

Why Nonviolent Direct Action: Shutting Things Down to Open Things Up

Inspired by NVDA organizers everywhere and specifically these: <https://organizingforpower.wordpress.com/strategy/resources/> (Lisa Fithian), Starhawk, and the Ruckus Society.

WHAT IS NVDA?

Nonviolent Direct Action is a set of strategies and tactics used to create a crisis of legitimacy for oppressive or harmful institutions and practices. By interfering physically with the oppressor, or embodying an alternative in a way that directly confronts structures of power, people using NVDA tactics raise the social costs of “business as usual” and shine a spotlight on who has the obligation to change. Whereas civil disobedience directly challenges an unjust law or norm as the point, direct action often disregards laws/norms in the course of making a point about something else.

Nonviolent Direct Action (NVDA) interferes with the operations of injustice and embodies alternative solutions to those injustices. Organized people power calls attention to and withdraws cooperation from harmful business-as-usual and unjust laws to weaken, topple and transform those systems. The confrontation awakens and appeals to the human desire to love life, freedom, and create a healthy web-of-life, beloved community, and true democracy. Examples of tried-and-true nonviolent direct action tactics include sit-ins, strikes, occupations, and blockades that model and show how a better world is possible as seen in integrated lunch counter sit ins, worker take overs of work places to create cooperative ownership, peace/free camps that block construction of dams, airports, or fossil fuel pipelines, and so many, many more. Our ends are our means and we expect to win.

People power is a method that works. Every successful social change movement in US history has had a key element of **people power** and mass nonviolent direct action: abolition, women’s suffrage, workers rights, civil rights, anti-Viet Nam war, anti-nuclear disarmament and power, Indigenous peoples’ sovereignty and rights, Central America solidarity, global justice, and other recent movements. It was in the heat of struggle by communities of color and poor and working white communities that people-power methods were developed in the US. **People power** is more than just a set of civil-disobedience and direct-action tactics. It is a different understanding of power and a wide range of organizing and strategies based on that understanding.

People are taught to obey and thus to be afraid of taking action. So many think we need to educate first before people will act. In fact it is often the other way around. Actions, done well, are full of life and power and people want more of that. Experiencing our individual and collective power can be liberating and having an embodied experience can help one fully integrate information and lessons. By taking action we learn. Actions are the containers for our tactics. Our tactics help us win and must be chosen wisely based on our goals and resources. Advance planning can make all the difference in our success.

A Successful Nonviolent Direct Action

1. Wins concrete improvements in people's lives.
2. Makes people aware of their own power (by winning victories).
3. Alters the relationship of power between people, the government, and other institutions by building strong, permanent organizations and relationships.
4. Directly stops a social, environmental or political injustice
5. Asserts or defends positive right despite consequences
6. Shows a willful refusal to cooperate or participate in an injustice
7. Sounds the alarm – alert folks to issue
8. Creates a community-based solution
9. Amplifies people's voices, build people power

Steps in a Nonviolent Direct Action Campaign

Strategic campaigns are an important part of building a movement. They focus our energy on the forces that need to be changed, and can often result in some victory (big or small) or mitigation of damage. These efforts require participation and creativity. As we build power through campaigns, we model what can happen when we work together inspiring others and igniting imaginations that feed more and more organizing. The momentum of success attracts people who in general want to be aligned with those they believe have power. When we organize campaigns we build momentum and power.

Each step continues through the duration of the campaign. For example we need to continue to research and education throughout. Each step builds/ escalates to the next while setting up your opponent to do the right thing. You need to give them opportunities to do the right thing at every stage and when they don't, you make it public; soon they begin to expose themselves. At some point it will be clear that negotiation is no longer possible and that the opponent is no longer a welcome player in our community and must be replaced.

1. **Investigate** –understand the nature and extent of problem. Gather information and evidence, know who is responsible, what do people want to do. You need a clear statement of the problem and the solution and evidence that backs up your case.
2. **Negotiate** – give the opponent a clear, fair, documented and publicized opportunity to resolve the conflict. Exhaust established channels for change
3. **Educate** – get the word out! Go door-to-door, leafleting, teach-ins, petitions etc
4. **Demonstrate** – marches, pickets, etc. Build support and increase pressure
5. **Direct Action** – sit-in's, blockades, occupations – create a crisis to force your opponent and the public to address the issues. Aim for dilemma actions where possible. Dramatize the conflict. Show your depth of commitment and test the determination of your opponent. Spark actions by other groups elsewhere to increase the heat
6. **Protracted Struggle** – move from negotiation (although keep the door open) to the creation of alternative or parallel institutions while we shut the other one down.

7. **Victory, Settlement** – while a victory might just be mitigating damage or you may not get everything you want, but victories are a necessity for long-term movement building and culture shifting.
8. **The Art of the Campaign** is engaging your opponent at every step. At the beginning we inform them of the solutions to the problems and give them the chance to do the right thing. They fix it or not. We escalate and educate and get more people involved and go back. We give them the chance to do the right thing. They fix it or not. We escalate and engage in demonstrations. We go back and give them the chance to do the right thing. They fix it or not. We escalate and engage in direct action. We go back and give them the chance to do the right thing. They fix it or not. We escalate and at some point we determine that our opponent is no longer a responsible member of our community and we seek to close them down while replacing them with another entity. In workplace situations this may be easier said than done depending on the industry.

What A Direct Action Campaign Can Do

- **Point a Spotlight:** Raise public awareness about an institution, program or injustice. Bring hidden wrongs to light. Example: Campaigns against WTO, IMF/World Bank; genetically engineered foods.
- **Delegitimize Organizations, Institutions and Programs:** Withdraw consent from the functioning of unjust bodies, laws, programs. Interfere with their operations. Raise their social costs. Examples: U.S. Civil Rights Movement, antinuclear activism, etc.
- **Build a Movement:** Provide opportunities for people to engage in action, experience solidarity and support, take greater risks, deepen commitment. Examples: almost any powerful action.
- **Educate and Inform:** Both those in the movement and those who hear of actions: Almost every good action.
- **Strengthen Voices of Reform:** It may not be our intention or goal, but when thousands of people are out in the streets, institutions are more likely to listen to 'respectable' critics within. Examples: calls for more 'transparency' within WTO and World Bank; de facto legalization of needle exchange in SF.

Mechanisms for Change by the Powers that Be

- **Conversion** – convince them to change
- **Acquiescence** – they go along because they don't want to fight
- **Accommodation** – reach a compromise
- **Coercion** – force an opponent to give up
- **Disintegration** – opponent no longer has anything to give up, incapacitated

Types of Direct Action

- Protest – registering dissent. Rallies, marches, teach-ins, pickets

- Non-cooperation – withdrawing your power. Boycott, labor strike, walkouts, tax resistance
- Intervention – directly intervening in the functioning of the system
- Creative Solutions – developing alternative community based systems / collectives
- And many, many more: here’s a link to ‘198 Methods of Nonviolent Action’ from the Albert Einstein Institute:
<https://www.aeinstein.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/198-Methods.pdf>

Points of Intervention

- Point of Production – where harmful items are created
- Point of Destruction – where resources are extracted, pollution released, natural resources destroyed
- Point of Consumption – where products reach consumers
- Point of Decision – where plans for the future are crafted
- Point of Assumption – where social norms are developed and held
- Point of Potential – when cultural or historic moments become actions opportunities

This simple chart helps explore the impact of our tactics that can be useful when assessing how to achieve our goals.

Action Type	Symbolic	Direct
Legal Protest	Vigil on Sidewalk	Phone Zap – mass call-in to clog phone lines
Civil Disobedience	Blocking 1 of 3 gates of a coal plant	Blocking all 3 gate

Nonviolent Direct Action Planning Basics

- Is it Symbolic or Direct? Public or Secret?
- Vision Counts -Details Matter
- Need Beginning, Middle and End
- Action Logic – does it make sense in people’s minds
- “Inside” or “Outside” strategy
- Strong Visuals to tell a clear message –make sure the picture tells the story – big stickers, classroom in the streets,
- Colorful, inspiring, life affirming, fun, strong, dramatic attract people and capture their imagination
- Cover basic needs – food, water, bathroom, transportation, communication/ information
- Support people at all levels – emotional, physical, mental, spiritual – before, during and after

- Using weapons of fear or violence against living things will almost always backfire if popular support is part of your strategy. There are other ways to let your opponents know that you can cost them,
- Organizing effective actions, which achieve short and long-term victories, growing movements that build culture and transform society.

Components of Empowered Nonviolent Direct Action

- **Vision:** We embody the world we want to create, we use means consistent with our ends. We engage in imaginative action. We expect to win.
- **Choices:** We do not let structures of force limit our choices. We expand the choices of our opponents.
- **Patterns:** We understand the patterns of violence and control so we can make choices about our responses. We learn how to de-escalate tension and potential conflict in order to expand our range of choices in any situation.
- **Communication:** We communicate with each other, with our potential allies and with our opposition, and develop our communication skills.
- **Energy:** We look at situations energetically and learn skills for shifting and directing energy.
- **Inclusiveness:** We focus on expanding our movement and increasing opportunities for people of diverse needs and awareness to take part. We resolve our internal conflicts through discussion and negotiation.
- **Respect and celebrate diversity and solidarity:** We respect our own differences, needs, cultures, life circumstances, politics and views as well as differences of gender, race, sexual orientation, age, physical challenges, etc.

Empowerment: Empowered direct action aims to transform the structures of domination and control, and to radically change the way power is conceived of and operates. Empowerment is our ability to create, to make choices, to have a voice in decisions that affect us. When we act together in an empowered way, we develop collective power. Through personal and collective empowerment, we can fight against, dismantle and transform the systems of domination that perpetuate oppression.

Interconnectedness: Empowered direct action sees that all of life is interconnected, and that empowerment arises from our connections to the web of life. Every act we take affects the whole. All systems of oppression are also interconnected. We might choose to focus on one issue at a given time, but we must ultimately dismantle the whole system of domination.

Radical Imagination: Empowered direct action envisions and prefigures the world we want to create. We use means consistent with our ends. We expect to win, and our strategies, tactics, and organizations are designed to be the foundation of our new social structure. We value creativity, bringing art, music, dance, drums, magic, ritual, masks, puppets, drama and song into action. We refuse to be boring, tedious, dreary or doctrinaire. **Solidarity:** We know that the structures of domination cannot be undermined without risk. Through solidarity, we share the price of our resistance and attempt to

mediate the violence of the systems of oppression. While we may incur suffering as a result of our actions, we don't embrace suffering for its own sake. Our goal is to alleviate suffering, and our solidarity extends to all who suffer under political and economic repression.

Choice: Empowered direct action understands that every situation offers choices to be made. We do not let structures of force limit our choices, nor do we let fear control us. We learn to stay centered in the midst of chaos, and retain our ability to make conscious choices in any situation. We pose new choices and craft dilemmas for our opponents. We learn how to de-escalate tension and potential conflict in order to expand our options in any situation. We fight against institutions, structures, and acts of domination, but we hold open the possibility that the individuals caught in those systems can change. We craft our strategies and tactics to make change easier for our opponents.

Inclusiveness and diversity: Empowered direct action values and celebrates diversity, and seeks to expand our movement and increase opportunities for people of diverse backgrounds, needs and life situations to take part. We respect our own differences, needs, cultures, life circumstances, politics and views as well as differences of gender, race, class sexual orientation, age, physical challenges, and others. The patterns of oppression also exist within us and within our movement, and we are willing to transform ourselves as well as the structures we oppose.

Direct democracy and horizontal organizing: Empowered direct action creates ways of organizing and acting that allow all people involved to have a voice in decisions that affect them. We create the minimum structures necessary for our actions and organizations. Decisions are made from the bottom up, not from the top down. We encourage everyone to take leadership in the sense of stepping forth and proposing directions for the group: but we allow no one to direct or control the group.

Dialogue: Empowered people will not all think alike. Our movement contains great diversity of ideas, visions, strategies, and principles. We honor these tensions, and engage in ongoing discussion and dialogue to further our collective growth. We recognize that decisions made without adequate discussion will not hold.

Freedom and Passion: Empowered direct action values passion, emotion, freedom, spontaneity, and surprise. We honor rage as a sane response to oppression and a potential creative power. We are willing to love deeply and fearlessly, and we fight not just against what we hate, but for what we love.