



Alliance against road building

Briefing on direct action and stunts

What are direct action and stunts? Are they useful for the campaign? What are the risks?

“Using direct action and stunts to get attention”

What is direct action?

- Direct action is just one tool in the campaigning toolkit, but a very powerful one.
- Direct action is one way of ensuring your campaign gets attention, and can sometimes actually stop the processes that lead to roads getting built.
- Direct action can be taken by anyone, and need not necessarily involve breaking the law.
- Direct action need not take place at the traditional last minute, when the bulldozers are rolling in. In fact it is more useful as a campaigning tool in the early stages of a campaign, as a way of ensuring your message gets publicity and your opponents treat you seriously.

Direct action is a broad ranging term that can cover a wide range of activities, from heckling at a council meeting that you believe is avoiding the issues, to occupying stages at meetings, to blocking roads, to physically stopping bulldozers. Direct action is not necessarily illegal. It can range from the perfectly legal (heckling at a council meeting, for instance), to the usually illegal (tying yourself to a bulldozer).

Eye catching stunts

Eye catching stunts can provide a ‘hook’ for a story that might not necessarily get any attention. Often local newspapers will be eager to cover your campaign, especially if you supply them with good photographs, or photo opportunities, and well written press releases. Plan the stunts well, think carefully what your message is, and keep it simple and clear. Visual stunts should ensure you receive attention – either directly from the public (events in your market square for instance) or from pictures in the media. If you can get the numbers, demonstrations are a great way to show popular support for your campaign. Create a good stock of campaign props such as well made banners, and costumes or masks for children.

Sometimes it might be appropriate to ask for police permission, and don’t forget to publicise it well to ensure success. See also the Road Block briefing on campaigning for more ideas.

Part of a strategy

Direct action alone can be very powerful, but is better if it is part of a wider campaign strategy. It can make space for more ‘respectable’ objections to be heard, where they might otherwise have been brushed aside. It can create a media story for an issue that would not normally receive coverage. Often direct action is not appropriate, and it is up to you to decide if it will further your campaign objectives. Always have a clear message, and have press spokespeople ready.

If you are worried about the impact of direct action on your campaign image, it can be useful to set up a separate group to carry out the action under a different name. Sometimes it might be appropriate to ask for police permission, sometimes it might be better to just go ahead.

Preparation

Direct action is often spontaneous, when you feel impassioned at appalling decisions for instance. The best direct action is often planned, however, with good preparation, support for those taking it, and a strategy worked out for getting maximum publicity. Training with others can often help you work out any worries, think through scenarios and plan for them.

Training can be as informal or involved as you like. Seeds for Change (details below) offer free direct action training for community groups. They have a superb website with plenty of downloadable briefings and resources. Road Block can also offer training.

In your training you should discuss the aims and objectives of the action, and how the message will be communicated clearly. You can practice likely scenarios and role-play how you could deal with difficult or confrontational situations. Even though it can feel artificial, by anticipating situations you will feel more confident having thought through your responses. Remember to organise a debriefing afterwards, so you can evaluate your success and plan ahead.

Support Roles

Sometimes it might be appropriate to have some support roles for those who do not want to take part. This could be liaising with the press or police, child minding, or handing out leaflets to passers by. These are all essential roles, and ensure the action is successful.

Legal Issues

There isn't enough room to go into the complexities of the legal issues surrounding direct action here. Direct action is not always illegal, but may often be in the 'grey area'! Sometimes, having a good relationship with the police can help. Contact a friendly local solicitor before you take action, and see if they will offer good support. Arrange for a solicitor to be ready to offer support when you take action, and make sure that everyone has their telephone number. Activists' Legal Project have a great briefing on the law surrounding direct action (contact details below), and Seeds for Change (below) also offer training on this.

Ideas for action

- Road blockades
- Disrupting meetings to make a demand
- Demonstrations at key meetings
- Information stalls outside of 'their' publicity events
- Stopping road construction work
- DIY zebra crossings and traffic calming
- Fake parking tickets for 4x4s or vehicles parked on pavements

Contacts

Road Block is an alliance against road building. We provide advice for those wishing to oppose road schemes through the planning process, and can offer training to your group if you want to take direct action. Contact us at Road Block, PO Box 164, Totnes, TQ9 5WX, or 01803 847649 or email office@roadblock.org.uk and see www.roadblock.org.uk

Seeds for Change offers free training for community groups who are considering taking direct action. Their website is at www.seedsforchange.org.uk/free or telephone 0845 458 4776 or email oxford@seedsforchange.org.uk or write to: Seeds for Change, 16b Cherwell Street, Oxford, OX4 1BG

Activists' Legal Project offers legal advice on direct action. Their website is at www.activistslegalproject.org.uk or telephone 01865 243772 or email activistslegal@gn.apc.org