# From mutual aid to dual power in the state of emergency

Woodbine

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Dual power is the process of simultaneously building and demanding.

In the coming weeks and months, we will have to figure out not only how to survive the present moment, but also how to develop into a force that prevents the present, crumbling order from being restored. Mutual aid is only the beginning. The horizon extends to the construction of autonomous formations capable of challenging the political and economic system that led us into the current crisis.

As we move into spring, people everywhere must gather themselves with masks and gloves and disinfectant in hand to pursue the beginning of a life in common.

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Woodbine is a volunteer-run experimental hub in Ridgewood, Queens for developing the practices, skills, and tools needed to build autonomy.

freeze, hand soap, peanut butter and jelly, hummus, butter, waffles and syrup, eggs, boxed milk, canned soups, frozen veggies and juices, oatmeal and cereals. Our friends have begun distributing masks and producing hand sanitizer.

Meanwhile, Hungry Monk, a local community response organization, is distributing fresh, free produce outside of a local church in Ridgewood, Queens. We are currently discussing whether to maintain Woodbine as a pick-up site for food and supply drives, but many uncertainties remain. For example, what happens if local supply chains are disrupted? Our approach is to forecast the coming need for supplies and services and to build accordingly.

But dual power refers not to a self-enclosed separatism. As access to money and income becomes increasingly uncertain, the state too will have its approach manage the costs of being alive. Will we see increasing state intervention and socialization or will economic and logistical breakdown require the development of alternative and autonomous equipment and infrastructures? In addition to all of the volunteer labor necessary to support each other, we must also test our strength by making demands of our elected officials at the city, state, and federal levels.

There is also an emerging campaign for a rent strike scheduled for April 1 and the following collection of demands have already begun to circulate on social media:

1. Free healthcare, testing, and COVID-19 treatment for all.

2. Universal food stamps and paid sick leave.

3. Indefinite suspension of mortgage, rent and debt payments.

4. Waiver of payments to utility companies, such as those providing electricity, gas and internet.

5. Emergency shelter in hotels, dormitories and vacant homes for the unhoused.

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gatherings, and even street mobilizations. While much remains uncertain, we know that we will have to stand in solidarity and learn from workers in the "essential" services and industries: nurses and doctors, train conductors and bus drivers, bodega and grocery workers, cooks and delivery people, sanitation workers, and more.

Furthermore, we must question how social movements will relate to spaces and institutions like hotels, dorms, luxury condos, schools, churches, museums that have been shut down and vacated. How might these spaces, wasting away like empty shells or only functioning at their most bare capacity, be repurposed to meet collective needs?

Finally, it is likely that state-based measures of "relief" will likely be accompanied by intensified forms of policing and militarization. How can we tackle this coming need for collective self-defense? As we think through such scenarios, we know that this crisis will give rise to new tactics, techniques, and forms that we cannot yet foresee.

## Power at the Community Level

Here at Woodbine, we are asking these questions as a matter of immediate praxis while we deliberate how, if, and when to activate our space as an infrastructural hub during the crisis as well as after the current period of isolation. Such an endeavor will require building relationships and trust among reliable collaborators who can assess their and others risk and capacity. We are asking people to think seriously about these questions and about what the time calls for.

Neighbors have already reached out to us about starting a food pantry based upon needs that have intensified with loss of income and the closure of schools. They put together a list of suggestions for us: bags of rice, canned beans, tomato sauce, pasta, bread to

as a necessary condition during an emergency? And what are our expectations when it comes to responses from the state?

We know that there are experienced and trusted organizers all around us, and we also know there are dormant organizing frameworks and relations that will need to be revived and reactivated. We know that we will need to share skills and practices with groups throughout the country. There are many others out there — at home, online, wanting to help, to volunteer, to contribute — with skills, knowledge and resources beyond which any of us realize. There will be the need not only to provide for our friends, but also our neighbors and community members.

At some point we will need to be with each other in person. The basis for shared recovery from the current and future crises will require us to see each other's faces, hear each other's voices, and touch the same surfaces. What will be the spectrums of risk, and what will be the best protective practices and guidelines for physical interaction when it occurs?

As the COVID-19 crisis intensifies, peoples' needs will increase, and political conflict will become inevitable. We must prioritize our community members and neighbors who are most at risk, including the elderly, disabled, immunocompromised, those who require regular aid and support, and the unhoused. Many community-based organizations are already experimenting with delivery services for food and supplies based upon online databases that match people and resources.

We must also be supporting aid and care workers, who will be over-extended in the coming weeks, and who will no doubt have economic and family needs of their own. We should already be checking in on each other to assess needs, and build a culture of honest and open communication, as well as a sense of shared responsibility. We should not be ashamed or embarrassed to ask each other for help.

However many questions remain. We must ask, for example, how we will approach physical distribution of resources, public

The COVID-19 public health crisis is rapidly devolving into a vast, multi-faceted crisis of social reproduction with no end in sight. How can we seize this moment to build dual power?

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With the shutdown of businesses, schools and countless other institutions, millions of people are facing loss of income, housing and access to basic survival resources, including food. Confronted by popular pressure and the specter of civil unrest, states have begun to undertake a "disaster socialism" of uneven and often contradictory aid measures. Still, conditions of emergency are intensifying by the hour and the current biopolitical regime faces an existential crisis.

Under such circumstances, the need for self-organized infrastructures of mutual aid, care and resilience could not be clearer. In the coming weeks and months, rent strikes and other acts of collective refusal are on the horizon. How could these works of mutual aid flow into the construction of a dual power situation? As the system collapses, can physical bases of autonomy and solidarity transform our relationship to the state?

At Woodbine, an autonomous space and organizing framework maintained in New York City since 2014, this is what we have been preparing for — to mobilize our networks, skills, knowledges and energy to coordinate and provide for each other, while simultaneously building the longer-term capacity to face an uncertain future.

## Digital Organizing

Although the severity of COVID-19 crisis is unprecedented in recent memory, many people in New York City seem primed for the moment, as if they have been waiting for a crisis of this magnitude to arrive.

Last week, Sandy Nurse, a co-founder of the MayDay Space in Bushwick and a candidate for New York City Council tweeted: "Movement folks: we know how to mobilize quickly and effectively. Time to get in formation. Start the conversations now w/ local social networks & hubs on collaborating what safe direct support may need to look like, & what does scaling-up and cross-neighborhood collab[oration] look like." We shared her post across our social media platforms and received immediate responses from friends and strangers alike reaching out to collaborate.

Experienced community organizers and newly activated neighbors alike have joined a dizzying flood of online coordination, from social media posts to Google docs, Zoom meetings and Signal threads. Just yesterday, a Google doc titled "Mutual Aid NYC" migrated to its own website, where hundreds of individuals are making plans for autonomous mutual aid and disaster relief on a local, place-by-place basis. This avalanche of online discussion, from resource guides and social media "hot takes," shows that there is much popular insight about how to to navigate the crisis. But questions remain as to who, how, when and where these calls for action will be taken up.

## Legacies Of Mutual Aid

There is a long history of radical mutual aid that links service provisioning with the construction of dual power. In New York, this has been led by organizations like the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, ACT-UP, and, in more recent years, Occupy Wall Street. Today, various decolonial and abolitionist formations have been established that involve mutual aid including Take Back the Bronx and NYC Shut It Down, which is already adjusting its Feed the People (FTP) program to the present crisis. These mutual aid projects exist alongside informal activities of interdependence, care and support that many communities already practice on a day-to-day basis. Now, New Yorkers are mobilizing these informal networks in more deliberate ways, aiming, for example, to connect vulnerable tenants with volunteers.

The local experience of Hurricane Sandy provides an important example of both the possibilities and the limits of a crisis moment like the present. The self-organized "Occupy Sandy" was a city-wide infrastructure of spontaneous, self-organized disaster relief after the hurricane struck in 2012. Many leftist observers suggested that Occupy Sandy offered a prefigurative glimpse of "disaster communism," an alternative, cooperative response to so-called "natural" disasters.

However, in practice, Occupy Sandy functioned largely as a supplementary service provider within the void left by the state's negligence. It never came close to becoming a sustained political formation, let alone one capable of forcing concessions from the ruling class. Most importantly, Occupy Sandy demonstrated a collective capacity to directly confront catastrophe. It served as a crucible for relationships, projects and spaces in the subsequent decade — including Woodbine itself.

Understanding the legacies and continuities of mutual aid are crucial to acting in the current moment. However, none of us have faced the surreal condition of social distancing. What does organizing in real life mean now and what are our expectations of safety and responsibility?

## The Dilemma of "Social Distancing"

As online attempts at mutual aid unfold, we must address the matter of real-life contact and physical space along with their ethical, medical and logistical dilemmas. While recognizing the urgency of "social distancing," how can we prevent state-mandated isolation and quarantine measures from becoming tools of political demobilization? What does it mean to normalize quarantine