

WARSHELL

undoing the impulse to police each other at street protests in so-called Melbourne, 2021

ITAW

TLDR marshals cannot protect us from the police – marshals end up policing the protest, restraining rebellious energy – the authority imbued in the role of the marshal makes people suspicious of other participants within a protest – the role of marshals exacerbates two negative tendencies of solidarity; laziness and distrust – an imposed, rigid structure to ensure ‘safety’ cannot be flexible enough to account for variables in danger – instead, organise with friends to look out for each other and then communicate with other groups *across* the protest – safety can’t be the only factor in determining what action looks like, we have to take risks beyond the predetermined boundaries of a formal protest.

This piece is influenced by a series of diverse and informal conversations about the entrenched role of marshals at demonstrations in this town. However, the political inflection it takes, the conclusions drawn, are mostly reflective of my own thinking. While there are common starting points, I don’t want to suggest that where I end up is necessarily representative of any greater collective intent. That is to say, I think some of you who I’ve had these conversations with will disagree with parts of this. I write this as part of the ongoing discussion, hopefully contributing to new forms of acting alongside each other at street protests that is open to taking risks and looking out for each other without always handing our power over to some higher authority.

It should be noted that there are 2 distinct layers that constitute critical conversations around marshals – one being the articulation of a variety of issues with how the current marshalling structure conducts itself, the other being a more general questioning of the very existence of formal marshals at demos. I start with the first, but quickly move to the second.

(1) As currently constituted there should be no illusions that marshals are capable of keeping us safe at a street protest. If it is understood that police are the main danger to participants at a demo, then we must recognise that a thin, single line of people in vests are not going to be capable of repelling a police charge into the mass of a protest. Realistically, in this country at this time, police have the capacity to control (or attack) protests however they want, and any sense of a 'safe' protest only occurs when a particular combination of reasons leads to an assumption that the police will not choose to do so. This generally involves acquiescence to the State's idea of how a protest should conduct itself, following a prescribed route in an 'orderly' fashion.

(2) This issue does not have an easy solution. This is especially the case because most of those who marshal have no real connection to each other apart from deciding to volunteer and participate in one, perhaps two, trainings and who often have no prior experience of fighting back against the police. No amount of faux militaristic discipline and loud yelling of instructions will change that. It might only begin to change alongside building a more engaged, militant culture of resistance where people don't expect to turn up at demos to merely follow instructions in a passive manner, but instead organise to be there with their friends, to actively participate and to look out for, and defend, each other.

(3) Understanding their own powerlessness in being able to resist the police, marshals tend to turn their attention to participants within a protest. It is noticeable that marshals almost always face the crowd instead of looking for external dangers. Under the ruse of keeping the protest 'safe' they form lines to corral the crowd, turning their gaze inwards to watch for any behaviour or rebellious energy that might be outside

the bounds of agreements that have been made with the State. Yes, in effect they police the crowd – this is not an abstract claim but one that most of us have seen occur in quite direct and obvious ways. Killing the cop in our (collective) head, is easier said than done.

(4) The power that marshals have comes from the implied authority that they are bestowed by people organising a demo. People organising a demo feel pressure due to the threatening attention of the state, but also from a responsibility to try and make a space that is as safe as possible for those who attend. These forms of pressure clash and generally result in more attention being paid to controlling the protest than resisting the police. Empowering marshals in this way has resulted in an awkward – or simply quite fucked – doubling-down on power dynamics. The 2020 BLM demo in Naarm (as just one example) saw white or non- Indigenous/ non- black marshals regularly attempting to restrain the energy and anger of Blak/ black folk. While many people opt in to marshalling with the best intentions, it shouldn't be a surprise that being invested with the idea that they are 'responsible' for the protest – however unrealistic that is – turns more than a few people into cops watching other protesters with a suspicious eye. It's probably also worth recognising that there are more than a few entitled people – yes even in 'The Left' – who get off on the power-trip and being imbued with an over-righteous sense of authority.

(5) The role of marshals exacerbates two negative tendencies within the political culture of solidarity. On the one hand, people acting in solidarity can be too lazy and/ or scared to take initiative and it is easier to be told what to do. At the same time, there is a distrust of people who aren't most centrally affected by an issue taking action, the assumption being that they will do something problematic or 'outside their

lane'. As a result, organisers (via marshals) feel it necessary to be on guard against anything that isn't within their immediate plans and that distrust feeds the laziness/ inaction in a feedback loop. Solidarity should be reciprocal, active and engaged with space for experimentation and mistakes – building confidence amongst each other to recognise and adapt our actions when they negatively impact others.

(6) The power that marshals have also exists because people in this country are too damn obedient, too easily willing to defer their own power and safety to the closest figure or institution that confidently claims its right to authority over. Overarching versions of safety tend to be lacking in complexity – blanket forms that cannot possibly account for the multiplicity of variations in oppression and threats to safety and so impose a rigid, lowest common denominator structure. Such a structure does not leave space for those who are more able to take certain risks to be able to do so. Additionally, within such a rigid structure, marshals have regularly missed the presence of threats that do appear – whether they be fascists, racists, TERFs, etc – because they either do not care, are incapable or spotting them due to focusing their attention within the demo or simply that their ranks are filled with people who do not have experience in doing so.

(7) Instead: prioritise connections that exist outside of the space of the protest and bring those into the protest. The connections where you already know how to communicate with each other, what conditions or forms of danger and threat need to be looked out for and how these effect yourselves and those around you. Have specific conversations about how you will attend and participate alongside each other and how you'll keep each other safe. And look for ways to extend that, so you communicate and coordinate with other groups who are there,

knowing who else has medic / first aid skills, who else is looking out for fash, who else are willing to fight back against the cops, who else is playing music, etc. Do all this so that the effect of having each other's backs multiplies outwards. Start coordinating across the protest with other groups instead of waiting for direction from the top.

(8) Ironically, the way that marshals surveil/ control a protest leaves them less attuned to the collective mood than if they were actually participating. They are always the ones restraining the energy of a crowd, looking to push anyone that steps out of bounds squarely back into the formal demonstration. One of the best comments against rigid marshalling structures I've heard was from someone trying to organise alternative forms of 'security' within a demo and experimenting with how that might look. They wanted participants in a demo to be able to use and take space as part of a protest without being restricted by strict spatial boundaries. Of course, as we push outside the obvious formal lines that demarcate a protest space there is more risk involved. However, instead of encouraging those who take that space to come back between the lines so that they will be safe, we should be working out how to look out for each other in those risky zones while pushing our demonstrations away from being a repetitive and safe act of obedience. There are uprisings around the globe from which we can learn from in this regard.

(9) The reliance on marshals is based on a couple of overarching tendencies. One is that politics in this town finds it hard to break from the liberal idea that action must occur within the bounds of 'civil society', and protests are limited to a spectacle with appeals to government and the media. The other is the premise that people will keep coming to the next demo so long as their experience within the current one feels entirely

safe and controlled. This idea predominates even amongst many who aren't particularly tied to liberalism.

The initial excitement of taking the streets with others starts to wear off in the endless procession of protests that are tightly controlled by organisers and police, simply proceeding from point 'a' to point 'b'. Sure, we might turn up anyway because we feel solidarity or connection with a particular issue, but the energy is contained and we haven't even bothered checking in with our friends about what their plans for the demo is – whether there's any actions we might take that could turn up the volume a bit. I would suggest that people might be more inspired by moments where they are able to experience a sense of liberation, where for whatever combination of reasons the State and the police are not able to assert their control and we can feel a sense of autonomous power. These moments might be fleeting – especially in this country – and they might occur at a demo or elsewhere, but they stick with you. The existence of marshals makes them less likely to happen.

**MORE THOUGHTS... SUGGESTED
FURTHER READING:**

- ACAB Includes the Peace Police
- Peace Police are Police: How Protest Marshals Sabotage Liberation and Protect the State
- We Don't Need "Safety" – We Need to Escalate!
- It's Safer in the Front
- What They Mean When They Say "Peace" & The Making of "Outside Agitators"
- The Illegitimacy of Violence, The Violence of Legitimacy
- 10 Points on the Black Bloc
- Voting is Not Harm Reduction
- Voting vs Direct Action

- Fighting For Our Lives: An Anarchist Primer

**...AND FOR THOSE THAT WANT TO
ESCALATE BUT DON'T KNOW
HOW, HERE'S SOME INFORMATION
TO HELP (USE A VPN OR TOR!)...**

- Blocing Up
- Affinity Groups: The Essential Building Block of Anarchist Organisation
- Get Your Head Right: Cultivating A Mindset for Militant Direct Actions
- A Recipe for Nocturnal Direct Actions!

(All titles readily available online)



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