

BEATING APATHY

LESSON 5: SWING INTO ACTION



TROUBLEMAKERS TRAINING SERIES



HOW TO USE THIS COURSE

Work together. Organizing isn't a solitary activity. You could read this on your own, but you'll learn more if you talk over each lesson with a buddy—or better yet, a group of co-workers. Along the way, try out the exercises to help you apply the lessons in your own workplace.

Graduate to the book. If you like this free course, you'll love the book it's adapted from, *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*, a step-by-step guide to inspiring your co-workers to action and building power at work. The 47 secrets are distilled from the insights and knowhow of generations of organizers, and illustrated with hundreds of real-life examples and practical tips. This course includes 29 of the 47 numbered secrets—if you want to read the ones you're missing, buy your copy today at labornotes.org/secrets.



Organizing is for everyone. Though this course was written with union members in mind, many of its lessons apply in non-union workplaces, too. But be careful, especially about acting alone. You'll find more safety—and strength—in numbers. Consider contacting a union for help, and check out pages 26-30 of the book *Secrets of a Successful Organizer* for more on your legal rights—or download the free handouts at labornotes.org/secrets.

Follow along. You'll get the most out of the course if you go lesson by lesson. Here is the full list, all available at labornotes.org/beatingsapathy.

- Lesson 1: How to Get Unstuck
- Lesson 2: How an Organizer Talks... and Listens
- Lesson 3: Assemble Your Dream Team
- Lesson 4: Choose Your Battles
- Lesson 5: Swing into Action
- Lesson 6: Expect the Unexpected
- Lesson 7: Always Be Organizing
- Lesson 8: Putting It All Together

Look for These Symbols



SECRETS



**REAL-LIFE
EXAMPLES**



EXERCISES



TIPS

LESSON 5: SWING INTO ACTION



Once you've identified the issue, potential leaders, and your target, you can think about tactics that will get you what you want. This lesson tells how to choose your tactics and deploy them in the right order as part of an escalating campaign.

We'll begin with a story that shows how to start with low-intensity tactics and turn up the heat. It happened in a local that had not been in good shape. Grievances were rare, and union meetings were nonexistent. But a handful of teachers at one school got together and figured out how to get results.

In this lesson, you will learn:

- What happened when Connecticut teachers wore surgical masks to school
- The three basics of a plan
- How social workers organized a 15-minute strike
- Your boss has a weak spot—you just have to find it
- How and why to turn up the heat gradually



HOW TEACHERS BROKE THE MOLD

"Our school was old and had not been well maintained," writes Steve Hinds, who was a teacher in New Haven, Connecticut. "We noticed that many teachers were suffering from sinus problems, headaches, and other respiratory illnesses. A group of teachers met to decide what to do.

"We decided to file a grievance, and got over 90 percent of the teachers to sign it in a single day. While gathering the signatures, we also conducted a health survey, and found that more than 70 percent suffered from symptoms related to air quality.

"There had been little grievance activity for years, so we could start fresh." The teachers formed a Grievance Committee, welcoming anyone. It held weekly meetings, produced a newsletter, and kept in daily contact with the parents' organization.

Using an information request, the committee forced the city to hand over a study of the school's air quality. "The report showed that the city knew there was a mold infestation in our building," Hinds writes.

"Our demands were simple. We wanted the city to do what its own report concluded it should have done six months earlier—fix the roof leaks that let moisture in, remove moldy ceiling tiles, and clean the walls and floors with bleach solution.

"We gave the city a deadline to agree to a reasonable completion date, followed by a walk-through by teachers and parents to inspect the completed work. The city indicated it was working on the problems, but wasn't formally agreeing to anything."

So the teachers decided to organize a meeting with parents. To publicize it, the next day teachers wore surgical masks to school.

"What a day it was," Hinds remembers. "We didn't even need to call the newspapers and TV stations to attract attention. Word got out through student cell phones, and the cameras and reporters were at the school doors by 9 a.m.

"Parents who heard about the masks were calling downtown with their concerns. City officials were furious, and the superintendent showed up to bully us. Most of the teachers simply walked out of this meeting.

"The city agreed to our timetable by the end of the day. The following day, a crew went through the building room by room to create a master list of work to be done. This list led to some 1,000 work orders. More work was done to improve our school building in those few months than had been done in the previous two decades, and health complaints by teachers and students gradually eased."

Through this campaign, Hinds wrote, "we developed leadership and negotiating skills in 15 members who previously had had no experience. And we built credibility with parents, who saw that the union was not interested only in salaries. We went on to form a Contract Organizing Group to pressure the local to fight for smaller classes."



ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

How do we address a problem in the workplace? The usual answer, if we have a union, is to file a grievance, setting paperwork in motion.

But the grievance procedure can be invisible, slow, and fruitless. And many problems aren't technically grievances. They're simply the result of someone else having power over you.

To solve the school mold problem, Steve Hinds and the other teachers started with a grievance—but they didn't end there. They turned up the heat with a series of actions that built their group's unity and confidence, culminating in the day everyone wore surgical masks to school and walked out of a meeting with the superintendent.

Whether or not a grievance is part of our plan, we're more likely to win if we take action on the job. Our actions should be:

- **Visible and public**, so that members are aware of what is taking place and the result.
- **Collective**, involving as many members as possible.
- **Confrontational**, mobilizing members to face the decision-makers who have the power to resolve the problem.

Mobilizing not only gets results, but also shifts power for the next fight.

"Not only does worksite mobilization work, it shifts the power for the next fight," says Hetty Rosenstein, longtime president of a public employees union in New Jersey.

"When workers confront management at the worksite, and as a result they correct something that is wrong, or they improve their conditions, or they get a fired worker reinstated, a power shift occurs right before their eyes.

"It happens in real time and workers witness it. Management holds the power over the situation—and workers take it away."



Dennis Williams, United Steelworkers



15-MINUTE STRIKE

Pennsylvania social workers figured out how to catch management off guard. During negotiations with the state, spokesman Ray Martinez said, “we wanted an activity that would irritate the boss, educate the public, and at the same time get the members psyched up. We decided that we would all take our 15-minute breaks at the same time.”

The union used its phone trees to call members at home. “At the agreed date and time,” Martinez says, “all of our members would get up and walk out of the office. This meant that clients in the office, phone calls, and so on would be placed on hold. In other words, all activity ceased.

“This served a couple of purposes. First, management and clients would get a feel for what it would be like without our services if we were to go on strike. Secondly, we, the members, would be outside of the worksite having outdoor shop meetings and updating the workers on the latest on the negotiations.

“While this was going on, we had picket signs asking drivers to honk their horns to show us their support. The beauty of it all was that this was perfectly legal, so there was nothing management could do.”

At the end of the 15-minute break, everybody went back inside and went back to work.



MAKE A GAME PLAN

Once you've identified a good organizing issue (see Lesson 4), you need a plan of action.

THE THREE BASICS OF A PLAN

- 1. What exactly do you want?** It's amazing how far along folks can be in a campaign without having identified what solution they're after, and whether or not it's winnable. The teachers had clear demands for how the city could fix the mold problem.
- 2. Who has the power to fix the problem?** It's not enough to say "management." Figure out which person in management could say yes to your solution. The teachers zeroed in on decision-makers at the city level.
- 3. Which tactics can work?** Aim your actions to build the pressure on the decision-maker you've identified. Consider how much pressure it will take to win, and where your leverage is.

GETTING BUY-IN

To get people on board, your strategy must be clear and credible—people have to understand it and believe it can work. Practice explaining the plan simply and quickly.



LUNCH TO RULE

On a military base, aircraft maintenance workers would happily interrupt their lunch in order to deal with urgent problems. But in return they had an understanding that, once the problem was solved, they would go back to their sandwiches even though the lunch period had ended.

The situation was mutually acceptable for several years—until a new supervisor came along. We all know how that is. Had to prove himself. Show who's boss. Etc.

Steve Eames, an international rep for the Boilermakers union, explained that the new supervisor insisted that workers take their lunch between 12:00 and 12:30, period.

"So the steward said, 'Okay, we'll play by the rules,'" Eames remembers. The maintenance workers had previously eaten at a lunch table in the work area. But now, when 12 o'clock came, they left and went to a fast-food restaurant on the base. For three or four days they all went as a group, leaving the shop unattended.

One day a plane came in during the half-hour lunch period. No one was there to help bring the plane in, or to check it out. The supervisor had to park the plane by himself.

"The boss went and talked to the steward, and the steward said, 'That's our time, we're at lunch,'" said Eames. "'You got what you wanted.'"

The workers went out for lunch for a couple more days, and then they ended what we might call "lunch to rule." "They didn't want to file a grievance," says Eames, "because the company would have won on the basis of contract language.

"Without anything in writing, it went back to the way it had been before. It empowered the guys. It told the supervisor, we'll be a little flexible if you'll be flexible."

Lunch to rule.



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WHAT HAPPENED?

Why did the supervisor back down?

The aircraft workers discovered that he had a weakness—what was it?



EVERY BOSS HAS A WEAK SPOT



Coalition of Immokalee Workers

Think about where your employer is vulnerable.

Steel production in the late 1800s used to require one crucial step: a 20-minute process called the “blow” that removed impurities, strengthening the metal. It was not unheard of for union members to go to the supervisor at the start of the blow and demand that some important grievance be resolved.

According to old-timers, it was amazing what the company could accomplish in those 20 minutes. These workers had found their employer’s vulnerability—and they used it to make the workplace safer and more humane.

Think about where your employer is vulnerable. For some companies it might be their logo or their image, which they have spent millions of dollars cultivating. For others it might be a bottleneck in the production process, or a weakness in their just-in-time inventory system.



FIND THE WEAK SPOT

What are some of your employer's weak spots?

What actions could you and your co-workers use to make use of those weak spots?



TURN UP THE HEAT

Don't bring out your big guns right away. Start with an easy-to-do activity that won't take a whole lot of commitment on the part of your co-workers. If enough people participate, you've built communication and solidarity. Maybe you've had some fun.

Take the New Haven teachers' fight against mold, for example. They began by gathering signatures on a grievance and doing a health survey. This helped them verify how widely and deeply felt their issue was, and form a network of activists who would lead their co-workers through the campaign.

If you don't achieve your goal through your first step, then you try something that's a bit harder, that pushes the boss a bit more. If necessary, another step could be to threaten to bring in outside pressure or publicity. And so on.

Why escalate gradually?

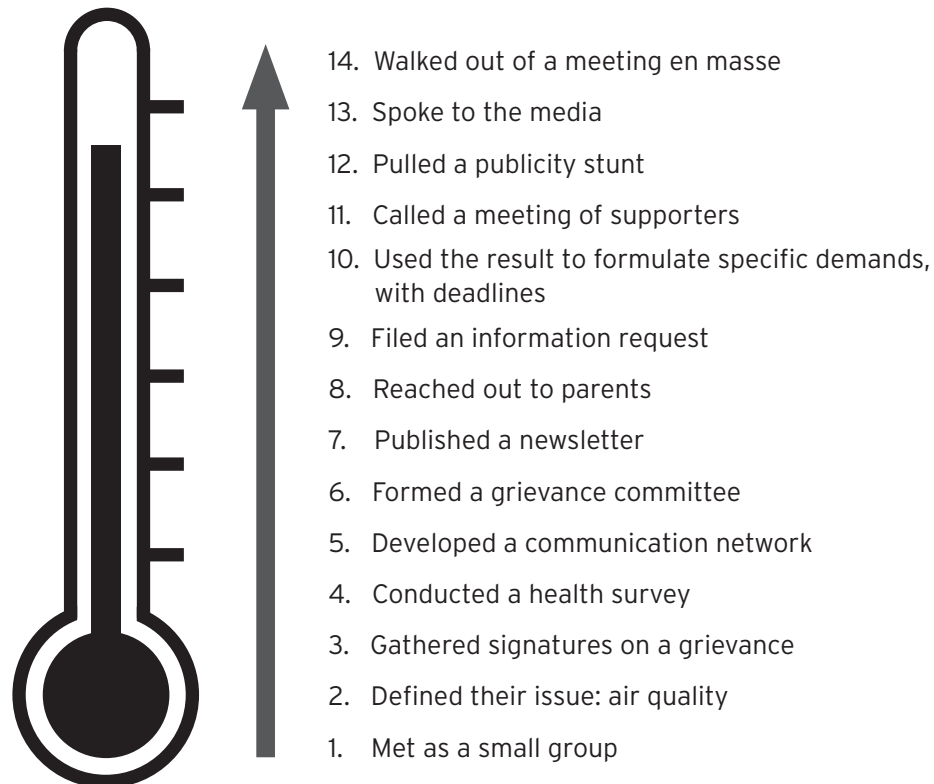
As your actions grow more intense, managers begin to understand you mean business.

- **Take the high road.** By starting small, you show you are reasonable and credible. You *did* try asking politely.
- **It builds your group.** If you start off with low-intensity actions, members who have never said boo to the boss before will be more likely to participate. As your actions get more intense, make sure not to leave people behind.
- **Strength in numbers.** If you leap straight into high-intensity actions and only a few people participate, it's easy for your employer to single them out. With a few illegal disciplines, management can teach everyone the lesson that sticking your neck out means getting your head chopped off. If you start smaller and build, you can achieve greater participation.
- **Each action has a greater impact than the action before.** As your actions get more and more intense, managers begin to understand that you mean business. You also keep them guessing. When supervisors don't know what's going to happen next—that's when they make mistakes. And every time they make a mistake, the balance of power shifts in your direction.
- **Don't play your aces too soon.** If you do your worst first, there's nowhere for your campaign to go but down. It's more effective when managers can see there's a lot more to come—and there's still time to save themselves a headache by giving in.



ACTION THERMOMETER

One way to visualize escalating tactics is to arrange them on a thermometer, with each action “hotter” than the last. Here are the steps the New Haven teachers took to solve the mold problem at their school, beginning from the bottom of the thermometer:



In many cases a survey would be the lowest-intensity task, the one to start with. But in this case teachers were already fired up about the mold issue, and the initial group had no trouble getting them to sign a group grievance.

When the teachers walked out on the superintendent, it showed how far they had come. Their escalating campaign had built up their sense of the justice of their cause, and they were not afraid.

CHECKLIST: CHOOSE TACTICS THAT FIT

- ☐ Does the action relate to your issue?
- ☐ Will it increase the pressure on the decision-maker?
- ☐ Is it simple?
- ☐ Is it visible?
- ☐ Is it timed for effect?
- ☐ Is it new and different—or tried and true?
- ☐ Are enough people ready to do it?
- ☐ How will others react? Will it unify people?
- ☐ How will management react? Could it backfire?
- ☐ Does it violate the law or the contract? If so, are you prepared for the consequences?
- ☐ Will it be fun?



ARRANGE THESE TACTICS ON AN ACTION THERMOMETER

Here's an assortment of tactics that workers have used and loved. Pick an issue in your workplace and imagine you're planning an escalating campaign. Use the blank thermometer (next page), and write in the tactics you might use, beginning at the bottom with the mildest ones.

Which tactics are "hotter" might vary from one workplace to another, and some tactics will be unique to a particular workplace. Can you think of actions you might try that aren't on this list? Place these on your thermometer, too.

Bombard the boss with phone calls and emails

Put up posters

Wear T-shirts or hats with a slogan or cartoon on a particular day

Visit the boss in a small group

Strike

Wear buttons or stickers

Distribute leaflets

File a group grievance with signatures

Hold an informational picket line

Rally in the parking lot and enter the building at the same time

Circulate a petition

Set up a Facebook page for your campaign

Write and sing a song about the boss

Barrage management with tweets and Facebook comments

Invite a giant inflatable rat to sit outside the workplace

Meet with outside supporters; get them to take action, too

Visit the boss in a large group

Do a survey

Call the boss out in front of other workers

Everyone gets "sick" on the same day

All take breaks at the same time

Spill the beans to the media

Work to rule

Rally at company headquarters or another target

Make up wallet cards that define workers' rights

Do a skit or other creative action at a picket line, shareholders' meeting, or public place

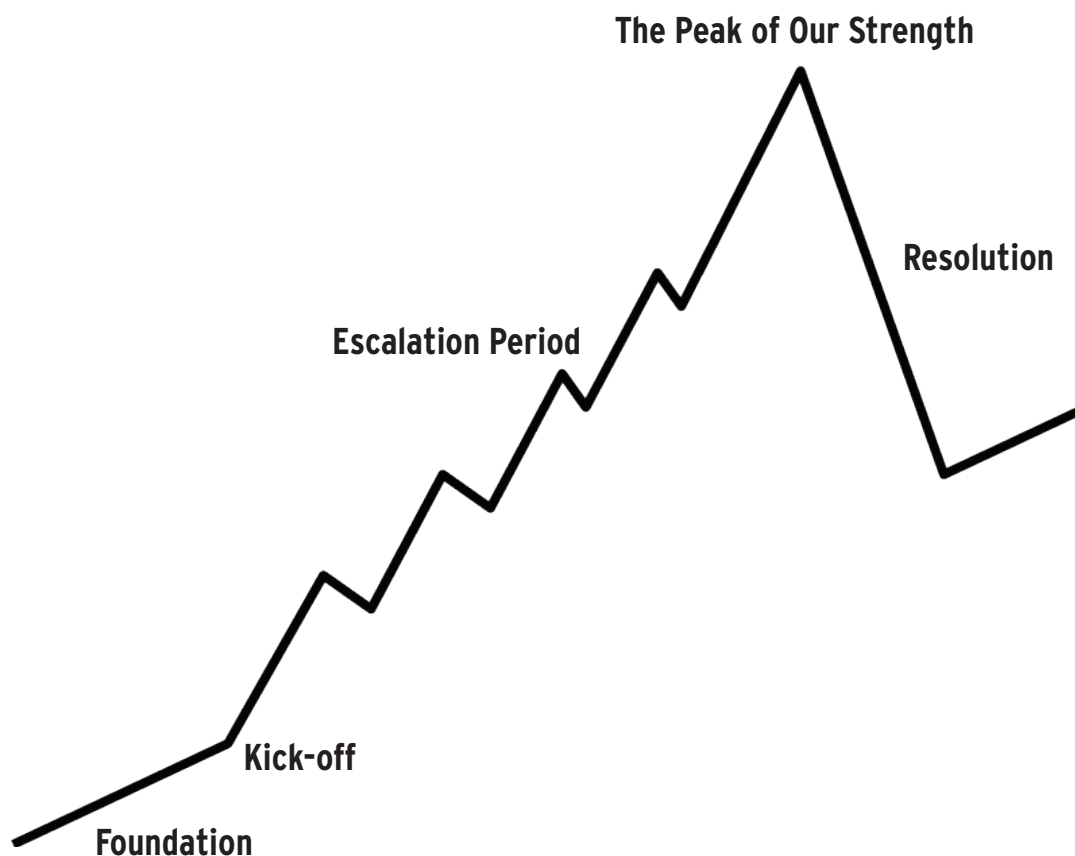
Stop working overtime, all together





CAMPAIGN MOUNTAIN

When you think of your whole campaign, think of it as mountain with increasing action.



PLAN YOUR CAMPAIGN

Use the blank campaign template (next page) to map out a campaign based on an organizing issue you identified in Lesson 4.

CAMPAIGN PLANNING TEMPLATE

Our Issue What is our deeply and widely felt issue? What is our demand to fix the problem?	Targets Who has the power to fix the problem?	Tactics What do we think will move our target? Which tactics fit this situation? What tactics do we start with? [warm] What tactics might we move to if necessary? [hot]



READ MORE: SWING INTO ACTION

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Check out Lesson 5 in the book for much more on Swinging into Action, including:

- Secret #29: Hold small meetings
- Real-life story: Five people can do a lot
- Simple steps to get the ball rolling
- Real-life story: Whistle while you work
- Real-life story: Overtime ban
- Secret #31: Keep the boss off balance
- Secret #33: Make sure every job gets done

Visit labornotes.org/secrets to buy your copy today.



YOUR VOICE:

What action tactics have you tried at work? Let us know at editor@labornotes.org.

LESSON 6 PREVIEW: EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED



Centro de Trabajadores Unidos en Lucha

You're on your way now, with a plan to build pressure till you win your issue. But what kind of backlash can you expect from managers, once they catch on? As your campaign ramps up, how will you cope with roadblocks? That's what we'll tackle in Lesson 6: Expect the Unexpected.

You will learn:

- How factory workers whistled down a big-shot union buster
- Three steps for answering tough questions
- Suppose someone gets fired?
- What to do when you're called into the office