

Society & Solidarity

United States: Mutual aid will help us survive the Biden presidency

Saturday 21 November 2020, by [SPADE Dean](#) (Date first published: 20 November 2020).

Biden and Harris are not going to stop the crises we are facing — mutual aid projects are essential to survive and build the world we want to live in.

Contents

- [Mutual aid amidst system \(...\)](#)
- [Solidarity and resistance](#)
- [Beating back racist state \(...\)](#)
- [Towards a new way of living](#)

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](#)

Many people are feeling great relief that Trump has been voted out and are rightly celebrating the efforts so many people have undertaken to make that happen. But even as we celebrate, we must ensure we do not demobilize, hoping that the new administration will take care of our problems. Unfortunately, we can be certain that the Biden/Harris administration will not address the crises and disasters of climate change, worsening wealth concentration and poverty, a deadly for-profit health care system and racist law enforcement.

[Biden](#) and [Harris](#) have built their careers off of criminalizing people. In response to the killing of Walter Wallace Jr. in October they promptly issued a [joint statement](#) focusing more words on admonishing protesters than acknowledging police violence. They have made crystal clear that they [will not oppose fracking](#), and if they return to [Obama-era](#) climate policies, [we are certainly doomed](#). Biden has a wretched [pro-war record](#), and has expressed [unconditional support](#) for Israeli colonialism.

He recently tapped [oil and gas industry booster Cedric Richmond](#) as a top advisor and a [third of his transition team](#) comes from think tanks funded by the weapons industry. Under the new administration, even if they roll back some of Trump's worst policies, our communities will still be witnessing worsening crisis conditions.

Trump's policies and rhetoric were extreme, openly racist and sexist, climate change- and COVID-denying, which helped mobilize many people to question the legitimacy of the police, military, border enforcement and capitalist economy and join social movement work to oppose those systems. While we are all tired from four years of fighting Trump, nine months of [urgently responding](#) to the

pandemic and all the [loss](#) and [devastation](#) it has caused, and the [bold efforts](#) that so many have undertaken to [fight the police in the streets](#) and organize an [historic uprising](#) against white supremacy, we cannot risk demobilizing now.

We must continue the momentum that [Black Lives Matter](#), [No DAPL](#), [Not 1 More Deportation](#), [Abolish ICE](#) and other [campaigns](#) have built exposing the utter failures of the Democratic party to oppose racism, war, the oil and gas industry, criminalization and wealth consolidation, and the necessity for [bold direct action](#) in the face of [mounting](#) crises. More than ever before, we need to organize and sustain [mutual aid](#) efforts, both to survive the crises we are facing and to build our movements for change.

Mutual aid amidst system collapse

In May 2020, we saw how mutual aid infrastructure feeds organizing in the streets. 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, police abandoned the East Precinct after days of [confrontations](#) 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 occupied 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](#). As 2020 unfolded, the bad climate news kept pouring in. Climate change-induced [permafrost melt](#) caused the largest oil spill in Russia's history.

The west coast of the US saw record-breaking [wildfires](#) that destroyed millions of acres and kept people [breathing smoke](#) for months on end. Ice shelf collapses in the [Arctic](#) and [Antarctic](#) suggested [alarming](#) new impacts of climate change. A record-breaking [hurricane season](#) is battering the Atlantic. 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.

Solidarity and resistance

As the world faces the ongoing crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, [worsening poverty](#), 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 needs.

[Bail funds](#), [legal defense campaigns](#) and [prison letter-writing projects](#) support those swept up in the ordinary day-to-day of the brutal policing system, and those criminalized for [bold actions](#) against the [police](#), [prisons](#), [immigration enforcement](#) and [corporations](#). Street medics treating tear gas and rubber bullet injuries and brigades of people [defending against police weapons](#) make street battles with police for days and [weeks on end](#) possible. Healing justice projects and [conflict mediation](#) projects help us build skills to 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 pm 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.

Beating back racist state violence

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, to support immigrant prisoners facing [brutal conditions](#) 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 city workers [attempting to evict](#) encampments of unhoused people, [sabotage](#) pipelines and fracking sites 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.

Towards a new way of living

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 — [which is already here](#) — 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. In doing so, we protect our communities and build systems that make sure everyone can have food, housing, medicine, dignity, connection, belonging and creativity in their lives.

As we move to a new presidential administration, the work of building mutual aid infrastructure in our communities remains as urgent as ever. There are no signs that Biden and Harris are going to stop the crises we are facing. There are abundant signs that we must be ready to support ourselves and each other, not only from the coming storms, floods, fires, evictions, power outages and austerity packages, but also from the cops and soldiers they will continue to send to put down our resistance.

We have no choice but to fight together for our shared survival in these dire times. Mutual aid projects are where we build that fight while building the world we want to live in, where everyone has everything they need. The only way to win is through collective action and massive participation and 2020 has given us many small glimmers of what that might look like. Now it is time to double down on caring for each other.

P.S.

- Roar magazine. November 20, 2020:
<https://roarmag.org/essays/dean-spade-mutual-aid-excerpt/>

This is an extended and updated excerpt from Dean Spade's "[Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis \(and the Next\)](#)," out now from Verso.

Dean Spade has been working to build queer and trans liberation based in racial and economic justice for the past two decades. He's the author of [Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law](#), the director of the documentary "[Pinkwashing Exposed: Seattle Fights Back!](#)" and the creator of the mutual aid toolkit at [BigDoorBrigade.com](#). His latest book, [Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis \(and the Next\)](#), was published by Verso Books in October 2020.