

How To Organize An Effective Peaceful Legal Action or Peaceful Illegal Action

I. Peaceful Legal Actions

Peaceful legal actions such as marches, demonstrations, protests, vigils, street theatre and pickets are a tactic/activity used to bring an issue/problem to the public's attention in a very direct manner.

Citizen groups usually organize such actions to show broad support for the solution(s) the group is proposing; to get media coverage (especially TV coverage, since actions provide the compelling pictures TV news programs like to show); or to highlight issues that are not receiving attention from the public for whatever reasons.

The following are the key steps to organizing an effective peaceful, legal action:

- make sure you have the resources to do the action successfully, including the resources to ensure that the action will remain peaceful;
- make sure you have a good reason for the action;
- make sure the demands you will make at the action are clear;
- make sure the action will attract the attention of the decision-maker you are trying to influence (and will influence them in a positive way);
- make sure the action will build public awareness of your issue/problem, and build support for your solution(s) (if it won't, don't do it);
- if you are planning a mass march, demonstration or other action, make sure a lot of people will actually show up (if they won't, don't plan a mass action);
- remember the rule of 1/2 -- if you try to call 100 people to come to the action, likely you will reach 50 people, 25 people will say that they will come, and 12 will actually show up;
- check with other groups to ensure that other actions are not planned for the same time, date or location, and to invite them to the action;
- make creative, colourful, and large materials (signs, posters, banners, costumes etc.) that deliver the message of your action in a very graphic way;
- scout the location of the action to make sure it is the best place to hold the action you are planning;
- check with the municipal, provincial or federal government (depending on the location of the action) and the police to make sure you have any permits you need to hold the action;
- choose people to play roles at the action (host, speakers, information sources, observers to watch police, security, photographers, sound and video recorders, first aid, special guests etc.);
- hold a dress rehearsal, if applicable (for example, street theatre plays or puppet shows should be practised in advance);
- confirm that you have all the equipment you need for the action (for example, a generator for electricity, microphones, sound speakers, megaphones, fences, name tags, etc.); and
- if you want media coverage, prepare and send a media alert to the media 2-3 days before the action, and prepare and send a news release to the media on the day of the action.

II. Peaceful Illegal Actions - A Last Resort

Peaceful illegal actions (known as "civil disobedience") are a last resort usually done only in the following situations:

- when citizens have tried every other strategy/approach and tactic/activity to try to have governments or corporations implement their solution(s) to their issue/problem;
- when the issue/problem is a systemic injustice that cannot be stopped except by direct resistance (for example, the denial of basic human rights); or
- to stop an activity that, if allowed to go ahead, will result in an irreversible, negative outcome (for example, blockading a road so trees cannot be cut down).

When such situations exist, citizens and citizen groups sometimes feel that using peaceful illegal actions is justifiable because it is the only possible way to effect change. This is known as the "necessity defence."

The modern history of peaceful, illegal actions can be traced back to 1906 and the movement for recognition of basic human rights for visible minorities in South Africa that was led by Mohandas Gandhi and others.

Other examples of peaceful illegal actions in the past century include several sit-down strikes by workers who blockaded factories to win the right to organize unions and the right to strike legally; mass marches and blockades in the 1960s by people pushing for civil rights for visible minorities in the U.S.; mass burning of army draft cards by youth protesting the Vietnam War in the 1960s in the U.S.; and the mass demonstrations and blockades in the summer of 1993 to stop the logging of rainforests in Clayoquot Sound in B.C.

A peaceful illegal action is not something a citizen or citizen group should attempt to do without the guidance of people who have done such actions in the past, mainly because it is likely that participants will be arrested for participating in the action.

The key steps to organizing a peaceful illegal action are the same as the key steps to organizing a peaceful legal action (set out above), but with the following additions addressing problems that can come up if and when participants are confronted by police or arrested:

- all participants in the action should agree in advance what will and will not be done during the action;
- all participants in the action should agree in advance when the action will begin, and when it will finish;
- all participants in the action should be trained in how to be arrested without resisting or being harmed (generally, stay calm, maintain eye contact, move slowly, clearly state when you are being hurt, cooperate and follow instructions);
- confirm in advance lawyers and their contact information and ensure all participants have the information so that they can get legal advice if arrested;
- confirm an organization and contact information that can provide other support to participants who are arrested (for example, calling family, work, school etc. to inform them what has happened, or that the person will not be at work or school); and
- have all participants fill out forms in advance with contact information for their key support people (family or friends).