

Mutual Aid: A Factor of Liberalism

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Mutual-aid is in the air. Look near any anarchist or socialist project, and you will see the importance of it emphasized in big bold text. In the name of mutual-aid, people are doing food shares, repairing pot-holes in black bloc attire, fixing brake lights, mucking and gutting flooded houses, and giving out Narcan and clean IV supplies to drug users. These have become ubiquitous practices on the left.

All very good deeds, how can we be against this? When people are hungry, you feed them. If you have two coats and your neighbor has none, you have one coat and your neighbor now has one. The impulse is more than relatable, I too believe in these things. The appeal is hard to disagree with. From disaster to crisis, mutual aid comes like Superman to save the day, feeding and housing everyone, saving each other's lives.

But the truth is, mutual-aid isn't a challenge or threat to the social order which produced hunger and precarity. The state is largely indifferent or even welcoming to it. In a world where the working class is increasingly being told to fend for itself, can we continue to call this "solidarity" with any honesty? If not, then what actually do these practices do for us?

The problem of poverty is precisely that we don't have the shit. Let's get a few very agreeable things straight, which really clarify why mutual aid is wholly insufficient: 1. The world of private property and wage labor drive poverty and produced a number of social problems. 2. The poor and working class is characterized by lacking reserves and does not have free time, and 3. The poor and working class do not have the unpaid labor and unused property by which to alleviate these problems directly without going to the source keeping it from them.

However, Big Door Brigade, a website which collects and aggregates mutual-aid efforts across the country says the opposite:

What do we mean by "mutual aid"? Mutual aid is when people get together to meet each other's basic survival needs with a shared understanding that the systems we live under are not going to meet our needs and we can do it together
RIGHT NOW!

How can both be true? If the working class does not have the shit, why is mutual aid elevated as "the work"? What are the impulses behind the popularity of mutual aid? Is it organizing? Is it solidarity? What do these things mean if it is not? What does the Bread guy that AOC likes to quote actually have to say about all of this?

Honest Service Work

It is more honest to call the bulk of what gets sold as mutual aid to be "service work". This comes under various names: "survival programs", mutual aid, and "serve the people". Regardless of the nomenclature, these function largely the same. They are not new, Food Not Bombs has been a staple of anarchist culture for decades.

There is no shortage of examples of good groups engaging in honest service work throughout history. The most well-known example is the Black Panthers. As the Black Panthers were constantly portrayed in the media as frightening armed terrorists, their survival

programs served a number of functions at once. They brought legitimacy to their more central practices. They improved their standing amongst the people they were trying to organize. They also served as an outlet for those wanting to have an “immediate” positive impact. It also overcame barriers to organizing, a Communist Party that takes up a literacy campaign doesn’t just do this to improve lives, but to actually further be able to reach people and deepen their relationships.

It is worth delineating and examining these and how they related to other organizing. The Lincoln Hospital was a site of struggle for the Young Lords as much as it was a place transformed by service work into something more egalitarian and humanistic. This was the kernel of what would become “harm reduction”, which is mostly voluntaristic work that saves lives every day. The Chicago Women’s Liberation Union had service work as a part of its multi-lateral apparatus, providing abortion care and procedures women did not have access to, this was one of many projects which brought attention to their brand of Socialist Feminism, while they also were heavily involved in workplace organizing amongst women in Chicago factories. It is hard to not be influenced by a historic organization which incorporated service work.

Honest service work is not always antithetical to a broader struggle which is primarily propelled by target-and-demand driven projects. They can be a very good supplement, to the point where if you are in a growing group dedicated to class struggle that is really making bigger and bigger moves, devoting a bit of extra labor in this direction is a good idea. However, it raises the question of an overall strategy, and where we really want to put our faith. We need to harvest new relations and forms of care, but outside the context of conflict, we lack the thrust which gives these new forms their class character.

This is not just the domain of the left either, Identity Evropa (a fascist group, now American Identity Movement) shares supplies and picks up trash in parks and neighborhoods, and you’ll hear a lot about the “good work” that Gazi and the Black Hammer organization are doing. However, this also says a lot for how we should approach honest service work: it’s politically neutral, often the domain of opportunists, and is very limited. It should be seen honestly for what it is, rather than giving the impression that this suffices for organizing. A “both-and” approach isn’t something I’m against, but it’s on us to make the service-work supportive of the organization’s broader thrust.

Words and Deeds

Today’s mutual aid efforts spend a great deal of time explaining all the ways in which they are not charity. They try to make it clear that they, the feeders of the hungry, are on the same side as the freedom fighters. According to Mutual Aid activist Dean Spade, mutual aid organizations “Use people power to resist any efforts by government to regulate or shut down activities”, “is connected to other tactics, including disruptive tactics aimed at root causes of the distress the aid addresses”, and “builds broader political participation, solidarity, mobilization, radicalization”. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez says in her Mutual Aid 101 guide,

that mutual aid is: “A great jumping off point for other kinds of organizing and movement work”

My contention is that mutual aid organizations do little, to none of this. The beliefs and rhetoric simply do not translate into action. There is certainly support at the peaks of struggle, protests are supplied with medics and water-bearers, however this is not the way this looks day-to-day, for either the mutual-aid groups, or the disruptive organizations they claim to build solidarity with. Most of the day-to-day looks like increasing support for mutual aid.

One characteristic of mutual aid sticks out, and reminds me of the self-exploitation that co-op workers put themselves through. It’s the rebranding of what are essentially capitalist firms and enterprises to be “movement-friendly”. As someone experienced on what a non-profit looks like from the inside, including as someone who was paid but was glad to do the work otherwise, this jumps out as a major concern from Spade’s chart:

Efforts to flatten hierarchies—e.g. flat wage scales if anyone is paid, training so that new people can do work they weren’t professionally trained to do, rotating facilitation roles, language access.

If implemented on a wider scale, this could possibly lower the value of everyone’s labor in a related industry. The capitalist class laughs all the way to the bank with this one, just look at the “learn to code for free” classes tech companies are giving, this lowers the cost of the labor for everyone, which Silicon Valley wants very badly to cut. There’s also nothing preventing a non-profit from seeing this and running with it, thus using a mix of volunteer and paid-staff labor to further exploit everyone!

I always try to reserve judgement not for where people came from, and less so (but still important) what they say, but mostly for what they do. These are not always the same thing, and the disconnect should always set off alarms. mutual aid groups dress up what is functionally similar to NGOs and church groups, and pass it off as something new and most contentiously, something “radical”.

Most of what Spade characterizes as mutual-aid he believes is radical because of what is believed about poverty (which reduces stigma) by the organization, how people are educated (to overcome differences), and an egalitarianism of expertises and skills. These are all good things, but all in the realm of ideas, the problem isn’t the way we think about care and poverty, it’s about how it’s organized, and how our labor is organized.

The problems and insufficiency with NGOs was never really the services they provide though, it’s where they locate and build power (“proper channels”, Democratic Party, seat at the table), and yes, to Spade’s credit, their ethic and structure. However, it’s not clear if breaking with this structure in form yields some new content. If anything, the mutual aid model that has become popularized is a good guide of practices that many non-profits could adapt and improve themselves, and they should. At times when reading Spade, I become confused as to whether what is being proposed cannot be done by a non-profit or is antithetical to them, as when describing the solidarity which mutual-aid builds, he still describes a non-profit organization (Sylvia Rivera Law Project), with a multi-tiered staff structure and all the fixings.

Why does the “non-profit industrial complex” use the organizational model of capitalist firms (sometimes at the cutting edge) to operate? Because it is effective. We will also never out-organize them by trying to compete directly with them. Instead, my proposal is to circumvent them entirely and organize the unorganized, but also to break with the primary function (service) they serve. Also, instead of abandoning NGOs to create a superior model, we should consider the fact that these are workplaces that need to be organized, and would be improved by organizing.

Funding? Nowhere in Spade’s “Solidarity, Not Charity”, even in the section describing the challenges of not being a charity, is there any discussion on how mutual-aid groups are funded. My personal experience is that they are either crowd-funded, or are funded by micro-grants/sub-grants from actual non-profits. That’s not quite “the revolution will not be funded”. Member run unions, tenant and student organizations solve this problem often with dues structures. Dues can be made sliding scale and have free rates for houseless and unemployed members, and slush funds to further assist them. If an organization is committed to democracy regarding how dues are spent, members can have a sense of ownership in the organization. Also, restricting donation sizes for members also prevents any member from using this as leverage, while still allowing for large donations and incomes overtime from members who have more to spare.

Peter Kropotkin and the Altar of Mutual Aid

A common source for the popularity of mutual aid is the work of 19th century Russian Anarchist Communist Peter Kropotkin. One of his works which could rightly be called his magnum opus, titled *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* has endured almost 120 years of relevance. I want to side-step a bit to examine what Kropotkin meant, as this is a common justification for the practices amongst anarchists. Is the mutual aid of today really what Kropotkin meant? In reading his description towards the end of the book, it would seem that Kropotkin was a proponent mostly of mass strikes and rebellions. He also described pretty clearly the interdependency of the working classes historically, even under capitalism, mutual-aid is a factor of capitalism, it was a factor of the reformation in Europe. In capitalism, through wage-labor, the working class is collectively subservient to the production process and therefore each other.

Nothing in *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* justifies the mutual-aid groupings of today. I wish he had foretold more, but there’s certainly no evidence that this was what he envisioned. It’s pretty clear that Kropotkin was a proponent of worker’s revolt, and spent a great deal highlighting the history of this in Chapter 7. He spoke clearly and plainly about solidarity, but of a specific kind, and never made reference to what we’d call mutual aid today.

In Chapter 7, Kropotkin clearly states:

From the point of view of social economics all these efforts of the peasants certainly are of little importance. They cannot substantially, and still less perma-

nently, alleviate the misery to which the tillers of the soil are doomed all over Europe.

Kropotkin does follow up with a good deal of clarification, and I don't think we should entirely dismiss the social economics, and examine the practices of the Panthers, Young Lords and CLWU as above. However, it is clear that quoting Kropotkin to justify today's mutual-aid is misleading and uncharacteristic of his views. Kropotkin does decry individualism of the ruling class, and associates this with charity and philanthropy. He also tells clear stories of mutual-aid playing a part of a life-death cycle of systems and institutions in Europe, the destruction of guilds by the state, and their replacement with trade unions. He also discusses mutual-aid in the daily lives of those living in slums, but again, you find no calls for trying to distribute goods and supplies within these, and amongst its inhabitants.

Where's the Solidarity? The Lost Art of the Fighting Organization

Look anywhere near a mutual aid grouping and you will see the slogan "Solidarity, Not Charity". While the look of "charity" and its association with philanthropy may not be what is intended, and it is arguable if the model is different enough to say it is not charity, the point is that "solidarity" doesn't describe service work. This is concurrent with a historical decline in class struggle organization.

By conflating "solidarity" with service work, we risk impoverishing what solidarity actually means and feels like. It's a serious problem when we're perplexed when a worker is having a conflict with their boss/landlord over stolen wages and rent, and the best thing we think we can do is start a GoFundMe for them. If your work is visibly indistinguishable from NGOs, capitalist firms, well-meaning religious groups, and even fascists, you cannot expect the political content to actually be different. No amount of plastering red flags changes this.

Proclaiming "solidarity, not charity!" doesn't actually put you in a position of solidarity with the people you claim to fight for, solidarity isn't about service, it's about reciprocal defense of each other because we are in the same social position. It also means "skin in the game", you're all in it together. That feeling, that massive undertaking, all the building that happens prior to the march on the boss, are not bonds formed by sharing our meager crumbs, but coming together to take what is ours. Its high points are preceded by less flashy work, but it's based in the kind of relationship between people willing to sacrifice themselves for each other.

It is certainly not easier to do actual organizing, with targets and demands, amongst people who are actually positioned to be in solidarity with each other. It takes a great deal more patience, planning, ground work, research, courage, pain and sacrifice. However, it is without any substitute. So, we need to think critically and politically about what is elevated as "good work", because there's a lot that's getting thrown around as such which is getting us nowhere.

Some may detract and point to the need to organize collective care work and the creation of a new world, and this deserves consideration. However, this is always proposed in the context of a clearly demarcated struggle. Proponents of mutual aid differ in that they presume the relationship of fighting organizations to mutual-aid efforts, and presume their political content, whereas those who sought to revolutionize care work paid close attention to the relationship of their reproductive labor to capital. What is proposed by these proponents looks markedly different than the mutual aid that Spade proposes.

If our mutual-aid efforts are not closely linked with target-and-demand driven fights with bosses, landlords, administrators, it has no relationship to organizing. What passes as “organizing” today is mostly being a member of an organization and doing whatever it takes to make that organization grow. Like “solidarity” and “direct action”, we have to draw some lines and some contrasting of “organizing” with mutual-aid.

Mutual-aid or Class Struggle? Why does the Liberalism in Mutual Aid Prevail?

What is the grip that mutual-aid has on the left? Why do people take to mutual-aid so quickly, instead of building a target and demand driven fighting organization? The answers to me are pretty clear

1. ***It requires little risk on anyone's part.*** If there is a risk, it's also a risk for the state to repress it, because of the moral consequence and optics of trying to impede service work. It poses very little challenge to the state and capital, who view these efforts largely indifferently, or even positively, since you are actively helping them reproduce workers, a burden increasingly relegated to the working class
2. ***Anyone can participate regardless of their social position.*** A group of aristocratic worker/petite bourgeois socialists can easily get in on the “work” without blowing their cover. There's very little in common you actually need to have with the people you are serving. In fact, there's a stark power division, you have something valuable, that these people need and do not have.
3. Because this does require some labor, ***you get away with all the ability to capture the rhetoric of “organizing”, you are doing “the” “work”.*** You can tell people “well, what are you doing?”. Most leftists who become active and reach out to leftist groups are looking for the first thing to DO and will latch themselves to the first thing that looks good. You can “do first, think critically about what you're doing later”.
4. ***The optics are undeniably good and you get all the moral high-ground.*** Your critics become critics of feeding people, and your opponents can be framed as not desiring people to be fed. This moral buffer can even be used to excuse other unrelated problems with your politics or practices. In this sense, it serves the same function as philanthropy from the ruling class.

5. ***Professional and managerial tendencies translate neatly.*** Your skill juggling 5 different communications platforms and work-flows are needed. You learned everything you need on how to check vibes, social network, “emails emails emails”, the whole thing. You’re on the cutting edge, and there’s important work to do. Who’s gonna send the email about it?
6. ***It requires neither the patience nor discomfort of class struggle work. Instead, the “good feelings” are immediate.*** The payoff and gratification of “doing something” comes instantly, and cannot be taken away from you. You may have had to enter an uncomfortable conversation but for the most part, you can do a lot just talking to the people you know. In today’s fast-moving world, our redemption and sleep at night comes to the lowest bidder on a first come, first serve basis.
7. **While this might seem counterintuitive to rationale 5 above, ***much of the economy is already service oriented.*** Therefore, it is easy for some to reduce it to the same interchangeable parts, and the work is accessible, and people know to expect a grind. It is easier to get people to give their labor in a strategic way, than it is to get them to withhold it.

It's not as simple as it is to say it's "easy", as mutual-aid organizations do a lot of work. In fact, the point of it is sort of that there's always work to do. It's more accurate to consider the myriad of political reasons why this gets attention over organizing. Mutual aid projects are more well supported than fighting organizations because they alleviate conditions on an individual basis (even if done many times over) without challenging their source, and it also provides no challenge to "common sense" consciousness that pervades much of US liberalism.

One “March on the Boss” is worth 1000 “Food Not Bombs”

Spade, in the beginning of “Solidarity, Not Charity”, gives an urgent warning to those who neglect mutual-aid:

Movement organizations could fail to provide any real relief for those whose lives are most endangered and leave newly scared and angry people to the most passive and ineffective forms of expressing their opinions.

Is mutual-aid now the least passive and most effective form of expressing your opinion? Also, is expressing our opinions the only channels we need to fly open? Why is it not an option to build an organization where people feel like they have a voice, where democracy lives and propels the organization forward, which actually favors direct action?

What do these things look like to me? Taking the problem to the boss. Taking the problem to the landlord. That's direct, not passive. That's effective. People with a common grievance come together and fight back and win every day. That's tenants coming together to fight

deposit theft and rent hikes in their complexes. That's workers coming together to fight wage theft and speed-ups in their workplaces. That's public university students coming together to fight tuition hikes and cuts to ethnic and cultural studies in their schools.

You won't find any of this in Spade's paper. The bonds formed this way can never be formed in his mutual-aid model. This is because it's not even on the table in his vision. In his view, "Working and living inside hierarchies deskills us for dealing with conflict", therefore conflict is best not located and fought in our daily lives, between workers and bosses and tenants and landlords, but in the context of mutual-aid. Spade gives what comes closest to a vision for a broader struggle in "Solidarity, Not Charity":

Resistant left movements seek to reignite people's imaginations about not just what they can demand but also what tactics they can use to win. Such movements model three kinds of work that change material conditions rather than just winning empty declarations of equality: (a) work to dismantle existing harmful systems and/or beat back their expansion, (b) work to directly provide for people targeted by such systems and institutions, and (c) work to build an alternative infrastructure through which people can get their needs met. Dismantling work includes campaigns to stop the expansion of surveillance, policing, imprisonment, and deportation, to close precincts and prisons, to stop privatization of schools and utilities, to terminate gentrification, pipelines, fracking, mining, and more. This work includes such tactics as pipeline sabotage, direct actions at building sites, training people not to call the cops, divestment campaigns, blocking deportation buses, disrupting city council meetings, door knocking, and working to change state and municipal budgets to defund police and jails. Work to support people impacted by harmful systems can include prison visiting and pen pal programs, rapid response systems for ICE raids, ride sharing, reentry resources, eviction defense, medical clinics, childcare collectives, food distribution, disaster response, and court support efforts. Work to create an alternative infrastructure based in left values of democracy, participation, care, and solidarity includes many of the prior activities, which establish community connections and put in place structures for meeting needs. It might also include things like creating food, energy, and waste systems that are sustainable and locally controlled, building methods of dealing with conflict and harm that do not involve the police or prisons, and building health, education, and childcare infrastructure controlled by the people who use it.

A lot of this is very solid, however there are also glaring omissions. Almost all of the above can be done without having to talk to your neighbors and co-workers or build in the places where the dreaded hierarchies that Spade decries run our lives. When you eliminate a lot of stuff on this list categorically, such as work that could also as easily be the domain of non-profits (anything involving education and service), spectacle-oriented and symbolic actions (disrupting city-council meetings, direct actions at building sites), you're left wondering how this is supposed to both build up and coordinate what we need. It speaks to the decades of decline and defeat of the labor movement.

There is an liberal tendency within today's anarchism that favors amorphous movements over the kind of long-term organization building that poor and working class people need, such as member-run independent unions or political organizations. There is a lot of emphasis on service and consciousness raising with symbolic actions and protest militancy, with some good ideas mixed in. Of course, I think organizations need childcare infrastructure, and things like rapid response systems for ICE raids are great as well. However, there is an allergy to organization building that has been plaguing anarchism since the 90's. The prescription is to look inward, to affinity groups, to people you trust only because you have the same ideas. Most (but not all) of the tactics in Spade's vision are completely consistent with the CrimethInc affinity group model. This is the same model that allowed for a dine-and-dash, calling for a Rent Strike everywhere early in the COVID-19 crisis, only to hear not a peep about the tenants movement months later.

Instead of actually grappling with the realities of friends and enemies, winning and losing, we have in its place grandiose delusions about "actually building new social relations that are more survivable" while my city is 6 feet underwater. Mutual-aid during Hurricane Harvey was phenomenal, but was also rife with conflict, opportunists, and just generally tragic experiences. Mutual-aid was so prevalent, whereas fighting organizations were nowhere to be found, what happened was people were left to fend for themselves, and the state called the bluff, evicting people at record-breaking rates. The role that mutual-aid actually played was contradictory and a mixed-bag at best. What we learned most from that experience is we cannot treat mutual-aid as some kind of silver bullet.

What we needed during Hurricane Harvey that wasn't there was any struggle against the forces which made our lives so fragile to begin with. There was no accountability and no taking back any of the wealth we created. What we needed was what we always needed, and the problems of poverty in Houston could not be resolved in Houston alone, nor does disaster present any special "opportunities", nor does it make organizing easier or change the rules around long-term building and fighting and winning.

To conclude, my prescription is actually not to pack up all the service work the left does. It is instead to be honest, to start building the kinds of fighting organizations the working class needs in the long run, and to think strategically about the role that service plays in our organizations, movements, and history. We can make the organizations of our future right now, and build the workplace organization that will someday be able to stop and bend entire economies to its will. We can build tenants' movements that won't stop until we have a world rent and landlords. These are where we can locate the kernels of "actually survivable relations" and they all begin in the here and now. We will have the mutual-aid and revolutionizing care work too, but we can't have a revolution without the organizations that build and fight at the places where capital is produced and reproduced. Every picket line needs reinforcement, every rent strike needs support, every comrade deserves care and aid. Instead of envisioning mutual-aid to contain the beginnings of a new world, we have to apply mutual aid to existing organizations that actually are.

Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow.

— W.E.B. DuBois

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