

Preparing for Action

Whatever kind of action you're planning to take, preparation is key to success. Thinking about what to expect, what to take and what roles people can play is all too often neglected. An important part of being prepared is realising that taking any kind of action - however peaceful and non-confrontational - can lead to problems with police and security guards. Always know your legal rights before taking any action and never assume you won't be arrested. Better to always be prepared - see the resources section for some guides to the law as it affects activists.

Roles During Actions

Support roles are vital to the success of an action, and to the safety of the participants. Often these roles aren't seen as being as "glamorous" as doing the direct action itself, but should be valued equally – without them, the action can't take place.

The roles listed here are common on actions, but shouldn't be regarded as a blueprint for all actions. Different actions will need different roles, and it's important, as a group, to think about what tasks you'll need doing (and how you're going to ensure it gets done) early on in the planning stage. Sometimes people can take on more than one role, e.g. a legal observer might also be a first-aider, or police liaison, or even media contact. The key is to make sure that all necessary roles are covered, that everyone understands the extent of their commitment before you begin, and no one takes on tasks (support or otherwise) which they are unable to carry out.

Transport: Self-explanatory, really - many actions need vehicles, and vehicles need drivers and map-readers. In most cases drivers will need to avoid arrest, so they can drive people home as well.

Police Station Support: Stays somewhere safe and away from the action, next to a phone. They should have all pertinent information about each member of the group such as their name, if they want someone contacting if they're arrested, and if so who, etc. They take calls from the police station and from legal observers, and co-ordinate post-arrest support, which might involve tracking down anyone who was arrested, ensuring that a solicitor knows they're in custody, and picking people up from police stations on their release. They should have access to transport to reach all the police stations in the area, and know how to get to them. They might take snacks, cigarettes, water - whatever people will want when they are released.

Legal Observer: Stays on the fringes of the action and is responsible for responding to calls from those taking part in the action if the police are being unreasonable or are making arrests. They should take detailed notes of interactions with police including names of anyone arrested, police badge numbers, what took place and exactly when. They can also help police station support people by finding out which police station arrested activists are being taken to, and what charge they've been arrested on. A camera or video recorder can be helpful. Being a legal observer is no guarantee of immunity from arrest.

Police Liaison: Conveys information and demands between the police and the group. Ideally your police liaison will be articulate, calm, and able to communicate diplomatically with the police. They can try to de-escalate the situation as much as possible to avoid police over-reaction. It's important that the group give the police liaison a clear mandate. Are they empowered to take decisions for the group? In most cases they are not the group's decision maker, and it helps to communicate this clearly to the police early on. They can facilitate the decision making process though (and slow down the police response) by acting as a go-between and consulting all activists, then reporting back the decision to the police. Like observers, they aren't immune from arrest!

Media Liaison / Spokesperson: Helps facilitate the interactions between the group and the media. They prepare news releases and make calls to get the desired media on site at the time of the action. They should know the issues and be able to speak clearly and articulately to reporters and TV cameras. Media work is often split into two distinct roles – background media work (writing and sending news releases) and the spokesperson on site.

First Aider / Street Medic: The more people who know medical care of any kind the better, but in many types of action it is wise to have at least one person who knows basic first aid. For a large mobilisation, street medics should also know how to deal with the effects of CS gas.

Action support: Provides direct personal support for arrestable people. This person may risk arrest, but tries to avoid it. Depending on the nature of the action this means bringing water and food supplies to action participants and keeping everyone high-spirited and informed. Activists may be scattered over a wide area, and action support is vital in keeping them in touch with the overall progress of the action. They might also be needed to carry messages and facilitate group decision making. For actions involving lock-ons it is best to have at least one support for every two people risking arrest.

Action Participants: Quite simply the people carrying out the actual action (climbing, locking on, sitting down etc). Should be technically prepared for everything they plan to do, and hopefully well rested, fed and calm. Last on this list for good reason – they are only able to play at being ‘direct action heroes’ thanks to all the support team’s hard work.

Support Systems on Actions

Affinity Groups [Borrowing heavily from: www.starhawk.org/activism/affinitygroups.html] An affinity group, at its most basic, is a group of people who have an affinity for each other- they know each others strengths and weaknesses, support each other, and do (or intend to do) political/campaign work together. They are a means to collective action, either on their own or as an autonomous group within larger protests.

The concept of affinity groups has a long history. They developed as an organising structure within the Anarchist army during the Spanish Civil War and have been used with amazing success over the last thirty years of feminist, anti-nuclear, environmental and social justice movements around the world: from large scale nonviolent blockade during the 30,000 strong occupation of the Ruhr nuclear power station in Germany in 1969 to more recent mass protest actions in Seattle, Washington, Genoa, and Prague. Their use in sustaining activists through high levels of police repression has been borne out time and again.

An important aspect to being part of an affinity group is to get to know where each other is at regarding the campaign or issue. You should all have a shared idea of what you want, individually and collectively, from the action; how you envisage it happening; what support you will need from others; and what you can offer others. It helps if you have agreement on certain basic things: how active, how spiritual, how nonviolent, how touchy-feely, how ‘spiky’, how willing to risk arrest, the limits of your involvement, your overall political perspective etc. But then again, you may all just work together / study together etc.

The Buddy System “Buddying up” on actions means agreeing in small groups (generally 2-4) to look out for each other’s well being. Buddying should mean you are never alone on the action – you are less likely to get lost, and have someone to leave the scene with you if you need to stop for any reasons. Buddying up is a good idea whether you're joining a larger mass-action, or acting within a large affinity group.

Buddies should be prepared to:

- Know if their buddy has any special (e.g. medical) needs
- Check that their buddy is still with them whenever a group is moving around
- Make sure their buddy is physically OK, and find food/drink/warm clothing/medical attention if they aren’t
- Leave with their buddy if they want to go, for any reason
- Keep an eye on their buddies emotional state, and try to calm them down / comfort them when necessary
- Tell legal support if their buddy gets arrested
- Call for observers/first aiders if their buddy is getting hurt

This might make it all seem rather formal and cumbersome. In reality it isn’t – it’s just a way of making sure no one gets forgotten in the confusion of an action, and everyone has a mate to look out for them.

Personal Safety on Actions – Body Protection & Fashion Tips

There are a number of obvious and simple things you can do to ensure that any piece of direct action is safer for you. Most of these are just common sense:

Wear appropriate clothing As we said, common sense. For example, if you're taking part in a die-in, and planning on passively resisting attempts to move you, you're likely to get dragged around a little by police or security. If the clothing you're wearing is too thin, or rides up your back so your skin comes into contact with tarmac....well, you see where we're going! Think about clothes that will protect you and be practical for the action. Secure pockets for essentials are really useful. Remember that cords from hooded tops, and belts will be taken off you if you're arrested, so if your trousers fall down without the belt.....think again!

Wearing several layers allows you to accommodate the changes in weather. Take more clothes than you need. You can take them off if you're too hot, but if you don't have them and get too cold, there's nothing you can do. They also make excellent padding in your rucksack, and help protect your neck, spine and kidneys against potential injury!

Remove jewellery: remove anything that might injure you or your fellow protestors in an action scenario before you go out to play.

Tying up hair & cutting nails: again just common sense to help avoid you getting hurt or accidentally hurting others. Hair can easily get tangled up and offers a nice handhold for police or security!

Emergency supplies : carry enough water and snacks to last you the duration of your action and a 6 – 9 hour stay in police custody. Don't carry water in glass bottles in case the bottle breaks and injures you, or is interpreted as a weapon by over-eager police officers! You might also want to think about tampons, any medication you need, reading matter, bust cards (a card telling you your basic rights on arrest and giving a friendly solicitor's number- usually given out on mass actions), change for phone calls, bus or taxi fare, etc.

What NOT to take: knives (unless absolutely vital for the action – even your swiss army knife can be seen as an offensive weapon should the police so want), illegal drugs, incriminating names & addresses (think about your mobile phone address book), briefing sheets, maps etc. If you're arrested the police will search you and can use anything they find as evidence against you or other activists.

Effective, Safe Actions

There are other techniques you can use to make your actions safe & effective:

Training: as a collective of trainers we'd naturally recommend training/skillshare workshops as a safe space to learn skills and roleplay scenarios, so that when you encounter the real thing, you've already got an idea of what it might feel like and how you might react.

Affinity groups: we also strongly recommend that you work as an affinity group. By definition affinity groups offer their members support – both emotional and physical - and can put in place support systems, such as legal support (see *Roles during actions*). A well prepared affinity group can still carry out an effective autonomous action in the midst of a larger action that has lost the plot. Your affinity group also ensures you have at least a few people who understand and approve of your action! At the very least we suggest that you 'Buddy Up' (see *Support Systems*)

Talking to friends, family & employers in advance can reduce the chances of feeling isolated and alone because you choose to take action. We hear lots of stories of people worried about their job or studies who have approached tutors and employers only to find them supportive and sympathetic. It's sensible to check the terms of your employment before taking action - will getting arrested cause problems?

Using the media can be an effective way to ensure that your message gets heard, and your action communicates effectively. This can't be guaranteed – not all journalists are sympathetic, so if using the mainstream media, do

some research. Having journalists/ photographers on site can make violence from police, security or the public less likely. Don't forget to use the alternative media to make sure your message gets heard the way you want it to!

Action groundrules: if you're organising an action, groundrules can ensure that it fulfils your vision of an effective action. If you're participating, groundrules, or the lack of them, can help you choose which actions you feel comfortable taking part in.

Legal rights: if unsure, consult a solicitor, approach experienced activists/trainers for info, or see one of the web based legal resources (below)

Further Resources on Direct Action

*General NVDA Guides / Activist resources

www.seedsforchange.org.uk/free/res

www.eco-action.org/rr/ - Anti roads protest guide (but applicable to many other types of action)

<http://www.geneticsaction.org.uk/resources/delia.pdf> – Interesting guide to what blockaders get up to.

www.actupny.org/documents/CDdocuments/CDindex.html - New York site with loads of resources

www.starhawk.org/activism/activism.html – Source for some of the stuff on this sheet

www.earthfirst.org.uk/manchester/porder.htm - guide to staying safe if you find yourself in a public order situation.

www.peacenews.info/tools – includes dealing with fences and organising mass actions

*Info on affinity groups

www.starhawk.org/activism/affinitygroups.html

www.actupny.org/documents/CDdocuments/Affinity.html

*Info on legal rights

www.activistslegalproject.org.uk

www.yourrights.org.uk/

www.freebeagles.org

*Info on consensus decision making

www.vernalproject.org/Papers/ASmithResponse-33W.pdf

www.starhawk.org/activism/trainer-resources/consensus.html

*Info on using the media

www.mediatrust.org/

www.fraw.org.uk/gs/handbook/media.htm

www.indymedia.org.uk - making the media!

[Websites listed here do not necessarily reflect the opinion or attitude of Seeds for Change :-)]



For more briefings on grassroots activism, and to find out about training workshops look at our website:

www.seedsforchange.org.uk

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