

Solidarity Across Borders: Guide to Working with Media

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A. Introduction

1) Solidarity across Borders

Solidarity Across Borders is a grassroots network of migrants and allies who work together to end deportations, end detentions of migrants, end the double punishment of migrants, achieve status for all migrants in Canada, and build a Solidarity City in Montreal. We use many strategies and tactics to achieve these goals, including media campaigns.

2) Aims of this Guide

This guide is for members of Solidarity Across Borders and for families and individuals Solidarity Across Borders is supporting who are planning a media event or campaign. It shares information and tips from other members of Solidarity Across Borders based on our past experiences working with media.

B. Before Starting

1) Strategic Questions to Ask Ourselves

Before approaching the media, we need to ask ourselves the following questions:

- What is our objective? What do we hope to achieve by going to the media?
- What audience do we want to reach?
- Which media are we targeting (national, regional, municipal; print, internet, TV, radio; mass media, community media, alternative media)?

2) Decide on Key Messages (and don't forget the solidarity!)

We will also need to get clear on the following questions:

- What is the main message we want to convey?
- What are the secondary messages?
- Are our messages in solidarity with others? Do they avoid "good vs bad immigrants" messages such as "we are not criminals"? Do our specific messages support other justice struggles and do they support systemic change?

3) The Best Approach (for you)

What is the best way of approaching the media, given your situation and objectives?

a. Media Advisory

An advisory is used to announce a press conference, a demonstration or another event, or our willingness to talk on a given question. The purpose of the advisory is to grab media attention and get them to come to your event or call you for an interview.

In general, the advisory should include: a catchy title; the subject of the press conference or event; the date, place and time; the name and title of each spokesperson; and a short and exciting summary of the issue (without saying too much).

Make sure to send the press advisory at least three days prior to the event, and one week before an evening or weekend event (so that the media outlet has time to arrange for special coverage).

b. Press Release

A press release is a text about a topic you want media to cover. The best way to think of a press release is that it is the article that you want the media to publish. It should be clear, concise and carefully written to maximize impact.

Here is the classic formula: a captivating title to grab media interest; a first paragraph with a strong statement of the main message; a second paragraph with a quote from the main spokesperson; subsequent paragraphs (2 or 3 at most) with a less important quote plus details (who, what, when, how and why) and facts to provide context.

You can send a press release all by itself or it can accompany a press conference or other event. If it is accompanying the event it should not be sent in advance, but distributed during the event or, depending on the situation, sent by email at the same time the event is happening or shortly afterwards.

c. Press Conference

A press conference is a sit-down media event. The classic formula : an MC briefly introduces the topic and each speaker in turn; 2 or 3 spokespeople each give a 3-minute presentation; and then there is an open question period, facilitated by the MC. All in one hour. After the formal press conference, journalists might ask for one-on-one interviews with some of the speakers.

Press Conference Tips:

- Don't forget television and cameras: make sure the conference or event has a visual dimension. An attractive background (eg. a poster, written slogans, photos, banner) helps to get the message out. Also, make sure the light is not behind the speakers.
- Cards with the name of each speaker to put on the table in front of them can help media identify who is speaking.
- When you are setting up, leave a central aisle with lots of space so that cameras have room to manoeuvre.

Check list for press conference:

- Book appropriate location
- Speakers (prepare, coordinate, inform of location and time)
- Media Advisory (write, translate, send)
- Phone calls to journalists and news desks
- MC (briefed and prepared to give introductions, manage question period and end the press conference)
- Media kit (prepared and copied) – see below!
- Attractive visuals (banners, photos, etc.)
- Set up the location (leave yourself plenty of time), including water and kleenex for speakers, and name cards on table.
- Sign up sheet for journalists (you can leave it at the door, and ask journalists to 'register' so you can follow up with them afterwards)

d. Press Briefing or Scrum

A press briefing or scrum is like an informal press conference, with more energy. In general, it takes place outside a symbolic venue or at an event (eg. before a court hearing) or as part of an event you are organizing (e.g. during a demonstration). Classic formula : an MC, followed by two or three spokespeople who give key messages in 5 minutes (total), followed by questions.

Tip: It is important to have a poster or banner behind the people talking.

e. Exclusive Interviews

An exclusive interview is an interview offered to a single media outlet or journalist. There must be a commitment to respect exclusivity: if you have an agreement with one journalist, you can't give an interview to another on the same topic. However, it is often possible to make an agreement with one French and one English outlet, as long as you are clear with both and they can arrive at an agreement to publish at the same time.

f. Op-Ed

An op-ed is an opinion text that you write and have published in the opinion pages of a newspaper. It normally has to have some link to current events or symbolic date, and express a strong opinion eloquently. There are strict limits of length. The editors usually reserve the right to edit your piece. Sometimes you can write a piece and ask a well-known person to put their name to it, to attract more attention.

4) Timing

Here are some tips about timing:

- Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday are usually the best days for media events and press releases. Sunday afternoons also work if they are promoted well in advance because there is often no other news at that time.
- Although it is impossible to predict what may happen, try not issue a press release or hold a press conference during major news stories (unless it is about that topic). Conversely, aim for symbolic dates that work with your story.
- The cut-off time (time that journalists must have their report completed) is usually 4pm for TV and 6pm for newspapers. Radio journalists may conduct interviews in the early evening.
- Ideally, press conferences are held between 9 am and 2pm. If possible, you should avoid having one after 4pm.
- For a special event in the evening, you must notify the media well in advance.

5) Spokesperson(s)

a. Who speaks for the family or person directly affected?

When someone decides to go to the media to discuss their case, they may decide to speak for themselves or to ask someone else to speak for them (another member of SAB, a lawyer, etc.). Similarly, a family may sometimes designate one family member to be the spokesperson for the entire family.

b. Who speaks for Solidarity Across Borders (SAB)?

Any member of SAB can speak as a member of SAB if s/he has a mandate from the Assembly, a committee of SAB, or the Decision-making and Organizing Committee (DMOC).

c. Guest Speakers

Carefully consider who you will invite to speak with you and how to prevent your guests from undermining your messages. Ask yourself: in what circumstances would you invite NGOs, "experts", other activists, other families, allies? What would each contribute? How would you prepare them to speak?

Note: SAB does not allow members of Parliament to speak at our media events.

C. Preparing to Speak to Media

1) Prepare Yourself

- Decide in advance which information to disclose or not to disclose about your personal life. You can control the information you share. You can set limits and decide not to talk about certain things.
- Decide whether to go with your heart and tell your story as it comes to you on the spot or prepare a statement in advance.
- Decide whether to show or hide your face, whether to ask for your voice to be altered, to use your real name, etc.
- Emotional preparation: an interview/press conference can make us emotional or even make us cry. That's fine. At the same time it is important to keep your goals in mind: the message you want to get across; the personal information you don't want to talk about.
- Link to a broader analysis / similar situations: prepare facts, examples, sentences to connect

your situation to broader problems.

- Some journalists insist on having the full immigration file. Most journalists will ask for some documents. Decide in advance which documents you will give and which you will not give.

2) Preparing a Spokesperson

- The spokesperson needs to understand the case, and be prepared for any questions. If there are difficult parts of the file (e.g. a criminal record, irregularities in the file), it is important that the spokesperson knows about them in advance and knows how to respond.
- Ensure that the spokesperson understands and is prepared to respect the message the family/individual has decided upon and what information the family/individual does not want to disclose.
- The spokesperson needs to be prepared to present the specific case, responding to its urgency and immediate needs, while raising similar situations and speaking about the system that produces such situations.

3) Preparing for a Press Conference or Press Scrum/Briefing

- Choose two or three points you would like to make and write them out. Practice saying them. At a press conference or press scrum this will be the basis for your initial speech. Emphasize these messages and repeat them in different words whenever possible during the question period: "If I only have one thing to tell people, it is that ..." or " My main message is that ...". Don't let the journalist divert your attention and make you deviate from the points you want to make.
- Try to guess the journalists' questions and criticisms and be prepared accordingly.

4) Preparing for an interview

All previous points and:

- Ask the journalist about the topics s/he wishes to cover to help you prepare. Ask them to send you the questions in advance by email if possible. You may in some circumstances be able to respond by email. Remember that you have more control over what you write than what you say.
- Ask if there will be other interviewees and find out about their positions.

5) Coordinating among Different Speakers

It is very important to ensure basic coherence between messages by the different speakers and especially to avoid contradictions and too much repetition. Here are some tools that can help coordinate messages:

- Prepare a "talking points" document and share it with all speakers well in advance of the event. Talking points consist of key questions that you are sure will be asked and suggested response or responses for each.
- Come up with a game plan about who covers what points, what points you will avoid, who will repeat the main demand, etc. (this can be worked out in a meeting or teleconference or in an email sent to all speakers).
- You need to check in with each speaker to make sure they know the time, the place, have read the talking points, and are clear on how long they have to talk and which points they are supposed to cover.

6) Media Kit

It is usually a good idea to prepare a media kit (in french and in english) to give to journalists at your press event. A media kit typically includes the following:

- press release for the event (or minimally the press advisory);
- list of speakers, a short biography for each and, sometimes, their contact information;
- fact sheet(s): depending on the topic, this can provide details of a specific case and relevant background information; information can also be presented in the form of question / answer or a chronology;
- Previously published media articles;
- Experts reports or other documents that provide the context or documentary evidence to back up your assertions;
- More creatively, you can include video clips, quotes from your speakers, statements of support from groups that are not present, SAB flyers, even stickers, buttons, etc.

D. Contacting Media

a) By email

SAB has access to comprehensive email lists in English, French and Spanish, created by activists in Montreal to send press releases and advisories to journalists and news desks of mainstream, community and alternative media outlets:

English: newswire@lists.riseup.net

Spanish: noticias@lists.riseup.net

French: fildepresse@lists.riseup.net

b) Phone calls

It's always a good idea to call newsrooms and invite them to cover an event, at least two days in advance. The SAB media committee has access to a list of newsroom telephone numbers.

c) List of sympathetic journalists

For each campaign, it's a good idea to keep a list of supportive journalists and send them the release / advisory directly, with a personal note, or call them directly with the news.

Caution:

- *Protect yourself ! Don't give your address, or your home phone number to media. Use SAB's or those of another organization.*
- *Not every journalist or every show will be open to our messages, or even in good faith, it is important to do some research before contacting them.*

E. In front of the Camera

1) "Behaviour"

Many people believe that it is necessary to play a role in front of the media: wear appropriate clothing, use good grammar, be polite and nice, give an "acceptable" message, etc. But there is also a danger in this, because it risks reinforcing social norms that we are seeking to challenge. We shouldn't have to play at being middle class, educated, white, man, Franco / Anglo ... in order to be heard.

The goal of this section is to examine this dynamic: how does it risk excluding or silencing us? How

can we be ourselves and still get our message out via racist, classist, sexist media?

a. Scenario Exercise

Discuss how you would handle the following situations. This can be done all together or in small groups.

Scenario A. You are going to a press briefing outside the Federal Court, where you will be the spokesperson on behalf of a man who may be deported tomorrow because of double punishment (criminal record for theft). You speak English well but your French is not very good, but there is no one else to speak and so far the French media hasn't picked up the story.

Discuss: What will you wear, what language will you speak, how will you prepare, how do you plan to respond to questions about his criminal record.

Scenario B. Solidarity Across Borders is invited to speak at a press conference organized by NGOs about the safe country list. The choice for SAB is between a SAB member who is directly affected by the list (a Roma person from Hungary, will not get a PRRA for three years), whose French isn't perfect, and another SAB member who is a French citizen studying law at UQAM and who understands the legal framework well.

Discuss: What are the arguments in favour of each of them speaking, and how would we help each prepare to speak alongside the NGO speakers?

b. Real Situations

Read the following situations and discuss whether or not the actions and words were strategic/useful/justified, and if there could have been a better way to deliver the message.

Situation A. Live camera is moving through an anticapitalist demonstration. It is a right-wing media outlet (TVA) who always portrays anti-capitalists as violent, unthinking thugs and "activists" as lazy bums who should get a job. The journalist is randomly selecting people (not the official spokesperson) and asking people why they are there, what the protest is about. She stops at someone rough looking, dressed in black, looks like the stereotype of "anarchist protestor" - she asks him why he is there. He answers promptly, in heavy joul, that he is there because CLAC (a radical anti-capitalist organization in Montreal) pays him to break windows. She then turns to someone dressed like a model, very classy looking and unlike the stereotype and asks her. This person doesn't say a word, just lifts her middle finger and remains in front of the camera from then on, with her middle finger lifted. Both were carried on live TV.

Situation B. A woman is being deported the next day. She and her lawyer and another supporter are talking to a journalist and being filmed. It is CTV who is usually pretty sympathetic. The male journalist is very paternalistic and wants to "help" the woman, who is crying and hugging her kids. He asks her why she deserves to stay when others have to go. The white lawyer steps in, giving a classic line about why the woman is a "good refugee" and deserves to stay. Two SAB activists are holding a banner in the background. They start shouting aggressively that she doesn't have to deserve it, the question is why Canada thinks it has the right to decide who gets to stay here or not. They also say that next time CTV should send a racialized woman instead of a white man. CTV puts the whole thing on line, including the heckling by SAB members.

Situation C. It is a press conference about "reasonable accommodation", organized by Rejettons l'Intolerance au Québec. Four Muslim-background women are speaking to the media about the racism behind the reasonable accommodations hearings. One woman wears a hijab and introduces herself as someone with a PhD, she describes how she was part of a group of well-educated Muslim women, all of whom wear the hijab, who travelled to a small town in Quebec to meet with people in the town and discuss an anti-Muslim bylaw the town had passed. Another woman, who is a doctor but does not introduce herself as such, does not wear hijab, openly discusses the racism of the hearings and the very framework of the inquiry. As she calls Charles Taylor and the other person who heads up the commission "male, white settlers" the CBC journalist (white, male, settler, normally left-leaning) gets up and storms out in anger.

2) Getting our Message Across

a. Slogans and Sound-Bites

If you give long speeches, journalists will choose what they want and leave the rest. While it is important to give as much context as possible, you can also try to control the message by giving media tightly-packaged, attractive messages and slogans. But the latter can also be dangerous because they risk over-simplifying complex issues and can lend themselves to sensationalism.

Some examples of sound-bites:

- Protest at Stéphane Dion's office, demanding that he vote against a new bill. The press release title was "Dion, Dit non!" which was widely and effectively picked up.
- "Two commissioners, same evidence, two different decisions"
- "Stop breaking up our families, stop hurting our children, stop destroying our communities."
- "Nobody should be punished twice for the same thing."
- "Refugees Welcome."

Discuss why these work and also potential pitfalls with each.

b. Scenario Exercise

Discuss (all together or in small groups) each of the following situations and come up with:

- a title for a press release;
- two sound bites that you want media to pick up;
- statistics or facts that you will find to back up your message.

You could also discuss whether what you have come up with lends itself to simplification and sensationalism; and how to prevent that.

- Quebec government is planning to bring in changes to immigration law mirroring federal changes brought in under Kenney in 2012 and has invited groups to send in feedback. SAB is

planning to write a report calling for status for all without papers in Quebec, and will put out a press release.

- A woman is facing deportation in one week. She will be separated from her one-year old son, who will be given into the custody of her husband, who she left because of violence. She has been the boy's sole care-giver since his birth. She hasn't lived in her home country for many years.
- SAB is planning a press point to launch its annual Status for All / Anti-Deportation mobilization. This happens every year, and this year there will be two weeks of decentralized actions calling for access to services for sans-papiers, an end to detentions, an end to deportations, and regularization of status for all migrants.

3) Responding to Difficult/Aggressive/Racist Questions

General advice: Prepare yourself and stay strong! Stick to decisions about what you want to say, do not let journalists direct you or put pressure on you!

a. Discussion on Responding to Difficult Questions

[*Video: press conference Q&A*] Watch video and then discuss how the people dealt with the questions.

b. Some tactics to answer Difficult Questions

Discuss each of the following tactics and examples:

Tactic 1. Answer with question!

Q "Why should you block the Minister of Immigration from speaking? That's an attack on free expression!"

R "Do you mean to tell me that you believe there is a level playing field here? That migrants and minister of immigration have equal place in public to speak ?! "

Tactic 2. Change the terms of debate!

Q "When so many are being deported, what makes you different? What makes you special, why do you deserve to stay in Canada?"

R "The question is not why i deserve to stay, it is why some government official has the power to decide who gets to stay or not and has the power to decide my life."

Tactique 3. Change the subject!

Q "What do Canadians need to know about the situation in Hungary?"

R "I think that Canadians first need to know about the situation in Canada! "

Q "What were his criminal charges?"

R "I'll get back to that in a second, but first I want to point out that whatever his charges, he has already been punished for them, did his jail time. So, if he had citizenship, he would now be free to carry on with his life. Instead, he now has to fight deportation to a country he hasn't lived in for twenty years ..."

Tactic 4. Call it what it is!

Q Why should illegals have access to our healthcare when we don't even have enough public resources to pay for our own healthcare?

R. You know, i think that question is based on racist assumptions. Let me explain why ...

c. Practice

Divide into groups of two or three (one role-playing the journalist) and practice possible responses to the following questions (and any others you come up with, specific to your own case):

- Why are you being deported? What did you do?
- Why should your case be treated differently from others? You've had your chance, have had an appeal and been heard by the court. Why should the minister intervene in your case?
- According to your record, you entered the country using a false passport. Why should someone who came here illegally and didn't respect our laws expect to be treated fairly?
- There are budget cuts to all social services. Where is the extra money to pay for social services for illegals going to come from?
- Tell me in one sentence why you should be allowed to stay in Canada.

4) Tips

a. Demand respect

- Be assertive. Do not let the journalist pressure you or make you feel uncomfortable.
- Give yourself time if you feel too emotional during an interview. It is fine to ask for a break of 5 or 10 minutes to pull yourself together.

b. You can say no

- You can refuse to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable. There is no problem saying, "I can't answer that question right now."
- You can end an interview at any time. Try to stay calm if you decide to cut an interview short.
- If it is less stressful, you can speak to only one journalist at a time.
- You can refuse to be photographed or filmed, ask to be photographed or filmed in shadows or from the back, ask for your voice to be modified, wear a mask or other disguise, use a different name, etc.
- You can refuse to be alone and insist on having a support person with you during an interview.

c. During the interview

- Relax and take your time. Speak slowly and articulate clearly.
- Listen to the entire question before answering. Make sure you understand the meaning of the question. You can ask them to repeat.
- Think about your answer before speaking. Take your time. If you are being recorded, you can stop and start again if you feel you were not clear.
- Be honest. If you do not know the answer, say so.
- Be consistent in what you say.
- It is better not to lie to a journalist; it may complicate things and create problems later on.
- When speaking to a journalist, remember that you are also talking to possibly thousands of readers, listeners or viewers.
- Everything you say in interviews is "official". Never say anything that you would not like to read in the newspaper. Once you have answered the question, stop talking. Anything you say can be quoted.
- Get the media on your side – they may have information that you don't know. Ask them to share their information with you.

E. Follow-up

1) After the interview / press conference / event

- Call the journalists who attended to see whether they understood, have questions, need more information, etc.
- Read the articles. You can ask to have any mistake corrected. You can also write letters in response or ask others to do so, or send a press release to correct or complement the information published.

2) Stay in touch

The media love a developing story. To get good coverage, make sure you have the contacts of journalists who follow your story, and keep in touch with them: share updates from time to time; send relevant background documents, etc.

Also, keeping all their contact details in one place can save you lots of time and ensure that you can react quickly in emergencies.