

# **The Roving Activist's Guide to Planning and Surviving a Protest**

## **Planning a Successful Protest**

A well-planned protest or action is more likely to result in success. It is impossible to factor in every eventuality, but a well thought out plan will allow flexibility in case of an unforeseen event. I have organized and participated in hundreds of protests in my 27 years as a disability rights and social justice activist.

### **Determine the reason for the protest.**

Look at the issue or problem and decide if a protest is warranted. Sometimes, a letter or meetings will suffice.

### **Decide what your demands will be.**

Determine what demands your group will make of the opposition, and what your compromise, if any, will be. Your demands must be simple, reasonable, and achievable within a short period of time.

### **Determine who in your opponent's organization wields the power.**

This is crucial! It makes no sense to talk to, or meet with someone who has no power, or authority to accede to your group's demands.

### **Decide where the protest will take place.**

Does your group want to demonstrate in front of the opposition's headquarters, or do you want to do it in a symbolic location? Be practical and realistic. Sometimes, the building housing the opposition's office is located in an out-of-the-way location. Your protest site must be in an area where there is either good car traffic, good foot traffic, or both. Have plans for an alternate site, or two in case your group is sent away by the police, or other plans emerge.

### **Decide how long the action will last.**

Will it last for one hour, or all day? Sometimes, this is not easy to decide, but your organization must have a clear idea of how long you are willing to sustain the protest. Devise an open-ended plan that would allow it to go on for as long as necessary.

### **Make a checklist of items that you'll need for the protest, and things you'll need to do to prepare for it.**

This is extremely important. Try to think of everything you will need, even if it

seems small and insignificant. This is important because you might get to the site and find that you need something that you don't have. Try to have as many of these items as possible beforehand.

### **Determine a strategy for your action.**

Will the group meet with the opposition, or stay put? Will you go for arrests, or stay peaceful and quiet? Will the group do other actions within this action, or concentrate on one major protest? This is best decided beforehand, but sometimes, things happen, so at least, be prepared. Think through everything. Ask about all the "what ifs" you can think of. Do this for all aspects of your protest.

### **Decide what members of your group will do the protest, and what members and/or groups will act as supporters.**

This is essential. Decide who among your group or coalition is willing to participate in an action, and for how long, and in what way will they be able to participate. Some of the more "hard-core" members might do the protest while the more reserved members and groups might arrange for food or supplies, make media calls, or initiate action alerts involving letter writing or call-in campaigns.

### **Decide who will be spokespersons and contacts throughout the action.**

Depending on the number of participants, it is a good idea to have at least 2 - 6 people to act as contacts and negotiators during the protest.

### **Determine the responsibilities of each person in the group.**

It is very important to determine the responsibilities of each person in the group, even if it's just showing up. Decide who will be responsible for getting food or water, or other supplies. Find out who will be runners or attendants. Decide who will write press releases, letters, or fliers. Decide who will be responsible for making signs, writing chants or songs, or organizing any theatre that you may do. Determine who'll be responsible for informing the entire group of the outcome of meetings, or decisions that the leadership has come to. Make it so that each person feels that they have a part in, and ownership of the action.

### **Surviving a Protest**

#### **At your protest.**

Your group has planned a protest. You're now at the site. The next task is to survive it. What do you do? Actually, you're doing one of the most important things by simply being there. You have a presence. At this point, any number of

things can happen. Large numbers of any group of people are sure to attract attention.

Count on a visit from a member of the opposition, or an official, or manager of the building or entity where the protest is being held. Explain why you are there, and ask to see someone in charge. Be sure to have the name of the person that your group wishes to see. When, or if they come out, state why you are there, and give them your demands, preferably in writing.

Expect that the police will be called, especially if your group has chosen to block entryways and street intersections, or if you are chanting and making noise. If your group chooses not to block, make that very clear from the start by keeping an open pathway.

### **Dealing with people.**

Expect people to approach your group and ask what is going on. Explain to them what is happening, why you are there, and how they can help, or support you. Give fliers, brochures or information that you may have about your group, or reason for the protest.

What do you do if you're dealing with a difficult person? The best thing to do is to be polite, yet firm. Ask them to leave if they're making the group uncomfortable. If they're being especially nasty, get on your cell phone and call the police!

### **The police.**

If you are not blocking as part of your action, chances are, you won't see much of the police. Be sure to have someone assigned as a police negotiator in case your group has to deal with them. It is a good idea to be co-operative with police officers, especially if you're not planning on being arrested. Your group may even be able to use them to negotiate with the opposition if they are being difficult. This tactic is so common that some police departments have officers who are trained to do this. Ask the police to take your demands to the opposition, or see if they will agree to broker a meeting by bringing your target out to the group. Just be careful to negotiate from a position of strength. Don't allow the police to put your group in a position of weakness by bartering, or tit-for-tat, such as, "I'll talk to Mr. Jones if you move out of the doorway". Decide what you're willing to negotiate on, and stick to it. Be strong!

### **The media.**

Make sure that you have a media list and use it! Try to contact the media shortly before the protest, and during it, as well. If there are certain news persons who always show up at your local actions or events, try to get those people to cover it. Make sure that you send out press releases. Don't be too disappointed if no one

shows up. The media is fickle, and there may be any number of reasons why they may choose not to cover your action.

Although there is not much that your group can do about politics and attitude within the media, it is wise to be aware of this. It may be that a certain television station or newspaper editor feels that your group is too controversial, and have ordered their reporters not to cover your protest. Some media outlets, journalists, or reporters may have their own agenda, or may actually be hostile towards your group, and may seek to slam you in their report.

Most of the time, small mistakes and misquotes are totally innocuous. This is why it is a good idea to educate the media about your group. Give handouts, talking points, and other information about your organization so that the small mistakes can be avoided. If, despite this, you notice that there are blatant misstatements, or a pattern of negative reporting, it is likely that someone within that media outlet may have another agenda, and you'll simply have to be careful when you deal with them.

### **Getting the word out to your organization.**

If your organization is national, or international, make sure that you get the word out to your other chapters about your action. If appropriate, send out e-mails before the protest, and take your organization's contact list with you to the site. Call contacts on the list and keep them abreast of what is going on. Make use of Blogs or social media such as Twitter or Facebook to update your friends on what is happening. That is also a good time to get support and advice on what to do. The support that you'll get from other chapters or groups will be a real morale booster.

### **How do you deal with violence?**

Unfortunately, there is the possibility that your group may experience violence, threats, or retribution for having your action. Hopefully, this will not happen to your group, or its members, but this is something that you must take into consideration. An individual may not agree with your group's reason for the protest, or your position on an issue, and use violence or threats to try to frighten or intimidate you into leaving, or changing your views.

Sometimes violence comes from the very people who are supposed to protect you - the police! During the '60's, particularly in the southern U.S. the police, who wielded clubs, dogs, and water hoses, routinely set upon civil rights activists and some were even killed! While police violence is rare these days, it does happen

So, what do you do if your group is confronted with violence during your protest? First, do **not** resort to violence in return! It will do nothing for your group but destroy your credibility. All of your hard work will be for naught. Even one

incidence of violence on the part of members of your group will result in the group getting a reputation for violence, and your opponent will not want to deal with your group, or its representatives.

Remember that swearing and name calling are also forms of violence. Always be polite yet firm, even if you disagree strongly. Remember the old adage, "two wrongs don't make a right", and follow it closely!

If a member of the group has a camera, or video recorder, make sure that they film or videotape what is occurring. Turn this information over to the media. Get the word out. Above all, don't let violence, or the threat of it stop your protest. Keep your eyes on the prize of your goal. Remember the civil rights activists of the '60's, who put their very lives on the line for their cause, and have courage!

### **What to Do After a Protest**

#### **The protest is over. Now what?**

Now your protest is over, and hopefully, has ended successfully. What do you do now?

#### **Thank the participants.**

Before you leave the protest site, gather the members of your group together and thank them for their hard work and resolve. That will go a long way.

#### **Clean up your mess.**

You are not pigs, and even the opposition will be appreciative. Leave a mess, and the community at large will be sure to know about it.

#### **Get together to celebrate and debrief.**

Within a few days after the action, get your group together to celebrate your victory. Have a party and a meeting at the same time. This can be done at someone's home, your office, or a favorite restaurant. This gives everyone a chance to reminisce, and to share what he or she liked, or did not like about the protest.

#### **Thank your supporters.**

As soon as possible, send out thank you letters to all of your supporters thanking them for their donations and support. Do something special for those who were especially supportive. Also, thank any members of the press for any particularly good stories that they may have put out.

**Keep watch.**

Keep on the lookout for any activity by the opposition. If they have made any promises or arrangements, make sure that they keep their word. Let them know that if they don't keep their end of the bargain, you'll be back.

**Conclusion.**

Well, there you have it - a basic guide to planning, surviving, and following up after a protest. Remember, every group is different and has a different style and approach to things; thus, every action will be different as well. Your group may come up with ideas that haven't even been thought of.

I hope that this will at least help with the basics. Even if you follow all of the advice within these pages, this is no guarantee that your protest will be successful. Your opponent may be every bit as determined as you. Don't give up, though. Your group has not failed. Continue to organize, and use every legal and nonviolent means at your disposal. In the end, you will win. Good luck on your protest!

The Roving Activist