

Solidarity in Plague Time

Mutual Aid Against the Pandemic

Bruce Trigg

2021

a review of

Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid during the Covid-19 Crisis Edited by Marina Sitrin and the Colectiva Sembrar. Pluto Press, London, 2020

Every nation state has failed miserably in preventing, controlling and managing the still raging COVID 19 pandemic. While military, police, and prison systems continue unabated in their coercive functions, hospitals, public health and social welfare systems in many parts of the world are overwhelmed and in disarray.

Pandemic Solidarity offers an indispensable guide to the large and small grassroots mutual aid projects, both new and long established, that have formed to protect and provide life-sustaining solidarity to those who bear the brunt of the Covid pandemic and its consequences.

This book also offers us a glimmer of hope in this tragic and dangerous moment that people have the capacity to build a brighter future without states, borders, capitalism and hierarchy.

Marina Sitrin, the lead editor, is an activist, author, professor, and mother, as she proudly states, and is the author of several books on horizontalism: *They Can't Represent Us!: Reinventing Democracy from Greece to Occupy*; *Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina*; and *Horizontalism: Voices of Popular Power in Argentina*.

Colectiva Sembrar ("sowing seeds") is a global group of friends and comrades, mostly women, including academics, writers, and veterans of past political struggles such as Occupy Wall Street. They came together to document what Sitrin calls "the largest, most diverse, mobilization of people—regular people—helping one another, under capitalism, that has ever happened."

In April 2020, quite early in the course of this pandemic that seems to have no end, the editors interviewed activists in six regions of the world to learn about and give voice to almost 100 projects that were starting to mobilize and provide mutual aid. The projects in this book are as diverse as the activists and the communities from which they come. One important commonality was a strong commitment to engage in mutual aid and solidarity rather than simply charity.

The editors highlight the work being done in communities that bear the brunt of the deaths and morbidity caused by the pandemic and also its devastating social and economic consequences. The selected projects focus on women, essential workers, those who work in the informal economy, immigrants, LGBTQ people, children, the unhoused, oppressed racial, ethnic and religious groups, Indigenous and First Nation communities, the elderly, the poor, people with disabilities, the incarcerated, people who use drugs, sex workers, and those who experience sexual and intimate partner violence.

Most of the projects address the immediate physical and health needs of their communities by performing the kind of public health functions that overstretched, demoralized, and underfunded medical and public health systems are unable or unwilling to provide to these marginalized communities. Some projects are involved in food production and distribution. Others help to provide money, shelter, water, masks, care for those with Covid infec-

tion, safety, childcare, elder care, and education. Many address the social, psychological and spiritual needs of their communities through art, dance, radio and social media, meditation, poetry and support groups.

The range of stories and situations is breathtaking and inspirational. From a pantheist Daoist temple on the outskirts of Taipai that offers spiritual healing to their community to anarchist militants in Athens, Greece who have long battled fascists, dictatorships, austerity and state repression. Many of the projects explicitly embrace the principles of direct democracy and horizontalism—holding general assemblies to discuss, plan and make important decisions.

The book begins, appropriately, in Rojava, in northeast Syria, because “it is...the closest thing to a democracy in the book, a real democracy, where the people collectively make decisions about their day-to-day lives, and women are structurally as well as relationally not only equal but have more say over things related to women.”

The following chapters focus on projects in Turkey, Iraq, South and East Asia, Southern Africa, Europe, South America and Turtle Island, one of the Indigenous names for North America.

Pandemic Solidarity is an early and important contribution to documenting and providing models of global mutual aid responses to the pandemic. But this solidarity is needed not just during pandemics, but all the time. Whether it's in the face of worsening disasters brought about by climate change breakdown, or the prosaic disaster of everyday life under capitalism and state power and violence.

Asked about their future plans, several activists expressed their belief that the world will be forever changed by Covid and that truly democratic, horizontal and non-hierarchical forms of organization and mutual aid must be the foundation for the coming social and political transformation.

Hopefully, there will be follow up reports or publications coming from this network of mutual aid projects about how they have fared and changed since the start of the pandemic. Blogs, podcasts and websites are already online.

How has state repression impacted their ongoing efforts? Highly effective vaccines against Covid that were only a dream in April 2020 are now widely available, but only in wealthier nations. How are the activists responding to this global “vaccine apartheid” that allows the US and Europe to have 70 percent vaccination rates among adults while only 3 percent are vaccinated in Africa? How should communities address both lack of vaccine and vaccine hesitancy?

We look forward to hearing more from the Colectiva Sembrar and this impressive global mutual aid network in the future.

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