

Setting Up a Legal Team

This document was created to help organizers form an effective legal team for a mass action. It is a general overview of places to begin discussion and work. Read [Office Setup](#) and [Legal Team Action Roles](#) for a look at the details and logistics of an action legal team.

Questions to consider:

- How will the legal team make decisions?
- How will the legal team be accountable to the larger group?
- What are the goals of the legal team? What assumptions are implicit that need to be made explicit?
- Who are you committing to provide legal support for? (e.g. anyone arrested in conjunction with the action, only those participating in legal solidarity, only those whose tactics or charges fall inside the “action guidelines”, etc.)
- What are likely police tactics (e.g. police picking people up in small groups after the action, rather than in mass during the action)? What are possible strategies to deal with these tactics?
- Are there proactive legal or political steps you can take to thwart police or government harassment and repression? (e.g. temporary restraining orders, putting the police on notice, media blitz, etc.)

Lawyers: It’s crucial to establish good relationships with the local legal community.

- Connect with progressive legal organizations, like the National Lawyer’s Guild and the ACLU, as well as public defenders. Also, if you don’t already have ties in the local legal community, ask a local activist which lawyers might be interested and who can help the legal team network.
- Try to arrange a group meeting with all the lawyers who are interested and all members of the legal team.
- Lawyers are usually busy, so the earlier you can let them know what kind of help you will need and when you will need it, the better.
- Make sure everyone’s commitments are clear so that you know what to expect and they don’t feel put upon. Don’t expect them to come to every meeting or training, but let them know what is happening and they are welcome to come.
- Communication is key. Be friendly and respectful and make them a part of your team.

Issues to flag:

- Make sure legal team members and volunteers don’t always get stuck doing the same mundane tasks. This is especially true with the Away Team (the people who go out into the streets, jails, and courts), which can be fun and exciting, versus the Office Team (the people who take all of the calls and process all of the information), which can be frustrating and stressful.
- The legal team can only be effective if everyone has good information. One of our biggest weaknesses in past actions has been sharing information effectively between Away Teams and the office as well as within the office.
- Most lawyers are used to working hierarchically. In the past, there have been issues with control and power dynamics between activists and lawyers. This can be a big problem when it comes to decision-making and information sharing. Be sure to identify and deal with any issues before the action.

Volunteers: Volunteers are critical for the success of your legal team. Here are some tips:

- Think about how you plan to train volunteers and incorporate them into the office.
- Do recruitment and get them involved early on so that you’ll have enough people.
- Coordination/Scheduling of volunteers is difficult, and should be done as much in advance as possible.
- The office can be hell, and people get can burned out quickly. Show your appreciation, let people take breaks, and vary their tasks.

Trainings: Be prepared to give trainings on Know Your Rights, Legal System 101, Legal and Video Observing, and Legal Solidarity (if you’re using it).

Legal/Judicial Research: Research the municipal or state codes regarding things like the wearing of masks; the allowed dimensions of wooden poles for signs; marching without a permit; graffiti and vandalism (especially in consideration of anti-gang laws); etc.

Also research the court system in your district.