Introduction: Crisis Conditions Require Bold Tactics

The contemporary political moment is defined by emergency. Acute crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change–induced fires, floods, and storms, as well as the ongoing crises of racist criminalization, brutal immigration enforcement, endemic gender violence, and severe wealth inequality, threaten the survival of people around the globe. Government policies actively produce and exacerbate the harm, inadequately respond to crises, and ensure that certain populations bear the brunt of pollution, poverty, disease, and violence. In the face of this, more and more ordinary people are feeling called to respond in their communities, creating bold and innovative ways to share resources and support vulnerable neighbors. This survival work, when done in conjunction with social movements demanding transformative change, is called mutual aid.

Mutual aid has been a part of all large, powerful social movements, and it has a particularly important role to play right now, as we face unprecedented dangers and opportunities for mobilization. Mutual aid gives people a way to plug into movements based on their immediate concerns, and it produces social spaces where people grow new solidarities. At its best, mutual aid actually produces new ways of living where people get to create systems of care and generosity that address harm and foster well-being.

This book is about mutual aid: it explains why it is so important, what it looks like, and how to do it. It provides a grassroots theory of mutual aid as well as concrete tools for addressing some of the most difficult questions facing mutual aid groups, such as how to work in groups and make decisions together, how to prevent and address conflict, and how to deal with burnout so that we can build a lasting mobilization that can win.

Left social movements have two big jobs right now. First, we need to organize to help people survive the devastating conditions unfolding every day. Second, we need to mobilize hundreds of millions of people for resistance so we can tackle the underlying causes of these crises. In this pivotal moment, movements can strengthen, mobilizing new people to fight back against cops, immigration enforcement, welfare authorities, landlords, budget cuts, polluters, the defense industry, prison profiteers, and right-wing groups. The way to tackle these two big tasks—meeting people's needs and mobilizing them for resistance—is to create mutual aid projects and get lots of people to participate in them. Social movements that have built power and won major change have all included mutual aid, yet it is often a part of movement work that is less visible and less valued. In this moment, our ability to build mutual aid will determine whether we win the world we long for or dive further into crisis.

We can imagine what is possible when we come together in this way by examining the response of Hong Kong's protest movement to COVID-19. In 2019, a massive anti-government mobilization swept Hong Kong, with people opposing police and seeking greater control over their lives. By the time the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, Hong Kong's chief executive, Carrie Lam, had an 80 percent disapproval rating. Hong Kong's protest movement had escalated significantly, with protesters coordinating sophisticated mass mobilizations, including the use of bold tactics like fighting police with poles, projectiles, laser pointers, and petrol bombs. Lam was remarkably non-responsive to the pandemic, despite the vulnerable position of Hong Kong, a densely packed city with a history of epidemics and a high-speed railway connection to Wuhan, where the COVID-19 pandemic started.

Hong Kong residents criticized Lam for her delay in closing the city's borders and her order barring city workers from wearing masks. But, despite the government's failures, the people of Hong Kong, mobilized by the protest movement, launched a response that suppressed the original wave of COVID-19 and mitigated its resurgence.

On the day the first COVID-19 case in Hong Kong was confirmed, people from the protest movement created a website that tracked cases, monitored hot spots, reported hospital wait times, and warned about places selling fake personal protective equipment (PPE). The protesters defied the government's ban on masks and countered misinformation from the World Health Organization discouraging their use. They set up brigades that made and distributed masks, specially making sure they reached poor people and old people. They created a system of volunteers to set up hand sanitizer stations throughout crowded tenement housing and maintain the supply of sanitizer at the stations. They also created digital maps to identify the station sites.

This essential mutual aid work was complemented by bolder strategies. When the government refused to close the border with China, seven thousand medical workers, as part of labor unions that had been formed during the protest movement, went on strike demanding PPE and that the border be closed. Members of the protest movement threatened the government with stronger action if steps were not taken to address the epidemic, and explosives were found at the border with China, possibly for this purpose. The Hong Kong government then created quarantine centers in dense neighborhoods, but never consulted the people in those neighborhoods, and the protest movement responded by throwing explosives into the quarantine centers before they were used, causing the government to change the location of the facilities to less densely populated holiday villages.

As a result of these efforts by a mobilized and coordinated movement, and no thanks to the government, Hong Kong had an immensely successful response to the first wave of COVID-19. Through the combination of mutual aid and direct action to force concessions, the protesters did what the government would not do on its own, saving untold numbers of lives.

This book provides a concrete guide for building mutual aid groups and networks. Part I explores what mutual aid is, why it is different than charity, and how it relates to other social movement tactics. Part II dives into the nitty-gritty of how to work together in mutual aid groups and how to handle the challenges of group decision-making, conflict, and burnout. It includes charts and lists that can be brought to group meetings to stimulate conversation and build shared analysis and group practices. Ultimately, helps imagine how we can coordinate to collectively take care of ourselves—even in the face of disaster—and mobilize hundreds of millions of people to make deep and lasting change.

PART I. What is mutual aid?

Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them. Those systems, in fact, have often created the crisis, or are making things worse. We see examples of mutual aid in every single social movement, whether it's people raising money for workers on strike, setting up a ride-sharing system during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, putting drinking water in the desert for migrants crossing the border, training each other in emergency medicine because ambulance response time in poor neighborhoods is too slow, raising money to pay for abortions for those who can't afford them, or

coordinating letter-writing to prisoners. These are mutual aid projects. They directly meet people's survival needs, and are based on a shared understanding that the conditions in which we are made to live are unjust.

There is nothing new about mutual aid—people have worked together to survive for all of human history. But capitalism and colonialism created structures that have disrupted how people have historically connected with each other and shared everything they needed to survive. As people were forced into systems of wage labor and private property, and wealth became increasingly concentrated, our ways of caring for each other have become more and more tenuous.

Today, many of us live in the most atomized societies in human history, which makes our lives less secure and undermines our ability to organize together to change unjust conditions on a large scale. We are put in competition with each other for survival, and we are forced to rely on hostile systems—like health care systems designed around profit, not keeping people healthy, or food and transportation systems that pollute the earth and poison people—for the things we need. More and more people report that they have no one they can confide in when they are in trouble. This means many of us do not get help with mental health, drug use, family violence, or abuse until the police or courts are involved, which tends to escalate rather than resolve harm.

In this context of social isolation and forced dependency on hostile systems, mutual aid—where we choose to help each other out, share things, and put time and resources into caring for the most vulnerable—is a radical act.

1. Three Key Elements of Mutual Aid

One. Mutual aid projects work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need.

Mutual aid projects expose the reality that people do not have what they need and propose that we can address this injustice together. The most famous example in the United States is the Black Panther Party's survival programs, which ran throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including a free breakfast program, free ambulance program, free medical clinics, a service offering rides to elderly people doing errands, and a school aimed at providing a rigorous liberation curriculum to children. The Black Panther programs welcomed people into the liberation struggle by creating spaces where they could meet basic needs and build a shared analysis about the conditions they were facing. Instead of feeling ashamed about not being able to feed their kids in a culture that blames poor people, especially poor Black people, for their poverty, people attending the Panthers' free breakfast program got food and a chance to build shared analysis about Black poverty. It broke stigma and isolation, met material needs, and got people fired up to work together for change.

Recognizing the program's success, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover famously wrote in a 1969 memo sent to all field offices that "the BCP [Breakfast for Children Program] represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP [Black Panther Party] and, as such, is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for." The night before the Chicago program was supposed to open, police broke into the church that was hosting it and urinated on all of the food. The government's attacks on the Black Panther Party are evidence of mutual aid's power, as is the government's co-optation of the program: in the early 1970s the US Department of Agriculture expanded its federal free breakfast program—built on a charity, not a

liberation, model—that still feeds millions of children today. The Black Panthers provided a striking vision of liberation, asserting that Black people had to defend themselves against a violent and racist government, and that they could organize to give each other what a racist society withheld.

During the same period, the Young Lords Party undertook similar and related mutual aid projects in their work toward Puerto Rican liberation. The Young Lords brought people into the movement by starting with the everyday needs of Puerto Ricans in impoverished communities: they protested the lack of garbage pickups in Puerto Rican neighborhoods, hijacked a city mobile x-ray truck to bring greater tuberculosis testing to Puerto Rican communities, took over part of a hospital to provide health care, and provided food and youth programs for Puerto Rican communities. Their vision—for decolonizing Puerto Rico and liberating Puerto Ricans in the United States from racism, poverty, and police terror—was put into practice through mutual aid.

Throughout the 1960s and '70s, many overlapping movements undertook mutual aid efforts, such as feminist health clinics and activist-run abortion providers, emerging volunteer-run gay health clinics, childcare collectives, tenants' unions, and community food projects. Although this moment is an important reference point for the contemporary left, mutual aid didn't start in the '60s, but is an ongoing feature of movements seeking transformative change. Klee Benally, project coordinator at Indigenous Media Action, argues that mutual aid is an unbroken tradition among Indigenous people across many cycles of colonialism, maintained through traditional teachings that contemporary Indigenous mutual aid projects are working to restore and amplify. Settlers have long worked to undermine Indigenous people's self-sustaining practices by first destroying food systems and then forcing dependency on rations given at forts and missions and, now, by settler nonprofits. Indigenous mutual aid efforts are both a matter of survival and a powerful form of resistance to forced dependence on settler systems.

The long tradition of mutual aid societies and other forms of "self-help" in Black communities, which, as early as the 1780s sought to pool resources to provide health and life insurance, care for the sick, aid for burials, support for widows and orphans, and public education efforts, is another important example. These efforts have addressed Black exclusion from white infrastructures by creating Black alternatives. Long traditions of mutual aid are also visible in working-class communities that have long supported workers on strike so that they could pay rent and buy food while confronting their bosses. Perhaps most of all, the pervasive presence of mutual aid during sudden disasters of all kinds—storms, floods, fires, and earthquakes—demonstrates how people come together to care for each other and share resources when, inevitably, the government is not there to help, offers relief that does not reach the most vulnerable people, and deploys law enforcement against displaced disaster survivors. Mutual aid is a powerful force.

Two. Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements.

Mutual aid is essential to building social movements. People often come to social movement groups because they need something: eviction defense, childcare, social connection, health care, or help in a fight with the government about something like welfare benefits, disability services, immigration status, or custody of their children. Being able to get help in a crisis is often a condition for being politically active, because it's very difficult to organize when you are also struggling to survive. Getting support through a mutual aid project that has a political analysis of the conditions that produced your crisis also helps to break stigma, shame, and isolation. Under capitalism, social problems resulting from exploitation and the maldistribution of resources are understood as

individual moral failings, not systemic problems. Getting support at a place that sees the systems, not the people suffering in them, as the problem can help people move from shame to anger and defiance. Mutual aid exposes the failures of the current system and shows an alternative. This work is based in a belief that those on the front lines of a crisis have the best wisdom to solve the problems, and that collective action is the way forward.

Mutual aid projects also build solidarity. I have seen this at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), a law collective that provides free legal help to trans and gender-nonconforming people who are low income and/or people of color. I worked with the group from 2002 to 2019. Again and again I saw people come to SRLP for help because something bad happened to them in a shelter, in prison, or in interactions with cops, immigration authorities, the foster care system, or public schools. People seeking legal services for these problems would be invited to participate in organizing and become part of SRLP, working on changing the conditions that had brought them to the group. As people joined, things were often bumpy. Members may have had some things in common—being trans or gender-nonconforming, for example—but also differed from one another in terms of race, immigration status, ability, HIV status, age, housing access, sexual orientation, language, and more. By working together and participating in shared political education programs, members could learn about experiences different from theirs and build solidarity across those differences. This changed—and continues to change—not only the individuals in the group, but the kind of politics the group practices.

Solidarity is what builds and connects large-scale movements. In the context of professionalized nonprofit organizations, groups are urged to be single-issue oriented, framing their message around "deserving" people within the population they serve, and using tactics palatable to elites. Prison-oriented groups are supposed to fight only for "the innocent" or "the nonviolent," for example, and to do their work by lobbying politicians about how some people—not all people—don't belong in prison. This is the opposite of solidarity, because it means the most vulnerable people are left behind: those who were up-charged by cops and prosecutors, those who do not have the means to prove their innocence, those who do not match cultural tropes of innocence and deservingness. This narrow focus actually strengthens the system's legitimacy by advocating that the targeting of those more stigmatized people is okay.

This pattern of anti-solidarity incentives and practices has been devastating for movements as non-profitization has taken hold, as I'll discuss further in the next chapter. Solidarity across issues and populations is what makes movements big and powerful. Without that connection, we end up with disconnected groups, working in their issue silos, undermining each other, competing for attention and funding, not backing each other up and not building power. Mutual aid projects, by creating spaces where people come together on the basis of some shared need or concern in spite of their different lived experience, cultivate solidarity.

Groups doing mutual aid to directly address real problems in real people's lives tend to develop a multi-issue and solidarity-based approach because their members' lives are cross-cut by many different experiences of vulnerability. Sometimes even groups that start out with a narrow goal adopt a wider horizon of solidarity and a wider vision of political possibility if they use the mutual aid model. An initial goal of serving people impacted by homelessness quickly reveals that racism, colonialism, immigration enforcement, ableism, police violence, the foster care system, the health care system, transphobia, and more are all causes of homelessness or causes of further harm to homeless people. Solidarity and an ever-expanding commitment to justice emerge from contact with the

complex realities of injustice. This is exactly how movements are built, as people become connected to each other and as one urgent issue unspools into a broader vision of social transformation.

Three. Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors.

Mutual aid projects help people develop skills for collaboration, participation, and decision-making. For example, people engaged in a project to help one another through housing court proceedings will learn the details of how the system harms people and how to fight it, but they will also learn about meeting facilitation, working across differences, retaining volunteers, addressing conflict, giving and receiving feedback, following through, and coordinating schedules and transportation. They may also learn that it is not just lawyers who can do this kind of work, and that many people—including themselves!—have something to offer. This departs from expertise-based social services that tell us we need to have a social worker, licensed therapist, lawyer, or some other person with an advanced degree to get things done.

Mutual aid is inherently antiauthoritarian, demonstrating how we can do things together in ways we were told not to imagine, and that we can organize human activity without coercion. Most people have never been to a meeting where there was not a boss or authority figure with decision-making power. Most people work or go to school inside hierarchies where disobedience leads to punishment or exclusion. We bring our learned practices of hierarchy with us even when no paycheck or punishment enforces our participation, so even in volunteer groups we often find ourselves in conflicts stemming from learned dominance behaviors. But collective spaces, like mutual aid organizing, can give us opportunities to unlearn conditioning and build new skills and capacities. By participating in groups in new ways and practicing new ways of being together, we are both building the world we want and becoming the kind of people who could live in such a world together.

For example, in the Occupy encampments that emerged in 2011 to protest economic inequality, people shared ideas about how to resolve conflict without calling the police. Occupy brought out many people who had never participated in political resistance before, introducing them to practices like consensus decision-making, occupying public space, distributing free food, and engaging in free political education workshops. Many who joined Occupy did not yet have a developed critique of policing. Participants committed to police abolition and antiracism cultivated conversations about why activists should not call the police on each other. This process was inconsistent and imperfect, but it introduced many people to new skills and ideas that they took with them, long after Occupy encampments were dismantled by the police.

Mutual aid can also generate boldness and a willingness to defy illegitimate authority. Taking risks with a group for a shared purpose can be a reparative experience when we have been trained to follow rules. Organizers from Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR) share the following story in their 2018 workshop facilitation guide to illustrate their argument that "audacity is our capacity":

When a crew of MADR organizers [after Hurricane Maria] travelled to Puerto Rico (some visiting their families, others bringing medical skills), they found out about a government warehouse that was neglecting to distribute huge stockpiles of supplies. They showed their MADR badges to the guards and said, "We are here for the 8am pickup." When guards replied that their names were not on the list, they just insisted again, "We are here for the 8am pickup." They were eventually allowed in, told to take whatever they needed. After being let in once, aid workers were able to return repeatedly.

They made more badges for local organizers, and this source continued to benefit local communities for months.

MADR asserts that by taking bold actions together, "we can imagine new ways of interacting with the world." When dominant ways of living have been suspended, people discover that they can break norms—and even laws—that enable individualism, passivity, and respect for private property. MADR asserts that "saving lives, homes, and communities in the event and aftermath of disaster may require taking bold action without waiting for permission from authorities. Disaster survivors themselves are the most important authority on just action."

Mutual aid projects providing relief to survivors of storms, floods, earthquakes, and fires, as well as those developed to support people living through the crises caused by poverty, racism, criminalization, gender violence, and other "ordinary" conditions, produce new systems that can prevent harm and improve preparedness for the coming disasters. When Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico in 2017, it was the existence of food justice efforts that made it possible for many people to eat when the corporate food system, which brings 90 percent of the island's food from off-island sources, was halted by the storm. Similarly, it was local solar panels that allowed people to charge medical devices when the electrical grid went down.

By looking at what still works in the face of disaster, we can learn what we want to build to prepare for the next storm or fire. In *The Battle for Paradise*, Naomi Klein argues that locally controlled microgrids are more desirable for delivering sustainable energy, given the failures of the energy monopolies that currently dominate energy delivery. In the wake of the devastating 2018 California fires, the public learned that the fires were caused by Pacific Gas and Electric Company's mismanagement, and then watched as California's government immediately offered the company a bailout, meanwhile failing to support people displaced by the disaster. Klein describes how large energy companies work to prevent local and sustainable energy efforts, and argues that in energy, as in other areas of survival, we should be working toward locally controlled, participatory, transparent structures to replace our crumbling and harmful infrastructure.

Doing so helps us imagine getting rid of the undemocratic infrastructure of our lives—the extractive and unjust energy, food, health care, and transportation systems—and replacing it with people's infrastructure. For social movements working to imagine and build a transition from "dig, burn, dump" economies to sustainable, regenerative ways of living, mutual aid offers a way forward.

2. Solidarity Not Charity!

Mainstream understanding of how to support people in crisis relies on the frameworks of charity and social services. We should be very clear: mutual aid is not charity. *Charity, aid, relief*, and *social services* are terms that usually refer to rich people or the government making decisions about the provision of some kind of support to poor people—that is, rich people or the government deciding who gets the help, what the limits are to that help, and what strings are attached. You can be sure that help like that is not designed to get to the root causes of poverty and violence. It is designed to help improve the image of the elites who are funding it and put a tiny, inadequate Band-Aid on the massive social wound that their greed creates.

The charity model we live with today has origins in Christian European practices of the wealthy giving alms to the poor to buy their own way into heaven. It is based on a moral hierarchy of wealth—the idea that rich people are inherently better and more moral than poor people, which is why they deserve to be on top. Not surprisingly, the charity model promotes the idea that most poverty is a result of laziness or immorality and that only the poor people who can prove their moral worth deserve help.

Contemporary charity comes with eligibility requirements such as sobriety, piety, curfews, participation in job training or parenting courses, cooperation with the police, a lawful immigration status, or identifying the paternity of children. In charity programs, social workers, health care providers, teachers, clergy, lawyers, and government workers determine which poor people deserve help. Their methods of deciding who is deserving, and even the rules they enforce, usually promote racist and sexist tropes, such as the idea that poor women of color and immigrant women have too many children, or that Black families are dysfunctional, or that Indigenous children are better off separated from their families and communities, or that people are poor because of drug use.

We can see examples in government policy, like the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families programs (TANF), which impose "family caps" in fourteen states. These laws restrict poor families from receiving additional benefits when they have a new child. For example, in Massachusetts, a single parent with two children receives a measly $578 in TANF benefits each month. But if a second child is born while the family is already receiving TANF, that child is ineligible, and the family receives $100 less per month, for a grant of $478. This policy emerges from the racist, sexist idea that poor women, especially women of color and immigrant women, should be discouraged from having children, and the faulty assumption that their poverty is somehow a result of being overly reproductive. We can also see harmful, moralizing eligibility requirements when people have to prove they are sober or under psychiatric care to qualify for housing programs.

Charity programs, both those run by the government and those run by nonprofits, are also set up in ways that make it stigmatizing and miserable to receive help. The humiliation and degradation of doing required work assignments to get benefits too small to live off of, or answering endless personal questions that treat the recipient like a fraud and a crook, are designed to make sure that people will accept any work at any exploitative wage or condition to avoid relying on public benefits. Charity makes rich people and corporations look generous while upholding and legitimizing the systems that concentrate wealth.

Charity is increasingly privatized and contracted out to the massive nonprofit sector, which benefits rich people more than poor people in two big ways. First, elite donors get to run the show. They decide what gets funded and what doesn't. Nonprofits compete to show that they are the best organization to win a grant. To win, nonprofits want to make their work look legitimate to the funder, which means working according to the funder's beliefs about the causes of and solutions for a particular problem rather than challenging those beliefs. For example, the funder may favor nonprofits that make sobriety a condition of receiving a spot in a homeless shelter, because rich people would rather believe that homelessness is caused by poor people's drug use than that it is caused by a capitalist housing market. To win grants, nonprofits also seek to make themselves look "successful" and "impactful," regardless of whether their work is actually getting to the root causes of the problem. For example, social service nonprofits will often claim they have worked with large numbers of people, even though most of those people did not become less vulnerable or get what they needed from their contact with the nonprofit. Similarly, homelessness service groups sometimes

claim that they reduced shelter use, but the people who stopped using the shelter are still unhoused and simply not using the shelter for various reasons.

In this way, poverty-focused and homelessness-focused nonprofits are essentially encouraged to merely manage poor people: provide limited and conditional access to prison-like shelters and make people take budgeting classes or prove their sobriety. They do not do the more threatening and effective work that grassroots mutual aid groups do for housing justice, like defending encampments against raids, providing immediate no-strings health care and food to poor and unhoused people, fighting real estate developers, slumlords, and gentrification, or fighting for and providing access to actual long-term housing. Rich people's control of nonprofit funding keeps nonprofits from doing work that is threatening to the status quo, or from admitting the limits of their strategies. In worst-case scenarios, nonprofits are integrated into programs that make vulnerable people even more vulnerable. An example of this is the Homeless Management Information System, a federal computerized information management tool that requires homeless services and charities to record the names and information of their clients in order to receive federal aid, putting criminalized and undocumented people at further risk.

Second, the nonprofit system creates a tax shelter for rich people. They can put a bunch of their money in a charitable foundation, allowing them to avoid paying taxes on it and instead getting to direct it to their favorite pet projects. Most foundation money goes to things the board members and executive directors (who, in the case of US foundations, are over 90 percent white) value, such as their alma maters, the opera, and museums. Foundations are not even required to give much of their wealth away: they give out only 5 percent a year and still reap the benefits of a tax haven for their money and the social cachet of being a philanthropist. And that 5 percent can also be used to pay their friends and family hundreds of thousands of dollars per year to be "trustees" of their foundation.

The creation of the nonprofit sector that has ballooned in the last half-century was a direct response to the threat posed by mass mutual aid work in anti-racist, anti-colonial and feminist movements of the 1960s and '70s. Non-profitization was designed to demobilize us, legitimizing unjust systems and hiding the reality that real change comes from movements made of millions of ordinary people, not small groups of paid professionals. These days, the nonprofits that purport to address poverty are mostly run by white elites. The idea promoted by nonprofits and universities is that people with advanced degrees are best suited to figure out the solutions to social problems. It mystifies the causes of poverty, making it seem like some kind of mysterious math problem that only people with advanced degrees can figure out. But any poor person knows that poverty is caused by the greed of their bosses, landlords, and health insurance companies, by systems of white supremacy and colonialism, and by wars and forced migrations. Elite solutions to poverty are always about managing poor people and never about redistributing wealth.

The nonprofit sector not only fails to fix injustice but also replicates it within the groups themselves. Nonprofits are usually run like businesses, with a boss (executive director) at the top deciding things for the people underneath. Nonprofits have the same kinds of problems as other businesses that rely on hierarchical models: drastically unequal pay, race and gender wage gaps, sexual harassment in the workplace, exploitation of workers, and burnout. Despite the fact that they pitch themselves as the solution for fixing the problems of the current system, nonprofits mostly replicate, legitimize, and stabilize that system.

One way the charity model is manifested is in the idea of "having a cause." Celebrities and philanthropists show us that picking an issue to care about and giving or raising money for it is part of their brand, in a similar vein as their fashion choices. This idea of a charitable cause that is disconnected from other aspects of life keeps us in our places. We are encouraged to be mostly numbed-out consumers, but ones who perhaps volunteer at a soup kitchen on Thanksgiving, post videos about animal rights on our social media accounts, or wear a T-shirt with a feminist slogan now and again. Only those few experts or specialists who work in nonprofits are supposed to make concern for justice a larger part of their lives by turning it into a career, but even they are supposed to still be obedient consumers.

The false separation of politics and injustice from ordinary life—and the idea that activism is a kind of lifestyle accessory—is demobilizing to our movements, hides the root causes of injustice, and keeps us passive and complicit. Robust social movements offer an opposing view. We argue that all the aspects of our lives—where and how we live and work, eat, entertain ourselves, get around, and get by are sites of injustice and potential resistance. At our best, social movements create vibrant social networks in which we not only do work in a group, but also have friendships, make art, have sex, mentor and parent kids, feed ourselves and each other, build radical land and housing experiments, and inspire each other about how we can cultivate liberation in all aspects of our lives. Activism and mutual aid shouldn't feel like volunteering or like a hobby—it should feel like living in alignment with our hopes for the world and with our passions. It should enliven us.

The charity model encourages us to feel good about ourselves by "giving back." Convincing us that we have done enough if we do a little volunteering or posting online is a great way to keep us in our place. Keeping people numb to the suffering in the world—and their own suffering—is essential to keeping things as they are. In fact, things are really terrifying and enraging right now, and feeling *more* rage, fear, sadness, grief, and despair may be appropriate. Those feelings may help us be less appeased by false solutions, and stir us to pursue ongoing collective action for change.

That doesn't mean that mutual aid work never feels good. In fact, it is often deeply satisfying and connective, creating caring relationships, raucous celebrations, and an enduring sense of purpose. In my experience, it is more engagement that actually enlivens us—more curiosity, more willingness to see the harm that surrounds us, and ask how we can relate to it differently. Being more engaged with the complex and painful realities we face, and with thoughtful, committed action alongside others for justice, feels much better than numbing out or making token, self-consoling charity gestures. It feels good to let our values guide every part of our lives.

Mutual aid projects, in many ways, are defined in opposition to the charity model and its current iteration in the nonprofit sector. Mutual aid projects mobilize lots of people rather than a few experts; resist the use of eligibility criteria that cut out more stigmatized people; are an integrated part of our lives rather than a pet cause; and cultivate a shared analysis of the root causes of the problem and connect people to social movements that can address these causes. Part II of this book focuses on how we can build our mutual aid groups in ways that can most successfully accomplish these goals, avoiding the pitfalls of the charity model and the learned hierarchical behaviors that can reproduce injustice even in activist group settings.

What we build now, and whether we can sustain it, will determine how prepared we are for the next pandemic, the climate-induced disasters to come, the ongoing disasters of white supremacy and capitalism, and the beautifully disruptive rebellions that will transform them.

3. We get more when we demand more

Disasters are ruptures—existing systems break down and then are either repaired, replaced, or scrapped. Disasters exacerbate and expose inequalities, showing the preexisting crises that elites strive to ignore and hide from view. When disasters emerge, governments and corporations quickly move to downplay them, hoping to get back to the status quo of extraction and profit-making as soon as possible, to take credit for having resolved them, and to silence demands for relief. Governments and the 1 percent also use disasters as opportunities to push their favored reforms. COVID-19, for example, has generated right-wing wins like closing the border; suspending environmental regulations; giving the FBI, DEA, and local police hundreds of millions of dollars; and expanding the capacity of police to harass and criminalize the poor for allegedly violating public health regulations.

At the same time, disasters are opportunities for exposing injustice and pushing forward left-wing demands. COVID-19 has also been an opportunity for mobilizing people to resist injustice. As more people are laid off or forced to work dangerous jobs, we are increasingly standing together against landlords, bosses, police, prisons, and a profit-driven health care system. In seeking to curb the worst effects of the pandemic, some forms of government relief have emerged that give us hope for another way of life: eviction moratoriums, increased unemployment benefits and income support, free public transit, suspension of student loan payments, and more. While this relief has been far from universal or adequate, it has demonstrated that many of the things our movements have fought for are entirely possible.

Disasters are pivotal times in the competition between political programs, moments when much can be lost or won. Winning the world we want is far from guaranteed. Our opponents, those who currently control the most of the land, work, food, housing, transportation, weapons, water, energy, and media, are feverishly working to maintain the status quo of maldistribution and targeted violence, and worsen it to increase profits and power for themselves. Our capacity to win is possible to the extent that we can collectively realize what they do not control—us—and collectively disobey and disrupt their systems, retaking control of our ways of sustaining life. If we want as many people as possible to survive, and to win in the short and long term, we have to use moments of disaster to help and mobilize people. Mutual aid is the way to do that. During the COVID-19 pandemic, mutual aid groups have proliferated and more people are learning how to organize mutual aid than have in decades. This is a big chance for us to make a lot of change.

We need mutual aid groups and networks capable of bringing millions of new people into work that deepens their understanding of the root causes of the crises and inequalities they are fired up about and that builds their capacity for bold collective action. We need groups and networks that do not disappear after the peak of the crisis, but instead become part of an ongoing, sustained mobilization with the capacity to support people and keep building pressure for bigger wins.

As mobilization builds, governments, corporations, and corporate media will approach mutual aid in three ways, all of which, as I write this, are already visible in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic. These three responses often happen simultaneously, among different agencies, elected officials, and levels of government: Some will ignore proliferating mutual aid efforts. Some will try to fold them into a narrative about volunteerism, labeling mutual aid efforts "heroic" and portraying them as complementary to government efforts and existing systems rather than as oppositional to those systems. And some police and spy agencies will surveil and criminalize mutual aid efforts.

This was visible in the response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012. Occupy Sandy, a volunteer-based mutual aid network that emerged from Occupy Wall Street, organized over sixty thousand volunteers to provide food, water, medicine, and other necessities to people left without power and in dire conditions by a government utterly unprepared to help them. The Department of Homeland Security extended its spying from Occupy Wall Street to Occupy Sandy at the same time that some New York City government agencies helped Occupy Sandy get supplies to redistribute. Governor Andrew Cuomo and New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg mostly ignored Occupy Sandy's frontline work as they focused on managing their own reputations.

The fundamental goal of all three of these responses is to ensure the legitimacy and stability of the current systems and delegitimize alternative ways of meeting human needs. At best, mutual aid projects get framed as non-threatening temporary adjuncts to existing systems. Elected officials and government agencies sometimes even seek legitimacy by associating themselves with mutual aid projects if those projects are more successful at meeting needs than the government. At worst, mutual aid projects are portrayed as unlawful, dangerous, and criminal. As we saw with the police attacks on the Black Panther Party breakfast programs, or more recent Trump administration raids on the medical camps of No More Deaths (which offers support to migrants at the southern US border), when mutual aid efforts truly build and legitimize coordinated action and autonomy against existing systems, governments typically crack down on them.

The criminalization of mutual aid work has been ongoing throughout social movement history precisely because mutual aid directly confronts unjust systems and offer alternatives. Groups doing frontline mutual aid work that is particularly risky today, such as those helping with access to abortion drugs or procedures illegal in the jurisdiction where they are working, providing clean needles and safe consumption spaces to drug users where that is illegal, supporting the well-being of people in the criminalized sex trades, and helping homeless people occupy vacant homes, have useful knowledge and experience for all of us about navigating safety risks. Studying those groups' experiences and methods for evading and/or confronting police, securing electronic communications, and sheltering the most vulnerable people from exposure can benefit all mutual aid groups as we prepare for our work to (hopefully) become threatening to the status quo.

In the face of increased mobilization and resistance—as with the rebellion against racist police violence in the summer of 2020—or fearing another destabilizing disaster, governments and the corporations they represent will sometimes grant concessions, many of which look similar to what mutual aid projects provide. In moments of deep social and economic turmoil—such as during COVID-19—governments expand income support, usually in the form of welfare benefits, unemployment benefits, or a one-time stimulus check. But government aid can also take the form of legalizing squatted property, providing mobile clinics, offering meals at public schools, creating restorative justice programs, creating resources for people being released from prison, and more. Concessions like these, where the government provides something previously only offered by mutual aid groups, can be celebrated as limited victories by movements: *Our organizing was so strong they had to co-opt us!* These concessions might also provide vital support to many more people than mutual aid groups can reach, as with the USDA's free breakfast program in schools, which fed more children than the Black Panther Party breakfast program that prompted its expansion.

However, it's crucial to remember that these concessions are necessarily limited. First, they can be shrunk or taken back whenever the moment of instability passes. This has been the historical pattern for poor relief in the United States: it gets expanded during a crisis, and then contracted and

stigmatized as soon as the crisis has lessened, quickly making people once again desperate and exploitable by their employers. Second, while government provisions sometimes reach more people than local mutual aid can, they usually exclude particularly vulnerable people, like people who are criminalized, working in underground economies, homeless, or undocumented. The welfare and income support programs in the United States, ranging from old age and disability benefits to support for families in poverty, are consistently designed to ensure that women, people of color, and Indigenous people get left out or get less. For example, the New Deal, which emerged to quiet the anti-capitalist rebellions brought on by the Great Depression and stabilize the capitalist system, was designed so that women and domestic and agricultural workers (disproportionately Black and Latinx) were excluded from the benefits created. By tying many benefits to work, the New Deal also perpetuated a status quo of grinding poverty for people with disabilities.

Whenever we rely on a capitalist, imperialist system to provide vital necessities, we can guess that the provisions will be fragile and inadequate, and designed to transfer far more wealth toward the populations those systems were designed to support: white people, rich people, straight people, and men. Often, the concessions are never delivered at all, only promised in an effort to quell resistance.

One pattern that is clear in regard to concessions is that, because the aim of elites is to concede as little as possible and maintain the status quo as much as possible, we get more when we demand more and build bolder, bigger pressure. It took mass movements threatening capitalism's very existence, like those seen during the Great Depression and the 1960s uprisings against racism, just to get stigmatizing, ungenerous welfare benefits. Decades of uprisings against police brutality yielded only surface police reforms, many of which expanded police budgets and numbers. Even unsatisfying concessions, in other words, only come with big, sustained, disruptive mobilizations. Nonprofit leaders and politicians frequently encourage "pragmatism" and peaceful incremental change, but the most radical imagination of what we want, and the escalation of direct action to get it, is what is truly pragmatic if we seek to win real change. Concessions won in crises—crises of sudden disaster and crises created by powerful social protest—will be as strong and lasting as the mobilizations that made them necessary. Elites and their nonprofit gatekeepers encourage us to make small, "reasonable," or "winnable" demands, and they try to redirect our action to official channels that are non-disruptive, with narratives about "peaceful protest" and "coming to the table." They encourage reforms premised on the assumption that the systems we seek to dismantle are fundamentally fair and fixable. We have to refuse to limit our visions to the concessions they want to give—what we want is a radically different world that eliminates the systems that put our lives under their control.

If concessions are signs of our impact, at best providing some relief to some people but ultimately stabilizing existing systems, what would winning look like? As we build mutual aid groups, what do we hope for if not that the government, instead of us, will someday provide what we are providing? If our current systems are based on illegitimate authority and use coercion and violence to keep us tied to them, and if those systems primarily pursue the aim of concentrating wealth and decision-making power, what is the alternative?

From our current vantage point, living in a world with the most militarized borders, the most expansive surveillance technologies, the most severe concentration of wealth, the most imprisonment in human history, the most military bases and high-tech weapons, and the most advanced mechanisms of propaganda, it can be hard to imagine other ways of living. Disasters often

stimulate fantasies of a benevolent government as we face brutal government failure and wish that things were different.

Part of the reason our dream of a savior government is so compelling is that it is hard for us to imagine a world where we meet core human needs through systems that are based on principles of collective self-determination rather than coercion. We are accustomed to a situation where the choice is between a government that either denies the disaster's significance and abandons people to its devastations or a government that responds with inadequate aid that comes with enhanced policing, surveillance, militarization, and wealth transfers to the top. This is no choice at all. Because of how capitalism controls the means for getting by—food, health, housing, communications, transportation—and how dependent we are on systems we do not control, it can be hard to imagine that we could survive another way. But for most of human history, we did, and mutual aid projects let us relearn that it's possible and emancipatory.

Mutual aid projects let us practice meeting our own and each other's needs, based in shared commitments to dignity, care, and justice. They let us practice coordinating our actions together with the belief that all of us matter and that we should all get to participate in the solutions to our problems. They let us realize that we know best how to address the crises we face. We don't need to be saved by professionals, government agents, or people elites consider "experts." Mutual aid cultivates the practices and structures that move us toward our goal: a society organized by collective self-determination, where people get a say in all parts of their lives rather than just facing the coercive non-choice between sinking or swimming; between joining a brutal and exploitive workforce, insurance scheme, or housing market, or risk being left in the cold.

How do we imagine "scaling up" mutual aid to a point where everyone has what they need, and gets to meaningfully co-govern and co-steward the structures and conditions of their lives? Because of the dominance of corporate and nonprofit models, people often think that "scaling up" means centralizing and standardizing projects, but this runs directly counter to the wisdom of mutual aid. "Scaling up" doesn't mean making groups bigger or merging them into one organization across a region, state, or country. Locally operated mutual aid works better for meeting people's needs in all kinds of situations, including disasters, because our needs are best met by those with the most local knowledge, and when we are the ones making the decisions affecting us. Scaling up our mutual aid work means building more and more mutual aid groups, copying each other's best practices, and adapting them to work for particular neighborhoods, subcultures, and enclaves. It means intergroup coordination, the sharing of resources and information, having each other's backs, and coming together in coalitions to take bigger actions like rent strikes, labor strikes, or the toppling of corrupt governments and industries. Factory takeovers, where workers push out owners and take control of the factory, deciding together how it will run and making fair systems for all, are good examples of this type of shift: a labor strike that becomes a factory takeover is "scaling up." Similarly, we might imagine people working to create local energy grids using solar power. The grids would be cultivated and cared for by the people using them, but they might be sharing practices and resources with other groups building and maintaining local grids. Governance and innovation remain local, but knowledge, support, and solidarity are networked and shared.

To imagine a society where we share everything, co-govern everything, have everything we need and don't rely on coercion and domination, we have to shed the capitalist propaganda that tells us people are naturally greedy, and that without police keeping us in our places we would all hoard and harm. Instead, we can notice, as is particularly clear in times of disaster, that people are naturally

connective and generous, though we often have cultural baggage to shed from being conditioned by white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. Again and again we see people sharing what little they have after storms, floods, and fires, saving each other. Through mutual aid projects, many of us get a chance to deepen those practices of generosity, and make them long-term support systems that we co-govern to help us all survive and mobilize for change.

Mutual aid is only one tactic in the social movement ecosystem. It operates alongside direct action, political education, and many other tactics. But it is the one that most successfully helps us grow our movements and build our people power, because it brings people into coordinated action to change things *right now*. As mutual aid expands in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, in climate change–caused disaster zones, and during economic crises, we have a chance to cultivate millions of new resistance fighters, to teach ourselves to work together in long-term ways, and to develop our ability to practice solidarity-based co-stewardship in all areas of collective life. The climate crisis will continue to bring worsening disasters into our communities in the coming years and decades. The stronger we build our networks of mutual aid now, the more prepared we will be to help each other survive those disasters and transform our ways of living together toward liberation.

PART II. Working Together *on Purpose*

Mutual aid work is important for meeting people's survival needs *right now*, and for mobilizing hundreds of millions of people to join struggles for justice and liberation. Most people newly fired up about injustice are eager to work on the conditions happening to them or to people they care about. Mutual aid projects are the on-ramp for people to get to work right away on things they feel urgent about, plug into social movements where they can learn more about things they are not yet mad about, and build new solidarities.

This section of this book is for people who want to start mutual aid projects or who are already in them and want to intentionally build group cultures and structures that will help the work flourish. Chapter 4 describes some of the larger political pitfalls of mutual aid groups, and chapter 5 turns to the nitty-gritty, providing tools for addressing common obstacles in mutual aid work. This section includes things groups can do to address conflict and avoid slipping into charity-model or business-model practices, as well as ideas for things individuals within groups can do to expand their own capacity to do this work with as much compassion and care as possible—according to our principles.

4. Some dangers and pitfalls of mutual aid.

Even while they explicitly work to reject the charity model, mutual aid projects can slip into some of the well-worn grooves of that model if we don't root deeply in our principles and practice careful discernment. Mutual aid groups face four dangerous tendencies: dividing people into those who are deserving and undeserving of help, practicing saviorism, being co-opted, and collaborating with efforts to eliminate public infrastructure and replace it with private enterprise and volunteerism.

Deserving hierarchies

People start mutual aid projects because existing programs or other services are not meeting people's needs, and often are leaving out particular groups of vulnerable people. The notorious failures of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the face of disaster are a good example. The 2018 Camp Fire in California was the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in the state's history, the worst wildfire in the United States in a century, and the most expensive natural disaster in the world that year. At least 85 people were killed in the fire, over 18,800 structures were destroyed, 52,000 people were evacuated, and the total damage was estimated at $16.5 billion. A tent city of people displaced by the fire emerged in a Walmart parking lot in Chico, California. In the days following the fire, as displaced people with more resources began to leave the tent city because they could afford to find new housing or stay with family or friends, city officials and media portrayed the people that remained as ordinary homeless and itinerant people who were "undeserving" of help, rather than as sympathetic fire survivors. The hierarchy of deservingness is built into FEMA's eligibility process, which excludes people who cannot confirm an address before the disaster, such as homeless people or people living in poor communities where individual dwellings are sometimes not given an individual mailing address.

The distinction between deserving and undeserving disaster survivors rests on the idea that suddenly displaced renters and homeowners are sympathetic victims, while people who were already displaced by the ordinary disasters of capitalism—and are especially vulnerable after an acute disaster like a storm or fire—are blameworthy and do not deserve aid. As I argued above, state and nonprofit disaster recovery and social services models generally work to stabilize the existing distribution of wealth, not transform it, so it makes sense that they provide little or nothing to the poorest people.

After disasters like Hurricanes Sandy and Katrina, the federal government offered loans to homeowners and business owners, and smaller loans to renters for replacing personal property. Only those who were deemed to be "creditworthy" could qualify, and many of those who qualified still never saw a penny. People in crisis are unlikely to be helped by having more debt—but putting them in debt does make money for banks reaping the interest. Similarly, during the initial COVID-19 outbreak in the United States, the federal government offered loans for businesses suffering economic losses. Almost immediately, stories broke about how giant corporations like Shake Shack and Potbelly received millions while small businesses owned by people of color received the least. Among individual workers, those with the most precarious jobs were cut out of unemployment benefits and the stimulus checks that were supposed to provide relief. Undocumented people were ineligible for relief. Disaster relief and poor relief are designed to uphold and worsen inequalities. Deservingness narratives justify those designs.

Even though mutual aid projects often emerge because of an awareness of how relief programs exclude people marked "undeserving" or "ineligible," mutual aid groups still sometimes set up their own problematic deservingness hierarchies. For example, mutual aid projects replicate moralizing eligibility frameworks when they require sobriety, exclude people with certain types of convictions, only include families with children, or stigmatize and exclude people with psychiatric disabilities for not fitting behavioral norms.

In his book *Gay, Inc.: The Nonprofitization of Queer Politics*, Myrl Beam tells the story of a Minneapolis group founded by queer and trans youth to support their community. As the group formalized and got funding, it diverged from its initial mission and commitment to youth governance and became dominated by adults. The group began to work with the local police to check warrants

for youth who came to the drop-in space. This functionally excluded criminalized youth—disproportionately youth of color—from the space and endangered people who came seeking help, turning what had been a mutual aid group into an extension of the local police department. When mutual aid projects make more stigmatized people ineligible for what they are offering, they replicate the charity model.

The charity model often ties aid and criminalization together, determining who gets help and who gets put away, as we can see in this account from a Mutual Aid Disaster Relief (MADR) participant:

After Hurricane Irma, a local sheriff announced that, "If you go to a shelter for Irma and you have a warrant, we'll gladly escort you to the safe and secure shelter called the Polk County Jail." [This] … essentially weaponizes aid against the most vulnerable and put[s] numerous lives in danger … There is always a shocking number of guns that show up after a disaster. A dehydrated child without access to electricity or air conditioning in the blazing Florida or Texas or Puerto Rico sun, needs somebody carrying Pedialyte, not an M16.

Saviorism and Paternalism

Mutual aid projects must also be wary of saviorism, self-congratulation, and paternalism. Populations facing crisis are cast as in need of saving, and their saviors are encouraged to use their presumed superiority to make over these people and places, replacing old, dysfunctional ways of being with smarter, more profitable, and more moral ones. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, politicians, non-profiteers, celebrity philanthropists, and corporations conspired to remake the city of New Orleans and the people in it by implementing devastating "innovations" that eliminated public housing, permanently displaced Black residents, privatized schools, and destroyed public health infrastructure. After storms, floods, and fires, there is often this kind of push to "rebuild" in ways that center the plans and dreams of elites and do real harm to the populations who have lost the most.

Paternalism is also visible in programs within welfare and criminal punishment systems that force criminalized people and people seeking welfare benefits to take parenting classes, budgeting classes, and anger management seminars. The idea that those giving aid need to "fix" people who are in need is based on the notion that people's poverty and marginalization is not a systemic problem but is caused by their own personal shortcomings. This also implies that those who provide aid are superior.

Mutual aid projects and their individual participants must actively resist savior narratives. These ideas are so pervasive that even those who have a systemic analysis of vulnerability still sometimes fall into the trap. Most mutual aid projects benefit from an explicit ongoing effort to build shared analysis among participants about the harms of saviorism and the necessity of self-determination for people in crisis.

Co-optation

For decades, politicians have combined attacks on public infrastructure and public services with an endorsement of privatization and volunteerism. As public services are cut, politicians push for already inadequate social safety nets to be replaced by family and church, implying that those who fail to belong to either deserve abandonment. Alongside the destruction of public welfare,

public-private partnerships are celebrated and bolstered by the fiction that everything from hospitals to prisons to city governments should be "run like a business." The prevailing myth is that business models are more "efficient." The truth is that making everything profit-centered, as we've seen with our health care system, actually degrades the care that people receive, as businesses seek short-term gains at any expense.

A cultural narrative about "social justice entrepreneurship" has also emerged in recent decades, suggesting that people should not fight for justice but rather invent (and patent) new ways of managing poor people and social problems. One example of this kind of "entrepreneurship" that has received media fanfare is Samaritan and other smartphone apps that coordinate digital donations to homeless people in ways that ensure restrictions on how they can use the cash. These apps are more focused on the experience of the giver than on the person in need of aid, and are designed to make the giver more comfortable by knowing their donation can only be used at local partner businesses, or if the homeless person's counselor authorizes it for a specific purpose like rent. This is typical of the kind of "innovation" that the social justice entrepreneurship model celebrates—it embraces ideas of paternalism central to the charity model, focuses aid on making donors "feel good," and has no connection to work that aims to get to the root causes of the problem. In fact, it is being developed by the same tech industry that has gentrified cities and increased housing insecurity.

In this atmosphere, mutual aid projects have to work hard to remain oppositional to the status quo and cultivate resistance, rather than becoming complementary to privatization. In the wake of Hurricane Harvey in 2017, corporate media news stories of boat owners volunteering to make rescues followed this script, neither criticizing government failures to rescue people nor interrogating the cause of worsening hurricanes and whom they most endangered. That is, the media stories of individual heroes hid the social and political conditions producing the crisis. Politicians and CEOs, who fantasize about a world where nothing is guaranteed and most people are desperate and easily exploited, love the idea of volunteerism replacing a social safety net. If we don't design mutual aid projects with care, we can fit right into this conservative dream, becoming the people who can barely hold the threads of a survivable world together while the 1 percent extracts more and more while heroizing individual volunteers.

We can see this struggle to resist co-optation in the work of mutual aid projects that support people who have been criminalized. Programs that divert some arrestees from the criminal system to social services or drug treatment, or that provide mediation between people who have done harm and those they have harmed as an alternative to the criminal legal process, can keep people out of jail or prison. However, they can also become non-disruptive adjuncts to carceral control, as they professionalize and become funded and shaped by police and courts. In Seattle, for example, throughout a seven-year fight to stop the building of a new youth jail, public officials have relentlessly used the small diversion programs run primarily by people of color—which receive minimal amounts of public funding—as cover to argue that King County has already addressed concerns about youth incarceration through progressive work with community partners. They have gone so far as to co-opt the ideas of the youth jail opponents, passing legislation stating that the city and county are committed to "zero youth detention." Meanwhile, the County built a youth jail for hundreds of millions of dollars. This story of a local government co-opting the message of the radical opposition, and showcasing grassroots, community-initiated programs to legitimize expansion of the racist infrastructure of state violence is chilling and highlights the thorny terrain of co-optation that mutual aid projects must navigate.

Mutual aid projects may appear to overlap with privatization and volunteerism in that participants critique certain social service models and believe that voluntary participation in care and crisis work is necessary. But the critiques of public safety nets made by mutual aid project participants are not the same as those of neoliberal politicians and corporations who tout volunteerism. Mutual aid projects emerge because public services are exclusive, insufficient, punitive, and criminalizing. Neoliberals take aim at public services in order to further concentrate wealth and, in doing so, exacerbate material inequality and violence. Mutual aid projects seek to radically redistribute care and well-being, as part of larger movements that work to dismantle the systems that concentrate wealth in the hands of the 1 percent.

The difference between neoliberal projects and mutual aid approaches is well illustrated when we compare the privatization of fire services with the work of the Oakland Power Projects (OPP), which seeks to build an alternative to calling 911. Increasingly, public firefighting services are inadequate and are facing further cuts, all in the midst of climate change–induced fires. Meanwhile, the private firefighting business is growing, with wealthy homeowners paying for private fire services to come seal their homes, spray fire retardants on the premises, and put owners in five-star hotels while less affluent people watch their homes burn, struggle in shelters, and fight FEMA for basic benefits. Fire profiteers aim to create a context in which only those who can pay get help or protection in the case of a fire, which means fires will be more deadly, the rich will get richer, and the poor will get poorer.

In contrast, the OPP emerged out of anti-police and anti-prison movement groups who observed that when people call 911 for emergency medical help, the police also come, hurting and sometimes killing those who called for help. In response, the OPP works to train people in communities impacted by police violence to provide emergency medical care for gunshot wounds, chronic health problems like diabetes, and mental health crises. If people can take care of each other, they can avoid calling 911 and avoid a confrontation with the police. This strategy is part of broader work to dismantle policing and criminalization, and it works to both meet immediate needs and mobilize people to build an alternative infrastructure for crisis response guided by a shared commitment to ending racist police violence and medical neglect. Note that, although the OPP and private firefighting both provide an alternative to inadequate public services, they are not the same at all: instead of profiting and only serving those who can pay, the OPP's programs build new ways of responding that allow those on the bottom to work together to meet survival needs while dismantling racist infrastructure.

Many powerful lessons about co-optation come out of the feminist movement against domestic violence. That movement started with mutual aid projects, such as volunteer-run shelters for violence survivors and defense campaigns for women criminalized for killing their abuser or attacker. Unfortunately, the anti– domestic violence movement emerged at the same time that criminalization was about to balloon in the United States. The mass uprisings of the 1960s and '70s brought a huge crisis of legitimacy to policing, with Black liberation, anti-racist, feminist, queer, and Indigenous movements protesting and exposing police violence. In response, US law enforcement worked hard to repair its public image, doing things like hiring cops of color, creating new police roles in schools through initiatives like the D.A.R.E. program, and creating programs and campaigns to portray the police as the protectors of women and children. Toward this end, law enforcement sought out alliances with the emerging anti–domestic violence movement, supporting new laws that increased punishment for gender-based violence and providing money for groups willing to cooperate with police.

This drastically changed the anti–domestic violence movement. It shifted from centering volunteer-based, grassroots mutual aid projects to emphasizing larger nonprofits, often run by white people with advanced degrees. These groups increasingly towed the line of a pro-police message and advocated for increased criminalization, meanwhile taking on charity-model approaches that treated people seeking help in punitive and paternalizing ways. This shift increased the criminalization of communities of color, made the services less accessible to the most vulnerable survivors of violence, and provided good public relations for police, prosecutors, and courts.

Notably, these co-optive approaches also failed to reduce gender-based violence. Research has shown that pro-criminalization policy reforms that became popular in this period, like mandatory arrest laws requiring police to make arrests during domestic violence calls, resulted in the arrests of abuse survivors, especially if they were queer, trans, disabled, or people of color. This is a sobering story of how co-optation can undermine our efforts to meet survival needs and cause us to contribute to legitimizing or expanding the very systems that are harming us.

At the same time, these events also produced a vibrant resistance from which we can learn much in developing mutual aid work that resists co-optation. Women of color, working-class and immigrant feminists, and feminists with disabilities have powerfully resisted this shift toward criminalization in the movement against gender violence. They have created mutual aid projects to address harm and violence that refuse to collaborate with police.

This work is often called "community accountability" or "transformative justice." It includes many innovative strategies developed in mutual aid groups. Drawing on lessons from years of experience, Creative Interventions authored a six-hundred-page guide on how to address sexual violence and family violence through community support and problem solving. GenerationFIVE and the Bay Area Transformative Justice Collective have designed approaches to addressing child sexual abuse that aim to get to the root causes and stop it, rather than just criminalizing the small percentage of people who get caught. Hundreds of local groups like Philly Stands Up and For Crying Out Loud have developed processes for supporting survivors of violence and confronting harm-doers, working with them to figure out what they need to never inflict the harm again. These processes sometimes last several years, with community members providing harmdoers with support for their sobriety, mental health, and housing needs, deepening understanding of their behaviors and their beliefs about gender and sexuality, and doing whatever else they need to stop the behavior.

The goal of this kind of work is to do the things that the criminal punishment approaches fail to do: give the survivor support to heal, give the harm-doer what they need to stop the behavior, and assess how community norms can change to decrease the likelihood of harm in general, such as by providing healthy relationship skills training, addressing a culture of substance misuse, and changing community ideas about sexuality and gender. The Safe OUTside the System Collective, a part of the Audre Lorde Project in New York City, has engaged a variety of tactics to address violence against queer and trans people of color, including police violence. One strategy it developed was building relationships with people working in businesses in a Brooklyn neighborhood where violence often occurred, asking those bodega cashiers, restaurant staff, and other workers to provide a place for people to run for help if something is happening on the street, a place that pledges to not call the police. This community-wide work of building long-term relationships increased those people's preparedness for helping people in need and de-escalating situations, which increased safety in the neighborhood.

Some transformative justice work is focused on prevention, and some is focused on providing support after something happens. Both are mutual aid approaches, since they address immediate survival needs with a recognition that the systems that are supposed to guarantee safety—the cops, prosecutors, and courts—fail to do so and actually make things worse. These mutual aid projects work to build a new world, where people create safety through community building and support each other to stop harmful behavior through connection rather than through caging.

These feminist activists and groups with an antipolice, anti-violence politics also developed much of the analysis that informs this book. They identified how the system of nonprofitization and pressure from funders were pushing anti-violence work toward criminalization, how mutual aid approaches were undermined when domestic violence shelters and hotlines became more like social services, and how the co-optation of anti-violence work undermined solidarity, further endangering communities most targeted by police. Their wisdom can guide us in building successful groups and movements and in resisting co-optation.

Characteristics of Mutual Aid vs Charity

Mutual aid projects depart from the charity model in crucial ways. Most mutual aid projects are volunteer-based and avoid the careerism, business approach, and charity model of nonprofits. Mutual aid projects strive to include lots of people, rather than just a few people who have been declared "experts" or "professionals." If we want to provide survival support to as many people as possible, and mobilize as many people as possible for root-causes change, we need to let a lot of people do the work and make decisions about the work together, rather than bottlenecking the process with hierarchies that let only a few people lead.

Despite these important goals, avoiding the pitfalls of co-optation, deservingness hierarchies, saviorism, and disconnect from root-causes work requires constant vigilance. The last half-century of social movement history is full of examples of mutual aid groups that, under pressure from law enforcement, funders, and culture, transformed into charity or social services groups and lost much of their transformative capacity. Here are some guiding questions for mutual aid groups trying to avoid these dangers and pitfalls:

- Who controls our project?
- Who makes decisions about what we do?
- Does any of the funding we receive come with strings attached that limit who we help or how we help?
- Do any of our guidelines about who can participate in our work cut out stigmatized and vulnerable people?
- What is our relationship to law enforcement?
- How do we introduce new people in our group to our approach to law enforcement?

While there is no single correct model for a mutual aid group, being aware of general tendencies that distinguish mutual aid from other projects can help groups make thoughtful decisions and maintain their integrity and effectiveness. To help us think through where things can get slippery, the chart below tracks characteristics within mutual aid groups against those of groups working in the charity model. It may be a good discussion prompt for a mutual aid group to clarify shared values or find areas of agreement and disagreement, or desire for further inquiry.

Chart 1. Characteristics of Mutual Aid vs. Charity

Mutual Aid	Charity
De-professionalized survival work done by volunteers	Service work staffed by professionals
Beg, borrow, and steal supplies	Grant money for supplies/philanthropic control of program
Survival work rooted in principles of anti-capitalism, antiimperialism, racial justice, gender justice, disability justice	Siloed single-issue work, serving a particular population or working on one area of policy reform, disconnected from other issues
Open meetings, with as many people making decisions and doing the work as possible	Closed board meetings, governance by professionals or people associated with big institutions or donors, program operated by staff, volunteers limited to stuffing envelopes or other menial tasks, volunteers not part of high-level decision-making
Support people facing the most dire conditions	Impose eligibility criteria for services that divide people into "deserving" and "undeserving" recipients

Give things away without expectations	Set conditions for getting help—recipients have to fill out onerous paperwork, be sober, have a certain family status, have a certain immigration status, not have outstanding warrants, certain convictions, etc.
People participate voluntarily because of their passion about injustice and care for their community	People come looking for a job, wanting to climb a hierarchy, build a career, or become "important"
Efforts to flatten hierarchies—e.g., flat wage scales if anyone is paid, training so that new people can do work they weren't professionally trained to do, rotating facilitation roles, language access	Maintaining hierarchies of pay, status, decision making power, influence that are typical of the mainstream culture (e.g., lawyers are more valuable and important than non-lawyers)
Values self-determination for people impacted or targeted by harmful social conditions	Offers "help" to the "underprivileged," absent of an awareness or strategy for transforming the conditions that produced injustice; embraces paternalism, rescue fantasies, and saviorism
Consensus decision-making to maximize everyone's participation, to ensure people impacted by decisions are the ones making them, to avoid under-represented groups getting outvoted, and to build the skill of caring about each other's participation and	Person on top (often the executive director) decides things or, in some instances, a board votes and the majority wins

concerns rather than caring about winning or being right	
Direct aid work is connected to other tactics, including disruptive tactics aimed at the root causes of distress	Direct aid work disconnected from other tactics, depoliticized, and distanced from disruptive or root causes– oriented tactics in order to retain legitimacy with government or funders
Tendency to assess the work based on how the people facing the crisis regard the work	Tendency to assess the work based on opinions of elites: political officials, bureaucrats, funders, corporate media
"Members" = people making decisions, usually everyone involved in doing the work and/or getting help from the group	"Members" = donors
Engagement with the group builds broader political participation, solidarity, mobilization, radicalization	Engagement with the group is not aimed at growing participants' connection to other issues, groups, or struggles for justice; main focus is to meet grant deliverables and give the organization a good public reputation with funders, media, elected officials

5. No masters, no flakes

One downside to the urgency that we bring to our mutual aid work can be that we dive right into the work, very concerned about how many people our project is helping, but fail to create good internal practices for our group to be strong and sustainable. It makes sense that we are not good at creating emancipatory group structures. Most of us have never been in groups that had fair, participatory,

transparent structures. We've been working at jobs where bosses tell us what to do, or been in schools, families, state institutions, or churches where strong hierarchies rule and most people get no say in how things will go. We do not have much practice imagining or being in groups where everyone can truly participate in decision-making.

In addition, we are used to being part of groups that ignore ordinary caring labor, much of which is seen as women's work, like cooking and cleaning and conflict mediation, while celebrating only the final, outward-looking evidence of production: the big protest march, the finalized legislation, the release of someone from prison, the media coverage. We have not been taught to notice or care about how things went along the way to a victory, whether people's capacity for confronting the next challenge was improved, or whether it was destroyed through burnout or damaging group dynamics. Capitalism makes us think about short-term gains, not building the long-term capacity for all of our well-being. This can make it easy to go for the quick fix and ignore the damage we might be doing to each other along the way. Many of us think "process is boring." Everyone wants a selfie with Angela Davis at the big event, but many people are less interested in the months of meetings where we coordinate how to pull off that event according to our values and handle the challenges of organizing.

But we *must* build strong structures for our projects if we want this work to be effective at saving lives and mobilizing people. This is essential to any effort to address injustice. Building efficient, participatory, transparent decision-making structures and cultures of care and principled action in our groups takes intentional work, but it is crucial for allowing our groups to flourish and win. If we do it right, it can help prevent the conflicts that tend to tear groups apart, divide participants from each other, and drive people away.

Groups are more effective and efficient when participants know how to raise concerns, how to propose ideas, when a decision has been made and by whom, and how to put that decision into practice. People who have gotten to participate in decision-making and feel co-ownership of the project stick around and do the work. People who feel unclear about whether their opinion matters or how to be part of making decisions tend to drift away. Strong structures also help us plug in new people, orient them to the work, train them in skills they need to build, and give them roles they want.

Chart 2. Default Approaches to Organizing Groups

Default Practices	Dangers of Default Approach	Alternatives

Hierarchy	Abuse of power; Burnout of a few people and no way for others to plug in; Unprincipled behavior by people at the top; People at the top can be bought off by attention, career opportunities, or money	Horizontal decision-making structure based on consensus that prevents decision-making from being concentrated in one person or a small group, and that can help tasks and roles get distributed to many people
Vague decision-making process	Individuals make decisions without consulting others; Some decisions don't get made in time; Conflict over decisions	Clear decision-making processes that everyone is trained in and that includes all members
Leadership held by people who have seniority or self-select	New people drift away because they do not feel real co-stewardship of the group; White people, men, and others with social privilege dominate	Training new people in how to participate fully in decisions and in new skills and roles; Cultivating a culture of group participation, feminism, anti-racism

Clear structures help us stick to our values under pressure—and we've already looked at many of the larger pitfalls that mutual aid groups can fall into, so we know what's at stake. In groups that aren't clear about decision-making, it is much easier for a leader to get seduced by money or prestige and sell out a group's core values for a job, a grant, or a moment in the spotlight. It is easier for law enforcement to infiltrate and destroy the group. It is also easier for participants to get burnt out on organizing. As I'll discuss below, burnout is often caused by conflict or by a failure to delegate decisions and tasks. A clear structure can help prevent conflict or provide ways to move through it, and can help make sure that people are sharing responsibility.

This chapter will explore three organizational tendencies that often emerge in mutual aid groups that can cause problems, and provide ideas for how to avoid them:

One. Secrecy, hierarchy, and lack of clarity. Many groups that fail to create clear decision-making methods and caring, emancipatory cultures end up with participants not knowing what is going on or who is making decisions, having all the decision-making concentrate in one person or clique, and risk the group being torn apart by conflict because of these dynamics.

Two. Over-promising and under-delivering, non-responsiveness, and elitism. Many groups bite off more than they can chew, promising to help more people than they can help or making it seem like they have a community need covered when they don't actually have the capacity to address it. This problem seems to be exacerbated when groups receive grants for specific projects, so there is money at stake in falsely claiming to be able to accomplish more than they are able. It also happens when people are not making decisions together and someone makes promises for the whole group without consulting everyone else about whether that work is a priority or a possibility. This tendency can include being nonresponsive, especially to community members in need, and sometimes being over-responsive to elites. Many groups, especially when money or ego is involved, answer calls from media or elected officials, but not from the community members they are supposed to serve.

Three. Scarcity, urgency, competition. Some groups also develop a culture of scarcity (of money, time, attention, and labor), which makes sense given the real scarcity that exists in many of our lives under capitalism. However, when we do our work from a feeling that there is not enough money, time, or attention to go around, we sometimes get competitive with other groups or with other people within our group, or we feel so much urgency about particular tasks that we don't take the necessary steps to do our task well, and we forget about being kind to each other in our rush to get something done. This can lead to conflict or making mistakes that harm our communities.

Chart 3. Tendencies that Harm Groups

Harmful Tendencies	What leadership looks like	What participation looks like	Dangers	What we want instead
Secrecy, Hierarchy, Lack of Clarity	Decisions made by one person or small group; Not clear to newcomers how decisions are made; No clear procedures about decisions	Be or follow the charismatic leader; If the leader disappears or sells out, the group does; Confusion about roles and decisions	New people never able to plug in; Theft of resources; Conflict about decisions; Cliques	Transparency; Shared participatory decision-making; Leaderless and leaderful with everyone co-leading

Over-Promising and Under-Delivering, Non-responsiveness, Elitism	One or more people making promises about what the group will do without consulting everyone; Group not responsive to the community it serves, yet responsive to elites and media	Participants don't get a say in whether the group takes on more work; Being overworked and over extended; Conflict over workloads and unmet needs; Charismatic leaders can easily sell out for attention or money	Burnout; Conflict; Loss of alignment with group principles; Cooptation by elites	Clear planning processes and shared decisions about workload; Accountability to community being served, especially its most vulnerable members
Scarcity, Urgency, Competition	Competition within the group or between the group and others doing related work for attention or resources; Rushed decision-making	Exhaustion; Conflict about priorities and over-extension; Blame between members about who cares most or does the most work	Burnout; Conflict; Damage to relationships inside the group and with other groups doing related work; Benefits the opposition to our movement	Cooperation; Generosity; Planning and pacing the work based on the group's collective wisdom and abilities; Staying in it for the long haul

This section will provide tools for addressing these tendencies in our groups and in ourselves, so that we can cultivate transparency, integrity, and generosity in our work and build our capacities to avoid the pitfalls discussed in chapter 4. We will look at what decision-making and leadership look like when these tendencies prevail, what alternatives to these ways of working look like, and what personal qualities and behaviors we need to cultivate to address these tendencies.

Group culture

Groups have cultures. Group culture is built from the signals we give people when they join or attend an event, norms the group follows, how we celebrate together, how we engage in small talk, what our meetings feel like, how we give feedback to each other, and more. Group cultures often reflect the personalities and ingrained behaviors and responses of the founders. If the founder is vague and loose with money, or often late to meetings, the group may be that way; or if the founder loves to sing at the end of meetings, the group may keep that practice going for a long time. But group culture also changes as new people come in and as conditions change. We can make intentional decisions to change group culture by having conversations about a group's tendencies and methods, talking about what is working and what is not, reflecting on how our own behavior can match what we want to see, and influencing each other.

There is no one correct or perfect group culture. Groups should be different from each other because the people in them are different and we all bring different qualities, skills, and viewpoints. Ideally, we want a group culture that supports participants in doing the work they came together to do, to be well, and to build generative relationships. In some groups that means people will form sexual and romantic connections with people they meet in the group. In others, that would be inappropriate or harmful, and the group will create a culture that discourages it. In some groups, people will love to sing and dance together, and in some groups people will want to engage in spiritual rituals together. In some groups, the nature of the work makes it essential to maintain certain forms of secrecy and security, to protect members who are taking bold actions. In others, cultivating openness to new members will be essential for bringing lots of people into the work.

The chart below is designed to provoke conversation about group culture among people already in a project or those about to start one. For those already in a project, the chart can be used to assess what the group culture is currently like. And even if there has only been one conversation so far about starting a project, the norms that the people in that conversation may be likely to bring to the group's emerging culture will already be noticeable. This chart can be used to talk about strengths and weaknesses participants have experienced before in other groups, including families, jobs, schools, and congregations, and what they want to emulate or avoid reproducing in this current group.

Chart 4. Qualities of Group cultures.

Helpful Qualities	Potentially Harmful Qualities
Reliable, responsible, punctual, follows through	Flaky, late, no follow-through

Welcoming to new people	Unwelcoming
Flexible, experimental	Rigid, bureaucratic, formulaic
Collaborative	Isolationist, competitive
Realistic workload, sustainable work flow, real culture of wellness and care	Overworking, perfectionist, martyrdom
Direct feedback and growth	Silence and/or gossip and shit talk
Sticks to values	Sells out, easily bought off, pushover when faced with political or financial pressure
Humble	Superior (can include taking credit for others' work, refusing to hear feedback)
Sharing work well	A few people do most of the work
Fun, celebratory, appreciative of each other	Serious, resentful, stressful

Forgiving	Holding grudges (between people inside the project and toward outside people and groups)
Able to have generative conflict and learn, repair	Being conflict-avoidant or letting conflicts explode but never reach resolution
Clarity about procedures	Confusion
Human pace with clear priorities and realistic expectations	Rushed pace
Transparency	Secrecy
Generous	Having a scarcity mind-set, penny-pinching

Real contradictions exist in the above chart. We want to be flexible, and we also want to have a culture of responsiveness, reliability, and punctuality. How do we work to cultivate both? Most of us, having received our concept of responsibility from dominant culture, associate it with being forced, lured, or shamed into being "good," ignoring our needs, and fearing punishment if we do wrong. How do we hold our values of flexibility, compassion, and justice while building a culture where we show up and do what we said we would? These tensions are real. If we do not talk about them together, we run the risk of falling into automatic behaviors, driving out new people, and falling apart. Creating a group culture intentionally, and having a shared vision about how we want it to be does not mean we all need to be just like each other. We can acknowledge differences in our capacities, talents, desires, and difficulties and still aim to create a culture where we support each other in the work, learn new skills, and are connected and kind to each other. The goal is not that everyone be similar, but that we all complement each other and build some shared practices based in shared values.

MADR's slogan is "No Masters, No Flakes," and it's a great summary of key principles for collective mutual aid work. This dual focus on rejecting hierarchies inside the organization and committing to

build accountability according to shared values asks participants to keep showing up and working together not because a boss is making you, but because you want to.

Making Decisions Together

Perhaps the most central group activity that makes everything else possible is making decisions. When we do it well, we make good decisions on the basis of the best information available, we feel heard by each other, and we are all motivated to implement what we decided. When we do it poorly, our decisions are unwise, some people are left resentful or hurt or disconnected from the group, and there is less motivation to proceed together on purpose.

Most of us have little experience in groups where everyone gets to make decisions together, because our schools, homes, workplaces, congregations, and other groups are mostly run as hierarchies. Our society runs on coercion. You have to work or go to school and follow rules and laws that you had no say in creating, whether you believe in them or not, or risk exclusion, stigma, starvation, or punishment. We do not get to consent to the conditions we live under. Bosses, corporations, and government officials make decisions that impoverish most people, pollute our planet, concentrate wealth, and start wars. We are only practiced at being allowed to make decisions as individual consumers, and rarely get practice making truly collective decisions. We are told we live in a system of "majority rule," yet there is rarely anyone to vote for who is not owned by—or part of— the 1 percent, and the decisions those leaders make do not benefit the majority of people.

The opposite of this approach to decision-making is to make decisions together, caring about every person's consent. This practice is called consensus decision-making. Unlike representative government, consensus decision-making lets us have a say in things that matter to us directly, instead of electing someone who may or may not advocate on our behalf. Consensus decision-making is a radical practice for building a new world not based on domination and coercion.

It's important to remember that no decision-making structure can prevent all conflict or power dynamics, or guarantee that we will never be frustrated or bored or decide to part ways. But consensus decision-making at least helps us avoid the worst costs of hierarchies and majority rule, which can include abuse of power, demobilization of most people, and inefficiency. Consensus decision-making gives us the best chance to hear from everyone concerned, address power dynamics, and make decisions that represent the best wisdom of the group and that people in the group will want to implement.

What Is Consensus Decision-Making?

Consensus decision-making is based on the idea that everyone should have a say in decisions that affect them. If we are working on a project together, we should all get to decide how we are going to do the work, rather than someone telling us how to do it. We will honor people's different levels of experience and wisdom as we listen to each other's ideas, but we will not follow someone just because they act bossy, got here first, or have a higher social status in the dominant culture because they are a professional, white, older, male, formally educated, etc. Consensus decision-making happens when everyone in the discussion hashes out possibilities and modifies a proposal until everyone can live with it. Consensus is cooperative rather than adversarial. When we use "majority

rule," the goal is to get as many people as possible to prefer your approach to another, and to "win" by getting things your way. That means that we disregard the needs and concerns of anyone who cannot muster majority support. Consensus encourages us to find out what each other's concerns are and try to create a path forward that addresses *all* the concerns as well as possible. It is based on the belief that people can cooperate and care about each other's well-being, rather than the myth that we are naturally competitive and greedy.

Consensus cultivates interest in the whole group's purpose and wellness, rather than cultivating a desire to have things exactly "my way." In consensus, any participant can block a decision, so we take time to actually talk through each member's concerns because we cannot move forward without each other. Because we are trying to build agreement by modifying the proposal until it comes as close as possible to meeting the full range of needs and concerns, we also build the skill of making decisions with group members and community members in mind, not just ourselves or our cliques, and being okay with something that is not our most preferred version going forward. That is, we learn to imagine how decisions affect all of us differently, and how to productively move forward taking other people's needs and desires into account. People can "stand aside" in consensus processes, letting others know that while they are not totally behind this proposal, they agree it is best for the group to go forward with the decision, given all the views that have been expressed and the efforts made to address concerns.
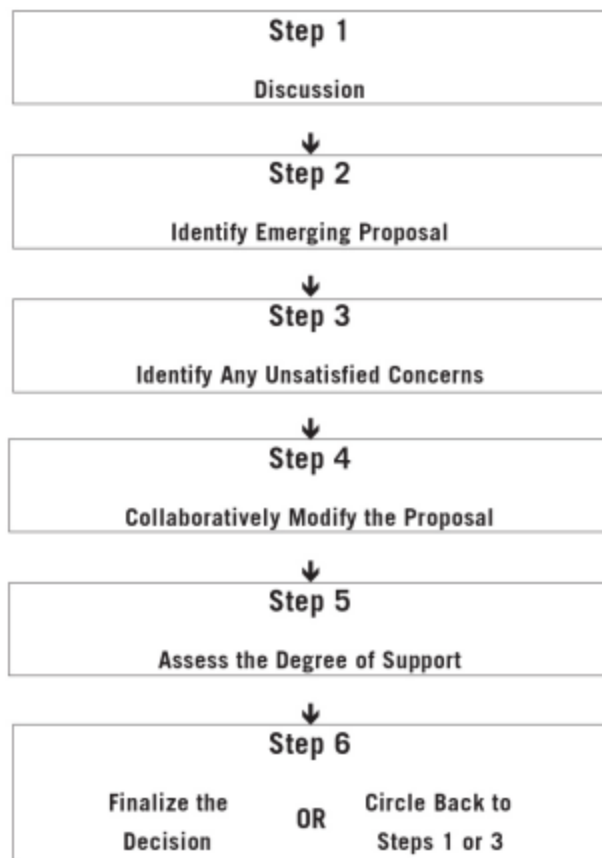
Here's an example of what consensus could ideally look like: Over a period of time, a group has hashed out a proposal, heard concerns in collective discussions, and tweaked it until it seems like everyone may be ready to agree. Someone then calls for consensus and checks to see if there are any "stand asides"—those who want to signify disagreement but don't want to block the proposal from moving forward—or "blocks"—those with disagreements significant enough that they feel the proposal cannot be passed without modification. If there are blocks, it means the proposal needs more work. The person or people blocking can share their concerns, and the group can either work further on modifying the proposal then and there, or have some people work on it and come up with a way forward before the next meeting. If no one blocks, but many people stand aside, the group may decide to discuss the reasons for the stand asides for a bit longer and see if they can be resolved by making the proposal better. If someone finds themselves blocking a lot, it may be worth examining whether they are in the right group—do they believe in the shared purpose?—or whether they are withholding their views earlier in the process, or feeling not listened to in the group. In general, blocking should be rare.

It is worth noting that this process often unfolds over multiple meetings, with Step 1 happening at one meeting and a group of people agreeing to come to the next meeting with a developed proposal to be discussed.

Consensus decision-making does not mean that every decision is made by the whole group. Decisions can still be delegated to teams working on implementing part of the group's larger plan. For example, if the group does grocery deliveries, a specific team can work on filling out the delivery schedule and assignments. Sorting out what decisions are delegated to teams and what is a wholegroup decision will be discussed below.

This chart summarizes the consensus process:

Chart 5. Basic Steps to Consensus Decision-Making

Step 1

Discussion

↓

Step 2

Identify Emerging Proposal

↓

Step 3

Identify Any Unsatisfied Concerns

↓

Step 4

Collaboratively Modify the Proposal

↓

Step 5

Assess the Degree of Support

↓

Step 6

Finalize the Decision   OR   Circle Back to Steps 1 or 3

For consensus to work well, people need a common purpose; some degree of trust in each other; an understanding of the consensus process; a willingness to put the best interests of the group at the center (which does not mean people let themselves be harmed "for the good of the group," but may mean being okay not always getting their way); a willingness to spend time preparing and discussing proposals; and skillful facilitation and agenda preparation. These skills and qualities can develop as any new group learns to work together—it is okay that we don't have all these in place at the start. The greatest area of strength for most mutual aid groups is a common purpose.

Advantages of Consensus Decision-Making

1. Better Decisions

When more people get to talk through a decision openly, sharing their insight without fear of reprisal from a boss, parent, or teacher, more relevant information and wisdom about the topic is likely to surface. In hierarchical organizations, people are discouraged from sharing their opinion either because no one is listening or because they could experience negative consequences for disagreeing. Because hierarchy is so ingrained in our culture, people on top often fall into dominance behaviors without meaning to, assuming the superiority of their ideas, not taking other's opinions seriously, or unilaterally making decisions and telling others to implement them. If we are trying to

build a world where people have collective self-determination, where we get to make justice-centered decisions together about land, work, housing, water, minerals, energy, food, and everything else that matters, we need to practice new skills beyond dominance and submission in decision-making.

2. Better Implementation

When other people make decisions for us and we don't get to raise concerns or disagreements, we are less likely to want to implement them. This happens all the time at workplaces. Bosses decide how things will be done, and employees think the method is wrong or that the wrong priorities were chosen, so they drag their feet doing the work, or do it differently, or don't do it at all. In volunteer groups, people who don't get to have a say in decisions are likely to just leave, because, unlike employees, they have no incentive to stay if the work does not align with their principles or feel meaningful to them. When we get to look at a proposal together and tell each other how it might be improved, hashing out our best ideas until we have something that we all like or at least can live with, we are more likely to vigorously do what we all decided, instead of drifting apart or failing to follow through.

3. Bringing More People into the Work and Keeping Them Involved

When someone shows up to a mutual aid group for the first time, full of urgency about something they care about, and they do not understand why things are being done the way they are, or do not understand how things are being done, and do not have a way to share their opinions and influence what is happening, they are likely to leave. People come to contribute, but they stay because they feel needed, included, and a part of something. Nonprofits often offer very limited ways for volunteers to participate. You can donate money, or maybe stuff envelopes, phonebank, or hand something out at a parade or event. Volunteers' relationships to those groups are usually thin—they don't have much influence in the group, and while they may get some satisfaction from feeling like they helped, they are not doing the core of the work.

Mutual aid groups, on the other hand, give people a way to build a deep relationship to the work and to feel the power of doing important, bold survival work together. The relations between a mutual aid group and the people in it, then, is thick—it includes shared stewardship of the group, and a chance to consider and influence the project as a whole, even if the focus is on one specific task like delivering the groceries or answering the hotline.

4. Helping to Prevent Co-optation

Co-optation of projects and groups often starts with the co-optation of individual people, often charismatic leaders or founders of projects, who get bought off by elites through access to increased funding, influence, a job, or other forms of status. When a small number of people have the power to shift the direction of a project, it can be hard to resist the incentives that come with co-optation. Often, leaders are not the most vulnerable of the group's members, because being regarded as "persuasive," "important," or "authoritative" relates to race, gender, age, language, and educational attainment. As a result, a single individual or small group running a project may not be the same people who have the most to lose if the project veers toward elite interests. It is the most vulnerable of the participants who are most likely to have objections to the shifts that come with co-optation, such as new eligibility requirements that cut out stigmatized groups, or a new cozy relationship with law enforcement or philanthropists.

Given these dynamics, some mutual aid groups establish explicit criteria or guidelines designed to make sure certain perspectives that are often otherwise left out or marginalized are heard, such as agreeing that decisions that break down around identity lines (for example, most of the group's women or currently undocumented people oppose a certain proposal) will be reevaluated to assess a proposal's alignment with the group's core principles. Some groups establish quotas about members of decision-making bodies within the group, ensuring that groups particularly likely to be left out are well represented in those bodies.

5. We Learn to Value and Desire Other People's Participation

In addition to avoiding the problem of having majorities vote down minorities and silence vulnerable groups, consensus decision-making establishes a culture of desiring others' participation. Decision-making systems focused on competition—on getting my idea to be the one that wins—cultivate disinterest in other people's participation. Consensus decision-making requires participants to bring forward proposals to be discussed and modified until everyone is sufficiently satisfied that no one will block the proposal. This means participants get to practice wanting to hear other people's concerns and other people's creative approaches to resolving them. If the goal of our movements is to mobilize hundreds of millions of people, we need to genuinely want others' participation, even when others bring different ideas or disagree with how we think things should be done. Most people will not stay and commit to intense unpaid work if they get little say in shaping that work. We need ways of practicing wanting one another's participation, not just going along with what charismatic or authoritative people say. In our culture, we get a lot of practice either going along with bossy people or trying to be the boss. It's time to learn something different.

Making Consensus Decision-Making Efficient and Effective

Here are five practices that set up efficient, effective consensus decision-making:

1. Creating Teams
2. Creating a Decision-Making Chart
3. Practicing Proposal-Making
4. Practicing Meeting Facilitation
5. Welcoming New People

1. Creating teams

When mutual aid projects are just getting off the ground, they often have only a few people in them. With a small number of people—five or less—it can be relatively quick and easy to discuss everything together. As things get off the ground and more people join, it can be very useful to create teams working on short- or long-term projects that report back to the larger group for input on proposals or to submit proposals for the group to decide on. Teams or pairs can come together to do quick tasks between meetings, or a team can form as a long-term body within the group. For example, an emerging project doing neighborhood grocery delivery for immunocompromised people may break off a small research team to find out about best practices for sanitizing groceries between purchase and delivery and bring back those ideas to the big group meeting. They may also create a standing team that manages the requests for support coming in through the group's social media platforms and online request form, and a team that assigns the deliveries. Groups can form teams

as they go, then change them, meld them, or break them into multiple teams as conditions change and experiences inform the group.

Having teams and knowing who is on them can help delegate work so that it doesn't fall on only a few people. It can help people who are new to the group know how to plug in and get started doing something useful because it makes the process by which work happens more transparent. It can help work get done between meetings because people can work out details and present proposals based on information they gathered and discussed with their team. It can also help prevent decision-making from getting bottlenecked at the whole group level, if teams are authorized to develop and implement certain parts of the work according to the whole group's plans and principles. The larger and more complex groups get, the more it may also make sense to do more in-depth planning, such as planning out the next six months of work and getting the whole group's approval of that plan so that each team can then manage its part of the whole.

2. Creating a decision-making chart

A great way to prevent conflict and gain the efficiency and productivity that task-specific teams can provide is to have a decision-making chart that lets people know which decisions can happen in teams and which are whole-group decisions. No decision-making chart can anticipate every single possible decision a group can make, but putting some big ones on there—especially ones more likely to be sensitive or cause conflict—can help groups make decisions according to their principles. Decision-making charts should always be considered to be working documents. As groups try them out, they find out what is working and what isn't, and make changes accordingly.

Below is a sample decision-making chart for our example group that delivers groceries to immunocompromised people in the neighborhood. Mine looks like a table, but it could really look like anything, include any categories, or be made in whatever way meets a group's needs. It could be designed as a flow chart, a flower chart, circles, an ecosystem, or whatever makes sense to the group.

Chart 6. Sample decision-making chart.

Decision	Who initiates?	Who needs to be consulted?	Who can finalize the decision?	Who needs to be informed and how?

Adding a new weekday for deliveries	Delivery Team (or anyone can propose to Delivery Team)	Whole group at monthly meeting	Delivery Team	Whole group by email and again at monthly meeting
Responding to media inquiry	Communications Team	Communications Team can reach out to anyone they need for quotes or an interview	Communications Team	Report what the request was and how it was met, and any results, to whole group by email and at monthly meeting

One common problem that groups address in these charts is how to make fast-paced decisions, such as responding to media requests or a coalition request to sign on to a letter or event that needs an immediate response. Having a team or subgroup that is authorized by the group to do a quick turnaround in these situations can help groups stay responsive while being grounded in a clear process. A quick-response group that has two or three people who are well-versed in the group's principles can tell if something is easy to respond to quickly, or if it is more complex and needs to go to a larger group for a decision. The quick-response group is also responsible for letting the whole group know immediately what quick decision was made so that others in the group are not surprised to find out, for example, the group has offered an endorsement, and so that people can offer input if they disagree with that particular call. It can be beneficial to have the quick-response group be a rotating role so that everyone gains experience and no person or team becomes the group's default deciders.

Some other items that might go on a decision-making chart:

- Decisions about applying for or taking money
- Decisions about spending money

- Decisions about increasing the work in some significant way (a new location, a new program, a new curriculum, a strategy for reaching a new population)
- Decisions to end some part of the work
- Decisions to add new people or join larger groups or coalitions
- Decisions to ask people to leave or about the group leaving larger groups or coalitions
- Decisions about endorsing something or someone
- Decision to create a new paid role, eliminate a paid role, hire someone, or fire someone

These are all decisions that I have repeatedly seen produce conflict in groups, when someone—often a charismatic leader or founder—has made the decision without consulting others and without a clear process. Not every decision a group makes will go on the chart, but having a chart that lists some decisions can help orient new members to how decision-making works, increase transparency and consistency, and prevent conflict.

3. Practicing Proposal-Making

We all do the Proposal → Discussion → Modifications → Consensus process informally in social settings: I say I want to go out for dinner. My friend suggests the place on the corner. I say it's too loud there, how about the old place? We agree. When dealing with more complex decisions involving more people, it helps to actually think of the decision as a proposal and develop it before the meeting.

For example, if our group has realized we need a database to track all the people calling our hotline, and that we need it to be relatively secure because our callers are undocumented and criminalized, and that we need it to be useable by people with a broad range of computer experience, we might ask some group members to research existing options and come back with a proposal that we can discuss. They will present what they learned, tell us the pros and cons of various approaches, and propose what they think is the best solution. Now the next conversation we have can be based on good, well-researched information.

Treating something like a proposal rather than just an idea or a preference means that group members take the time to think through and research options, so that the whole group doesn't become mired in speculation or very small details. For example, if our group wants to plan a fundraiser for someone's transition from prison to life outside, we might have a subgroup or team work on a plan for the party that includes location, date, time, performances, outreach strategy, accessibility, and other details, and bring that back to the next meeting for everyone to discuss and modify. The process would be much slower if as a large group we talked at length about all the details.

What happens when we discuss a proposal in our meeting and we do not come to agreement? Usually, if the group thinks we eventually need to figure this thing out (for example, we still need a database but we have outstanding questions about the options, or we still want to have the party but we realize we don't know how much time our favorite performers need on the program), the proposal can go back for further development. It need not go back to the same people. Perhaps someone new wants to take it on and address the outstanding questions because they have access to helpful information, or they have a good sense of the criteria that we are looking to meet, or they have time between meetings to do this next step. Decision-making works better if, rather than anyone seeing it as "my proposal," we can see it as the group's proposal. That way we are less likely to become rigidly attached to one outcome.

One helpful tool is for a group to have a proposal template. This can especially help new people know how to get their ideas heard if they have never been in a group that used a consensus process. Some groups keep this kind of template in a shared folder (paper or electronic) so that everyone can access it. A proposal template could be as simple as the following:

- What problem does this proposal address?
- What is the solution being proposed?
- What teams might this proposal involve, and do you want to run it by any of them before bringing it to the whole group?
- Is there any research that could help flesh out this proposal before people consider it?

You might also add a statement of the group's shared purpose to the proposal, since that guides group decisions. Some groups also add questions that the group has decided should always be addressed when moving forward, such as, "How will this proposal affect access to our project for people with disabilities?" or "Does this proposal include any financial costs, and if so what are they?"

4. Practicing Meeting Facilitation

How well or poorly we facilitate meetings will make or break our groups. Skillful facilitation helps us make decisions together, feel heard and included by each other, prevent and resolve conflict, celebrate our accomplishments and wins, grieve our losses, and become people who can be together in new, more liberating relationships. Bad facilitation can make meetings boring, exhausting, oppressive, and damaging to individuals and groups. Most of us have never been to well-facilitated meetings, so we don't know how to create them without help from someone who has more experience in how to do it. In other words, it's worth putting some attention to meeting facilitation in your group—and if no one in your group has that experience, I hope the tools below and other resources available online can help guide all of you as you decide what works best for your group.

Some very basic elements of good meeting facilitation worth considering are:

- Start and end on time.
- Write out an agenda (a list of what the group will talk about at the meeting). If possible, circulate it to attendees ahead of time so they can add items they want to discuss. At the beginning of the meeting, ask again if there are missing items. If there are too many items for the time allotted, work with the group to decide what can be discussed next time or by a team in between regular meetings.
- Assign a note-taker who will take notes that the group can refer back to or share with people who couldn't be at the meeting. Sometimes it is nice to dedicate a space in the notes for a task list where, as we go, we write down which tasks people have agreed to do. This can be a good reference for group members between meetings and be reviewed at the start of the next meeting to see if anything was left unfinished that needs attention.
- Assign each agenda item a time amount and have a time-keeper watch the time so the group doesn't end up running the meeting too long or not getting to important items.
- Provide food, beverages, poetry, a game, or music. Also consider opening with a go-round check-in question that is funny or invites people's personalities to shine a little. We don't want to be over-serious. We're here to work but also to know and enjoy each other!
- To help the meeting be a participatory and supportive space, establish group agreements. The group can agree, for example, that each person will wait for three other people to speak

before speaking again (sometimes called "three before me") or that they will respect people's pronouns, or whatever else the group decides will create a caring and respectful space. Go over these agreements at the beginning of each meeting and make sure newcomers understand them and get to ask questions or suggest additions.

- When talking about something important, if time allows, consider a go-round so that the group hears from everyone. This is especially important if the same people are usually talking and others are usually quiet.

One way to establish some group norms about facilitation is to have an agenda template. This also helps people who are facilitating or making an agenda for the first time. An agenda template may look like the following:

Chart 7. Agenda template.

Date:	Note-Taker:	Time-Keeper:	Meeting Facilitator:	Attendees:
Topic		**Time**	**Facilitator or Presenter**	
Intros and Check-In Go-Around		10 min.		
Agenda Review		3 min.		
Topic A		20 min.		
Topic B		15 min.		
Closing Go-Around		10 min.		

Ahead of the meeting, facilitators are responsible for thinking through how much time agenda items need, how to refresh the group on any decision-making processes that the group has agreed to so everyone is oriented, and how to create a warm and participatory culture in the meeting. Facilitators often sort out these questions in conversations with others, such as by asking people who proposed things for the agenda how much time they need and how urgent it is that the item be discussed at this meeting, by finding out if new people are expected to come to this meeting, or by asking for help in any aspect of agenda preparation.

Group dynamics are improved if facilitation rotates in the group along with other roles like notetaking and time-keeping, so that people can learn new skills and power dynamics don't stagnate and rigidify. When new people are asked to take on these roles, they should be given support and guidance so they can have a satisfying experience of serving the group in this way. Some groups find it beneficial to have all meetings co-facilitated by two people.

People show up in groups to do important work, but we show up as our whole selves, not work robots. We are social beings who evolved in groups, and we have deep, ingrained desires for safety, dignity, and a sense of belonging when we are with others. Good facilitation lets us satisfy these desires, even in the presence of conflict and difference.

5. Welcoming New People

If we are going to win the big changes that we want and need so that people can live with dignity and we can sustain human life on our planet, we need to organize hundreds of millions of people who are not yet politically active to take bold collective action together. We will never have as much money and weapons as our opponents. All we have is people power. We need to support people who have not been part of social movement work to join social movements. They need to feel like they can become part of a response to conditions that they find intolerable.

Mutual aid is the best onramp for getting people involved in transformative action because they get to address things harming them and their communities right away. To harness new people's energy and capacity for collective action, our groups need to be ready to welcome them and, to paraphrase Toni Cade Bambara, make resistance irresistible. We want them to join groups, have satisfying experiences of taking action, build new skills, develop their own political understanding of injustice, and stay in the resistance movement for the rest of their lives. Movements grow because new people join groups and feel co-ownership and co-stewardship of the work, and then recruit other people and orient them so they get deep in too, and on and on.

Some things that help make groups and meetings accessible and interesting to new people include:

- Giving new people a chance to share why they care about the issues and came to the group— many people are seeking to break their own isolation and find a space where they can be heard and be part of a shared understanding of the root causes of injustice.
- Making meeting discussions as accessible as possible to new people by providing a background of the problems the group is addressing and the group's activities so far; avoiding jargon, acronyms, and overly technical theoretical language.
- Giving new people a chance to share their ideas, even if the group has thought about those ideas before.
- Making the group's facilitation process transparent to new people so they don't feel lost about what is going on or being discussed.
- Making sure someone follows up with each new person after their first meeting to find out if they have questions, how they want to plug into the work, and if there is anything that would make the group more welcoming to them.
- Making careful decisions about agenda items and activities at meetings focused on orienting new people, since some detailed group discussions that need to happen about ongoing work might not be the most accessible to newbies.
- Helping new people plug into a clear role or task as soon as possible so they feel a part of things.

One harsh reality in our currently under-developed, under-peopled, under-resourced movements is that sometimes we are tired from doing all the work, and sometimes we have feelings of resentment that more people aren't engaged. When we greet new people with exhaustion and resentment, we rarely succeed in making participation in our group irresistible. Making our meetings welcoming, fun, warm, and energizing; making space for people to feel their rage and grief about the issues we are organizing around; and cultivating care and connection with one another strengthen the group and make the work more sustainable, in addition to supporting the well-being of all the participants.

Leadership Qualities That Support Mutuality and Collaboration

One thing we need to do to create strong, sustainable mutual aid projects is shed the baggage of what we are told "leadership" is in a racist, colonial, patriarchal society. That model is usually about individuality, competition, and domination. We often think of leaders as people in the spotlight, holding the mic. To win big, we need to build leaderless and leaderful groups. This means we want lots and lots of people involved, all of whom are building skills that help them do the work and bring new people into the work. We want transparency in our groups, so that our opposition can't mess up our work by just neutralizing or co-opting one person. We want everyone to have the strength and skills to lead. The chart on the following pages can be a tool for individuals and groups to reflect on what we've been taught about leadership and how to redefine it for ourselves.

Chart 8. Leadership Qualities

Domineering Leadership	Cooperative Leadership
"Success" defined by dominating others or being the decider	Supports the growth of decision-making processes that include everyone affected by the decision
"My way or the highway" attitude	Wants to find out how others are doing, what they need or believe, what they want
Self-promoting	Eager to help many people develop leadership skills and share the spotlight, able to assess when some things should be done under the radar rather than seeking attention
Concerned with maintaining reputation, looking like "the best," looking "right"	Willing to admit mistakes

Arrogant and superior	Humble and dignified
Good at talking and commanding	Good at communicating: sharing and listening
Wins others' support through status, fear, or because others see them as most powerful	Wins support by being supportive, consistent, trustworthy
Certain they are right	Open to influence and changing their opinion
Concerned about the reputation of group with media or elites	Concerned about the group's material impact—does it alleviate suffering and increase justice?
Fosters competition in the group	Fosters compassion and a desire that no one is left out of the group
Suspicious of new people	Generous and open to newcomers while holding clear principles and boundaries
Impulsive—plans change with their whims	Holds steady to the groups' decisions and purpose; reliable

Judgmental and quick to exclude others who aren't like them or who disagree	Can tolerate people being different in a lot of ways; sees potential in people to become part of the work for change and helps them develop skills and abilities
Gets their sense of self from status	Self-accepting and steady in sense of self, and so able to take risks or hold unpopular opinions
Cares most about what elites think	Cares most about what those on the bottom of hierarchies think and know; works to cultivate authenticity
Needs to be the center of attention	Can take the risk of being seen, can step back so others can be seen
Tells people what to do	Avoids advice-giving unless asked, interested in supporting people to make decisions that align with their values
Seeks immediate gains, even if it means big compromises	Sees the long view and holds to values
Gives demeaning feedback or fails to give feedback; gossips instead of giving direct feedback	Gives direct feedback in a compassionate way

Defensive, closed to feedback	Open to feedback, interested in how they impact others
Controlling, micromanaging	Can delegate, can ask for help, wants more people's participation rather than more control
Outcome-oriented	Supports processes with integrity that lead to more people participating in decision-making
Seeks and demands to feel comfortable at the expense of others feeling uncomfortable	Interested in what can be learned from discomfort, from changing roles or being out of place, from conditions transforming

Ways to use this chart:

1. Write or talk in your group about what is missing from these lists.

2. Circle qualities you see in yourself that you are working to cultivate and grow. What might help them grow?

3. Circle qualities you see in yourself that are obstacles to you practicing cooperative leadership or that don't fit your values. Where did you learn those qualities? How have they served you? How have they gotten in the way of what you want or believe in? What helps you move toward acting in greater alignment with your values?

4. Notice qualities that are prevalent in groups you are in. What could help cultivate qualities you think are beneficial and reduce ones that are harmful?

A Cautionary Note on Fame

Social media has encouraged our individualism and has enhanced the desire to "brand" ourselves as radical or as having the "right" politics. It is in the interest of corporations like Facebook and Twitter that we spend as much time as possible creating free content for them, and that we feel compelled to get approval on their platforms. All of this can motivate us to want to be perceived to be doing things, rather than actually doing them. Much mutual aid work is very ordinary, sometimes

boring, and often difficult. To return to an earlier example, everyone wants a selfie with Angela Davis to post, but many people do not want to take the time to visit prisoners, go to court with people, wait in long lines at welfare offices, write letters to people in solitary confinement, deliver groceries to an elderly neighbor, or spend many hours in meetings about how to coordinate care for people in need.

When we get our sense of self from fame, status, or approval from a bunch of strangers, we're in trouble. It is hard to stick to our principles and treat others well when we are seeking praise and attention. If we are to redefine leadership away from individualism, competition, and social climbing, we have to become people who care about ourselves as part of the greater whole. It means moving from materialist self-love, which is often very self-critical ("I will be okay and deserve love when I look right, when others approve of me, when I am famous") and toward a deep belief that everyone, including ourselves, deserves dignity, belonging, and safety just because we are alive. It means cultivating a desire to be beautifully, exquisitely ordinary just like everyone else. It means practicing to be nobody special. Rather than a fantasy of being rich and famous, which capitalism tells us is the goal of our lives, we cultivate a fantasy of everyone having what they need and being able to creatively express the beauty of their lives.

This is a lifelong unlearning practice because we have all been shaped by systems that make us insecure, approval-seeking, individualist, and sometimes shallow. Yet we also all have the deeply human desire to connect with others, to be of service in ways that reduce suffering, and to be seen and loved by those who truly know us and whom we love. Mutual aid groups are a place where we can notice these learned instincts and drives in ourselves and unlearn them—that is, make choices to act out of mutuality and care *on purpose*.

Handling money

Handling money can be one of the most contentious issues for mutual aid groups. Because of this, it can be very useful for groups to consider whether this is something they want to do. Some groups can do their work without raising money at all. Some groups can do their work just raising money through grassroots fundraising in their communities, taking small donations from many people. That kind of fundraising can avoid the problem with grant-making foundations attaching strings to grant money and trying to control the direction of the work. Grassroots fundraising can help build a sense that the community controls the organizations rather than an elite funder, and doing grassroots fundraising can be a way of spreading the ideas of the group and raising awareness about the problems the group works on. However, even if money is raised in this way, managing money still comes with pitfalls.

Handling money brings logistical issues that can cause stress and take time, such as figuring out how to do it fairly and transparently and figuring out how to avoid a problem with the IRS or otherwise expose group members to legal problems. Because most people in our society have a tangled, painful relationship with money that includes feelings and behaviors of secrecy, shame, and desperation, a lot of otherwise awesome people will misbehave when money is around or get suspicious of others' behavior.

Sometimes groups want funds so they can pay people to do the work. When groups have no staff, it can be a challenge to do mutual aid work that has to take place during typical workday times, such as accompanying people to courts or social service offices. Staffing can increase capacity to provide

aid. But it is worth weighing some of the challenges that paid staffing can bring. When groups that have operated on an all-volunteer basis get money to pay staff, there is a greater danger of institutionalization and pandering to funders, because someone's livelihood will be impacted if they lose the funders' favor. Groups can lose their autonomy, feeling pressured to direct their work toward fundable projects or put time into measuring their work and reporting it according to funders' demands, rather than doing the work the way they think is most effective.

To get funding, groups may want to become nonprofits by applying to the IRS, or get a nonprofit fiscal sponsor so that they can receive grants and/or tax-deductible donations. The downside is that this requires financial tracking and administration skills. Becoming a nonprofit sometimes concentrates power in the hands of people who have had more access to these skills and systems, such as white people, people with more formal education, and people with professional experience, especially when having those skills becomes a prerequisite for getting hired as staff. It also may bring government attention and funder surveillance to the group and cultivate a culture of timidity or risk aversion. In addition, when groups are dependent on funders, they have an incentive to declare false victories or stick to strategies they have followed to win funding in the past, even if those strategies are not working toward their purpose anymore. We see this problem frequently in the nonprofit sector, where an organization will purport to serve some population's needs but in reality serve only a small number of people—yet the public story is that they have it covered. This can prevent new organizations from emerging that can truly address more of the population's need. When groups are volunteer-based, people are more likely to admit their limitations and scrap bad ideas, because they are motivated by purpose, not elite approval.

Another pitfall of hiring paid staff is that when groups become staffed, unpaid volunteers in the group sometimes expect that staff person or few staff people to suddenly do *all* the work, and volunteers sometimes check out (especially if they felt overworked before the group started paying staff). This can make the group vulnerable to a loss of capacity, to becoming governed by just a few staffers, and to burnout and overwork of those staffers. It can also be a setup for new staffers to be heavily criticized and considered to be "failures" because they are overloaded with responsibilities. In some groups, where people from the most impacted communities are hired, and they are the same people who have the least formal work experience in professional settings, this can be a particularly cruel setup.

There can certainly be good reasons to seek funding and have paid staff roles, but these steps should be taken with caution and with a focus on building transparent and accountable systems regarding money and decision-making. At least two people should always be working together on tracking funds to help prevent theft. How money is earned and spent should be clear to all group participants. The group's values should guide how money is spent—for example, the group should ensure that staff are paid fairly and equally rather than on the basis of the privileged status that comes with a professional degree, and should ensure that people are not pressured to overwork. Having clear and transparent budgeting and planning processes that can be understood by all participants, including people with no prior experience with such processes, so everyone can weigh in and make decisions together will help prevent the group from shrinking to become staff-centered, small, and likely less mobilizing and relevant. The more that people in the group can be aware of the dangers of institutionalization and philanthropic control, the more likely the group can stay committed to its purpose and principles when handling money.

Burnout

Burnout is a reason people often give for why they leave mutual aid groups. Burnout is more than just exhaustion that comes from working too hard. Most often, people I meet who describe themselves as burnt out have been through painful conflict in a group they were working with and quit because they were hurt and unsatisfied by how it turned out. Burnout is the combination of resentment, exhaustion, shame, and frustration that make us lose connection to pleasure and passion in the work and instead encounter difficult feelings like avoidance, compulsion, control, and anxiety. If it were just exhaustion, we could take a break and rest and go back, but people who feel burnt out often feel they cannot return to the work, or that the group or work they were part of is toxic.

These feelings and behaviors are reasonable results of the conditions under which we do our work. We are steeped in a capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist culture that encourages us to compete, distrust, hoard, hide, disconnect, and confine our value to how others see us and what we produce. Our work is under-resourced in important ways. Many of us come to the work because of our own experiences of poverty or violence, and doing this work can activate old wounds and survival responses. We come to the work to heal ourselves and the world, but we often do the work in ways that further harm ourselves and impede our contribution to the resistance. When our groups are focused on getting important things done "out there," there is rarely room to process our strong feelings or admit that we do not know how to navigate our roles "in here."

Burnout is created or worsened when we feel disconnected from others, mistreated, misunderstood, ashamed, overburdened, obsessed with outcomes, perfectionist, or controlling. Burnout is prevented or lessened when we feel connected to others, when there is transparency in how we work together, when we can rest as needed, when we feel appreciated by the group, and when we have skills for giving and receiving feedback. There are several things that groups can do to cultivate conditions that prevent, reduce, or respond to burnout, and there are things that individuals experiencing burnout can do. Before people who are burnt out leave groups, they often cause a lot of disruption and damage, so this section is also aimed at reducing the harm that burnt-out or overworked people can cause. Figuring out how to have a more balanced relationship to work and overwork is a matter of both individual healing and collective stewardship of the group.

Signs of Overwork and Burnout

- High stress when thinking about tasks being performed by someone else who might do it differently, or the group coming to a different decision than we would make.
- Feelings of resentment: "I've done the most for this group" or "I work harder than anyone else." This can include creating a damaging group culture of competition about who works the hardest.
- Not respecting group agreements or group process because we feel above the process as the founder or the hardest worker.
- Feelings of competition with other groups that are politically aligned or with other issues or activists that we perceive as receiving more support.
- Feelings of martyrdom.
- Desire to endlessly be given credit for our work.

- A desire to take on tasks and responsibilities in order to "be important" to the group or control outcomes.
- Feeling overwhelmed or experiencing depression and/or anxiety.
- Feeling like we "have to" do all these things, cannot see any way to do less work or have less responsibility.
- Inability to let others take on leadership roles.
- Hoarding information or important contacts so that others cannot rise to the same level of leadership (this behavior is usually rationalized in some way).
- A life-and-death feeling that "it *must* be done the way I do it." An extreme version of this can result in leaders sabotaging the group or project rather than recognizing that it may be time to step back and take a break from leadership.
- Paranoia and distrust about others in the group or other people working in this kind of work. Feelings of being alone. Feelings of "me against [members of the group/other groups/everyone]."
- Over-promising and under-delivering, which can lead to feeling fraudulent and afraid of being caught so far behind.
- Having feelings of scarcity drive decision-making: "There's not enough money/time/attention."
- Having no boundaries with work—working all the time, during meals, first thing upon waking and last before sleeping, during time that was supposed to be for connecting with loved ones. Not knowing how to do anything besides work. Not having fun or feeling relaxed on vacation or days off.
- Dismissal of the significance of group process and overvaluation of how the group is perceived by outsiders such as funders, elites, and others.
- Being flaky or unreliable.
- Being defensive about all of the above and unwilling to hear critique. "I'm doing so much, I'm killing myself with work. How can you critique me? I can't possibly do any better/more!"
- Shame about experiencing all of the above.

We also carry around fallback attitudes and behaviors that can undermine our principles, especially when we are stressed out and over capacity. These can be behaviors we learned from dominant culture and also roles we learned in our families. When we are stressed and overworked, these things can come out in damaging ways. It can mean we misuse or obstruct group processes, disappear from the work, or act from a place of superiority or dominance on the basis of gender, race, ability, class, or educational attainment.

How Mutual Aid Groups Can Prevent and Address Overwork and Burnout

Overwork is pervasive in mutual aid groups, and if we can move away from shaming and blaming ourselves and others and toward acknowledging it, we can support change. It is hard to confront another person about behavior that is harmful, and it is hard to be confronted about harmful behavior and listen to what is being said. The ideas below do not change that, but they may help individuals or groups create concrete steps to address the problems.

1. Make internal problems a top priority. The group cannot do its important work if it is falling apart inside, and it cannot do its work well if it is promising to do work it does not have the capacity to do. The internal concerns cannot wait until later, because the giant need the group exists to fill is probably not going to be reduced in the immediate future. This does not mean the group's work needs to stop, but it may mean calling a moratorium on new projects and commitments so that the situation does not worsen, and so that people can carve out time for working on internal problems.

Groups working on internal problems might seek any of the following resources:

- Training in meeting facilitation, decision-making, consensus process, active listening, giving and receiving direct feedback.
- Facilitated discussions and training about how racism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and other systems of meaning and control affect group development and culture, and how to change that.
- Collective planning of the group's work so that participants build shared clarity on what the priorities are and what they have agreed to do and not to do together.
- Creating work plans for teams and/or individuals to figure out how to assign work fairly, assess workload, and plan out a reasonable pace of work.
- Conflict mediation between particular people or groups working with a facilitator who understands the group's values and whom the people in conflict trust and/or see as relatively neutral.
- Work on building transparency in the group so that people know what each other are doing, and allied groups doing similar or related work know what the group is doing.
- Regularly scheduled conversations where people can hear from each other about what is going well and what needs work in the group's dynamics, or can discuss issues or concerns about their own role and ask for the group's assistance.

2. Make sure that new people are welcomed and trained to co-lead. This means new people are given a full background on the group's work, understand that they are being asked to fully participate in all decisions, and have space to ask any questions they need to in order to participate. Ensuring that everyone is getting access to what it takes to co-lead is essential to building leadership among more people. Group members and the group as a whole will be better off if many people are leading, not just one or two.

3. Establish mechanisms to assess the workload and scale back. How many hours is each member working? Is it beyond what they can do and maintain their own wellbeing? Did they actually track their hours for a week to make sure they are aware of how much they are working? Assess the workload and scale back projects until the workload is under control. Create a moratorium on new projects until capacity expands. Enforce the moratorium—no one can unilaterally take on new work for the group or for themselves as a member of the group.

4. Build a culture of connection. How can the group's meeting culture foster well-being, goodwill, connection between members? Eating together, having check-ins with interesting questions about people's favorite foods, plants, movies, or politicizing moments may feel silly at first but makes a big difference. Bringing attention to wellness into the group's culture means helping members be there as multi-dimensional people, rather than just as work or activist machines. People need to build deep enough relationships to actually be able to talk about difficult dynamics that come up, or those dynamics will fester.

5. Make sure that the facilitation of meetings rotates, including agenda-making and other key leadership tasks. Rotating tasks can help us address unfair workloads and transparency concerns. Making sure everyone is trained on how to facilitate meetings in ways that maximize the participation of all members of the group can help. Whenever there is a danger that just a few people will dominate an important conversation, use a go-around rather than having people volunteer to speak. Quieter members speaking up can really change the dynamic.

6. As a group, recognize the conditions creating a culture of overwork. It is not one person's fault, and everyone may be feeling the different forms of pressure. Have one or many facilitated discussions about the pressures and dynamics that lead to overwork or to an individual's dominating or disappearing behavior. Create a shared language for the pressures the members may be under so they are easier to identify and address moving forward.

What Individuals Experiencing Overwork and Burnout Need

In addition to creating group approaches to burnout, we can take action in our own lives when we recognize our own symptoms of overwork and burnout. This requires us to work on changing our own behavior and that we be willing to examine the root causes of our impulses to over-commit, to control, to overwork, or to disconnect. This is healing work aimed at helping us be well enough to enjoy our work, make sustained lifelong contributions to the movements we care about, and receive the love and transformation that is possible in communities of resistance. Above all, we must take a gentle approach to ourselves, avoid judgment, recognize the role of social conditioning in producing these responses in us, and patiently and humbly experiment with new ways of being.

The compulsive worker, over-worker, or control freak might come to understand their needs in the following ways:

- I need trusted friends who I can talk to about what is going on, who I can ask for honest feedback about my behavior, and who can help support me and soothe me when I feel afraid of doing something in a new way. For example, these people might remind me that even though someone else in the project will do this task differently, it is better to let them do it so they can build their own skills and I can use the time for something healing that has been missing from my life. These people might help remind me that it will be okay if I say no to a task or project. These friends can help me give love to the wounds underneath my compulsive, competitive, or controlling behavior, reminding me that I am worthwhile and my value does not hang on what the group does, how much work I do, or what other people think of me.
- I need supportive people who can also point out compulsive, competitive, or controlling behavior or ideas when they hear them from me or see me engaging in them. It can be difficult to receive such feedback, but it is truly a gift.
- When I get feedback from friends or collaborators about concerns they have, I need to resist the impulse to defend myself or critique the way they delivered their message. This feedback, including any anger they express while sharing it, is likely a sign that others think I am a leader and that what I do matters. They are doing the hard and uncomfortable task of raising a concern because they see me as a person with influence. I can remember that, no matter how it is delivered, this feedback is an investment in me and in our work, and an act of love. I can seek out a friend separately to process the difficult feelings that receiving this

feedback brings up. The need to avoid acting out my defensiveness, or taking on a victim narrative, is especially important when I am in a position of privilege of any kind and/or have more developed leadership in the group or project.

- If I hate everyone I'm working with or feel like I am going to die or like I have to stay up all night working, this is probably about something older or deeper in my life, not about the current work/workplace/group/coworker. If my heart is racing, if I feel threatened, if I feel like I can't get out of bed, if I feel like I can't speak to my coworker or I'll explode, I am probably experiencing pain deeply rooted in my life history. To get out of this reactive space, I need to devote resources to uncovering the roots of my painful reactions and building ways of being in those feelings that don't involve acting out harm to myself or others (including the harm of overworking). The first step is recognizing that my strongest reactions may not be entirely or primarily about the work-related situation directly in front of me, and being willing to slow down to explore what is underneath.

- I need a healing path for myself if I want to be part of healing the world. What that looks like is different for everyone, and could include individual or group therapy, 12-step programs (including Workaholics Anonymous), exercise, bodywork, spiritual exploration, art practice, gardening, and building meaningful relationships with family or friends. Whatever it is, I have to engage in a gentle way and be careful that it does not become another thing to perfect or to try to be the leader of. Pursuing a healing path can be a way to practice doing things because they feel good rather than because they accomplish something.

- I need to stick around. It may be tempting to disappear altogether from a group if relationships have gotten difficult and I am experiencing negative feelings about myself and others. If I want move toward a more balanced role in the group, or even transition out altogether, I need to do so gradually and intentionally. I need to transfer relationships and knowledge and skills that I hold and make sure that my transition is done in a way that ensures support for the people continuing the work.

Conflict

Working and living inside hierarchies does not teach us how to deal with conflict. Most of us avoid conflict either by submitting to others' wills and trying to numb out the impact on us, or by trying to dominate others to get our way and being numb to the impact on others. Our culture teaches us that giving direct feedback is risky and that we should either suppress our concerns or find ways to manipulate situations and get what we want. We are trained to seek external validation, especially from people in authority, and often have few skills for hearing critical feedback, considering it, and acting on what is useful. To survive our various social positions, we internalize specific instructions about when and how to numb our feelings and perceptions, avoid giving feedback, disappear, act defensively or offensively, demand appeasement, or offer appeasement. As a result, we are mostly unprepared to engage with conflict in generative ways and instead tend to avoid it until it explodes or relationships disappear.

Conflict is a normal part of all groups and relationships. But many of us still seem to think that if conflict happens, it means there is something wrong—and then we seek out someone to blame. If we do work we care deeply about with other people, we will experience conflict because the stakes of the work feel very high to us, and that conflict is likely to bring up wounds and reactions from

earlier in our lives. This may mean we revert to oppressive scripts and power dynamics from the dominant culture.

The emergence of conflict does not have to mean that someone is bad or to blame, and the more we can normalize conflict, the more likely we can address it and come through it stronger, rather than burning out and leaving the group or the movement, and/or causing damage to others. Some of the reasons that conflict can be so pitched in social movement groups include:

- We have the strongest feelings about people who are closest to us. We are more likely to be up at night stressing about a conflict with a friend or collaborator than thinking about the mayor or some other person whom we have a more distant relationship with.
- When we come into movement spaces with high expectations and desires for belonging and connection, disappointment is likely.
- Sometimes we are so used to feeling excluded that we tune into that familiar feeling quickly and easily, unconsciously looking for evidence that we are different or are being slighted or left out.
- Even good experiences, like finding a space that breaks our isolation by joining a group with others who share our values or identities, can bring up our conditioned thinking and feeling. We might feel like we don't deserve it or like we are fraudulent. We might even unconsciously make up stories about what other people are thinking about us.
- Mutual aid work, by definition, responds to intense unmet needs and brings stress and pressures that can heighten feelings and provoke reactive behavior.

Given that conflict and strong feelings are inevitable if we are working on something we love with people we care about, what can we do to cause less harm to each other and our groups? How do we hold the strong feelings that come up, and how do we survive the conflict without being our worst selves to one another?

Here are three ways to check in with ourselves, get perspective, and act based on our principles when conflict is coming up:

One. Get away for a quiet moment to feel what is going on inside. This inquiry could also include talking to a friend or writing things down.

A lot of times when we perceive some kind of threat, we go on autopilot. That autopilot could take the form of a obsessive critical thinking about another person, self-hating thoughts, disappearing, picking a fight, getting lost in work, getting wasted, or obsessing all night and not sleeping. Whatever it is, it can help to ask ourselves about what kinds of feelings are coming up. Paying careful attention to ourselves can stop us from going with the autopilot reaction that might not be aligned with our intentions, purpose, or values and might damage our relationships.

Two. Remember, no one made us feel this way, but we are having strong feelings and they deserve our caring attention.

It can be easy when we are hurt or disappointed to decide that another person caused our pain. Certainly, others' actions and inactions stimulate feelings in us, but what feelings get stimulated, and how strong they are, has a lot to do with ourselves and our histories. Often, when something really riles us up, it is because it is touching an old wound or raw spot.

Three. Get curious about our raw spots.

We all have raw spots—things that bother us because of the insecurities we carry or the way we were treated as kids at school or by our families at home. Other people do not know our raw spots—we sometimes do not know them ourselves—so people are often surprised at the impact of their actions on our feelings. We can become curious about our own raw spots, finding origins in childhood experiences, the cumulative impact of microaggressions and systemic harm, or other sources. When someone brushes a raw spot, we can have a big reaction—sometimes acting outward toward them, sometimes harming ourselves. The trick is to realize that our raw spots belong to us, rather than us being hostage to them, and that we can experience the feelings, notice them, and decide how to move forward, rather than having the feelings drive our behavior.

For example, imagine my feelings got hurt by a person in my mutual aid group who did not follow through on something. If I then launched an informal campaign to get other people in the group to perceive my flaky collaborator as a person lacking integrity, and to get them pushed out of the group, or if I refused to work with them anymore, we could lose a lot. If I know their actions hit my raw spot, I can observe my feelings coming up, being aware that they may not be proportional to what happened, and that my feelings are not my flaky collaborator's fault. I can hold off on campaigning against them and find right-sized action to address my concerns for the good of all.

What Else Is True?

When we find ourselves obsessing over an opinion, story, or judgment, it can often be helpful to ask, "What else is true?" For example, when conflict is emerging and we have strong feelings, we might ask:

- What else is true about this person/group/space? Can I think of any of their positive qualities? Can I think of any way that I benefit from their actions? In addition to what they did that I dislike, are there also other experiences that show a more full picture, demonstrate good intentions, or balance any vengeful feelings toward this person?
- Might there be things I'm unaware of that are contributing to this situation or behavior?
- What else is true about my life that counterbalances this situation? What else is in my life? What percentage of my time is spent in this space or with this person? What else do I do and have? Does this situation feel like it occupies 80 percent of my mind space, while this group actually only takes up 5 percent of my week? If I am afraid of what this person thinks of me, can I think of other people who I know that admire, care about, and respect me?
- Is this situation or person my responsibility? Is this something I can control? If not, can I imagine letting go, even just 5 percent or 10 percent, to gain some peace of mind?
- Are there ways that I am particularly activated by this that might have to do with my own history and experiences? Are there ways to give myself attention or care around these wounds?
- Are there any ways that I am stepping into a familiar role with my strong feelings about this person? In my inner reality, did I cast us into roles that relate to my family of origin or other formative groups?

Use Direct Communication before Using Gossip and Social Media

Sometimes the first impulse we have when we are hurt is to make our hurt known—through negative gossip or on social media platforms. Negative gossip and accusatory posts can hurt the person doing the gossiping, the target, the group, and the movement. It usually magnifies conflict. This doesn't mean that we should not share difficult experiences we are having so we can access support. We often need to speak with a friend to help clarify what we are feeling, get affirmation of our experience, talk through possible responses, and get sympathy. So, how can we tell if we are engaging in negative gossip that might harm someone? Here are several questions we can ask ourselves:

- *Who am I telling?* If you are having strong feelings about someone in your mutual aid group, talking about them negatively behind their back with other people in the group is likely to harm group dynamics and create a culture that will drive some people away. Talking to a therapist or a friend who is not part of the group is less likely to be harmful. Telling the stories on social media is likely to have many harmful and possibly unintended impacts on everyone involved.
- *Am I campaigning?* What are my motivations in telling this? Am I trying to get support and process my experience, or am I trying to get other people to think badly about this person?
- *Am I mocking them, laughing at them, or otherwise being cruel?* If the content of what you are sharing is something you would not consider compassionate or constructive feedback, something you would never say to their face, it may be malicious gossip. Any time we are feeling justified dehumanizing people in our movements and social circles, it is good to pause and ask, "What else is true?" We might be reacting to a deep wound that needs our attention, and causing damage along the way.
- *Am I building my obsession with someone's faults?* Is the choice to talk about this person's behavior or qualities right now going to help me be clear about my choices and feelings, or is it building a habit of thinking too much about this person and cultivating hyper-criticism of them?

Giving direct feedback is hard. Rather than saying, "It was difficult for me when you did not follow through with the tasks you took on at the meeting," or "I wonder why you didn't ask me to join that team," it is easier to project negative feelings and malicious behaviors onto the other person and gossip about it. This is likely to feel bad and damage relationships. When a lot of people in groups or scenes are doing this, it can make for broad conditions of distrust, anxiety, and betrayal, and can augment hierarchies of valuation and devaluation, making groups unstable and more vulnerable to disruption by law enforcement.

We live in a society based on disposability. When we feel bad, we often automatically decide that either we are bad or another person is bad. Both of these moves cause damage and distort the truth, which is that we are all navigating difficult conditions the best we can, and we all have a lot to learn and unlearn. If we want to build a different way of being together in groups, we have to look closely at the feelings and behaviors that generate the desire to throw people away. Humility, compassion for ourselves, and compassion for others are antidotes to disposability culture. Examining where we project on others and where we react strongly to others can give us more options when we are in conflict. Every one of us is more complex and beautiful than our worst actions and harshest judgments. Building compassion and accountability requires us to take stock of our own actions and reactions in conflict, and seek ways to treat each other with care even in the midst of strong feelings.

Working with Joy

It is not surprising that most of us have distorted relationships to work, including work in mutual aid groups. The conditions and systems we live under make work coercive, create severe imbalances in who does which kind of work and for what kind of compensation and recognition, and make it hard to feel like we have choices when it comes to work. Working to change the world is extremely hard because the conditions we are up against are severe. We cannot blame ourselves for having a difficult relationship to our work, even though we understand that learning to work differently is vital for our movements and for our own well-being and survival. We must be compassionate to ourselves and each other as we practice transforming our ways of working together.

We need each other badly to share what is hard about the overwhelming suffering in the world and the challenge of doing work for change in dangerous conditions. Even in the face of the pain that being awakened to contemporary conditions causes, all of our work for change can be rooted in the comfort and joy of being connected to one another, accompanying one another, and sometimes being inspired by each other. Reflecting deeply about our own orientations toward work—what it feels like to participate in groups, what ideas we are carrying around about leadership and productivity—is crucial to building a practice of working from a place of connection, inspiration, and joy. This means intentionally creating ways to practice a new relationship to work, and diving into the psychic structures underlying our wounds from living and working in brutal, coercive hiearchies. The following chart may be a useful reflection tool for individuals and groups trying to change harmful cultures and practices of work.

Chart 9. Workaholics Anonymous's "Working Joyfully"

Working Compulsively	Working Joyfully
Very long hours	Setting boundaries
Impossible standards	Reasonable goals
Insatiable, never done	Content with a day's work
Tightly scheduled	Room for the unexpected

Arrogant and superior	Humble and dignified
Adding more work	No adding without subtracting
Unable to estimate time	Realistic time allotment
Non-stop	Pausing for change of pace, focus, new ideas
False deadlines	Appropriate timing
Driven, adrenalized	Feeling of being in flow
Sense of urgency	Relaxed about time
Must complete	work Can delay task
Confusing urgency with importance	Able to prioritize
Reacting to pressure	Following inner guidance

Mentally scattered	Focused
Inefficient	Effective
Mistakes: misplace, drop, spill	Doing it right the first time
Rigid	Flexible
Intolerant of new ideas	Open-minded
Impatient	Calm
Perfectionistic	Learning from mistakes without blaming
Tense	Relaxed
Loss of humor	Keeping a humorous perspective
Loss of creativity	Flow of novel solutions

Overly serious and intense	Able to be playful
Not enjoyable	Finding work pleasurable
Abrupt with colleagues	Responsive to others
Loss of spontaneity	Open to the moment
Out of touch with feelings	Aware of moods
Doing many things at once	Doing one thing at a time
Body/mind out of sync	Unity of thought and action
Rushing	Leisurely paced
Blurred perception	Vivid impressions
Unaware, mechanical	Mindful

Quantity-oriented	Quality-oriented
Little delegation	Trust in colleagues
Racing the clock	In sync and respectful of time
Exhaustion	Happy tiredness
Struggle	Feeling of ease
Feeling of being a victim	Feeling completed
Neglecting health	Nurturing self
Can't hear body signals	Knows when to rest
Neglecting rest of life	Balanced life
Worry, overplanning	Staying in the now

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is an insidious and harmful force in our mutual aid groups and in our own psyches. "I'm not a perfectionist, everything I do is so imperfect!" we say to ourselves. Exactly. Nothing is good enough. We live in a very materialist culture that tells us we need to have the "perfect" body, sexuality, family, consumer goods, home, and job. Even those of us who know those norms are bullshit still struggle with the patterns of perfectionist thinking and behavior they can create. In our personal lives this can give us anxiety and feed painful misperceptions of ourselves.

Perfectionism can shrink our mutual aid groups, causing them to be exclusive, producing conflict, and feeding dynamics of overwork and burnout. Perfectionism sometimes appears as a fear of saying anything that is politically off-base and being judged, so that people don't share their opinions; or are wildly defensive if someone questions something they said; or quickly attack or exclude anyone who doesn't use the same jargon as them or is still learning something they already know about. These tendencies can create cliquishness and make it hard to grow our groups and movements. Perfectionism can also lead to people being overly controlling of group work, which can mean work does not get delegated and the same few people are doing everything. It can mean that people who started the group are patronizing to people who come in later and do things differently.

Whenever we see inflexibility in ourselves or in a group culture, there are opportunities for healing from social conditioning and cultivating new ways of being. The chart and reflection questions below are tools to use by yourself or in a group to begin to unlearn perfectionism. Check anything that feels familiar.

Chart 10. Perfectionism Checklist

- **Setting Even More Demanding Standards**
  - Doing well isn't good enough, I have to do better.
  - If I don't strive, I am a lazy and useless person.
  - Other people or groups are producing more, reaching further, or getting more praise.
- **Fear of Failure**
  - I must do things perfectly.
  - I must not fail.
  - I can't have others think poorly of me.
  - If I try, then I will only fail.
  - If I put myself out there, then others will think badly of me, I should keep quiet.
- **All-or-Nothing Thinking**
  - If I have conflict in this group, everything is ruined and I have to quit.
  - My work is never good enough.
  - There is a right way and a wrong way to do things.
  - If some people are critiquing me, I should just leave this group.
- **Shoulds, Musts**
  - I can't make any mistakes or others will realize what I am really like.
  - I should already know everything about this topic.
  - I should already be able to do this the same or better than others.
  - Any mistake will expose me as a fraud.
- **Constant Checking**
  - I have to go over any work I do, several times, before I can show it to anyone else.

- ○ I have to keep checking in with others to make sure I am liked, look okay, didn't say anything wrong, etc.
- ○ I check my social media likes, my appearance, my bank account, my email constantly.
- **Self-control**
  - ○ I must work all the time or I will become a lazy slob.
  - ○ I have to work extremely hard in order to deserve a treat or a rest.
- **Structure, Control**
  - ○ I must know what is going to happen.
  - ○ I must be prepared for possible outcomes.
  - ○ I can't let anyone else do a task in case it goes wrong.
- **Procrastination**
  - ○ I can't start because I'm afraid I will do it wrong.
  - ○ I feel dread and a sense of avoidance about my task because of my fear of failure, exposure, humiliation.
  - ○ I feel deadened by overwhelming shame or grief that I am suppressing.

Reflection Questions:

1. Where does perfectionism show up in my life? School work, job, family interactions, how I regard my body, activism, social media interactions, housework? What is the cost?
2. How might I be applying perfectionist standards to others? When am I intolerant of others' learning processes or differences? Where did I learn that? What emotions motivate that? What is the cost of this intolerance to my relationships, to my work, to my principles and purpose in the world?
3. Does our group culture enable or produce perfectionist behaviors? If so, how? How does it impact our group work, relationships with each other, and relationships to people who come to our project for help or to volunteer? How could we add more flexibility, care, compassion, and trust to our group culture?

Mad Mapping

Doing mutual aid work often brings some level of stress or pressure, because we are meeting urgent needs, learning new skills, working in groups, and taking on new responsibilities. These are the same things that make the work meaningful, satisfying, and pleasurable. But pressure and stress can bring out patterned emotional responses and autopilot reactions and behaviors. Learning to notice the patterns and plan for them can help us make choices or get support at key moments so that our actions can be as beneficial as possible to ourselves and the people around us.

One technique to learn these patterns in ourselves is to use a "mad map"—a guide we can make for ourselves that we can turn to when things go sideways or we feel ourselves slipping into more difficult states. A mad map can be like a gift to your future self, to help navigate the potentially dangerous waters of stress or conflict. It can guide you through the wild thinking, feeling, and behaviors that emerge when things are really rough, reminding you what helps and what harms during such times. Your mad map can have any content you want. It can be illustrated, or include songs, physical movements, or images—whatever feels best. Below are just some starter ideas and

examples of potential content. Some people share their mad maps with friends and loved ones. You can include sections on how other people can support you when you are in difficulty or crisis, and what you do or do not want them to say or do if you are struggling. (I learned about mad mapping from the Icarus Project, and you can find more information in the resource list at the end of this book.)

Signs of Difficulty under Pressure

Some areas to think about when making this section might include:

- Overly self-critical thoughts (about your contributions to the group, your appearance, personality, intelligence, etc.).
- Overly critical thoughts about other people.
- Feeling insecure in the group or like people are out to get you, don't like you, are talking about you, excluding you.
- Obsessing over details.
- Taking on too many tasks even though you know you're already overloaded.
- Feeling controlling about how things get done in the group, not wanting to let other people do it differently.
- Avoiding tasks, flaking, becoming vague.
- Obsessively checking anything (social media, email, reflection in the mirror, your work, other people's work, your health, your money).
- Overworking on anything (house cleaning, paid job, activist work, art project).
- Letting the physical space around you get chaotic.
- Not eating or eating in ways that make you feel bad.
- Not taking regular meds or supplements that are helpful to you.
- Misusing alcohol, drugs, shopping, video games, TV, social media.
- Avoiding people you love.
- Avoiding work that is meaningful to you.
- Avoiding work you need to do to survive.
- Not taking care of bills, paperwork, other logistical necessities.
- Escaping through sex or romantic highs.
- Lack of sleep or oversleeping.
- Over-exercising or not moving enough for what your body/mind needs right now.
- Any other compulsive behavior that, in your experience, suggests imbalance.

Guidelines for Greater Wellness

In this section, try to set realistic expectations, not piein-the-sky guidelines that will cause shame or feelings of inadequacy if they are not met. You can always increase and adjust later. Be aware of harsh "should" messages that may show up here, which many of us have in areas of eating, work, exercise, money, sex, and so on. Being mindful to avoid perfectionism, focus on gentle realistic steps toward greater balance.

This section might include things like:

- A limit on the number of times per day you check email, social media, news, etc.
- Limits on amount of or number of times of day you engage in particular escapist or toxifying behaviors.
- Goals for how often and in what ways you want to move your body.
- Goals for making sure you feed yourself in nourishing ways.
- Goals for meditation, spiritual practices, or anything else that would help but might be falling away right now.
- Types of media or apps you want to avoid or delete.
- Limits on amount of or number of times you use social media (for example, not upon waking or before bed).

-Goals for getting outdoors or interacting with the natural world.

- People you want to be connected to, how often and in what ways.
- People you need to limit your exposure to and what those limits are.
- Sleep schedules or other rest plans.
- Limits on working hours, creating days off or other limits on work, including unpaid activist or artistic work if you are overworking in those areas.
- Timelines for taking care of essential paperwork or logistics.
- Baseline activities to maintain physical space and hygiene.

Bonus Activities That Help

The previous section is a baseline set of goals you are committing to. This section can include things you may aspire to do, things you know would feel good, things that are lovely extras to improve your state of being.

- Kinds of movement or exercise that are fun and feel good.
- Cooking adventures.
- Gardening.
- Literature, music, art you want to make or read, listen to, look at.
- Spiritual practices you want to try or return to.
- Additional ways you want to connect with loved ones.
- Additional activities that may boost your mood or sense of purpose, connection, or self-worth.
- Ways to beautify your space
- Ways you want to be generous to others.
- Things you want to try to improve your sleep, reduce your pain, break your isolation, generate a more structured routine, break up a monotonous routine.

Unhelpful/Untrue Thoughts

Painful or difficult thinking increases when we are under pressure. Often it will be familiar thinking that has appeared in other difficult times, feeding harmful behaviors that disconnect us from ourselves and others. Noticing these thoughts and behaviors can give us a chance to interrupt them and see if they can be reduced.

- Scarcity thoughts (about anything—food, money, work, self-worth, sex, health):
  - I'm not doing enough.
  - I'm doing everything and no one is helping.
  - I'm not going to have what I need.
  - I better get mine before everyone else takes it all.
  - There are not enough people in this group.
  - There is not enough time.
- Hopeless thoughts like:
  - There is no point in trying.
  - I have lost everything.
  - I ruined everything.
  - Nothing every works out for me/us.
- Self-hating thoughts like:
  - I'm a fraud.
  - I am undesirable.
  - I am the worst.
  - I don't deserve help/care/support/love/admiration/survival.
  - I am a bad person.
- Superiority thoughts like:
  - No one else can do this right.
  - No one else can see the truth like I can.
  - Everyone else is handling this incorrectly.
  - Any criticism or feedback about my behavior is incorrect/inappropriate.

Helpful Truths to Remember

In this section, call on your most centered self, your inner adult, your inner kind parent, your highest spiritual self, or however you think of that part of you that can offer a compassionate perspective. Go through your unhelpful thoughts list, above, and explore what the part of you thinking each thought needs to hear or remember to diffuse the untrue thought's power. The examples below may help you generate your list.

- The work I am doing in this group is difficult and the conditions we are facing are severe. It is okay that we can't meet everyone's needs at once or solve everything.
- It is okay for me to place limits on what I can do for others and say no to things.
- Everyone deserves to exist, including me.
- I don't have to do anything perfectly. We are imperfect people doing imperfect work.
- It is okay to try new things. I can stop whenever I want.
- I am neither the best nor the worst. I am learning just like everyone else here. I have wisdom and experience to offer just like everyone else.
- I cannot read minds. If I think someone does not like me, ignored me, or was mean to me, it may be a misinterpretation of their behavior.
- I don't have to like everyone in this group to care about them all. I can stretch myself to be kind and caring to people even if we have different styles of interaction. I can choose to notice what values we have in common and what is beautiful about their contribution, rather than focusing on criticizing them.
- My contribution will be more sustainable and of greater service if it comes from a sense of choosing to act on purpose than if it is motivated by guilt or a sense of inadequacy. If I am

choosing to do things on the basis of those feelings, I can take a pause to reconnect to my purpose and make intentional choices about what kinds of tasks and responsibilities I can take on.

- Controlling feelings are a normal response to social conditioning, but I don't have to act on them. I can remind myself to trust the wisdom of the group, let others learn by doing, and offer my contributions with generosity and flexibility.
- Avoidant feelings are a normal response to social conditioning, but I don't have to act on them. I can remind myself of the feelings of purpose that guide me and then make a practical, reasonable action plan for following through with my commitments. I can ask friends to help with accountability on tasks if needed. - All that I choose to do will be better for me and others if it doesn't come from a "must" and "should" feeling, but instead from sober discernment of how I can care for myself and others.
- Everyone experiences ego issues when doing work together, not just me. But I don't have to let those fears and insecurities guide me. I can remember the true collective purpose of this work and have compassion for the parts of me that want attention or credit. I can remember the ways that I am loved and seen by friends and people in my group.

Conclusion: Everything is at Stake and We're Fighting to Win

The only thing that keeps those in power in that position is the illusion of our powerlessness. A moment of freedom and connection can undo a lifetime of social conditioning and scatter seeds in a thousand directions.

— Mutual Aid Disaster Relief

In May 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic that exposed the brutality of racist, capitalist health systems and the frailty of social safety nets, Minneapolis police brutally murdered George Floyd, sparking global protests against anti-Black racism and police violence. The mutual aid projects that had been mobilizing during the first months of the pandemic became vectors of participation in the growing protests. Millions of people participated in new ways in this moment—providing food, masks, hand sanitizer, water, medical support, and protection to each other while fighting cops and white supremacists in the streets, organizing and supporting funds for criminalized people, pressuring schools and other institutions to cancel contracts with the police, and more. In the first two weeks of the protests alone, an unprecedented 3.5 million people donated to bail funds around the United States. As organizers demanded the defunding and dismantling of police departments, vibrant conversations about transformative justice emerged, with more and more people learning about the possibilities of addressing conflict and violence through mutual aid rather than criminalization.

In Seattle, after days of confrontations police abandoned the East Precinct, and protesters established an autonomous zone around it, taking up several blocks and a park. With the withdrawal of the police and most businesses closed already because of COVID-19, the zone, like earlier Occupy encampments and other similar spaces where protesters have taken public space, became a site of experimentation where practices of governance, co-stewardship, leadership, decision-making, and collective care were being debated and innovated. Mutual aid projects

emerged in this space to provide mental health support, food, water, medical care, masks, spiritual support, haircuts, clothing, conflict mediation, and more.

At the same time that the mobilizations against policing and for Black lives were growing, scientists announced that May 2020 had been the hottest May on record and that 2020, like the ten preceding years, would likely be another record-breakingly hot year; the Trump administration announced it intended to open the Atlantic Maritime Monument to commercial fishing and waive environmental review for infrastructure projects; the EPA slashed clean water protections; climate change–induced permafrost melt caused the largest oil spill in Russia's history; and scientists announced that carbon dioxide levels were at a record high despite reduced emissions during the pandemic. Everywhere we look, we see signs that the systems we have been living under are collapsing, and something new must emerge if we are to survive.

As the world faces the ongoing crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, a worsening economic depression, climate change, and domination by illegitimate and racist policing, criminalization, and border enforcement systems and militaries, it is clear that mutual aid projects are essential to the broader ecosystem of political action. Mutual aid helps people survive disasters of all kinds, mobilizes and politicizes new people, and builds the new systems and ways of being together that we need. The stronger we build our mutual aid projects, the more lasting our mobilizations can be.

Mutual aid is essential to the other tactics that make up our movements, not only because it is the way to onboard millions of new people into lasting movement participation, but also because it supports all the other strategies. Decades of work developing transformative justice projects provide an alternative vision for community support as we push to end police budgets and redirect resources toward human need. Bail funds, legal defense campaigns, and prison letter-writing projects support those criminalized for bold actions against the police and corporations. Street medics treating tear gas and rubber bullet injuries make street battles with police for days on end possible. Healing justice projects and conflict mediation projects help us live together in police-free zones. Mutual aid is essential to all of our resistance work.

Moments of crisis and transformative organizing empower increasingly bold actions of mutual support. On June 1, 2020, Washington, DC, police surrounded protesters on a residential street intending to arrest them for violating the 6 p.m. curfew imposed by the city to quell uprisings over George Floyd's murder. As police began making their arrests, people living on the street opened their doors to let protesters take shelter in their homes. Police tried to remove the protesters, even throwing tear gas into the windows. But the residents kept the protesters inside overnight, feeding them and meeting their needs. This open refusal of police authority and willingness to take risks for one another illustrates the vibrant possibilities of solidarity and mutual aid.

The same week that residents were defending protesters in DC, bus drivers around the United States refused to allow police to commandeer public buses for making mass arrests. Despite offers of overtime pay to drive buses for this purpose, bus drivers organized a shared resistance to cooperating with police. The bus drivers' union in Minneapolis issued a statement declaring that their drivers have the right to refuse to transport arrested protesters and refuse to transport police to protests.

Ideally, our experiments with mutual aid and solidarity become bolder and bolder as experiences with our shared authority emancipate us from the illegitimate authority of dominant systems. This has been visible in increasing actions to protect immigrants from ICE arrests. In July of 2019,

community members in Nashville, Tennessee, surrounded a man in his car to protect him from ICE agents who had come for him. At the same time, mutual aid groups all over the country were organizing to hide immigrants, to warn immigrants of coming ICE raids, to care for the families of detainees and deportees, and to block buses leaving immigration prisons to bring people to airports for deportation. These same groups were also often tied in with campaigns to shut down the immigration prison in their region or stop the building or expansion of an immigration prison, to get local ordinances to ban ICE from using local airports for deportation, to block collaboration between ICE and local law enforcement in various ways, or to withdraw the business license of a private prison used to cage immigrants.

These anti-ICE efforts provide a picture of how mutual aid ties in with strategies aimed at beating back the explosive growth of racist state violence, and building courage among participants to take more and more direct action to protect each other. As crises mount, our organizing could inspire people to greater daring, using our people power to block ICE and the police from arresting people, block marshals attempting to evict tenants, and even to prevent military forces from occupying territory. We might reach a level of mobilization where we free our own people from prison, rather than asking that their captors free them, and where we redistribute stolen wealth rather than asking that it be taxed and spent differently. Our movements must contend with the structures in place in order to dismantle the weapons they use against our communities, and simultaneously build new ways of surviving that are based in our principles of liberation and collective self-determination. We must imagine and build ways of eating, communicating, sheltering, moving, healing, and caring for each other that are not profit-centered, hierarchical, and destructive to our planet. We must practice co-governing, creating participatory, consent-based ways of cooperating that are not based in militarism.

Mutual aid work plays an immediate role in helping us get through crises, but it also has the potential to build the skills and capacities we need for an entirely new way of living at a moment when we must transform our society or face intensive, uneven suffering followed by species extinction. As we deliver groceries, participate in meetings, sew masks, write letters to prisoners, apply bandages, facilitate relationship skills classes, learn how to protect our work from surveillance, plant gardens, and change diapers, we are strengthening our ability to outnumber the police and military, protect our communities, and build systems that make sure everyone can have food, housing, medicine, dignity, connection, belonging, and creativity in their lives. That is the world we are fighting for. That is the world we can win.

Resource List

This book expands upon the author's previous writing and worksheets published in *Social Text* and *Medium*. A teaching guide to accompany this book is available online at <http://v.versobooks.com/Mutual_Aid_Teaching_Guide.pdf> Below are more resources, some cited in this book.

Barnard Center for Research on Women. "Queer Dreams and Nonprofit Blues" video series. bcrw.barnard.edu.

Batza, Katie. *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018.

Beam, Myrl. *Gay, Inc.: The Nonprofitization of Queer Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

bergman, carla, and Nick Montgomery. *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance in Toxic Times*. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017.

Big Door Brigade. bigdoorbrigade.com.

Butler, C.T. Lawrence, and Amy Rothstein. *On Conflict and Consensus: A Handbook on Formal Consensus Decision-making*. theanarchistlibrary.org.

"Consensus: Direct Democracy @ Occupy Wall Street." October 13, 2011. youtube.com/watch?v=6dtD8RnGaRQ.

Creative Interventions Toolkit. creative-interventions.org.

Critical Resistance. "Oakland Power Projects." criticalresistance.org.

Davis, Angela Y. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York: Seven Stories, 2003.

Dixon, Ejeris, and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement*. Chico, CA: AK Press 2019.

Enck-Wanzer, Darrel. *The Young Lords: A Reader*. New York: NYU Press, 2010.

Flaherty, Jordan. *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality*. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2016.

Gelderloos, Peter. *The Failure of Nonviolence*. Seattle: Left Bank Books, 2015.

———. *Anarchy Works: Examples of Anarchist Ideas in Practice*. 2nd ed. London: Active Distribution / Sto Citas, 2015. First published 2010 by Ardent Press (San Francisco).

GenerationFIVE. *Transformative Justice Handbook*. generationfive.org/the-issue/transformative-justice.

The Icarus Project. *Madness & Oppression: Paths to Personal Transformation and Collective Liberation.* fireweedcollective.org, 2015.

INCITE!, ed. *Color of Violence*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

———. *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

It's Going Down. itsgoingdown.org.

Morales, Iris. *¡Palante, Siempre Palante! The Young Lords*. Video. New York: Third World Newsreel, 1996.

Klein, Naomi. *The Battle for Paradise: Puerto Rico Takes on the Disaster Capitalists*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018.

———. *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. New York: Metropolitan, 2008.

Klein, Naomi, and Avi Lewis. *The Take*. Brooklyn, NY: First Run / Icarus, 2004.

Koyama, Emi. "Disloyal to Feminism: Abuse of Survivors within the Domestic Violence Shelter System." eminism. org.

Kropotkin, Peter. *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*. Manchester, NH: Extending Horizon Books, 1976.

McGuire, Danielle. *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Vintage, 2011.

Movement Generation Justice and Ecology Project. "From Banks and Tanks to Cooperation and Caring: A Strategic Framework for a Just Transition." November 2016. movementgeneration.org.

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief. mutualaiddisasterrelief.org.

Mutual Aid Hub. mutualaidhub.org.

Nelson, Alondra. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight against Medical Discrimination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Neubeck, Kenneth J., and Noel A. Cazenave. *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card against America's Poor*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Piven, Frances Fox, and Richard A. Cloward. *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*. New York: Random House, 1993.

Smith, Easton. "The State, Occupy, and Disaster: What Radical Movement Builders Can Learn from the Case of Occupy Sandy." 2014. thetempworker.wordpress.com.

Solnit, Rebecca. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*. New York: Penguin, 2010.

South End Press Collective, ed. *What Lies Beneath: Katrina, Race, and the State of the Nation*. Cambridge, MA: South End, 2007.

Spade, Dean, and Roberto Sirvent. "Abolition and Mutual Aid Spotlight" interview series. blackagendareport.org.

Strike Debt. *Shouldering the Costs: Who Pays in the Aftermath of Hurricane Sandy?* 2012. strikedebt.org.

Storytelling & Organizing Project. stopviolenceeveryday.org.

Survived & Punished. survivedandpunished.org.

Sylvia Rivera Law Project. *From the Bottom Up: Strategies and Practices for Membership-Based Organizations*. May 2013. srlp.org.

Thuma, Emily. *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019.

Transformharm.org.

Tufekci, Zeynep. "How Hong Kong Did It: With the Government Flailing, the City's Citizens Decided to Organize Their Own Coronavirus Response." *The Atlantic*, May 12, 2020. theatlantic.com.

Walia, Harsha. *Undoing Border Imperialism*. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2013.