

Support for Civil Disobedience and Direct Action

October, 2002

Many forms of political protest are safe and perfectly legal. When we engage in civil disobedience or direct action, however, we run the risk of arrest.

Being arrested and going to jail can be an unpleasant and even traumatic experience, but it can also be empowering and liberating. For many people of more privileged backgrounds, it is an invaluable education! Even in the post 9-11 climate, arrests for peaceful acts of protest are not necessarily detrimental to one's future life—in fact, they can be a badge of honor! But the experience is more likely to be empowering if we are prepared, and have organized support.

Before embarking on an action which risks arrest:

- Arrange home support, someone who will take care of your cats, plants, kids, excuses to the boss, or whatever else you need.
- Arrange day-of-action support, someone who will be onsite to witness the action from a safe place, or offsite, whom you will call at a prearranged time. If you don't call, your support person will know you are in jail and take action.
- Arrange legal support—someone who will be your lawyer and guard your interests. The National Lawyers' Guild has branches around the country, and many members are willing to volunteer to support activists. You may have friends or contacts in the legal profession who are willing to help. Do them the favor of letting them know your intentions ahead of time.
- If you have no money, and no prearranged legal counsel, the court will appoint a public defender.

Before the action:

- Write or email your friends and relatives, let them know what you are planning to do and why, and ask them to stand by to call or write letters should you be arrested. Doing this will also help to get them involved in the issue.
- Write down the names, jail names if you are planning to use them, contact numbers and relevant emergency information for all who are taking part, and leave it in a safe place. Your support person should have access to it.
- Take thought to where you leave identification (if you choose not to carry it), car keys, money and other necessities. Your support person should know where all of it is, and have access to it.
- Don't wear or carry anything that you cannot bear to lose.
- Write the contact numbers for your legal support and general support on your body in ink, as paper and pens may be taken from you.

- When you are arrested, you may get a phone call. You may have access to a cell phone. If so, contact your legal and general support people. Try to consolidate and pass on the names of all who have been arrested.
- While you are in jail, your support people can vigil at the jail, attend arraignments or trials, let your friends and relatives know where you are, visit you, and mobilize people to write letters or call officials on your behalf.
- When you get out of jail, they can greet you, feed you, help you get where you need to go, and provide massage, cheers, and healing.
- The role of support can be as stressful or more as going to jail. Supporters also need support, cheers, massage and healing!

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