

TRAINING FOR CHANGE

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Into the Streets! Training as a Tactic

By Nico Amador

I've never been arrested. Many of the people I'm currently organizing in Philadelphia to stop casino development haven't either and have gotten nervousness about the possibility of it as our movement has escalated.

As luck would have it, this fall a roadblock in our campaign provided just the opportunity to innovate a new tactic to boost our confidence with arrestable actions and create a strong push-back on our opponents. What did we come up with? A public civil disobedience training - a training that we took to the streets and used as a tactic.

OUR CAMPAIGN

When government officials and the gaming industry conspired to bring two casinos to residential neighborhoods Philadelphia, we knew we were going to be outspent to fight them (our most recent assessment shows they have actually spent \$1,000 to every \$1 we've spent during this campaign). We rely heavily on our creativity, media skills, community support and strategy smarts.

For over a year we have successfully fought back the casinos with numerous twists and turns. Recently, however, we received a nasty punch in the gut when the state Supreme Court ruled in favor of one of the casinos, effectively mandating that the city of Philadelphia give the casino the zoning permits it needed to begin construction with little opportunity for further review or delay.

We knew it was time for direct action. If we did not up the ante, the casino's story would be that they finally prevailed and their construction was imminent. We needed to show that we were not bowing to the court's decision and would keep pressuring officials who still had options to intervene and stop the construction.

Our campaign exploded into action. In the first five days after the decision we held a large rally, passed out fliers to city workers asking them to slow down the processing of the zoning permits and held a press conference where we pointed out several ways that city and state officials could still intervene to block casino construction.

Most importantly we announced a "practice site occupation" at the end of the week and made it clear that we would follow through on our promise to use civil disobedience at the site of construction if necessary.

Reporters asked us, "What's a practice site occupation?" We told them to show up to find out.

IN THE TRAINING ROOM

Many trainers and activists know that training and role-playing can be an essential part of preparing groups for direct action and civil disobedience. As groups prepare for civil disobedience, the group experiments with what will make their action successful while expressing and overcoming their fears.

The video documentary series *A Force More Powerful* shows Reverend James Lawson's thoughtful use of trainings to instill courage and discipline in student participants in lunch-counter sit-ins. They, of course, won the desegregation of lunch counters in the south.

Typical trainings are held in private meeting spaces, churches, classrooms or community centers where participants will not be in the eye of the press or public. Casino-Free Philadelphia has modeled a value of transparency by leaving our trainings open but other activist groups often want to maintain the element of surprise with the actions they are planning and create a low-risk training environment for practicing.

THE PRACTICE SITE OCCUPATION

We knew the secret: a practice site occupation was essentially a direct action training right on or near the site.

On the day of this action we had about sixty members who showed up to participate at the site where Sugarhouse Casino wanted to begin building. Our original plan was to go past the fence and lead a group of people who were willing to be arrested onto the site. Others who did not want to risk arrest would stay outside the fence to lead chants, guard the entrance and communicate with the press and police.

However, when we arrived we found a heavy police presence. We estimated over one-hundred police were on-site and in reserve. Philadelphia's City Police Commissioner, Sylvester Johnson, personally came to oversee the event.

As we spoke to the police, they made it clear that if anyone attempted to breach the fence or go onto the site they would be arrested, taken to jail, and prosecuted to the full extent of the law - not just a citation they normally give for trespassing. Because it was a Saturday, anyone taken to jail would be held until Monday before they could be processed.

We decided that getting arrested at this action would not necessarily move us closer to our objectives; and, since we had not made any promises of the outcomes to the media, we could be flexible as we go along. Since this was a "practice occupation," it was a symbolic action meant to demonstrate what we would do if the casino tried to break ground in the coming weeks; our presence at the site was more important than the actual arrest.

So we changed our plans. As we had originally intended we gathered our people together a few blocks from the site and marched down to the fence where the police were waiting for us.

Instead of going past the police and onto the site, we circled together in front of the site. There we laid down a tarp in front of our banner and held a civil disobedience training right there on the street.

We did two rounds of role plays for people to practice a scenarios of getting arrested at a future site occupation and blocking a bulldozer. Several members volunteered to play the role of the protestors while others played the police or observed as press.

Daniel Hunter and I stood on the sidelines as facilitators to coordinate the role-play and take comments from participants during the debrief.

The training had its usual benefits, people gained new experience, they learned and reflected on their behavior within the role play, they increased their solidarity with each other and confronted their fears of getting arrested, right in front of the police! But what was so special about this was that the training became an action of its own.

The action helped us build better relationships with the police. Throughout the role-play they watched and laughed along with us and got to see our empathy towards them. During the debrief Daniel pointed out that one consideration for a protestor "going limp" during an arrest is

that it puts extra strain on police putting them at greater risk for back injuries - I looked up to see the chief of police nodding his head in agreement.

We personalized ourselves to the police officers and explained clearly why we were doing what we were doing.

Further, we got to show the police who we really are: long-time residents, retired school teachers, parents, students, and professionals who care about protecting their community - not a mob of crazies that others in the city had made us out to be. Building this reputation with the police ahead of time means that if we do an action where we risk arrest in the future, they'll be less likely to act out of tension and fear with us, making it safer for everyone involved.

The other major accomplishment was that this action created the story we needed in the media. Unlike a typical march or rally, this public training told a more interesting story about who we are and the ultimatum we are delivering to the casino. Just the same as if we had actually occupied the site, holding the training in front of the site showed that we are serious about civil disobedience and will get in the way of construction if it comes to that.

Pictures of our training and our march were disseminated in most print newspapers and journals in the city and we also received reportage on local television and radio stations. Despite the criticism we had received leading up to the action, once the story was out there it was clear that we had conducted ourselves in a respectful, even playful manner with everyone involved.

Now, a month later, our struggle continues with the casinos but they still haven't broken ground. We know that our training action has played a role in assuring that city officials, including the new mayor continue to make efforts to halt any movement forward. And if the casinos do move forward with construction we've made it clear - we're trained, we're ready and we're not afraid to get in their way

To learn more about Casino-Free Philadelphia go to www.casino-free-phila.org