

# SOCIAL STRIKES

**Can General Strikes, Mass Strikes, and People Power Uprisings Provide A Last Defense Against MAGA Tyranny?**



**BY JEREMY BRECHER**

A REPORT FROM THE LABOR NETWORK FOR SUSTAINABILITY  
CO-PUBLISHED BY ZNETWORK.ORG

**DECEMBER, 2025**



LABOR NETWORK  
FOR SUSTAINABILITY



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The mission of the [Labor Network for Sustainability](#) is to be a relentless force for urgent, science-based climate action by building a powerful labor-climate movement to secure an ecologically sustainable and economically just future where everyone can make a living on a living planet.

[ZNetwork.org](#) is an independent media platform dedicated to advancing vision and strategy for a better world. Since 1977, we've produced a series of projects that go beyond critique to explore and organize alternatives, including: [ZMagazine](#), [Z Media Institute](#), [ZNetwork.org](#), & [AllofUSDirectory.org](#).

# Forword: Mass Non-Cooperation

by Alex Caputo-Pearl and Jackson Potter

Alex Caputo-Pearl is former president of United Teachers Los Angeles. Jackson Potter is vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union.

Jeremy Brecher's report on social strikes is a timely contribution to the urgent conversations we must be having in the movement regarding the probability that, to defeat MAGA authoritarianism, we will need these kinds of mass actions that exert power through withdrawing cooperation and creating major disruptions. Brecher draws from international experience and US history, and helpfully discusses laying groundwork, goals, tactics, organization, timelines, and endgames of such mass actions.

There is no doubt that, as MAGA's authoritarianism and military invasions accelerate, we need a strategy to push back. We face a context in which Trump's team will continue to threaten to undermine our elections, warmonger, cause a recession, and attempt to federalize the national guard and enact martial law. There is a high probability that one, if not all, of these things will happen. We must combine continued organizing at the electoral and judicial levels with strikes, boycotts, sick outs, and mass non-violent direct action and non-cooperation. This mass non-cooperation should target MAGA-aligned entities, build to majority and super-majority participation, fight for an affordability agenda that helps the many not the few and, in the South African tradition, make society "ungovernable."

Labor must be key to this. We have been part of transforming our locals, in which we have made strikes, structured super-majority organizing, bargaining for the common good, coalitions with community, synthesis with electoral work, and broader state-wide and national coordination the norm. We need to support more locals in developing these habits to push our county federations of labor and state/national unions in the same direction.

At the same time, given conditions, it is urgent that all of our unions, with community allies, take leaps, throwing ourselves into broad networks like May Day Strong. It is networks like these that give us a container within which to learn about and drive towards the kinds of social strikes that Brecher discusses and we may need, drawing upon lessons from US history, South Africa, the Philippines, South America, and more. We must experiment with fusing the best of structure-based organizing with the best of momentum-based strategy, remaining society-facing and super-majority-focused, organizing with union and non-union workers and community organizations, and with as much coordination of contract and political demands as possible. The broad networks we build must have the capacity for strategic deliberation and the ability to sustain through repressive counter-attacks, again raising the importance of having unions as part of its core. This core must drive a politics that can meet the moment in fighting for regime change, but that is not satisfied with simply deposing an autocrat, also bringing concrete demands, in the South Korean tradition of "Beyond Yoon," to shape a non-neoliberal future.



# Introduction

Donald Trump and his accomplices are conducting an attack not only on democracy but on society. This is manifested in their executive usurpation, aka creeping coup, which is seizing all the powers of the government and concentrating them in the personal will of the President. It involves the elimination of all bases of opposition, not only in the agencies of government but in civil society, including universities, trade unions, and media. It is revealed in storm trooper violence, with unidentified armed masked men invading communities and workplaces and seizing people with no legal justification. And it is seen in government actions that punish opponents and provide billions of dollars of benefits to supporters.



No Kings protest in Palo Alto, California, June 14, 2025. Photo credit: [King of Hearts](#), Wikipedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

A movement-based opposition to the MAGA assault on society is growing. It is developing in the electoral system, as illustrated by the rise of Zohran Mamdani. It is developing in the streets, for example the massive nonviolent direct action to protect immigrant neighborhoods from ICE attacks and the seven million people who turned out for No Kings Day. This opposition, if it continues to grow, may undermine MAGA power and ultimately remove Trump and his associates from office.

But what about a worst-case scenario where neither electoral nor non-electoral opposition forestalls a MAGA tyranny? Where democratic procedures and the right to vote have been so denied that it is impossible to defeat MAGA at the polls? Where both official and vigilante violence are unrestrained by law? Where a substantial part of the population has been bamboozled by lies and distraction? Where all dissent has been effectively branded as treason? Where those who don't go along with the program are subject to harassment, beating, jailing, and death? And where much of the population has been driven by fear into silence and acquiescence? How is it possible to resist the MAGA juggernaut under such conditions?

Tyrannical regimes from Serbia to the Philippines to Brazil and many other places have been brought down by “people power” — large-scale nonviolent direct action that made society ungovernable and led to regime change. While the U.S. has a tradition of social and labor movements using mass action and local general strikes, it does not have a tradition of using people power for the defense of democracy. However, in other countries where democratic institutions have been so weakened or eliminated that they are unable to halt tyranny, such methods have emerged and been used effectively. They go by such names as nonviolent uprisings, people power, general strikes, political strikes, and, as I will call them here, social strikes.

Social strike is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of activities that use the withdrawal of cooperation and mass disruption to affect governments and social structures. In many countries, where democratic institutions have been so weakened or eliminated that they are unable to disempower tyranny, such methods have been used effectively.

I use the term “social strikes” to describe mass actions that exercise power by withdrawing cooperation from and disrupting the operation of society. The goal of a social strike is to affect not just the immediate employer, but a political regime or social structure. Such forms of mass direct action provide a possible alternative when institutional means of action prove ineffective. In all their varied forms they are based on Gandhi's fundamental perception that “even the most powerful cannot rule without the cooperation of the ruled.”

Social strikes represent the withdrawal of cooperation and acquiescence by a whole society, manifested for example in general strikes and mass popular “people power” uprisings. This Report draws on the history of social strikes in the US and around the world to illuminate the problems and possibilities of using social strikes as a way to overcome the emerging MAGA tyranny. It is based on the premise that the power of the powerful ultimately depends on the acquiescence and cooperation of those they rule. Social strikes have been one way that people have developed the power to withdraw that acquiescence and cooperation.

A social strike to make the US a democracy will depend on the courage, wisdom, and vision of millions of people. The purpose of this report is to provide knowledge of how people have used social strikes in the past and inspiration from that knowledge about self-liberation from tyranny in the future.

Chapter 1, “How People Power Has Defeated Authoritarian Regimes Around the World,” presents examples of social strikes that have defeated dictators or coups in other countries. Chapter 2, “Social Strikes in American History,” recounts the story of mass strikes, social strikes, and political strikes in the US. Chapter 3, “Social Strikes vs. MAGA Tyranny,” describes how social strikes might serve as a means for removing Trump from office and establishing government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Chapter 4, “Laying the Groundwork for Social Strikes,” tells what we can start doing right now to make social strikes against authoritarian rule more likely and more likely to succeed. Chapter 5, “Timelines,” describes how social strikes are likely to unfold. Chapter 6, “Organization,” describes various ways that social strikes have been organized. Chapter 7, “Goals,” explores the process by which social strikes develop common objectives. Chapter 8, “Tactics,” reviews the ways social strikes select and use their means of action. Chapter 9, “Endgames,” explores what is necessary to bring a social strike to a successful conclusion.

There are no guarantees about either the occurrence or the success of future social strikes. But they are more likely to happen – and to succeed – if they are informed by reflection on the history of social strikes in the past.

## Chapter 1: How Social Strikes Have Defeated Authoritarian Regimes Around the World

In many countries around the world, mass “people power” revolts have blocked authoritarian takeovers and eliminated dictatorial regimes. This chapter presents four examples that illustrate the potential power of such social strikes. As Trump’s MAGA authoritarianism grows, such actions provide a potential means for reasserting popular democracy.

### South Korea: “Our Citizens, armed with nothing but conviction...”

President Trump is engaged in executive usurpation, aka a “creeping coup.” If at some point his power is threatened, it is entirely plausible that he will turn to a full-scale coup. The capacity of a social strike to defeat such a coup is illustrated by the defeat of a presidential coup in South Korea, a country which had 40 years of firmly established democracy.

Late in 2024, rightwing president Yoon Suk-Yeol, facing plunging popularity, went on live TV and declared martial law. Yoon alleged that the Democratic Party, which had a majority in the National Assembly, was conducting “anti-state activities” and collaborating with “North Korean communists” to destroy South Korea. His martial law order prohibited political activities, including gatherings of the National Assembly and local legislatures, and suspended freedom of the press. Yoon reportedly ordered the arrest of various political opponents, including the leaders of the Democratic Party and his own Peoples Power Party.



The picture shows the Grand Courtroom of the Constitutional Court of Korea. Moon Hyungbae, acting President of the Constitutional Court, sitting at the center of the bench, declares the removal of the President of South Korea, Yoon Suk Yeol, from his office on 4 April 2025, as presiding chief justice of the case. Photo credit: Constitutional Court of Korea, Wikipedia Commons, free use with attribution.

Soldiers appeared at the parliament and attempted to arrest MPs. Workers, students, and ordinary people flooded the streets and rushed to Parliament where they faced martial law troops and broke through the military blockade. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and the Korean Public Service and Transport Workers' Union declared a general strike. A series of strike rallies called for Yoon's resignation and "Beyond Yoon" union demands of just working conditions and public policies to ensure quality public services for all Koreans. Railroad workers, subway workers, metalworkers, and other trade unionists announced they would join the strike. After the military blockade of parliament was broken, the National Assembly was able to vote and blocked the Martial Law order 190 to 0. After six hours, faced with near-universal condemnation, President Yoon rescinded the martial law order. A [statement](#) by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions said,

"Our citizens, armed with nothing but conviction, rushed to Parliament and stood against the martial law troops. Through sheer determination, they broke through the blockade, enabling Parliament to lift the martial law. Once again, it was our citizens who protected democracy."

When Yoon refused to step down and his party refused to allow him to be impeached, hundreds of thousands of Koreans [continued to demonstrate daily](#) for a week. As 200,000 people marched outside, the parliament finally voted to impeach him. The crowd erupted in celebration as the result was announced. Young South Koreans danced, sang, exchanged hugs and waved K-pop light sticks, which had quickly become a symbol of resistance. Yoon was immediately suspended. This was followed by a half year of turmoil in which Yoon was eventually impeached and the opposition was voted into office.

Trump has already sent the Marines into Los Angeles and sent the National Guard to occupy Washington, DC. His minions have arrested Senators, Representatives, judges, and mayors. It would be entirely in character with his longstanding behavior to "discover" a trumped-up conspiracy and use it as a pretext for seizing still more power. Defeating such a coup might require – and might call forth – the kind of social strike that restored democracy to South Korea.

## Serbia: Otpor

After the 2019 election, President Trump attempted to retain the presidency by trying to falsify the results. Fortunately, the forces defending democracy were powerful enough to [defeat his effort](#). The defeat of dictatorship in Serbia in 2000 illustrates how a social strike could be used to protect an election and thereby terminate an autocracy.

In 1988, despite the circumvention of electoral laws, repression of universities, restriction of media, and ethnic cleansing, Serbia under Slobodan Milosevic was still holding elections of a sort. An activist group called Otpor formed around the goal of driving Milosevic from power. It initiated hundreds of small actions of resistance around the country to counter pervasive fear of the regime. Its plan was that activists would compel the regime to call elections; they would create massive turnout for a united opposition candidate; they would join other nongovernmental organizations in carefully monitoring election results so they could document their victory; and they would use mass noncompliance – leading up to a general strike – if and when Milosevic refused to step down.

In 2000, Otpor pushed 18 of Serbia's squabbling opposition parties to form a coalition to support a unity candidate, promising to deliver 500,000 votes to the unity candidate but threatening to put 100,000 protesters at the door of any politician who betrayed the coalition. As elections approached, the regime called Otpor an "illegal terrorist organization"; police raided its offices and shut down independent radio and TV stations; each day an average of seven activists were arrested.



This is a photo of the Overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, also sometimes called the Bulldozer Revolution or the 5 October Overthrow. Photo credit: [WagingNonViolence/Viktor Sekularac](#), Wikipedia Commons, [CC By 4.0](#).



Meanwhile, the opposition organized ten thousand election monitors. After the election they announced exit polls showing Milosevic had been defeated by a 50% to 35% margin. Instead of accepting the results, Milosevic refused to leave office and demanded a run-off election.

Otpor announced a deadline for Milosevic to concede and 200,000 people demonstrated in Belgrade. The opposition called on the population throughout the country to “perform any acts of civil disobedience they have at their disposal.” Miners struck; TV and radio stations opened their airwaves to opposition voices. As the deadline approached, cars and trucks filled the highways heading toward Belgrade. Police put up roadblocks and were issued orders to shoot, but seeing the size of the convoys they abandoned their barricades. Half-a-million people gathered in Belgrade. Police fired tear gas, but when the crowd stood its ground riot police began running away or joining the crowd. The opposition candidate declared victory and Milosevic accepted his defeat. (For a detailed account of Otpor and the defeat of Milosevic, see [Mark Engler and Paul Engler, This Is an Uprising, 2016](#)).

## Philippines: People power

Dictators often use fraudulent elections to establish or maintain their power. The means to do so range from denial of voting rights, to arresting or disqualifying opposition candidates, to trumped-up conspiracies, to armed terrorism. A classic case was the election called in 1986 by Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos – and his defeat by a revolt of almost the whole of Filipino society.

After the 1983 assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino, Jr., Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos met growing protests. Marcos called a presidential election for

February 1986. Aquino’s widow Corazon Aquino was backed by all major opposition parties. Marcos’ campaign included vote-buying and the murder of more than 70 opposition workers. On election day, casting of fake ballots and falsification of returns were widely witnessed.

Marcos claimed victory, but Mrs. Aquino met with opposition leaders and proposed a long nonviolent campaign of what she dubbed “people power.” Top military officers resigned, withdrew support from Marcos, recognized Aquino as the legitimate winner, and fled to military camps in Manila. The leader of the city’s Roman Catholic Church appealed on nationwide radio for people to nonviolently protect the officers and prevent bloodshed. By midnight 50,000 people surrounded the camps; two days later it was more than a million. Marcos ordered tanks and armored transports to attack. Nuns knelt in front of the tanks and priests climbed on them and led a million protesters – plus soldiers – in prayer. The troops turned back. The next day Marcos ordered another assault, but the commanding officer ordered his troops to return to their base. The military rebels announced that ninety percent of the Armed Forces had defected. Large crowds took over the government television station. The following day Marcos fled the country and [Aquino was inaugurated president](#). Ever since, mass nonviolent direct action has been known around the world as “People power.”

Marcos’ “electoral coup” indicates the level of violence and repression that an autocrat may use in order to perpetuate their power. His opponents’ mobilization of people power shows the possibility of overcoming even such massive repression.



Aquino takes the oath of office before Chief Justice Claudio Teehankee Sr. in Club Filipino, San Juan on February 25, 1986. Photo credit: [Malacañang Palace archives](#), Wikipedia Commons, public domain.

## Puerto Rico: Rickyleaks

Social strikes may be triggered when those in power act in ways that outrage the people and violate widely shared norms. Consider the 2019 “People’s Impeachment” of the governor of Puerto Rico.

On July 13, 2019 a Puerto Rican public interest group, Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (Center for Investigative Journalism), released more than eight hundred pages of online chats between Governor Ricardo Rosselló and eleven of his closest cronies. The chat group members attacked and belittled disabled people, fat people, and gays, including Puerto Rican actor, writer, and pop star Ricky Martin. They made jokes about those who had died from Hurricane Maria. And they revealed corruption and toleration of corruption.

Governor Rosselló criticized the Puerto Rican former speaker of the New York City Council, Melissa Mark-Viverito, saying, “Our people” should “beat up that whore.” When the island’s chief fiscal officer wrote that he was “salivating to shoot” the mayor of San Juan, Rosselló replied: “You’d be doing me a grand favor.”

Dubbed “RickyLeaks,” the revelations caused an instant public outcry. Almost immediately, Puerto Ricans began protesting outside the governor’s mansion calling for Rosselló to resign. #RickyRenuncia (#RickyResign) became an instant hashtag and slogan. Protesters were described as including “unionists, students, socialist groups, unemployed youth, rainbow flag-waving queer and transgender folks, people with disabilities, and elders.” Also spotlighted at marches were a committed group of radical feminists, Colectiva Feminista en Construcción, who had long been campaigning for Rosselló to acknowledge that there was a crisis of violence against women in Puerto Rico.

For three days the crowds swelled. They were overwhelmingly peaceful, but a few plastic bottles and other objects were thrown at the police—possibly by agents provocateurs. Eventually police began arresting protesters and attacking them with tear gas and rubber bullets. That further incited popular outrage.

Major newspapers and leading political figures from all parties joined the call for the governor’s resignation. At eight every evening people throughout the island banged pots and pans from their balconies, windows, and streets in a traditional Latin American *cacerolazo*. The day after the first massive Monday march, three women went to the Department of Motor Vehicles office in a municipality of San Juan and removed the governor’s portrait from the wall in protest, setting off a series of copycat takedowns in other governmental offices around the island.

Meanwhile, the crowds outside the governor’s mansion continued to grow larger every day. Early on the morning of July 23, people from across the island boarded trains and cars bound for the capitol. Schools shut down, San Juan’s largest mall shut down, and banks stayed closed in what was widely referred to as a general strike. A march shut down miles of the Las Américas highway. Protesters at the governor’s mansion performed mass yoga and read aloud the 889 pages of chats. Eventually an estimated half million people demonstrated for the governor’s ouster. One-third of the entire population of Puerto Rico participated in the movement.

Facing what appeared a nonviolent insurrection of virtually the entire Puerto Rican people and a threat of impeachment by the legislature, just before midnight Rosselló posted a resignation message on Facebook. Celebrations across San Juan lasted all night. Rosselló was deposed as governor less than two weeks after RickyLeaks became public. These events became known as the “[People’s Impeachment](#).”

These examples illustrate the possibility of using social strikes to defeat authoritarian regimes and outrageous behavior by those in power. They also indicate that there is no off-the-shelf model for social strikes. The conditions that give rise to them are varied, although they usually include severe repression and growing popular discontent. Social strikes grow out of extreme grievances and deep anger at the regime. Sudden



Protesters on July 25, 2019, celebrate in Puerto Rico following the resignation of Governor Ricardo Rosselló. Photo credit: [Daryana Rivera](#), Wikipedia Commons, [CC By 4.0](#).



“trigger events” may kick them off. (See Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is an Uprising* for a discussion of “[trigger events](#)”.) While preparation can be helpful, sensitivity to the state of current popular feeling is also crucial.

## Chapter 2: Social Strikes in American History

What can we do if MAGA authoritarianism so undermines democratic governance that it cannot be successfully challenged by conventional means? In many other countries, tyrannies have been overthrown by nonviolent mass popular uprisings. This commentary scours US history for examples of “social strikes” – mass strikes, general strikes, and other large-scale nonviolent actions – that shed light on the possibilities and difficulties of using such forms of action to challenge Trump’s burgeoning autocracy.

Tyrannical regimes from Serbia to the Philippines and from South Korea to Brazil have been brought down by large-scale nonviolent revolts that made society ungovernable. Could such social strikes play a significant role in countering Trump’s developing autocracy?



Female tailors on strike, New York City, February 1910. Photo credit: [The U.S. National Archives](#), Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.

From the outset of the Trump regime, calls for mass disruptive action started coming from unlikely places, like Anthony Romero, executive director of the ACLU, an organization normally associated with legal action through the courts. When Romero was asked in an interview what would happen if the Trump administration systematically defied court orders, he [replied](#), “Then we’ve got to take to the streets in a different way. We’ve got to shut down this country.” Similarly, senior Democratic representative Jim McGovern [said](#), “We can’t just sit back and let our democracy just fall apart. What we need to think about are things like maybe a national strike across this country.” Sara Nelson, head of the Association of Flight Attendants, [said](#) that American workers – no matter what they do or what sector they are in – now have very few options but to “join together to organize for a general strike.” (Nelson led the organizing for a national general strike that successfully deterred Trump’s attempt to shut down the government in his first term.) On the mass calls of anti-MAGA groups the question of general strikes and other mass nonviolent popular action is constantly raised.

Calling for general strikes is a staple of the radical toolkit. (I’ve made questionable efforts to call two or three myself over the past half-century.) But why has the idea of such mass actions suddenly appeared on the lips of such a wide range of people? There are three principal reasons:

- ▶ The wide range of people being harmed by the MAGA juggernaut gives credibility to actions based on wide public participation.
- ▶ The demolition of key institutions of democracy, constitutionalism, and the rule of law is threatening to leave few alternatives to popular uprising.
- ▶ The failure of the leadership of the Democratic Party to effectively oppose the emerging MAGA tyranny has led to despair about resistance within the institutions of representative government.

These undeniable realities are forcing people to think in unaccustomed ways. Are there precedents in US history from which they can learn?

## Social Strikes, Mass Strikes, and General Strikes

“Social strike” is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of activities that use the withdrawal of cooperation and mass disruption to affect governments and social structures. Although labor and social movements in the US have sometimes engaged in mass action and local general strikes, the US has little tradition of using popular “civil resistance” for the defense of democracy.

The U.S. has seen at least half-a-dozen phases of intense class conflict like those the German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg called “periods of mass strike.” These often involved popular action that went far beyond, though usually including, the withdrawal of labor power that conventionally defines a strike. Mass strikes have included general strikes, mass picketing, occupation of workplaces and government buildings, nonviolent direct action, shutdowns of commerce, blocking of traffic, and other disruption of everyday activities. Mass strikes have often been met with severe repression and at times involved violent conflict with company guards, police, state militias, and the US Army.

The U.S. has also seen a handful of actions that fit the classical definition of a “general strike” as a coordinated work stoppage by trade unions in many different sectors.

The closest the US has come to a national general strike was in 1886, when a strike for the eight-hour day became a general strike in Chicago and some other locations. Since then, there have been a handful of general strikes in individual cities, for example Seattle in 1919, San Francisco in 1934, and Oakland, California and Stamford, Connecticut in 1946. They have all been sympathetic strikes to support particular unions in struggles with their employers.

Such union-called general strikes, however, have been a rarity in U.S. labor history. American unions are bound by laws specifically designed to prevent them from taking part in strikes about issues outside their own workplace, such as sympathy strikes and political strikes. In most cases their contracts include “no-strike” language that bans them from striking during the contract. Unions that violate these prohibitions are subject to crushing fines and loss of bargaining rights. Their leaders can be – and have been – packed off to jail.

Historically, American unions have often opposed their members’ participation in strikes that union officials have not authorized because such leaders wished to exercise a monopoly of authority over their members’ collective action. US unions have often disciplined and sometimes supported the firing and blacklisting of workers who struck without official authorization. As a result, unions have often deterred their members from participating in mass strike actions even when the rank and file wanted to strike.

Strikes for specifically political purposes, like affecting legislation or deposing political leaders, are common in other countries. In March 2025 alone, there were general strikes in Belgium, Argentina, Serbia, and Korea – all directed against government austerity policies or, in the case of Korea, unconstitutional seizure of government power. But such political strikes have been a rarity in the U.S.

A unique US political strike was conducted by West Virginia coal miners in 1969 demanding that the state legislature pass a law to provide compensation for victims of black lung disease. The strike was opposed by the United Mine Workers union; its president, Tony Boyle, pledged “The U.M.W.A. will not abridge the rights of mine operators in running the mines. We follow the judgment of the coal operators, right or wrong.” Miners encouraged research by sympathetic doctors, then established the Black Lung Association, which some miners came to refer to as “our union away from the union.” The strike began when a West Virginia miner, fed up with the lack of progress on health and safety conditions, spilled his water out on the ground – the



Photo credit Workers’ agitation as portrayed in Strike by [Mihály Munkácsy \(1895\)](#), Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.



traditional appeal to other miners to join a strike. Within five days [the wildcat strike](#) spread to 42,000 of West Virginia's 44,000 coal miners. They continued to strike for twenty-three days until the state legislature finally passed a bill to compensate victims of black lung disease.

## General “Strikes”

In recent decades the use of the terms “strike” and “general strike” has often been broadened beyond workers’ withdrawal of labor power to other forms of direct action, such as student strikes and general popular uprisings. There has been some criticism that this broader usage misses the unique power that results from workers’ ability to halt production through the withdrawal of their labor power. But the term “general strike” continues to be widely used for actions that may include striking unions but are based on a wider set of actors, tactics, and objectives. I use the term “social strikes” to include this wider set.

An example was the “general strike” initiated by the Occupy Wall Street movement. In December 2011, Occupy Los Angeles proposed a general strike on May 1 “for migrant rights, jobs for all, a moratorium on foreclosures and peace – and to recognize housing, education and health care as human rights.” Occupy Wall Street in New York echoed with a call for “a day without the 99 percent, general strike and no work, no school, no housework, no shopping.” On May Day, thousands engaged in such protests in dozens of cities including New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Oakland, and Seattle. Several [resulted](#) in street battles and tear gassing by police. While there were many forms of protest, there were few if any walkouts from work.



Occupy Wall Street has effectively shut down the main strip of the financial district, September 28 2011. Photo from [Zuccotti Park](#), Wikipedia Commons, [CC BY 3.0](#).

## “Imagine the Power of Working People...”

Perhaps the most powerful use of a general strike in US history came during Trump’s first term – a general strike that was threatened but achieved its main objectives before it needed to be carried out. In December 2018, President Trump refused to sign any appropriations bill that did not fund his proposed Mexican border wall. The government shut down, putting more than a million employees out of work. TSA officers and air traffic controllers began calling in sick, and the entire airline industry teetered on the edge of collapse. Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants, gave a speech saying, “Go back with the fierce urgency of now to talk with your locals and international unions about all workers joining together – to end this shutdown with a general strike.” She recorded a video message urging her union’s members to get



Sara Nelson at the AFGE convention in 2015. Photo credit: [AFGA](#), Wikipedia Commons, [CC BY 2.0](#).

to the offices of their congressional representatives until the shutdown was resolved. After 35 days of the shutdown, flight delays were cascading. Trump unexpectedly reversed course and agreed to a congressional resolution to fund the government – but only for three weeks.



Airline flight attendants then announced a new website called [generalstrike2019.org](http://generalstrike2019.org) with the banner “Imagine the Power of Working People Standing Together to Demand That Our Government Work for Us.” It called on “all Americans” to “join us in protest at our nation’s airports to show what workers can achieve together.” At the last minute, instead of shutting down the government, Trump declared a state of emergency in order to build his wall. (Both the Democratic House and the Republican Senate soon voted to revoke the emergency.)

Sara Nelson summed up the lesson of the workers’ action: “Our country doesn’t run without the federal workers who make it run.”

Unlike some countries, the US does not have a tradition of using mass strikes, general strikes, political strikes, and other forms of social strikes as a means to resist and overcome government tyranny. But these examples give some hints about how such movements can arise and be effective. The great periods of mass strike in American history show a process of working-class self-mobilization that could provide a seedbed for social strikes against tyranny. The various citywide general strikes show the potential for union-led general strikes where enough workers belong to unions and unions are willing to play such a role. The effective threat of general strikes to end and avert government shutdowns in 2019 shows their potential power and reveals that their possibility is more than a pipedream.

## Chapter 3: Social Strikes vs. MAGA Tyranny

What if MAGA rule so dismantles the institutions of representative democracy that normal institutional processes are insufficient to overcome tyranny? Around the world, general strikes, “people power” uprisings, and other forms of “social strikes” have overthrown violent, armed dictatorships. What conditions might put social strikes on the agenda in the United States?

An authoritarian takeover is under way in the US, complete with the arrest of opposition political leaders, unrestrained executive usurpation, and lawless physical violence and kidnapping by masked, unidentified, armed federal agents. As detailed in Chapter 1, forms of mass nonviolent “people power” uprising have forestalled or reversed such takeovers in many other countries, ranging

from the Philippines, to Serbia, to South Korea. Yet as we saw in Chapter 2, the United States has little tradition of using such social strikes to oppose tyranny. Could social strikes nonetheless play a significant role in countering Trump’s developing autocracy?

What conditions put social strikes on the agenda?

- ▶ Growing disaffection of the population leading to a “great repudiation” by a large majority. As a study a century ago noted, “strike conditions are conditions of mind.” Social strikes are unlikely to happen before a large proportion of the population are enraged at the MAGA tyranny, dubious that more moderate forms of action will suffice, and willing to take personal and institutional risks to oppose it.
- ▶ Growing self-organization and capacity to act by the movement-based opposition and forces of social self-defense more broadly. This involves cooperation among national organizations and networks. Even more important is local organization, formal or informal, that is able to act and coordinate with others. Such networks need to be able to persist despite pervasive repression.



St. Louis, Missouri Protest 2/1/2025 against the deportation policies of the Trump administration. Photo credit: [Sharon Mollerus](#), Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY 2.0](#).

- ▶ Actions by the movement-based opposition that win wide popular support and participation. “Exemplary actions” that visibly oppose the harm the regime is doing and show that people can stand up and resist it can help lay the groundwork for mass participation in social strikes.
- ▶ Internal conflicts within the regime. As Abraham Lincoln (and the Bible) observed, “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” A divided regime is less able to engage in a strategy of either consistent repression or of manipulative concessions.
- ▶ Undermined pillars of support. Every regime depends on the support of its supporters, whether that takes the form of campaign contributors, propagandists, or soldiers, police, or other agents of repression.
- ▶ Disaffection in the instruments of repression. Turning points in civil resistance in the Philippines, Serbia, and many other cases came when police and soldiers opposed a coup or refused to fire on protestors.
- ▶ Lack of concessions or reforms from the regime. It is a truism that the powerful defeat challenges to their power through a combination of repression and concession. A ruling force may appear strong because it never backs down, but in the long-term such pig-headedness is likely to force more and more of society into opposition.
- ▶ Ineffectiveness of other forms of opposition. Many people, quite reasonably, will prefer conventional forms of institutional resistance to ameliorate their conditions rather than undertake risky ventures like social strikes. The failure of less drastic forms of resistance often lays the groundwork for social strikes.

Clearly, such conditions for social strikes do not currently exist in the US. However, there are harbingers that may point toward the emergence of such conditions. For example, millions of people have participated in a series of days of action opposing MAGA autocracy and its gestapo tactics, its decimating of food, housing, and healthcare for millions of Americans, and its destruction of our climate and environment. Polls demonstrate that a majority of the public has increasingly opposed such Trump initiatives.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has been riven by firings, resignations, and other signs of internal conflict; the MAGA movement was sharply divided by the US bombing of Iran and the concealment of documents about Jeffrey Epstein. While many universities, law firms, and other institutions have caved in to Trump’s demands, others are moving to public opposition. Some key elements of support for the Trump regime have gone into opposition. Disaffection was widely reported among the National Guards and Marines sent to repress the people of Los Angeles and Washington, DC. Despite the growth of public opposition, the Trump/MAGA modus operandi seems to have little or no role for concessions to placate opponents or win back disillusioned neutrals and supporters. Although all of these factors might provide favorable conditions for a reinvigorated opposition in the political arena, the leadership of the Democratic Party has so far failed to provide such an opposition.



Demonstrators calling for the Epstein files to be released. No Kings Day DC 10-18-2025. Photo Credit: [Geoff Livingston](#), Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0.

Social strikes could result from actions by the regime and its supporters or from initiatives by the opposition that stimulate mass popular action. Mark and Paul Engler write in their book [This Is an Uprising](#) that “a strategy of nonviolent escalation can sometimes set off historic upheavals of their own.” They offer numerous examples, including Gandhi’s “salt marches” that mobilized India against British imperialism; Rosa Parks’ refusal to go to the back of the bus in segregated Montgomery in 1955, which triggered the Montgomery bus boycott and helped start the entire civil rights revolution; and the protest suicide of a Tunisian fruit seller that set off the ouster of the Tunisian dictatorship and the start of the “Arab Spring.”



In two of the four case studies in Chapter 1 above, social strikes in the Philippines in 1986 and Serbia in 2000 were a response to efforts to perpetuate authoritarian rule by stealing elections. The 2024 social strike in South Korea was in response to an attempted presidential coup. Puerto Rico's 2019 social strike was a response to the disclosure of outrageous behavior by top officials that violated a wide range of shared norms. Social strikes can also be triggered by outrageous violence on the part of the regime.

All of these cases illustrate Gandhi's maxim that even the most powerful cannot rule without the cooperation and/or acquiescence of the ruled. In all these cases, popular mobilization and the threat of general social disruption were so great that the autocrat's supporters abandoned or turned against him and forced him to resign.

The timelines for such scenarios are largely unpredictable. The popular mobilizations in the Philippines and Serbia built for many months. Those in South Korea and Puerto Rico responded to sudden events and removed their targets within weeks.

Such events are full of unknown unknowns. While preparing for what can be anticipated is valuable, it is no substitute for constantly keeping watch and experimentally "testing the waters" to see what is actually happening in people's hearts and minds.

Today's expressions of popular disaffection from Trump and MAGA do not guarantee that social strikes will become possible, that they will occur, or that they will succeed. But they do provide good reason to consider them as a possible strategic horizon for the growing movement for social self-defense.

## Chapter 4: Laying the Groundwork for Social Strikes

Mass people power uprisings, general strikes, and other forms of withdrawal of popular acquiescence in tyranny have established or restored democracy in many countries. As we saw in the previous chapter, while the conditions for such "social strikes" are far from mature in the US at present, a time may come when they are both necessary and possible. How can that eventuality be prepared for?

The conditions under which social strikes might occur in the US are mostly unknowable.

So preparation can't be for a specific type of event or action. We must be prepared for a wide range of possibilities. For example, a union-led general strike is unlikely but possible. A challenge to authorities led by the movement-based opposition might swell into a social strike. Or unbearable conditions might generate a sudden and unexpected uprising from below.

Similarly, there is no predicting how those in power would respond to a social strike. Repression is almost certain, but its forms, extent, and success are not; martial law and shooting down demonstrators in the street are surely not beyond their limits. Conversely, under sufficient pressure regimes often negotiate, as happened for example in the roundtable discussions between the Polish government and the Solidarity union that ended authoritarian rule in Poland in 1989. Challenges to authoritarian regimes can end in their surrender, often in the form of resignation, flight, or arrest of top officials. They can also end in collapse, for example in the melting away of Serbian police and military forces on which the regime depended.

Although social strikes often seem to emerge suddenly and unexpectedly, they are frequently preceded by less visible organizing and smaller-scale actions. With the Democratic Party currently failing to effectively play the role of an opposition party, there is an important role for a "non-electoral opposition" that can mobilize those



No Kings protest at Washington Street/Clark Street in Chicago, June 14, 2025. Photo credit: [AlphaBeta135](#), Wikimedia Commons, [CC0 1.0 Universal](#).



harmed by MAGA, identify common interests, unify their programs and actions, and articulate alternatives. A movement-based opposition has developed since Trump's election, exemplified by the participation of millions in protest days of action like Hands Off!, MayDayStrong, and No Kings Day, and the mass civil resistance to ICE raids and National Guard occupation in Los Angeles and around the country. That movement-based opposition is part of a developmental process that could, depending on circumstances, culminate in social strikes. Indivisible's [One Million Rising](#), which it describes as "a national effort to train one million people in the strategic logic and practice of non-cooperation," could be a step in preparing the participants in mass protests for social strikes.

On-going social self-defense can progressively incorporate elements of noncooperation and disruption that evolve toward social strikes and serve as living representations of their potential power. They can combine strikes with non-workplace actions like boycotts, commercial shutdowns, mass picketing, blockades, occupations, and civil disobedience. Such actions will need to constantly seek the "sweet spot" between effective disruption of MAGA oppression and alienation of forces that might otherwise be won over.

Successful social strikes generally depend on support from sources of power that go far beyond established social movements. They require – and often acquire – support from sectors like educational, medical, and legal professionals; civil society institutions like universities, hospitals, and religious denominations; and political forces including local and state governments, legislators, judges, jurors, sectors of government agencies and security forces, and segments of political parties. Such forces often join social strikes not out of fondness for social movements, but from a growing understanding that eliminating an autocracy may be necessary for their own self-preservation and the preservation of society itself – for social self-defense.

A "general strike" is often advocated as a means to resist MAGA tyranny; calls for a general strike abound in anti-MAGA web meetings and a "general strike" [website](#) has received tens of thousands of pledges to join a general strike if one occurs.

A general strike has conventionally been defined as a coordinated work stoppage by trade unions in many different sectors. In a variety of countries general strikes are relatively common, but as indicated in Chapter 2 above, they have been a rarity in the US. Any proposal for a general strike must also take into account the fact that fewer than 10 percent of US workers are currently members of unions.



Homepage of <https://generalstrikeus.com>

While an effective social strike will certainly require wide participation by union members, US unions are unlikely to join as a bloc – for example through the AFL-CIO – in a social strike; the reasons for this are explained in Chapter 2. Union participation can, however, be promoted in advance by resolutions and educational campaigns. For example, in the midst of the 2011 "Wisconsin Uprising," the 90 unions belonging to the Madison region's South Central Federation of Labor voted to set up a mechanism to promote discussion and education about general strikes.

A recent article titled "[To Stop Trump, Unions Need Joint Campaigns and a Shared Vision](#)" by Jackson Potter, vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union and Alex Caputo-Pearl, former president of United Teachers Los Angeles, lays out a strategy for drawing organized labor more deeply into the struggle against Trump and MAGA.

"We must build up to strike readiness through greater organizing and collaboration by large locals and labor councils, and through escalating direct actions involving members and non-members alike.

As Trump's authoritarianism escalates, we have to broaden our tent to include labor-community coalitions. We have to draw on a range of tactics, like consumer boycotts, sickouts, and slow-downs. We need to reenergize union structures at the national, state, and local levels and line up political and contract demands.

We can now conceive of a new period of social strikes: “mass strikes, general strikes, or other large-scale nonviolent actions,” [as Jeremy Brecher of the Labor Network for Sustainability argues](#).

To pull this off in short order will require strategic convenings, regional meetups with key players across the labor movement and in powerful community organizations, and an orientation to pressuring politicians and corporate titans to reject creeping authoritarianism.”

Can unions plan for a general strike in the future that may not violate the terms of their contracts? The UAW has called to align all union contract terminations for May 1, 2028 as a way to promote united action and perhaps even a general strike by circumventing the prohibition on striking during a union contract. That call has already promoted wider discussion of general strikes in labor and social movement circles.

Of course, different unions striking at the same time does not guarantee a united front around issues of common concern: The first half of 1946 saw nearly 3 million workers simultaneously on strike in auto, steel, coal, railroad, and many other important industries, but unions pursued separate demands, made little effort to pool their strength, and reached settlements with little consideration of the impact on those remaining on strike. To avoid such a fate, simultaneous strikes by different unions will need common demands and a solidarity that keeps them united through the course of the struggle.

Self-organization at the grassroots will be a crucial ingredient for any social strike. This will be especially so under conditions of serious repression, when unions and other large-scale organizations are likely to be under immobilizing attack.



WTO protests in Seattle, November 30, 1999. Pepper spray is applied to the crowd. Photo credit: [Steve Kaiser](#), Nov. 30, 1999, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

Social strikes against MAGA tyranny are unlikely to follow a preconceived plan. They require flexible improvisation. But that doesn’t mean there is no way to prepare for them. The best preparation is to have “cadres in place” – grassroots activists who understand the need for and possibility of social strikes. To paraphrase Flight Attendants Union president Sara Nelson, these are people who are already engaged in “coordinated solidarity” – and who are “ready to strike.”

## Chapter 5: Timelines

Discussion of general strikes, nonviolent people power, popular uprisings, and similar forms of mass revolt has become widespread in the movement to resist the oncoming MAGA tyranny. The use of social strikes – mass action by a whole population – to overcome authoritarian regimes in Poland, the Philippines, Brazil, South Korea, and elsewhere lends credibility to such an approach. While today the U.S. is far from conditions that might lead to social strikes, the fact that they are even under discussion makes it worthwhile to consider what they might be like and how to conduct them.

It is difficult to envision concretely what social strikes would mean in the context of the struggle against Trumpian autocracy. We can presume that growing rage at Trump’s depredations may manifest itself at some point in some form, but what form will depend on many unpredictables: what the regime will do, what the people will do; what third parties will do. What is happening under the visible surface may be unknown and even unknowable.

Social strikes could look like the extended periods of labor conflict that Rosa Luxemburg dubbed “[mass strikes](#)” which have occurred at least half-a-dozen times in U.S. history. Or they might resemble the mass political uprisings, such as those described in Chapter 1 above, that have removed authoritarian dictatorships around the world. They might involve a period of mass strike growing into a political uprising. They are likely to

combine features of planned action and unplanned responses to emerging conditions. They are likely to exhibit both strategic and emotive behavior.

By far the two largest outpourings of popular protest in recent decades in the U.S. were Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter. Hardly anybody anticipated either of these movements, and the forms they took were very different from each other and from previous forms of action in the U.S. or, indeed, elsewhere in the world. In such a context of unpredictability, preconceived plans and assumptions can not only be wrong, they can be a disorganizing force. Any attempt to shape such events needs to start by recognizing their probable uniqueness.



No Kings Downtown Miami, 18 October 2025.  
Photo credit: [Phillip Pessar](#), Wikimedia Commons,  
[CC BY 4.0](#).

Social strikes express power that results from the fundamental dependence of ruling groups on those they rule – a reality emphasized by both Marx and Gandhi. Social strikes cause a problem for the owners and managers of the businesses and institutions that they shut down. They appeal to and mobilize a wide public by embodying its values and interests in opposition to the regime. They demonstrate that the authorities depend on the cooperation and acquiescence of those they rule, and that they are vulnerable to the non-cooperation of the population.

These forms of efficacy can sometimes interfere with each other. 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.

Vigilante violence, police and military attacks, abductions, persecutions, prosecutions, slanders, and similar tactics are part of the normal playbook of authoritarians in power. Social strikes in the MAGA era will surely be met by such repression. If people have the necessary courage, they can not only stand up to such repression, they can use “political jujitsu” to define it as proof of the authoritarian, anti-democratic character of those perpetrating it.

Social Self-Defense against a creeping or galloping MAGA coup is most likely to succeed through a combination of electoral and social strike methods. [The overcoming of authoritarian regimes](#) in the Philippines, Serbia, and elsewhere, while accomplished under circumstances far different from those in the U.S. today, provide examples of how they can be combined.

The detailed timelines of social strikes cannot be known in advance. They are likely to grow out of a gradual and not always visible buildup of harm – and resentment at harm. This is already occurring in Trump’s America. It could lead to a series of escalating struggles, possibly punctuated by defeats or by concessions generating temporary quiescence. Popular opposition could also diminish as a result of repression, MAGA counter-maneuvers, a sense of futility, or other “unknown unknowns.” A period of apparent quiescence with a rising sense of grievance might eventuate in a sudden explosion of popular rage and a mass uprising. Whether gradually or rapidly, social strikes will need to develop the power necessary to reduce MAGA power enough to bring an end to its rule -- through elections, collapse of political support, or social disruption.

There is a difference between a protest action, lasting perhaps a day or two, and an open-ended struggle for power. An effective one-day general strike would be a valuable augmentation of the marches, demonstrations, days of action, and other protests that are already in progress. Beyond that, in countries ranging from the Philippines to Tunisia to Korea, protracted social strikes have been the ultimate means to overcome tyranny.



## Chapter 6: Organization

Social strikes are most likely to involve a combination of existing and newly emerging forms of organization. They often require coordination of both formal organizations and rapidly improvised informal ones.

A cluster of organizations have taken the lead in organizing the Hands Off, Mayday, and No Kings days of action. The most prominent are Indivisible, 50501, and MaydayStrong, all highly decentralized networks with minimal national structure, originally developed in the first and

second Trump presidencies respectively to oppose his rising authoritarianism. They have coordinated with more than 200 other organizations; without a formal organizational umbrella or coalition structure, they have so far been able to agree on program and strategy for the national days of action.

Immediately after the October No Kings Day, sponsoring organizations announced a [No Kings Alliance](#), “a nationwide rapid response network built to meet this moment: coordinating across our movement to push back in real time against authoritarian attacks.” Indivisible co-founder Ezra Levin [told a mass call](#) with thousands of participants, “The alliance is an effort to coordinate the full diversity of our movement and use the leverage that we have with the people power we’ve collectively built.”

Experience indicates that [informal coordination can be effective in resisting MAGA](#) authoritarianism. Expanded national coordination can play a further role in social strikes, but it will need to develop new capacities in order to do so. It will need to be able to:

- ▶ respond to rapidly changing states of the public mind
- ▶ function despite repression
- ▶ deepen its coordination, developing a common strategy and becoming able to act together on a daily basis
- ▶ “on-board” new constituencies and engage in new modes of action
- ▶ avoid factional splits

Labor unions are almost always a component of social strikes. However, in the U.S. the leading labor federations have never led a general strike – indeed, as we have seen in Chapter 2 above, they have almost always opposed them. Organized labor’s participation in social strikes will therefore most likely depend on the development of [networks of activists within and across unions](#) who are willing to lead or join in emerging actions. They can also endeavor to draw official union structures and leaders into the struggle.

Self-organization at the grassroots level will be a crucial ingredient for any social strike. This will be especially so under conditions of serious repression, when unions and other large-scale organizations are likely to be under immobilizing attack.

Historically, self-organization for U.S. social strikes in the absence of large-scale union leadership has taken a variety of forms. One is small “affinity groups” that send representatives to “spokescouncils” – highly effective in the 1999 “Battle of Seattle” that shut down the city of Seattle and the World Trade Organization’s founding convention. Another is “workers councils” where workgroups send delegates to a representative body. This is particularly important where unions don’t exist or are unwilling to act. Large wildcat strikes like the 1970 postal wildcat have sometimes been coordinated in this way. A third is “general assemblies” like those that played a central role in the Occupy Wall Street movement, open to anyone and often moderated by trained facilitators.



Second No Kings Protest in Chico, California, 18 October 2025. Photo Credit: [Frank Schulenburg](#), Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

There are currently many potential seeds for such self-organization. Pro-democracy, anti-MAGA days of action have been organized in more than two thousand seven hundred locations. These are generally sponsored and organized by local coordinating groups that may or may not be affiliated with one or another national organization but that often coordinate locally across organizational lines. In many cases they have developed activities far more continuous than the periodic national days of action. And many are pursuing more disruptive forms of action. They can begin to define one of their roles as building support and preparing for social strikes.

In a context of repression, multiple forms of communication within a movement are essential. Internet and 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, and other media beyond the reach of repressive authorities. 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.

## Chapter 7: Goals

Sometimes there is so much rage at a tyrannical government that millions of people are willing to participate in general strikes and popular nonviolent uprisings – what I have called “social strikes” because they represent noncooperation and disruption by an entire society.

Social strikes have brought down authoritarian rule in many countries around the world. Conditions for such action do not yet exist in the United States, but the growing wrath of the American people against Donald Trump’s authoritarian takeover make such actions increasingly plausible. Conducting such actions will require defining goals, selecting tactics, and bringing the struggle to a successful conclusion.



A Black Lives Matter die-in over rail tracks, protesting police brutality in Saint Paul, Minnesota, September 20, 2015. Photo credit: [Fibonacci Blue](#), Wikimedia Commons, [CC by 2.0](#).

Military strategists distinguish “wars of position” and “wars of movement.” Social strikes are “wars of movement” par excellence. Many of the habits of thought and action developed in more normal times are counterproductive and need to be put in a [beance](#) during [what Mark and Paul Engler have called “the whirlwind”](#) of sudden and unexpected popular revolt.

Social strikes generally grow out of burgeoning discontent about what is, not from pre-defined and agreed-to objectives about what should be in the future -- think of Black Lives Matter. While some participants may have pre-formed goals (often unaligned or conflicting with each other), the goals of an emerging social strike movement usually need to be established in the course of the struggle.

This requires a willingness by disparate constituencies to adapt to the goals emerging for the movement as a whole. A prefigurative example might be the way many currents came together around a common set of demands in the Hands Off!, MayDay, and No Kings national days of action. Such a confluence of goals requires a formal or informal process for discussing, 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.

In defining the goals of social strikes several criteria need to be coordinated. Their demands need to represent broad objectives that appeal to a broad public. They need to unify different sectors of the population, such as private employees, government employees, women, educated middle class, business owners, rural poor, urban poor, etc. They also need to unify different movements, such as climate, racial justice, labor, immigrant, etc. They need to embody broadly accepted norms. These may be norms widely held in the society, such as support for democracy; they often are embodied in the existing constitution but denied in practice by the

regime. Again, the 2025 national days of action provide good examples of such unifying demands, combining protecting democracy with protection of immigrants, labor, women, LGBTQ+ people, kids, the elderly, the disabled, and others.

It is often possible in a social strike to combine such broad social goals with specific demands by more specific groups that can be met by local officials and immediate employers – release of prisoners, permitting of demonstrations, shorter hours, wage increases, or whatever is important to the participants. Broad goals that cannot be realized immediately can be combined with more immediate goals that the regime can grant without completely undermining its own authority. For example, the authorities can refuse to grant full freedom of speech, assembly, and press, but can agree to let political prisoners out of jail and restrain vigilante groups.

In many social strikes against tyrannies the unifying goal, often reduced to a single demand, is removal of the top government officials from office. In many situations such a demand may be the best or even the only way to develop the unified power necessary to overcome an authoritarian ruler.

However, as [a study of popular uprisings over the 2010s](#) indicates, such a narrow demand can leave a successful uprising with little consensus about how to go forward from initial success. Or it can simply restore a less terrible but still unsatisfactory status quo ante. The drive for unity around one or limited specific goals needs to be combined with vigorous discussion of longer-range programs by constituent elements of the social strike coalition. A good example of how to do this was provided by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and other major unions which declared a general strike against president Yoon Suk-yeol's attempted martial law coup, while also demonstrating for ["Beyond Yoon" demands](#) for just working conditions and public policies to ensure quality public services for all Koreans.

## Chapter 8: Tactics

Social strikes can use a wide assortment of tactics. For a compendium of such tactics, I believe there is still no source more useful than Gene Sharp's magisterial three-volume opus *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*. [1] The second volume, *The Methods of Nonviolent Action*, presents 198 different forms of action that have been used by nonviolent movements. A few more have been invented since it was published.

Social strikes can take a lot of different forms. They can be centered in unionized industries or in urban districts or regions. They can take the form of a single uprising or general strike or of "rolling" actions in which different groups strike or otherwise disrupt and then return to work or normal life. They can be "quickie" actions lasting a day or even less, or open-ended actions that last until victory, defeat, or explicit compromise.

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

Social Strikes often include strikes and general strikes, discussed at length in previous chapters. Social strikes have often involved occupation of workplaces (the Polish general strike that gave birth to the Solidarity union 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 authority, making them less willing to compromise.



2012 Laureate Gene Sharp. Right Livelihood Award  
2012 - Stockholm 2012 Photo: [Wolfgang Schmidt](#)



Social strike tactics need to be selected on the basis of many considerations. For example, what are people willing to do given the present state of public opinion and the movement? How will the wider public respond to different tactics? What responses are different tactics likely to provoke from the authorities? What kinds of outcomes (e.g. showdowns, negotiations, shifts in public opinion, splits and shifts in attitude of the authorities) are different tactics likely to generate?

The ability to shift tactics can be a great asset. When a movement is locked into a particular tactic, its opponents often try to break it by raising the cost and pain of continuing. This can be thwarted if the movement is able to shift tactics on its own initiative. One of the reasons for the demise of Occupy Wall Street was its inability to redirect its energies from continuing the occupation of Zuccotti Park, even when it recognized that police eviction could no longer be effectively prevented. When the authorities are willing to shoot down large numbers of people in the street, staying at home or occupying workplaces may be the best alternative to submission.

Social strikes often benefit from leadership by example. If one group is ready to take an action and face the risks it entails, their initiative may well encourage and inspire others to do the same. This can be a way to escape 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 social strike. They can also introduce new themes and tactics into an on-going struggle. [The Tesla Takedowns and the blockading of downtown Baltimore](#) by trade unionists during the MayDay 2025 day of action illustrate the potential of such exemplary actions.

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 help the authorities paint a portrait of themselves as out-of-control hooligans attempting to maintain their own power through illegitimate violence. In such a context, even members of the public who do not fully support the goals of the movement can be mobilized around opposition to its illegitimate repression. An example is the way labor and public opinion swung to support Occupy Wall Street in response to a brutal police attack on peaceful demonstrators crossing a bridge – resulting in an extended pause in police efforts to evict the Occupy encampment.

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 to escalate tactics. If the authorities brutalize 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 further repression.

Choosing the right tactics largely depends on grasping their real context.



## Chapter 9: Endgames

Social strikes represent the withdrawal of cooperation and acquiescence by a whole society, manifested for example in general strikes and mass popular “people power” uprisings. Previous chapters have examined many aspects of the conduct of social strikes. But how do social strikes succeed?

Repressive authorities famously try a long string of tactics, including ridicule, ostracism, division, harassment, and repression, to defeat a movement. Only when all these have failed to quell the movement are the authorities likely to recognize that they will have to make concessions or face the threat of movement action without abatement. 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.



F.W. de Klerk, left, the last president of apartheid-era South Africa, and Nelson Mandela, his successor, wait to speak in Philadelphia, 1993. Photo Credit: [Photographs in the Carol M. Highsmith Archive](#), Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.; de Klerk and Mandela were in Philadelphia in 1993, to receive America's Liberty Medal for effecting the transition to black majority rule. Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.

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 once indicated, consists of conducting small offensives within the context of a broader pull-back. Successful retreats make an opponent's victories hollow. They establish that, despite repression, challenge from the movement will not go away. As [Gene Sharp once wrote](#), “Massive stubbornness can have powerful political consequences.”

Sharp pointed out that most movements succeed less by overwhelming their opponents than by making their opponents -- and the supporters on whom their opponents depend -- conclude that the price of continuing the struggle is too high. That often takes the form of the emergence of “peace factions” among the authorities. Promoting such splits is a key strategic objective for social strikes. That requires that potential “peace faction” elements within the establishment not be driven into the arms of the “war faction.” That may mean that the possibility of a relatively peaceful and amicable resolution must be held out, even in the face of repression.

How do successful social strikes end? Of course, autocrats can simply resign or accede to electoral defeat. But in many instances (like President Trump in 2019) they are unwilling to leave office voluntarily. If the authorities are nonetheless unable to suppress the movement, at some point they are likely to turn to tacit or formal negotiations. In Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe this took the form of the “roundtable 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 may well do so when other alternatives look even worse. While this is hard to imagine with MAGA tyranny, there are many cases when the epithet TACO – Trump Always Chickens Out – has been exemplified.

The idea of negotiations with “the enemy” is always uncomfortable for a social movement. There is always an opportunity for splits and sell-outs. But such negotiations are often part of the way that social movements and social strikes have led to significant 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 for establishing common goals, so that different groups cannot be split off by the offer of narrow concessions. The British did just this to the movement for Indian independence, splitting Hindus and Muslims and leading to the partition of India and Pakistan.

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 occupying 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. For this the movement must 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 direct struggle. To paraphrase Mao, “Fight fight, talk talk.”

## Conclusion: “The power is in our solidarity”

Resisting the rise of tyranny will no doubt require sacrifice. After all, we are dealing with an aspiring tyrant who sends armed, masked agents into farms and restaurants to brutalize workers; endorses the roughing-up and arrest of elected political opponents; and lionizes foreign leaders who shoot down demonstrators in the street. But that sacrifice will not be primarily on behalf of one political party vs. another, of Democrats vs. Republicans. It will be a defense

of democracy – defense of government of the people, by the people, and for the people. Beyond that, it is the protection of that which makes our life together on earth possible. It is defense of the human rights of all people; of the conditions of our earth and its climate that make our life possible; of the constitutional principle that government must be accountable to law; of global cooperation to provide a secure future for our people and planet; and of our ability to live together in our communities, our country, and our world. A MAGA tyranny is a threat to all of us as members of society. Overcoming MAGA usurpation of power is social self-defense.

Social strikes can play a role in the resistance to growing MAGA authoritarianism. But, in the [wise words](#) of Sara Nelson, “A general strike is a tactic, but the power in it is our solidarity.” We should think of social strikes not as ends in themselves but as one possible means to build the solidarity and power that will be necessary to overcome MAGA tyranny.

We can hope that social strikes will not be necessary to limit and ultimately end MAGA tyranny. Accomplishing that goal by less drastic forms of social self-defense inside and outside the electoral system would likely require less risk and less pain. But if other means are unavailing, experience around the world indicates that social strikes may provide a way for people facing authoritarian takeover to establish or reestablish democracy.



## Endnotes

- [1] Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1973). Sharp recognizes both well-organized, intentional campaigns with well-defined leaderships like those of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and most trade union-led strikes, and also more “spontaneous” nonviolent “people power” popular uprisings. He is a strong advocate for the former. While movements with such defined and empowered leadership indeed have advantages, the reality of social strikes is often more like an eruption from below. Nonetheless a great deal can be learned about strategy and tactics even for such “whirlwinds” from Sharp’s work. For understanding the dynamics of uprisings that emerge outside of any kind of centralized control there is no substitute for studying the actual history of a variety of such movements.