

De-escalation & Nonviolent Security

At protests, the police, counter-demonstrators or infiltrators, and angry passersby can start conflicts that disrupt the focus of the action, including provoking protestors into impulsive acts to discredit the cause. Having our own security or “de-escalators” at actions helps track and diffuse unstrategic conflicts, no matter the source, and support the action to be as effective as possible.

Different names for this role are used, such as “security,” “de-escalator,” “marshal,” or “peacekeeper.” This handout offers an approach to nonviolent security for you to adapt to the goals and values of your group, whatever you call this role.

PHILOSOPHY OF NONVIOLENT SECURITY

- Security has an eye out for the safety and well-being of everyone. They are looking for, and are prepared to deal calmly with unusual events and avoid unnecessary violence.
- In any action, both escalation and de-escalation of conflict may be called for. Security works with these ebbs and flows, for the sake of the group, its message, and its overall goals.
- De-escalation requires treating people with respect and dignity. Folks in security roles may have to be firm, in the interests of everyone’s safety, but shouldn’t be “bossy” or assume any authority over other protestors.
- Security folks are centered in their own resilience; they leverage self-awareness for the safety and power of the group.

SCENARIOS TO PLAN FOR

- A speaker’s platform is rushed or taken over.
- At the end of a march, hecklers follow; some protestors fall further behind to confront them.
- Counter demonstrators: familiarize yourself with who and where they are, their mood, and their tactics.
- Counter-demonstrators may mix with the crowd and attempt to engage people in arguments or fights.
- During a march, the group gets separated due to pace, traffic lights, etc.
- Some protestors use tactics outside the agreements or values of your group.
- Tensions may erupt as people are leaving the event. Stay until the very end.
- Police may act violently and erratically, using projectiles, tear gas, singling out protestors, kettling on foot and in vehicles, etc.

SECURITY TIPS

Overall, it's important to be in relationship with organizers, leaders, and groups in the streets, so that security roles are clearly known, in coordination with any other action roles, and held with the particular values and goals of your group. Do not assume authority over any group.

Be alert, yet relaxed – Watch the edges of the crowd, overhead passes, passing cars, members of the crowd who behave oddly, and police officers for trouble, before it occurs. However, try not to create uneasiness or paranoia by your example.

Be available to help – People with particular needs – the elderly, parents with young children, folks with disabilities, those struggling with banners in high winds – may need support from time to time. Encourage cooperation and consideration, while respecting folks' agency, by your example.

Prepare for scenarios and trouble spots – Familiarize yourself with potential sources of trouble, and places where trouble might come up (see pg 1 for some examples, but you should anticipate scenarios based on your own context).

Security is a full-time job – Don't hand out literature, get signatures on a petition, or take on some other task while you're doing security. Your job is to have all your antennae up, watching for potential problems and to be completely free to respond to trouble.

Come early and stay late – Arrive at the event early to see the territory, to learn action goals, and to get last minute information. It is important to get your bearings before things start. Also, be prepared to stay until the very end, because trouble can happen when the event ends.

Work in a group – Team up with other de-escalators or form a security team to cover a certain area of the event together. Get to know each other so it is easier to make quick decisions together.

Make yourself identifiable – You can use armbands, hats, or some clear way to identify yourself as security. Be transparent about your role when it's appropriate to do so.

Know who to get answers from – Be sure to know who the organizers are. Where are the first aid and medics? Who are the legal observers or media spokespersons (if any)? Where do you go if you find a problem you can't solve? Be careful about rumors!

Wait to be arrested last – If the event includes civil disobedience, where people are risking arrest, and you want to risk arrest as well, try to be one of the last. Once arrested, you won't be able to do much security.

DE-ESCALATION TACTICS

- Draw disrupters away from the crowd and out of attention.
- Listen attentively to argumentative people, occupying their time, allowing the rest of the group to focus on action goals.
- Move your group of protestors away from disrupters or create a neutral area between them.
- Surround disrupters with de-escalators; link arms if necessary.
- Invite the group of protestors in your group to sit down to help isolate a person.
- Divert attention: Start singing a song, do something silly or funny, create some theater, pass out balloons or flowers.
- In the event of violence against protestors (by police, for example, or an organized attack by counter-demonstrators), remind people to cover their heads, don't grab legs, etc, and help people make quick decisions for their safety.
- Keep thinking creatively!

PREPARATION CHECKLIST

Know logistics:

- Schedule of events
- Agreed upon cues and signals
- Legal observers & jail support info
- First aid or medic location
- Media spokespersons and/or other action roles.
- Route of march /or the action plan, including awareness of different levels of risking arrest, if applicable.

Other things to prepare

- A "go-bag" with essential items; this might include phone, ID, first aid, depending on your context.
- Scout the location and different groups or people who might show up
- Practiced strategies for handling different scenarios
- Any agreed upon identification as security.

First edition by Betsy Raasch-Gilman and Will Pipkin of Future Now: A Training Collective, 1991; Second edition by Betsy Raasch-Gilman and Matt Guynn, 2011; Includes materials from War Resisters League Organizing Manual (1981)

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