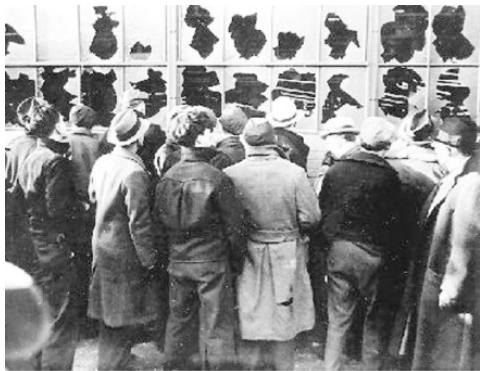


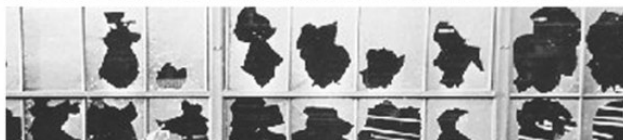
# Four Points on Mutual Aid

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STRUGGLESSESSIONS



**Four Points  
on Mutual Aid**



by Cathal

## 1. Political Power Grows from ~~a Plate of Lentils~~ the Barrel of a Gun

“There can be no competition between a mutual aid society and a revolutionary circle... But if in this same mutual aid society there develops a certain political tendency—not to aid revolutionaries, for instance, or to exclude illegal books from the library—then every honest ‘politically minded’ person is *in duty bound* to compete with it and combat it outright.” –Lenin

There are two types of mutual aid: real and false. Real and genuine mutual aid is exemplified clearly in history; workers providing a canteen for other workers who are striking, a socialist state assisting armed struggle or defending against imperialist invasion in another country—such as the People’s Volunteer Army entering Korea to assist the Korean people in their fight against US imperialism. There is also false mutual aid; more precisely, there is charity which brands itself as mutual aid. The distinction between real and false mutual aid rests on whether or not the “aid” is actually mutual.

The revolutionary orientation toward mutual aid is made clear in the above Lenin quotation. The matter of support or opposition for a mutual aid society has everything to do with the political line. Is it aiding revolutionaries or not? Is it aiding revisionism? Is it maintaining oppression by making it more bearable? Does it increase the fighting or, instead, does it allow a lack of fighting to be suffered peacefully?

Mutual aid groups have become the fad of the American left; there is one in every flavor, branded as anarchism, liberalism, Christian progressivism, even “Maoism.” The activities mainly consist of volunteers distributing donated items to the poor. The groups are rarely ever “mutual” in any respect; those being aided are being aided just to survive or because “it is the right thing to do” and, after receiving aid, are not actually returning aid to the revolutionary

struggles or being mobilized to take part in them. Welfare is mistaken for socialist activism. In this sense such charity is never actually socialist; nor is it activism. Both socialism and activism require a certain amount of force to be worthy of their names.

The so-called mutual aid groups—be they anarchist, social-democratic, “Maoist”, or any other—often attempt to combine charity with literature distribution as a half-measure to “politicize” the masses. We must question; politicize them for what? When the only organic model provided is more and more charity programs, then active and actual political struggle is foreclosed. Politics mean activity more than ideas. Whatever they claim to believe in, a group’s activity or lack thereof shows their actual politics. Charity is a stand-in for activity; it is an alternative to activity. It is inactivity which disguises itself as activity. Communist William F. Dunne once said that “inactivity is inexcusable and it is worse than making mistakes.”

Charity when red-washed as mutual aid and promoted as “mass work” is precisely the idea that charity is the means with which to “build” power. This is plainly counter-revolutionary and such organizations or “mutual aid societies” must be competed with and combated outright; this is very clear.

The question of mutual aid is also determined by the question of power. When socialist construction was taking place in revolutionary China under the guidance of Chairman Mao Zedong, mutual aid teams were developed in the countryside to organize peasants into co-operatives. This provided a big impulse to socialist development in the countryside; it was revolutionary and good. Had the peasants settled for only such mutual aid teams and not a people’s army before coming to power, it is not even imaginable that socialism could have been constructed under the whip and lash of the landlord class or the occupation army—even though living conditions were so poor and there was so much need.

This brings us to the essence of the matter; Chairman Mao is 100 times correct when he says “Without a peoples army, the people have nothing”. Let this be

understood; the people will have nothing even with millions of mutual aid teams.

## **2. The appeal of mutual aid, diversions and distortions**

Mutual aid is appealing, and revolutionaries should use it, but the appeal itself must be understood unless it is to become dead-end charity. No one, least of all revolutionaries, like to see our people go without; indeed, this is one of the ways that revolutionary violence is affirmed. The response to the misery must concern itself not in finding shortcuts out of it, but in confronting misery head on, at the root. We must not get lost in the emotional gratification that comes with charity for some people. In any case, charity without combat (missionary work among the poor!) does not prepare the masses for class combat; whatever the emotional gratification, it is a placebo effect in the revolutionary sense. One might feel as if we are making a difference, promoting revolution etc., but such work is not, and it does not prepare the revolutionaries or the masses for the fight. In the present conditions, it is right to consider such activity a form of capitulation and disarmament.

The most confused re-brand their charity as serving the people. “To serve” here has only two definitions: the first is to perform duties or services for someone, while the second means to distribute food or drink. Our charity teams settle on the second definition at the expense of the former.

At the risk of stating the obvious, we must go into what Chairman Mao actually meant with the slogan “Serve the People.” Chairman Mao raised this slogan in 1944 not to encourage the Chinese people to distribute food and drink; rather, it means to die for the people—and it promotes this as the utmost duty and service to the broad masses. Serving the people means willingly giving one’s life for the sake of the people, serving them in life and in death. Nothing more, nothing less.

In first raising the slogan, Chairman Mao was commemorating the death of Zhang Side, who came from a family of poor peasants and joined the Red Army and Communist Youth League after his father and brother were worked to death by landlords. When he came of age, Comrade Zhang joined the Communist Party. He was a combatant and soldier on the Long March and was wounded in battle. He would not die in battle against the Kuomondang or the invading Japanese; he died in 1944 as a combatant assigned to the regular duties of guarding the Central Committee, and his duty included working hard to make charcoal.

It is not the death of Comrade Zhang Side which is celebrated, but his revolutionary life. It is his life and his death which exemplify serving the people; that means mainly fighting as a combatant of the Red Army and a member of the CPC. In memorializing this servant of the people, Chairman Mao did not instruct those taking his example to serve the people in the sense of mainly distributing goods, but in the sense of waging a tireless fight, a literal war in the interests of the people while remaining modest. It is none other than the Chairman who defined the tasks of the revolutionary combatant; fighting is the main task, and mobilizing the masses and production are the next tasks.

There is nothing objectively wrong with mutual aid, but there is something wrong with distorting the teachings of Chairman Mao.

### **3. Anti Authoritarianism and mutual aid**

The first principal of socialism as the lower stage of communism is; *Those who do not work, do not eat*. In the higher stage—communist society—it becomes possible to operate on the principle; *From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs*.

Anarchism is a form of bourgeois individualism in the extreme, and as such it seeks to circumvent the period of socialism and it imagines a stateless and classless society falling from the sky. As such it promotes “revolutionary” lifestyles which are often based on individual or individualized acts of armed struggle or property destruction in times of unrest and food and goods distribution in times of calm. The slogan of anarchism would be “The people have nothing; give them a plate of beans”.

Just like anarchists, the others in the church of distorted mutual aid are obsessed with the question of distribution while largely ignoring the question of production. It is tempting for those inexperienced in Marxism to see the main social injustice as a matter of distribution; in doing so, they fail to proceed from the mode of production and the relationships to production it demands. Exploitation does not reside in distribution nor in consumption, but precisely in production.

Marx expressed that “It was in general a mistake to make a fuss about so-called distribution and put the principal stress on it.” This is exactly the problem with all types of charity proclaiming themselves mutual aid. Marx explains why this is a problem:

“Any distribution whatever of the means of consumption is only a consequence of the distribution of the conditions of production themselves. The latter distribution, however, is a feature of the mode of production itself. The capitalist mode of production, for example, rests on the fact that the material conditions of production are in the hands of non-workers in the form of property in capital and land, while the masses are only owners of the personal condition of production, of labor power. If the elements of production are so distributed, then the present-day distribution of the means of consumption results automatically. If the material conditions of production are the co-operative property of the workers themselves, then there likewise results a distribution of the means of consumption different from the present one. Vulgar socialism (and from it in turn a section of the democrats) has taken over from the bourgeois economists the consideration and treatment of

distribution as independent of the mode of production and hence the presentation of socialism as turning principally on distribution. After the real relation has long been made clear, why retrogress again?”

The activities of the charity teams reduce themselves to nothing but shifting around the meager possessions of workers among themselves, divorced in any respect from revolutionary struggle; and, in other cases, this means accepting funding and donations for the charity programs from the ruling class itself and hence existing as a ruling class auxiliary.

Why this obsession with distribution of goods? Often when discussing the issue with the most vocal advocates of “politicized” charity dubbed mutual aid you will hear a moral argument, based on feelings; “I like helping people” etc. If we were to regard this as a personal hobby, we should applaud the kind heart of the givers here. This is not our task. We are not theologians—we are Marxists. We must examine the issue politically and in terms of class society, based in the criteria provided in the former sections. With very few exceptions, the matter is simply rooted in an aversion to leadership, and aversion to authority and a reluctance to organize anything more combative due to these aversions—in a word, anti-authoritarianism runs like a thread through the school of charity disguised as mutual aid. All of this is related to a very cynical view of the people, a refusal to see their clamor for organized rebellion; those who cannot imagine the thirst for power among the people can thus only imagine them seeking amelioration.

Distributing food and other commodities requires no amount of forcing one’s will on others. In essence it requires nothing revolutionary since revolution is a precise act of forcing the will of a class on other classes. Revolution is always authoritarian.

Circling back to our initial point: anti-authoritarians, just like revisionists, are unable to aid the revolution, no matter their pretense. The sooner this fact is understood, the better. What is left is to cast aside all illusion and to prepare for struggle. As for the anti-authoritarians, this means competition from

revolutionaries and outright combat. This view might seem “extreme,” but it is ultimately correct and absolutely rational.

The distorted view of mutual aid results in (what passes for) the left acting like fish flailing around in a shallow brackish muck; refusing to swim among the people, their muck exists as an hypoxic estuary, and they simply refuse to swim against the current to truly enter the fight.

#### **4. Mutual Aid when understood and implemented correctly**

We must warn against the risk of over-correcting the mistakes of arid-revolutionaries—obsessed with charity and calling it mutual aid—and refuse to accept the verdict of outright rejection of mutual aid or social service programs run by revolutionaries. There are those who will, in a knee-jerk reaction, reject any attempt to help the masses with any programs or mutual aid, and these types swindle themselves; they cede the trench to revisionism.

If mutual aid is used, then it must actually be mutual and also must aid the revolution. What does this look like? It looks like auxiliary services in a given struggle. Bandaging up fighters during an uprising, or raising bail money for the arrested fighters and masses is valuable mutual aid—provided it does not exclude revolutionaries—because of the fact that it improves the fighting conditions and fortifies the fighters, increases morale etc. A clear example is the formation of people’s mess halls during strikes or protracted struggles even by those who are not directly in the struggle, because they are once more fortifying the ranks. Further, these actual mutual aid teams must be politically organized; like everything else they must form a part of a broad struggle. Lack of organization will ultimately diminish the fighting capacity of the revolutionary forces or mass struggles.



Not only are there cases where mutual aid is an acceptable auxiliary, but in many cases it is an absolute necessity to the victory of a campaign. It must not be understood as a means of propaganda or a means of education, but mainly as a means of sustaining combat. That is to say, a means to improve fighting capacity, a means to mobilize the people who are not yet ready to fight by giving them tasks which support the fight. Aimless distribution of goods cannot accomplish this. The masses will come to organize to meet their immediate needs; if revolutionary forces do not use this to aid the revolutionary struggle, then it is certain that the revisionists and other reactionaries will. The masses are a site of struggle in which proletarian and bourgeois leadership collide.

Implementing mutual aid is also not a casual thing. It will not aid the revolutionary struggle if it is not based in the correct method of leadership. Chairman Mao expressed:

“The Central Committee has issued several documents to combat excessive meddling, and this has done some good. What is meant by excessive meddling? Drawing up subjective plans at variance with reality and regardless of what is imperative and possible, or carrying out plans, even realistic ones, by means of commandism. Subjectivism and commandism are always bad and will be so even ten thousand years hence.”

There are two errors here; 1) carrying out plans at variance with reality and 2) carrying out realistic plans with commandism. Many so-called mutual aid groups carry out their charity with little regard for the reality of the people; they act on assumptions and merely give things to people and people take them. There is most often no concrete analysis. These will imagine a program which will draw in hundreds of participants and gain crowds eager to hear about Mao. This far exceeds these groups' actual ability, which is to pass out groceries to people who may or may not be glad to get them. The second type, in many ways even more dangerous than the first, are those with preconceived notions of what is imperative. They come to do what is possible and use commandism. These types often have an idea of their own; we must save this

housing complex from being “gentrified” etc. and then proceed to tell the tenants of the complex this, to which the tenants respond, “We hate this place and it should be demolished.”

Commandism can destroy imperative and possible mutual aid programs mainly by coercing those with meager means to distribute them at their own expense and hence it deviates immediately from being either mutual or aid. Convincing with democratic means takes more effort than peer pressure or intimidation but is ultimately the only possible way to proceed. When 1) correct methods are used, and 2) it is in service to the revolutionary effort, only then is the catchphrase “Solidarity not charity” actually realized. We should dispense with any illusion that solidarity is ever possible without being based in clear politics, or that solidarity is possible when based mainly on social need and not on concrete politics.

We again turn to the pertinent example of a strike mess hall; it is imperative and possible to prolong the strike action with food services—and this must be entirely political. To put this another way: such rights are guaranteed under socialism only, but there is the need to fight for them in the fight to conquer power indispensably. Work among the poor must be understood in the same way; there are millions of fighters among the poor who—in order to be organized—require certain aid, be it child care, food assistance, or other things. In the absence of organized class struggle, such programs are meaningless.

The proletariat can administer its own affairs only after it has conquered the room to do so, and such administration cannot be arbitrarily imposed. Even in the most simple acts of collective administration, co-optation from bourgeois forces and interference from the police and the agents of the old-state must be combated and resisted. It is important here to fight to not only snatch conquests from the enemy, but to administer these conquests once conquered. That is the essence of revolutionary mutual aid.

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