Direct Action Protest, Australia

Direct action has been used in Australia by groups involved in social movements such as the labor, indigenous, peace, and environmental movements. Such actions are usually undertaken by small, often autonomous groups wanting to make strong statements about social practices they regard as morally wrong. Sometimes, these actions are illegal and so constitute civil disobedience. The messages they are attempting to communicate are directed at ordinary people, urging them to join or, at least adopt, the same moral positions, rather than to governments or other representative institutions to change their policies.

Strikes, sabotage, and go-slows tended to characterize direct action in the Australian labor movement up to World War II. Radical labor organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or “Wobblies”) used such methods in the early 20th century, and their paper was named Direct Action. New social movements arising from the 1960s onwards resorted to creative direct action when they found it difficult to get their message heard any other way.

Both the indigenous rights and the anti–Vietnam War campaigns in Australia in the 1960s took inspiration from the U.S. civil rights and anti-war movements. In 1965, Charles Perkins, a leading Australian indigenous activist, led a group of Sydney University students on a bus tour of rural New South Wales towns to expose the extent of Australian racism. Similarly, Australian protesters undertook such actions as the burning of draft cards and throwing blood at the stock exchange. During the 1970s, a younger generation of environmental activists, frustrated by the conservatism of movement leaders, began to engage in more confrontational methods that included forestry blockades, occupations to prevent the destruction of historic urban buildings, and messages on public buildings. Perhaps the most famous of Australian direct actions was the Franklin River blockade in early 1983 during which the protesters used rubber rafts to blockade barges taking machinery to a proposed dam site. One of the most spectacular examples occurred during the nuclear disarmament campaigns of the 1980s when activist and surfer Ian Cohen maneuvered his surfboard in front of a visiting nuclear warship and rode it along the Brisbane River until it was forced to come to a halt midstream. He repeated the action on Sydney Harbor a week later gaining national and international media attention.

Mass social movements will often have within their complement of activities a direct action component and, as in the case of the Franklin campaign, the direct actionists can often play an important and creative role in achieving the movement’s objectives. However, there is often a tension between the more politically moderate movement leaders, who play representative roles and who use political pressure to change government policy, and the direct actionists, who are often more interested in making moral points and doing things their way using consensus decision making.

— Libby Connors and Drew Hutton

Further Reading

Entry Citation: