

Direct Action

Solidarity and Sabotage

“Sabotage is aimed directly at ‘the boss’ and at his profits, in the belief that that is the solar plexus of the employer, that is his heart, his religion, his sentiment, his patriotism.”

– Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The Conscious Withdrawal of the Workers’ Industrial Efficiency*, 1916

The term sabotage often brings to mind media images of people hurling bricks through the windows of transnational companies, or of small covert groups committing acts of property damage under cover of darkness. These actions can put economic pressure on large corporations and draw

attention to their shady business practices, however, they can also have negative repercussions – such as brutal repression – as they are largely high risk, unsustainable, and are often inarticulate, as their very nature requires anonymity.

However, sabotage takes many other forms. In France, the *Confédération Paysanne* dismantled a McDonald’s in broad daylight, and the *KRRS* has burned acres of GM crops in India. And of course, sabotage also takes place regularly in workplaces everywhere.

The word *sabotage* actually emerges from the labour movement. There are many unverifiable anecdotes about this, and all connect it to workers, and agree that it comes from the French, *sabot*, which was the wooden shoe worn by the French peasantry,

the wearing of which made one clumsy and slow-moving – less efficient.

Sabotage in the workplace frequently involves individualistic one-off actions, or pranks, which may be expensive or damaging to the business’ reputation, but which, alone, are limited in their effectiveness. This sort of action, while often entertaining, serving to blow off steam, and clearly measurable in broad economic terms – just ask any business owner about the costs of absenteeism, worker theft, and vandalism – generally doesn’t lead to an improvement in working conditions, as the individual often disappears shortly after the prank, leaving no sustained pressure on the employer.

What’s important for sustainable and effective workplace solidarity is building the power and community of the workers, using a spectrum of tactics which can be escalated as necessary, and



Sabotage is not just about property destruction. Barcelona, Spain

achieving short term goals while working towards long-term visions.

Of course, the most commonly used tactic of workplace solidarity is the strike. Strikes can be incredibly effective, however, striking workers don't get paid, and are often locked out of the workplace. This doesn't mean strikes aren't useful, but it's important to be creative. This is about reclaiming what unionism really is – workers acting together in their common interests, plain and simple. There are plenty of possibilities for action with or without the support of a union; many don't even require you to miss a single paycheck. Wobblies (members of the Industrial Workers of the World) call it "striking on the job". Here are just a few tactics:

Open mouth: Most effective in the service industry, the key to this is coordinating throughout the business. Workers are open

and honest with customers and state their true feelings about working under grueling conditions for low pay when asked: "How are you?" Complete honesty is also subversive – stating that goods are overpriced, of low quality, and can be found cheaper elsewhere makes an interesting sales pitch! With trust and advance preparation, workers can avoid obvious manipulation such as singling out "ringleaders", and can use this as leverage to force their boss to negotiate. If this doesn't work, an escalation of tactics can follow.

Good work strike: Doing essential work competently may not seem like sabotage, but in France, hospital workers who were afraid that a strike would compromise the health of their patients came up with an excellent strategy. They refused to file billing slips for drugs, lab work, or any other procedures, and spent more of their time with patients. The hospital's

income dropped by half, and after three days, the hospital conceded to all of the worker's demands.

Work-to-rule: In most workplaces, the boss imposes a set of rules and structures to run the business. The workers then determine more efficient, and often safer ways of working. Think of all the silly rules at the various jobs you have had, which, if you followed them, would have resulted in, reduced productivity, or even a complete collapse of the business. The notion of the work-to-rule is brilliantly simple — workers follow every rule, no matter how foolish, inefficient, or ill-advised. They break no laws, cause as much disruption as a strike, yet everyone still gets paid! In Austria, where national law requires that postal workers weigh each piece of mail to determine the required postage, workers ceased the common practice of estimating

weights, and began weighing every single piece. By the second day, post offices were completely congested with unweighed mail, and the government swiftly entered into negotiations. Dockworkers on the US West coast recently instituted a work-to-rule, in which they followed all health and safety regulations. Since working on the docks is incredibly dangerous, there are innumerable safety rules. By following them, workers reduced efficiency coast-wide by 50 per cent. The employer was forced to complain that the workers were obeying the rules, and the workers were empowered in the knowledge that they know the best way to run the business.

Resources:

» *The Troublemaker's Handbook: how to fight back where you work, and win!* by Dan LaBotz, Labor Notes, 1991

» **Wobblies' website:**
www.iww.org