

Congressional Visits

The short-term goal is to raise the profile of increased militarization in Latin America and the Caribbean, from the military bases in Colombia to the occupation of Haiti. Congress has a key role in approving and funding nearly all the military and policing policies we are trying to stop. The economic crisis should be a rallying cry to cut military spending and re-direct it to social services!

The Day of Action or early this fall may be a good opportunity to meet with your local Congressional representatives. Whatever issue you are focusing on, be sure to define some clear objectives (what are your goals for this meeting?) and asks (what, specifically, do you want the Rep to do?) for these visits.

Meeting Objectives (SAMPLE):

1. Update Congress about the effects that militarization, throughout Latin America, at the border, and within U.S. immigration policies.
2. Enlist support among Congressional allies in the struggles against militarization.
3. Consult with allied Representatives on ending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and relate that to what is going on in our hemisphere.

Congressional Asks (SAMPLE):

1. Support for the proposal to cut 25% of the military budget
2. Close the SOA/WHINSEC
3. Cut military aid to Honduras, Colombia and Mexico (while we support cutting all military aid, these represent the worse human rights crises in the hemisphere).
4. End the Mirida Initiative and the increase militarization of the U.S. border with Mexico.
5. Support Rep. Barney Frank's proposal to reduce the social debt by cutting the U.S. military budget immediately by 25%.

For more suggestions on how to conduct these visits and get the most out of them, see the newly updated "Grassroots Guide to Congressional Lobbying" at the end of this guide (Appendix 1).

Guide To Grassroots Congressional Pressure *Updated Sept. 2009*

1. Differing Levels and Forms of Congressional Pressure

Congressional pressure plays a critical role in whether or not we defeat policies on decreasing military budget, not to mention other implications of militarization that affect Latin America as well as immigrants in the U.S. After all, Congress is the body legally charged with approving trade deals. According to the Constitution, our Congressional representatives in the House and the Senate exist to represent the views and best interests of their constituents (those who live in their district or state). Unfortunately, our representatives are often more greatly influenced by large corporations and monied interest groups than they are by their constituents or they are simply uninformed or uninterested. Sometimes, all that is needed to convince a Representative to take a stand is to ask (or subtly demand) that s/he do so; at other times we must force

him/her to do so through grassroots political pressure. Even if your representative has regularly voted against war – or sided with us on other issues – it is still vital to maintain political pressure. Congressional representatives can change their minds between the time of your meeting and the day of the vote. By maintaining adequate political pressure we send our representatives a clear message: your constituents do not want free trade and militarization and there is no room for a change of heart.

There are many different ways, with varying levels of militancy, to express to our Representatives our opposition to policies of war and militarization, and other forms of US intervention and to pressure them to vote the right way! Among the most widely used tactics are:

- Writing letters/emails/postcards
- Phone calls
- Congressional visits
- Hounding/Bird-dogging
- Protests and demonstrations
- Office sit-ins

All of these tactics can be carried out in a diverse number of ways, all with varying levels of confrontation. Which tactics you use to carry out your strategy will depend on the conditions particular to your locale.

The keys to a successful congressional pressure campaign are:

1. Building mobilizing capacity
2. Escalation of pressure
3. Diversity of tactics

Because the policies we seek to change are integral to the U.S. neoliberal model, many Representatives will vote against these measures only when forced. Representatives must believe that if they do not do so their constituency will not vote for them in the future. This means that we must mobilize as many people as possible to pressure Congress, under the threat that if our representatives do not heed the call they will lose their jobs. To this end, we must ensure that even while escalating our actions that we continue to reach out to and recruit new activists. Optimally, the actions we carry out should have the objective not simply to mobilize but to educate and reach out to the public.

The need to build mobilizing capacity is one of the big reasons to increase escalation over time instead of starting off with the highest level of militancy. If we started a pressure campaign using the highest level of militancy, such as an office take over, we would be hard pressed to find a means to increase our militancy in the future while expanding our base.

However, simply because we do not want to start with the highest level of militancy when launching a campaign does not mean that escalation of pressure must be a long and drawn out process. Depending on the local conditions, it is very possible to climb the pressure ladder quickly. It is also possible and suggested that campaigns employ more than one type of tactic in the same conjuncture. Escalation of pressure does not have to mean that a campaign starts off with letter writing and THEN move on to phone calls and only THEN move on to congressional visits, etc. Rather, campaigns can easily start with letter writing and phone calls and combine with congressional visits, etc.

2. Congressional Visit How-To

A. Advanced Preparation

Do Your Research, Compile important facts and figures.

- Research in the Congressional Directory (www.congress.org, www.house.gov, www.senate.gov). Just punch in your zip code, and the site provides you with contact information and a web page for your Member of Congress. You will be able to find biographical information, committee and subcommittee assignments, and key issues of concern for your Representative.
- Certain policy groups have good information beyond what LASC has put out, so check those.
- Review your legislator's voting record and any publicly stated views or opinions.
- Learn who does staff work on the issues that concern you most. These are the people who answer your letters and brief/advise their boss on pending issues. These people are a very important resource but are often overlooked.
- All legislators supposedly want to improve the economy and quality of life in their district/state and have a positive international impact. Search for information on the impact of free trade agreements, military bases and the SOA, or whatever you're are lobbying about.

Make sure everyone in your group is prepared.

- Brief everyone attending the meeting and provide them with written materials.
- Be organized. If you are part of a group, it is a good idea to organize a preparatory meeting beforehand. Decide who will discuss what and in what order participants will speak.
- Be certain everyone agrees on the central message and what will be asked of the legislator. This way you will avoid a possible internal debate in front of your legislator.
- Know the counter-arguments. Be ready to respectfully answer any questions or disagreements. However, we must keep in mind the purpose of the visit, to express our opposition to the policy in question, not to have a debate. Be careful not to get so caught up in the details that the overall message gets lost.
- Prepare an information packet to leave with your legislator. This should include information on the topic (i.e. brochures, outreach materials, political pressure materials, info sheets, etc.)

B. Getting the Meeting

You can meet with your Legislators either in their local office or in their Washington DC office.

1. Contacting your legislator:

- Send a fax to your Representative requesting a meeting
- Call to follow up on you fax and ask for a specific time. When you call your legislator's office ask to speak with the person who handles the legislator's schedule.
- Keep in mind that each congressional office schedules appointments differently, but the legislator's scheduler or appointment secretary usually arranges appointments.

2. Making the Appointment:

- When speaking to the scheduler, introduce yourself and explain that you are a constituent.
- Tell the scheduler the date and time you would like to meet with your legislator (be flexible) and the general topics you wish to discuss.
- Let the scheduler know that the meeting should take no longer than one hour.
- If there is more than one person attending the meeting, let the scheduler know their names and affiliations.
- If someone in your group knows the legislator personally or professionally, make sure that the scheduler is aware of the relationship.
- Getting a meeting can sometimes be a long and arduous process with staffers giving you the run-around. Be persistent yet polite, and make it clear that YOU, the member's constituent, are the most important person s/he will ever listen to. Don't give up even if you are told the member has no time to meet with your delegation and even if they don't return your phone calls-it does pay off in the long run and in most cases you will eventually be able to sit down with your representative.
- Emphasize why the issues you are presenting are important to you as constituents and why they should be important to your Congressperson.
- If your Member can't meet with you, visit the staff member who works on the issues that most concern you. For most issues relating to El Salvador and trade policy, you will want to meet with the foreign policy and trade staffers. Usually that person will be based in Washington DC, but there will also be an aide in the local office who can meet with you. Try to meet with the highest ranking aide possible in the local office, i.e. the Legislative Director.
- After you schedule a meeting, send a confirmation letter that includes a list of those who will attend the meeting.

(a) Visits at the Local Office

- Seek appointments during congressional recess periods (around every holiday) when your Representative returns to your district.
- the telephone number and address of your legislator's district office can be found on their webpage, which you can find at <http://www.house.gov/> or <http://www.senate.gov/>

(b) Visits in Washington DC

- You can often make plans to visit the Washington office through the local office. Otherwise, contact the DC office, find out who the scheduler is, and ask them to arrange a meeting.
- Remember that most legislative business occurs Tuesday through Thursday and that the closing days of a session are extra busy.
- When you arrive in Washington, call the Representative's office to confirm your appointment.

C. Meeting with Your Representative

1. Be on time!
2. Introduce yourself and say what issues and legislation you want to discuss.
3. Always begin your meeting by thanking your legislator for taking the time to visit with you. If your legislator has been supportive of our stance around trade and social and economic justice, you should thank him/her for his/her support as well.

4. Explain to your legislator who you represent and why you asked for the meeting. If you are in a group, you should individually introduce yourself and briefly describe your organization.
5. Have different people cover different issues so that the Member can see the breadth of the coalition, but make sure that all introductions are kept brief allowing more time for conversation w/ the Representative.
6. Ask his or her position. How will s/he vote?
7. Remember that you might be talking to someone who has yet to hear of the issue. Be prepared to explain a little something to them and ask if he or she would like more information.
8. Do party leaders have positions on the issue? What is their influence likely to be?
9. Listen well -- you will hear occasional indications of your Representative's actual views, and you should take those opportunities to provide good information.
10. Be prepared but do not feel that you need to be an expert. Most members of Congress are generalists. Be open to counter-arguments, but don't get stuck on them. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Nothing is worse than being caught in a lie or inaccuracy. Offer to look into the question and get back to the Member (this is also an excellent opportunity to stay in touch).
11. Is the office hearing from opponents? If so, what are their arguments and what groups are involved?
12. Does the Representative know any other key House Members or Senators who should be contacted to get favorable action on the bill? Is s/he willing to facilitate contact?
13. Follow up -- you should consider sending a thank you note after the meeting, and if commitments were made during the meeting, repeat your understanding of them.

D. Strategy Tips

Always ask for specific actions; always get a specific commitment and then follow up.

Ask for Something More-- No matter how supportive or unsupportive your legislator is, there is always a next step. If your member is generally unresponsive, ask him or her to sign a letter on human rights. If your member is very responsive, ask him or her to initiate a "Dear Colleague" letter, etc.

Provide Affirmation Where Possible-- Look for areas of agreement and affirm them. Convey your appreciation for positive steps, no matter how small. Keep written records of meetings. Take notes for use in future contacts. What did you request? What was the response? What was promised? What are the chief areas of interest?

Thank you to CISPES for putting this Congressional guide together!

Further resources to check out: http://www.lawg.org/tools/contacting_congress.htm