

Direct Action Gets The Goods – But How?

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Elsewhere in this magazine (see ‘Anarchism, Elections and all that’), the anarchist case against participation in elections is outlined. The alternative political strategy put forward by anarchists is the use of direct action. This article sets out to examine what is meant by the concept of direct action and also to argue that it is impossible to combine electoralism and direct action, that by its nature electoralism is disempowering, and that real direct action and participation in elections are mutually exclusive. Politics in Ireland and elsewhere is dominated by clientelism. People see themselves as needing politicians to “do stuff” for them. The politicians who are most successful are those who play the clientelist game most effectively. And left wing or socialist parties and candidates who decide to play the electoral game find themselves drawn into this clientelist game as well. This has huge implications in terms of how they approach campaigning work.

Many left-wing activists will argue that it is possible to combine campaigning and participation in elections. The reality however is different. Because of the way in which the electoral system works, the person who is going to be the election candidate has to be the ‘face’ of the campaign, has to be the main spokesperson, has to be seen to be the driving force of the campaign. Thus campaigns can often become the opposite of encouraging mass participation, campaigners are treated as ‘followers’ or ‘supporters’ of the election candidate not as equal participants.

Thus the very participation in electoral politics re-enforces the concept of clientelism, and endorses – whether deliberately or not – a political system based on rulers and ruled, leaders and led. Anarchism is about building a different type of political system – one that rejects that notion and that attempts to build a society based on power from below – one whereby people take responsibility for their own decisions and for their own actions. One of the principal tactics for getting to such a society is through the use of direct action – whereby people are encouraged to take responsibility for and ownership of their own struggles and to reject the concept that ‘someone else’ will sort out our problems for us.

Definition

According to the Wikipedia definition ‘Direct action is a form of political activism which seeks immediate remedy for perceived ills, as opposed to indirect actions such as electing representatives who promise to provide remedy at some later date.’

An Anarchist FAQ (see www.diy-punk.org) states ‘Basically, direct action means that instead of getting someone else to act for you (e.g. a politician) you act for yourself. Its essential feature is an organised protest by ordinary people to make a change by their own efforts.’

Anarchists have always been proponents of direct action as a political tactic. Not only is direct action most often the most effective tactic to use in a political struggle but also – and just as importantly – direct action is about empowering people, it’s about breaking from dependency on others to run our lives. Rather than pleading with our bosses or electing ‘better’ politicians to make decisions for us, it means ordinary people coming together to win change through our own efforts.

But, as well as seeing it as an effective tactic in the here and now, anarchists see direct action as a preparation for the type of new society we are trying to build. Central to anarchist belief is that the means leads to the ends. If we are to create a free society built on real grassroots democracy from the bottom up, a lot of people will have to be involved. Huge numbers of people will have

to believe that together they themselves are capable of overthrowing the present system and building, developing and defending a different type of society.

Through engaging in direct action we all can learn, through direct involvement, that there is no need to leave things to ‘experts’ or professional politicians. We can discover how to organise our own campaigns, how to devise strategies, how to build links with others, how to develop feelings of mutual interest and solidarity, we learn that there is strength in numbers, that by linking up with others who are concerned about the same issue we make ourselves so much stronger. After all, there is no point in refusing to pay the bin tax if you don’t try to convince your neighbour to oppose it as well, there’s no point in getting your neighbour to boycott it if people in all the other areas are unaware of the campaign and continue paying.

Direct action – whether that’s a work-to-rule or strike in the workplace or a campaign which involves the non-payment of the bin tax – leads to the development of ideas of solidarity and mutual aid. This in turn leads to the development of political self-confidence among those directly involved. If we want to develop that new free society, that level of self-confidence is a prerequisite.

Nothing mysterious

But what exactly is ‘direct action’? The answer to this is that while there’s nothing mysterious about what constitutes direct action, it can take many forms. In the workplace, it’s everything from work-to-rule to strike action. In the community or in campaigns it’s everything from refusing to pay bin charges to taking a hammer to the nose of a plane in Shannon to blockading the Shell terminal in Mayo. The common characteristic is that it involves people doing something for themselves, and not relying on someone else – be that a politician, a trade union official or a community ‘leader’ to act on their behalf.

The growth of libertarian and anarchist politics in Ireland and elsewhere in recent years has seen ‘direct action’ as a political tactic gain currency and popularity. Some of the most prominent examples of direct action on the Irish political landscape in recent years have been the decommissioning of U.S. troop-carrying planes at Shannon airport and the community resistance to the installation of a high pressure gas pipeline in the Erris area of Co. Mayo. The words ‘direct action’ and ‘Non Violent Direct Action’ have entered the political lexicon of practically all political activists.

These two particular examples provide us with an interesting comparison. The first – the attacks on planes in Shannon carried out by the Pitstop Ploughshares 5 (see www.peaceontrial.com) and by Mary Kelly – involved small group or individual action. The second – the protests against Shell’s pipeline in Mayo (see www.corribsos.com) – involve attempts to include as many people as possible in collective action. Small group and individual direct actions are in themselves effective means of protest, they give hope, they show us that resistance is possible and effective. On the negative side, however, they leave the majority in the role of spectators and supporters.

It is the involvement of large numbers of people in direct action protests which is the type of action that we most favour. This involvement helps to break down the distinctions between ‘activists’ and the ordinary person. It encourages everyone to become centrally involved in taking action him/herself rather than relying on someone else. Such participation is of itself empowering. Certainly participation in a successful mass direct action shows somebody quite vividly their

own power and the collective strength of people banding together to demand their rights. But, even if unsuccessful, such participation has nevertheless taught the participants a huge amount about collectivity and strength. The knowledge of skills and tactics and the confidence gained will ensure that in future cases people will look to that same collective strength instead of relying on the clientelist approach to politics.

Mass direct action

On 1st March 2003, the Grassroots Network Against War controversially organised what it billed a mass direct action at Shannon airport. The call-out for the protest stated “We will attempt to engage in a mass trespass at Shannon airport. This action will be an example of mass non-violent civil disobedience in the tradition of Gandhi’s salt march. It will be a purely peaceful protest. We intend to signal our opposition to US warplanes refueling at Shannon airport and to indicate that we refuse to sit back while our government, acting in our names, gives material assistance to a war that will be both brutal and unjust.” (see [struggle.ws](#))

While it was to be expected that the media and mainstream politicians would react with near hysteria to the announced plans, what was not so expected was that most of the left and the Irish Anti War Movement were almost more hysterical and negative in their reaction. This resulted in an intense debate among activists as to whether the plans should have been announced publicly. Some argued that by making such a public call for the protest we played into the hands of our opponents allowing them to create a hype about ‘violent protest’. The counter argument was put succinctly in a subsequent issue of *Workers Solidarity* “In the afterglow of February 15th it was reasonable to assume that a couple of thousand would show up at Shannon. The reason for publicising it was to encourage the maximum number of participants in the direct action itself. The plan to tear the fence down was dependent largely on numbers. The fact that the numbers didn’t materialise was disappointing, and all the publicity, far more than expected, probably served to scare away people rather than attract them.

If people don’t know about an event then they we can’t expect them to participate. Open publication of the plan allows people to make an informed decision about the extent of their involvement. It minimises the chances of them being drawn into events they are uncomfortable with.” ([www.struggle.ws](#))

Mass involvement in direct action builds a feeling of strength and solidarity which cannot be achieved by small group or individual action. All most of us can do in the situation of someone or a small group who carries out an individual act of sabotage or direct protest is to offer support and solidarity to that person or group. It leaves us in the position of being cheerleaders/supporters for the actions of others rather than opening up the possibility of our own direct involvement.

And if we want to get maximum involvement from as many people as possible, it is self-evident that this cannot be organised in a clandestine or secret manner. It is interesting indeed that 3 years and a half later when the Shell to Sea campaign organised days of action in Mayo with the explicitly stated aim of stopping work on the Shell terminal at Bellinaboy, this debate didn’t even happen. It was just taken for granted that calls for mass participative direct action was the way to go. As this article is being written, controversy rages about the fact that the local campaign has stepped back from these mass participation direct action protests in the face of extreme police brutality. But there is no debate about the fact that the campaign tactic of mass

participative direct action has been strengthening and empowering. Compared to the serious controversy engendered by the proposal of such a tactic in Shannon in March 2003, it seems that political debate has moved considerably and that 'direct action' as a tactic has moved closer to centre-stage.

Strike action

One of the other controversies at the time of the proposed Shannon action in March '03 was the contention that the action would make the organisation of strike action by the workers at Shannon more difficult to organise. This was and remains an important argument. After all there's probably no argument with the fact that the single most effective form of direct action protest is workers – through their unions – refusing to re-fuel planes in Shannon or refusing to build Shell's terminal. Or, in the case of another anti-war action in Ireland – refusing to co-operate with Raytheon's pro-war work in Derry.

Across Europe there have at various times been such actions. But in Ireland we have never got past ritualistic calls for strike action. The challenge that faces us is to turn the tide of public opinion to one supportive of such action. If we are asking workers in Shannon, for example, to refuse to handle planes carrying US troops we are asking them to put their jobs and their livelihoods on the line. How can we create a public climate which will rally round and support such workers? How can we even create the climate where their unions – who despite their stated position of opposition to the war – will support them in such an action?

One thing is certain. Direct actions such as the March '03 attempt to pull down the fence at Shannon or the August '06 occupation of the Raytheon plant cannot harm attempts to organise workers' action. As the Workers Solidarity article referred to above (from WS 75) put it: "Aren't workers' strikes are the best form of direct action?"

True again, and while we should do our bit to encourage and support them there's no reason to wait for them to do it. They mightn't be agreeable to the anti-war case or they mightn't have the confidence to risk going on strike. If we're going to call for them to take a risk we should at least be prepared to take a few ourselves. Workers' strikes and breaching security are not mutually exclusive tactics."

This is the challenge in the context of anti-war activity and in the Shell context in Mayo. Can we continue to (or in Shannon's case re-start) build direct action protests with mass participation, and at the same time work through our unions and community organisations to create the political climate in which workers will feel able to take the most effective form of direct action – strike action.

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