

Direct (In)Action

State Suppression of Community Organising

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More than twelve years on from the global economic crash, across nations the world over, the state continues to not only abdicate responsibility for the ongoing social ills and economic hardships so many ensure, but, as witnessed this week, a significant proportion of those in positions of power actively suppress community-driven efforts to support those around them.

Sometime between late Thursday 1st and early Friday 2nd July 2021, a representative from Glasgow City Council removed a community pantry — stocked with ‘baby formula, pasta, nappies, tomato sauce, sanitary products, water, jam, beans, toothpaste, curries, shampoo and baby wipes’ — from Queen’s Park. Initiated by the Glasgow chapter of Food Not Bombs, the Community pantry was a small antidote to sustained state inaction.

The pantry fridge was positioned permanently in the park due to public events blocking off the group’s usual weekly stall area, though progressing towards a constant presence is a logical step in creating radical solutions to food poverty (as well as the ongoing erasure of freely accessible community spaces). Though community pantries aren’t unique with an increasing number of community organisations running them out of their respective centres — intended as spaces for self-service rather than a food bank which, usually, relies on a referral / food voucher process — actions like including a notebook that allowed people an opportunity to make specific dietary or product request demonstrates an ambition to further recognise the humanity of those in positions of economic or social marginalisation. A second stall, based in Glasgow’s west end, commenced in late June, whilst the group members previously pitched up to support the Palestinian solidarity demonstration in May. The members also have emphasised their outreach that ensures food reaches others who might not be able to attend the stalls directly.

The Food Not Bombs Approach

Since 1981, an estimated one thousand groups Food Not Bombs have emerged boasting varying degrees of association with the original U.S. body that emerged in the aftermath of anti-nuclear power demonstration in Massachusetts (U.S.). Premised on the reality that:

‘The amount of money spent by governments on weapons of war could feed the hungry many, many times over, but instead it is spent on violence, creating yet more hunger. Meanwhile the capitalist system our food is produced in results in vast quantities of perfectly edible, good food being thrown out, rather than eaten, despite the many people who need it.’

Chapters worldwide operate as volunteer-led community-organised interventions supporting mutual aid via direct action. Though far from all Food Not Bomb chapters would state themselves to be anarchist collectives, hopefully it’s slipped few that the now removed pantry fridge was explicitly labelled as an ‘anarchist community pantry’.

For decades, many through the political spectrum — including plenty from ‘the left’ — have demonised and vilified anarchism, waxing lyrical through the numerous cliches of chaos and disorder when anarchism, in its sincere sense, is nothing of the sort.

With the exception of anarcho-capitalism — an approach touted by the likes of Murray Rothbard and Patrik Schumacher — which shouldn’t be counted anywhere within the same spectrum (fuck, even the mess of a right wing anti-statist attitude has more in common with genuine anarchism than this U.S. free market libertarianism), anarchism is the belief that we, the people, are able to better govern ourselves through direct engagement, voluntary association, care, and mutual aid than a political elite and careerist class. Given the shitty state of affairs we’ve, bor-

derline, always been under through representative politics, it's pretty hard to argue otherwise. One need only access the thousands of texts available at The Anarchist Library to understand the philosophy. Anything by Ruth Kinna or Colin Ward is a good place to start.

Though rarely explicitly named as such, there's been a surge in anarchistically styled community action over the last eighteen months or so, certainly as we've experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland and the U.K. more generally. From picking up a neighbour's messages at the shops to collecting a workmate's medication whilst they're shielding or isolating, and from the thousands who've volunteered their time and energy to any number of locally-run initiatives, fundamentals of anarchism can be observed in each. Many believe these actions have borne greater impact for our communities than a majority of state interventions,¹ and the Glasgow Food Not Bombs community pantry in Queen's Park was the latest amongst them.

The Glasgow Chapter: 'No Referrals, No Means Testing, No Worries'

'The reason the pantry was created is because the government is failing to live up to its duty to ensure its citizens' basic needs. There are people struggling to feed themselves and keep their children alive due to the negligence of the government'.

As a community development practitioner co-running a Community Hub / Foodbank Partnership in central Edinburgh, that these Glasgow community members decided to place their pantry in such a publicly accessible place (noting that it was previously positioned elsewhere in the park) was an action I was thrilled to observe online. Though our partner organisation operates to set eligibility criteria through their practice with Scottish Welfare and other partners, the organisation I work with, Tollcross Community Action Network, operate to principles of universality and trust that our community come to us based on their own needs. We do not and will never require referrals from health, social care, or poverty alleviation charities for the support we offer. Though in our case we're a registered charity, our practice is entirely centred on redistribution, signposting, and 'service user'-directed actions, I'm therefore in admiration of Glasgow Food Not Bomb's actions.

'We will be accepting donations of vegetarian and vegan food, which we will cook to serve to anybody who is hungry, be they rich or poor, stoned or sober. We are also very happy to co-ordinate with other groups who share our values, and support them in direct, non-violent actions.'

Immediately stating their openness to cooperate with organisations already established in Glasgow (and presumably beyond), provided that the partner is rooted in the same values stated above — the very essence of anarchism in-action. It's already evidenced through the abundance of acknowledgements made through their social media posts, thanking local businesses who've donated, as well as MILK Cafe who've shared their kitchen space to allow food preparation. Organisations engaging in voluntary association and sharing what resources they have (be that physical space or the activists' time) for the benefit of all — that's anarchism.

Since their formation, the Glasgow chapter have run community collections, with several local business partnering to ensure excess or leftover produce is directed to those who need it.

¹ Elements of furlough payments, arguably, being something worthy of greater discussion, though the qualification criteria and duration have created significant problems for many.

‘Political pessimists of all stripes like to talk about the magic money tree, and how there are problems with capitalism but the logic of the free market is still the most efficient economic system. But look at these photos from a single collection we had this week — this is all from one shop, none of it even past its sell-by date. The shop was simply in a position where it needed to clear space on its shelves for new stock, because the people who could afford this food had evidently wanted to buy something else. We deeply appreciate our donors working with us; this isn’t us saying they’re bad people at all. But this is where market logic gets us: fresh food spoiling in dumpsters while people starve’.

The Struggle Continues

A Council Spokesperson stated in The Glasgow Times that ‘[w]e understand the good intentions behind this idea, but we were concerned the unsupervised fridge could be misused and lead to harm of someone in need’. Remember then, that when there was community action taken to address a crisis the state has failed to address, the council stepped in to prevent it; not because the pantry was abused, but because of a lack of trust in the community members to take care of each other.

As encouraged by commenters in the various social media threads, folk are already looking to make it possible to circumvent the state who continue to position themselves as arbrotor of what we can do to survive these successive crises. One proposal asks whether, if the state ‘object to [the pantry] being on council or public property, is there a local church or mosque who would allow it outside on their property?’, whilst there’s also offers of shared insights into practice from those running Mutual Aid Alnwick who adapted a B.T. phone box into a community larder.

Though there’s a handful of, admittedly self-proclaimed, cynical comments suggesting others from the local community might be inclined to abuse the pantry, most responses support Food Not Bombs sustained activities. With a strong food redistribution network, a universalist philosophy, and ambitions to engage in far more than just food activism (blankets and masks have been handed out previously), these activists are demonstrating that we can look after each other, even if the state will make that challenging along the way.

Anyone wishing to support Glasgow Food Not Bombs is encouraged to message the page directly, including the opportunity to be added to their mailing list. I’d also like to signpost folk to an article on recent mutual aid initiatives in Glasgow and Brighton featured over on the Anarchist Studies Blog.

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