

LIVERPOOL ANARCHIST

In Britain, the working class is being attacked on all sides. From rapidly rising inflation rates and energy bills, to benefit cuts and the rise in the National Insurance tax. Locally, the Labour-run Wirral Council is implementing severe austerity measures, targeting libraries, leisure centres and park maintenance.

This problem is global, a crisis of capitalism. This is just one reason we don't think a change in government is a viable solution. Instead, the way to turn the tide is through a mass movement of resistance. Clearly no such movement currently exists in Britain, but we saw oil workers' strikes turn into a revolt in Kazakhstan in January, demonstrating how quickly things can change.

Such a movement could emerge around three tactics. Firstly, we could see a mass non-payment campaign, like the Poll Tax rebellion of the 90s or student rent strikes in more recent years. Secondly, we could see a campaign of direct action against those responsible for these attacks on our class, using similar tactics to Extinction Rebellion, Palestine Action or Insulate Britain, but focused on businesses, and demanding a reduction in prices. For example, the Stanlow Oil Refinery, run by Shell in Ellesmere Port, has been the site of several blockades due to rising fuel costs since the early 2000s. Finally, and most probably, we could see a strike wave, in an attempt by workers to keep their wages in line with inflation. Large and successful strikes can have a domino effect.

In the absence of any of these campaigns, the rest of this issue is focused on direct action and mutual aid regarding food. We certainly don't think these things will reverse the trend of falling wages and rising prices, nevermind bring us much closer to transforming society, but it might help people survive, and rekindle a sense of solidarity in our neighbourhoods. •



“As a practical matter, Anarchist-Communists believe that we should start to build the new society now, as well as fight to crush the old Capitalist one. We wish to create non-authoritarian mutual aid organizations (for food, clothing, housing, funding for community projects and others), neighborhood assemblies and cooperatives not affiliated with either government or business corporations, and not run for profit, but for social need. Such organizations, if built now, will provide their members with a practical experience in self-management and self-sufficiency, and will decrease the dependency on welfare agencies and employers. In short, we can begin now to build the infrastructure for the communal society so that people can see what they are fighting for, not just the ideas in someone's head.”

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin

FOOD CO-OPS

Recently I started using the Walton Vale Community Shop, in North Liverpool. It was set up due to high levels of poverty in the area, and anyone living in Walton can pay £3.50 or £5, for 10 or 15 items. It appears to be run by volunteers, but is funded by a mixture of the council, charities and the GMB union, while also receiving surplus food. While the food and toiletries they provide are very cheap, there is some discontent from users around it only being open for 2 hours a week (during typical working hours) and the fact that it is not unusual to have to queue for over an hour. However, I think there are deeper issues with this model, which calls itself a “food cooperative”, although I am grateful for the volunteers that make it feasible.

I find using the Community Shop, like most other forms of charity, is a disempowering feeling for everybody involved. As users we seem to have no input (there have not been any surveys of what food we would like, or minutes from meetings, in fact we have had no contact since joining), while I can only imagine volunteering feels exhausting. The fact that it is heavily linked to the council also guarantees political neutrality, it has to stick narrowly to its parameters or risk defunding, for example the shop couldn't really be used to distribute literature criticising the council, yet you will see plenty of Labour Party merchandise. Dependency on the council also raises the question of what happens if a different party, or faction of the ruling party itself, wins office. These issues are typical of charities, which address the effects of poverty, rather than challenging its root causes.

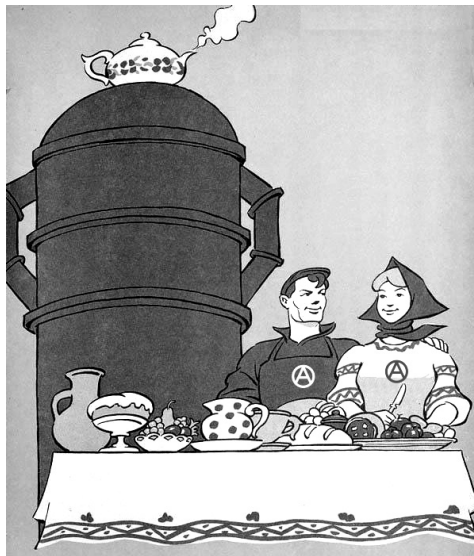
I was surprised then, when I attended a talk by Cooperation Town, a group which has helped set up several grassroots food cooperatives. They described food cooperatives as being member-led associations, which they advised do not grow larger than 10-20 households, at which point they risk becoming too large to manage democratically. They can still access surplus food, but also collectively

spend their membership fees to buy goods in bulk at wholesale prices. Every household is supposed to help out if and how they can in running the co-op (ideally for less than an hour a week), such as ordering or delivering food. They can be organised geographically, and then split into smaller localities as they grow. However, they could also be set up around specific dietary requirements or preferences, such as being vegan or gluten free, or preferring chinese food. If there were several food cooperatives in one city, they could still work together, while maintaining their autonomy, for example by forming a federation.

In contrast to my local community shop, this model of neighbourhood food co-ops enables people to act for themselves. It could give people new skills and also the experience of making decisions in a non-hierarchical manner. If autonomous, these co-ops would have the freedom to support social struggles, for example they could donate surplus food to striking workers, or they could form the basis of local campaigns to resist evictions, protect green spaces or oppose austerity measures. They would also be more resilient, since there would be no risk of defunding.

There are of course risks involved in this model. They could end up being co-opted by politicians or developing a bureaucracy, taking control away from members. Likewise they could become too large, or work might not be shared equally, which could lead to them becoming unwieldy and falling apart. But these are risks with any form of bottom-up organising.

Realistically food co-ops won't solve the underlying problems around capitalism. As well as the fact that people go hungry in one of the worlds richest nations, the production process also poisons our bodies and the earth, and wage slavery subjects us to lives of monotony and cruelty. For this reason, I think it's worth fighting for a world where food, and everything else, is distributed freely according to need, and where the people involved in this work do so voluntarily. But in the meantime, setting up food co-ops seems like a worthwhile endeavour. •



THE LIVERPOOL BREAD RIOT OF 1855

In mid-19th century Liverpool, a large part of the working class were casually employed by the docks. This meant that they might have work, and a wage, one day but not the next. Nowadays we call this 'precarious' work, and it's nothing new. When, in February 1855, the docks were brought almost to a standstill by a combination of adverse winds and frozen-over waters, thousands of people found themselves out of work and so without any income. Most of the dock workers were already suffering dire poverty; now they were being pushed into starvation.

The poorest people of Liverpool were aided at the time by a combination of charitable societies, privately organised relief agencies, and the provisions of the Poor Laws based in the workhouses. This relief system was completely overwhelmed by the downturn at the docks, and Liverpool was ravaged by destitution. A new relief committee was established and began distributing food and fuel on a larger scale. However, relief was not offered indiscriminately. The upper-class "philanthropists" did not want to encourage idleness or dependency, as they saw it. The bread and oatmeal keeping starvation at bay was distributed by means of a ticket system, and these tickets handed out arbitrarily and inefficiently to those they deemed deserving.

On Sunday 18th February, fighting erupted among a crowd of over 1000 people, seeking to claim a morsel of food to keep their families alive. Three older women were crushed in the desperate crowd, one of whom died.

On Monday 19th February, from 8am crowds began to form around the Vauxhall and Scotland Road area of Liverpool. Up to 1000 people, around half of whom were women, began raiding bakeries and other food shops, starting with the bread shop of a Mr Huntington on the corner of Collingwood Street. It is surely no coincidence that said owner was a member of the relief committee. What people could not gain through a dysfunctional and unjust system, they took for themselves.

Rioting continued throughout Monday and into Tuesday, with hungry crowds moving from shop to

shop, street to street, taking as they pleased. Smaller groups raided bakeries in many other parts of town; in fact, the riots are understood to have affected half of Liverpool. Contrary to newspaper reports, the rioting was not indiscriminate: particular bakeries were targeted, often several owned by the same person, while others were left untouched, passed by the rioters on their way to their next objective. When confronted by lines of police, the crowds would disperse into smaller groups, only to regroup elsewhere. The targeting and tactical movement suggest an element of self-organisation and rational decision-making.



On the Tuesday, the ruling order was restored by police after receiving reinforcements (including 200 special constables), arresting 60 people in the process. Many of the arrested were Irish immigrants (who were casually employed at the docks), a fact seized upon by the newspapers for further vitriol in condemning the riots. To dampen sympathy for the starving dockers, participants in the riots were cast as the dregs of society: the idle poor, vagrants, criminal types, and backwards immigrants. In contrast, the dockers were reported to have observed such disorder with disgust, patiently awaiting a few crumbs from their masters. This fabricated division of the "deserving" and undeserving poor is a trick as old as poverty itself, and continues to be applied with success today. One caricature is provoked to blame the other for the suffering they share, and the small relief offered (whether tickets for bread and oatmeal, or state benefits) marks them with the shame of "dependency" and failure... until they can again take up their work: generating profits for and reinforcing the power of their rulers. •

COMMUNITY CUPBOARDS

In the past year the Cupboard Network has set up community cupboards in Chester, Ellesmere Port, Southport and Yeovil, with another soon coming to Wrexham. The idea is quite simple: cupboards full of food in people's driveways, which anybody can access for free at any time. Most of the food comes from businesses which would otherwise unnecessarily throw it out. Anarchists in Alnwick and Durham in the North East have been involved in similar projects, where telephone boxes have been turned into community larders where people take what they need and leave what they can.

The cupboards are not food banks, and there is no guarantee they will always be full. However, you do not need a voucher or have to fulfil any conditions to use them. This means people can avoid a potentially embarrassing and demeaning process, and can access them even if they do not meet the criteria for food banks.

The cupboards have been warmly received, with a couple of exceptions. Some youths used them to throw food around the place and one neighbour emptied the contents of one cupboard into her bin, and reported the network to environmental health. Because of this, the network has been in contact with the police and most of the cupboards now have CCTV cameras. But this risks endangering the most vulnerable people within our communities, causing further division and normalising mass surveillance. Alternatives could be something as simple as locking the cupboard at night or neighbours setting up similar cupboards to show

their support.

Nonetheless the Cupboard Network is doing great work. The network is volunteer-run, and receives no external funding, except donations. It started as just two friends leaving boxes of surplus food on their front wall, a great place to start for anyone, and something that could be replicated with other items such as furniture. If you want to know more, offer support or to set up your own cupboard then you can email:

whitbycommunitycupboard@gmail.com

If you're interested in the telephone box pantries then you can email:

mutualaidalnwick@gmail.com •



"We must face the men who hold the keys to our bellies, look upon the organization and system of the factory they have created to subjugate us, and turn on it like wild beasts."

Ōsugi Sakae



The *Liverpool Anarchist* is edited by individual members of the Solidarity Federation, an anarcho-syndicalist union. Our next issue will focus on **feminist topics** and we welcome all contributions in accord with our basic ideas. We advocate working class direct action to improve our lives here and now while building a revolutionary movement to do away with capitalism, the state, and all other hierarchies.

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