Anarchist Relief Efforts for Hurricane Florence

Three On-the-Ground Accounts

CrimethInc.

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When Hurricane Florence hit North Carolina in September, flooding countless towns and temporarily turning the city of Wilmington into an island, anarchists involved with Mutual Aid Disaster Relief and other grassroots projects swung immediately into action. Dozens of anarchists provided resources and relief work to residents of countless cities, towns, and rural settlements in over a dozen counties, spanning a great deal of the eastern part of the state. In the following accounts, participants describe their experiences and the obstacles they encountered along the way. As Hurricane Michael threatens to hit the same areas impacted by Hurricane Florence and climate change catalyzed by global capitalism generates increasingly destructive "natural" disasters, it's more important than ever to understand disaster response as part of our collective efforts towards liberation.

I. Disaster Is the Status Quo

Anonymous, October 7

Where I live was mostly spared from the immediate effects of Hurricane Florence. While I was safe in my home, reports began to pour in about the increasing damage out east. Dramatic pictures of historic storm surge plastered the headlines alongside reports of people needing immediate rescue. In 2016, Hurricane Matthew taught us that the damage during the hurricane itself is only the beginning. Some parts of North Carolina received six months of rain in two to four days—historic record-breaking quantities of water. As the storm surge receded, the rain from across the whole state made its way east down the river basins to flood the areas that had already been hit hardest by the initial impact of the hurricane.

If we wanted to intervene, we had only a short window of time. In a few days, the floodwaters and the response from the Department of Transportation would block access to the worst-hit areas. It would take time for the disaster relief organizations to establish control of the effort, and the state needed time to cement control via their apparatuses.

Some friends and I had spoken in advance about what we might do to help out. We got back together the morning after the storm made landfall to discuss our options and lay plans. Other comrades were already in eastern NC on their way to Wilmington, where they had secured a space in which to base their operations.

The hurricane hit some of the poorest counties in North Carolina hard. Some of us had deep connections to those places. We decided to visit the more rural areas. It was likely that these counties would receive less attention than the well-known towns. We talked about what the residents' needs might be and how we could prepare to help.

Eastern North Carolina has a few features that take newcomers by surprise. First, it's flat for miles upon miles. The coastal plain was once dominated by the long-leaf pine savanna, an awe-inducing and amazingly diverse ecosystem that capitalist development has reduced to about 2% of its historical range via logging and fire suppression (since these ecosystems require wildfires to sustain themselves). Second, a good portion of eastern North Carolina smells like hog waste. There's a good reason for this: it's because there is hog waste everywhere. North Carolina has one of the world's biggest hog industries. Along with massive chicken, turkey, and tobacco farming

and similar enterprises, this has reduced one of the most diverse ecosystems on the continent to hundreds of square miles of industrial agriculture.

It's estimated that there are approximately three times as many hogs as people in North Carolina. The vast majority of them are concentrated in the eastern and southeastern coastal plain. These hogs are shipped around the state to various processing facilities, including the biggest slaughterhouse in the world. Owned by Smithfield and located in Tar Heel, NC, it kills about 32,000 hogs daily—roughly the same number as the student body of UNC Chapel Hill, an affluent university in the center of the state.

The hogs' waste is stored in gigantic retention ponds. There are approximately 4000 of these. Through complex capitalist acrobatics, the hog farmers are often trapped in rental contracts to the effect that one of the only aspects of their operations that they own is the hog waste. When the ponds threaten to overflow, the farmers often spray waste over their crop fields in order to avoid violations. This literally covers some of the poorest counties in hog waste. Flash floods, hurricanes, and similar events empty these ponds for the farmers, washing untreated waste downriver and causing massive ecological damage. A breach in one of these ponds is often followed by massive marine life die-offs, closures of water access due to toxicity, and well-water contamination, among other long-term consequences.

As we traveled east, the landscape grew more and more ominous. Gloomy skies gave way to heavy winds and intermittent rains. We followed flooded and closed roads around small towns without electrical power. Fallen trees lay across wrecked houses and power lines. Here and there, an abandoned car hinted at a dire story; out-of-place objects were littered around us. In one dramatic scene, we came upon agricultural storage tanks, some thirty feet high, that had been thrown across the road and rolled into adjacent fields.

When we arrived at the coastal town where we were staying, we saw even more damage. The storm surge had inflicted the highest water level in their history. Standing water crept throughout the streets of town; docks were torn apart; pieces of houses littered the streets. Boats were perched sideways atop the docks, perhaps having experienced a better fate than the boats now only slightly above the water.

After removing a fell tree from a house in the town, we drove around the county to see how we could help. Most of the residents hadn't yet returned from the mandatory evacuation, so the already sparsely populated county felt even more abandoned. We chatted with some people who were just coming back home to their trailer park and passed along some water and food to them. The floodwaters blocked access to many of the regions we attempted to visit, but we also had many comforting interactions with residents of the county who were going around checking on each other, delivering supplies, and providing aid wherever people needed it.

As was widely reported, police and emergency crews from all around America came to eastern North Carolina as part of the larger relief effort. The relief efforts were staged in central locations, often near courthouses and jails. At first, we hoped that the people at these staging areas could help us learn how to plug into local efforts.

We went to a small town center and presented ourselves to the first person we saw—a cop from New York City, as it turned out. He cut short our introduction, warning us that there was a strict curfew in effect and that we needed to be on the watch for looters. He emphasized how dangerous the area was, insisting that these looters posed a serious threat. We gleaned no useful information about the needs of those who had been hit by the storm; our efforts definitely did

not feel welcome. To me, it was clear that his role was to orchestrate the relief effort according to a prescribed agenda, so people in need would remain disempowered and criminalized.

Nevertheless, as the day went on, we found ways to help out. We delivered food to farmworkers whose employer had abandoned them without food or any idea as to when work might resume. We checked on people whose loved ones had not heard from them. We cleared trees from roads in the flooded neighborhoods to which people were beginning to return.

Then we stopped by the disaster relief center in New Bern. New Bern was hit particularly hard by the storm surge, which crested at over ten feet. We asked around for information and direction. Someone pointed us to the police sergeant who was overseeing the effort. When we explained what we were doing and asked if he knew where we could plug into relief efforts, his first question was "What kind of people are you trying to help?" We repeated ourselves, emphasizing that we were there to assist anyone who was in need of help as a consequence of the storm.

He knew where we could plug in, he told us. His wife owned a bar downtown that had experienced some flood damage, and he tried to assign us to help her clean it out. We politely declined. Then he sent us to a neighborhood fifteen minutes away that he said had been hit really hard, with instructions to tell anyone who asked that he had sent us in order that we would be perceived as possessing some legitimacy.

He sent us to a country club. It was true: their golf course, private lake, and large front lawns had taken quite a bit of damage from fallen trees. Yet in this neighborhood, there were many companies that specialized in relief work already clearing trees and working on home repairs. When the sergeant told us to go to this neighborhood fifteen minutes away, streets just three blocks from the relief center were blocked by fallen trees and lined with homes with standing water in them. There were no relief teams there to help them, no companies working overtime. People had just begun to come back to their homes; they were searching for a warm meal before picking up the pieces of their lives.

Some of the ways that the damage from natural disasters impacts poor people are obvious. Poorer neighborhoods are often built in areas that are more susceptible to disaster; the homes of the poor often aren't in good enough condition to withstand a storm. Other ways that natural disasters impact poor people are subtle. For example, when police are positioned as the ones who conduct disaster relief efforts, this empowers them to utilize natural disasters as opportunities to target the marginalized and vulnerable.

We've become accustomed to hearing stories about gigantic amounts of food, water, and supplies not reaching the people who need them most. This is no accident. Rather, it is the completely avoidable consequence of an approach to disaster relief that serves capitalism at every turn. If that were the whole story—a cold and calculated approach to maximizing profit during disaster—it would be a horror, but this is not all there is to say about the ethos of the state. In addition to aiming to facilitate exploitation, representatives of the state also utilize disasters to hatefully eliminate unwanted portions of society. Every interaction we had with the police showcased how their role, as representative of the system they serve, was to ensure that undesired persons did not receive the help they desperately needed and to reinforce the systems and myths that have been constructed to block people from solving their problems without the state. In view of this, the amount of money that has traded hands in the weeks following Hurricane Florence is maddening.

Over the following weeks, we heard story after story about insurance money not coming through due to fine print (such as flood damage being covered, but not in case of a hurricane), or

the payouts amounting to a fraction of the costs people were dealing with. As we tore molding, insulation, and ductwork out from under flooded houses, we heard how people were forced to work extra hours to make up the time they had missed due to the hurricane. We patched a damaged roof belonging to a man whose son was a roofer; the son had been making too much money due to the hurricane to come and patch his own father's leaking home. A group of people who were accused of looting a store in Wilmington were arrested and displayed as trophies by local police even after the store requested that the police not press charges against them. In South Carolina, police drove a van containing two prisoners into rising floodwaters and lost control. They climbed out to await rescue on the roof while their prisoners drowned beneath their feet.

Many farmworkers, subject to precarious conditions in worker camps, endured considerable suffering. Farm owners, who are legally obligated to feed their workers, abandoned hundreds of them behind flooded roads without food or water.

We delivered supplies to some of these people. They told us stories about how they had been treated. Some had been told that if they weren't present when the owner returned, they would lose their jobs, which would put their legal status in jeopardy. They were in limbo without food, water, or work, with their legal status tied to absent employers. In one case, we gave aid to a large group of women living in an abandoned building owned by their employer, who had cut off the power and left them with no supplies and no assurance of when he would return. These employers put their workers in incredibly dangerous situations without the basic supplies necessary for survival. When we delivered food and water to people who hadn't had food for many days, they told us that we needed to be careful to visit only when their employers were away, because their employers didn't want us helping them.

When one river crested days after the initial storm, a building inhabited by some of these workers flooded dramatically. They called 911 and requested a rescue, but no one came. It turned out that the landowner had called and canceled the emergency response, saying that the workers were fine. They stayed on their roof as the floodwaters overtook their housing, continuing to call for help with no response.

While coal ash full of arsenic, untreated wastewater, and hog sewage seeped down the waterways into the ocean, people were trying to get back on their feet. When farm work resumed, the crops were so damaged that in some cases workers could only make a fraction of their previous earnings on the few days of work they were offered. Farmworkers were pulling rotten sweet potatoes out of knee-deep polluted river mud for 40 cents a bucket, or leaving their worksites in search of other opportunities. Residents queued up for home repair work that insurance refused to cover. Temperatures reached 90 degrees in an unseasonable warm spell while the insulation and air conditioning in flooded homes grew deadly black mold. Mosquitoes made the front-page news in many counties due to their massive breeding success, thanks to the record-breaking rainfall. People screamed at each other over how resources were distributed. Radicals were pushed out of relief spaces or ordered to pretend to be apolitical volunteers by organizations that aimed to control the relief narrative. Right-wing militants paraded in heavily armed anti-looting patrols to great patriotic fanfare.

All of this was avoidable. The state deals a death sentence to the people and landscapes it exploits. Massive amounts of wealth are centralized via these disasters. As catastrophes create the illusion of a blank slate for capitalists to reinvent reality according to a more profitable blueprint, the people who are attempting to put their lives back together are dealt a volley of hardships.

Many people were still in the process of recovering from hurricane Matthew two years prior when Florence destroyed whatever progress they had managed to make.

This continues as supplies rot, guarded out of reach of those who need them most. These disasters will be in effect for years after their initial impact. Like Katrina and every storm before it, the damage Hurricane Florence caused will be quantified as a dollar amount, leaving out all the other forms of harm inflicted on people and animals. When you see the effects of Florence reduced to a billion-dollar price tag, remember—those billions are exactly what made it such a disaster in the first place.

II. The Anarchists Showed up First

Anonymous, September 27

We were sitting in our driveway in Wilmington, NC when a truck with a kayak strapped to the roof pulled up. The power had come back on just a few minutes earlier; it was the Sunday after the hurricane hit. Someone from the truck walked up and asked if [redacted] was here. I introduced myself and they told me that my friend hadn't heard from me and was worried; they had stopped by on their way to make sure I was OK. The people in the truck introduced themselves as Mutual Aid Disaster Relief; they gave us a box of food and other supplies and asked if we needed anything else.

I was happy to see new faces after days of isolation without electricity, and even more so to meet people who were comrades as well. Before they left, we planned to meet the following day to start organizing a response to the destruction inflicted by Hurricane Florence. Not long after the truck pulled away, my neighbor came running out to flag down a cop car that was flying down our residential street in order to ask for updates. They learned very little. I pointed out that it was the anarchists who showed up first to check on us, whereas they had to flag down the cop, who had no intention of checking on any of us. Later on, some comrades came back to crash with us and plan for the following weeks.

The next day, we split up into crews. Some of us went to the space we were going to be working out of; others went to scout the neighborhoods to see who needed help with repairs, cleanup, tree removal, and the like. Florence had devastated some of the most already marginalized communities: whole bedroom ceilings had collapsed, leaving everything exposed and soaking wet; roofs had been torn off the tops of the trailers as if by a can opener; trees were impaled through houses; there were loose hanging electrical wires and downed telephone poles all over town.

We saw a considerable number of DHS and Border Patrol vehicles driving around. ICE was sure to be around as well. We notified local residents and distributed the number for the legal hotline, as well as cleaning up and starting to make connections with people throughout the city to learn who needed help and who else would be interested in helping. We regrouped afterwards to talk about the next steps. Our staging space was a small school located in the lower-income part of town, owned by the city but run by liberals. It was out of commission due to the hurricane; in the beginning, they welcomed us gladly.

Later on, another crew joined us, driving a box truck to and from the airport to pick up supplies that were being flown in from Virginia and parts of North Carolina that had not been hit by the

worst parts of the hurricane. We were the first group of people—before any government agency or NGO—to arrange for supplies to be flown in and air-dropped for distribution to those who survived the hurricane. This aroused the suspicions of some military and police officials, who were perplexed and embarrassed that a bunch of strange-looking people were already responding to the disaster before anyone even knew when to expect FEMA or other state organizations to show up.

We began distributing supplies throughout the community as soon as our space was open. From the beginning, we ran according to the principles of mutual aid and gift economics: take what you need, offer what you can share, volunteer if you're able. We shared food, water, medical supplies, hygiene products, soap, household cleaning supplies, clothes, blankets, shoes, baby formula, and diapers; trained first responders and EMTs were there to offer medical assistance. We also set up a table offering zines sent to us by Occupied Southwest Distro, covering topics including anarchism, mutual aid, policing, capitalism, prison abolition, feminism, disaster relief, responding to trauma, police violence, consent, and security culture; some recounted previous Mutual Aid Disaster Response experiences from prior emergencies, such as Hurricane Harvey. In addition to all this, there was also a phone charging station and a lounge area.

The first day our space was open, we distributed food throughout the community, sent crews out to other parts of town, and picked up supplies from the airport. We were already meeting people who offered to volunteer alongside us.

The next day, people from the community who'd visited the day before to get supplies showed up to volunteer. The distribution was already essentially self-managed by members of the community. This enabled us to focus more on the logistics of flying in supplies, and reaching out to other communities that were more isolated or located in the city's blind spots. Every day added 100–200 people to the previous day's numbers; by the third day, we served 400 or 500 people at the space, plus the crews traveling out to provide aid to people who were unable to get there. We reached many elderly and disabled folks this way, and brought food, water, and other supplies directly to many families who were unable to find transportation to us. We also had been helping with house repairs, providing tarps for roofs that were exposed, and cleaning up debris and fallen trees from homes.

Already the project was growing and thriving, practically running itself. Every day, I would see people come up unsure of who we were and what was going on at this school that had been turned into a space for the community. Often they were visibly upset, in need of help, dragging their feet towards the door, asking us if we had anything to eat. Of course we did—"Come right on in!" They would leave with bags of supplies and smiles on their faces.

Many members of the mostly Black and Latino/Latina communities were also interested in the zine table. I can still see the huge smile that greeted me as I said, "Those are great choices!" to the elderly woman who had selected titles including "Everybody Hates the Police," "Life Without Law," and "Learning From Ferguson." But by the time the zine table was half empty, some of the liberals had also taken notice of the zines, as well. They didn't read "What Anarchists Have Been Saying for Years, and What Liberals need to start Hearing" or "Accomplices Not Allies"—they just raised their eyebrows at the critiques of police. I soon noticed them passing the zines around to each other and staring at me; I guessed they were making phone calls to their superiors.

Within a few hours, some of the liberals that had been shadowing us and the community members who were taking the literature asked us not to distribute it, describing it as "divisive" and "too political." We were asked to "keep politics out of it"—they told us that the facility was on

good standing with the local police. We pointed out a strange dynamic that was emerging in the space: liberal, white staff members were the ones asking us to keep politics out of it, while Black community members would converse with us about the zines and talk about their experiences with police and city officials. The staff members were not happy with us pointing out this dynamic and stated that they were not racist. No one had accused them of racism.

This was the first sign of trouble, but we continued to bring in supplies, clean up debris and felled trees, and repair houses. We removed the zines to avoid drama, because we felt it was more important to have the space to be there for the community no matter what. But over the following days, people came up to me to ask for more zines, and we began to discuss other projects we could do in the community on a more long-term basis.

Community members warned us of what was to come. Soon, there would be visits from news crews—even Mayor Bill Saffo finally showed up a week and a half later for a photo shoot. We also started to notice an increase in attention from the local police, who would drive their patrol cars around the space periodically throughout the day and night. This was the same police force responsible for murdering two black men and a young white woman with a mental illness—the same police force that had purchased a brand new L-RAD device for "announcements" and introduced training for "peace officers" that thrilled the local liberal career activists.

For two weeks, the community came together to hold it down. We became good friends and met a lot of wonderful people throughout the city. I had people coming up to me after reading our literature saying, "I never knew I was an anarchist." Intriguing conversations followed about our experiences, our aspirations, our goals. More and more people showed up to volunteer and help.

But what started with the principle of "everything for everyone" soon turned into rationing, as the liberal staff members peering over the shoulders of the community volunteers endeavored to spread paranoia about potential thieves and parasites who were supposedly coming in and taking way too much. In fact, we were continually getting in more and more supplies—why should we begin rationing when every day we ended up with more stuff than we had started with? We were traveling out to other towns and cities in the more rural parts of the state, like Lumberton, where the large indigenous community was hit hard with severe flooding, while still trying to recover from the previous hurricane, Hurricane Matthew.

As more and more volunteers came, more supplies were air dropped in, and comrades from all over came to help out, we all became both exhausted by and excited about the work we were doing. But one day, unexpectedly, we were informed that we would have to vacate the space by the following morning at 8 am so they could open the school as a daycare for children whose parents were out of work as a result of the disaster. We were all sad to have to leave so soon and without warning, especially since the staff had originally agreed that we would receive at least two days' notice before we needed to pack up. But we understood that it was important for the kids to have a place to go. Besides, they told us, the school would still be open as a space for people to obtain food and supplies, and the outreach crews would still do supply runs and cleanups and repairs; we just had to vacate the back rooms where volunteers from out of state had been staying and holding meetings.

We packed our things and were gone before morning, seeking another space to use for storage and to house volunteers. However, visiting and conversing with some of the new staff members two days later, we discovered that they never intended to use the space for a daycare; they told us that the back rooms were just occupied by the staff that was doing the "managing." Now the

distribution utilized a ticket system and rationed food; we saw a huge news crew outside, and a trailer belonging to a massive non-profit organization offering medical services to fill the vacuum that opened up when we were told to leave. The staff had become increasingly unfriendly and passive-aggressive. It was clear that the real reason we had been told to leave had nothing to do with offering assistance or a space for children. It was about our physical appearance and political beliefs, and the fact that we were building relationships in the community and that the community was coming together for itself, without the help of outside government or NGO assistance—or the liberal staff members.

Although we lost the first space, we're still operating, while searching for a new space. We're still here; we will be here doing Mutual Aid Disaster Relief as long as it's necessary. We'll continue proving to people that this is possible—that we don't have to wait for the state to come to our aid—that we are the ones who keep us safe.

We continue to work together to rebuild and strengthen our communities. We've already built lots of valuable relationships in the process.

III. Through the Eye of the Storm

An interview with MouseMouse from Blue Ridge Autonomous Defense, working under the umbrella of Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, September 24.

What have you been doing, and where?

We've been doing a lot. Wellness checks in flooded areas using kayaks. Supply scheming and pick up and drop offs as a street team. Bringing supplies directly to impacted folks and communities. Basic first aid and harm reduction. Interfacing with community members and discussing disaster politics. Supply distribution center organizing. Hot food delivery.

We were in Washington, NC when Florence hit. We worked out of there for a day. Then we moved through the eye of the storm, through its back wall, into Wilmington. I was in Wilmington for seven days working in North Wilmington neighborhoods such as Love Grove as well as trailer parks near Military Cutoff Road. Then I moved up to Lumberton, NC along with another member of my group to assist in the indigenous-led relief efforts being organized in that community.

Describe your motivation and past experience with this kind of work.

My motivation for doing this work is multi-faceted. Capitalism's insatiable desire for profit and new markets means that climate change and its associated extreme weather events will not stop, but only increase. So the need for autonomous, anarchist-led efforts will also increase as we struggle to meet the needs of impacted and devastated communities.

In addition, I recognize that there are very few opportunities in which the state will totally vacate territory, and natural disasters are one of them. This gives us unprecedented opportunity to build new methods of community organization in the ruins of the existing order. We can claim space and show that a new world is possible by reaching people in new ways.

And finally, as an anarchist, I want to practice mutual aid. I want to stand in solidarity with those targeted by the state, against the state.

This was the first time I've done anything like this. However, my group has a focus on street medic and community defense work using small teams. This disaster tested all of the skills we have been honing. It demonstrated that through praxis, we can shape the theory that guides us.

Can you share any lessons for the future?

One of the biggest lessons I learned from this experience is that regional networks involving organizations, affinity groups, and individuals can be utilized in emergencies to meet the needs of our communities. The logistical and operational push before and following this storm has been mind-blowing. In the first days following the storm, we were able to do things that even the state was unable, or unwilling, to do—and we did that by never separating our politics from our efforts.

The need for realistic planning and continuous preparation was also important. It would be easy to create a situation in which you too become a person in need in the middle of the disaster. Any sort of complacent act or careless planning could put you there.

Having appropriate supplies and vehicles is necessary, as well as being able to make longer-term commitments. Showing up as a group that can only commit a day or two or three to efforts drains resources and does not allow for the necessary long-term interaction and commitment required to build trust and community.

Looking forward, we can use the lessons from this response, along with other disasters, to refine the theory behind disaster relief and mutual aid in the age of extreme weather, resource exploitation, and mass extinction. We can say with confidence that we do truly keep each other safe, and that with a little bravery, the new world we hold in our hearts can take root in this world, as our collective future.

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