

Mutual Aid

A Fight for a New Future

Rui Preti

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a review of

Fight for a New Normal? Anarchism and mutual aid in the Covid-19 pandemic crisis Ed. Jim Donaghey, Foreword by Ruth Kinna; Afterward by Rhiannon Firth. Freedom Press, 2024

People all over the world, including in the U.S., are facing increasing authoritarianism, natural disasters, industrially-produced destruction of the living environment and intensifying social breakdown. Nevertheless, there is some basis for hope because of the growing numbers of mutual aid projects with the potential to be part of strengthening community defense and decentralized liberatory communities, emerging everywhere.

Many people who had previously found it difficult to imagine breaking out of the limits of modern capitalist civilization have experienced social solidarity and have discovered that a return to the old normal state of things is not the only possibility. In the context of what people have learned from experiences of the pandemic, many are talking and writing from an anarchistic perspective about what normal is worth aspiring to.

The anthology *Fight for a New Normal?* is part of the conversation. The articles in the collection explore both the positive and challenging aspects of mutual aid in general and with reference to several specific situations.

Articles include descriptions of mutual aid groups in places as diverse as industrial towns in the process of gentrification and those undergoing irreversible deterioration, in Britain, the U.S., Australia, the Philippines, and Indonesia, among others.

Anarchist mutual aid has a political perspective of cooperation as part of a model for how a whole society can be run, and the pandemic created a new awareness of interdependence. So, it is not surprising that anarchists have been active in many projects from Appalachia in the U.S. to Chile to Italy and many other countries.

Several articles and books have been published recently which give us the opportunity to compare experiences in different social settings.

Fight for a New Normal? provides descriptions of several different kinds of anarchist-inspired mutual aid groups. These demonstrate what is involved in providing social solidarity and individual support through bottom-up organizing.

One chapter is devoted to mutual aid groups in two cities, Glasgow and Brighton in the United Kingdom. An experienced anarchist activist, Sam, relates the development of Brighton's No Fixed Abode Mutual Aid into a well-functioning, decentralized group, able to respond collectively to complex issues of housing, poverty, mental health and support for migrants, by building up links with other groups already addressing these concerns, some anarchist influenced and some more mainstream.

Sam notes that his and other anarchistically inspired groups differed in significant ways from groups focusing on charity work or government assistance programs. For one thing, the former refused to evaluate and divide people in need into deserving and undeserving categories, with the undeserving judged as personally and morally responsible for their desperate situations.

Instead, they gave assistance without demanding proof of worthiness. They were able to provide support to those who might otherwise have been denied it. This was an important aspect beyond what even the most generous charity can do because of financial obligations and entanglements.

Sam and his friend Aidan also describe some of the challenges faced by mutual aid projects in Brighton and Glasgow, which over time contributed to burnout of participants. They note that despite hopes of mutual aid helping to create community bonds, in those projects, all too many providers and recipients of assistance were unable to move beyond the division between helpers and those being helped.

They recognized the division as "disempowering those who receive support by keeping them in a passive role in relation to the groups, and creating a proprietorial 'activist' mentality in those who provided support."

Volunteers continually tried to explain the difference between the mutual aid they were providing as acts of solidarity and the approach of charities and government welfare agencies. But this was not generally convincing to the grateful recipients. Given the continuing context of modern capitalist society, no satisfactory way of dealing with the problem was found.

An article about East London Scrub Hub describes a somewhat different kind of mutual aid activity, one which was a self-organized group of health workers and apparel crafts people who provided personal protective clothing and necessary accessories to healthcare workers in hospitals and clinics who were not receiving them from their employers.

Katya Lachowicz, an anarchist and one of the main organizers of the group, describes the development of two parallel types of scrub hub groups, one organized top-down and one bottom-up. The East London group was among the bottom-up type. It succeeded in producing high quality clothing and accessories, and also in bringing together many people who might otherwise never have had the opportunity to collaborate.

In addition, Lachowicz comments that joining in the Scrub Hub has helped many people deal with the psychological impact of the crisis, "this is because we ourselves have constructed conditions of dignity, human interaction and care in purposeful practices of work."

Other articles examine what it means to prioritize caring for people with mental health challenges and with neurodiversity by insisting on prioritizing their self-determination as part of community support.

In her Foreword, Ruth Kinna, a British historian and anarchist theorist, cautions that anti-authoritarians, including Kropotkin, do not claim to have discovered or invented mutual aid. "Rather they have generally sought to strengthen the dynamics of the already existing productive struggle to cooperate between families, friends, neighbors, in the workplace and in everyday life"

that has always been part of human society. Moreover, when anarchists engage in mutual aid projects they enhance the practice with their social critique.

In the introduction, Jim Donaghey, a multi-discipline anarchist academic, who teaches at Ulster University, challenges the idea that social isolation and neglect are inevitable and normal in modern society. He notes that during the pandemic many people experienced a new normal of caring for each other, at least for a while, along with the feeling of increased possibilities for a life worth living.

In the book's Afterword, Rhiannon Firth, an anarchist sociologist at the University of Essex, notes that anarchists and other social justice activists understand mutual aid as responding to human needs that are perceived and communicated empathically and through unmediated relations with others.

Each of the articles in *Fight for a New Normal?* argues in one way or another for going beyond mutual aid to challenge both the old and new normal by evaluating policies and practices in terms of their relationship to freedom, social justice, non-hierarchical order, participatory and democratic self-organization and self-determination.

Firth adds to Donaghey's concerns by warning of the dangers and challenges of any solidified normality. She asserts that anarchist mutual aid involves trying to understand the needs of the person who is being helped. But none of us can understand others enough to decide what norms would be best for them.

She indicates that, "Even where norms may be collectively decided at one point in time, in a crisis individuals' normal coping mechanisms break down, so attempts to impose social norms become at best ineffective, and at worst oppressive."

Firth also asserts that mutual aid projects should not only serve those in the greatest need. Ideally, they should demonstrate what most people have to gain from connecting and sharing with others.

On the whole, the book's essays lead to the conclusion that mutual aid is important as part of self-defense, but must be connected with positive forms of social struggle and respect for the autonomy of the individual in order to succeed.

Fight for a New Normal? leaves us with the challenge of continually questioning old and new norms, and exploring new values and tastes within a blossoming social context. This kind of response could lead to decreasing alienation, more inclusive, empathic, creative relations beyond the reach of commercial exchanges.

Rui Preti is a longtime friend of the Fifth Estate and a great believer in the value of continuous questioning.

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