

Police Liaison

What is it and why we do it

Police liaison is a role used in direct action that allows for clear communication between activists and police. It is typically considered a communications role, not a decision making role. As liaison you are acting only as a conduit for information in most cases, and your primary purpose is to support the safe and successful completion of your group's action. It can often be useful to advocate for safety of activists particularly if they are risking arrest, and/or 'locked on' to machinery or equipment.

The power dynamics of dealing with police and authorities

It can be quite intimidating doing police liaison for the first time or coming across police in a situation where people are actively participating in civil disobedience arrests.

We are often brought up to instinctively obey police, or have been culturally accustomed from childhood to seeing them as people who are supposed to keep us safe so it can be an interesting experience when you first set out to challenge that power dynamic.

From a different perspective, people who have had a bad experience of police, or have witnessed police prioritising corporations over community using force, can have a very negative or hostile view of police.

We also need to be mindful that aboriginal peoples and other marginalised groups may have had different experiences with police, and may be at greater risk, so need to ensure we support them if they want it.

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Police are used to people deferring to their authority. If activists are polite but assertive and treat their authority as somewhat irrelevant and carry on business as usual it can actually sometimes takes a little time for police to recalibrate, and allows us more space to assert ourselves.

It can be confronting – we often need to challenge authority in the struggle for environmental and social justice, and we should feel proud of our actions when participating in peaceful civil disobedience arrests; but also try and see the humanity in our opponents.

Our fight is not with the police, but the policies they enforce and it is important to distinguish between the two. Act with respect to all of them where possible, especially the ones who treat you similarly, and hold the others to account.



Locals fighting proposed gas hub block road, near Broome: Julia Rau

THE BASICS

Before an action

If you are organising a covert action that relies on an element of surprise, obviously you won't be speaking to police, however make sure you have scoped the area and ensure you have a good eye line to see them coming. It is always best to approach them first.

If it is a large convergence or an ongoing event it may be useful to meet the police beforehand. Some activists try and secure agreements about what tactics police will use (for example, not using the dog squad), though do not make the mistake of assuming agreements will be honoured.



Police wedge tactics - Occupy Melbourne

In any case it can be worthwhile meeting for a respectful chat, though be mindful of the information you want to share with them. Their job is to gather intelligence on you. Your job is to work towards the agreed objectives of your action, and to minimise risk of injury to activists where possible through constructive dialogue.

It is useful to let them know how they can communicate with you and if need be give them a clear point of contact.

For smaller actions, ensure you have talked through a range of possible scenarios, including when you will end an action, and how people can exit if they need to. Make sure you are aware of any medical conditions or concerns people have about the action.

DURING AN ACTION

Initial contact

- When you see the police or security arrive, approach them immediately and introduce yourself away from where the 'arrestable' people are. They will often try to confuse things by approaching people individually which splits the group.
- Advise them that this is a nonviolent protest, and if it feels appropriate, why the people are there. Keep this very generic.
- Give as much information about yourself as you are comfortable with – they will generally ask for your full name, your phone number or your address. Some people don't mind giving them their phone number, however this is a personal choice. It depends on which state in Australia you are in, as to the level of detail you need to give police if they ask you. Find out.
- Advise them that the group has authorised you to be a point of contact. Emphasise you are not a decision maker, merely a conduit for information, however it helps to position yourself as the person who can help gain a positive outcome.
- Remain calm, maintain eye contact and an even tone of voice.

- Reflect on your body language. Try and keep it as open as possible. (Eg: don't cross your arms)
- The police often don't know the law in as much detail as you would imagine sometimes. Be assertive about your knowledge and rights.

During an action

- Keep a record of any discussions with police, such as what they are likely to charge people with, what time things happened. Also, names, badge numbers, and which police station people are being sent to.
- Check in often with the people who are risking arrest and relay accurate information. Also feed back to the broader group or supporters as well as the arrestables.
- Whilst we can ensure we clearly communicate with our group about when they are risking arrest, it is not our role to do the police's job for them. If they want to give an order for a large group of people to disperse, that is their job, not ours.
- If search and rescue need to be called to remove 'lock ons' treat them with respect. They are the ones who will be looking after your friend's safety. Apart from the fact that they often have a reputation of generally being more friendly and professional than other cops, it's in all of our best interest to treat them with respect: they have the machinery, and are the ones who can ensure the safety of our crew.

After an action

- Write a summary of the day, and any relevant notes down that may be useful for court. In most states you can be charged up till 12 months after committing a summary (relatively minor) offence, even if people weren't notified of a likely charge at the time, and you won't be able to rely on memory.
- If there has been any inappropriate behaviour by police, document it, and ensure you have contact details for all witnesses, so you can respond if necessary. You should also check in with any legal observers if they were in attendance.
- Check in with people who participated in the action and debrief if possible
- Say a friendly bye to the cops ☺

Some tips for police liaison

- Record everything
 - When they arrive on the scene
 - How many cars, if there are horses
 - The names and badge numbers
 - Times of incidents, or discussions
 - Eg: at 1015 Simon was asked to come off the roof
- Make it clear you do not speak for the group, but can merely pass information on
- Do not give information away unnecessarily (Ask if the potential arrestables want their names public for example)
- Be friendly but assertive, and ask to speak to the officer in charge.
- Do not be pressured into their timelines – if you need to take a phone call, take it.
- Know your rights – check legal fact sheets and be aware of the most likely charges people could be up for. This will help if the police start throwing around threats of increased charges.

- Always insist on search and rescue being called if someone needs to be cut off from a 'lock on'. It is not the work for renegade cops. (they will generally be called into cut folks off machinery, or who are locked to office equipment, remove people from high places) Get advice from an experienced activist of the safest way to do this, and ensure you call the police to account if they do not follow procedure.
- Police may want to clear the area and have you leave. Try and negotiate for police liaison, and if possible a 'buddy' (support person for arrestable people) to stay – for reasons of safety, to help keep things calm and to keep the lines of dialogue open. Arrestables may want to refuse to talk to police at this point, and insist on a liaison to represent them which may increase the likelihood of the liaison being able to stay. There are no guarantees however, and sometimes, despite best efforts you will have to leave unless you want to risk arrest yourself.

You need to have the trust of the group of the people you are working with, and a mandate from them to speak on their behalf. This means you need to have talked in detail about all possible scenarios, and what people's demands/possible negotiation points might be. As an affinity group people should have discussed their triggers for fear and any concerns they might have, and let people know how best to support them in the instance they are feeling vulnerable or upset.

DO

- Try and act with respect, and encourage others to do the same.
- Speak with the rest of your action group and ask them to support the role of police liaison by not crowding around. Ensure you have the trust of the group.
- Clearly and regularly feed information back to the arrestables, and also any support crew you have in other areas.

DON'T

- Lie to police. Withhold tactical information if you feel you have to, but try not to lie directly to them. They need to feel they can trust you. People's safety can depend on it.
- Encourage a culture of 'crying wolf' or screaming 'police brutality' over very minor issues. If someone is 'locked on' or the situation is volatile it is important to know when someone is genuinely in pain.

Other resources

- <http://anitamckone.wordpress.com/articles-2/how-to-do-police-liaison/>
- <http://www.activistrights.org.au/handbook/ch03s03s01.php>

We will be working to build upon this resource, and publishing an extended version in future, including more detail, criticisms and challenges to the role of police liaison, and more detail about police tactics and their organisational structures.