

Socialism is not charity

Why we're against mutual aid

Black Flag Sydney

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In the past few years, the term “mutual aid” has caught on like wildfire on the left. In particular, it has come to describe a sort of practice whereby small groups of volunteers gather together to provide some kind of philanthropic service, from providing food and blankets to the homeless to organising community gardens to fixing strangers’ brake lights so they don’t get pulled over by policemen. Though there are other activities that may fall under the category, we will focus on these sorts of service-provision approaches, since they appear to us to be the most representative of the tendency.

The rise of this sort of tactic forces us – organisationalist, social anarchists – to critically reflect. Whilst we are sympathetic with the desire to break out of lefty bubbles and “do something more”, our concern is that the gradual rise in enthusiasm for these approaches may not be sustainable, precisely because they function as a kind of political dead end – particularly when they are taken in isolation from broader social politics.

What is mutual aid?

Simply put, mutual aid is the tendency among animals – including humans – to co-operate for the benefit of themselves and for the species as a whole. The term is most closely associated with Kropotkin, the anarchist and scientist who identified it as a prime factor in evolution, being responsible for the survival of species. In this sense, he was pushing against both optimistic humanists who thought of social co-operation as being driven by a kind of selfless love, as well as the conservative social Darwinists who appropriated Darwin’s ideas about competition to justify and intensify the existing capitalist social order.

For Kropotkin, the tendency of humans to co-operate also made possible the realisation of anarchist communism. Humanity, from a scientific perspective, did not *need* armies, policemen and capitalists to organise a functioning, harmonious society; solidarity would come to replace authority as the glue that binds civilisations together. The competitive market economy led to social chaos; a society based on free production and free distribution would secure a more stable social order. In this sense, Kropotkin was only restating what earlier anarchists like Bakunin and Proudhon had already identified before him. Proudhon’s entire social philosophy, which he called mutualism, was focused on gradually reshaping society around the principle of mutuality, of reciprocity; the term itself was borrowed from the radical circle of workers in Lyons that called themselves the *Mutuellistes*.

As capitalism developed through the 19th and 20th centuries, so did the workers’ movement; most prominently, trades unions rose to the fore as the foremost manifestation of what workers could achieve when they associated with each other for the benefit of their class. The unions were not the only kind of working-class institution, though; for decades, the combative unions were joined at the hip with co-operatives, credit unions and friendly societies.

Though they have since faded away in importance for a variety of reasons, these peaceful institutions were a core part of the workers’ movement in both its radical and reformist modes for decades. In the absence of quality affordable healthcare, workers clubbed together and contributed a portion of their wages each month to employ medical personnel. Similarly, faced with expensive mark-ups on consumer goods from local businessmen, workers created consumer co-operatives to take advantage of wholesale pricing, providing goods for their members at a lower cost.

What does it mean now?

In contemporary radical language, mutual aid has come to simply mean a kind of service-provision that is in some sense distinct from the mainstream methods of service-provision – charities and government aid. A Current Affairs article written by Cate Root in October 2020 which typifies the current discourse states that there are “myriad examples of mutual aid among humans in the modern world: abortion funds, bail funds, grassroots legal and eviction defense, disaster response, and food distribution, among others”.

Whereas mainline NGOs and governments are bureaucratic, top-down and manipulative, the new mutual aid groups are horizontal, bottom-up, empowering and genuinely expressive of community needs. Often, the mutual aid groups feature democratic structures like consensus decision-making protocols, the absence of a paid leadership, and the regular rotation of elected positions. They tend not to have paid staff. Mutual aid in this context is most often contrasted with “charity”; mutual aid being good and radical, and charity being bad and conservative.

Why we are dissatisfied

Put simply, most mutual aid organisations fail to live up to their own name. In the vast majority of instances, the contrived distinction between charity and mutual aid collapses. Only a small number are genuinely *mutual* in the sense that they involve a strong degree of reciprocity – a degree of both giving and taking. These groups primarily act on other people’s behalf. To make an organisation genuinely mutual is not an easy task, particularly when most people only approach such organisations in order to solve a problem that they are currently experiencing, whether it’s a lack of food, unpaid wages, or whatever. Once the problem is solved – or if the group is unable to help – people have a tendency to withdraw.

This attitude among workers is a byproduct of the incredibly ruthless capitalist regime we live in, where institutions of solidarity like unions have been broken up through force, or through their integration into the system. People feel incredibly disconnected from each other, and they experience their grievances – like mistreatment at work – as individuals, not as a collective. They feel that their only way out is through working harder and climbing up the ladder somehow. In the worst cases, workers feel that their failure to achieve such things is a result of their own ignorance or inability. Such an environment breeds reaction.

In order for this sort of ethic to be broken, workers need to have confidence in the other members of their class, and in the institutions that represent them. Building this confidence is a gradual process and there are no clear, hole-in-one strategies, but it’s hard to see how the isolated “mutual aid” projects themselves will help us get there.

The pitfalls of service-provision

The bulk of the contemporary mutual aid groups focus on providing a service, whether it’s food, legal assistance or a change of brake-light on your car. The desire to do this continuously and on a significant scale inevitably pressures the group to practically moderate itself – in order to secure the community support that they rely on, service-provision organisations tend to depoliticise the issues they seek to solve. Though this is most apparent with established NGOs

that rely on corporate donors and government grants, the same pressures they face will affect the smaller mutual-aid groups.

For instance, NGOs in the refugee movement tend to moderate themselves to attract a broad spectrum of financial donors. They will portray the most severe problems refugees face as being primarily humanitarian in nature, or things stemming from a lack of empathy – instead of the deliberate, calculated political projects that they are.

Whilst this is most obvious with large, conservative NGOs, that rely on corporate donations and government grants, there is no reason to believe that radical mutual aid groups would be exempt from such pressures. A group forced to rely on “the community” in order to act is naturally going to struggle to practically critique “the community”. If you’re involved in a project that redistributes surplus food from local greengrocers, you will naturally feel hesitant to criticise said greengrocers for, say, exploiting staff, and you’re unlikely to openly criticise the role of the petit-bourgeoisie in making workers’ lives miserable.

Service-provision activity itself tends to *declass* the socialists involved in it. Appeals to the working-class to realise its own latent strength are replaced with appeals to the community for donations; either the definition of working-class is expanded to cover all sorts of potential non-worker supporters, or it is rendered in a populist, inoffensive manner. For Stalinists and others who are comfortable with “popular fronts” with various sectors of the bourgeoisie this may not be an issue, but for socialists with standards, it is.

Charity: the first refuge of a demagogue

On the topic of Stalinists, one of the most odious byproducts of the recent left infatuation with “mutual aid” is the tendency for the term to be appropriated by all sorts of awful groups without much pushback. Every hideous institution from the Catholic Church to the Minerals Council of Australia seeks to influence society through philanthropic projects, and as mutual aid degenerates into a leftist spin on charity, it is no surprise that left sects increasingly attempt to do much the same.

Deploying a mutual aid project – perhaps as part of a general strategy of “base” or simply “party” building – grants the sect a positive reputation, as well as a means to recruit. Well-meaning people get sucked into front groups, and the sect has a ready-made defense against all critics: unlike you who are all talk, we’re actually out there, serving the people! The masses are hungry, and the party is here to help.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this in Australia is the Community Union Defense League – CUDL, presumably pronounced “cuddle”. CUDL began life as a street kitchen project of the Communist Party of Australia, but took on a new life in the wake of the 2019 split, wherein the street kitchen activists and others departed with disgruntled former party general-secretary Bob Briton to form the creatively named Australian Communist Party.

The CPA’s strength was and is based on their toehold in the left union bureaucracy, having neither an electoral presence (like the Greens) or major activist base (like the various Trotskyist groups). This has been the case since it first began in the 70s as a pro-USSR split from the original, Eurocommunist-ish CPA. As the ACP was unable to attract any significant number of the mothership’s union activists at the outset, they were left adrift and the CUDL instead became the centrepiece.

The CUDL is nothing if not very active: alongside the Street Kitchen, their activity has ranged from providing tea and biscuits and fundraising for Legacy at ANZAC Day dawn services, to picketing an Anglican church in Dulwich Hill because they fired the priest for getting a divorce, to mowing lawns in Ipswich. Their website features posters with generic slogans like “the richest 1% own more wealth than 70% of Australians combined!” alongside .pdf copies of *The Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism* and a bizarre poem by Pablo Neruda entitled “To My Party”.

It remains an open question as to how tenable this heated mixture of apolitical charity work and intensely political Stalinism is, but the future is not bright for the Neruda poem: a recent listing¹ on the job board of the non-profit sector, ethicaljobs.com.au, identifies the CUDL as seeking a voluntary “Fundraising Co-ordinator” willing to donate “8 to 12 hours” of their time a week to “a relatively new organisation here in Australia” that needs to secure “donations, grants and sponsorships from governments, local businesses or larger companies”. The “highly motivated and resilient” Fundraising Co-ordinator will be “ready to knock on the door, literally or virtually to every government/business/community group” in Australia.

One feels sorry for whoever will reply to this: maybe it’ll be a social work student seeking work experience, or a recent retiree who’d rather do charity work than lawn bowls or gardening; they’ll be in for a wild ride, whoever it is. In any case, one of two things will happen: either the CUDL will be the first emphatically Marxist-Leninist group in history with corporate sponsors and government grants, or it will tone itself down and secure the money.

This won’t be the first time such a thing has happened. Whilst the label “mutual aid” is new, the practice of leftists engaging in social work is not; such activities were a mainstay of the many American New Left groups of the 60s and 70s. For the Black Panthers – romanticised by an enormous section of the left – the network of social support organisations they had built up like breakfast programmes and schools led, in part, to the integration of many Panthers into liberal-democratic electoral politics; the Panthers were a major force in the 1977 election of ultimately right-wing mayor of Oakland, Lionel Wilson.

For an even more direct example, we can look to the Communist Workers’ Party and their front group “Asian-Americans for Equality” (AAFE). Once known for their militancy – the CWP were the ones targeted by the Ku Klux Klan in the 1979 Greensboro massacre – they began to shift as AAFE developed.

Like many New Left groups, they endorsed the Jesse Jackson presidential run in 1984, and a year later formally morphed into something new. As the general-secretary explained, “[O]nce you get people elected or appointed to office, you can award contracts to friends... When you can raise money for political purposes, when you do it in the right place in the right atmosphere, and look right, and the [mainstream] party bosses are there, then that money makes them take you seriously.” Today, the AAFE is primarily known for being one of the largest and most exploitative landlords in New York’s Chinatown², totally enmeshed within the Democratic party machine, their “non-profit” status being a fig-leaf for standard landlordism.

¹ <https://archive.ph/2QS7A>

² <https://documentedny.com/2021/05/06/aafe-a-nonprofit-and-one-of-chinatowns-largest-landlords-has-a-troubling-record/>

Don't donate – rebel!

The most serious practical effect of service-provision groups is to work against the basic socialist critique of capitalism. Socialism is not simply about raising the living standards of people or making their lives better; though it goes without saying that peoples' lives *would* be exponentially better in a communist society. In a nutshell, socialism is about locating the source of people's misery in capitalism and in the systematic exploitation of the working-class for the benefit of capital; accordingly, our foremost priority is to work for its abolition. Our strategies centre around that goal – to build the capacity required to overthrow the regime of private property and replace it with communism.

Of course, this process naturally involves improvements in conditions: strikes are won to secure better pay, councils are forced to provide green space and community centres, landlords are prevented from evicting tenants, and so on. It should also go without saying that providing meals for the homeless is never itself a bad thing to do, whether you're a Catholic or a Stalinist; nowhere in this article do we suggest otherwise. The basic mistake in our view is to approach improvements in conditions as ends in and of themselves, nullifying any serious strategy. They're only strategically valuable insofar as they strengthen the working-class and allow it to move forward in the fight against capitalism.

In figuring out a strategy for socialists in our region, we have to think about two things: one, how we can take the "mutual" part of "mutual aid" seriously, and two, how fundraising and charitable projects like legal defense funds could form part of a general strategy for working class rebellion. What is clear so far though is that we cannot sit alongside capital, let alone work positively with it. The idea of bringing about a socialist society through merely building "community power" until it can subsume the state is bankrupt – capital needs to be confronted. We can't waste our time on anything else.

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