

# TACTIC HUNGER STRIKE

The deliberate and public refusal of food, and sometimes water, as a moral protest against injustice or abuse of power. A single individual can hold a hunger strike, or hundreds together in solidarity.

## CONTRIBUTED BY

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**“A HUNGER STRIKE IS A POWERFUL MORAL AND INDIVIDUAL ACT, BUT IT IS ALSO A TACTIC THAT IS MEANT TO ADVANCE A CAUSE.”**

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“A hunger strike . . . means you refuse food until you are at death's door, and then the authorities have to choose between letting you die, and letting you go.”

—Emmeline Pankhurst

The hunger strike is a classic nonviolent pressure tactic used for centuries by activists from all corners of the world. In fact, it's so central to the direct action toolbox that it is the only tactic among Gene Sharp's 198 methods of nonviolent action to be broken down into sub-tactics. The gist of it is pretty simple, though: Stop eating.

All people must eat. By refusing to do so until an injustice is corrected you can often exert enough pressure to force a powerful target to concede to your demands.

Used strategically, a hunger strike can not only draw attention to a situation of injustice or violated rights, but also elevate the cause and credibility of those who have chosen to take such a strong and personally risky action, giving hunger strikers more leverage at the negotiating table.

100 years ago, suffragettes in the UK and the US used hunger strikes (often prolonged and from jail) as a pressure tactic in the fight to win women the right to vote. Both governments responded with gruesome force-feeding of prisoners.

For Gandhi, fasting was both a political pressure tactic and a spiritual part of his satyagraha philosophy of nonviolence. He fasted 17 times during the struggle for Indian independence and again

## POTENTIAL RISKS

A hunger strike can be an excellent tactic for reversing an apparent power disadvantage, especially from within a prison, where it can be used as a last resort after exhausting other tactics such as refusing to leave your cell, refusing to dress, etc. But, with life in prison already posing numerous health and other challenges, it comes with great risks.

Death, sickness, and force-feeding, to name three. The physical risks are very real, and prolonged dehydration can cause important organs to fail. But the political risks are real, too, because in spite of risking your life, you might still fail to meet your goals.

Yes, a hunger strike is a powerful moral and individual act, but it is also a tactic that is meant to advance a cause. So, it is critical

against the communal violence after Partition. During his longest strike (21 days), the British, worried at the sympathy that might be generated, prohibited any photographs of him to circulate.

In 1981, during a prolonged hunger strike for better conditions and political recognition, 10 imprisoned members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) died, including strike leader Bobby Sands (after 66 days) who was elected MP from prison during the strike. The strike radicalised Irish nationalist politics, elevating Sinn Féin into a mainstream political party.

In 2011, a much-publicized series of hunger strikes outside the administrative headquarters of the Indian Government (some by tax officials turned activists) led to the passage of major anti-corruption measures, and swept the newly-founded Common Man party into power in New Delhi's municipal elections.

In 2016, 17 Angolan political prisoners, including Luaty Beirão (known also by his musician persona Ikonoklasta) protested their detention with a hunger strike of 36 days — one day for every year the then dictator-President Jose Eduardo dos Santos had been in power. The protest (which came to be known as the Angola 15+2 won international visibility and the regime was pressured to release the prisoners. Weakened by this capitulation, and with popular and international opinion polarized against him, dos Santos stepped down the following year.

Sometimes hunger strikes are undertaken by people on the frontline of an injustice (say the 30,000 California prisoners who engaged in a mass hunger strike against solitary confinement in 2013); sometimes by their allies (as with the hunger strikes by prominent religious leaders in solidarity with Florida farmworkers engaged in the Taco Bell Boycott.

A hunger strike works best when it is part of a thoughtful (and strategic) mix of other tactics, such as solidarity fasts and vigils. In some situations, mass mobilization is required to force a ferocious opponent to budge, as in 2012 when The Palestinian Political Prisoners' Movement organized 1800 inmates dispersed across several Israeli prisons to go on a coordinated hunger strike.

Before deciding on a hunger strike, you need to ask basic questions such as: Are you acting alone or as a group? Who are you trying to influence and will this tactic be effective on them? And, also, what is your Plan B?

It's critical to publicize the strike, and especially to escalate pressure (see: PRINCIPLE: Escalate strategically) as the stakes rise and public attention grows. In the 1981 IRA hunger strikes, Bobby Sands began first, but other strikers joined one at a time and at staggered intervals to generate maximum pressure and public support.

In addition to such tactical considerations, you must always ask:

to think things through strategically. No matter how brave and well-intentioned you are, if you're not thinking like a movement, you may be making a costly political error. Ask yourself: Are you making a demand that is important to your people? Are you choosing a tactic that strategically corresponds to that demand? You don't want to find yourself in the awkward position of having gone through all the risk and drama of a hunger strike, only to not get any traction, and have to give up with nothing to show for it.

## **RELATED TOOLS**

### **Stories**

- Angola 15+2
- Taco Bell Boycott

### **Tactics**

- Artistic vigil
- Distributed action
- General strike
- Jail solidarity

### **Principles**

- Activate international mechanisms
- Anger works best when you have the moral high ground
- Choose tactics that support your strategy
- Define "hardcore" strategically
- Escalate strategically
- Lead with sympathetic characters
- Maintain nonviolent discipline
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Seek safety in support networks
- Take risks, but take care

### **Theories**

- Action logic

What are *you* prepared to risk and how far are *you* prepared to go? As Ms. Pankhurst said more than 100 years ago: “Only people who feel an intolerable sense of oppression” should adopt such an extreme tactic.

## LEARN MORE

How an underground hip hop artist and his book club threatened the

Phil Wilmot, *Waging Nonviolence*, 2016

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/how-an-underground-hip-hop-artist-and-his-book-club-threaten-angolas-regime/>

Rules for (hunger-striking) radicals

Nadine Bloch, *Waging Nonviolence*, 2013

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/2013/09/rules-hunger-striking-radicals/>

Samer Issawi, *Hunger Strikes, and the Palestinian Struggle*

*Foreign Policy Journal*, 2014

<https://www.foreignpolicyjournal.com/2014/01/01/samer-issawi-hunger-strikes-and-the-palestinian-struggle/>

- Al faza'a (a surge of solidarity)
- Decolonization
- Expressive and instrumental actions

## Methodologies

- Action star
- Battle of the story
- Peel the onion
- Pillars of power

## TAGS

Campaign strategy, Nonviolence