



# Action Strategy

a how-to guide



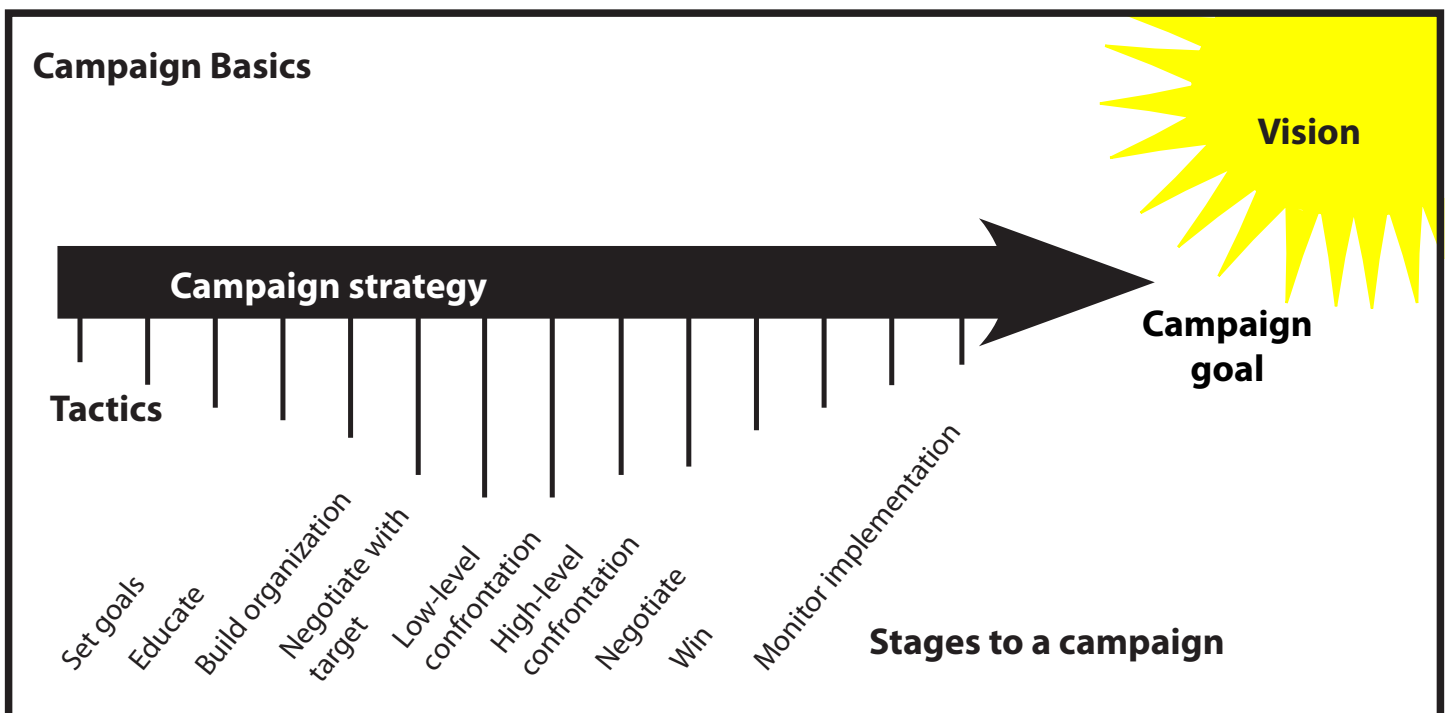
THE  
**RUCKUS  
SOCIETY**  
Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Actions can empower a generation, catapult an issue onto the international stage, and force political change. Yet, actions can also be poorly executed or harmful to your group and goals. This handout is here to help you design a strategic action.

The Ruckus Society defines direct action as the strategic use of immediately effective acts to achieve a political or social end and challenge an unjust power dynamic.

## The Power of Social Movements

Usually, actions take place within campaigns, and campaigns take place within social movements. A social movement is made up of different groups, networks, and individuals moving toward similar systemic goals. Social movements are powerful because their impact is greater than the sum of their parts. If your actions and campaigns synergize and align with others, it can create exponential change. Smart actions and campaign strategies complement the campaigns other groups are working on and amplify impact. Remember, no campaign operates in a vacuum, and your work or actions will impact and be impacted by the work of many others.



Many campaigns start with investigating the problem and **setting goals**. **Education**, such as hosting workshops, often comes next. Early on, campaigns also engage in **organization building**, forming alliances with new allies, establishing a group, and recruiting members. Groups often **negotiate with the target** in the hope of easily reaching an agreement. Campaigns then tend to start using **low-level confrontational tactics**, such as speaking at city meetings or wheat pasting. **High-level confrontational tactics** and resource intensive actions follow, such as rallies, lawsuits, and civil disobedience. Campaigns usually subside when a group **negotiates** a deal with the target, although it's common for groups to reapply pressure to ensure the agreement is **implemented**. This handout is about the confrontational actions that occur in the middle of a campaign.

**Vision:** the way we think the world should be. Visions are big-picture, transformative, compelling, and deep.

*E.g., We envision a Canada where First Nations have the right to say "no" to industrial activity on their land.*

**Campaign goal:** what we think we can achieve to solve our problem.

*E.g., End unwanted logging by Weyerhaeuser on the territory of the Grassy Narrows First Nation.*

**Campaign strategy:** our plan to get from point A (where we're at now) to our goal.

*E.g., Boycott campaign against Weyerhaeuser.*

**Action:** a tactic taken to execute our strategy. *E.g., Protest outside an Office Max store to encourage people to buy elsewhere (as Office Max buys Weyerhaeuser paper).*

### Goals & Strategy

Is the action part of an ongoing systemic campaign with SMART goals?

How will the action help us achieve our goals? What goals?

Is this tactic in keeping with our strategy, and what has been done before, and will be done after?

Does this tactic embody the lessons we've learned from previous work?

### Target

Who is the target?

What influence does the target have on the goal?

How will this tactic impact the target?

How will the target react?

Are we prepared for the target's reaction?

### Location

Where will the tactic take place?

Does the location show the problem and reveal the target?

Is the location at the point of consumption, destruction, or decision?

### Message

What will the tactic communicate to our audience, target, or allies?

Is it understandable and persuasive?

### Timing

When should we do the action? Why?

Does the timing hold potential for us or vulnerability for our opponents?

Can we take advantage of current events or new developments?

### Resources

Is this action worth the limited time, energy, and resources of our group?

Do we have the capacity to pull it off effectively?

Can/should we expand it or scale it back?

### Tone

What is the tone of the action?

Solemn, fun, angry, calm?

How will people we want to engage (participants, passersby) react to the tone?

### Organization

How will our group be affected?

How will this tactic affect recruitment, member-

retention, and the acquisition of new skills?

Will the tactic build trust or exacerbate tension and burnout?

### Relationships

How will our relationships with key stakeholders be affected?

Will they likely move closer to our view or further away?

We will create new relationships?

Who should we communicate, consult, seek approval from, or collaborate with?

### Regrouping

How do we plan to celebrate our action once it's done?

What's our plan for debriefing the action?

What does success look like?

What we do want to measure?



**Here is a tool that guides us through critical questions so we can craft a strategic action. Move around the star from the top, clockwise, refining your action design as you go.**



**G**oals should be **SMART**, which stands for:

**Specific:** The goal clearly explains the purpose of the campaign. E.g., Stop Arizona’s anti-immigration bill, SB1070, not help support migrant rights.

**Measurable:** We can clearly measure success, quantitatively or qualitatively. E.g., Bill SB1070 was approved by the Arizona legislature. We recruited 15 new members in one month.

**Activating:** There are many ways for people and groups to get involved. The campaign has a place for people who can dedicate time and expertise, as well as new activists, or people with little time.

**Realistic:** The goal is ambitious but achievable. If we run a great campaign we can realistically see ourselves achieving this goal within one month to 10 years. It’s okay if an activist group doesn’t have the capacity to lead a multi-year campaign provided another group is taking the lead, and everyone is collaborating. Groups like the **Indigenous Environmental Network** frequently partner with smaller groups. If our goal is way too ambitious, it’s useful to identify a sub goal that will move us closer to the big goal. “Ending all war” is not a realistic campaign goal, although it is a beautiful vision. But pressuring the U.S. Military to release **Bradley Manning** – a U.S. soldier stationed in Iraq and accused-whistle-blower – is realistic and visionary. When we win realistic goals, it shifts the political moment and makes “unrealistic” demands more possible.

**Time-specific:** The goal will make a difference to people’s lives within a set time-frame. It’s easier to recruit and keep members if they can foresee victory and the changes that will result.

When we have **SMART** goals we can more easily evaluate and re-evaluate our progress and change direction if necessary. **SMART** goals mean we can be students of our own context, and make our campaigns more strategic as we learn what works and what does not.

**S**trategy: A smart strategy considers the goals, niche, and capacity of your group. For instance, a student group might want to achieve the goal of helping pass legislation to reduce student debt. The group decides their strategy will consist of a series of direct actions targeting elected officials across the state. They decide upon this strategy because a) the group is skilled at organizing actions, b) they want to organize with student groups across the region, and c) other groups in the state are lobbying and taking to the courts to pass the law. This group is embracing its tactical niche.

**Examples of Strategy**

- Corporate campaign
- Boycott campaign
- Shareholder campaign
  - Lawsuits
- Passing legislation on a city, state, or federal level
- Moving a group or cluster of groups closer to your side

Smart strategies are consistent and responsive to change. Consistency lets you build upon your efforts. For example, a company boycott grows powerful if a group’s tactics are all about executing the boycott, from sending a letter to a company’s customers to protesting at the retail outlets of one high profile customer. A group’s energy becomes too diffuse if members are running the boycott AND trying to pass legislation. Our actions should be in keeping with our strategy, and the work we and others have done before this time, and intend to do moving forward.

On the other hand, it is critical you continually meet and reassess the effectiveness of a strategy, asking questions like 'is this the best thing we can do with our time?', and 'what new political developments or changes are affecting our work?'

If we don’t have the resources or time to execute a complete strategy, then we can choose to collaborate with other groups and together execute a strategy.



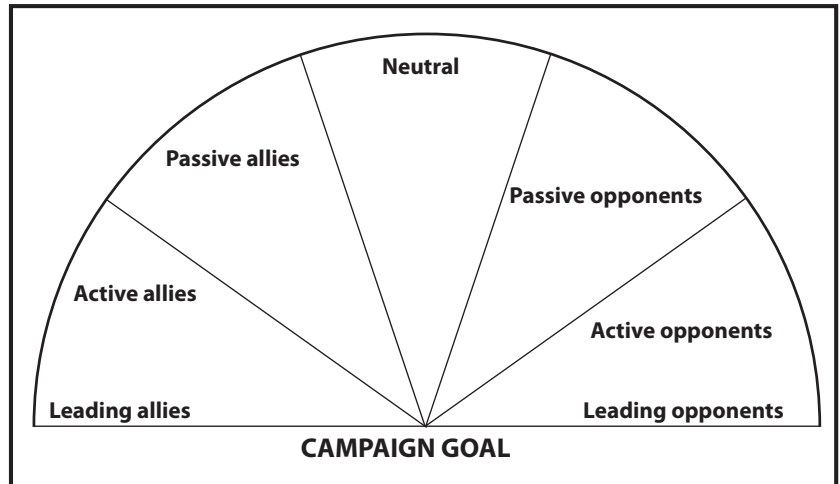
**A**ctions have a target. A **target** is often the group or people who have considerable power over the issue and who are actively opposing you, such as a mining company.

But the actions in your campaigns are not just about pressuring your target; campaigning is also about building **relationships** with other stakeholders affected by or involved in the issue.

The “Spectrum of Allies” diagram (which was created by **Training for Change**) is a useful aid to help us identify and assess the stakeholders involved in an issue. When identifying stakeholders, be as specific as you can, identifying both groups and influential individuals.

Most groups choose one or two priority stakeholders to “move” in a campaign. It’s a positive thing when a stakeholder moves even a little closer to our side. We might prioritize a stakeholder because they don’t get a lot of attention from other allies, we already have some credibility with or access to them, or we know they’re sympathetic to direct action tactics.

When designing an action, it’s useful to ask how will our action affect and involve these stakeholders? Who are we targeting? Will our action help us do outreach to, recruit or partner with groups that share (or could share) our strategic priorities? Remember, some actions might unintentionally move key groups in the opposite direction.



It is sometimes wise for tactic ideas to be discussed with other groups. It is considered respectful for frontline or impacted communities to have some influence over the goals and tactics of groups working on campaigns that affect their daily lives. For example, some members of the Grassy Narrows First Nation were concerned they would experience greater harassment from residents at the nearby town following a blockade of the TransCanada Highway to draw attention to unwanted logging on their land. As a result, community members asked non-Native allies to be spokespeople at the blockade to divert blame and attention from Native organizers.



Civil rights lunch counter sit in, Atlanta, GA, 1963

### Case Study: SNCC

In 1964 the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was a major driver of the civil rights movement, and at the time they were registering black voters in the South. SNCC found they had a lot of passive allies who were students in the North: they were sympathetic but had no entryway into the movement. SNCC sent busses up North to bring folks down to participate in the struggle for the summer through organizing and action. It was called Freedom Summer. Locally, SNCC collaborated with other allies in church groups and others to make sure that the influx of outsiders reinforced their work and didn’t jeopardize it. Students came down in droves and for the first time witnessed lynching, violent police abuse, and angry white mobs—all simply for trying to vote. So a shift happened – a

large group of passive allies became active allies. Then they wrote letters home to mom and dad, who suddenly had a personal connection to the struggle. So another shift happened: their parents became passive allies. And they brought their workplace and social networks with them. Some of those students went back to school in the fall and proceeded to organize their campuses. More shifts. The cascading waterfall of support helped turn the tide in the struggle, all because of a strategic set of actions. The landscape in the U.S. changed.



An action's **tone** heavily influences the message, and our ability to recruit and retain participants and allies. If we aren't intentional about our tone, we may end up communicating a message we didn't intend. The annual vigil and civil disobedience undertaken by **School of the Americas Watch** carries a somber tone that underscores the moral weight of their campaign to stop the US military training mostly Latin American military personnel. Conversely, flash mobs are fun and exciting. The exuberant **flash mob** in 2009 at a Whole Foods store to protest the CEO's opposition to public health care was perfect for recruiting young creative activists. The joyous tone also attracted the attention of shoppers (passive allies), instead of alienating them.

**D**ebriefing an action is crucial to learning from our mistakes, **regrouping** and building a more effective group and strategic campaign. Shortly after the action, it can help to bring the group together and ask questions such as these: What did we do well? What could we improve upon? How did the tactic affect our group, and our relationships with stakeholders and our target? What lessons did we learn from this action that we want to carry with us? What are our next steps?



Celebrating victories or successful actions (even if we haven't officially won) is a key ingredient of campaigning, and we don't do it enough. Take the time to organize a celebration – a party, a dinner together – before moving on.



**A**ctions are often a great way to recruit new members, generate publicity, boost fundraising, empower, politicize and embolden people, improve skill-sets, and increase an **organization's** capacity to work well together. But actions can also exacerbate divisions over group-direction, lead to burnout, and sometimes create legal consequences the group is not equipped for.

We should take steps to maximize the positive and minimize the negative consequences of direct action. Get training! It is wise to have all members participate in a direct action training so everyone knows what to do and expect. (That's why **Ruckus** exists, after all).

Choose actions that people are excited about! Also consider the experience of the group. For leadership and skill-development purposes, it's sometimes useful to choose actions that are challenging, but not overwhelming. Moving from leafleting on the street to a three-day occupation of a senator's office, for instance, could lead to burnout as people might not be prepared for the emotional, physical, and psychological consequences. Also consider what skills the group already possesses; if a group is tech savvy it might make sense to do an online action, such as a **spoof website**; but if a group is skilled at art and prop-making then a creative street-theatre action might be best.



Spoof of Chevron's "We Agree" campaign, Rainforest Action Network, 2011

Consider recruitment and organizing goals. If we're trying to attract non-political neighborhood residents to our cause then we might want to consider hosting an event that allows many people to safely participate, connect with others, and learn more about the issue, such as an educational tour or rally.

Many small groups swallow the pill of urgency-addiction and dedicate their time to doing action, action, action. As a consequence, some groups fail to address group health, address power-imbalances within the group, recruit and train new members, and build friendships. Members then burn out and leave. It's useful to occasionally ask if doing an action is the best thing the group could be doing right now.



**W**e're more likely to secure media if we associate our actions with a "time" or "event" that is typically reported on. Reporters usually cover yearly events, anniversaries, like Earth Day or the **anniversary of the US Invasion of Iraq**, Martin Luther King Day, or Halloween. Business and political reporters often cover the events of your opponents, such as the first day of city council or a shareholder meeting.

When **timing** our actions we should also consider when our targets are vulnerable: for instance, political parties are vulnerable during elections. **Forest Ethics** brilliantly harnessed the power of timing by targeting Victoria's Secret retail outlets during the massive **Valentine's Day** sales to protest the company's decision to make its catalogues from endangered forests.

Consider how timing will affect the logistics of organizing the action. Organizing mass outdoor rallies in a snowy winter climate might pose a challenge for recruitment. Could the group pull off an action of similar scope and effectiveness indoors? It's useful to consider the activities of our allies. Affiliating our action with a planned national day of action, such as those organized by **350**, could give our local event a publicity-boost.

Finally, consider the time-frame of the action. Is the action just 10 minutes long? An hour? Two days? Short actions, such as a meeting disruption, are usually exciting, but we often need to do some pre-planning to secure media attention. Perhaps give one journalist advance notice of the action, or do the action where media will already be in attendance? Climate activists secured national media attention by having two campaigners dressed in suits give a fake environmental award to **General Motor's CEO** before a slew of journalists at the LA Auto Show. Long actions require us to think about maintaining morale and enthusiasm. Consider music, creative skits, speeches, interactive games, marching, etc. Long actions – such as the **Occupy protests** - also demand serious planning, as we have to consider food, water, toilet access, sleeping arrangements and so on and on and on.

**R****esources** include time, money, skills, and volunteers. Actions always take more energy and time than we expect so be generous in estimating needs. To gauge the resource-intensiveness of an action, we can call up people who have executed similar actions and get an assessment; **Ruckus** can help connect people with experienced organizers.



Protest for native land rights, Toronto, ON. June 2007 Photographer Jon Schledewitz

Some tactics are more expensive than others. A banner drop requiring technical-climbing or rappelling requires certain kinds of gear and skill to be safe. Blockades, on the other hand, can be executed with cheap gear (think PVC pipe lock boxes and oil barrels) or with no gear at all.

Think through which costs are fixed, and which costs can be reduced. One strength of being part of a social movement is that we all have tools and resources we can share with one another, such as connections with pro-bono lawyers, press lists, props, bullhorns and sound systems. First Nations solidarity activists in Toronto have used variations of the same massive banner **time-and-time** again because it's a media-draw and the prop just needs

to be dragged out of someone's basement, and not constructed from scratch. Fixed costs often include bail and legal costs above and beyond paying the lawyer, such as photocopying (It's more expensive than you think). Make sure to budget for these!

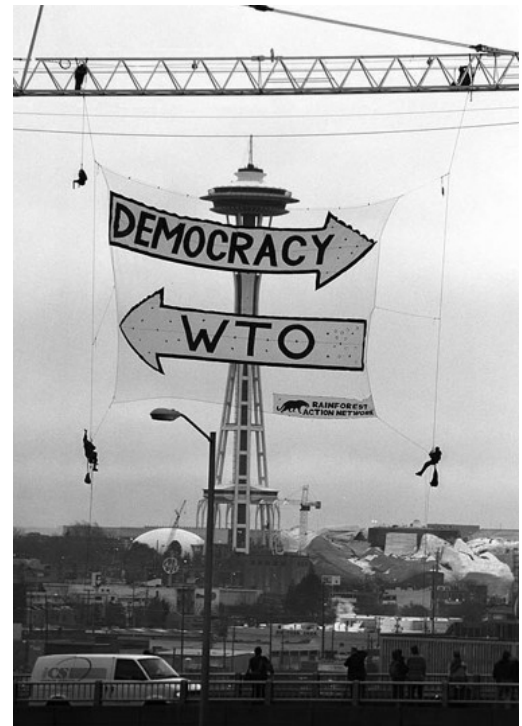


**O**ur **messages** should convey our goals, make sense, be easy-to-understand (especially for non-activists!), short, and simple. For example, “George Bush: End the War in Iraq” conveys the campaign

goal, problem, and target in one sentence. We don’t need to convey our entire worldview at every event.

Consider how the message will be received by your allies, targets, and other key stakeholders. Will we be seen as credible, upstanding, and powerful? Or disorganized, weak, and easily dismissed? Spokespeople are great at conveying tone and meaning. First Nations grandmothers being arrested while protecting their homeland evokes injustice, sympathy and outrage and tugs on society’s obligations to respect and protect our elders. A Climate change scientist speaking out against climate policy conveys legitimacy. Review the [Center for Media Justice](#) handouts and Smart Meme’s “[Battle of the Story worksheet](#)” and other exercises if you want to dive deeper into messaging and narrative.

Media will usually cover your actions with a 30 second television clip, a 100 word article, or a photo in the newspaper. Cater to these constraints by having spokespeople ready to share key messages in short one-sentence “soundbites”. It helps when we share our message visually. A classic example of a powerful and simple visual is the **banner** hung during the WTO protests in Seattle in 1999. Not all of us can hang banners off cranes, but we can certainly make a colorful banner, print images on a t-shirt, and distribute leaflets and press releases to onlookers and reporters.



Anti-WTO banner hang, Seattle, WA, Nov. 28, 1999



**E**ffective actions are often located at the point of consumption (such as where products are purchased, like a gas station), the point of production (such as an oil refinery) or the point of decision (such as a Senator’s office or an oil company’s corporate headquarters). When an action’s **location** is linked to the target it’s easier to visually show the issue, and associate the target with the problem.

Protesting the war in Afghanistan at the Pentagon (point of decision) sends a clearer message than protesting the war in Afghanistan on a highway overpass in a small town in Idaho. Protesting at a coal-mining site (point of destruction) will expose individual reporters to the magnitude of the problem.

Think about distance. Media and participants are less likely to attend an action if it’s a long way away or inaccessible via public transit. Consider logistical challenges as well; remote actions require thinking through basic necessities, such as where and how you will access food, water, restrooms, shelter, and transportation. (Yes, police have been known to cut activists off from their food supply.) Is there are a closer equivalent target?

Consider accessibility at the action site. It’s harder for both participants and the media to access private property, such as shopping malls or offices. Have a plan for how participants will enter, and how the group will get the message out. Consider embedding a journalist, or having spokespeople available nearby on public property. Relying on getting the message out via internet access, such as live streaming, is another option, but beware of technical hiccups.



Occupy Wall Street, Zuccotti Park, NY Nov. 15 2011  
Photographer Beбето Matthews



## Protest

*registering your dissent.*

- **Public Speeches**
- Letters of opposition or support
- Signed public statements or **declarations**
- Group or **mass petitions**
- Brands, slogans, **symbols**
- Banners, **posters**
- Leaflets, pamphlets, reports
- **newspapers**, journals, books
- Websites, blogs
- Radio, **video**, **online media**
- **Social media actions**
- Skywriting and **earthwriting**
- Deputations
- **Mock awards**
- **Lobbying**
- Picketing
- **Mock elections**
- Displays of **flags**, **symbols**, and symbolic colors
- Prayer and worship
- **Delivering symbolic objects**
- Destruction of own property
- Displays of portraits
- New **slogans**, signs and names
- **Symbolic reclamations**
- **Banner hangs**
- Haunting, **bird dogging** or taunting officials
- Vigils
- Humorous skits and pranks
- Performances of **songs**, plays, **dances**, and **music**
- Processions
- **Street parties**
- **Marches** and parades
- **Rallies on bike**
- Pilgrimages
- **Political mourning**
- **Mock funerals**
- Demonstrative funerals
- Homage at burial places
- Protest meetings
- Teach-ins
- **Walk-outs**
- Silence
- Witnessing
- Renouncing honors
- **Turning one's back**

## Non-Cooperation

*withdrawing something from the system that makes it difficult to function*

- Ostracism
- Student strike
- Social disobedience
- Withdrawal from social institutions
- **Consumers' boycott**
- Rent withholding
- **Workmen's boycott**
- Withdrawal of bank deposits
- Refusal to pay **fees**, debts or interest
- Refusal of a government's money
- Protest or quickie strike
- Industry strike
- **Prisoners' strike**
- Sympathetic strike
- Slowdown strike
- **Work-to-rule strike**
- **General strike**
- Strike by resignation
- Economic shutdown
- Refusal of public support or allegiance
- Boycott of legislative bodies
- **Boycott of elections**
- **Resignation** or boycott of government employment or government agencies
- Withdrawal from government educational institutions
- Refusal of assistance to enforcement agents
- Reluctant and slow compliance
- Disguised disobedience
- Refusal to disperse
- **Sitdown**
- **Livein**
- Noncooperation with **conscription** and deportation
- Hiding, escape, and false identities
- Civil disobedience of laws
- Whistle-blowing

## Solutions or Alternatives

*developing alternative systems that challenge an injustice*

- **Alternative social institutions**
- **Alternative communication system**
- Dual sovereignty and parallel government
- Alternative markets
- Alternative transportation
- Alternative economic institutions

## Intervention

*directly intervening in the functioning of the system*

- The fast
- **Reverse trial**
- **Occupation**
- **Obstruction**
- **Blockades**
- **Tree sits**
- Property destruction
- Establishing new social patterns
- Overloading of facilities, systems, or services
- **Speak-in or meeting disruption**
- **Guerrilla theater**
- **Nonviolent land seizure**
- **Seizure of assets**
- **Disrupting industry or government procedure**
- Disclosing identities of secret agents
- Seeking imprisonment



**TAKE  
ACTION  
AND  
CHANGE  
YOUR  
WORLD**

[www.ruckus.org](http://www.ruckus.org)