

AFFINITY GROUPS FOR NON-VIOLENT DIRECT ACTION

People working for environmental and social justice social often organise non-violent actions in what are known as “affinity groups”. This means different things to different people but essentially it is a small group of people (eg: 5-15) who have something in common who take action together.

They could be an affinity group that works around a specific theme – for example the street medics (who take care of people’s physical health), or legal observers (documenting human rights), or, more commonly it is a group of people that take action as a team.

Why do we use affinity groups?

There are lots of reasons. Sometimes in a large, mass action it can be easier to coordinate and allow more flexibility if people organise in smaller groups. It is also a good way to keep track of people. For example, at a mass civil disobedience at a coal mine, 100 people organised themselves into affinity groups. That way people could ensure that everyone was accounted for (easier to track groups with different names and only 10 people in each) when different groups came in from different directions and folks looked after each other.

A representative of each affinity group can input into large scale consensus decision making and action coordination as well. They can be a way of organising that is nonhierarchical and can contribute to building effective communications and involvement at many levels.

One of the most important functions of an affinity group is to support each other. This could be particularly important when it comes to participating in your first arrestable action. Civil disobedience can be wonderfully powerful, but also intimidating to participate in for the first time so here are some thoughts about how you could organise your own affinity group to participate.



1) Pick a fun name and theme At a climate focused event in Victoria some years ago, there was a strong emphasis on affinity group organising. There were some great ideas from groups who prepared and planned before attending. They came with props, banners and costumes - there were Wombat Warriors, “Carbon Cops” who handed out carbon infringement notices, Radical Cheerleaders, the “No footy on a dead planet” team, Power plant “De-Commissioners” in fabulous sashes, and Clowns for warmer waters. Someone even brought outfits and props for a whole affinity group to form and join them on the day – “The ministry of energy resources and silly walks”.

Other events have featured endangered animals, medics against coal, climate emergency teams, fossil fuel zombies, knitting nana’s, and the Climate Angels are another example of a great affinity group who have used theatre and spectacle very effectively.

So, one option can be to head together to a large action in an already formed affinity group. You can come up with a great idea, and creative costume, and work out how to support each other. Facilitators and people providing action support can also be help you into a group when you arrive and sometimes people will organise an experienced person available for each group to facilitate and communicate important information.



Affinity groups organised as part of a mass walk on at #LeardBlockade coal mine

Affinity groups can also be used for tactical reasons. Police can more easily manage large groups of people, than a handful of well organised groups coming at them from different directions. Activists involved in the defence of the Beelir wetlands (WA) successfully used smaller groups to delay work for longer by breaching the fence at multiple points.

1) What does everyone bring to the group? Ideally in any group you would want a mix of skills and

experience. Some groups might have an entire group willing to risk arrest, others might have people who are participating on different levels.

It’s useful to have people who are good with logistics, facilitation, welfare, de-escalation, first aid and more. Families might want to be with other families so child care can be shared.

2) What level do you want to participate in? Have you had some experience before, or are happy to jump in the deep end? Are you willing to risk arrest or would you prefer to play a support role? (Just ask questions if you aren't sure of anything, an experienced person should be able to help you out)

Some people have tended to use a "street light" model for assessing risk that people want to take. Also this feels counter intuitive to us (we reckon green should be GO!)... this is typically used in organising circles in this country. Red is for definitely arrestable, Orange is for people who are willing to risk it, and push it to the edge (stay as long as possible in place to delay work, for example), and green is people who definitely need to be clearly in situations that don't risk arrest at all.

3) How do we look after each other, and work together? How do you handle conflict and situations of stress? Have a talk about your shared values, what you perceive as non-violence, and what is important to you in an action in terms of how people behave. Do you want to have an agreement for how far you go, or how you behave together?

Do you have any concerns about how you could be treated by workers, security or police? A simple suggestion is to have a conversation with people in your affinity group... and talk about three questions

- a) *What I look and feel like under stress ...* do I get pale, do I shake or do I exhibit symptoms people can't see...beating heart, dry throat etc... at least if you have thought deliberately about this, you might be aware that you need a bit of support
- b) *What I act like under stress ...* do I get fidgety, do I get withdrawn, do I get hyperactive
- c) *How can people support me if I'm under stress* (hell no, don't hug me, or yes please.... I really need some sweets, or I really need some space and quiet)

Even within affinity groups, if possible it is always good to have a buddy. If your affinity group is doing different things – they can keep an eye on you, you can talk stuff through and support each other. It is also really important to debrief after actions as well with your group where possible.

Another commitment you might make in your affinity group could be to fund-raise and help each other pay any fines incurred through action. Many activist groups operate on the premise "the action isn't over until the court process is over" ... it means we show solidarity with each other all the way through, a great principle to work on.

Read more about affinity groups here:

<http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/affinitygroups>

<http://www.activism.net/peace/nvcdh/affinity.shtml>

<http://www.actupny.org/documents/CDdocuments/Affinity.html>

