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More of the State You've Got

(While Mutual Aid Grows to Tackle Coronavirus)

Anarchist Federation (of Britain)

March 15, 2020

As various governments leap into action, or not, over the reality of the coronavirus pandemic, it's evident that the different approaches to containment and delay have a heavy ideological component.

The mass surveillance approach of China has seen blocking of criticism of the state on the widespread social media platform WeChat and citizen reporters being taken off the streets, whilst the e-commerce app Alipay (like Paypal in UK) platform has been commandeered to build and track individual movements. It is doing this by assigning a 'Alipay Health Code' status of Red, Yellow or Green which is then being used to control access to work, public facilities and movement in general.

In the UK, the central government's approach is equally ideological, strongly criticised last week for being too 'laissez-faire', seemingly having more concern for the economic system than its people, especially with the idea that letting the population reach a 'herd immunity' is almost something to encourage, which would be a death sentence for many people who are immuno-compromised or have particular disabilities or long-term conditions. Added to this is the state's health

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ministry choosing to inform itself by expertise in behavioural economics and public health ‘nudging’ to try and encourage citizens to do the right thing. As a result, action to stop social contact has been led as much by non-state decision making such as the decision of sporting bodies to cancel games and fixtures into the future.

In Italy, the government has moved to being more controlling, introducing fines and threatening prison time for people who don’t adhere to the new travel bans.

For anarchists then, a ray of sunshine must be the evidence of rapid formation of mutual aid groups across the country, especially on Facebook. Freedom has published a list of these which is growing very fast indeed: COVID-19 UK Mutual Aid groups: a list.

Mutual aid has been forced on us by the state’s neoliberal approach to public services and life in general during the last decade of austerity. The idea from HM government that older people over 70 years old will be asked to begin isolating themselves “within the coming weeks” for “a very long time” is obviously going to create worry and practical difficulty that will require a huge community effort to overcome. But many people are already involved in mutual aid activities such as food banks. Existing tenants’, neighbourhood and church groups are likely to be at the forefront of rapid response. Anarchists, with our experience of running local solidarity networks, are already involved in setting up or supporting new groups. These groups will help ensure people who are vulnerable will be fed and get their medication, and can coordinate things like childcare for healthworkers and others.

Workers are also taking action, pushing their employers to do the right thing more quickly. It was evident in the University strikes last week that strikers on picket lines had used the solidarity and communications on the ground to make bosses act more quickly to close off things like ‘open days’ that would have seen mass movements of potential students and parents

across England. All over Italy, workers in factories, steel works and docks who are not able to do their jobs at home, are striking over their bosses lack of care.

Coronavirus won’t be beaten by community mutual aid alone, but groups that are involved in direct communication are surely a vital public health resource that will help counter fear and dampen the noise of bad information more effectively than direct marketing or broadcast media messages. More optimistically, if not too optimistic in this present crisis, these types of groups may well act as a springboard for the better social cohesion that is part of what it will take to achieve social revolution in the future. Hopefully too, mutual aid of the kind envisaged by anarchists will also realise a vaccine in due course, by means of scientific cooperation. On the other hand it will be important to learn from the different ways states are responding to the outbreak because the measures being put in place will no doubt be applied in the near future to control borders and movement, whether for the purpose of internal repression within states or regions or to deal with the climate emergency or other yet unknown crises that capitalism will create.