

A Protest Organizer's Guide to NLG Legal Observers

by the Pittsburgh chapter of the National Lawyers Guild

National Lawyers Guild legal observers have a simple purpose - to make note of police activity at protests in order to create a record of events. These records aid in the legal defense of protesters who get arrested. Bitter experience has taught us that the police cannot be trusted to tell the truth, often fabricating testimony in attempts to convict protesters of crimes, even when their only offense was opposing the status quo. Having an unbiased record of what actually happened can be crucial in counteracting such false testimony.

The NLG requires organizers who want LOs to request them in advance of the protest. This request creates an attorney-client relationship between the organizers and the NLG. That means LOs' notes are considered attorney work product and cannot be subpoenaed by the prosecution. In Pittsburgh an LO request can be made by filling out the form at tinyurl.com/nlgpgh. Please try to give us as much notice as possible! The more lead time we get, the more likely it is that LOs will be available.

Things NLG legal observers do:

- Take notes on police activity. (Note that in Pittsburgh they will not be taking video or photographs of the police).
- Wear florescent green hats for easy recognition.
- Coordinate legal support with hotline operators. (See our hotline operators manual for more details).
- Identify other potential witnesses to police misconduct, particularly those who have video footage.
- Identify victims of police brutality, and possibly take pictures of their wounds for later use as evidence.
- Testify in court proceedings for protesters.

Things NLG legal observers DO NOT do:

Pretty much anything not on the above list. In order to be effective as witnesses LOs have to be neutral. That means they cannot take part in the protest in any way, including but not limited to...

- Chanting, holding signs or banners, linking arms.
- Acting as police liaisons.
- Acting as marshals.
- Accepting (let alone handing out) any literature.
- Wearing any clothing with political slogans.
- Helping with logistical tasks like carrying sound equipment.

In addition, NLG legal observers do not record activity by protesters, or anyone except the police. This means they don't take notes about counter-protesters, hecklers, or breakaway marches. They also don't talk to the media. NLG legal observers do not testify for the prosecution.