

TACTIC

NONVIOLENT SEARCH AND SEIZURE

A direct action tactic that involves showing up with a “citizens’ search warrant” and attempting, nonviolently, to liberate important documents that are being kept from the public.

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Daniel Hunter is a trainer and organizer with Training for Change, which practices a direct education style rooted in popular education, helping each person find their own wisdom and strategic brilliance. He has trained thousands of activists including ethnic minorities in Burma/Myanmar, pastors in Sierra Leone, independence activists in northeast India, environmentalists in Australia, and Indonesian religious leaders.

“THE TACTIC RESTS ON THE IDEA THAT ANY INFORMATION THAT IMPACTS THE PUBLIC BUT IS BEING HIDDEN FROM THEM SHOULD BE LIBERATED.”

The tactic of nonviolent search and seizure rests on the idea that any information that impacts the public but is being hidden from them should be liberated. It involves taking matters into our own hands by showing up with a “citizens’ search warrant” and attempting, nonviolently, to liberate the documents in question. Even though the tactic is unlikely to succeed directly, the ensuing controversy (and possible arrests) can nonetheless bring the secret documents to the public’s attention. In several high-profile cases, the successful application of the tactic has created enough outcry that the target has been forced to make the documents public.

The tactic originated in 2001, when Philippe Duhamel, a trainer and organizer based in Montréal, Canada, thought back to Gandhi’s strategy of nonviolent raids on colonial salt deposits (see: STORY: The Salt March). Duhamel was working with a campaign to expose the secretive Free Trade Area of Americas (FTAA) trade agreement being negotiated. Even senators and members of parliament could not see the negotiating texts — only key CEOs and the leaders of participating nations. Decrying the anti-democratic nature of the negotiations, Duhamel decided to reinvent Gandhi’s open, transparent raids.

Weeks ahead of the Québec City summit, the campaign announced it would attempt to “liberate” the texts for public scrutiny. On the

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Principles

- Anger works best when you have the moral high ground
- Maintain nonviolent discipline
- Play to the audience that isn’t there
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Take risks, but take care

Theories

day of the action, wave after wave of participants approached the police barricades erected (for their benefit) around the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Each wave read aloud a citizens' search warrant: "Hello, my name is _____. Access to information is basic to democracy. Without that information we cannot have a meaningful public debate. We ask the police to do their job and help us search for the texts. Please let me through."

The first wave went over and was promptly arrested. Over several hours, eighty people — some dressed as Robin Hood — climbed over the fence and attempted to liberate the documents. Their action was their message (see: THEORY: Action logic).

As the public saw the lengths the government and corporations were going to hide the texts, public outrage mounted until eventually the Canadian government broke down and released the texts. Exposed to public scrutiny as the corporate coup d'état it was, the FTAA never moved forward.

Nonviolent search and seizure has since been used successfully by other groups and campaigns, including the Canadian Union of Postal Workers and Casino-Free Philadelphia, the latter of which won the release of 95% of the documents they had sought to liberate with only 14 arrests, showing the tactic can be effective on a small scale.

Originally published in Beautiful Trouble.

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New Tactics in Human Rights

<https://www.newtactics.org/tactic/using-citizen-search-and-seizure-operation-pressure-gov%2ADernment-release-public-documents>

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Daniel Hunter, Waging Nonviolence, 2014

<https://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/fbi-files-free-trade-negotiating-texts-liberate-secret-documents/>

- Action logic
- Direct action
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TAGS

Action design, Campaign strategy, Corruption, Democracy, Direct action, Nonviolence