

Discussion points re: social strikes

These notes apply to strikes where 1) most potential participants are not organized into unions or other formal labor organizations; 2) the principal goal is to affect not just the immediate employer but the regime or social structure; and 3) those in authority do not accept such actions as legitimate. We will call them “social strikes.”

1. Organization

Where labor organizations are few, weak, or controlled by employers and/or the regime, workers have to be able to organize quickly on a large scale. This has happened many times historically from Poland to Brazil to South Africa to the Philippines, but it requires a flexible organizational form that people can create for themselves overnight and that can continually bring in new leaders and participants.

These organizations typically take one of two forms. Some are “workers councils” in which those who work together meet, define themselves as a group, and elect representatives. The strengths of this approach are that all who work together are included and representatives have the legitimacy that goes with being elected. The weakness is that agreement may be impossible to reach where those who work side-by-side are radically divided in their views.

The alternative is “affinity groups” in which small groups of individuals (typically 5-10) who trust each other and share views meet and define themselves a group, then send representatives to a coordinating group (“spokescouncil”) that coordinates their action. This form lacks the legitimacy of a workers council, but allows people to organize and take initiative in situations where majority support has not yet emerged. It also allows groups to take visible public actions and then fade back into invisibility to avoid repression.

In many situations it makes sense to call for the formation of workers councils and organize them where possible, but to form affinity groups where it isn't.

2. Sources of power

Social strikes express several different kinds of power. 1) They cause a problem for the owners and managers of the businesses and institutions that are shut down. 2) They appeal to and mobilize a wide public by embodying its values and interests in opposition to the status quo. 3) They demonstrate to the authorities the potential withdrawal of consent to which it is vulnerable.

These may interfere with each other to some degree. For example, disorderly actions may frighten the authorities but at the same time also frighten a large part of the population. Much of the art of social strikes lies in appealing to a wide public while at the same time effectively confronting employers and the authorities.

3. Defining goals

Several criteria must be coordinated in defining the goals of action.

Demands need to represent broad objectives that appeal to a broad public.

Demands need to unify different sectors (e.g. private employees, government employees, women, educated middle class, rural poor, urban poor, etc.)

Demands need to embody broadly accepted norms. These may be norms broadly held in the society, such as support for democracy. They may be international norms, like the human and labor rights norms incorporated in the program of Polish Solidarity. They may even be norms embodied in the existing constitution, but denied in practice by the authorities.

It is generally possible in a social strike to combine such broad social goals with specific demands by more local groups that can be met by immediate employers – shorter hours, wage increases, change in work rules, etc.

Broad goals that cannot be realized immediately can be combined with more immediate goals that the authorities can grant without completely undermining their own authority. For example, they can refuse to grant general freedom of speech, assembly, and press, but can agree to let political prisoners out of jail and restrain vigilante groups.

Social strikes and the movements of which they are part need for a process for establishing and modifying goals. Some kind of on-going participatory forums – more or less open depending on the level of repression – need to be part of this process.

4. Communication

In a context of repression, multiple forms of communication within a movement are essential. Internet and other “Web 2” social networking tools have proved themselves crucial in recent social strikes, but they need to be supplemented by a wide range of phone trees, personal networks, word-of-mouth communication, etc.

Communication needs to perform two functions, each of which has its own requirements. Communication must allow for rapid formation of opinion and consensus. And it must make possible rapid coordination of action.

5. Dealing with repression

Faced with the possibility or reality of a social strike, the authorities normally turn to repression, ranging from harassment to arrest to torture to assassination. Often the most effective way to deal with repression is to render it counterproductive for the authorities by means of a “political

jujitsu” in which each act of repression further undermines the support and legitimacy of those responsible for it. This generally requires a form of disciplined nonviolence in which the protestors present themselves to the public as the upholders of peace, order, and legitimate law and the authorities as out-of-control hooligans attempting to maintain their own power through illegitimate violence.

This does not require a commitment to nonviolence as a universal principle, but it does require a commitment on the part of participants not to turn to violence no matter what the provocation. This can often best be accomplished by a formal agreement by participants to act nonviolently during the strikes and other protest actions.

In the context of the strikers’ commitment to nonviolence, every act of repression and violence by the authorities can be highlighted as illegitimate hooliganism and even members of the public who do not fully support the goals of the movement can be mobilized around opposition to its illegitimate repression.

6. Tactics

Social strikes can take a lot of different forms. They can be centered in basic industries or in urban commercial activities or both. They can be one large general strike or “rolling” strikes in which different groups go out and return to work one after another. They can be “quickies” lasting a day or even less, and open-ended actions that last until victory, defeat, or explicit compromise.

Social strikes have often involved occupation of workplaces (the Polish general strike emerged when activists spread the word: Don’t burn Party headquarters; occupy the factories.) Such occupations tend to make repressive violence more difficult. However, they are frequently perceived by the authorities as a fundamental, even revolutionary challenge to their power, making them less willing to compromise in the long run.

Social strikes can involve quiet or disruptive street actions, or they can simply involve people staying quietly at home. Street actions allow strikers and supporters to show their courage, confidence, and resistance to repression; they also provide easy targets for repression.

Tactics need to be selected on the basis of such considerations as 1) what are people willing to do given the present state of the movement; 2) how will the wider public respond to different tactics; 3) what response are different tactics likely to provoke from the authorities; 4) what kinds of outcomes (e.g. showdowns, negotiations, shifts in public opinion, splits and shifts in attitude of authorities; etc.) are different tactics likely generate.

The ability to shift tactics can be a great asset. When a movement is locked into a particular tactic, its opponents can often raise the cost and pain of continuing it high enough to break the movement. This can be prevented if the movement is able to shift tactics on its own initiative. When the authorities are willing to shoot down large numbers of people in the street, for example, occupying workplaces may be the best alternative to submission.

7. Exemplary actions

Social strikes often benefit from leadership by example. If one group of workers are ready to take an action and face the risks it entails, their initiative is likely to encourage and inspire others to do the same. This can be the best way to counter the situation where everybody is waiting to act until they see whether others have the courage and commitment to act. Such exemplary actions can precede and lay the groundwork for a general strike. They can also introduce new tactics into an on-going struggle.

8. Tests

Social strikes are ventures into unknown territory. It is impossible to know in advance just what potential participants will actually be willing to do. Nor is it possible to know how those in authority, or the broader public, will respond. Movements can attempt to “test the waters” by means of lesser actions. If people won’t turn out for a peaceful demonstration, maybe it’s not the right time to call on them to strike. Conversely, if larger numbers come out than expected, and they are all talking about what to do next, the time may be ripe. If the authorities beat demonstrators and the public expresses outrage, or sections of the establishment criticize the repression, the movement can get some sense of who it might appeal to for support and who might restrain the authorities from repression.

9. Winning by losing

Repressive authorities generally try a long string of tactics, including ridicule, ostracism, division, harassment, and repression to suppress a movement. Only when all these have failed to quell the movement are the authorities forced to recognize that they will have to make concessions or face the threat of movement action indefinitely. Movements that are ultimately victorious often seem to suffer a long string of defeats – witness, for example, the long struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

Movements need to be prepared to continue despite such defeats – that is what makes it possible for them to succeed in the end. They need to interpret such defeats as necessary steppingstones on the path to victory. And they need to master the art of strategic retreat, which, as Mao indicated, consists of conducting small offensives within the context of a broader pull-back. Successful retreat makes an opponent’s victory hollow.

10. Utilizing splits among the authorities

As Gene Sharp has so brilliantly shown, most movements succeed less by amassing more power than their opponents but by making them and their supporters conclude that the price of continuing the struggle is too high. That usually takes the form of the emergence of “peace

factions” among the authorities. Promoting such splits is a key strategic objective for social strikes.

First this requires establishing that the movement and its challenge will not go away. As Sharp says, stubbornness is the key to successful nonviolent resistance.

Second it requires that potential “peace faction” elements within the establishment not be driven into the arms of the “war faction.” That generally means that the possibility of a relatively peaceful and amicable settlement must be held out, even in the face of repression.

11. Fight fight, talk talk.

How does a social strike end? If the authorities are unable to suppress it, at some point they are likely to turn to some kind of tacit or formal negotiations. In Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe this took the form of the “round table talks” between the regime and the opposition; in South Africa after the great COSATU strike it took the form of negotiations between the regime and the ANC represented by Nelson Mandela. Even regimes that have sworn never to negotiate with their opponents are likely to do so at the point when other alternatives look even worse.

The idea of negotiations with “the enemy” is always uncomfortable. There is always an opportunity for splits and sell-outs. But it is generally the way that social movements and social strikes have led to serious social change.

Movements are most likely to negotiate effectively if they have treated negotiations as an explicit goal of their action, so that the opening of negotiations is perceived as a victory, rather than a confusing diversion.

Negotiations are most likely to be effective if the movement has had an effective process of establishing common goals, so that different groups cannot be split off by the offer of narrow concessions.

Movements need to establish ways to hold negotiators accountable. (The negotiations that ended the first Gdansk general strike were conducted in front of TV cameras that broadcast every detail to tens of thousands of workers waiting in the shipyard outside.)

Finally, negotiations are most likely to succeed if they provide some means for graceful retreat by the authorities rather than requiring unconditional surrender. This requires that the movement have a clear sense of what are its essential demands and what are incidental matters on which it can afford to compromise.

Negotiations are not an alternative to struggle, but another way of conducting it. They are often an on-again, off-again matter; movements must be prepared to walk away from fruitless negotiations and return to struggle. As Mao said, “Talk talk, fight fight.”