



What Can a Person Do?

Here are some ideas about how an individual can bring about distributive justice:

Communicating with Business Leaders and Representatives of Government

Petitions, letters, phone calls, and personal visits from their constituents exert a much greater influence on politicians than most citizens realize. Politicians at the federal level assume that thousands of voters agree with the opinion expressed in a single constituent's letter.

Justice-oriented organizations like Bread for the World specialize in lobbying for laws that address the problem and causes of hunger in the United States and the world. By getting the word out to their membership about specific bills coming up for a vote in Congress, Bread for the World has mobilized an enormous amount of citizen communication to members of Congress. This has had a significant impact on U.S. policy. By joining and funding such groups, individuals can create a strong network to effectively influence the government.

Likewise, stock shareholders can try to influence their corporation by voting at annual meetings on proposals and policies. Also, consumers can write letters to companies whose policies they disagree with. Companies view these letters as representative of many similar but unwritten opinions.



Applying Economic Pressure

Some of the most effective campaigns for justice have been carried out largely through economic pressure applied by millions of concerned individuals. For instance, **economic sanctions** (withdrawal of trading privileges and imposition of other penalties) levied against the South African government pressured that government to negotiate to end apartheid in 1990.

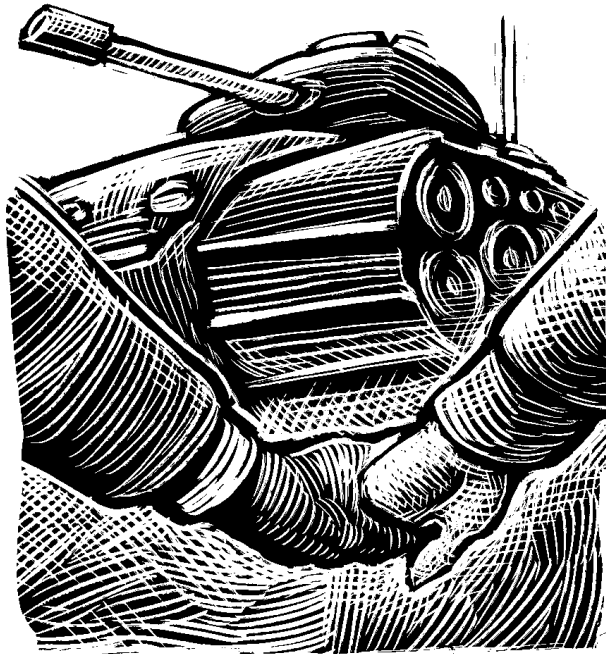
Boycotts (the organized refusal to buy) of produce led by the United Farmworkers in the 1970s and 1980s brought about some changes in the unjust and dangerous working conditions of migrant workers. In another example, a U.S. producer of infant formula persisted in promoting its products in the Third World despite evidence that bottle-feeding led to increased malnutrition and death for thousands of infants living in the poor conditions there. A worldwide boycott of all the company's products, and its subsidiaries' products, pressured the company to market its products in a way that would not encourage poor Third World mothers to bottle-feed their babies. Later, when the company went back on its agreement, another boycott was initiated.

Refusing to support unjust practices and businesses with your money makes a clear statement—"I am not neutral in the face of injustice."

Engaging in Nonviolent Direct Action

Nonviolent direct action has helped to usher in tremendous social and political changes all over the world during the last few decades—for instance, the end of British colonial rule in India in 1947, the reversal of racial segregation laws in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa in the 1990s, the overthrow of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines in 1986, and the toppling of communist regimes in eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union in the 1980s and 1990s.

Individuals who practice nonviolent direct action commit themselves to standing up to injustice without violence, although their actions may break the law. (This is called *civil disobedience*, which is described on page 60 of the student text.) For example, to protest segregation laws, white people and black people sat down together at “whites-only” lunch counters in the southern United States during the civil rights movement. Many were arrested and suffered dire consequences, such as attack by police and angry bystanders. But eventually the unjust laws were overturned.



Shaping Public Attitudes

Individuals can also influence the creation of just public attitudes and opinions. These attitudes in turn can shape government legislation. Here are some examples of shaping public attitudes:

1. writing letters to the editor of a newspaper
2. wearing buttons or using bumper stickers that carry a message
3. organizing educational programs
4. demonstrating, marching, or rallying
5. discussing issues with friends, teachers, other students, relatives, coworkers, and so on