

Direct action has a rich heritage here in North America, extending back to the Boston Tea Party and beyond. Despite this, there are many misunderstandings about it, in part due to the ways it has been misrepresented in the corporate media.

Direct action is terrorism.

Terrorism is calculated to intimidate and thus paralyze others. Nearly all direct action, on the other hand, is intended to inspire and thus motivate others by demonstrating the power people have to accomplish goals themselves. While terrorism is the domain of a specialized class that seeks power for itself alone, direct action demonstrates tactics others can take up themselves, empowering people to take control of their own lives.

Direct action is violent.

To say that it is violent to destroy the machinery of a slaughterhouse or to break windows belonging to a political party that promotes war is to prioritize property over human and animal life. This objection subtly validates violence against living creatures by focusing all attention on property rights and away from more fundamental issues. Direct action may obstruct the activities or destroy the property of a corporation or institution—but if the latter is itself involved in violent activity, then such an act is not violence but rather the prevention of violence.

Over the past three decades of protests, civil disobedience, and sabotage, not a single person in the United States has been killed or seriously injured. Thousands, however, have been beaten, tear-gassed, and imprisoned. One need only reflect upon a news report such as “Violence erupted when protesters began throwing tear gas canisters back at police” to discern who holds the monopoly on violence.

Direct action is not political expression, but criminal activity.

Unfortunately, whether or not an action is illegal is a poor measure of whether or not it is just. The Jim Crow laws were, after all, laws. To object to an action on the grounds that it is illegal is to sidestep the more important question of whether or not it is the right thing to do. To argue that we must always obey laws, even when we consider them to be unethical or to enforce unethical conditions, is to suggest that the arbitrary pronouncements of the legal establishment possess a higher moral authority than our own consciences, and to demand complicity in the face of injustice. When laws protect injustice, illegal activity is no vice, and law-abiding docility is no virtue.

Direct action is unnecessary where people have freedom of speech.

In a society dominated by an increasingly narrowly focused corporate media, it can be almost impossible to initiate a public dialogue on a subject unless something occurs that brings attention to it. Under such conditions, direct action can be a means of nurturing free speech, not squelching it. Likewise, when people who would otherwise oppose an injustice have accepted that it is inevitable, it is not enough simply to talk about it: one must demonstrate that it is possible to do something about it.

Direct action is alienating.

On the contrary, many people who find traditional party politics alienating are inspired and motivated by direct action. Different people find different approaches fulfilling; a movement that is to be broad-based must include a wide range of options.

Sometimes people who share the goals of those who practice direct action while objecting to their means spend all their energy decrying an action that has been carried out. In doing so, they snatch defeat from the jaws of victory: they would do better to seize the opportunity to focus all attention on the issues raised by the action.

People who practice direct action should work through the established political channels instead.

Many people who practice direct action also work within the system. A commitment to making use of every institutional means of solving problems does not necessarily preclude an equal commitment to picking up where such means leave off. If the established channels were themselves sufficient to address injustices, one might surmise that people would never make the difficult decision to work outside of them at greater risk to themselves.

Direct action is exclusive.

Some forms of direct action are not easy for most people to engage in, but this does not necessarily mean they are irresponsible or ineffective. Everyone has different preferences and capabilities, and should be free to act according to them. The important question is how the differing approaches of individuals and groups that share the same long-term goals can be integrated in such a way that they complement each other.

Anonymous direct action is cowardly.

This accusation is almost always made by people who have the privilege of speaking and acting in public without fearing repercussions: that is to say, those who have power in this society, and those who obediently accept their power. Should the heroes of the French Resistance have demonstrated their courage and accountability by acting against the Nazi occupation in the full light of day, thus dooming themselves to defeat? For that matter, in a nation increasingly terrorized by police and federal surveillance of just about everyone, is it any wonder that those who express dissent might want to protect their privacy while doing so?

COMMON OBJECTIONS TO DIRECT ACTION

Direct action is practiced only by privileged young people/uncivilized poor people/adventurist lunatics/etc.

In fact, direct action is and long has been practiced in a variety of forms by people of all walks of life. The only possible exception to this would be members of the wealthiest and most powerful classes, who have no need to practice any kind of illegal or controversial action because, as if by coincidence, the established political channels are perfectly suited to their needs.

Direct action is the work of agents provocateurs.

This speculation is generally made from a distance, without concrete evidence. To allege that direct action must be the work of police agent provocateurs is disempowering: it rules out the possibility that activists could do such things themselves, overestimating the powers of police intelligence and reinforcing the illusion that the State is omnipotent. Likewise, it preemptively dismisses the value of a diversity of tactics, and the reality that people are applying them. When people feel entitled to make unfounded claims that every tactic of which they disapprove is a police provocation, this obstructs the very possibility of constructive dialogue about which tactics are most effective.

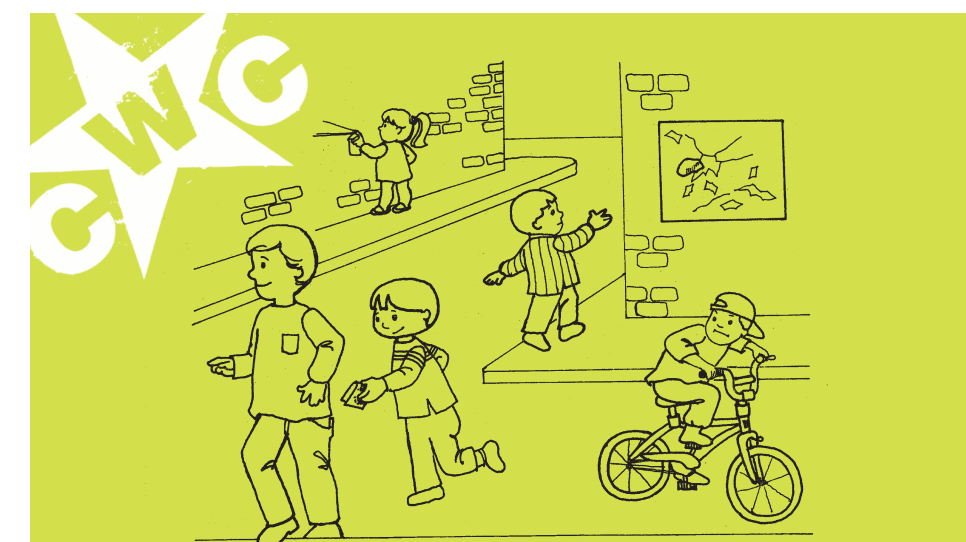
Direct action is dangerous and can have negative repercussions for others.

Direct action can be dangerous in a repressive political climate, and it is important that those who practice it make every effort not to endanger others. This is not necessarily an objection to it, however—on the contrary, when it becomes dangerous to act outside established political channels, it becomes all the more important to do so. Authorities may use direct actions as excuses to terrorize innocents, as Hitler did when the Reichstag burned, but those in power are the ones who must answer for the injustices they commit in so doing, not those who oppose them.

Likewise, though people who practice direct action may indeed run risks, in the face of an insufferable injustice it can be more dangerous and irresponsible to leave it uncontested.

Direct action never accomplishes anything.

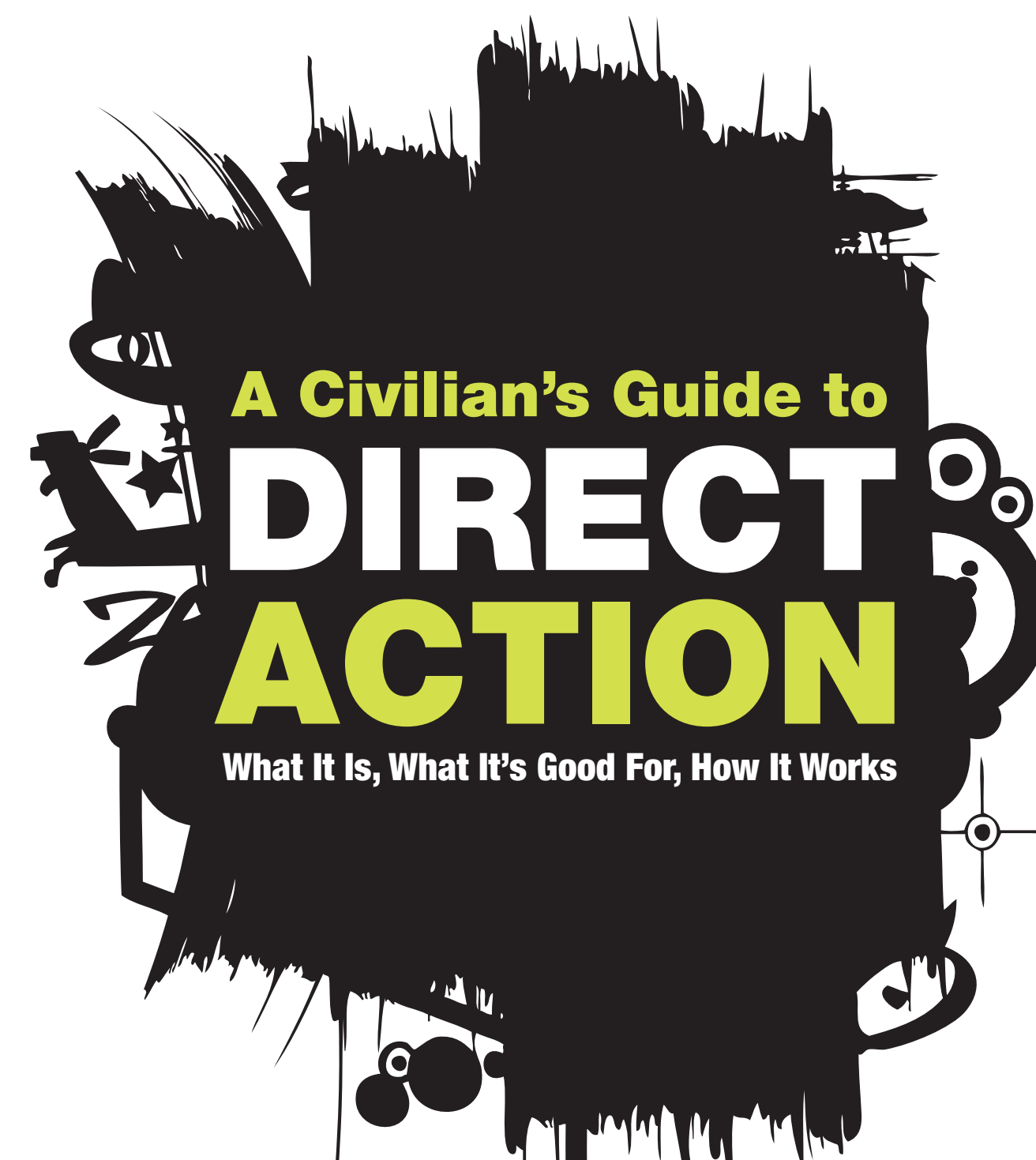
Every effective political movement throughout history, from the struggle for the eight hour workday to the fight for women’s suffrage, has used some form of direct action. Direct action can complement other forms of political activity in a variety of ways. If nothing else, it highlights the necessity for institutional reforms, giving those who push for them more bargaining chips; but it can go beyond this supporting role to suggest the possibility of an entirely different organization of human life, in which power is distributed equally and all people have an equal and direct say in all matters that affect them.



THE OPPOSITION www.crimethinc.com
www.infoshop.org

For extensive information about specific direct action tactics, consult *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching* or *Recipes for Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook*. You can obtain the latter book, as well as more copies of this primer, from:

Crimethinc. Agents Provocateurs
P.O. Box 13998
Salem OR 97309



First of All . . .

Brainstorming: Choose a project and devise a plan

If it makes sense for your action to be organized openly, establish a format, such as a public spokescouncil, in which to work out a strategy and tactics. Invite friends, or circulate fliers, or go door to door announcing it. Have a proposal in mind ahead of time, in case no one else does.

For more clandestine actions, brainstorm in a secure environment with a trusted friend or two. Keep your ideas to yourselves as you hash them out so you won't have already given them away when you're ready to try them.

Brainstorming can start with a problem you want to solve, or a social contribution you want to make; it can be informed by the resources you have, the kind of experience you desire, or the people you want to work with. You can plot a single short adventure, or a long-term campaign. Often, the best brainstorming doesn't happen consciously, but in the course of daydreams and informal conversations—it's a good policy to trust that your craziest ideas can become reality and try them out.

Even if you are attending a massive event organized by others, always have a plan so you can contribute to it in your own way.

Goals: Establish and prioritize the goals of the action

Who is your action “for”? Is it directed at on-the-spot spectators, corporate media viewers, the owners of specific corporations, their stockholders, the police and government, other members of the radical community, the participants themselves?

What is it intended to accomplish? Is it meant to communicate ideas, to call attention to an injustice, to inspire people, to secure resources, to set a particular tone, to inflict crippling material damages, to provide a deterrent, to

DIRECT ACTION IN A NUTSHELL: A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE

demonstrate a model others can apply, to be a learning and bonding experience for those involved?

Establishing the goals of the action from the outset will save a lot of headaches later, when your plans shift and potential conflicts arise.

Structure

Affinity Groups: Work tightly with those you know

One of the most secure models for direct action organizing is the affinity group model. An affinity group is a group of friends who trust each other deeply and share the same goals; by working together over a long period of time, they become efficient and effective.

For a small action, the members of an affinity group can take on different roles. For a larger action, affinity groups can work with other affinity groups in a “cluster,” each group playing a role. This can make decision-making easier than it would be in one big mass, as each group can send a representative to discussions. Clusters of affinity groups can work together over long periods, building trust and effectiveness.

Recruiting: Bring in other individuals and groups carefully

Once you have a plan to propose, figure out how many people you need to accomplish it. Invite only people you trust to keep secrets and that you are sure will want to join in—everyone you invite who doesn't end up participating is a needless security risk. Extend invitations one

Direct action, simply put, means cutting out the middleman—solving problems yourself rather than petitioning the authorities or relying on external institutions. Any action that sidesteps regulations and representation to accomplish goals directly is direct action.

In a society in which political power, economic capital, and social control are centralized in the hands of an elite, certain forms of direct action are discouraged, to say the least. These forms are of particular interest to those who struggle against hierarchy and oppression.

There are countless scenarios in which you might want to use this kind of direct action. Perhaps representatives of despicable multinational corporations are invading your town to hold a summit, and you want to participate in protests against them as more than just another body holding a sign; perhaps they've been there a long time, operating franchises that exploit workers and ravage the environment, and you want to draw attention to or hinder their misdeeds; perhaps you want to organize a festive, community-oriented event such as a street party. Direct action can plant a public garden in an abandoned lot or defend it by paralyzing bulldozers; it can be used to occupy empty buildings to house the homeless or to shut down government offices. Whether you're acting in secret with a trusted friend or in a mass action with thousands of others, the basic elements are the same.

by one, or affinity group by affinity group, so those who decide against participating will not know anything about the others involved; likewise, ask general questions at first, and don't reveal critical details of the plan such as exact target or date until a person is ready to make a commitment. As people are brought into a plan and go on to bring in others, make sure everyone has the same idea of how cautiously this should be done.

As more people become involved in the project, it's also important that everyone understands how much commitment is called for. Sometimes the group that first presents a plan will be more invested in it than others; if they do months of work preparing, only to have another group they depended on drop out at the last minute, all that work is wasted. Everyone shares the responsibility of being honest from the beginning about what others can expect from them. At the same time, those who initiate a project should be careful to share ownership of it with everyone else involved.

Dynamics: Make sure power is distributed evenly within your group

Make all decisions in a participatory and consensual manner. If your group is large enough to warrant it, use an informal or formal consensus meeting process to make sure all voices are heard: set an agenda for each meeting, and pick a facilitator to keep meetings on track and another person to keep track of whose turn it is to speak. The better structured your process, the more likely it is that everyone will participate equally.

Be aware of internal dynamics that may be unbalanced, such as those between people with different privilege, or



between local organizers and participants from out of town. The more everyone participates in planning and preparing for the action, the more invested in its success everyone will be. A group with good internal dynamics is smarter than any individual can be; together the group can work out the best way to apply the ideas brought in by individuals.

Make sure everyone feels supported and comfortable throughout the project; check in with each other outside of formal structures as well as inside them. Maintaining morale is a critical, though often overlooked, aspect of successful direct action organizing—keep level heads in the face of surprises and uncertainty.

The Basics

Security Culture: Be intentional about how you share information

Security culture is a way to avoid unhealthy paranoia by minimizing risks at all times. If you and your friends always conduct yourselves wisely, you'll have little to fear from infiltration and surveillance.

The essence of security culture is that information is shared on a need-to-know basis. In some cases, the whole town will need to know about your action for it to be a success; in others, it will be crucial that the action is never spoken of outside the circle of those directly involved. Everyone privy to the action needs to share a sense of what security has been deemed appropriate, and to respect others' needs regarding safety.

Consent is as important in security as it is in sexual intimacy; it is never acceptable to violate another's wishes about security issues. Make your own security needs explicit from the beginning.

It can be helpful for people working on a high security project to swear an oath of silence together. Never violate agreements about security, no matter how much time has passed since the action. When a group comes together to work on a project, make sure everyone present is vouched for by others in the group as reliable and trustworthy, and is willing to perjure themselves rather than send their comrades to jail.

From the beginning of a project, you should operate according to the highest possible level of security it might require; you can always lower the level of caution later, but if you start out being careless you close off a lot of options you might later miss.

Be aware of all the ways your actions can be monitored or tracked: the records of surveillance cameras, the purchases and phone calls you make (both the numbers you dial and the things you say), the fingerprints you leave (on the batteries in a flashlight as well as on the outside of it, for example), the places you go and the people with whom you are seen. Be especially careful about the location of meetings, the

items you throw in your trash, and the files you have on your computer. Devise codes and prepare alibis as need be.

Legal Support: Prepare an infrastructure to provide support during and after the action

Everyone involved in the action should be aware of and prepared for the risks they are taking and the potential criminal charges associated with them. It's important not to take things further than you feel ready to go: if you get hurt or arrested or otherwise in trouble while engaging in a level of risk for which you are not emotionally prepared, the effects can be debilitating. Far better that you get started slowly, building a sustainable involvement with direct action projects that can continue over a lifetime, than rush into an action, have a bad experience, and swear off all such activity.

If your action may result in arrests, prepare a legal support structure for those who participate. This could include a legal aid number for arrestees to call, legal observers to monitor and document the actions of police, money for bail, lawyers to provide immediate support to arrestees and to represent them in court, and a circle of people prepared to offer emotional, financial, and logistical support throughout court cases.

The legal aid number should be open to receive incoming calls at all times throughout the action; bear in mind that often you cannot call a cell phone from jail. It should not incriminate the arrestees or the people who receive the calls—if part of your alibi is that you don't know each other, don't all call the same number from jail. If you fear you will forget the number, write it on your body in permanent marker. The person operating the legal aid number should know the full names of those who may be arrested, so as to check on their status.

To bail someone out of jail, you can either give the entire amount of the bail to the court system, in which case you will presumably receive it back when the legal process is finally concluded, or you can go to a bail bondsman and pay 10% of that; in the latter case, the bondsman's fees may cost you a significant amount of money. If no one can pay bail for someone, they may sit in jail until their court date, although in the case of minor infractions it can happen that police release people on their own recognition so as not to have to deal with them.

If you are risking arrest, decide whether you want to have your identification on you to expedite processing, or you want to be without it, so they cannot identify you immediately. A group of arrestees who refuse to give their information can tie up the legal process and sometimes gain bargaining power. If you need any forms of medication, consider hiding them on your person, or carry a note from a doctor explaining what you need.

Find a sympathetic and trustworthy lawyer, or perhaps a few of them for large actions; a lawyer cannot represent more than one defendant on the same charges. You can research which lawyers have taken on similar cases in the past, or approach the American Civil Liberties Union or National Lawyers Guild. If you don't give away anything sensitive, you can ask sympathetic lawyers about the charges associated with hypothetical acts, or specify the dates and times you may require their services—but don't let them know anything that could implicate them: in order to do their job, they need to be able to prove that they are not connected to anything illegal.

Any community whose members may suffer arrest would do well to establish a bail fund in advance; this can save a lot of running around in the middle of emergencies. Throw benefit shows, set aside infoshop profits, solicit donations from wealthy sympathizers, have your friends at the university book you speaking dates at their school in return for student funds; make sure the bail fund stays with someone who is even-handed, trustworthy, and always easy to reach. Likewise, consider what your media strategy will be in different scenarios—whether it will be wiser to attract a lot of attention and support to the case, or to try to keep it under the radar.

Media: Establish what coverage you want and get it

Long before an action, when you are establishing and prioritizing goals, work out exactly how much media coverage you want, from which sources, and how you are going to obtain or avoid it. This could mean composing and sending out a press release (Who, What, When, Where, How, Why) or a communiqué, electing a spokesperson to represent your project to the press, inviting corporate or independent reporters to the action or to a press conference, faxing announcements or making press calls, offering interviews (in person or anonymously over the phone), or having members of your group cover documentation themselves. If you want to avoid certain kinds of coverage, it could also mean assigning a participant to make sure photographers do not aim their cameras at those involved.

When predicting the responses of others—say, for example, the police—consider the factors influencing them: Are they expecting what you're planning, or do you have the element of surprise? If you have the advantage of surprise, how long will it last? Will there be a lot of attention focused on the event? Will it be immediately apparent what you are doing? Will there be middle-class citizens or reporters around, and will their presence put a damper on the authorities' response? What is their strategy likely to be? Do their bosses want them to come down hard on you, or to avoid provoking a scene? How well do they communicate, how fast do they move, where are they located and what routes will they take?

Don't underestimate the challenges of simple logistical matters, such as trans-

porting people or communicating in stressful situations. Don't forget to plan an exit strategy, either.

Because plans rarely come off exactly as they are laid, it's important to have backup plans worked out for different scenarios: "If ___, we'll ___; if ___, we'll ___." Have a few different objectives in mind, in case your ideal one turns out to be impossible. Having a basic structure for communications and decision-making in place will help you be prepared for situations that play out differently than any of the scenarios you had imagined.

Groundwork

Planning: Study the context, chart a strategy, plan for different scenarios

Proper planning is the essence of safe, effective direct action. Keeping your goals and priorities in mind along with the resources you have to work with, plot and compare different strategies. Weigh out the risks and potential rewards of each: always pick the safest way to accomplish a given objective, and make sure you can afford to take the risks you choose. It often happens that as the planning process goes on, a project will get more and more ambitious and hazardous, until some of those involved start to have doubts; at this point, it may be necessary to work out a safer or scaled-down version of the plan, so it can still take place.

There are countless factors to take into account in planning. You must pick the most effective tactics in the context of the current social and political situation. You must pick the best location for the action and take into account all its attributes; likewise, you must pick the best date and time of day. You must bear in mind the others who will be in the area, and how they can be expected to react—will they be sympathetic, or will hostile vigilantes interfere with your activities? You must coordinate the timing of different parts of the action, predicting how long each will take, and figure out how those involved in the action will communicate.

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Be careful not to put some people at risk for others' actions; the authorities will probably charge whomever they get their hands on with the worst crimes they can, so it's important both to get those who take risks out of the area safely and to make sure serious charges can't stick to anyone else. In some cases, you can bring together multi-leveled groups in which everyone knows the general goal but only a few know critical details such as what the target is (until the last minute) or who is carrying out the riskiest activity.

Be prepared for the best case scenario as well as the worst. New ideas, if they are good ones, tend to fail because people don't take them far enough, whereas older ideas usually fail because they are too familiar to everyone, including the authorities. Sometimes the best results come from applying familiar tactics in entirely new settings.

Look back in time for precedents, occasions when similar actions were attempted in similar contexts; these can be very instructive. As you gather years of experience and learn from the successes and failures of others, you'll develop skills for predicting and preparing for a wide variety of situations.

Preparation: Gather equipment and dress appropriately

Once your plans are laid, draw up a timeline until your action, counting backwards from the big day to establish the deadlines for all the pieces that must be in place.

Early on in the planning, work out what funding, materials, and other resources you will need and how to obtain them. If security is a priority, obtain what you need in such a way that it cannot be traced to you; affinity groups from out of town can acquire potentially incriminating materials far from the site of the action.

Make sure everyone has appropriate clothes for the action, including different outfits in layers if necessary. Take security issues into account as they relate to clothing: if everyone is dressing in black for anonymity, be sure no one's clothes have unique identifying features; likewise, if you're going to be posing as random passers-by, remember that civilian dress is different in Miami than it is in Seattle. If

timing is important, make sure everyone's watches are synchronized.

Double-check to make sure everything is ready by your deadline; go through a practice run, verbally if not physically. If participants are unfamiliar with the area, distribute maps. If need be, plant necessary materials in the area in advance of the action; be careful not to give anything away by doing so.

Scouting: Study the site of the action and keep up with changes

Before the action, study the area carefully. Chart safe routes in and out; look for hiding places, obstacles, potential targets, and surveillance cameras (including those in ATMs and stoplights). Note how long it takes to travel key distances, and be aware of the visibility from and of key locations. How close are the authorities, how long will it take them to arrive? Can their approach be delayed? Who else is in the area?

While scouting, be careful not to call attention to yourself or leave an obvious record of your passing. Be sure to do at least some of your scouting at the same time of day as the planned action, and if possible do a quick check immediately before it to make sure nothing has changed. If your action calls for daunting tasks, such as climbing a steep rooftop, it may be good to make an actual practice run at some point.

Information can also be gathered from photos, maps, and brochures; aerial maps may be available on the internet. In some cases you can obtain information from a tourist center, or call and ask questions on a pretext (as a student doing a report, for example), or even receive a guided tour. Once you've collected a lot of information, it can be helpful to consolidate the important parts into a map suited to your needs. Be careful to dispose of all your paperwork securely.

Roles: Divide up responsibilities and set up decision-making structures

Establish all the roles necessary to pull off your plan, and make sure every one of these is filled. Roles might include lookouts, scouts, police liaisons, media spokespeople, internal ("embedded") media, legal aid contacts, legal observers, medics, distractions, "plants" (for example, people disguised as innocent bystanders who are ready intervene if necessary, or who will politely honk their horns while a barricade is erected in front of them), getaway drivers, people to transport materials, people to receive information and make tactical decisions, and people to carry out the actual action.

In some situations, it is wise to have understudies for important roles, in case it turns out at the last minute that someone can't participate. This is especially true if you

don't know in advance what the date of your action will be—for example, if it is to coincide with the beginning of a war not yet declared.

Diplomacy: Consider the way the action will affect others

If your action is taking place during or as part of a larger event, there may be large meetings at which different groups try to coordinate their efforts; these can be useful, but they tend to consume a lot of time and energy, so make sure you go into them knowing exactly what you hope to accomplish.

Whether you're acting in the midst of thousands of other activists or far away from anyone, take into account the way your actions will affect other people. Will your actions endanger others? Will they provoke police repression? If so, will others bear the brunt of it, and is it possible to offset this? Will your actions make it more difficult for other people to do important work in a given community? Are there negotiations or reassurances that should be made to others before, during, or after the action?

Honor all agreements you make with other groups; some might be willing to help you, with or without knowledge of the specific details of what you're doing. Over time, if you prove reliable and considerate, you'll build alliances with them.

During and After the Action

Awareness: Stay alert throughout the action

Awareness is key to the success of any action. Often, the atmosphere and the conditions that determine it can change very quickly. It is important to keep up with what is going on around you, and to have established in advance how you will react to a given scenario. For example, is the arrival of one police car a big deal? How about ten? Is it common for police to tail marchers in this city? While you can never be certain of exactly what will happen, going over possible scenarios in advance and having an idea of how your group wants to deal with them will give everyone a more solid idea of how to react—and how not to overreact—as the situation develops.

When informing others of a development, announce the raw information, not the conclusions you may have drawn from it ("The police are putting on gas masks," not "They're going to gas us!"), so others can draw their own conclusions. Resist the urge to panic, and the tendency to get carried away as well.

Communications: Keep each other informed

During the action, scouts can keep track of changes in the terrain such as arriving police, crowd movements, others'

activities nearby, and safe zones. They can use communication systems such as cell phones, text messaging, two-way radios, or whistles to keep in touch; audio or visual signals such as car horns or fireworks can also be useful. A police scanner can be used to monitor police communications.

To make communication more efficient, scouts can report to an individual or sub-group in the center of the action; in a larger setting, they can phone in their findings to a central information hub, which others can call with questions.

Just as communications equipment can make you more efficient and effective, it also increases the risk of surveillance. You can use codes and code names, but be judicious—complicated codes are easy to forget, and prosecutors can argue that your codes meant something more drastic than they actually did. Even if no other communication system is used, it can be useful to have the option of an "abort" signal for emergencies.

Dispersal: Quit while you're ahead

A safe escape is the most commonly overlooked part of direct action organizing. Be sure to have an exit strategy worked out in advance. If you'll be in a large group, especially with others who haven't been part of the planning process, think about how to avoid the herd mentality that keeps crowds together after it would be better to split up. Know when to press your advantage, and when to quit—when to run as fast as you can, and when to walk nonchalantly. Discard anything that could incriminate you, if possible in a place it will not be found; wait to change your clothes until you're sure you're no longer under observation.

If need be, gather in a safe place afterwards and make sure everyone is accounted for; collect bail money, seek outside assistance, write press releases. While everyone involved is still around, get contact information for anyone who might be able to testify or provide documentation to assist arrestees.

Debriefing: Regroup to discuss what went well and what lessons can be learned

After the action, destroy any evidence that could be used against you; keep tools that could be tied to the action in a hiding place outside your home. Get together in a secure setting and go over what happened. Follow up on ongoing matters, such as supporting those with court cases, providing further clarification to the public as to the goals of and ideas behind the action, and sorting out conflicts. Celebrate your victories, offer each other constructive criticism, learn from your mistakes, and lay plans for the next project.

