

Manual for a hunger strike of asylum seekers.

Many asylum seekers have started a hunger strike during the last years. Many have gotten a residence permit but many others have done actions, fasted, suffered and taken big risks without a satisfying result.

This manual does not want to take position for or against hunger strike, it just wants to reach that people who want to start a hunger strike, do this knowing well what they are beginning.

Lessons can be drawn from the different hunger strikes. There are reasons why some groups achieve results and some don't. This manual wants to offer a report of the gathered experience. If one is better prepared, there is a bigger chance for success.

Does a hunger strike bring result? If we look at results achieved in the past, we have to say "yes", even though the reaction of politicians in the future remains hard to predict.

1. Conditions before starting

1. All hunger strikers must be fully free to participate in the action, nobody can force anybody and every one must be 100% motivated.
2. Hunger strikers must be well informed about all consequences of a hunger strike: medical, physical, psychological, administrative, penal and organisational consequences. They must be warned that a hunger strike may take 55 days or longer.
3. The hunger strikers have to realise that they suffer and run a risk of serious injury, they may be in a life threatening situation.
4. Nobody may and can be forced to participate, to stop or to continue the action. All this is an individual choice of each person. But a hunger strike is not a game or an elimination race. Hunger strikers who stop minimize the possibility of success. A hunger strike is a group activity: the group has a responsibility for each individual, and the individual has a responsibility for the group. A good group communication is necessary.
5. *In order to have a bigger chance of success it would be good if some Belgians join the group from the beginning of the action. They help the hunger strikers, help to organise actions and*

contacts etc. They also are the bridge to the public opinion and the Belgian politicians. It is important that there are people from Vlaanderen, Brussel and Wallonië. They know Belgian and local politics, culture and habits. They have contacts with the media, lobby groups, politicians and other policy people and organisations. They represent Belgian solidarity with the hunger strikers, which is important for public opinion but also in negotiations.

6. The hunger strike has a bigger possibility of success if some Belgians of the “delegation” also start to hunger strike. This is not necessary from the first day.
7. There must be a good location: big hall, church, community building..., where people all lay together. Not a house where people are in different rooms, on different floors. The participants must be together to support each other. Maybe women will want a separate room, which then must be provided. Good toilets are needed and if possible also a kitchen if there are children, old people, pregnant women in the group who do not hunger strike.
8. If possible the group must be big. The number of people can depend on the location or place. **The number should not be too big because the situation should be liveable.** The group of people will spend some weeks, maybe two months together, so there should not be too many people.
9. Choose the right time to start a hunger strike. Wintertime or governmental holidays are not the best possible periods.
10. Before the hunger strike starts or at the latest during the first week, some practical things need to be organised:
 - a medical group for health care
 - responsible people for practical care like mattresses, water, toilets etc.
 - responsible people for internal communication, if the group has different language groups.

2. Points of interest before, at the beginning and during a hunger strike

1. Agree on who will hunger strike and how many people will participate, taking into account the size of the location,

hygiene, the wishes and demands of the owner of the place etc.

2. Make a list of the people who are in hunger strike. Write the number of the Service of Foreign Affairs (Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken – Service des Etrangers), family name and first name, nationality, address (people who do not have an address, can write the address of the hunger strike or of the priest...etc.), mobile phone number. **Do not forget to put wife (husband) and children on the list between brackets. Do not forget because it will cause problems later.**
3. Some days after the hunger strike has started, the list can not be changed any more. Give the list only to a few people (for instance the leader or spokesman of the delegation and all responsables of the different groups. NOT to the Service of Foreign Affairs. They will get the list after the agreement).
4. The spokesmen of the hunger strikers are appointed by and among the hunger strikers themselves. **It is important that every body feels represented.** Experience shows that it is better not to chose spokesmen who don't participate in the hunger strike.
5. Put together “a delegation” who takes all decisions, following the wishes of the hunger strikers. This delegation chooses the strategy and the tactics and will negotiate. It will point a person for a French and Flemish speaking press.
6. “The delegation” preferably consists of the hunger striking spokesmen and one or two Belgians supported by the hunger strikers. It is an advantage if the delegation points a “delegation spokesman”. This person will be the contact person with the minister and the cabinet and with Service of Foreign Affairs. If you want a lawyer, it is better to let the lawyer only advice you. The lawyer only needs to check the juridical part of the matter. Negotiations are for the hunger strikers themselves: they decide what they want.
7. “The delegation” only does what the hunger strikers decide and it must support the hunger strike 100%, till the end.
8. It is not good to have a delegation without hunger strikers. Also in contacts and negotiations with the Service of Foreign Affairs,

the cabinet or others, hunger strikers need to be there (no matter how weak they are).

9. At the beginning of the hunger strike a press conference and a press folder with explanation need to be given. Experience shows that later, press conferences are usually not necessary or useful anymore. Later, well-written and well-circulated press announcements have as much effect. People have to know that later the press will only come when sensational things happen. Somebody who has to go to hospital is not considered sensational anymore but it must be mentioned in press announcements. For that reason, it is important that after some weeks a group starts thinking of all kinds of spectacular actions in order to keep the hunger strike in the public attention. Those actions best remain secret until the moment of performance and just some journalists are personally informed.
10. Involve as much organisations as possible in your action. If you can involve the syndicates, you have a better chance to succeed.
11. Try to form an action committee or neighbour's committee to support the action. **Never forget that the hunger strikers have the last word: it is and it will be their action. Do not allow support groups to start their own life or worse, that they would use the hunger strike in order to put forward other demands.**
12. Every time there are important announcements, actions to be done or decisions to be taken, all the hunger strikers have to be called together and informed and they must decide together. **Be sure that every one understands everything.** If there are different language groups, all announcements have to be made in different languages.
13. The delegation leader/spokesman and other responsables should speak to the people individually daily to encourage them and to listen to questions and wishes. **Moral support is very important in the process to success.**
14. Make an internal regulation about order, discipline, hygiene, cleanliness, theft, spokesmen, safety etc.
15. Be sure to spread all information to the media and the outside world in the two biggest country languages, if possible by a

Dutch-speaking and a French-speaking person. This is very important for contacts with press and politicians.

16. Keep press, politicians, syndicates and other policy making people informed by mail and personal contacts. Try to push everyone to help to look for solutions.
17. Each hunger striker should have a mobile phone and the phone number of available doctors and of the spokesman of his or her group (important in case of hospitalisation or eviction) and of the delegation leader/spokesman of all hunger strikers.
18. Medical care and explanation will be given step by step by your medical team, so every hunger striker will understand what he has to do in order to have as little medical problems as possible during and after the hunger strike.
19. Each hunger striker points a person of confidence to whom he trusts his written last wishes. A long lasting hunger strike can cause confusion. On such a moment it is important that the person of confidence can declare the wishes of the hunger striker.
20. Juridical explanation will be given by the lawyers who support the group.

3. What is going to happen

1. A lot of resistance and a very difficult struggle.
2. Physical suffering, especially after more the 30 days.
3. Psychological confusion and wanting to give up. In the beginning it is easy to say "until the end", but in the end it is very difficult to continue when.
4. Authorities will put you under pressure and will want to break the hunger strike. Freddy Roosemont, general director of the Service of Foreign Affairs and possibly other important people will come to tell you that will never get papers, that hunger strikes have no effect , that they are blackmail, that the minister never will give in, that hunger strike never brought papers to any one, so that you immediately have to stop etc. Later on, those people will return and maybe propose that you stay 3 months longer in Belgium for health reasons. (Orange

card.) Later on, the message will be spread that the place will be evicted and that every one will be brought to different hospitals, also if there is no such plan at all. An eviction is a difficult plan and usually the local authorities refuse to cooperate with such a plan. **Make sure that you are prepared for this and don't give them a chance to discourage you. The motivation and support of the Belgians is necessary for success.**

5. If a hunger striker is brought to the hospital, this person can only continue the action if declarations have been written in advance where the hunger striker declares not to wish food en where he demands the possibility to leave the hospital at own risk. The hospital can not feed you or keep you inside if you do not want, this is not allowed in Belgium. If necessary you arrange to meet each other and continue in another place.

4. What not to do during a hunger strike

1. To accept politicians, authorities or other persons to have speeches to "inform you about the law, the consequences of hunger strike, the position of the Service of Foreign Affairs or the minister" etc. Their goal and effect is to break the hunger strike and to take away the motivation of the people. **Your delegation and your lawyers know the law and criteria sufficiently well and they can inform you.**
2. You should not drink little or not listen to the medical information of the doctors.
3. You should not argue or waste your energy to things that do not relate to the hunger strike. Problems need to be solved by conversation, by talking. Don't waste energy, you need it hard!
4. You should not accept that some people get papers and others don't, or that most people get papers but some don't. The action has started in solidarity and it should end like this.
5. You should not doubt or consider propositions which you can not accept. Be clear to the Service of Foreign Affairs, that is better for them too. When there is an acceptable compromise, accept it (think about the solution for the Beguinage Church in Brussels: they asked for 1 year white card and work permit C but the compromise became 9 months white card and work permit C. And unacceptable compromise would have been: orange card).

6. Do not start thirst strike (to stop drinking) because it can never last longer than some days, one week at the most. There is a very fast physical breakdown and it is extremely difficult to hold on to a thirst strike. To stop drinking, as a strategy to reach a goal, is not in balance with the goal you want to reach because it destroys the health too quickly.

5. when reaching an agreement and/or the end of a hunger strike

1. The list of hunger strikers to be regularized is handed to the Service of Foreign Affairs after reaching an agreement.
2. After giving the list to the Service of Foreign Affairs, the hunger strike is interrupted for one or two days until everyone has received the papers. Let those papers be sent to the communes and the duplicate not to the hunger strikers but to the delegation leader/spokesman or your lawyer (or another person of confidence). That person brings all papers together to the location of the hunger strike when they have **all** arrived. This way you prevent that people will be forgotten or excluded.
3. Meet each other again within 3 weeks after the hunger strike, so that everybody, hunger strikers, helpers and supporters can see each other again.
4. Do not start eating immediately. First soup, and little by little more solid food. The medical team will give you a paper with advise.
5. Medical follow-up: **every one must go to the doctor after the hunger strike** with his/her medical card so he/she can be checked. This is VERY IMPORTANT in order to find and treat possible (and after 50 days: probable) injury as a result of the hunger strike quickly.
6. Practical guidance and follow-up concerning information towards work and others: preferably assign a contact person for all hunger strikers.

6. What can (not will) be the result

- - a. **if you have the power and the courage to carry on...**

If we gather recent experiences, declarations of minister A. Turtelboom (minister of asylum and migration) and of F. Roosemont (general director of Service of Foreign Affairs), then we can conclude the following:

- After some weeks of hunger strike you will possibly receive a certificate of 3 months of delay of leaving Belgium (orange card).
- After some more weeks of hunger strike possibly a certificate of 6 months of delay of leaving Belgium (orange card and possibly work permit B).
- *After more than 50 days and if you are in a very bad medical shape: possibly a real residence permit of 9 months or 1 year. You will receive a white card as a proof of inscription in the foreigner's register - work permit C is automatically linked with this card. After so many days of hunger strike, the risks are serious and the minister can explain that this is not a real regularization but a temporary one for medical reasons.*

b. if you stop without an acceptable agreement you have nothing

c. there is always a possibility of a serious "accident" (death person or serious physical or mental injury).

Every one has to make a balance: on one side the risks and on the other side the papers which give you the chance of a human existence. A new life. Don't forget that your hunger strikes are putting serious pressure on the government to look for a solution for all people without papers.

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