



HOW TO ORGANIZE A PROTEST MARCH

i.

To commemorate the anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, a group of “activists”—progressives, those who protested the war back in 2003, and lifelong radicals—decide to organize a march in downtown Grand Rapids. The day is what some might describe as a “perfect” day for a protest—the sun is shining and it is unseasonably warm for a Saturday in March.

The protest attracts the largest crowd to an anti-war protest in months. There are signs indicting the war, drawing attention to the staggering death toll, and highlighting the ongoing crime of occupation. The protest is held on a plaza next to the Federal Building (which houses the offices of U.S. Senators and Representatives) and near several banks—a perfect location to highlight some of those forces responsible for the war. However, despite the intent of the organizers—nobody really sees the protest. Downtown is essentially a ghost town and only the police watch as several speakers denounce the war.

Following the speakers, a representative from one of the groups sponsoring the rally announces that there will be a march. The assembled crowd begins to walk around the block—past the federal building, the banks, the local newspaper, and other institutions connected to the war. The march sticks to the sidewalk and marchers converse with each other, while the occasional chant echoes off the empty buildings.

After the march, people pack up and go home. There is little or no coverage of the march on the news, nobody in power hears the message, and essentially nothing is changed.

ii.

A few years later, another group looks at past marches against the Iraq War and concludes that something different must be done. The group decides on an ambitious plan and holds the protest several miles out of the downtown area. Nobody aside from the organizers really know the plan, yet thanks to intensive advertising efforts, a few hundred people turn out.

After waiting a few minutes, a spokesperson for the group announces that the march will be leaving for the home of U.S. Representative Vern Ehlers—a Congressman who has been an ardent supporter of the Iraq War. The march is led by several banners—“U.S. Out of Iraq,” “Stop Funding War,” and “Stop U.S. Imperialism.” As the crowd turns onto the Congressman’s street, people dart out of the crowd and begin leafletting the Congressman’s neighbors, explaining his support for the war. When the march arrives at Ehlers’ house, people knock on his door to ask him to sign a contract pledging to stop funding the war. The Congressman—who the group would later learn was home—doesn’t answer the door and the contract is taped to his house. Others put signs in his yard demanding that he stop funding the war while a member of the group talks about the Congressman’s support for the war on a megaphone.

After the march, the Congressman—who had never really been questioned about his support for the war—is forced to defend his record in the media. The march gets considerable coverage in the local news and it is a catalyst for further organizing. Moreover, whenever the Congressman speaks in public, he talks about the protest—and admits to telling other members of Congress about the march. It has clearly affected him.

iii.

The difference between the two marches is one both of intent and empowerment. The first is what could be described as a traditional protest march—it addresses an important issue yet fails to draw connections. It is unfocused, lacks clarity, and there is ultimately little gained. Participants may have felt good about speaking out against the war, yet it is sadly doubtful that it made much of an impact. By contrast, the second march is directed towards a specific target who has the (potential) power to grant the protestors' demands. The Congressman could stop funding the war, which could theoretically end the war (if enough did it). Moreover, the march—which was heavily advertised—is well planned and it is clear what the group is hoping to accomplish. People left feeling like they made a difference and people stay involved in the organizing group's efforts for the next few years. The march not only affects its target, but it also empowers people and generates excitement even if the specific demand is not granted.

intro.



If you are engaged in anarchist political and/or community organizing, there is a good chance that at some point you will either want to or feel compelled to organize a protest march. Protest marches are a traditional tactic and it seems that everyone from anarchists to unions make use of them. Some people dislike them— and who hasn't been to a dull and boring march — while others love the feeling of taking to the streets. A march can have many positive attributes: they can raise awareness, they can force an issue into the open, they can be inspiring for people in your community, and they can build momentum as part of an ongoing campaign — among other things.

As with any tactic you might choose to use, a march should only be undertaken if it makes sense for the issue you are working on. To have a successful march— or any other action for that matter—you should always begin by asking questions about what you hope to accomplish, how much energy it will take, and whether it will be effective as part of your long-term goals and strategy. Furthermore, a poorly planned march can often lead to over extended organizers and potential burnout, can be a disempowering experience for those who attend, and can discourage others from seeing what can be accomplished by anarchist organizing in general.

Finally, a word of warning: this guide describes the very basics of organizing a protest march. The nuts and bolts of how to do it are here, but we have forgone a larger discussion about the effectiveness of such marches. This explains *how* to do it, but it would be a useful exercise to consider *why* folks keep returning to this tactic over and over again. Is it out of success? Is it because we don't know any different? A lack of ambition? As anarchists, we're skeptical, but we've definitely (perhaps grudgingly) made use of his tactic in the past. Maybe this approach can be useful, and maybe not, but we'd encourage folks to think critically about it and experiment with different approaches.

If after considering those questions, you decide to go forward, read on...

how to...

WHAT YOU NEED: THE BASICS...

- An issue or cause that needs to be addressed (for example: police brutality, U.S. imperialism, gentrification, capitalism, etc.)
- A group of people to help you organize a march (this can be an established collective or an ad-hoc group of people that come together to organize the march)
- A well-thought out plan (without a plan, a march is going to fail—but don't worry, read on for some helpful ideas and suggestions). Optional: If you don't have a set plan, at the very minimum a series of ideas is helpful.
- Optional but Preferable: A creative idea that will make the march break out of the “typical” protest mode (for example, a festive march with puppets, a themed march, a street party, etc—the sky is the limit)

GOAL

The first part of organizing a successful protest march is to consider what the goal of your march is going to be. Is it to raise awareness? Do you want to disrupt business as usual? Do you want to force an issue into the open? Do you want to protest a particular injustice?

Asking questions about your goals can help the group organizing the march to clarify their purpose and to make sure everyone is on the same page—which can be critical in ensuring a successful march. You don't want have half your group looking for a riot while the other half wants to look good for the media. Exploring the many facets of your issue—for example local developers and government agencies engaged in gentrification that displaces low-income people to make way for upscale housing—can lead to new angles that can shape your goals.

It also helps to consider multiple levels of goals. While your primary goal might be to draw attention to the exploitation of the fur industry or the U.S. occupation of Iraq, you should also consider other secondary goals such as getting new people involved, generating excitement, or increasing your group's name recognition.

CHOOSING A TARGET

Once you have a goal and focus for your march, you should establish a target or

series of targets. Ideally, these will be institutions or individuals that are related to your goal in some way, and preferably, those that have some degree of power to grant your demand (or perhaps the might be completely unwilling or unable to grant a demand, which means they could be useful in delegitimizing the system). For example, if you are protesting the Iraq War, you might want to direct your protest against a company making weapons for the war, a Congress member who supports the war (or takes a typical spineless liberal position through which they fail to challenge the war), or some other such target. In other cases, you might want to direct your march towards another target—for example an office supply store that is selling paper made from old growth forests—if you are protesting deforestation.

All too often, protest marches lack focus—who hasn't seen a march winding its way through town with no clear destination or with no focus? Protesting can be an effective educational tool, but most often, it is much more empowering to direct that anger and energy towards a specific target. Would you prefer to stand on the corner by your house yelling about the war or would you rather yell in the face of those who make the slaughter possible?

CHOOSING A DATE

Sometimes, you can't control the date of your march. For example, a politician or a corporate executive might be coming to town. In that case, the date will be set for you. However, if you are able to set the date yourself—for example it's an issue that allows some flexibility—you would do well to give your group plenty of time to advertise and prepare materials. We have generally found that a date one month in the future works well.

Additionally, when choosing a date, you should consider traffic (pedestrian and vehicular) in the area where you will be marching. Are Saturdays particularly dead in your downtown? You might want to have a march on a weekday instead. Is your target closed on the day you choose? Then you should probably choose a day when it is open. If your downtown is a ghost town, it may not be worth organizing a march in that area. Nothing is more disempowering than a march that nobody sees and from which participants leave feeling as though they accomplished nothing.

CHOOSING A MEETING PLACE

You will want to choose a meeting place for the march that is near any targets that you want to go by, stop at, or at which you wish to conclude. If your location is over a mile from your intended target, you are likely meeting too far away. Additionally, you should choose a meeting place that is easy to find—for example a park—and always provide the nearest intersection to make it easier for people to find.

Depending on the political situation, you may want to meet at a place such as a park at which people can legally gather. In some places, there may be obscure laws that state that political gatherings need to have permits and/or prior approval. In general, these can typically be avoided without much consequence. In several years of doing political organizing in our hometown of Grand Rapids, nobody has been arrested for gathering without a permit.

CHOOSING A ROUTE

Once you have chosen your meeting place and targets, you should figure out the route of your march. Marches that decide this in advance generally go the smoothest—after all, you don't want to take a wrong turn down a dead end street or make some other embarrassing mistake.

Generally, you will want to take the route that gets you to your destination in a reasonable amount of time. People tend to get bored on long marches and nothing is easier to dismiss than a march that looks like a horde of zombies (unless of course it is a zombie-themed march). Most often, the routes that are the best will be on visible streets or by those with related targets. For example, if you are protesting the war in Iraq—you might want to go by the government and corporate office buildings that sustain the war.

ADVERTISING

Once you have the logistical aspects of your march covered, you will want to get started advertising (you very well may want to do this before you have some of the details figured out). We suggest that you begin by creating a flyer that contains:

- The date, time, and location of your march
- An eye-catching graphic or two
- A website or email for more information
- A brief background on your march (the “why” and “what” of what you are protesting)
- Anything you want people to bring: for example, signs, banners, etc.

This flyer will be the basis of your advertising and outreach. You should make several 8.5×11 or larger copies to post around town along with quarter or half-size copies to distribute to people by hand. A successful advertising strategy will include posting flyers at “sympathetic” businesses and other locations (for example, coffee shops, record stores, high schools, colleges, local collective spaces), on telephone poles and street posts (using wheat paste or tape), and handing them out at events where sympathetic people will be (note: when doing this, you should ask first and be sure to stick around for the actual event).

You should also aim to tell as many people as you can about your march via face-to-face conversations. Tell your friends, tell those with similar politics, and seek out groups or coalitions that have open meetings and invite them to the protest.

Additionally, you should plan to do additional advertising on the Internet. Unless the march is being organized on incredibly short notice, Internet advertising should never substitute for flyers and other advertising. That said, Internet advertising is critical—post your march on local independent media websites, Craig's List, local event calendars, related local message boards, and make “events” for your march on websites such as Facebook and invite your friends—and encourage others to do the same.

You can never do too much advertising—always push yourself to find new places and ways to advertise. It’s critical if you want to have a successful march.

SHAPING THE MESSAGE AND CREATING MATERIALS

While it is good to encourage people to bring their own signs and banners to your protest, you may want to make sure that a coherent message is being presented to your targets, passersbys, and/or the media. To do this, it often helps to produce a series of compelling signs and visuals with your message.

For example, you might want to have a banner at the front of your march that makes your message clear, for example, “Stop Police Brutality Now.” In some cases—especially for semi-legal protests that plan to occupy the streets, it helps to have additional banners down the side that can help prevent cars and police from driving into the march (and potentially protecting people from being arrested).

Aside from a lead banner, it can also be helpful to produce signs for the march because no matter how many flyers you distribute asking people to bring signs, you can be pretty sure that a good number of people won’t have signs. An easy way to mass produce signs for minimal cost is to use stencils and spray paint to spray onto cardboard. Taking the police brutality protest example from above, you could quickly produce a number of signs with a wealth of messages—“GRPD = Racist,” “Police Off Our Backs,” and other such slogans.

Beyond signs, it is generally helpful to have a leaflet that you can distribute to pedestrians and drivers as you march. Your leaflet should include a basic explanation of the issue, a website for people to get more information, and ideally, a way for them to get involved in future organizing efforts.

STICKING TOGETHER

As you think about the logistical aspects of the march, it is also important to think about how to keep the crowd together. Keeping the group together gives you the maximum visual impact, gives marchers a sense of strength and unity, and ensures safety (particularly if you are marching in the street and are concerned about traffic or police). One way to do this is by having people in the front who are in communication with people in the back who can then adjust the pace if necessary to ensure that the march isn’t thinning out and that people are not being left behind. Moreover, you will want organizers in the front to ensure that the march follows its intended route.

MEDIA

Dealing with the media is a whole other topic—and there is a good debate to be had if it is worth it or not—but generally if you are organizing some kind of protest march, you should plan for some kind of interaction with the media. You should also be prepared for the fact that the media has two basic goals: 1) to sell its product; and 2) to protect the status quo.

Consequently, you can expect the media to do everything in its power to minimize the point of your protest (because dissent is a challenge to the status quo) and to focus on the most outlandish or sensational aspect of your protest. Did someone get arrested at your march? You can bet that will be a big focus of the news coverage. Is there someone who looks “weird” by so-called “mainstream standards” at your protest (say, a kid with a mohawk)? You can be pretty sure they will talk to that person.

It is easy to spend hours talking about how the media works to minimize dissent, but suffice it to say, they rarely want to portray your efforts in a positive light. Consequently, if you plan to talk to the media, it helps to make an effort to consider a few points before hand:

- Designate one or two “media spokespeople” from your group. Have them actively seek out reporters and offer those reporters interviews.
- Spokespeople should have a few key talking points—agreed to beforehand by the rest of the group—that they wish to share with the media. Talking points that deal with why you are doing and what you are doing are definitely the best.
- Be prepared for the traps: don’t answer questions like “are you disappointed with the small turnout?” or others that aim to give the public a disempowering view of your march. Play up the positives of what you are doing.

THE LAW

In addition to the media, another one of those adverse forces that you will likely have to deal with is the law. In all cases, police are never your friends. When it comes to protest marches, they generally have one goal—to minimize the disruption through repression (this can range from arrest to enforcing arcane ordinances requiring a picket line to be constantly moving). In some cases, they want to neutralize dissent altogether and may respond in incredibly brutal ways. Before your protest march, it is a smart idea to consider what you are going to do if the police come. While debating “what if” scenarios can be crippling, it is typically helpful to consider the big ones: What will you do if a person(s) is arrested? Do you wish to obey police orders? Who will you represent your group to the police (if you want anyone to do so)? At what point will you challenge or cease challenging their authority?

Beyond these questions, it is also helpful to designate a few people to deal with the police. Typically, having one person engage with the police (wait for them to approach you, never defer to their authority) is helpful—that person can relay information to the larger group. In addition, it is a good idea to have a couple people with video cameras recording the actions of the police in case of arrests and/or other repression. The person(s) designated as police liaison(s) can also help to keep the crowd calm.

Finally, you would do well to consider what you will do if people get arrested at the march. When an arrest happens, the legal/police liaisons should gather as

much information as possible—the names of the person(s) arrested, what was happening, what the police did or said, officer's badge numbers, witnesses (and a way to contact them), and any photos/video of the arrest. In addition, at the conclusion march, it is imperative that the organizers pass a hat to collect money for bail and invite the group to come to the jail to get the arrestees out and show their support.

ROLES

With the suggestions above, you may be thinking that it seems like an awful lot of work for one—or even a few people. And it is. Consequently, it often helps to split the work into a series of roles. For example, a few people can be designated legal observers, a few people can leaflet, a few people can be paying attention to the speed and direction of the march, and a few people can deal with the media. By designating roles, you can greatly enhance both the efficiency and effectiveness of your protest march.

ADDITIONAL TOPICS FOR CONSIDERATION

There are no doubt many ideas, potential roles, and other such things that we have not thought of. Moreover, it is important to remember that while the authors have had success with these tactics and strategies, we are by no means experts and everything must be refined and adapted to local circumstances.



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