

Solidarity Is Our Strength

Mutual Aid in Action in Oklahoma Tornado

Dr. Zakk Flash

2013

The 2013 Moore tornado was an EF5 velocity storm that struck Moore, Oklahoma, and adjacent areas on the afternoon of May 20, 2013, with peak winds estimated at 210 miles per hour, killing 23 people and injuring 377 others.

At the beginning of June, when I arrived in Little Axe, Okla. to take a look at post-tornado recovery efforts, the countryside was still in crisis mode. Mountains of rubble and garbage filled gravel roads and red dirt paths leading to the remains of homes. Neighborhoods that had been full of working-class houses were uprooted and dirty, unsafe tent camps were all that remained.

Just 30 minutes away, the big non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) operated, bringing national attention to Moore—a badly struck area, to be sure. But not the only one affected.

In Little Axe, Newalla, Carney, Luther, Shawnee, and other areas, humanitarian workers at the local nonprofits complained how little had been done, despite the hundreds of millions that the Red Cross said had been donated. It was only later that everyone's thoughts were confirmed—money sent to the big players was ending up in Washington, D.C.

Certainly some of it would be spent on affected people here, but the vast majority would be sent to other areas or spent on overhead, administration costs. At last count, the Red Cross was still sitting on \$110 million allocated for Superstorm Sandy. While the NGOs have done some fantastic work here, our communities know their own needs best. There had to be a better way.

OpOK Relief stepped in to fill the gaps as part of the People's Response. As a convergence of Occupy groups, anarchists, libertarian socialists, Food Not Bombs folks, Rainbow Family, IWW organizers, teachers, social workers, and non-hierarchical, non-bureaucratic relief groups from out of state, our focus was on direct action. Local and international initiatives came together to address community specific needs. We assessed damage on the ground, got people into emergency housing, helped them secure their homes, and provided connections for outside volunteers to plug into affected communities, prioritizing the most impoverished and overlooked.

The response to our work was overwhelming; we got supplies and volunteers into areas that had either been underserved or neglected altogether by the major NGOs. Horizontal organizing, based on people's needs on the ground, made it possible.

Allowing residents and victims to shape the services they receive was an essential part of our disaster relief efforts. Find local organizers and community leaders on the ground in these locations, ask what they need, crowd-source and share information, and see what you can do to meet these needs.

Cooperative decision-making, participatory democracy, and mutual aid are tenants of anarchist society. OpOK Relief wasn't an anarchist group, but anarchism motivated my work within it. Anarchism is a movement for a society in which the violence of racism, sexism, homophobia, capitalism, and coercion are removed from our daily

lives. Anarchism is the belief in a world without war and economic poverty. Anarchism is a philosophy and movement working to build cooperative, egalitarian human relationships and social structures that promote mutual aid, radical democratic control of political and economic decisions, and ecological sustainability.

I believe that our work here today can create the kind of world that I carry in my heart. I believe that this work brings the best out of everyone involved, from the people on the ground to the people directly impacted by these storms. I believe that everyone has a part to play here, that anyone is capable of making a difference in these struggling areas.

I believe in solidarity. I believe in mutual aid. I believe in you.

Solidarity is our strength.

Dr. Flash lives in Norman, Oklahoma, five miles from the epicenter of the main storm damage. OpOK Relief can be contacted via Facebook at facebook.com/OpOKRelief or on the web at opokrelief.net.

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