

# GIMME A BRAKE (LIGHT)



## A DIY Guide



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## Brake Lights & Socialism: A Manifesto

Dear Comrades,

To begin, I want to open this handbook by saying right away that this project, *Gimme a Brake (Light)!* is easier to make happen than you think. When the idea first came to me, as I was changing my own brake light, I immediately dismissed it as too complicated. How many kinds of brake lights are there, even? And how many different ways of changing them? This might seem silly now, but I haven't been organizing that long. Most of the projects I'd undertaken at that point, ridiculously, I'd done alone. I had recently joined the New Orleans DSA, and pitched it to them to see what they thought. It was their belief in the project, their enthusiasm, and their work that carried the project to fruition. This is why organizing with like-minded people is so important. Our work means so much more when we band together and make impossible things happen.

Changing a brake light is not typically difficult or expensive. However, being stopped by a police officer for having a brake light out can be both. A ticket can cost a significant amount of a working person's earnings. If that person has a warrant out for their arrest due to unpaid tickets or something like that, they might be detained and arrested. This means more fines. It can also be quite disruptive to a person's life—they might miss work or be unable to care for their children. It can also be extremely traumatic. In fact, any traffic stop can pose an existential threat to the person being pulled over, especially for people of color and people without papers. In 2015, Walter Scott was stopped by a police officer for having a brake light out. He pulled into the parking lot of the auto parts store he'd been going to to replace the bulb, but he was tased and shot to death by the officer who pulled him over before he got the chance. In 2016, Philando Castile was pulled over for having a brake light out, and was shot almost immediately while informing the officer that he legally was carrying a firearm. His partner Diamond Reynolds bravely live streamed the encounter so that the world could see the aftermath of the unjust execution that had just occurred in front of her and her

toddler daughter. Having a brake light out is not that dangerous. The most dangerous thing about having a brake light out is probably the threat of state violence.

We did not change brake lights because we thought people could not do it themselves. We didn't give the supplies for free because we thought people couldn't afford them. We did not conceive of this project as charity. The Democratic Socialist project requires that we address race, gender, ability and class oppression as they exist, bound inextricably together. For working class people, the time and energy that it takes to change a brake light are in short supply—who wouldn't put it off for a while? And if you're unable to change it, you've got another reason to put it off. If you're a person of color, the physical danger of the traffic stop is ever present. If you're undocumented, it's possible that a traffic stop could dramatically disrupt your life, even lead to deportation. Through an intersectional, democratic socialist lens, a free brake light replacement clinic is inherently political.

I see this project as occupying an interesting place between mutual aid and direct action. It is like mutual aid in that we are offering a service to help people meet basic needs so that they may be slightly more empowered to live a life beyond the isolating personal struggle to survive. It is direct action in that we are spending 6 hours visibly declaring our intention to protect people from state violence at the hands of the police. While this purpose was centered in almost all of our communications regarding this event, the brake light is a powerful enough symbol on its own that the message is clear for people who are endangered by police interaction. Centering the message of protection is crucial for people who do not understand how this kind of policing endangers people around them. This message is for everyone that hears it, not just the people we serve. The work and the message amplify each other.

This kind of work is powerful and should be pursued by socialists. Some socialists are skeptical of the power of mutual aid because of the possibility of it becoming just another charity. There are many ways in which we can avoid clouding our political message that way. To be clear, this service should always be offered unconditionally to anyone who shows up. There should never be any means testing. The only requirement should be a broken brake light. This should not be used to actively

recruit people—the service should not come with a lecture on false consciousness. Treat people with great respect, hospitality, and kindness, and this project will build trust with people who are skeptical of socialism. Finally, funding should be community based, and offered unconditionally based on your vision for the work, rather than from sources that seek to influence the direction and meaning of the project and that demand quantitative accountability. This is a low-cost project, so this should be easy to obtain.

Ultimately, the meaning of this work lies in community members standing up for one another, lending each other a hand, and doing a simple favor for each other. The meaning comes from showing that we are moving beyond fear and anger, and taking steps to solve problems for each other when we are able to. We are telling people they are not alone, their burdens are everyone's burdens, and we can share them. We are building power beyond electoral politics. I feel very certain that there are so many more tiny, easy, low cost services we can do for people that have big symbolic and material impacts. I hope that this project starts DSA chapters across the country on a path to look for these projects and share their experiences making them a reality so that we can continue to build the powerful communities that can address our own needs without turning to systems that would oppress us. I hope that this work opens our hearts to the needs of others and builds our strength within groups of socialists as well.

In Solidarity,  
Kaitlin Marone  
New Orleans DSA

## A Note About Safety and the Police

The concern has been raised, with varying degrees of faith, that this action would endanger those it intended to serve by acting as a trap, allowing state and nonstate antagonists to harass people on their way to the venue.

In New Orleans, the municipal police force is still operating under the terms of a Justice Department consent decree, and the areas where motorists are at the highest risk of a pretextual stop are short drives outside city limits, including Gretna, Louisiana, which has the dubious honor of being the arrest capital of the United States.

The NOPD has also recently made public clear limits on the procedural prerequisites necessary for their resources to be lent or personnel to cooperate with federal immigration enforcement, in contrast to the enthusiastic enforcement of immigration detainer requests offered by the Sheriff's Office in Jefferson Parish, which leads the state in deportations.

This is a discussion you should have with your chapter, those you partner with & those you intend to serve, based on your local situation.

Mark D'Arensborg  
New Orleans DSA

Narrative Explanation of How We Planned the Event,  
*i.e.,*  
What We Learned From Our Mistakes Along The Way

The idea for the brake light event was proposed (by our chapter's resident genius Kaitlin Marone) in late spring. She formally proposed the event at a General Meeting, and members voted unanimously to pursue the idea and to form a 'Brake Lights Caucus' to serve as the organizing body for the execution of the event.

Then we held a couple meetings to try and get things going. At first we were overly ambitious: we wanted to hold four brake lights events on four Saturdays in late summer. But we were limited (thankfully) by our ability to secure a location for the event.

In terms of a location, we were basically just looking for a large parking lot that we could commandeer for a whole Saturday. Ideally, it would be a well-trafficked area. We were thinking: churches, parking lots owned by individuals, etc. But you'll probably have the most luck looking within your own network, rather than finding the ideal parking lot and asking people if you can use it. That's how we wound up getting the parking lots we eventually used, and the availability of those lots was ultimately what determined the dates we selected.

Once we had the location settled and the dates decided on, we realized that the mechanic we knew was not available on that date. So we decided to make up for this by holding a volunteer training with the mechanic. Six or so people came, and the mechanic showed us how to change the brake light on a few different cars. Although it's a super simple repair, I think most of us had never done it before, and so it was really, really helpful to have someone show us what to expect in advance of the event. Even though we scheduled this event by necessity, I think it would be a good thing to do no matter what, if possible. Especially if you don't have a mechanic there the day of. This way, we all went into the event a little more confident. Even so, another mechanic wound up volunteering for that day, which was exceptionally helpful.

From there, a key point at which the project really kicked into gear was when Kaitlin outlined different roles and responsibilities and people volunteered to take on particular roles. These roles included: supplies coordinator, volunteer coordinator, location person, promotion person, etc. Then whoever had volunteered for a given role had full authority to just go ahead and make the decisions they needed to make to get done what they needed to get done. This decentralization of authority not only meant that more work could get done; it also meant that more people felt personally invested in the success of the event.

I was volunteer coordinator. I started looking for volunteers to sign up for 'shifts' a couple weeks in advance and generally fielded any scheduling/logistical questions from volunteers. Our supplies coordinator made sure that we had all the bulbs and also all the day-of supplies. This meant not only generating the list of things we needed but also coordinating with people who offered to lend things, like a tent or a cooler or whatever. Next time, we want to streamline this process by marking people's belongings with different colored tape, because it was very confusing at the end figuring out who had brought what stuff. Locations coordinator would be someone in charge of communicating with the location and finding new locations. The promotions person would be someone in charge of creating a plan for promoting the event (printing flyers, getting people to go out flyering, sending out the press release) and making sure that plan got executed. Of course, these roles wound up being somewhat fluid, and it's likely that different chapters would have different needs.

We got bulbs from a local mechanic who was willing to lend them to us and allow us to return the ones we didn't use. We got a canopy from Home Depot. A lot of people offered to loan us tools. I think when you start looking around your own network and seeing what people have to offer, you'd be surprised by how much you already have access to. More details on what supplies we used can be found in the supplies list.

We opted not to have much DSA/Socialism literature or to make it a recruiting event. This was both a practical and a philosophical decision. Practical because we were worried about the weather and wanted to keep the whole operation as



simple as possible. And philosophical because we didn't want the event to be about recruiting or preaching to people. And there just wasn't any need. I think that just being out there doing something good for people in your socialist t-shirt does more work than handing somebody a brochure ever will. But that being said, again, different places are different and I don't think there'd be anything wrong with having some pamphlets out.

Things we'll do differently next time (in a couple weeks!): have more 3057 bulbs. Have more see-through red tape. Have a smoother process for looking up the types of bulbs people's cars need (we just did it on our phones). Have a better process for checking borrowed supplies in and out. Wear more sunscreen; drink more water.

Altogether, a lot of this event wound up working out just by pure good luck. We were lucky to find a location, lucky to have so many volunteers to help out on the day of, lucky to have a mechanic volunteer to help out, and lucky to get so much online attention and thus, funds. But I like to think—and maybe this veers a little into hokey pokey mystical territory—that that good luck was summoned by the collective goodwill towards and excitement about the project. I.e. we got so lucky because it was *such a damn good idea*. So even though the circumstances will be different in different chapters, I believe that with a strong team and a lot of enthusiasm, any chapter, no matter what kind of financial resources they have access too, can pull this off.

Frances Gill  
New Orleans DSA

## How to Use This Guide

The bulk of this guide is practical tips for how to plan your brake light event from start to finish. As Frances highlighted in Section II, the sharing of labor is crucial to success. In planning your event, you will likely want to call for volunteers to direct efforts in the following categories:

- Venue Coordination
- Volunteer Coordinator
- Supply Coordinator
- Budget/Fundraising Coordinator
- Promotions Coordinator(s), with focuses in:
  - Press
  - Social Media
  - Canvassing

Conveniently, this guide is broken down in exactly the same way! These coordinators' roles may overlap, and while each person has authority to make decisions on their own, all will still want to work together. For example, it is crucial to allow for at least 2-4 weeks' time for promoting your clinic, so when the Venue Coordinator is selecting dates, they'll want to ensure that they are providing enough lead time for each team to complete their work.

At the very end, you will find an Appendix, which includes Google Doc links to all the files we thought would be useful. These links are view-only, so when you open them, just make a copy into your drive, share with your comrades, and get to work.

## Planning Your Event

### A. Venue

The first location was the parking lot of a clinic that I happened to have access to. In other words, we mostly chose it because it was available to us. But it was also pretty convenient: close to an AutoZone, on a busy street near a busy intersection, near a gas station (lots of cars coming in and out), and in a neighborhood that, as Kaitlin put it, “has a Whole Foods, but shouldn’t.” The main lesson learned here was simply: look within your network to see what you already have available. But also try to be close-ish to an auto parts store.

The venue should have enough space to accommodate lots of cars, plus room to set up canopies and chairs. You also want your event to be visible from the street. On the day of the clinic, you’ll want to ask some volunteers to wave signs and direct motorists into the lot. Think about how you’ll boost street visibility to bring people to your clinic.

### B. Volunteers

To schedule volunteers, we tried to have four ‘mechanically inclined’ volunteers and four ‘casual’ volunteers. MI’s had either gone through the volunteer training or were already comfortable changing a brake light. Casual volunteers were mostly in charge of sign waving on the busy street corner, directing people into the event. This is, obviously, the most thankless job, so we would highly recommend making sure that they get swapped out regularly and that they are drinking tons of water and have lots of sunscreen. These volunteers are also able to keep an eye out for anything bad: cops lurking around to catch people with brake lights out or any other ne’er-do-wells. Might be valuable to have a Signal group text with all your volunteers on it, in case anyone needs to alert the whole group about something quickly.

We scheduled people in two hour shifts, but a lot of people stayed basically all day. Just make sure you have enough snacks, water and sunscreen for all volunteers AND people getting their brake light fixed. Also, to that end, make sure you

have someone who can bring lunch or pick up lunch for the group. We had pizza; that was wonderful.

A couple days before the event, we sent out a reminder email to volunteers with finalized details about shift times, exact locations, parking instructions, and contact info. A day after the event, we sent out a thank you email to all volunteers and also solicited any feedback on the execution of the event.

### C. Supplies

The Supplies Coordinator will take charge of making sure that you have EVERYTHING you need on the big day, including comfort supplies such as canopies for shade and chairs, water and snacks, all the required tools (including some you may not think of, like pry tools to not damage upholstery), and of course, brake lights!

Because we were sharing tools, we decided it was best to mark tools with colored tape (i.e., all orange tape tools belong to Mark, all the blue tape tools belong to Kelly). We also asked a volunteer to check-out and check-in tools throughout the day and keep us organized.

As for the brake lights themselves, we pre-ordered 80 from a local mechanic of what he evaluated were the most common bulb types. On the day, we ended needing to buy many more of certain bulbs, which doesn't mean that he was wrong, but that there is going to be variability in terms of who actually shows up the day of the event. We ended up buying the complete stock of two bulbs types from two different auto parts stores. To give you an idea, the following table shows what we brought the day of versus what we actually ended up using for the event:

<u>Bulb Model No.</u>	<u>What We Brought</u>	<u>What We Used</u>
1156	10	2
1157	10	3
1157 NA	10	0
7443	10	16
3057	0	26
3156	10	3
3157	10	0
921	10	3
194	10	3
2057	0	1
7528	0	1
5007	0	1

#### D. Budgeting and Fundraising

We raised more than \$3,000 for our chapter. We hosted a comedy night fundraiser that netted about \$350 from our community. We also raised approximately \$3000 from the online fundraiser. Not all chapters will be able to do a comedy fundraiser and not all chapters will have the success with the online fundraiser that we did, just by virtue of being the first chapter to raise money for this. But every chapter has unique resources and talents that could be used to host a really fun, unique fundraiser! And the event can really be done for quite cheap.

If you have an online fundraiser, consider your choice of platform. All of the popular ones take cuts of your donations except YouCaring and Chuffed. YC doesn't take cuts but pulls processing fees from the donation amount, and Chuffed adds the processing fee to the donation amount so you receive the full donation. The choice to make here is how much you think seeing that extra 3% upfront will matter to people.

We spent about \$450 for our first clinic, including purchasing some permanent supplies for future events.

## E. Promotions

### i. Press

The first step is to try to identify all media outlets in your metro area. In New Orleans, we have two major metropolitan newspapers (The Times-Picayune and The Advocate). We also have an alt-weekly (Gambit), a number of music magazines (Antigravity, Offbeat), a few online-only media outlets (The Lens, Uptown/Mid-City Messenger), and two black- or multicultural-identified papers (Louisiana Weekly and The New Orleans Tribune). Then of course there are TV stations (WWL, WDSU, Fox 8, WYES, WLAE), public/community/college radio (WWNO, WWOZ, WTUL), as well as any radio stations or personalities that had available contact information (Wild Wayne at Q93, Power 1029).

The reason why I'm listing all of these outlets is because your media world is much, much bigger than the one you encounter every single day. If you want the greatest possible outreach for your event, do not assume that you know the landscape already. It will take some research to identify all the possible outlets. I recommend nominating a member in your DSA who has at least some press relationships, who reads widely and is familiar with local journalists and what they tend to cover, and someone who has many community relationships.

Once you have identified your outlets, make a list of contacts for them. You want to send the release widely, but there is no need to send it to every single person who works at the organization. Here's a breakdown of what our list looked like:

- Editor at the Lens
- Two staff writers at Gambit who regularly report on politics/demonstrations and events
- At both major dailies, we sent to: The Community News Editor for Orleans Parish, the Crime Editor, as well as a few staff writers who cover politics, crime, and GA reporters.
- General "send us your press release"/submit event listings emails posted on various outlets.
- COMMUNITY SUPPORT: I also sent our press release to people that are not media but who might feel solidarity with our mission. This

included a popular DJ who has a magnetic social media presence, contacts at nonprofits like the Youth Empowerment Project, VERA Institute for Justice, Ashe Community Arts Center, Women With A Vision, New Orleans Workers' Center for Racial Justice, the Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal, BreakOUT—Fighting the criminalization of LGBTQ youth in New Orleans... as well as local playwrights, actors, emcees, activists, freelance journalists and photojournalists.

- All in all, our list of contacts was 60 people.

### SEND OUT YOUR PRESS RELEASE AT LEAST TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE EVENT!

If you are planning more than one clinic, you can include all of the dates in your initial press release, then send fresh reminders about two weeks before each event. You will want to copy and paste the press release directly into the body of an email. Be sure you BCC your contact list into the email.

Our chapter chose to keep the press release simple and straight to the point. While we mentioned the goal of helping people avoid traffic stops, we didn't get too detailed about the political ideology. The ability for this program to appear to be simple community service will grant you access to media outlets you might not get any response from by going all in on the politics. Your strategy could be different, but in Louisiana this was a necessary choice.

Just a note: Don't expect replies, and there is no need to re-send releases unless, again, you have a totally awesome success or are 2 weeks away from another event.

#### ii. Social Media

Create a public Facebook event through your DSA page.

DSA has an extremely active and tightly knit Twitter base, and it was really helpful in our fundraising efforts. You can probably count on other chapters to help you get the word out (shoutout to DSA San Francisco especially for helping us), but taking an active approach can make a huge difference. Here are some tips:

Once you have the fundraiser set up, tweet a link to it from your chapter's official account. This seems obvious but it's important for when your members promote

it personally: having the link come from the chapter account makes it clear that it's not a copycat scam or anything.

Don't be shy about trying to get people sympathetic to the cause who are really popular on twitter to give you a boost! Some notable leftists and celebrities were sharing without us even asking.

Try to thank people as much as you can! If possible, stay glued to your menchie's while you're running a campaign and thank people who donate or rt or say something nice, answer questions or good suggestions people have, and politely ignore all chuds. Directly responding to people was responsible for at least one of the national media writeups we got too.

It is, however, important to keep in mind that Twitter is the *smallest* social network (smaller than Pinterest and LinkedIn even) and it's not where you want to focus your efforts on getting people to actually attend the event, that's much more a Facebook and local media thing. What it *is* useful for is fundraising, making connections with people who want to get more involved, and the odd national media outlet.

### iii. Canvassing

We used a Google Doc to brainstorm places to flyer and coordinate efforts. We decided to use a two-prong approach.

We created an "inside" flyer -- the type you may see hanging at a coffee shop or in a store window. It invited you to take a moment to read it -- with eye-catching red color, graphics, and a little block of text explaining our mission. This is a great flyer to distribute at rallies, bring to campuses, hang in coffee shops or community centers.





But this is a brake light clinic, and we needed to also reach motorists. We designed a simple-style flyer with black text on white legal paper. This was our “outside” flyer that we staple-gunned to light poles around neighborhoods.

You’ll want to canvass with a friend. One person drives, and the passenger hops out at opportune moments to staple up a few flyers. You know an opportune moment if you’re sitting at a red light and you see an empty pole that would be easy to read from the road.

<b>FIX YOUR CAR FREE!</b> <b>AVOID TRAFFIC STOPS!</b> <b>FREE BRAKE LIGHTS!</b> <b>FREE INSTALLATION!</b> <u>AUG 26: 10A-3P</u> BROAD & ORLEANS  <u>SEP 16: 10A-3P</u> BARONNE & EUTERPE	<b>¡ARREGLE SU CARRO GRATIS!</b> <b>¡EVITE PARES DE TRÁFICO!</b> <b>¡LUCES TRASERAS GRATUITAS!</b> <b>¡INSTALACIÓN GRATUITA!</b> <u>AGO 26: 10A-3P</u> BROAD & ORLEANS  <u>SEP 16: 10A-3P</u> BARONNE & EUTERPE
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People who saw us canvassing asked us for flyers. One man was sitting on a stoop when we were stapling a flyer to a pole in front of his building. He asked what the flyer was for, in that way that made you think he was going to ask us to please not, but when we told him, he smiled and said, Oh, that’s fine!

### Day-Of-Clinic Tips

- Make it comfortable! You need room for people to wait while their cars are fixed. Bring extra canopies for shade, chairs, and enough water and snacks to share.
- Make sure you have room for more cars than you are expecting. People won't mind waiting, but you want them to be comfortably off the street.
- Make sure the event is clearly visible from the street. You will likely want to have volunteers waving signs near the roadway so that motorists can easily find the clinic. These volunteers can safely direct cars into the space.
- Make sure you are relatively near an auto parts store and have someone at the ready to run to get more supplies.
- Bring a tip jar for donations.
- If you have another clinic scheduled, bring flyers for that one. People can help you spread the word.
- Be welcoming and friendly! We had people walk up to us all day who just wanted to hang out and eat snacks. Some were surprised that we didn't try to turn them away if they didn't have a car, but the goal of this isn't to change brake lights. It's to build power. We can't build power if we turn people away.

## Appendix

[Volunteer Scheduling](#)

[Supply Sheet](#)

[Press Release](#) and [Updated Press Release](#) (with links or photos)

[Waiver](#)

[“Indoor”-Style Flyer](#) (Adobe Illustrator File)

[Social Media Optimized Flyer](#) (Adobe Illustrator File)

[2'x2' Stencil Sign](#)

Sincere gratitude to the members who made our clinics happen, who donated labor, supplies, and funds, and gave their unqualified support. Thank you to the members who compiled this guide: Christopher Curley, Mark D'Arensbourg, Frances Gill, Tim Jones, Kaitlin Marone, and Cate Root.

GOOD LUCK, COMRADES!