

SURVIVAL OF THE ORGANIZED



CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON MUTUAL AID



www.blackrosefed.org



Produced by Black Rose Anarchist Federation

24. Ibid., 179.
25. BRRN, of course, has a less vanguardist understanding of “leadership” than many Panthers did.
26. For powerful descriptions of how the survival programs contributed to the BPP’s growth and standing in the community, see Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Politics and Society in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 231-232; David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Story of the Black Panther Party* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001); Flores A. Forbes, *Will You Die with Me? My Life and the Black Panther Party* (New York: Atria Books, 2006).
27. Huey Newton, *To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 104.
28. Nicolas Delalande, *Struggle and Mutual Aid: The Age of Worker Solidarity* (New York: Other Press, 2023), 70.
29. Cooperation among police departments has long been seen as a form of mutual aid; see California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services, *Law Enforcement Mutual Aid Plan* (Mather: Cal OES, 2019), https://www.caloes.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/Law-Enforcement/Documents/Blue-Book_Law-Enforcement-Mutual-Aid-Plan.pdf. For examples of far-right and white nationalist mutual aid efforts, see Zoya Teirstein, “Boots on the Ground,” *The Grist*, May 17, 2023, <https://grist.org/extreme-weather/boots-on-the-ground-fema-oath-keepers-natural-disaster/>; Candice Bernd, “Fascists Are Trying to Co-opt Mutual Aid Organizing in East Palestine, Ohio,” *Truthout*, March 6, 2023, <https://truthout.org/articles/fascists-are-trying-to-co-opt-mutual-aid-organizing-in-east-palestine-ohio/>. When the far-right engages in these activities, they tend to be described in left media as forms of co-optation, propaganda (e.g., <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/academics/centers-initiatives/ctec/publications/dangerous-organizations-and-bad-actors-patriot>), or “disaster tourism” (e.g., <https://itsgoingdown.org/statement-against-fascist-disaster-tourism-in-western-north-carolina/>).
30. Anonymous, “Notes on Mutual Aid Volume 2 — Friends, Foes, and Wolves in Sheeps Clothing,” *Mutual Aid Notes* (blog), 2024, <https://mutualaidnotes.noblogs.org/post/2024/02/04/volume-2-friends-foes-and-wolves-in-sheeps-clothing>; Suzanne Cope, *Power Hungry: Women of the Black Panther Party and Freedom Summer and Their Fight to Feed a Movement* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2022).
31. Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

We also explain how important practices like mutual aid—working outside of and against the state to collectively pool and redistribute resources, skills, and other necessities—may relate to and support our efforts to build a new world in the shell of the old.¹ Although mutual aid is an important, often imperative facet of revolutionary struggle, we argue that it is not and should not be used as a synonym for organizing because it does not confront—and therefore cannot change—unjust power structures on its own. However, by planting mutual aid within organizing campaigns and returning it to its mutual roots, we can create conditions within mass organizations that prefigure the kinds of social relationships that will truly liberate us.

What is Organizing?

Revolutionizing the world requires specific forms of organizing. Founded in anarchism’s organizational-dualist traditions of platformism and especifismo, BRRN organizes on the political and social levels. We created our federation to organize ourselves as anarchists, through a shared political program, a democratic structure to decide it, and a collective responsibility to adhere to it and carry it out (political organizing). We don’t believe we’re going to make any revolution on our own, though; for that, we need to organize broad-based, combative social movements (social or mass organizing).

The latter requirement is what we mean by “organizing”: working with ordinary people to shape ourselves into a fighting force that is capable of standing up to and eventually dismantling capitalism, the state, and other structures of domination. This is distinct from a more general understanding of organizing: “an association for a particular purpose,” where people use whatever means are needed to achieve that purpose, which Errico Malatesta argues is a “fundamental prerequisite of living in society.”² In this sense, general organizing might refer to organizing a dinner party, organizing groups to clean up a beach, organizing a free-clothing drive, or even organizing a protest march.

By contrast, mass organizing is a question of power: building the

power of our coworkers, neighbors, classmates, and other “actors of struggle” (i.e. people who share common problems and social locations) to dismantle the ruling class’s dominating, atomizing power over us.³ To do so, we build people’s confidence to make demands and directly act against bosses, politicians, landlords, administrators, and other class enemies in order to win specific goals and shift relations of power in our workplaces, neighborhoods, schools, and other arenas of social life. We encourage everyday people to run these struggles with formal, directly-democratic bodies—what we call mass organizations—that we can one day use to run all of society. By forging mass organizations that simultaneously develop our capacity to eventually overthrow those who immiserate our lives while prefiguring the society that we can collectively self-manage, we work toward social revolution. This, for us, is “organizing” in the focused, militant, and necessary sense of the word, and the primary one we believe capable of ushering in the world we deserve.⁴

Mutual Aid: Revolutionary Relief?

Unfortunately, many activists substitute broader general organizing—“an association for a particular purpose”—for specific and liberatory mass organizing. Contributing to the confusion, general organizing and mass organizing share some similar features despite different structures and goals. A closer look reveals that general organizing lacks the necessary elements of what we see as organizing proper: a clear, structural power-shift and practical steps to get from here to there. Mutual aid organizations and projects that see themselves as operating outside the state, capital, and the non-profit industrial complex are good examples of the tensions that exist between these different conceptions of organizing. They also exemplify ongoing arguments over how mutual aid should be defined.

Generally speaking, mutual aid projects attempt to sustain and save the lives of those who have been left behind or targeted by the state. As a whole, mutual aid projects often position themselves as “solidarity, not charity,” uniting community-based service and/or resource distribution with attempts to “build shared understanding

and Struggle,” Mutual Aid Notes (blog), 2023, <https://mutualaidnotes.noblogs.org/post/2023/04/02/volume-1-a-local-history-of-survival-and-struggle/>.

14. James Stout, “Border Kindness and Mutual Aid Along the Border,” *It Could Happen Here* (podcast), August 17, 2023, <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/105-it-could-happen-here-30717896/episode/border-kindness-and-mutual-aid-along-121304587/>.
15. Water Drop LA, “About Us,” last modified in 2021, <https://www.waterdropla.org/about>; McHenry, 2015.
16. DSA: Mutual Aid Working Group, “Brake Light Clinics,” *Democratic Socialists of America*, n.d., <https://mutualaid.dsausa.org/projects/brake-light-clinics/>.
17. Indeed, this is what Pytor Kropotkin meant when he coined the term: species collaborate and aid one another to survive, thrive, and evolve. As we explain further, revolutions (will) draw on collaborative instincts, but those instincts are not in themselves revolutionary.
18. McHenry, 36–38, 41–43, 47.
19. Spade, 16–17, 75–95.
20. Two political organizations that try to incorporate these efforts into a longer-term strategy are worth briefly mentioning. Borrowing from Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s mutualism and Murray Bookchin’s libertarian municipalism, the Symbiosis Collective’s “community institutions of mutual aid” and the Libertarian Socialist Caucus of the Democratic Socialists of America’s “counter-institutions” are intended to one day supplant capitalist and statist social relations. Mutual aid projects thus figure prominently in their “dual power” strategies for working-class self-emancipation. We argue below that rather than relegating mutual aid practices to a separate plank in our strategies, they have the greatest potential to reach masses of people and reconfigure social relations when they are built into the mass organizations that can seize the means of life. Symbiosis Collective, “Community, Democracy, and Mutual Aid: Towards Dual Power and Beyond,” 2017, https://thenextsystem.org/sites/default/files/2017-07/Symbiosis_AtLargeFirst-corrected-2.pdf; DSA Libertarian Socialist Caucus, “Dual Power: A Strategy to Build Socialism in our Time,” 2018, <https://dsa-lsc.org/2018/12/31/dual-power-a-strategy-to-build-socialism-in-our-time/>.
21. For an incisive account of the status quo’s (un)intentionally recuperative efforts, see Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).
22. William C. Anderson, *The Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition* (Chico: AK Press, 2021).
23. *Ibid.*, 178.

2. Errico Malatesta, "Organization," *L'Agitazione* (Ancona) 1, nos. 13–15, June 1897, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/errico-malatesta-organization>.
3. To help identify actors and goals of struggle, Chilean anarchist José Antonio Gutiérrez Danton also challenges us to identify the traditions of struggle they can draw on to guide their action within their shared social location; see Jose Antonio Gutiérrez D., "The Problems Posed by the Concrete Class Struggle and Popular Organization," *Black Rose/Rosa Negra Anarchist Federation* (blog), September 17, 2017, <https://www.blackrosefed.org/problems-posed-by-the-concrete-class-struggle/>.
4. Felipe Corrêa, "Create a Strong People: Discussions on Popular Power," *Black Rose/Rosa Negra Anarchist Federation* (blog), April 6, 2020, <https://www.blackrosefed.org/create-a-strong-people-discussions-on-popular-power/>.
5. Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the Next)* (New York: Verso, 2020), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/dean-spade-mutual-aid.pdf>, 8.
6. Spade, 16.
7. Mia Wong, "Common Humanity Collective and the Politics of Mutual Aid, Part 1," *It Could Happen Here* (podcast), November 1, 2021, <https://www.iheart.com/podcast/105-it-could-happen-here-30717896/episode/common-humanity-collective-and-the-politics-88736727/>; Keith McHenry, *Hungry for Peace: How You Can Help End Poverty and War with Food Not Bombs* (Tucson: See Sharp Press, 2015), https://foodnotbombs.net/new_site/hungry_for_peace_book.pdf, 32.
8. Spade, 45–50.
9. Rhiannon Firth, "Mutual Aid, Anarchist Preparedness and COVID-19," in *Coronavirus, Class and Mutual Aid in the United Kingdom* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 57–111, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/rhiannon-firth-mutual-aid-anarchist-preparedness-and-covid-19>.
10. scott crow, *Black Flags and Windmills: Hope, Anarchy, and the Common Ground Collective* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011).
11. Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, "A Love Letter To The Future: On Mutual Aid & Building Power While the Lights Are Out," *Mutual Aid Disaster Relief* (blog), n.d., <https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Love-Letter-to-the-Future.pdf>.
12. See, e.g., Boise Mutual Aid, "Mutual Aid: Solidarity in Action," *Mutual Aid Disaster Relief* (blog), 2021, <https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Mutual-Aid-Solidarity-in-Action-BMA-READ.pdf>; Rhiannon Firth, *Disaster Anarchy: Mutual Aid and Radical Action* (London: Pluto Press, 2022).
13. Anonymous, "Notes on Mutual Aid Volume 1 — A Local History of Survival

about why people do not have what they need.”⁵ These projects encourage participants to “cultivate a shared analysis of the root causes of the problem.”⁶ To do that, many mutual aid projects pair political education with service provision to cultivate “space[s] for inspiring discussion and action.”⁷ This education intends to help those who engage in mutual aid avoid the errors of charity: doling out relief based on hierarchies of deservingness and supporting their recipients as paternalistic saviors.⁸ Disaster Anarchy author Rhiannon Firth punctuates the differences: “mutual aid,” in contrast to charity, “presumes an equal footing” between all community members, regardless of who is receiving or offering services, support, and/or resources.⁹

Notably, mutual aid projects often emerge to meet crucial needs in times of acute crises. Recent interest in mutual aid efforts surged shortly after 2005 when anarchist-led projects like Common Ground Collective outshined Federal Emergency Management Agency’s and large nonprofits’ pitiful Hurricane Katrina relief efforts in New Orleans.¹⁰ Inspired by these successes, activists formed Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR) to coordinate communal medical services and get food and other supplies to people devastated by Hurricanes Sandy, Irma, and Maria.¹¹ Similarly, activists launched local networks and resource hubs for communities to support one another during the COVID-19 lockdowns by volunteering to grocery shop for one another, picking up prescriptions from pharmacies for neighbors, collaboratively running learning pods for each other’s children, and more.¹²

Other projects aim to address ongoing crises like homelessness, hunger, police brutality, migrant safety, and unsafe drug use. For example, needle exchanges aim to slow the spread of AIDS and other bloodborne diseases by providing people who use intravenous drugs with new hypodermic needles and safely disposing of used ones.¹³ Similarly, activists strategically place water, food, blankets, and other supplies to help migrants safely cross the southern border.¹⁴ Others have replicated this strategy and deployed similar ones, such as Food Not Bombs (FNB) chapters that collectively cook and serve

free meals to people who are homeless to expose the state's funding of war over social welfare and illustrate our capacity to provide for one another.¹⁵ Members of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) fix broken tail lights on community members' cars for free with the hopes of eliminating a primary justification for police stopping, harassing, and potentially brutalizing particularly Black and Brown drivers.¹⁶

Clearly, FNB, MADR, and similar mutual aid projects involve general organizing: people working together to arrange social life.¹⁷ A group that pulls off a weekly meal for the unhoused probably requires recruitment and outreach, perhaps even direct action to commandeer public space.¹⁸ Participants may learn important self-management skills, like how to make, adopt, and implement collective decisions.¹⁹ Their accessible "onramps" may even nurture networks of activists to experiment in other "transformative social action."

However, despite bringing people together, generating dialogue about political problems, and providing opportunities to build various skills, mutual aid on its own is not an example of the type of organizing that is necessary to bring about social revolution. For all the real benefits of mutual aid projects, they rarely build power except in the most abstract or technical sense among small groups of well-meaning activists; they do not undermine ruling power; and they rarely situate these relief efforts within an overarching revolutionary strategy.²⁰ Divorcing mutual aid projects from concrete power-oriented objectives leaves the "revolution" part of the Black Panther Party's slogan "Survival Pending Revolution"—a frequent reference for today's mutual aid projects—vague and abstract, untethered to any strategic program, revolutionary or otherwise. The result—whether a needle exchange, producing and distributing do-it-yourself air purifiers, a "really free store," water drops for crossing migrants—is survival pending...more survival.

Despite well-meaning initiatives and the temporary "paradises built in hell" they can help create, mutual aid and disaster relief efforts

revolution indefinitely, however. By distinguishing mutual aid from organizing and situating the former within the latter, we ensure that our actions are powerful enough to transform our world, permanently shifting the balance of forces in favor of the dominated classes. This is the only way to truly survive.



References

1. Although some mutual aid activists make a distinction between "direct aid" (decentralized charitable provisions of goods and services) and "autonomous mutual aid" (a supposedly more radical version that seeks to address the causes that necessitate aid), we stick to the more common term "mutual aid." As will become clear, we think the differences between the two are minimal. The term "autonomous mutual aid" was created, in part, to answer the sorts of reservations outlined in this essay. It is a linguistic broadening that is not accompanied by a corresponding practical or strategic shift. In some usages, "autonomous mutual aid" seems to cover any collective struggle to improve people's lives, becoming synonymous with organizing, or even radical activity itself. In practice, though, when people actually do mutual aid—autonomous or not—such distinctions tend to disappear.

Revolutionary Care in No Uncertain Terms

Language shapes how we see the world. Unclear or misused language can divert us from our political goals, just as precise language and sharp ideas can bring them closer. It is beyond the scope of this essay to fully catalog how the growing, often contradictory conceptions of mutual aid might obscure or illuminate a revolutionary horizon, but we will note that both state, as well as non-state actors on the far right have utilized these practices and sometimes even the terminology for their own ends.²⁹ While some may suggest that this is an example of how mutual aid can become co-opted or appropriated, we are less concerned with arguing for or against any inherent or essential quality that mutual aid might possess. In the current sociopolitical climate, mutual aid, like organizing itself, is politically neutral, only rendered counter/revolutionary by those who use it and for what purposes.

We raise the above distinctions between mutual aid and organizing to speak to a vision of mutual aid that coheres with BRRN's existing program and strategy, not to denigrate comrades and the blood, sweat, and tears they devote to mutual aid projects. Emergent, unsanctioned, activist-led relief efforts can mitigate the worst effects of crises, especially for populations disproportionately dispossessed by state disinvestment. It is also inherently risky, as state agencies frequently bid to regain social control by targeting those projects with harassment and other repressive techniques.³⁰

Moreover, the work of caring for each other has historically been and still is considered a "lesser" form of supporting social transformation. Patriarchy's declaration that social reproductive labor is "women's work"—and thus, according to misogynist logic, both gendered and devalued—seeps through our social movements.³¹ These divisions leave power imbalances unchallenged; they ignore the impossibility of struggle without robust mechanisms for sustaining movements; they prevent our movements from reaching their liberatory ends. Against this sort of essentialized compartmentalization, we must consciously integrate these practices of care into mass organizations to survive, pending revolution.

We must also be aware that survival as an end unto itself can delay

can never fully sow the seeds of the sorts of new social and property relations they promise to prefiguratively root. In most instances, mutual aid projects remain something activists provide. Moreover, mutual aid activists rarely extend these efforts and the relationships they create beyond the small groups of people involved while their efforts flounder in the wider social storm of domination, capitalist exploitation, and state oppression.²¹ Neither can we assert that these projects fundamentally restructure how we relate to each other in lasting ways or on a large scale; the sheer number of people who remain disenfranchised and oppressed despite a notable rise in service projects and mutual aid efforts from 2005's Hurricane Katrina to present day speak to this pressing concern. If we want a liberated world for everyone, we can't sidestep the world we already have, or rely on fleeting prefigurative enclaves within it. We have to fight against domination, and that's what organizing is for.

This assertion coheres with working-class, Black, Brown, and/or Indigenous cultures to the extent that their community structures and values systems oppose (or even predate) settler colonialism, white supremacy, nation-states, and capitalism. Mutual aid is often, for instance, regarded as a central characteristic of Black anarchism. William C. Anderson links mutual aid to a Black experience of statelessness, citing various approaches used to counteract state neglect.²² At the same time, Anderson notes that "as Indigenous anarchism, autonomous movements, and stateless people everywhere can surely attest, we cannot simply turn our back on the state and hope it goes away; nor can we seek new, or even old, ways of living outside the state and assume it will ignore us."²³ Mutual aid, he says, "must be done to sustain ourselves as we work to dismantle and take down the apparatuses of power. Without clear revolutionary content, mutual aid, survival programs, and even horizontalist organizing can be co-opted and absorbed into the state's infrastructure."²⁴

To the extent that mutual aid is part of revolutionary struggle, it is largely found where mutual aid projects are embedded within social movements, from the crucial material support given to Indigenous anti-pipeline encampments and striking workers to the collective

care that sustains police/prison abolition movements and immigration struggles.. Importantly, mutual aid should be understood as one tactic to support a broader organizing strategy in these communities, as opposed to the sum total of organizing itself. This is due in large part to an emphasis on the “mutual” (i.e. the reciprocal) aspect of “mutual aid,” a key word in the term that is largely overlooked or misrepresented.

Putting the “Mutual” Back into Mutual Aid

To illustrate this point, let’s return to the Black Panthers’ Free Breakfast for School Children and other “survival programs.” These programs were clearly forms of mutual aid, but they did far more than fill an important community need; they allowed the BPP to build revolutionary Black power more effectively. In the case of the breakfast program, the children being fed (and their parents) listened to talks about Black liberation generally and the BPP specifically. The survival programs generated goodwill for the BPP in the community, increasing their acceptance and leadership.²⁵ They were used as propaganda tools to dramatize the failures of structurally racist institutions. Programs drew hordes of new recruits to the Party. They were also hubs for sharing information about Party actions and events.²⁶ As Chairman Huey P. Newton put it, “the survival programs are not answers or solutions, but they will help us to organize the community around a true analysis and understanding of their situation.”²⁷ They fed into an overall revolutionary strategy.

When tied to concrete political action, mutual aid practices in mass organizing can reinforce efforts to build power by fostering new relationships. Imagine, for instance, neighbors who host language exchange classes so that they can better fight their landlord together or co-workers who set up childcare networks so parents can attend strike preparation meetings. These practices invite people to see “taking care of one another” more expansively than the mere provision of services. Against the ways the structures of domination chew us up and spit us out, we begin to build a world founded on reciprocal solidarity that meets all of our needs.

The operative word here is reciprocal. As opposed to “goodwill and generosity,” reciprocal solidarity—actually mutual mutual aid—“create[s] an economic, moral, and political link between people... [that] would contribute to a collective emancipation.”²⁸ In the nineteenth-century, labor unions lent each other funds—across professional and national boundaries—at zero-percent interest to support striking workers, print propaganda, and establish collectively owned and run ventures. Such practices were intended to create a pool of generalized credit that strengthened ties among workers, funded each other’s struggles, and developed a revolutionary consciousness of kinship. Reciprocity is an inherent feature of organizing above and beyond the provision of aid; against the hierarchy implied by a logic of service, reciprocity creates the conditions under which power can be built and shared among members of dominated classes, thereby improving the success of any given organizing campaign.

Reciprocity does not mean we keep one-to-one balance sheets about who contributes and receives what. That would ignore the deep inequalities capitalism cultivates within the working class. At the same time, developing no mechanisms to encourage recipients of support to contribute back to the movement defaults these practices to individual choice and morality. Truly reciprocal solidarity is predicated on a radical form of social consciousness and organizational structures that the informal affinities of most mutual aid can’t hope to match.

This is one reason BRRN focuses on mass organizing. This doesn’t mean rejecting mutual aid—far from it. However, by centering organizing, we can approach the question of mutual aid in a more rigorous and intentional way. When developing our own campaigns, we can make sure mutual aid practices are integrated into a strategy designed to build enough popular power to alter the conditions that require aid in the first place. We can foreground reciprocal solidarity as a way to forge new relationships premised on shared struggles and shared visions. We can change the world as we care for one another.