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# Collective Action For Informal Workers



**Organising In The Informal Economy:  
Resource Books For Organisers**

Number **6**

This series of resource books on Organising in the Informal Economy was written in response to requests from unions and associations for practical ideas on how to go about organising workers in the informal economy. It is an attempt to share more widely the experiences of those already organising informal workers.

The project was initiated by the International Coordinating Committee on Organising in the Informal Economy (ICC) composed of representatives from the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India, StreetNet International, Ghana Trades Union Congress (GTUC), Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), HomeNet South East Asia, Confederacion Revolucionario de Obreros y Campesinos of Mexico (CROC) and the General Federation of Nepal Trade Unions (GEFONT).

Written by: Christine Bonner, Director, Organization  
and Representation Programme, WIEGO

Cover Photo: Chris Bonner

Design and Layout: Julian Luckham, (Luckham Creative)

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Overview: Melanie Samson: Waste picker on landfill, South Africa

1. StreetNet: Vendors protest against removal, South Africa
2. Ana Paola Cueva Navarro: Informal workers, Mexico
3. KKKPKP (Trade Union of Waste pickers): Tableau at a rally, India
5. Fabiana Goulart: Waste pickers march against privatisation, Brazil



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## **Overview**

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### **Organising in the Informal Economy: Resource Books for Organisers**

#### **The Books**

There are six books in the series:

1. Recruiting Informal Workers into Democratic Workers' Organisations
2. Building and Maintaining a Democratic Organisation of Informal Workers
3. Handling the Day-To-Day Problems of Informal Workers
4. Collective Negotiations for Informal Workers
5. Handling Disputes between Informal Workers and those in Power
- 6. Collective Action for Informal Workers**

## **The Aims**

This series of resource books aims to assist anyone who has the task of organising workers in the informal economy. It hopes to give organisers practical ideas on what needs to be done and how to do it.

## **Using the Books**

The resource books provide ideas, guidelines and examples that you can draw upon when organising informal workers.

Use them:

- **as an organising guide:** draw on the ideas, checklists and experiences
- **for information:** read, and share your knowledge with others
- **to generate ideas:** create new ways of doing things
- **as a planning tool:** use the steps and strategies to help you plan
- **to educate and empower:** in informal discussions, workshops or training sessions.

## **Three key organising principles**

- Win real, immediate concrete improvements in workers' lives
- Give workers a sense of their own power
- Alter power relationships

“Be passionate, committed, innovative and creative in your efforts toward the organisation and mobilisation of workers in the informal economy”.

*(Kwasi Adu-Amankwah, Secretary-General of Ghana Trades Union Congress, September 2006, addressing the ICC Conference on Organising in the Informal Economy)*

## Issues and Challenges: Informal Workers in Different Sectors

<b>Sector / group</b>	<b>Priority issues</b>	<b>Organising challenges</b>
Street, market vendors and hawkers	Right and space to vend Facilities- storage, shelter, toilets, water Protection against police harassment Safety and security Competition –protection against bad effects Access to credit	Not regarded as workers by selves and others Controlled by politicians, “mafia” Fear of harassment by authorities, police Competition amongst selves and formal sector Time spent on organizing means loss of income No forums for bargaining
Home-based workers	Equal income, benefits as factory workers Identifying employer End to exploitation by middlemen Access to regular work Access to markets (own account) Access to credit (own account)	Isolated in homes, invisible Time-double burden of work and home care Fear of losing work Restrictions imposed by religion, culture Children working Unprotected by labour law or disguised status
Garment workers	Living wage Right to Organise Excessive overtime Security of employment	Women workers are seen as ‘seasonal’, ‘supplementary’ wage earners Harassment of trade unions Often small workshops

<p>Waste pickers and recyclers</p>	<p>Access/right to recyclable waste                      Integration into municipal systems                      Work higher up the recycling chain                      Fair prices for recyclables                      Recognition and improved status                      Health and safety                      End to exploitation by middlemen</p>	<p>Low status and self esteem                      Fear of losing work                      Fear/dependency on middlemen                      Competition amongst selves                      Time to meet means loss of income                      Child labour                      Not protected by labour law</p>
<p>Agricultural, forestry and fish workers</p>	<p>Right to land and land use                      Right to natural resources                      Regular work                      Access to resources and equipment                      Access to credit and markets</p>	<p>Scattered locations                      Isolated and far distances                      Child labour                      Not protected by labour law                      Seasonal or intermittent work</p>
<p>Domestic workers</p>	<p>Recognition as workers                      Protection against dismissal, abuse                      Freedom of movement                      Freedom to change jobs (migrant)                      Less hours, more rest                      Better living conditions</p>	<p>Isolated and invisible in homes                      Fear of employers and losing jobs                      Dependency on employer for housing etc                      Not protected by labour law                      Lack of time: long hours                      Fear of authorities (migrant)</p>
<p>Transport workers (urban passenger)</p>	<p>Access to routes and passengers                      Protection against harassment                      Health &amp; safety/ accident protection                      Parking and facilities                      Petrol and spares prices and fares                      Competition-protection against bad effects</p>	<p>Mobility                      Competition between selves and formal sector                      Control by politicians, “mafia”                      Threats by employers                      Fear of harassment by police/ authorities                      Time for organizing means loss of income</p>
<p>Women workers all sectors</p>	<p>Safe and affordable child care                      Income protection during/after childbirth                      Physical security                      Sexual harassment protection                      Equal income for equal value work                      Access to higher income earning work</p>	<p>Fear and lack of confidence                      Cultural and religious barriers                      Often in scattered locations                      Dominated by men in sector                      Lack of time                      Child care and home care</p>
<p>All sectors</p>	<p>Better and more secure income                      Improved working conditions                      Social protection</p>	





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## 1. Introduction

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### **In This Book**

In this resource book you will find information on the many different ways in which informal workers creatively engage in collective action to press their demands and highlight their situation. You will find examples of the experiences of different organisations, in different sectors and different countries, and of both women and men. The book gives practical ideas on how to strategise, plan and prepare for action. It looks at mobilising members, building alliances and publicising the action. At the end of the book you will find a group activity that you can use in workshops or when planning collective action.

### **Collective Action – opportunities and challenges for informal workers**

#### **# Opportunities**

Collective action is a key weapon in worker struggles for rights and justice. It is an important weapon for informal workers. Through acting together informal workers can bring their demands to the attention of

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authorities, employers and the public. If informal workers engage in collective action strategically, backed with good publicity, they can force concessions from authorities and employers, build public support and demonstrate the power and importance of informal workers and the work that they do.



**Definition**  
**Collective Action**

Any form of united action taken by a group of workers which has the intention of pressuring those with authority and decision making powers to accede to their demands, either immediately, or as part of a longer term strategy

### # Challenges

Because most groups of informal workers do not have negotiating rights or access to formal dispute resolution mechanisms, collective action is often the only way they can make their voices and demands heard. When they do succeed in negotiating with those in power, they often need to reinforce the negotiations, or follow up failed negotiations, by using collective action.

However, taking action can be risky for informal workers. Unlike workers in the formal economy, whose strikes often carry some protection under labour law, informal workers do not usually have this protection. When they act, they are vulnerable to further harassment and intimidation by police, authorities and/or employers. On the other hand, those in authority may ignore their action. Unlike formal workers, the bargaining power of many groups of informal workers, or their power to directly “hurt” an opponent, is not very strong. Many groups of informal workers cannot use the strike weapon. They have to find alternative forms of action that will be appropriate to their situation, but are still effective.

“Big struggle big gain; small struggle small gain; No struggle no gain.”

*(Chinese worker saying-thanks to CAW)*



## **2. Collective Action And The Organiser**

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When collective action is on the agenda, organisers in the informal economy need to be adaptable, quick thinking, creative and strategic. Different circumstances call for different roles.

### **Organiser roles**

#### **#Where action is planned**

Where action is planned in advance, support leaders and workers in:

- Analysing the potential risks and benefits of taking action
- Developing creative and appropriate strategies
- Making the necessary preparations for action to successfully and safely take place
- Ensuring full member participation and democratic decision making processes
- Providing ongoing education, encouragement, technical support and monitoring

### **#Where action is spontaneous**

Where members take “spontaneous” action to defend themselves against evictions, harassment and violence by police and authorities, show leadership. Be:

- a peace-maker
- a mediator or go-between
- a negotiator
- a militant leader
- a defender
- a care giver
- a publicists
- an advisor and educator

### **#Where action is difficult**

It may be difficult for workers scattered and isolated in their own homes, or in the households of employers. It may be difficult where workers lack experience or fear authorities, employers or their partners. It is difficult for migrant workers, especially undocumented migrants, and for women whose religion restricts their movements. Support your members by:

- Educating and sharing experiences about collective action
- Building confidence and solidarity
- Mobilising workers and community support
- Providing know-how and practical assistance
- Finding creative alternatives



### **3. Forms Of Collective Action**

Informal economy organisers should have lots of information and ideas on different forms of collective action. Where and how have informal workers used collective action successfully and where less so? What are the experiences in your sector? What lessons can we draw from the experiences of other workers? Use this information to help workers think through the options and find creative and strategic ways of pressing their demands.

Workers in different occupations will take action appropriate to their circumstances. Some of the more common forms of collective action used by workers in different jobs are listed below.



## Experiences: Forms of collective action: summary by occupational group

Vendors:	boycotts- of market and site levies; of new trading sites marches- to offices of authorities rallies
Taxi drivers:	strikes blockades- of roads boycotts -of new taxi ranks
Homeworkers:	rallies (with other workers e.g. on May Day) demonstrations- placards
Domestic workers:	demonstrations- placards marches rallies petitions
Waste collectors:	rallies “theatre” marches demonstrations
Sex workers:	demonstrations marches
Casual/seasonal workers:	strikes marches



**TIP:** Build up your own collection of informal workers collective action experiences. It will provide you with a store of ideas to draw upon in future.



## Experiences: Informal workers take collective action

### Cycle rally: waste pickers in India

On World Environment Day, in Delhi, waste pickers took part in a cycle rally to highlight the impact privatisation of waste management has had on them. They also submitted a memorandum to the Mayor demanding a right over waste. “While rag pickers have been an essential part of the waste disposal cycle, with privatisation of collection of waste by the MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) they have been left out completely. With no other source of income, they are being further pushed to the margins”.

*(The Hindu, 5 June 2007; Chintan Environmental Research & Action Group)*

**Placard demonstration: domestic workers in SA**

“Prisoners in our own rooms”

“Will you babysit tonight, but do you pay me overtime? I have nights you know”

The South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers’ Union (SADSAWU) held a peaceful protest in Cape Town. Workers were armed with placards bearing slogans such as those above. They drew attention to their long hours, poor conditions and low wages. Their placards highlighted abuses by employers such as underpayment and lack of safety. They plan more demonstrations.

*(Cape Times, 23 June 2006)*

**Strike for a fare increase: taxi drivers in the Philippines**

In 2004 transport unions, organising informal taxi drivers, joined together in a nationwide jeepney strike. They demanded that government raise the minimum fare by 50 percent because of increases in petrol and oil. By 2pm the transport department conceded to the strikers’ demand.

*(International Transport Worker’s Federation, ITF;2006, Organising Informal Transport Workers. Global Research Project. Overview Report)*

**Boycott of levies: vendors in Kenya**

Nairobi street vendors applied pressure on the council by not paying levies for two weeks. The Council agreed to provide cleaning facilities and water, with the support of the provincial authorities.

*(StreetNet.News)*

**Protest rally against contract work in Thailand**

In Thailand, more than 1,000 workers held a protest rally in front of Government House demanding an end to the contract labour system and an amendment to the New Labor Protection Act. Workers ended their protest by a symbolic burning of the Labour Law. They posted a petition to the Prime Minister urging him to abolish the contract labour system, at the gate of Government House. It was a peaceful rally. Workers promised to launch more, bigger protest actions if government did not heed their demands and grievances.

*(Alliance of Democratic Trade Unions, News Release, 2005)*

**Blockade by Benin motorcycle taxi drivers**

Synazeb, a motorcycle taxi drivers’ union, held a march and blockaded roads, after criminals murdered a union member. No taxi drivers worked that day. Roads were blocked for two hours. Security forces were forced to negotiate with Synazeb. They met the union’s demand for a motorcycle park for union members to use. “This was one of the union’s successes, especially considering that it is not often the authorities make concessions, especially to motorcycle taxi drivers”.

*(ITF Report)*

**Women and collective action**

It is sometimes difficult for informal women workers to take action, due to the scattered nature of their work places, their weak bargaining positions, and for cultural, religious and social reasons. But this does not mean that women are less militant and brave than their male

counterpart. Given the chance, the opposite is often true. Many times women have proved to be stronger and more determined than men. And, where they prefer not to use confrontational strategies, they often devise creative collective actions to press their demands.

Recognise and build on the strength and creativity of your women members.

- Ensure that women have the opportunity to lead.
- Involve women in the planning.
- Listen to, and respect, women's ideas.
- Engage in actions that women are comfortable with.
- Hold meetings and actions at suitable times and places.



## **Experiences: Women make an impact**

### **Women waste pickers in India find creative ways**

Members of the KKP KP (trade union of waste pickers, mainly women) held a public rally to demand identity cards endorsed by the municipality. They carried the tools of their trade (sacks, baskets and push carts). At another rally they put black bags over their heads as if they were going to the gallows. This was led by a tableau of a woman with a hangman's noose around her neck with the words, "if you cannot offer us legislative protection, you may as well send us to the gallows".

*(P.Chikarmane, L.Narayan, Organising the Unorganised. A Case Study of the Kagad Kach Patra Kshatakari Panchayat (Trade Union of Waste-pickers)*

### **Migrant Chinese women push men into action**

"male workers were reluctant. Finally a large crowd of women workers gathered at the dormitories and yelled at the male workers, scolding them as useless, exhorting them to act as bravely as Xinglai workers did (*in a strike*). The yelling and scolding aroused the courage of male workers, and they left their dormitories and gathered at the playing field. The fight back then began".

*(Committee for Asian Women, CAW, 2007, Women Migrant Workers under Chinese Social Apartheid.)*

### **Market women in Guinea strengthen general strike**

"In the recent strike in Guinea, market women's role in a general strike was decisive in the demands being won".

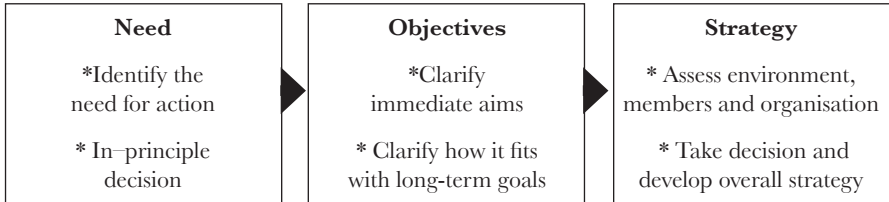
*(ICC, Report on International Conference on Organising in the Informal Economy, Ghana, 2006)*



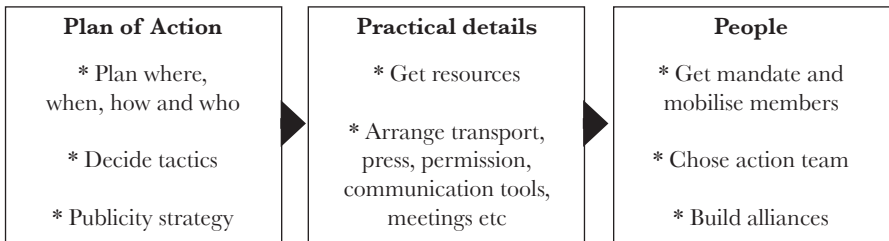
## 4. Preparing for Collective Action

### Taking collective action: an overview

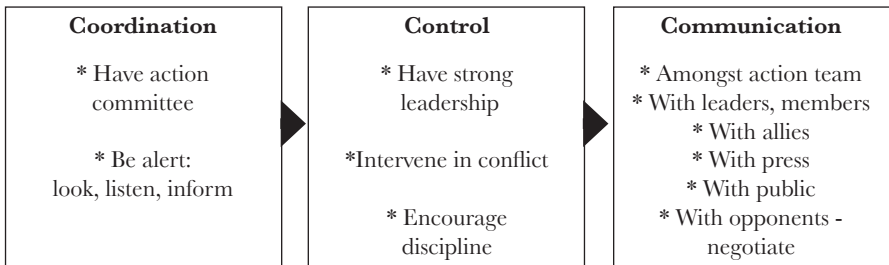
#### 1. Prepare the way: the strategy



#### 2. Make concrete plans and preparations



#### 3. Carry out the action



#### 4. Evaluate the action

Outcomes:	achievements and failures
Organisation:	strengths and weaknesses
Members:	powerful and empowered: more or less
Lessons:	now and future

LIVE TO FIGHT ANOTHER DAY! PLAN THE WAY FORWARD

## Step 1: Prepare the way: the strategy



**TIP:** There is an old saying, “To fail to prepare is to prepare to fail”. Take these words seriously!

Be clear about the need, objectives and overall strategy for collective action. Exercise power selectively and strategically.

### # Why collective action?

Before your members decide on action, be sure everyone is clear why there should be action. This is especially important if members' incomes and safety are likely to be affected, such as in a strike, blockade or a large march in working time. Are you taking action because it is a necessary strategy or because it is a useful one? Are their other options if action is risky? Consider:

Is action **needed**:

- because of a break down in negotiations?
- because power seems to be the only thing that your opponent will listen to?
- because you have been attacked and have no other way of defending yourselves?
- because your opponent refuses to talk or negotiate with you?
- to shake up your opponent who is failing to implement an agreement or using delaying or avoidance tactics?

Is action **useful**:

- to bring your demands to the attention of authorities?
- to show your power and “threaten” your opponent during the course of a negotiation or a dispute?
- to highlight your situation and gain public support?
- to mobilise, educate, unite and empower workers?

Is action **appropriate**:

- does the issue warrant taking action?
- can the issue be resolved or taken up differently?
- can it make a difference?

### # Clarify your aims and objectives

It is important to be clear what you want to get out of the action and how this fits in with your organisation's long-term goals.

- Do you expect to fully achieve all your demands immediately?
- Will members be satisfied with a partial victory through a compromise?
- Will successfully highlighting demands and mobilising workers be your main aim?

### # Develop the overall strategy

Look more closely at the risks and benefits of taking action. This will help you decide on the form of action most likely to lead to success. Use the checklist below to help you and the members analyse the situation.



#### Check List 1:

#### Assessing the risks and benefits of action

<b>External Forces</b>	✓	X	?
Is the environment generally hostile towards us?			
Are there laws and regulations that will protect us if we comply?			
Do police have a history of repression or violence against workers?			
Is the public generally sympathetic to our situation/demands?			
Do we have allies and friends that we can work with or who will support us?			
Do we have sympathetic press and media contacts?			
<b>Our Opponent(s)</b>			
Have we clearly identified all our opponents?			
Does the opponent have a positive attitude towards your organisation?			
Is your relationship with the opponent "reasonable" ?			
Will action directly hurt /negatively affect the opponent?			

Is the opponent likely to concede to demands under pressure?			
Can they meet your demands?			
Is the opponent able to make decisions?			
Is the opponent concerned about public opinion?			
Do we know of weaknesses that we can exploit?			
Do we know of strengths that might block or hurt us?			
<b>Our organisation</b>			
Are members truly ready for action?			
Are all members involved in making decisions about action, including women members?			
Are members united and strong?			
Do members understand the purpose of the action and have realistic expectations?			
Do we have the know-how and skills to coordinate and administer successful action?			
Do we have strong, capable and trusted leaders?			
Does the organisation have the necessary resources?			
Do we have all the information that we need?			

Gather missing **information** (research). Consolidate the analysis of:

- Your strong and weak points
- Your opponent’s strengths and weaknesses
- Risks and benefits of taking action
- Chances of success.

In the light of your overall assessment explore different types of action and develop options. You are now ready to take a firm **decision** on action, and to plot your overall **strategy**. This should include:

- Workers’ demands
- Who the demands are directed to
- Objectives and expectations
- What type of action



**Definition  
A Strategy**

Is a big-picture plan to achieve organisational objectives

**A Tactic**

Is the method you use to achieve the larger strategy

- Overall approach: “war”, peaceful protest, retaliation
- Extent of the action: local, national
- Length of the action: short, over a specific time, until the demands are met
- Whether to go it alone or act in alliance with other organisations
- A one-off issue or part of a long-term strategy or campaign
- An approach to publicising the action
- How and when to retreat if necessary

### **# A democratic and empowering process**

Make this assessment and strategy phase as participatory as possible. Use it to educate and empower members about collective action. Hold informal and formal meetings. Send out the message with leaders, organisers and members. Gather information on what workers are saying. Take the decision for action collectively, in the appropriate structure in your organisation.

## **Step 2: Make concrete plans and preparations**

### **# Work collectively: build the action team**

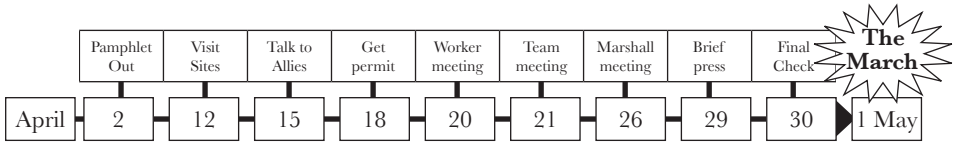
Always work collectively. Work with a team. This could be a leadership team; a coordinating committee or a strike committee depending on the action. Women should be fully represented in the team. It should have clearly defined powers, authority and reporting guidelines. Members should choose and support the team.

### **# Draw up the Action Plan**

Draw up a plan of action with the team to flesh out your strategy. It will include practical planning of activities before, during and after the action. It will include planning your tactics. Include a list of all the preparatory activities you need to do; who is responsible for implementing them and the deadline for completion. You could use some simple planning tools to assist your team, and to inform others, such as a time line and an action-planning sheet.

*Time-line example*

Construct a time-line working backwards from the action date. This will show the deadlines for completing tasks and dates of key activities.



*Action planning sheet example*

Develop this collectively with the team. If possible, draw it on a large sheet of paper and pin it up in your office or regular meeting place. When something is completed, tick it off. It is a reminder and a motivator! Everyone can have their own, smaller version too.

Task	Who?	By when?	Resources
<b>Prepare and distribute pamphlets</b>			
Write, layout	Media officer	25 March	Computer, examples of old pamphlets
Printed	Admin assistant	28 March	Photocopying facilities, cheque for payment
Distributed	Admin assistant, action team, organisers	2 April	Pamphlets Distribution lists
<b>Visit all work sites</b>	All organisers	12 April	Pamphlets Joining forms Newsletter
Penong market	Dan, Portia		
Kalapur road	May, Lucia		
<b>Brief allies</b>		15 April	Pamphlets, constitution, press clippings
TU federation	General Secretary		
NGO alliance	President		
Lawyers for Justice	Organiser: Mirriam		

## # Prepare your tactics, “what if?”

Use “what if” questions to help the team develop action tactics.

*Examples: What (will we do) if?*

Member participation is poor?

The speaker fails to turn up or is late?

The press does not arrive?

The police block the road?

The police threaten or attack workers?

Workers retaliate or attack police?

The mayor refuses to accept our memorandum and demands?

The mayor sends out a junior official to speak to us?

Workers are not disciplined?

Marshalls or leaders cannot control workers?

We run over the time on our permit?

Our demands are not met?

Unity starts to crack?

### **Step 3: Plan a publicity strategy**

If collective action is to be effective in pressurising those in authority to agree to demands, it must have the power to affect the opponent. Or it must demonstrate the power, or potential power, to do so in the future. You need members, workers, authorities, allies, enemies and the public to sit up and notice the action. A well-prepared publicity and media strategy is needed.

It is important to plan your strategy in line with the type of action, the extent of the action, the desired outcomes and your organisation’s resources and capacity. For example, a short, localised strike in a small workshop by members of an association with few resources, may require community pressure to help resolve the dispute. The strategy might be to inform community elders and leaders by word of mouth, and to distribute an informal leaflet amongst workers and community members. It would be pointless trying to get the national press to report on such action.

## # Plan who to target and how to do it

Draw up a table to help you develop a publicity and media strategy.

Then draw up a detailed action plan to make sure things happen!

This will include making detailed lists of useful press contacts, worker organisations, NGOs, opinion makers.



### TIP:

Most people are too busy to read!

- Have a short, clear message
- Use clear, simple language
- Use languages your target group will understand
- Tailor the media to the intended audience
- Make it interesting
- Use facts and emotion

## Developing a publicity and media strategy-example

Target group	Objectives	Media & publicity
Members	Inform and mobilise Build unity and solidarity Counter negative propaganda	Formal structures and informal channels (word of mouth) Short, clear pamphlets in worker languages Slogans Radio, press SMS, telephones, e-mails if available
Opponents	Highlight situation of workers Inform of demands Create a "threat"	Letter or memo informing of action and with demands, and /or Leak information through contacts Local press
Worker organisations/NGOs	Mobilise support Build alliances and solidarity	Personal visits Circular letter/memo Pamphlets Publicise action in their media Press and radio



Opinion makers	Highlight and bring to their attention situation and demands of workers Build support Counter negative publicity	Letters/memos Local and national press In-depth articles
Public	Highlight and bring to their attention situation and demands of workers Build support Counter negative publicity	Press Pamphlets Web sites

### # Plan a creative approach

- Present information in a way that will motivate your members and attract other workers.
- Find an angle to your story that will attract the attention of a wide range of people.
- Be ready to seize opportunities that will raise the profile of the action for the press.
- Include something dramatic, unusual, eye-catching, topical or embarrassing in the action that you can alert the press about.



#### **TIP:**

Work hard to get the press involved. But don't rely on them. The press is interested in selling newspapers. The story must be of high interest to the majority of their readers. If it is sensational, then all the better! Informal workers struggle for recognition. Editors may consider other stories more newsworthy.



## Experiences: Using the press

### **Informal workers in Malawi seize an opportunity to get press publicity**

Street and market vendors were evicted by armed police during a so-called ‘clean-up’ operation that affected an estimated 30 000 street and market vendors in Malawi.

“MUFIS (Malawi Union for the Informal Sector) took advantage of our (StreetNet International) visit to call a press conference on 11th May to publicly encourage the Malawi government to engage in dialogue with MUFIS in finding a lasting solution to the problems of street vendors.

At the press conference, we denounced the unilateral decision by government and its use of force against street vendors. We also called on government to respect the economic rights of its people and to use practices that are acceptable, citing the example of Zambia where dialogue with government has been productive, rather than the example of Zimbabwe whose ‘clean-up’ operation has left many thousands of people homeless and without means to earn an income. We urged government to put in place facilities in all places where the street vendors have been forced to trade.

The press conference was attended by 10 media organisations. As a result, we had good coverage of MUFIS and StreetNet’s opposition to the Malawi government’s approach to the informal economy”.

*(StreetNet News, #8, September 2006)*

## **Step 4: Build Alliances and Support**

You have identified your allies and potential supporters. Go out there and discuss in detail what role they will play.

- Will they participate in the action?
- Will they make a press statement in support of worker demands?
- Will they write a letter to your opponent supporting your demands?
- Will they provide material support: money, printing facilities, legal advice, sound equipment?
- Will they provide advice, education and sharing of experiences?
- Will they assist in a crisis?



## Experiences: Building alliances

### **SEWA mobilises its customers**

For 25-30 years, more than 300 women vendors, members of the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), India, have sold goods in the Gridharnagar to Ghevar Complex road. The Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation wanted to stop them from vending there. Every single day the trucks and officials of the Estate Department would come and evict the vendors and confiscate and destroy their goods. SEWA tried to negotiate with the Municipal Commissioner, but their efforts fell on deaf ears. The Commissioner told SEWA that they had received complaints from nearby shops. SEWA changed its tactics. It decided to exploit the goodwill of the local residents, who had been purchasing fruits and vegetables from the vendors for years and were highly supportive of them. SEWA started a letter campaign. It got the residents to write letters to the Municipal Commissioner stating that they supported the vendors and why they wanted the vendors to remain.

*(Streetnet International meeting on collective bargaining in the informal economy and laws and litigation strategies in street vending sector, Senegal, March 2007)*

## **Step 5: Finalise Preparations**

### **# Mobilise workers**

Use this period to constantly mobilise workers for action. Build their confidence, unity and power. Involve as many workers as possible in the preparations. Involve them in distributing pamphlets, holding informal meetings with members, informing their families and communities and preparing placards. Hold regular meetings with members. Give regular progress reports. Get news into the press and on the radio. Be creative! Don't forget to include women.

### **# Monitor preparations**

Meet regularly and monitor the action plan. Review the plan and make amendments if necessary. Do a final check on your readiness for action.



**Check List 2:**  
**Are we ready for action?**

	✓
Are members ready and mobilised for action?	
Are members clear about the plan of action, including times, venues?	
Has the venue (s) been arranged?	
Do you have a permit or written permission where necessary?	
Have you met with the chief of police or authorities?	
Has transport been arranged?	
Have speakers confirmed?	
Are the placards, banners, pamphlets, costumes ready?	
Do you have hailers, public address systems, cell phones?	
Are marshalls fully briefed and ready?	
Is the action committee ready to handle crises, unexpected events?	
Has the press been informed?	
Are our allies briefed and committed to support the action?	
Are documents for the opponents prepared?	
Does everyone know their roles and responsibilities?	
Have we arranged where and when to meet after the action?	

**# Crisis! Is planning impossible?**

Informal worker organisations cannot always follow such a careful planning process. When informal workers are attacked by employers, authorities, criminals and sometime from “rival” workers, they often react immediately to defend themselves, or to proactively attack. There is a crisis! Don’t react immediately. A few minutes to think and plan may make all the difference to the outcome of the crisis.



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## 5. Taking Action

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### **Step 6: Carry out the action**

Successful action needs to be well coordinated. It needs good channels of communication with members and externally. Good action is controlled and well disciplined action.

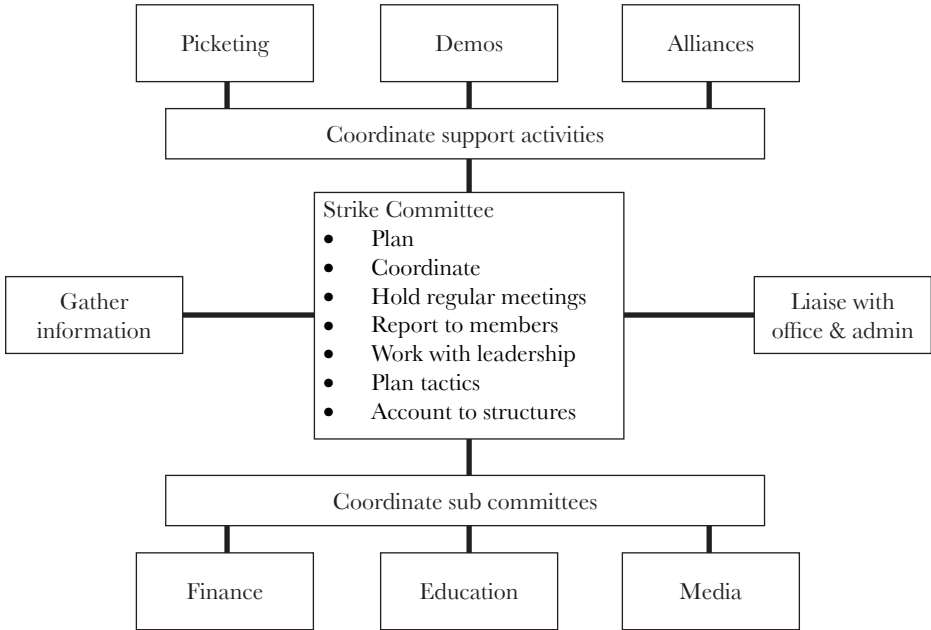
### **# Coordination**

The action /leadership team are responsible for coordinating the action. Where the action is taking place in different centres and/or lasts over a long period of time, you will need a coordination centre equipped with good communication tools. But for short, localised action, well-organised, committed and self-disciplined people can do the job effectively with minimum resources.

Allocate clear roles, responsibilities and powers. Set times for regular communication. If the team is physically separated, work out how to do this effectively. Agree the communication system. Agree who is the

public face of the organisation and who can speak to the press. Choose strong and trusted leaders to speak to workers, or intervene in a crisis.

### Example: Strike committee roles



### # Communication

Good communication goes together with effective coordination and effective action.

- **Communicate with members.** During sustained actions, such as strikes, it is easy for members to lose hope and give up. You will need a proper communication system in place. This could include daily bulletins, regular pamphlets, ongoing communication with contacts and leaders at different sites and general meetings of members. During short actions, such as demonstrations and marches, keep workers' spirits high. Keep communicating through hailers, speakers, songs and through marshalls spreading latest developments by word of mouth.

- **Communicate with the press and public.** If your media strategy is working, you should have caught the eye of the press. You may decide to call a press conference before or during the action. You may arrange for interviews as action takes place. You will make sure that you have informed the press of notable speakers and when they will speak. With major action you will be communicating daily with the press, including radio and television.
- **Communicate with your opponent/authorities.** During a march you will do this indirectly through banners and T-shirts, public pamphlets and press statements. You may want to deliver a memo in front of workers and demand that the authority figure address workers. Your demand may be to negotiate on worker demands, or reopen previously failed negotiations. Keep communication lines open. Make sure they can find you!

### **# Control and organisational discipline**

With good coordination and communication you should be in a position to have controlled and disciplined action. At the centre will be the action team and/or leaders. At the action site(s) marshalls, leaders, activists will help maintain control.

Well-disciplined action is more likely to gain public support than action that gets out of hand. Well-disciplined action will make it more difficult for your opponent(s) to refuse to talk or deal with you. Ill-discipline may provide an excuse to refuse your demands. It may discredit the organisation and lead to loss of support by workers and public.

Where your tactic is to take a more “aggressive” or threatening stance, plan this carefully. Make it part of a controlled and agreed strategy, not one that arises from anger or ill discipline.

### **# Dealing with harassment and violence**

However well prepared we are, things do not always go according to plan. It is not uncommon for worker anger to spill into conflict and violence during collective action. Police, authorities and employers often provoke this by their violence against informal workers. Workers

who refuse to participate; the general public who taunt workers; rival organisations and criminal elements may also fuel violent clashes.

**Be proactive:** before the action

- Discuss, share experiences and educate leaders and workers on violence and collective action. Look at the role of informal workers and the role of hostile forces.
- Make sure everyone knows the policy of the organisation on using violence during collective action. If there is no policy, agree an approach.
- Get commitment from leaders and members to abide by the policy/ approach.
- Develop guidelines on how members should react if attacked by police or others and the role of leaders in such a situation.
- Make sure you have crisis information ready e.g. contact information of police or relevant persons in authority; trade union leaders, sympathetic lawyers.
- If there is a chance of violence, make sure you organise communication tools (hailers, cell phones); water in the event of tear gas; first aid equipment.

**Be interventionist:** where violence happens or is threatened

- If workers are attacked without warning, try to lead a retreat to safety rather than encouraging retaliation (acknowledging that workers may need to defend themselves).
- Try and take control of a potentially violent situation by addressing workers and diffusing anger.
- Make sure key and trusted leaders are accessible to act quickly, and talk to workers.
- Coordinate with marshalls. Use cell phones if possible.
- Communicate with workers through marshalls and use of hailers.
- Negotiate with the police if they are threatening.

**Rescue the situation:** after the event

- Attend to workers who are injured and support their families.
- Counter negative publicity. Authorities/employers will blame workers. The press will usually blame workers. Publicise the workers' stories.



## # Negotiation

Be ready and prepared to negotiate at any time during action. Your action may force employers/authorities to the table. Don't be taken by surprise. Your negotiating team should be on standby. Your mandate and demands should be clear. You should have planned your strategy and tactics. (See Resource Book 4 on collective negotiations) Be ready for "on the spot" negotiations with police, traffic authorities, shopkeepers and with rival organisations.



### TIP:

Don't get carried away by anger and emotion when workers take spontaneous action. Take a step back and assess the situation. Think clearly and quickly. Working with leaders, try to bring some structure to the situation. Assess when to advance and when to retreat. Find ways to maximise opportunities and minimise negative effects.

## Step 7: Evaluate the Action

After collective action, evaluate:

- What were our aims for the action?
- To what extent did we achieve the objectives we set?
- What did we gain; what did we lose?
- What were our strengths and weaknesses as an organisation?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of our members?
- What lessons can we draw from the action?

Be honest in your assessment. At the same time try not to demoralise workers if the action did not achieve everything workers expected.

Plan a way forward:

- How do we take the gains forward?
- How do we counter any setbacks?
- How can we use the lessons to strengthen organisation and empower members?

**Celebrate success!**



## Learning Activities

### Activity 1: Do's and Don'ts of Collective Action

#### Aim

To help you plan for successful collective action

#### Task

Work in groups:

1. Share experiences of successful collective actions that you have been involved in or know about. What did the actions achieve?
2. List all the things that contributed to the success of the actions.
3. If you were to advise other organisations on how to carry out successful collective action what would you tell them to do and not to do? Summarise your ideas on a large “DO” and “DON'T DO” chart.

DO	DON'T

4. Pin up your chart and compare with the other groups.



## Learning Activities

### Activity 2: Collective action: what would you do if?

#### Aim

To enhance your skills to respond appropriately to different situations during collective action

#### Task

In small groups read the situations below. As an organiser/leader:

- What would you do?
- What could you have done to prevent the unwanted incident occurring?

#### Situation 1: A march

The march grows as people on the streets join in. Some of the marchers overturn rubbish bins and throw empty cans at food vendors. You see two marchers smash a shop window.

#### Situation 2: A demonstration

A huge group of women are demonstrating peacefully outside the mayor's offices. They are holding placards and singing. They are waiting for the mayor to come out and accept their petition and address them on their demands. One hour later than the agreed time, he still has not appeared. Workers are getting restless.

#### Situation 3: A rally

One of the speakers at the rally tells workers that they must stop demonstrating and take action. They should go now and occupy the local government offices. Workers stand up from their seats.

Situation 4: A blockade

Workers blockaded the main road in town to highlight their demands for safety and security. Police approached the blockade dressed in riot gear (helmets, masks, shields). They were carrying batons, teargas and guns.

Situation 5: A strike

Negotiations had failed. Your union called a strike. You were sure that workers supported the strike. But on the day the strike was due to start only a handful of workers stayed away from work. Only a handful attended the strike meeting you had called.

Chose someone to report.

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### **Web sites**

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

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

### **Resource Centre**

The Development Institute for Training, Education and Support for Labour, DITSELA, in South Africa has a large collection of local and international trade union education materials. These were used extensively in preparing the books. For access to these resources contact [info@ditsela.org.za](mailto:info@ditsela.org.za)



