

Boots On The Street Beat Four Aces

So you've decided to go and demonstrate? Great! We always need more boots on the street.

Large-scale demonstrations are an extremely effective thing in a democracy: they can dominate the news cycle, force issues into the limelight, and help mobilise enormous public support. Small demonstrations can also be very effective at raising awareness of issues, and reminding the victims of those issues that they have not been forgotten.

I would recommend that your first demonstration is a large one. This is not only the most exciting sort of demonstration, it's also the most stage-managed, the easiest and the safest.

What follows is advice for new people who have never felt the need to attend a demonstration before. It assumes a large demonstration in an urban area. A lot of it may not apply to more experienced people. Likewise, a lot of it may be flat-out wrong in your region. If you have more useful regional experience, please let us know in the comments.

How Do I Find A Demonstration?

Paradoxically, the best place to find out about a demonstration is at another demonstration, usually via flyer. These will also be distributed by smaller picketing groups or at events. If you happen to walk past a small event, tell them that you want to get involved and ask them if they have any flyers for upcoming larger events.

If you have a radical bookshop in your town, it will usually have flyers for upcoming demonstrations and other events.

Large demonstrations will normally be advertised via social media. These will usually be advertised by local activist groups rather than by national ones; however the large national groups can act as useful clearing-houses.

First, Be Friendly

When you go to a demonstration, you will meet other people who feel like you do. Meeting one another in person can be an incredibly powerful feeling, as you discover that you are not alone. Introduce yourself. Make friends. Most people here will have views similar to yours, and may enjoy discussing them with another person in real life.

If this is your first demonstration, take the time to find and talk to some experienced activists. They may be very busy coordinating the event, but they will be very useful in helping to connect you to others. In Europe, they often wear high-visibility jackets to mark themselves out.

Make sure to reach out to members of minority groups. Be humble and respectful: you're here to build bridges. Don't assume that the first Black person you meet is the local spokesperson for all Black people, but if you find an activist from a minority group, ask them how you can help. While they may be initially wary or over-polite, if they think you're genuine then they'll have plenty of ideas. Avoid whataboutism or devils-advocating, as this can alienate people and they will have heard it before a tiresome number of times.

Large demonstrations can be alienating due to the size of the crowd. Go with a group if you can. If not, find some like minded people and stick with them. A lot of people will be here for the first time and making new friends will make the experience better for them too.

I shouldn't have to say this, but don't be antisocial. Don't litter, don't graffiti, don't vandalise and don't steal. Remember, you are here today to show morale force: you lose that if you behave antisocially.

The Media

If it's a big demonstration, there will be cameras. Smile for them: the world is watching through those lenses, and the world is on your side. Always behave kindly towards the media: even if they belong to ideologically hostile organisations, do not jostle or bump them.

If you have brought a placard, do your best to angle it towards the cameras.

If someone sticks a mic in front of you and asks you a question, don't feel ashamed to simply say nothing. They will probably be doing this hundreds of times throughout the day, and will take the best one or two responses. If you do choose to say something, make it very short - a few seconds at the most. Remember to enunciate clearly.

If you have brought a camera yourself, do not take pictures that include people's recognisable faces unless you have asked permission.

Timings

Most demonstrations will only last a few hours, or at most a day. The normal arrangement is to meet at a particular place at a particular time, and then march to somewhere else. Evening demonstrations will normally start after work and go for only a few hours. Weekend demonstrations will normally be longer, starting around noon or early afternoon and ending in the early evening. Only very rare events are multi-day.

If a demonstration lasts for a long time (for example, if you're sitting-in or picketing something) then don't feel ashamed about turning up late, or leaving to return later. These events will normally ebb and flow depending on the real-life commitments of the people involved.

A Quick Note On Solidarity

If you have radical politics, consider moderating your tone unless you know the crowd is with you. If you are uncomfortable with how radical the other people at the demonstration are, consider that they may have information and experience that you do not, especially if this is your first time. If you disagree with part of the demonstration's message, try to focus on the part you do agree with.

Today The Police Are Not Your Friends, But Don't Have To Be Your Enemies

Up until now, you may have seen the police as a benevolent force. If so, this may be because up until now you have always been obedient. Tomorrow, you may go back to being obedient and seeing them as benevolent. However, today will be different. The police are here to preserve order. If necessary, they will use violence or the threat of violence to do so.

The police will have been given instructions for what to do with you. These instructions will normally consist of keeping you in one place or on one route, normally somewhere where you can do as little harm as possible. If in doubt, ask them.

The police will have been told what to do if order breaks down or if the demonstrators cross some particular line, for example forcing their way into a building. Bear in mind that only very

disciplined and experienced police forces are likely to completely stick to the plan if things start going wrong.

Know your local law enforcement's approach. In Germany and the UK, police like to be as heavy-handed and obvious as possible in order to intimidate people into behaving. In Spain and Italy, police prefer to hang back until something goes wrong, and then rush in to beat up and arrest as many people as possible. If you don't know what your local law enforcement are like, ask an experienced person.

If your town or city doesn't see many demonstrations, the police may not be well trained or experienced. They may have a bad plan, or may panic and do something stupid. If a policeman panics, the other police will come to their aid rather than yours. If this happens, leave the area as quickly as possible.

If there are other security forces present, for example private corporate security, prison guards, border control or immigration enforcement, be very careful. They are unlikely to be as competent or well trained as the police when dealing with large numbers of civilians. They may panic more easily, and they may use brutal means if they resort to violence.

If the police do anything at all that makes you nervous, take photos and tell the people around you what's happening.

Wardrobe

Wear stout shoes. This is the single most important piece of advice that I can give you. You may be on your feet for an extended period, so make sure they're comfortable and dry. Army boots and Doc Martens are common and extremely practical. If you don't have them, hiking boots are just as good. Avoid heels or flip-flops.

The rest of your clothes should depend on the climate. Carry a jacket or umbrella if you think it might rain. Carry gloves and a hat if it might get cold. Be careful about branded clothes or those carrying clearly legible slogans. Dress respectably according to your local community's standards.

Some people may choose to go in costume. If you go in costume, make sure it's climate-appropriate and on-message. If you are American and present as female, Statue of Liberty costumes are an excellent and common choice, although carrying a torch aloft for long periods can be tiring. For some causes, dressing up like inmates of Guantanamo Bay is also fairly common.

A few things to avoid when it comes to costume: Do not wear costumes which may be offensive to bystanders or your fellow demonstrators. Do not wear costumes which caricature groups that you are not a member of. Do not wear sexually revealing or explicit costumes. Do not impersonate a police officer, soldier or other government official - this will get you into trouble. Never use a weapon or an imitation weapon as part of a costume.

Bring a bag. A small backpack, the sort a child takes to school, is perfect. Make sure you have a bottle of water in it, ideally one of the big 2 litre ones per person. Even if you don't drink it all yourself, sharing it will be appreciated. If you're bring children, bring water for them too. Don't bring alcohol. If you want to bring food, sandwiches are the best thing. Baked goods to share around are also good - I've seen tight bonds formed over homemade cookies. Food that needs to be eaten with utensils or from a bowl is best avoided, as you may get jostled.

Bring your phone. Carry a spare phone battery if you have one. If you have a cheap camera or video recorder, bring it. Don't bring other valuables or fragile items. Do not bring a weapon, even if your local law allows it. A knife is a weapon. A leatherman or swiss army knife is a knife.

If you think you might need an epipen or inhaler, bring it. Do not bring illegal drugs.

Don't be the guy who brings a Guy Fawkes mask. 2008 was a long time ago and politics has moved on.

Children

It may sound odd, but demonstrations are an excellent place to bring children. It's not dangerous, and it will be a good way to get them tired so they go to bed promptly when you get home. It's also a good opportunity to teach them about good citizenship and about solidarity. The demonstration may be loud, so bear this in mind if you have very young children.

If you're bringing placards, let the kids make their own - they've probably got more skills with the felt-tip pens than you do.

Placards

A placard is a sign on a stick, and it's a great thing to bring. Placards not only help you communicate your feelings, but they make it impossible for hostile media to misrepresent photographs of the demonstration.

If you've never made one of these before, the best material is paper stuck onto corrugated cardboard (or a stiff plastic equivalent) which in turn is attached to a slender wooden or plastic rod. The paper is there to be a good, clean writing surface, and the cardboard is there to keep it rigid. Make sure you attach the paper to the cardboard firmly: don't just glue or tape the corners, as it will come loose. A2 size is ideal. The best rod to use is bamboo, but other light woods work well too. The rod can often be reused next time even if the rest of the placard doesn't survive the wear and tear.

If you make a placard, it should be easily legible from a distance. A few memorable words, written clearly and largely, are better than an essay. If you are a graphic designer, or you have skills in that area, you will be at an advantage. Consider making several placards so you can share them. You will be popular: lots of people won't have brought one. Established activist groups will often mass-produce them ahead of large demonstrations.

Avoid having messaging on your placard which may alienate other demonstrators, even if you think it's clever.

Don't make your placard too sturdy: don't give the police permission to class it as a weapon. More than this, you don't want to accidentally hurt anyone if you stumble or turn around quickly. Be considerate. Try to avoid using a wooden surface if possible, and never use a metal rod.

A placard shouldn't be too large. If you can't walk around easily with it alone, you won't be able to do so in a crowd. Remember that you'll be carrying it for several hours.

Always take your placard home with you or dispose of it responsibly. Otherwise, it's littering. Not only is this bad citizenship, but photographs of piles of discarded placards make good propaganda for your opponents to use to try to accuse you of antisociality.

Music

There will probably be singing. This may sound silly, but a group of people united in song is a very emotionally powerful experience.

If you can sing and you know a song which may be appropriate, then leading people in song is a great idea. The best songs are those that are well-known, are appropriate in subject matter, and which have a beat of approximately human walking pace. As of the time of writing, American protest songs include Quiet (for the #MeToo movement) and This Is America (for the BLM movement.) European protest songs include Paper Planes (for pro-immigration demonstrations) and Links 2 3 4 (for anti-AfD demonstrations.)

Do not sing The International. Do not sing Unadikum. Then again, if you know the words to either, this is probably not your first demonstration.

Be cautious about singing national anthems, especially those of other nations, as they may be misinterpreted. Singing your own national anthem can be extremely effective but be aware that as with all national symbols, this may also be used by ultra-nationalist groups.

Chanting and singing can be tiring. Take breaks to maintain your voice.

If you own a megaphone or loudspeaker, bring it. Be prepared to share it - a good demonstrator is willing to let others have their turn to have their say.

Some demonstrations will have marching bands. If you are a member of a marching band, consider asking them if they want to come to the demonstration (ask the organisers first; they are unlikely to say no but may need to make arrangements.) In my experience, percussion bands are the best.

Flags

Flags are extremely emotional symbols and can mean a lot of different things to different people. For this reason, unless the flag you're using is already the symbol of the cause you're demonstrating, be cautious about bringing it.

Be careful about national flags. At demonstrations, national flags are often the symbol of ultra-nationalist groups, and you don't want to be mistaken for them. This is especially the case if there are counter-protestors who may have ultra-nationalist policies.

On the other hand, if you are a foreigner or you identify as being part of a distinct ethnic minority group, and the demonstration has a theme of multiculturalism, bringing your country's flag is a good idea. Do not carry the flag of a nation not your own, unless you know that the people of that nation see foreigners using their flag as acceptable.

If you do bring a flag, don't carry it on a sturdy flagpole. Those things can easily be used as weapons, and the police will treat them as such. The best way to carry a flag, in my experience, is to wear it as a cloak and then occasionally lift it to wave it.

Never burn a flag. Not only is it deeply insulting to many people, but setting things on fire in a crowd is a very dangerous act.

Counter-Demonstrators

Demonstrations will sometimes result in counter-demonstrations. Often, the counter-demonstration will be larger than the original; an example of this was in Berlin in 2018 when the far-Right marched and the people of Berlin came out to meet them with several times the numbers.

If you are part of a counter-demonstration, or part of a demonstration which is being counter-demonstrated, remember that this is not a street battle. You are here to shout the other people down, to show that you outnumber them, and to demonstrate your courage and refusal to be silenced. You are not here to hospitalise anyone.

Stay with your group, and do not mingle with the other side. The police will probably be attempting to keep you apart; help them achieve this. If the police are not trying to keep you apart, this is an extremely bad sign and you should leave immediately.

Make sure that when you leave, you leave in a different direction from that taken by the other side. If you came by car and your car is parked in an unsafe area, the best thing is to wait in a coffee shop or library until the crowd disperses.

Five People You Will Spot

I have never been to a demonstration of any size that did not have all of these people present. Places outside of Europe may be different.

Firstly, see the young people clad in black and purple, carrying backpacks? These are members of an anarchist group called the Black Bloc. While most demonstrations are peaceful, if it does turn violent, the Black Bloc will be participating in the violence. For this reason, if things start to go badly, you may want to keep your distance. However, they will often carry medical supplies and will usually be willing to help you if you need medical help.

While it's easy to dismiss the Black Bloc as violent thugs, bear in mind that they are normally very well organised, often better than the police, and are rarely the ones to start the fighting. They tend to keep their peace as long as others do.

Secondly, see those people with the really well-made banners that don't have anything to do with the theme of the demonstration? Those are veterans. They may be trade unionists, members of ethnic minorities, or members of local activist (environmental, political, LGBT, etc) groups. They will often be significantly older than most other demonstrators, and have probably carried these banners at dozens of events. If you're an older person yourself, you may find their presence reassuring. They will often form the core of any chanting or singing.

Thirdly, see the people with pushchairs and young children? Families are a common sight at most larger demonstrations. Go up and say hello! Needless to say, make sure to ask the parents before you offer the children food or drink, and observe other social niceties that you would with other people's children. In much of Europe, we do not photograph children without their parents' permission. Your region may vary.

Fourthly, see those people with grey ponytails and sandals? Those are old-timers. They believe very earnestly in their causes and have done so for many years. Make sure to say hi to them. This is an important part of their life and they will treat it like religious people treat church attendance. If they start enthusing to you, don't feel bad about making an excuse to move on.

However, they will normally be very friendly, and can be excellent contacts if you want to attend more events or find volunteering opportunities locally.

Lastly, see the guy with the Palestinian flag? I have only been to two demonstrations in my entire life where there wasn't at least one White guy with a Palestinian flag (it's never a woman for some reason), and both of those events were small and had good reasons why one would specifically not be carried. At all larger events, there will be a minimum of one of these guys. Depending on your politics, you may or may not support the independence of Palestine. Either way, leave that guy alone. If you disagree with him then arguing won't help, and if you agree then he's likely to be really boring and obnoxious about it.

Flirtation

Demonstrations, like a lot of things that get people outside, emotional and in the company of those of similar mind, see a lot of flirtation happening. This is by no means a bad thing. However, be aware that many of the people demonstrating with you may move in different circles from yourself and so may have different social standards for how to approach flirtation. As a rule of thumb, operate on the stricter of the two standards.

Never pressure anyone to flirt with you if they do not enthusiastically respond. A demonstration should be a safe space.

If you feel that someone is pressuring you, let an activist or organiser know. Your safety and comfort matters.

Do not attend a demonstration with the primary intent of hitting on people. This isn't a speed dating event. If you're that guy, please stay away. People can tell, and they don't want you here.

What To Do If It Turns Violent

This will probably not happen. Almost all demonstrations are peaceful and stay so throughout. However, it is a risk and you should be aware of it.

If it does turn violent, the demonstration is over. Go home. Nothing more is going to be accomplished today. You cannot win a fight with the police: they will bring in heavier firepower until they overwhelm you. If the police start violence, it's possible that they have been ordered to do so in order to provoke an escalation and justify wholesale violence. It's also possible that one of them panicked and did the wrong thing; if so the other police will probably back them up. Either way, don't give the police an excuse.

There are two common police tactics during violence: kettling and dispersal. Which one they use depends on what their goals are.

Kettling consists of pinning all the demonstrators in one area, often for hours at a time, and not letting anyone leave. This is common in the UK. People may go thirsty, or be forced to urinate or defecate where they are standing. This is deliberate on the part of the police: kettling is a humiliation tactic, aimed at reminding you of your powerlessness. It's also a tactic intended to prevent demonstrators from running loose and looting or smashing windows.

If you are kettled, keep morale up. Sing and chant. Take pictures. Conserve your phone battery as long as you can: you may be here some time.

Dispersal consists of getting the demonstrators to scatter, usually as quickly as possible. This is normally done when demonstrators have gathered at an important building or other facility, or are blocking roads. The police don't care what else you do elsewhere: they just don't want you here, now. If you do not leave then they may use tear gas, water cannons or even more violent means.

If your demonstration is dispersed, go home. You've done your part. If someone tries to get you to regroup elsewhere, ignore them. If the police have been ordered to disperse you then any secondary regroupings are very likely to be dispersed as well, and usually in a less organised and more violent manner.

If you are arrested, stay quiet and comply. Unless something has gone very wrong, you will probably be released later without any charges. Be aware of your rights, and be aware that the police sometimes choose to violate those rights. If this happens, try to remain calm and memorise the details of the incident.

What To Do If You Want It To Turn Violent

Stay home.

Seriously, if you're coming to the demonstration intending to start a fight, we don't need or want people like you here. You're not only going to ruin everyone's day, you're also going to ruin the message and give the police the excuse they need to do whatever they want to everyone else who's here.

Good Phrases To Use

"Hi, my name's X, and this is my first time at a demonstration."

"Hi, my name's X. Is this your first time at a demonstration?"

"That's a really good placard. May I take a picture?"

"Do you know where we are / where we're headed?"

"If you're thirsty/hungry, I've got some water/cookies in my bag."

"What are the words of that chant? I want to join in but I can't make it out."

(To an activist) "Who is this speaker?"

(To a police officer) "Can we cross this line?"

(To a police officer) "Where should we be?"

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