

we may end up not helping anyone, even ourselves. We may get discouraged and decide to give up or take up other types of strategies that may be counter-productive, such as mainstream politics and the use of force. Or we may get into a pattern of protesting for its own sake, without any strategic sense. As such, we may appear superficially to be still engaged in the struggle and others may admire our persistence, but we have lost a purpose for all the energy we expend. Our ineffectiveness and purposefulness may discourage others from engaging. If – as I believe – we have a duty to protest, we also have a duty to prepare ourselves well: to identify the risks to our physical and emotional well-being and to take steps to ensure that we can overcome these risks and continue the struggle in a positive and effective manner, keeping true to our ideals. Last, but not least, let's keep trying, have some fun while we do it, and by that, give peace a chance. We are not the first ones to do it, nor will be the last ones.

Humour and Nonviolent Actions

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We usually use nonviolent action about serious problems. Thinking about an action in humorous terms may therefore seem a strange way to deal with an issue and not your first choice. However, humour and seriousness may be much more closely related than at first they appear. Almost all good humour thrives on contradictions and absurdity; nonviolent action often tries to point out the contradiction between the world as it is and the world as we want it to be. Humour is powerful because it turns the world as we know it upside down and escapes the logic and reasoning that is an inevitable part of the rest of our lives.

How to Start?

If humour doesn't come to you easily, don't despair – it can be learned. Watch your opponent: If there is a contradiction between what they say and what they do, might this be the basis for a good joke? The closer you stick to the truth about what your opponent is saying and doing, the better the humour will work. Almost all dictators say that what they are doing is 'for the good of the people'. That kind of statement might be contradicted by their actions.

Using Humour Wisely

- Don't overdo it – humour should be used with moderation and works best if complemented with a serious message.
- Choose the object of your humour carefully!



CLOWNING AROUND DURING FREEDOM TO PROTEST DEMONSTRATION, LONDON, UK.

PHOTO: IPPY

If you are making a political action, you want a political message, and you want to stick to the point. How people look, their ways of speaking, or their sexuality are not good subjects. Making jokes about such things is usually not the way to reach out to other people and also takes attention away from the political point you want to make. At the end of this section are two examples of actions that stick to the political points and don't get sidetracked.

Why Use Humour?

Using humour in your actions can be useful in a number of ways. First, it should be fun for those who participate in the action. Humour has a potential to prevent and counter activist burnout, although it is not a magic solution.

Using humour is also a way to increase the chance of getting attention from media, potential supporters, and bystanders. Journalists who know that they will get good images and a lively story are more likely to show up when you announce that something is going to happen.

If you are part of a small movement that wants to expand, humour will show potential members that although you work on a serious issue, you are still capable of enjoying life.

The Power of Humour

Humour is a powerful way to relate to your opponent, as the 'absurdity' of your actions will change both the relationship and the logic of rational argumentation. Both the police and the opponent may have difficulty responding to good, humorous actions. They can provide a perfect opportunity for creating a 'dilemma action', meaning that no matter what your opponents do, they have lost and are likely to appear weaker in the eyes of both bystanders and the people on 'their' side. But be prepared for harsh reactions if you humiliate anybody. When you make it difficult for your opponents to find an 'appropriate' reaction (adequate from their point of view), frustration might cause a violent reaction.

Examples of Humorous Actions

Two examples can illustrate some of the points above. We don't recommend that you copy them directly, as your context is likely to be very different. But they can show how powerful humour can be:

In Norway in 1983, a small group of total objectors organised in the group 'Campaign against Conscription', (KMOV in Norwegian) refused both military and alternative service. They wanted to create public debate and change the law that gave them 16 months in prison. The state refused to call it 'prison' and instead said the objectors would 'serve their service in an institution under the administration of the prison authorities'. To avoid having political prisoners,

there were officially no trials, no prisoners, and no punishment. The cases of the total objectors went through the courts only to identify the objector, and the result was always the same: 16 months in prison. Sometimes the prosecutor never showed up because the result was clear anyway. KMV exploited this in one of their actions:

One of the activists dressed up as the prosecutor and overplayed his role, demanding that the total objector get an even longer prison term because of his profession (he was a lawyer). During the procedure in the court, nobody noticed anything wrong in spite of the 'prosecutor's' exaggerations. One week later KMV sent their secret video recording of the case to the media, with the result leaving most of the Norwegian public laughing.

This example clearly illustrates the power of turning things upside down. A friend of the accused playing the prosecutor and demanding a stronger punishment than what the law can give parodies the court. In this action, KMV activists satirised the absurdity of having a court case with nothing to discuss; they succeeded in getting attention from both media and 'ordinary people'. In addition to turning the roles upside down, the parody of the court also exposed the contradiction between what the Norwegian state said and what it did. If the politicians call Norway a democracy and claim that it has no political prisoners, why are people sent to prison for their beliefs? And why is that imprisonment not even called a prison sentence, but an administrative term for serving alternative service? This is an absurd situation. Through dramatising it in a humorous frame, KMV cut through all rational explanations and made people understand that this did not make sense.

However, this case also makes the important point that the activist using humour should be aware of the context it is used in. If you want to avoid long prison terms, imitating this kind of action is not recommended.

In a second example, we move from democratic Norway to dictatorial Serbia in the year 2000, before the fall of Slobodan Milošević. To support agriculture, Milošević placed boxes in shops and public places and asked people to donate one dinar (Serbian currency) for sowing and planting crops. In response, the youth movement Otpor arranged its own collection called 'Dinar za Smenu'. Smenu in Serbian is a word with many meanings; it can mean change, resignation, dismissal, pension, or purge. This action, consisting of a big barrel with a photo of Milošević, was repeated several times in different places in Serbia. After donating a dinar, people would get a stick they could use to hit the barrel. On one occasion, a sign suggested that if people did not have any money because of Milošević's politics, they should bang the barrel twice. When the police removed the barrel, an Otpor press release said that the police had arrested the barrel and that the action was a huge success. They claimed they had collected enough money for Milošević's retirement, and that the police would give the money to Milošević.

This is an example of a dilemma action, because Otpor left both Milošević and the police with no space for reaction. If the police did not take away the barrel, they lost face. When they did do something, Otpor continued the joke

by calling it an arrest of a barrel and saying that the police would give Milošević the money for his retirement. No matter what the regime did, it lost.

** You can find Majken's dissertation on humour and nonviolence on the Website of the Centre for Peace and Reconciliation Studies, Coventry University <http://www.coventry.ac.uk/researchnet/external/content/11/c4/11/36/v1202125859/user/Humour%20as%20Nonviolent%20Resistance.pdf>*

Working in Groups

A challenge for any nonviolent movement is how to prepare its actions. Since the 1976 occupation of the Seabrook nuclear power site, in New Hampshire, USA, (see 'Seabrook-Wyhl-Marckolsheim', p96) a number of Western nonviolent campaigns have favoured using an affinity group model of action coupled with consensus decision-making. This section introduces that style.

Affinity Groups

'Affinity groups' are autonomous groups of 5 to 15 persons. An affinity group in this sense is a group of people who not only have an affinity for each other, but who know each other's strengths and weaknesses and support each other as they participate (or intend to participate) in a nonviolent campaign together. Affinity groups and spokescouncils (see p71) challenge top-down, power-over decision-making and organising and empower those involved to take creative direct action. They allow people to act together in a decentralised and non-hierarchical way by giving decision-making power to the affinity group. Affinity groups have been used constructively in mass anti-globalisation actions in the USA (Seattle 1997), anti-nuclear protests in Europe and North America (beginning in the 1970s), and other large and small nonviolent protest actions in many countries.

