

# TACTIC OCCUPATION

Physically occupying contested space to create community and disrupt the functioning of power. Examples include: sit-ins, factory occupations, housing squats, occupations of public squares or at-risk land.

## CONTRIBUTED BY

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## “OCCUPATIONS ARE A POPULAR TACTIC EMPLOYED BY SOCIAL MOVEMENTS TO HOLD AND DEFEND SPACE.”

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“Lost a job, found an occupation.”  
—Occupy Wall Street

The first recorded labor strike was a form of occupation: Over 3,000 years ago, ancient Egyptian tomb builders from the desert village of Deir el-Medina repeatedly occupied temples following the failure of Pharaoh Ramses III to provide adequate provisions. We see other examples of public occupations that have propelled history forward ever since.

In seventeenth-century England, for instance, the Diggers formed a utopian agrarian community on common land. Workers, soldiers and citizens established the Paris Commune in 1871. In the United States, in the Great Upheaval of 1877, striking railway workers and their supporters occupied train yards across the land. A wave of plant occupations in the mid-1930s led to the justly famous Flint sit-down strikes of 1936, which won union recognition for hundreds of thousands of auto workers.

Occupations are a popular tactic employed by social movements to hold and defend space. Other direct action tactics may also be deployed to support the occupation such as sit-ins, blockades, or banner hangs; or in some circumstances full-blown occupations have been known to grow out of a smaller tactic, such as a sit-in.

While the term can refer to an oppressor who has invaded or annexed land from a population (“occupied North America/Turtle Island” or “occupied Palestine”), the tactic of occupation is often

### POTENTIAL RISKS

Occupations are difficult to sustain indefinitely. Make sure you have a plan — including an exit plan.

### RELATED TOOLS

#### Stories

- Battle of the Camel
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- Bring Back Our Girls
- Daycare Centre Sit-In
- Earth First!
- Fees Must Fall
- Gezi Park iftar
- Nuit Debout
- Occupy Wall Street
- PARK(ing) Day
- Sign Language Sit-in
- Trail of Dreams
- Welcome to Palestine
- Wisconsin Capitol Occupation
- #YouStink
- Zapatista Caravan

used by those same groups to assert their right to that land: For example, the occupation of Alcatraz Island in 1969 by Indians of All Tribes, or when the Mendota Mdewakanton Dakota community, American Indian Movement, and Earth First! held a sixteen-month occupation to defend Minnehaha State Park from highway construction slated to desecrate sacred land.

The action logic of many of these occupations is that people are reclaiming space that they are entitled to, thereby highlighting a greater theft. This same action logic can be applied to students taking over a building that should be serving them (for instance, in the late 1960s when African-American students occupied university buildings across the US, leading to the creation of many African American/Ethnic Studies departments), or environmentalists defending land that should be held in common, or workers occupying the factory in which they labour.

While occupations can range in style and form, they generally have two key components: 1) a focus on the logistics of maintaining an encampment, semi-permanent rally, or sit-in, which requires meeting needs around food, shelter, defense from police raids, etc., and which can often be a profoundly politicizing experience in its own right, and 2) a public pressure campaign that seeks to put your target in a decision dilemma.

The location chosen for an occupation site often determines its success. A number of considerations may factor into the decision, such as symbolic significance, ability to concretely disrupt a target (see: PRINCIPLE: Don't expect a concrete outcome from a symbolic action), a logistical ability to maintain the occupation, as well as public visibility and technicalities of legal ownership. Historically, occupations have lent themselves to spontaneity, but the enduring ones tend to be well planned.

Groups like the Landless Workers Movement (MST) and La Via Campesina support communities of peasants in occupying fallow private land and reclaiming it for common use or basic subsistence. In the US, groups like Take Back the Land apply this same principle to foreclosures, defending housing as a human right (see: TACTIC: Eviction blockade). In the environmental movement, tree-sits are a common example of occupations being used to defend forests from logging. Squatters movements across Europe have "taken back" abandoned buildings and repurposed them as homes and social centers with the intention of flying under the radar of authorities until they can lay legal claim to the space.

Occupations inherently threaten the legitimacy of a target by demonstrating the power-holder's inability to enforce the status quo. They also serve to expose the arbitrary, and often unjust, nature of private property regimes (see: THEORY: The commons).

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## **Tactics**

- Blockade
- Cacerolazo (noise-making protest)
- Eviction blockade
- General strike
- Gherao (encirclement)
- Mass street action

## **Principles**

- Build people power, then negotiate
- Choose tactics that support your strategy
- Choose your target wisely
- Define "hardcore" strategically
- Don't expect a concrete outcome from a symbolic action
- Escalate strategically
- Kill them with kindness
- Maintain nonviolent discipline
- Play to the audience that isn't there
- Put your target in a decision dilemma
- Simple rules can have grand results
- Take risks, but take care
- The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself
- Training for the win
- Use the law, don't be afraid of it
- Would you like some structure with your momentum?

## **Theories**

- Action logic
- Al faza'a (a surge of solidarity)
- Baltajiah (thugs)
- Comunalidad (communality)
- Direct action
- Expressive and instrumental actions
- Floating signifier
- Hamoq and hamas
- Neoliberalism
- Palace coup
- Revolutionary nonviolence
- Strategic nonviolence

## **LEARN MORE**

Brazil's Landless Workers Movement  
Friends of the MST  
<http://www.mstbrazil.org>

Take Back the Land  
<http://takebacktheland.org>

Occupy Homes  
Wikipedia  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy\\_Homes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Homes)

- Temporary autonomous zone
- The commons
- The Global South

## **Methodologies**

- Baraza
- Pillars of power
- Theory of change

## **TAGS**

Action design, Campaign strategy, Direct action, Democracy, Dictatorship, Land use