

TACTIC MASS STREET ACTION

A large public protest that shows the scale of people power behind a cause.

CONTRIBUTED BY

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“WHEN THOUSANDS OF FOLKS COLLABORATE IN A MASS STREET ACTION, THAT’S WHEN MAGIC AND MOVEMENTS HAPPEN.”

Everyone has felt the irresistible people-power of a large march or rally. When a crowd is fired up by great musicians or fiery speakers it can rock. There is real strength in numbers. Most of us have also been inspired by a great nonviolent direct action. When individuals or small teams decide to creatively throw themselves upon the gears of the machine, it can detonate powerful mind bombs in our psyches.

But when you bring the two together, and thousands of folks from all walks of life collaborate in a mass street action, that’s when magic and movements happen. Movements do mass actions. And you need a highly functioning and energized movement in order to repeatedly pull off smart mass actions in an escalating struggle for change.

In the spring of 2011, a million Egyptians took to the streets, occupied Tahrir Square, fought off wave after wave of security forces, and after eighteen eventful and often bloody days, forced President Hosni Mubarak from office. In 1999, 70,000 people took to the streets of Seattle and nonviolently shut down the World Trade Organization ministerial meeting, the world’s largest business meeting (see: STORY: Battle in Seattle). In 2010, 3,000 trade unionists and their allies formed a “Citizens’ Posse” and encircled a downtown Washington D.C. hotel full of insurance industry lobbyists for a day in a show of force during the closing weeks of America’s

POTENTIAL RISKS

At their best, mass street actions make for beautifully organized chaos. But provocateurs (theirs or ours) can easily tip the fragile balance toward a nightmarish battle between cops and protesters. Unless this is your agreed-upon goal, you have to have strong agreements, principles, and preparation to ensure the safety of those who have heeded your call to action.

RELATED TOOLS

Stories

- 99% Bat Signal
- Angola 15+2
- Battle in Seattle
- Battle of the Camel
- Billionaires for Bush
- Brazil’s Free Fare Movement
- Bring Back Our Girls

epic health care reform fight.

In spite of the differences here in scale, duration, political importance, targets, and tactics, all three of these mass street actions succeeded in their goals because they all shared a few key ingredients:

- they disrupted business as usual;
- they had a clear motive and story;
- they used disciplined nonviolence and focused militancy; and
- they offered an easy way for individuals to participate.

A mass street action can't really be choreographed, because it's too big to direct by shouting through a megaphone — instead, it needs to be largely self-organizing. To work, though, it needs a shared framework, mode of action, or rough script to both facilitate self-organizing and maintain the coherence of the overall action (see: PRINCIPLE: Simple rules can have grand results).

Tahrir didn't need a script. All it needed was a call to congregate in public spaces.

The movement that shut down the WTO was built around a loose coalition, held together by a horizontally democratic spokescouncil. It agreed on a broad messaging frame and laid down some tactical ground rules (e.g. an agreement on nonviolence, specific responsibilities for each cluster of affinity groups, etc.). It was not choreographed, it was chaotic; decentralized but connected.

The Citizens' Posse action was tightly scripted. Coalition partners designed and agreed on the action frame up front. It needed a tighter script because the action relied more on theatre and story than on an actual shutdown of the target. Even though it was primarily a communicative action, it felt like a concrete one because the theatre itself was militant, and participants were given a powerful role to play in it (see: PRINCIPLE: Don't expect a concrete outcome from a symbolic action).

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LEARN MORE

The Square

Directed by Jehane Noujaim. Noujaim Films., 2013

<http://thesquarefilm.com/about>

This Is What Democracy Looks Like

Directed by Jill Friedberg and Rick Rowley. Big Noise Films., 2000

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0265871/>

- Citizens' Posse
- Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army
- Countering Homophobic Policing
- Earth First!
- Fees Must Fall
- #GambiaHasDecided
- Justice for Janitors
- Kisangani Demands Electric Power
- Manich Msamah
- Miniskirt March
- Nuit Debout
- Occupy Wall Street
- Orange Alternative
- Pyramid of Shoes
- Québec Student Strike
- Reclaim the Streets
- Schools of Struggle
- Stolen Gas Campaign
- Stop Praver Plan
- Street Graduation
- Streets Into Gardens
- Taco Bell Boycott
- The Salt March
- The Teddy Bear Catapult
- #ThisFlag
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation
- "You'll never have a home in your f***ing life!"
- #YouStink

Tactics

- Blockade
- Cacerolazo (noise-making protest)
- Civil disobedience
- Flash mob
- General strike
- Guerrilla projection
- Inflatables
- Jail solidarity
- Lamentation
- Nonviolent search and seizure
- Occupation

Principles

- Build people power, then negotiate
- Consensus is a means, not an

end

- Define "hardcore" strategically
- Don't dress like a protester
- Don't expect a concrete outcome from a symbolic action
- Enable, don't command
- Escalate strategically
- Maintain nonviolent discipline
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Show, don't tell
- Simple rules can have grand results
- This ain't the Sistine chapel
- Use organizing strategies that scale
- Would you like some structure with your momentum?

Theories

- Action logic
- Al faza'a (a surge of solidarity)
- Baltajiah (thugs)
- Decolonization
- Direct action
- Hamoq and hamas
- Neoliberalism
- New Pan-Afrikanism
- Participatory democracy
- People's "Shock Doctrine"
- Poverty
- Revolutionary nonviolence
- Revolutionary reform
- Strategic nonviolence
- The Global South
- The shock doctrine
- The social cure

Methodologies

- Baraza
- Pillars of power
- Points of intervention
- SMART objectives
- Spectrum of allies

TAGS

Action design, Democracy, Dictatorship, Direct action, Movement building, Nonviolence, State violence,

