

# **Approached by the Police**

## **A factsheet on being asked to be an informer**

### **Police and Informers**

Policing is expensive work; it takes costs a lot to mount intelligence gathering operations, and like all government sponsored agencies they have tight budgets. Informants, or grasses, is instead an efficient way of gathering intelligence, the money they offer generally working out as a saving for them.

Paying for information is a tactic as old as the hills, and the police are skilled at putting pressure on people to get them to provide useful knowledge. The information they are after is not necessarily about a specific crime, it can also be practical stuff such as how a group is structured, who are the most important people, where do they meet, etc. Informers can be very dangerous and every protest group needs to be aware of them - as it is not just police; companies being targeted are also known to use them.

If approached, the best thing to do is to simply say they are not interested and get on with your life. If you let them intimidate you into doing nothing, then they have beaten you. They are approaching you on the off chance that you might actually agree; once you have made it clear to them that you are not interested then the matter is over. Running away on a paranoia trip because you have been approached is stupid and a bad example to others.

### **Why you may be approached**

If you are approached do not panic. It does not mean you are now fatally compromised and can never be active again. In fact, being approached can be quite useful as it allows you to glean information on how they view you or how much they know about you, permitting you to act accordingly.

Remember, they are approaching you because their intelligence is less than perfect and this means that they may not know that much about you either.

They will have made a judgment about you, perhaps perceived what they think is a weakness they can exploit. In some cases you will be chosen because they believe you are of 'low rank' but have access to the 'top people'.

Common reasons for approaching you are:

- a) you may have financial problems leaving you vulnerable to pressure;
- b) they think you have a need to talk which they can exploit;
- c) you may be facing a prison sentence or heavy charges which they can help lift (sometimes they charge people with much greater crimes in order to put pressure on them to talk - thus it appears they have done you a favour by reducing the charges);
- d) they perceive a personality conflict they can use to their advantage;
- e) they say they can put pressure on your employers to cause you to lose your job;
- f) they are simply desperate to get someone close to the people they are after;
- g) they perceive some ethical issue or questioning in you which they can use as a lever.

None of this actually has to be true; it is what they think and how much power you believe they have that matters.

People are being approached all the time. Everyone has the potential to be asked to become an informer. If you are approached, accept the fact and do not fall in to the trap of believing you are being singled out for special treatment. Refuse them and get on with being a successful activist.

Never allow yourself to be intimidated into selling yourself out. It is far easier to say no at all times than to extract yourself at a later date. Once you have allowed them to get a grip on you they do not like to let you go.

## **How you may be approached**

The police like to get you in a place where you are isolated, away from friends. The more vulnerable you are, the more likely they are to be able to

coerce you into working for them. They will watch and pick the right moment.

Often, if you have been just arrested they will ask you towards the end of your stay in the police station, as this is quite a vulnerable time for many people. Similarly they will approach you after a court appearance, trying to play on any fears you have over its outcome.

Other methods they use is to get you out of your house onto 'neutral territory', such as when a copper calls you to invite you out for a 'friendly drink' in a local pub or something. The police will play good cop/bad cop routines at police stations, so that you will be more inclined to communicate with the 'good cop' when they approach you later. Of course they will spin every sympathetic sounding lie in the book to win you over.

There is no one way they use. Some times they can be very aggressive, threatening you with all sorts of things such as raids, trouble at work, having you sent to harsher prisons. They will temper this with promises, such as getting charges dropped or reduced and/or financial incentives to make life easier for you.

Others use a softly, softly personal approach, trying to get to know you, offering a sympathetic ear, pretending friendship and empathy with your cause. Meanwhile they will play on any personal rifts or ethical doubts you may have to swing you around to working for them, turning you against your friends.

Even though you may have already told them now, it may take a few conversations to convince them to give up on you. They will ring you up to invite you out to a 'friendly' meal or drink; or ask you if you have reconsidered their offer and do you want to meet up and talk about it. In this case they think they have got a lever on you and are attempting to put pressure on you. It is a simple enough matter to turn them down.

The more you pander to them the harder it becomes to shake them off. And once you do start giving information, then they are not going to be keen to let you go once as long as you are of use to them.

If you have agreed to work for them, besides the problems of being found out by your friends, you have provided the police with a very strong grip on you as they can threaten to expose you once you have ceased to be useful to them.

The police are not there to be your friends; they are doing this because it is their job and they want something. The sooner you make it clear to them that you are not interested the easier it will be for you.

## **Handling the situation**

Normally, the police will not come out with the fact they want you to be an informer straight away. They will attempt a conversation to get you talking to them, and also to let you know which particular tactic they are using to pressurize you into working for them. Of course you are under no obligation to talk to them and if they are not going to arrest you then you have the right to walk away and ignore them. You even have the right to shout or sing songs while they attempt communication.

If being approached on the street, one of the first things they do is try to get you to move a more secluded area, where they can "talk in private". Simply stand up to them and say no. The first thing you should ask is are they putting you under arrest. If they ask you to move to a quiet area say no, it is not your policy to go into a dark ally with strangers. Indicate a more public place as being better suited to you. They may bluster and try and intimidate you, but other than physically carrying you (which they can't unless they are arresting you) there is little they can do about it.

It is possible to have a conversation with them as long as you are careful not to give anything away. The onus is on them and they are attempting to get you on their side, which means they will have to betray their knowledge of who they are targeting and some of what they know about you. This can be very useful. In some cases, it has allowed people to realize just how weak the police were in their knowledge of certain areas and about the person they have approached to be an informer.

However, we recommend that unless you are an experienced activist, wise in the ways of police intimidation and lies, in this situation err on the side of caution. It is much better to say little and protect yourself, than say a lot and give information away which will give them a stronger impression of who you are.

Even if you say no, you are not interested, they will try and give you a piece of paper with names (normally fake) and numbers to contact them on. Depending on the situation it may actually be hard to refuse, and they may take this as a certain willingness to co-operate (thus leading to follow up phone calls), but there is nothing to stop you taking the paper and throwing it in the first bin you come to.

Being approached can be a very intimidating experience; however, if you keep your cool you can get out of it. Either refuse point blank from the start to co-operate, or play along to find out what you can. However, at no point indicate that you are going to work for them. The most you should ever give them, is that you will consider their offer and want time to think it over - if they approach you again, simply reply that you have considered it and want nothing more to do with them. Talk to them but do not get into a chatty conversation.

### **“Letters to the Judge”**

One tactic the police commonly use is to make a promise to have your sentenced reduced, or have charges dropped/reduced.

If your case has not gone to full trial then getting the charges dropped or reduced is something they can easily do; indeed, as noted above, sometimes the charges are bumped up just so they can be seen to be doing this, though it is just as likely that the Crown Prosecution Service will also realise that the charges are nonsense and drop or reduce them anyway.

On the sentencing the police have the right to send a letter to the judge or magistrates saying that you are now helping them and asking for some clemency. This they have the right to do, and it does not have to be declared

in court. There is no obligation on the judge to reduce your sentence, but they do normally take it into account.

## **Be open about being approached**

If you have been approached and suspect that they police are going to try and follow up their contact with you, get support. Because you have been approached does not mean your friends will stigmatize you.

In fact it is far better to get the fact out in the open as soon as possible. This makes you a less appealing target for follow up approaches. It also means you can get your colleagues to rally around you, especially if you are going to be in a position where there is a good chance the police would normally be able to get you by yourself. The police are not going to ask you to be a grass while you have a friend around. Knowing you have the support of your colleagues makes it much easier to say no to police advances.

There are other benefits to being open about the fact you have been asked to be an informer. It means that people in general are better prepared, and the experience as a whole will be less intimidating as they know what to expect. The more people know, the less likely they are to succumb to police pressure.

Also, being open means it is much harder for the police to spread rumours that you are working with them. The police are not above such dirty tricks, but if everyone knows that you have been approached and clearly said no then it is much hard for them to pull it off, as it mostly depends on people being surprised and angered when they are told by the police.

## **Consequences of being an informer**

If you do become an informer, the chances are you will be found out eventually. Your colleagues will become suspicious and lay traps for you, or the police will discard you when you cease to be of use.

Informers are scum; they are traitors to their cause and to their colleagues. Found out they will be rightfully ostracized. There is no excuse. You may have problems in your life, but that does not mean you have the right to jeopardize the lives of others. If you cannot deal with it, or you have personal/ethical differences with your colleagues, the simple solution is to walk away. There are simply no reasons to justify becoming a grass, and if you go down that path you deserve all the anger and disgust you get. People will talk and spread the message that you have turned.

## **Suspecting someone has turned**

This is not easy and one has to be careful that you are not deliberately being lead down this path as the police try to sow dissent to break up your group or that it is your own paranoia that is the issue. A classic black-op is to use electronic means of collecting data and pretend that the information came from a human source, thus triggering destructive mole hunts and general mistrust. Remember, the police have their own agenda and any information they give out is for their own purposes, not to help you. Think very carefully about the situation, before jumping to any conclusions.

## **Public Immunity Certificates**

In cases where a number of people have been arrested, some may have their charges dropped because they have started co-operating with the police. It can be hard to judge whether this is for lack of evidence on the person or because they have turned. In this case we would say again to be very cautious before thinking the worse. However, there is something called a public immunity certificate - this is a tool used to protect grasses who have provided information on their fellow defendants and have got off as a result. If in a case someone suddenly drops out and you hear of a public immunity certificate being used to prevent that person being mentioned in court then in all likelihood they have become an informer.

Many lawyers who work with political, environmental and animal rights activists will not represent people who have turned informants.



## Playing the game...

It has been known in the past that people approached to be informers have played the game, and passed on fake information. We really can not recommend this approach unless you have the full support of your colleagues, are able to play a very difficult game and are prepared for the consequences of very angry police if you are found out. It is a lot of stress and hard work, so if you do go down this path be sure that you are doing it for the right reasons, have the ability to turn around and say no at any point and are not going to get hooked on what they are offering you. Never, ever think that this is something you can pull off by yourself.

## Conclusion

Being approached by the police to become an informer is not something to be frightened at, and nor does it mean you are more at risk from police attention. The best way to handle it is to keep your cool, and never agree to co-operate. They will try all sort of tricks to get you to work for them, but it is easy to say no and stand up to any intimidation. Indeed, if you play it right you can gather useful information about what the police believe and know.

Don't be shy, just because you have been approached, does not now mean that you are a grass. Tell your colleagues, get their support and continue being as active as ever. We hope that you also understand why being a grass is a risky road to go down on, no matter what your opinions on those you are asked to talk about are. If you do turn, then you are no better than slime, and you deserve to be refused entry to any campaign ever again.

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