereas occupation implies positive action actually to take over a plant and to deny access to the management. The latter needs a high level of militancy and solidarity, as well as good rank-and-file organisation. There have been quite a lot of sit-ins in Britain over the years, most of them of short duration.

Unity of purpose is essential for a successful sit-in. Its absence can lead to demoralisation and to discrediting the method. Potential opportunities may also sometimes be lost because of lack of imagination and the dead weight of traditional

► Sick-in

The sick-in is a way to strike without striking. The idea is to cripple your workplace by having all or most of the workforce call in sick on the same day or days. Unlike the formal walk-out, it can be used effectively by departments and work areas instead of only by the entire workplace, and can often be used successfully without formal union organisation. At a United States mental hospital, just the thought of a sick-in got results. A steward, talking to a supervisor about a fired union member, mentioned that there was a lot of flu going around, and would it not be too bad if there were not enough 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. The supervisor got the message and the union member was reinstated.

At one major Chicago hospital, during a union organizing drive, the night shift on one of the most pro-union wards came in to find that their schedules had all been changed without notice. The night shift replied by calling in sick - all of them - for three days in a row, forcing nursing supervisors who had not handled a bedpan for years to do honest work again. When the night shift came back, they found the supervisor only too glad to put the schedule back the way it was.

► Dual power

Sometimes the way to get what you want is to take it. This requires better and stronger organisation than any other direct action method. It also works the best. When workers decide that they are going to do what they want to do, instead of what the employers want them to do, there is not a lot the employers can do about it. This tactic has been used pretty exclusively by the Industrial Workers of the World.

IWW lumber workers in the Pacific Northwest of the USA used dual power to get the 8 hour day (they had been working 10 to 12 hours). A strike had been on since July 4th, and was not going too well due to government harassment of picket lines and closing of halls and offices when on September 7th the lumber workers voted to go back to work and simply take the 8 hour day themselves. This was decided in a series of meetings the strikers held in each district. As in all IWW strikes, the strikers made all the decisions in beginning, running, and ending the strike.

At each logging camp, workers would work 8 hours, then stop. Since all but a very few loggers were in the union, and since the strike had driven up the price

by supervision to improve the situation had resulted in a "go-slow" by these men.

They took so long over each car that they prevented other employees on the line from performing their operations thus causing congestion and frequently leading to the lines being stopped and sometimes other employees being sent home. This also took place when the headliners were suffering from any type of grievance, real or imaginary. On one occasion the company had no choice but to send other employees home at 3.30 am as a result of this type of action. Shop stewards however, supported by the convener, had always maintained on these occasions that the employees concerned were working normally and refused completely, in spite of numerous appeals, to persuade their members to remove restrictions.'

This heartrending *cri de coeur* by the Ford Motor Company was published in the report of the Jack Court of Enquiry (C.M.D.E 1999, April 1963 H.M.S.O p.57) It is a pity that this great tradition of 'working normally' is not as strong at Ford's as it used to be. But matters are beginning to improve.

Glasgow Dockers. *'In 1889 the organised dockers of Glasgow demanded a 10% increase of wages, but were met with the refusal of the employers. Strike breakers were brought in from among the agricultural labourers and the dockers had to acknowledge defeat and return to work at the old wage scale. But before the men resumed their work, their secretary of the union delivered to them the following address: "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 labourers who had taken our places for several weeks during the strike. But we have seen them at work; we have seen that they could not even walk a vessel, 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 by the work of these fellows; well then, there is nothing left for us to do the same and to practice ca'canny work as the agricultural labourers worked. Only they often fell into the water; it is useless for you to do the same."*

'This order was obeyed to the letter. After a few days the contractors sent for the general secretary of the dockers and begged him to tell the dockers to work as before and that they were ready to grant the ten percent increase.'

Walker C. Smith,
Sabotage: Its History, Philosophy and Function

► Good work

One of the serious problems facing militants in general and workers in the service industries in particular is that they can end up hurting the consumers (mostly fellow workers) more than the boss. This isolates them from the general mass of the population, which enables the authorities to whip up 'public opinion' against the strikers. One way round this problem is to consider techniques which selectively hurt the boss without affecting other workers - or better still are to the advantage of the public.

The 'good work' strike is a general term which means that workers provide consumers with better service or products than the employer intended. An example would be if shop workers consistently under-charged and gave over-weight. Or if workers building working class flats put the best quality craftsmanship even into the shoddiest materials. Obviously there are numerous occasions when the good work strike is not a serious proposition, but it could certainly be used more often than it is. For instance if car workers took the company's hypocritical appeals for 'more quality' seriously, it would be interesting to see managerial reactions when they got more quality than they bargained for. One good side-effect of the good work strike is that it places the onus of stopping a service on the employer.

The Lisbon Transport workers 1968 *'Lisbon bus and train workers gave free rides to all passengers today. They were protesting because the British-owned Lisbon Tramways Company had not raised their wages. Today conductors and tram drivers arrived at work as usual, but the conductors did not pick up their money satchels. On the whole the public seems to be on the side of these take-no-fare strikers and schoolboys are having the time of their lives, Holidays have begun, and they are hopping rides to pass the time.'*

The Times,
July 2, 1968

There should be food for thought here for British Transport workers who have tended to be rather unimaginative in their forms of struggle. It could be argued that a refusal to collect fares could lead to a lock-out by the employers. Even if this happened the passengers would clearly see that it was management, not workers, who were depriving them of transport. And it would not even be possible to counter a refusal to collect fares by a lock-out if the workers acted suddenly, without notice, and for limited periods - and then repeated the treatment later on.

In New York City IWW restaurant workers, after losing a strike, won some of their demands by heeding the advice of IWW organisers to "pile up the plates, give 'em double helpings" and figure bills on the Lower side.

One might imagine similar situations in other industries, for instance postal workers behind a counter only accepting unstamped letters or petrol pump attendants dishing out free petrol, etc.

► Open mouth

Sometimes telling people the simple truth about what goes on at work can put a lot of pressure on the boss. Consumer industries (restaurants, packing plants, hospitals and the like) are the most vulnerable. "Open mouth" direct action is a very good weapon. There is not much that the boss can do about it other than improving conditions. There is nothing illegal about it, so the police cannot be called in. It also strikes at the fraudulent practices which business for profit is based on. Commerce today is founded on fraud. Capitalism's standards of honesty demands that the worker lies to everybody except the boss. An honest businessman is a myth, and an honest clerk couldn't sell the shoddy goods of the businessman. There is not a single area of commerce where honesty would not spell ruin under present conditions.

In the food industry the open mouth tactic is particularly effective. Its use will enlist broad public support. Workers, instead of striking, or when on strike, can expose the way food is prepared for sale. In restaurants, cooks can tell what kinds of food they are expected to cook, how stale foods are treated so they can be served. Dishwashers can expose how 'well' dishes are washed. Let construction workers make known the substitutions that are always made in construction materials, and the cheating on fire and safety regulations. Factory workers can tell of materials used in products that most people use. Workers on the railways and public transport systems can tell of faulty engines, brakes, and repairs. Those workers in the nuclear industry can open their mouths about radiation leaks that were covered up.

The persistent use of the 'open mouth', besides gaining demands, will do more to eliminate abuses than all the 'health and Safety' regulations that will ever be passed.