

This article looks at ways of disrupting corporate events and is the result of a collaboration by anti-corporate power activists from different countries (predominantly in Europe).

If you are taking direct action, depending on your context this can lead to arrest or violence and it's important to be prepared for that. Depending on the police force in your country, private security can sometimes be worse than the police, especially if your action takes place in a private space. As written in WRI's article on [responding to violence](#): Also remember that "people have different experiences and face different risks with the police and the legal system. Someone's ethnicity, race, gender identity, class, age, or a whole host of other social characteristics can mean some people encounter greater levels of direct violence or discrimination than others, be it during actions, as they are arrested, or while in custody." While this article focuses on disruptive actions, remember that confrontation is just one tool in a much bigger toolbox of tactics.

Why disrupt corporate events?

Intervening in corporate events can be an effective way of directly disrupting the workings of the corporations you are targeting. These events are often elite affairs and held at expensive hotels or venues and public institutions like museums. If there is government support or presence at the event, they can be ways in which corporations and governments try to legitimise their policies - whether it's support for the arms trade; investing in fossil fuels or bailing out banks.

Sponsoring an event in partnership with a well-known media outlet or a prestigious institution is also a great way for a corporation to greenwash/whitewash their activities and buy themselves a platform or some one-on-one time with their co-panelist - a priceless lobbying opportunity. These events thrive on networking and bringing business representatives with the government representatives they are trying to influence.

Creative interventions can cause embarrassment and be costly for the organisers and the government. If the venue is a well-known public cultural institution, challenging their association with the corporation(s) is a way of [exposing your campaign target](#) and amplifying your campaign.

These actions are an effective way of subverting the message that your industry targets or governments are trying to push - and to cut through the brandwashing. Your action can help force issues and processes into the public eye that happen in secret or which exclude civil society. You can gain media coverage, and inspire others to join your campaign or use your ideas for their taking action on other issues.

By taking action you prevent these events from being able to operate as 'business as usual', and you can make the lobbying and networking more difficult. For example:

- after seeing the protest on arrival at arms fair events at both the National Gallery and Science Museum in London, some government delegations and arms company representatives turned away. At the Science Museum, on learning that the museum was hosting an event for arms dealers, several of the catering staff quit their shift and joined the protestors outside.
- Following a campaign against arms industry events being held at the National Gallery in London, the art museum [cancelled its sponsorship contract](#) with Italian arms company Finmeccanica a year early. As well as giving anti-arms trade activists a way of organising creative actions, the campaign engaged artists, museum-goers and its unionised staff.
- And after a six-year campaign by artists and activist groups and collectives including the [Art Not Oil Coalition](#), [Liberate Tate](#) and [BP or Not BP](#) oil company BP announced that it would [end its 26-year sponsorship deal](#) of London's Tate Museum.

What are you trying to do?

The first thing to do is to think about your aims in order to choose the most appropriate tactic. For example are you trying to:

- Actively disrupt the event as much as possible, shut it down or make it costly to the organisers or the government?
- Shame the corporate or government for their crimes against people and the environment?
- Act in solidarity with communities impacted by the corporations or government's actions?
- Bring civil society into a space they've been denied access to?
- Use the event to gain media coverage or popularise your issue?
- Create an engaging video or take photos that encourage others to get involved or mobilise people for future actions?
- Denounce the cozy relationship between corporations and governments?

Thinking about what you're trying to achieve and how your action fits into the current political context and your campaign's wider strategy will help you choose the most effective tactic.

What resources or number of people do you have?

As with all action planning, dream big and then scale it down according to what resources and people you have available. There's always a lot of invisible work that goes into planning and carrying out an action such as preparing the materials and writing the press release, but you can cause a lot of disruption and even shut down meetings with few people and resources. For example, you could takeover the stage with only two people: One to take the stage and one to film the action, as [this activist did](#) at a major arms industry event in London.

You can also cause quite a lot of hassle by doing a die-in with a small group of people at the entrance to the building. If a banner-action isn't possible, you could wear a t-shirt with your campaign message on as [these two activists did](#) for the BAE AGM.

Getting into corporate events

If you can apply for a ticket, the easiest thing to do is to register and attend the event as if you were a business representative. If you can't get an official ticket, you can pretend that you have registered (which often works well for low-profile events) or try and walk straight in. Often looking the part and acting with confidence can get you through the door. If you have more time, you can try and get a job at the venue or as part of the catering or support staff. You can set up a fake company to try and get a ticket or a stall. US activists '[the Yes Men](#)' who are experts at impersonating corporations and crashing their events have [a handy guide](#) to disrupting conferences.

Dress the part: As well as helping you get into an event and blend in (as much as possible...); wearing smart clothes, removing piercings and doing your hair differently can help you get into character and feel more confident being in a space that can feel quite hostile. Activists in London once received an email from someone who had leaked an arms industry event saying: "Make sure you dress smartly - your mismatched charity shop suits aren't going to cut it!".

Know you can't get in? Try anyway! If the event is closed to civil society you can always openly 'invite yourself' as [Belgian peace activists did](#) at the European Defence Agency conference. Knowing they would be refused entry, people kept trying to get in one after the other until all were carried away or arrested - and the disruption continued while they were held by police as they kept chanting while handcuffed! This built

on [the action they did](#) for the same event in 2017.

You can have a back-up plan if you are refused entry - such as causing a fuss and filming the interaction - or doing a blockade. Make sure you've thought through different scenarios and prepped the people taking photos and filming.

Tactics and Tips

Taking the stage

Civil society voices are often excluded from corporate lobbying and trade events, and so one thing you can do is take the stage for yourself get your message heard. For example, activists in [Brussels](#) managed to take the stage of European Defence Industry Summit and give an alternative keynote speech. It took some time for the organisers and attendees to realise the speaker wasn't part of the official programme, especially as another activist unfurled a banner and so they thought he was protesting the speaker!

At London Fashion Week, [Justice4Grenfell activists](#) (J4G) [took the stage](#) to make a powerful statement about the Grenfell Tower fire in London. 72 people representing the 72 who were killed by the fire wore t-shirts saying "72 Dead. And still no arrests? How come?". The activists included a model and musician, bereaved families and member of the community.

Getting on stage: Timing is key! Once you've made it into the event, sit near the stage and next to the aisle so you can easily get to the stage. Check what access is like: Do you need to walk up stairs? Is there security next to the stage? Even if there are staff or security nearby, the element of surprise often works in your favour and if you act with confidence you can often get away with more than you expect. If you want the microphone to be working (which is recommended so everyone can hear you), you have to wait for it to be switched on which can be seconds before the first official speaker is due to start. Make sure you have a couple of people with their phones or cameras ready to film you and take photographs - and that you are all in contact to coordinate the start of the action.

Plan for success! We often think that we won't get away with our plan or that we won't have much time to have our say, but plan for success and make sure you have prepared a speech. Sometimes it takes the organisers and the audience a while to realise that you are not an official speaker and you will be able to speak for as long as you like. So make sure you have a long-enough speech, but that you can also shorten it if you need to (and practise it several times beforehand). Be clear about your three key messages and have a back-up chant so you can resort to that if you need to. If they turn the microphone off as you're speaking, you can keep going but raise your voice. You can also keep chanting as you're being led away...

Think about your exit plan: The organisers might decide not to remove you forcibly and to let you do your action. Think about what you're going to do once you've made your speech: Are you going to sit down and refuse to move?

Give a fake award

When activists in England found out that the head of the government department responsible for tax collection was giving his retirement speech at a gala dinner that brought together the UK's most notorious tax dodging companies, they [gatecrashed the dinner](#) and delivered a fake award.

Impersonate the corporation

Activists in London set up [a fake press launch](#) of a new exhibition sponsored by oil company BP in the

British Museum. They pretended to be BP staff and set up a fake “welcoming committee” in front of the exhibition for two and a half hours. The “BP Brand Enforcement Ambassadors” gave visitors a startlingly honest introduction to the exhibition and BPs activities and were accompanied by two official-looking pop-up signs and other branding. You can use “[invisible theatre](#)” action to highlight the ironies or hypocrisies of the companies you are targeting, as well as the outrageousness of their actions. The group [BP or not BP](#) use theatre to target the museums and cultural institutions that BP sponsors to try and pressure the institutions into breaking their relationship with BP.

In Brussels, the night before a European Parliament hearing on the ‘[Monsanto Papers](#)’, the pesticide lobby invited MEPs for dinner to talk to them about the “possible impact of a ban on Glyphosate could mean for EU agriculture sector”. Attendees were greeted by [a fake 'RoundUp Cocktail' reception](#) with spoof menus featuring “homemade scary crop loss figures with a sprinkle of fake truths”. The fake Monsanto staff held signs saying “Pesticide lobbies are good for you” and “Believe Monsanto, not science”.

From the audience...

‘Mic check’ the speaker!

If you can’t get on stage, you can hijack the keynote speakers from the floor. Again at the “Room for Discussion” event at Amsterdam University, the managing director of the IMF was ‘[mic checked](#)’ from the [audience](#) with her own quotes. The aim was to highlight the absurdity of applauding the head of the IMF without any critical questions. Having seven different people leading the mic check meant it could continue each time the security escorted somebody out.

At the G4S AGM, several people would each say one word of a protest chant like “shut” “them” “all” “down” - G4S security were confused about what to do with as they couldn’t tell where the chanting was coming from and didn’t know how to deal with people just saying one word.

Singing flashmobs

Activists in Belgium consistently [disrupted the negotiations of the free trade agreement](#) between Europe and the US (TTIP) with a singing flashmob that slowly crescendoed throughout the meeting. The activists were sitting in the audience of the meeting dressed in suits and each had a simple A4 sign which had the campaign slogan on one side, and the song lyrics on the other - so there wasn’t even a need to memorise the words! The singing was so persistent that the EU trade commissioner gave up trying to run the meeting and walked out. Many groups used this song and action for years at TTIP meetings and events - following the Commissioner in Brussels and internationally! Having an easily transferable concept works really well for keeping up the pressure and enabling others to mimic your action.

And dancing...!

Activists have used dance to blockade, disrupt and cause havoc in corporate spaces. In Spain, at the height of the economic crisis, people organised [flamenco dance flashmobs](#) in banks, and in the US, LGBTQI+ activists occupied the road outside Mike Pence’s house with [a queer dance party](#) to protest his anti-LGBTQI+ policies. Activists in Brussels blockaded an arms industry event with [dancing](#) which made it hard for the police to know what to do with them and ridiculed the secrecy of the event. And outside the European Council negotiations on the Common Agricultural Policy negotiations, activists organised [a ‘disco soup’](#) action making food in the street with music.

Young FoEE took part in the Disco Soup Day with Slow Food Youth Network and the #GoodFoodGoodFarming movement. Chopping, dancing and serving soup in front of the EU Council, for a better EU agricultural policy!

Posted by [Young Friends of the Earth Europe](#) on Wednesday, November 28, 2018

Glitterbombing

Showering politicians and media personalities with glitter has been a popular tactic of LGBTQI+ activists - to highlight their anti-LGBTQI+ positions. In the US, the videos of the actions have often gone viral and resulted in widespread media coverage. Rick Santorum, the Republican presidential candidate [was glitter-bombed](#) six times at his campaign events in 2011-2012.

Remembering the victims

By calling for something reasonable and respectful such as a minute's silence to remember those impacted by the war in Yemen at an arms company's AGM, you can put your target in a [decision-dilemma](#): It is awkward for the company to refuse to respect such a thing, but also impossible for them to allow this. When activists did this in England, it was even more difficult for the company when it was called for by a priest (recognisable as such), to whom the Chair was more deferential than other people asking questions. On another year, activists dressed in black with red gloves and [stood up during the meeting holding signs with testimonies from people living in Yemen](#) and statistics of the number of people killed and displaced by the war. Again it made it hard for the company to react - if they left the protestors with the messages from Yemen it was embarrassing for their meeting; but forcibly removing them would seem disproportionate too.

Bloody blockades and die-ins

You can cause a lot of disruption by blockading the event - and depending on how many people you have, you can either do a simple die-in, forcing the attendees to step over you; or you can do a more effective blockade of all the entrances using equipment as activists [did in Belgium](#) to block negotiations for the US-EU trade deal (TTIP). You can also cover yourself in fake blood using paint as [activists did in Madrid](#) to protest a arms fair - people and the police are often not keen to get themselves covered in paint. If paint isn't an option, you can make a convincing bucket of blood using beetroot juice, chocolate drinking powder and paprika powder.

Causing chaos: a 'carnival' of tactics

If your aim it to cause as much disruption as possible, having a 'carnival' of tactics, or rolling 'waves' of actions can be really effective. By staggering your action and having groups of people doing different things one after the other it can make it really hard for event organisers or security to know how to deal with it or even know when the action is actually over. It's also a good way of including a diversity of tactics that suits people's different needs or experience.

At a university event in the Netherlands which brings together the CEOs of major corporations and representatives of institutions such as the European Central Bank and IMF, activists unleashed [a wave of disruption targeting the CEO of Shell](#): It started with 'Bullshit Bingo': people had classic greenwashing phrases on a flyer, and every time the speaker said a green lie someone would shout BINGO. A group then brought in an inflatable pipeline into the room (which was easily inflatable on the spot). There was a banner drop and other people raised signs with uncomfortable questions that the moderator would never select to be

asked. Finally there was a ceremony with a coffin to commemorate the many victims of Shell's infiltrate and to celebrate the imminent end of oil.

Activists in England also carried out [waves of action at the AGM](#) of major arms company BAE Systems: They had "BAE Bingo cards" which key phrases BAE always used and different actions people would do when they were said. People repeatedly asked difficult questions, delivered speeches and heckled from the floor. Some activists tried to deliver a 'whitewashing award' to the BAE chairman and others ridiculed the over-the-top security checks by packing toy guns, ping pong balls and pasta into their bags... As well as exposing the ludicrousness of BAE's attempts to present itself as an ethical company, the action was a way of trying to reclaim a hostile space closed off from the public eye.

Disrupting without confrontation

There are also a lot of ways you can disrupt events without confrontation. You can try and get the event cancelled in the first place or get panelists or sponsors to pull out. In London, artists wrote to the Design Museum calling on them not to hold an event for an Italian arms company. When the Museum refused to cancel the event, they went in and [removed their artwork themselves](#).

You can stand outside the event distributing flyers or holding a big banner, telling people what's going on inside the building.

If the event has a hashtag on social media, you can try to hijack it. Some events have giant screens where people can ask questions live- if so, you can try a twitter storm and tweet pictures or messages at the same time to take over the wall.

Anti-arms trade activists in the UK worked in solidarity with Bahraini human rights activists, to disrupt a PR event for the Bahraini regime in London. The event gave a hook for activists to tell the real story of what is happening. After media criticism the keynote speaker, Prince Andrew, withdrew. Activists were able to use the event, designed to promote a positive image for the regime, to do the opposite. They had huge banners outside and successfully hijacked the #ThisIsBahrain hashtag - completely taking over it and filling it with stories of the regime's human rights abuses and the UK's complicity in it. The event organisers had also paid for a (really expensive!) multi-page supplement in the national newspaper the Telegraph, about how great the situation in Bahrain was. But, with a £10 banner and a bit of time, the protests generated far more media coverage exposing the real situation, and allowing the Bahraini activists to talk about the abuses their relatives and friends were facing.

There is a long history of people disrupting corporate events and this article only includes a few examples. We'd love to hear of other actions from other countries so feel free to share your story in the comments below.

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