

Facing the police: a guide

Police tactics and behaviour at a protest can have a significant impact on its outcome. Strategies that take into account police use of force, arrest and possible use of violence need to be developed when planning an action.

Well organised legal strategies and activist legal support structures are vital when planning any kind of action that may face a significant police response.

Some argue that the legal system is designed to break us down and dehumanise us. Organising for your affinity group or larger organised demonstration to have a Legal Support Team is another step towards empowering people to feel safe and sure about protesting.

It is vital to understand that police power operates in different ways depending on who is targeted.

Your race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity and disability can all be factors in how the police choose to behave towards you.

Because police are part of the machinery of the state, the power they exercise can often be arbitrary. Police will not always act as expected – that is, according to the law or their own regulations.

Police strategies can vary depending on the nature of your actions, the political climate, the media, etc. It may be possible that police exert force to control an action rather than simply arresting. Using force can sometimes be a more efficient strategy for the police than arresting people in large numbers.

As a result, it is important to know your rights and hold the police accountable for their behaviour.

Some things to keep in mind

Remain calm as much as possible when dealing with police.

Behave as if you expect to be treated with respect. If you represent people at a mass action, insist on speaking with the senior officer present.

Be prepared to negotiate with police, but be firm and stick to the basics of your plan of action. Some compromise with police may not be detrimental to the action so long as it doesn't compromise the basic aims of the action.

Police may renege on agreements at times (because they are acting under orders or because their good faith with you is not a priority) and arrest may come unexpectedly. Be prepared.

Police officers have different ways of interacting with protestors. Some are insulting, others are quite friendly. In either case, a part of their job is to collect evidence against you. Don't let an insulting cop provoke you into a justification for your action or a friendly one draw you into a conversation about it.

Police power can be based on bluff, bullying and intimidation. Police insisting on your "cooperation" mean

that they want your obedience. Knowing that police power can be challenged whilst retaining a basic human respect for police can be vital.

Safety tactics

- ?? When you have an unexpected encounter with the police or with any other law enforcement agents, you will be safer if you pay attention to your body language.
- ?? Do not make any sudden movements.
- ?? Keep your hands in view and open (so it's clear that you're not holding anything or making a fist). Do not reach into pockets or bags, unless instructed to do so. If the police ask to see identification, tell them where you keep it before you start to get it out.
- ?? Never touch the police or their equipment (vehicles, weapons, radios, flashlights, animals, etc.)
- ?? Breathe deeply, speak slowly, and relax your shoulders and knees. This will reduce the officer's fear that you may be about to attack or run away. Relaxing under these circumstances is harder than it sounds, because your body usually produces adrenalin when confronted by police. Adrenalin makes you breathe, move, and talk more quickly. You have to concentrate to slow down, because you're probably going a bit faster than you realise.
- ?? Make eye contact, to indicate sincerity and maintain a respectful facial expression and speak politely. Again, this is harder than it sounds, because most of us feel angry and/or scared when we're dealing with police. If you're perceived as displaying "attitude," the officer will usually try to humble you—then you'll get angrier and so will the officer, a vicious cycle. Your best bet is to control your expression and tone of voice from the outset.

Keeping records

If there is even a slight possibility of any ongoing legal action, either as a result of arrests or to use in an action against police misconduct, it is of great importance to keep records. These may include seeking medical attention immediately, taking photographs of injuries and making a personal and detailed written record of what happened.

You should include any conflicts you have with arresting officials, the time and date of the incident,

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how many arrests took place and names of police officers involved where possible.

Also record names and contact details of all other activists involved and any independent witnesses. Where possible, have witnesses also make a personal and detailed record of what they saw.

If there is a court case, these records may become admissible as evidence. Make the notes within minutes of the events, including the time the note or tape was made. If possible, get someone else to verify the time in writing or on the tape. Do not notify the police that you have made this record.

Try to record details of the incident in objective or value neutral language. Do not use highly subjective or value laden language. This may be important in court when assessing the credibility of your observations and recollections.

For more information go to: www.activistrights.org.au