



# Protest/Rally Organizing Guide

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## Introduction

**There are three reasons for organizing a rally/protest/march.** This first is a response to a crisis. This could be in response to a local or national issue, generally sparked by an event, such as the murder of George Floyd or the expansion of oil/gas pipelines through Indigenous territory - Standing Rock. Another reason could be to raise awareness about on-going systemic issues or crises, such as the Climate March and Women's March. The third reason is to engage in escalation tactics as part of an organizing campaign for social change. In this situation, demands clearly articulated to a target(s) have been ignored or explicitly denied and more public pressure is needed to change their minds. This type of rally is different from the other two because the community has already come together to develop a plan of action for addressing their issue(s). The target(s), the person(s) with the ability to make a decision about the community's collective demands, has already been personally engaged as part of the campaign. All three types of rallies are opportunities for base building, simply put growing your list of people willing to take action on the issue. This is a necessary part of building power for your local campaign and/or for long-term social movement building. If the community does not have an action plan in place, the list of people you recruited at your event is the perfect place to start to engage to develop a collective community action plan for change. **A rally or even a series of rallies are ONLY effective tools for social change when connected to community organizing.** Rallies are one of the many organizing tools communities use to demonstrate

community power, raise public awareness, polarize an issue, and grow the base. [Check out Southern People's Organizing Toolkit for more information on the fundamentals of organizing.](#)

**An effective rally can be as basic as several folks standing outside of their Representative's office**, holding signs to show where they, as constituents, stand on an issue. Or it can be much more involved and theatric — to include a full program of speakers, a hefty recruitment effort, artists and partner organizations. And it can be anything between. It depends on your goals for the rally, your group's capacity, and how much lead time you have.

This guide provides basic tips from our experiences organizing different kinds of rallies. You'll have to figure out what makes strategic sense for your particular rally.

## Before your rally

*Preparation and planning are the most important elements of successful action. Some of the questions we should answer when planning an effective nonviolent direct action:*

**Campaign/Movement goals:** What is your intention? How do you define "winning," especially in terms of the current campaign/movement? What will "winning" look like? What is your strategy to win? Are other groups or organizations using different strategies? How do you or your group fit into them? How does it affect the children, health or well being of people in your community? Are there especially egregious facts, images, data, statements or actions by opponents, etc. that you want to point out to the public? Is direct action the best tactic for this stage of your campaign? How/When could the tactics of NVDA be best used in your campaign? What story are you trying to tell?

**Audience** Who is your audience? Who are you trying to affect? Who are the decision-makers? What do you want them to do?

**Timing & Political Climate:** What makes this timing strategic? Is there a more strategic date? What is the political significance of this date? Is it special just to you, your organization or movement? Is it a culturally important date? What is the political climate? How is your campaign relevant to people in your community/state/country? How is it compelling and timely? How soon do you need to take action? What is your timeline?

**Goals of public non-violent direct action:** What is the goal of the action? What are you trying to achieve by taking action at this point? (e.g. gain leverage for negotiation, sound the general alarm, frame your campaign of the issue in general, prevent greater harm from occurring, etc.) What do you want to accomplish? Does this action fit into a larger campaign or more long-term strategy?

**Resources:** What resources do you have in terms of people, time, money, equipment, skills, etc. Do you have allied/affinity group already organized into roles and capable of making quick consensus decisions or assisting with planning and preparation?

**Action planning:** Scouting, budget, logistics, hardware and equipment, roles, training and preparation, staging area, etc.

**Strategy:** Is there a way to do this without arrests? How could we accomplish our goals and get our message out without arrests? Should we do a more "mainstream," "soft" action first to build support? Do we need to raise bail funds prior to the action in case there are arrests, and who will be responsible for bailing people out of jail?

**Political Leverage:** Who is the decision maker? What person is the target of the action?

**Creativity/Theatre:** What could we try that has never been tried before? What could we do differently? How could we involve artists or musicians in this action? What is the message? What is your six second sound-byte? What compelling image(s) will accompany your action and reach your audience? What is the money shot? What symbols can you use to simplify and stream-line your message to the audience? Could you exploit your opponent's symbols against them?

**Target/Location:** Why here? Is there a major media market nearby? Have there been actions there before? Would there be a more strategic location? Have you scouted it? Taken pictures?

**Media:** What is the angle? What makes it newsworthy? What makes this significant? What is the one-sentence talking point you want to highlight?

**Demands:** What are your short-term demands? What are your long-term demands? Make sure that your primary demand can be reasonably expected to be met by the people at the location, given the timeline of your action.

**Outreach:** How can we outreach to non-traditional communities for this action? Will your action build or foster community support for your campaign? Will the tactic alienate or interest the general public?

**Tactic:** Based on answers to the above questions, which tactic will you and your affinity group use? Will it be a soft (symbolic) or hard (blockade/occupation) action? If you want to plan a hard action, planning is even more critical as you will be asking people to consent to arrest and further contact with the criminal justice system, and as such will need to raise funds for bail, fines and other legal fees etc. This is not to be taken lightly.

**Needs?** What do you need to know, do, accomplish, or acquire to move forward? Do we need training/support in civil disobedience?

### **The Four C's**

**C: Clarity:** communicate with symbols.

**C: Consciousness:** Make it about right and wrong. Go for a visceral emotional response (rather than an intellectual/factual argument). Values. Create cognitive dissonance.

**C: Commitment:** Your demonstrated commitment may cause them cognitive dissonance.

**C: Sacrifice:** You must be willing to risk something.

## **Planning a basic “soft” non-violent direct action protest/rally that does not involve intentional civil disobedience and arrest:**

**1. Choose a date, time and location.** If your event is targeting a public official or department, it makes the most sense to hold your rally outside of their office/building. If your city has central town square or public park, this can also be a great location. Or maybe it makes sense to pick a location that ties to the issue you’re focusing on. When choosing a location, consider direct pressure on your target, accessibility, parking and visibility — to the public and the media.

Rallies are often held during business hours (starting no earlier than 8:30 am and no later than 4:30), when we have the best chance of getting media and the attention of the public official/department we’re targeting. The lunch hour is often the best time during the business day to turn out the most people — and it’s a convenient time for reporters.

If turnout is your main goal/concern, weekends generally are more conducive for this as more folks are off work and able to attend.

**Rallies and protests on public property (e.g. City Hall grounds) do not require permits as freedom to assemble is protected by the First Amendment. However, if your action requires blocking off streets, you need to coordinate with proper public officials for permits and law enforcement.**

**2. Line up speakers.** Here are a few examples of speakers it may make sense to invite:

- **Everyday folks with compelling personal stories related to the issue.** Voices of the most impacted should be centered and amplified. Storytelling by folks who have experienced harm or been most impacted by the issue you’re protesting is the most powerful/impactful tool at a protest.
- **Community leaders, advocates, activists who can articulate the issue in an impactful way.**
- **Artists-** musicians, spoken word artists
- **Clergy**
- **Local/State Elected Officials in support of your issue and demands.** Mayors, state representatives, state senators, city council members and others in the area. ***As a general rule, we (MRC) do not invite public/elected officials to speak at our protests/rallies because our goal is to amplify the voices of the people, not the power structure. However, depending on the issue/situation in your city/area, there may be exceptions to this rule. (Note: do not invite anyone who is running for public office who may hijack your event for their own agenda.)***

It's very important that you prepare your speakers well. Make sure to have a prep call or meeting with everyone who is speaking at your rally to ensure messaging/narrative is coordinated.

### 3. Plan logistics.

- **Do you need a sound system?** You should arrange to have at least a basic sound system. Megaphones are also an inexpensive option.
- **Do you need a permit for your event?** In most communities, you don't need a permit to stand and assemble on public property — including public sidewalks. However, many senate offices are in federal buildings that do require permits. If you're unsure, just check with local authorities. Also, if you have a sound system, you may need to arrange a permit if your municipality has a noise ordinance.
- **What roles need to be filled?** This depends on the size and details of your event, but here are some roles to consider planning for:
  - **Lead organizers**
  - **Outreach-** coordinate social media outreach, flyering, communications with partner/allied organizations, etc.
  - **Marshalls and Security-** People who will keep the marchers safe from police and other aggressive elements/counter-protestors; recommend that this role be filled by folks with experience in marshalling/protest security. Reach out to MRC if you need help with filling this role.
  - **MCs and Speakers-** generally helps to designate 1-2 emcees who keep the agenda moving along and keep crowd engaged with chants, transitions between speakers, etc.
  - **Media spokespeople** - make sure to send out press release 24-48 hours before event and have a designated point of contact to field all media requests. Media messaging/narrative should be very clear and all media points of contact should have talking points prepared to clearly articulate the desired message to the media.
  - **Accessibility coordinator**
  - **Street medic-** first aid and CPR trained
  - **Designated person to gather contact info from protest/rally attendees to coordinate after-action steps.** Will need sign-in sheets, clipboard, pens.
  - **Filming, live streaming and photographing**
  - **ACLU or MS Center for Justice-trained legal observers** to monitor for and document any police or civilian misconduct that violates protestors' civil and constitutional rights; ACLU of MS and MS Center for Justice offer legal observer training remotely if you need to get folks trained before your event. If you have any questions or want Legal Observers at your event, please visit [www.mscenterforjustice.org/protestsupport](http://www.mscenterforjustice.org/protestsupport) or email [protestsupport@mscenterforjustice.org](mailto:protestsupport@mscenterforjustice.org).

- **Hydration/Nutrition** tents or stations especially if action is longer than an hour and/or in hot weather.
- **Transportation coordinator** if you're having a march to transport march participants from ending location back to staging/parking location safely.

#### **4. Prepare the materials you'll need.**

- Signs, Banners, Flags
- Day Of leaflet/flyer with call to action information
- Sound System
- Bullhorns and batteries
- Sign In Sheets, clip boards, pens
- Noisemakers, whistles, drums
- Legal instructions, marshall instructions
- Chant sheets
- Cameras, film
- Food, drinks
- Transportation (busses, vans, cars) & routes for drivers
- Set Up crew
- Clean up crew
- Security arm bands, medic arm bands, marshall vests or arm bands
- Day of Press packets
- Communication equipment (radios, phones)
- Bail money

#### **5. Recruit people to your event.**

- Hit the phones
- Emails
- Social media
- Flyering
- Traditional media

**6. Contact the media.** It's really important to get the media to cover your event – news coverage educates other constituents on the issue and puts additional pressure on your target. Here is an example of a press release you can use as a guide:

# MISSISSIPPI



**For Immediate Release: Monday, January 10, 2020**

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## **Mississippi Poor People's Campaign to Hold Vigil at Parchman Prison in Solidarity with Our Incarcerated Loved Ones**

"Somebody's hurting our people, and we won't be silent anymore."

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MISSISSIPPI – The Mississippi Poor People's Campaign and its partners will hold a prayer vigil and solidarity demonstration outside Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman tomorrow at 12 pm.-- rain or shine.

The mistreatment of our incarcerated loved ones and additional loss of life that has occurred in recent days in the state prison system is unacceptable. Public officials continue to mislead the public and deflect accountability for both the recent tragedies and the longstanding systemic abuse and neglect that our incarcerated family members suffer in the prison system.

We, the People of Mississippi, say no more to the violation of the constitutional rights, dignity and safety of our incarcerated brothers and sisters and state workers, and we will not accept anything less than the implementation of comprehensive prison reforms as outlined in the demands presented during our press conference on Tuesday, January 7.

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**7. Have a final check-in call with your group.** Walk through the event from start to finish to make sure everything is ready and everyone is clear about their role. Anyone who is speaking or playing a role should be on the call. You can also discuss any breaking political updates related to the issue.

**8. Make final preparations — including reminder calls.** In the last 24 hours before your event, make sure you're ready! Re-read this guide and review all your materials. Also, be sure to check in with any local organizational partners (if applicable) the day before the event to finalize any logistics items and talk through any questions.

## During your rally

**Arrive at least 30 minutes early.** Typically some folks will show up early, and you'll want to be there to greet them. Welcome people as they arrive, and ask folks to start displaying their signs. Start as close to on-time as possible.

Here's a sample 1-hour rally agenda, assuming a start-time of 12:00 noon:

- **Arrive early** — no later than **11:30am** to make sure there are no unanticipated logistical issues, and to greet folks who arrive early.
- **11:45-12:05** – As people arrive, greeters welcome them and sign them in.
- **11:45-12:10** – Lead the crowd in cheers and chants.
- **12:10-12:15** – Emcee officially starts the event, thanks people for coming, and briefly states why you're all there. Emcee should give brief overview of agenda and provide instructions to protestors about expectations of non-violent protest and exercise of First Amendment Constitutional rights to free speech and assembly, how to respond collectively to agent provocateurs and counter protestors and safety plan should any physical violence break out. Emcee should let people know where water/food stations, restrooms, medic(s) are and should let people know how long the rally will go.
- **12:15-12:20** – First speaker (introduced by emcee)
- **12:20-12:25** – Second speaker (introduced by emcee)
- **12:25-12:30** – Third speaker (introduced by emcee)
- **12:30-12:40** – Emcee wraps up prepared statements and takes questions from the media.
- **12:40-12:50** – Continued chanting and cheering.
- **12:50-12:55** – Emcee thanks people again for coming, and announces demands and call to action.

Tips:

- Ask others to step up into roles — don't run a one-person show!
- If you are on a public sidewalk, make sure to keep a path clear for passersby.



- People often tend to huddle close together — and this often makes their signs less visible and makes the crowd look smaller. Encourage folks to spread out and to make their signs visible to the public and the media.
- Chants are often a great energizer.
- Have fun!

## After your rally

**1. Hold a debrief meeting.** Talk through what went well, what needs to be improved and next steps in campaign. Plan that gathering to take place within 10 days of your rally.

**2. Follow-up with folks who attended your rally:**

- Call through your sign-up sheets to thank people for coming and ask them to attend the debrief/next steps meeting.
- Debrief with any members who took on leadership roles during the event. This includes greeters, the Emcee and other coordinators.
- Share any news coverage and press clippings with attendees. (It's also great to send this to the office of your member of Congress.)
- Send a thank-you note to any of the speakers from your event.

**3. Celebrate,** and get ready for next steps.