

U.S.A. : Left-Wing Disaster Relief Efforts Spread Goodwill for Socialism

Friday 21 December 2018, by [ARRIA Michael](#) (Date first published: 14 December 2018).

Hurricane Michael, the brutal storm that hit the Southeast US in October may have faded from the headlines, but its victims are still dealing with the impact. Eight weeks after the hurricane, hundreds of Florida residents are still living in tents because their homes were destroyed.

“We are wondering why we feel abandoned — there’s no place to go,” Tammy Nichols, a woman camping out in a Panama City church recently [told](#) a local news station.

Nichols and many other residents have consistently [complained](#) that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has not provided enough relief to the region and are worried that the long-term efforts to rebuild the area have largely been [abandoned](#).

Contending with this inadequate response from FEMA, a number of left-wing groups throughout the state have stepped in to provide direct aid, in addition to the aid provided by the more usual volunteers and local churches.

“The American people are helping us,” city manager Mario Gisbert of Panama City Beach declared in October. “FEMA will eventually come into the game and get the accolades in six months.”

In addition to providing much-needed relief, left organizations in the area are highlighting the root cause behind the current intensification of natural disasters: global warming. Hurricane Michael was the seventh hurricane of the 2018 Atlantic hurricane season and the strongest hurricane to ever hit Florida’s panhandle and the strongest storm to make landfall in the continental US since 1992’s Hurricane Andrew. It hit just two days after the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its October 8 blockbuster report warning that environmental catastrophe is inevitable unless vast changes are made within the next 12 years.

“We Have Been Spreading Goodwill for Socialism”

At the outset of the storm, the [Socialist Rifle Association](#) (a working-class gun rights organization that advocates for self and community defense) started a GoFundMe for hurricane victims, which led to a relief effort that was coordinated with other left-wing groups, including the autonomous direct action group [Mutual Aid Disaster Relief](#), the [Tallahassee Democratic Socialists](#) (Tallahassee DSA), the [Tampa Democratic Socialists](#) and the [Tallahassee Party for Socialism and Liberation](#).

These kinds of efforts are certainly not limited to Hurricane Michael. Many of the same lefty groups [provided](#) relief after Hurricane Florence ripped through the Carolinas. Decentralized action was also carried out by organizations like the [Blue Ridge Autonomous Defense](#), [Interfaith Alliance for Climate Justice](#) and the [River City Medic Collective](#). NC Piedmont DSA, Charlotte Metro DSA and Charleston DSA came together to create the Florence Recovery Working Group. In [some areas](#) of

North Carolina, anarchists were the first people to show up after the destruction. The Socialist Rifle Association [organized](#) a massive supply run to hurricane shelters. After Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, leaving millions of its residents without power, a group of [anarchist organizers](#) built a solar grid to get the lights of a village back up. It would be another two months before the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority would even show up.

Ryan Ray, the communications director of the Tallahassee DSA, told Truthout that the group helped fix damaged roofs, brought food to the hungry, provided much-needed supplies like gasoline and cleared brush so people could leave their homes.

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Ray and others drove out to some of the areas most impacted by the storm the day after it hit, with a truck full of supplies. He described the scene in Blountstown, one of the state’s poorest cities. “The high school looked like yellow snow had fallen on it because there was insulation everywhere,” said Ray. “People were sheltered in the school and didn’t have the means to leave. DSA showed up with water, toiletries and gasoline to run their generators.”

“There’s so much predatory capitalism that moves in after a disaster,” Cosby Hayes, the group’s co-chair told Truthout. “We wanted to circumvent that and bring relief directly to the people.”

Tallahassee DSA has raised almost \$10,000 through a [GoFundMe](#) in an effort to keep providing necessary relief.

Hayes tells a story about DSA handing out pizzas to victims of the storm. He says he was approached by a police officer who seemed “infuriated” over the fact that socialists were giving out free food. “He told me that the people guarding the distribution centers were the ones who deserved the help,” said Hayes, “not the people ‘sitting around waiting for handouts.’ I also met a FEMA employee who was completely confused by what we were doing. He was so baffled by it.”

Vulnerable Communities During Disasters

Hayes believes this disconnect underscores a number of issues with the state’s disaster relief efforts, including a hesitancy to assist communities that are either ineligible for aid or afraid to seek it. Hayes said that Border Patrol agents had been spotted outside of distribution centers, frightening undocumented individuals who were impacted by the storm.

Hayes’s sentiments were echoed by Karen Woodall, the executive director of the Florida Center for Fiscal and Economic Policy, the group that established The Florida People’s Advocacy Center (FL PAC). FL PAC is a trans-inclusive organization that gladly assists undocumented victims. Woodall told Truthout that Immigration and Customs Enforcement had been seen around the locations where supplies are picked up. “Once the word goes out, people are afraid of identifying themselves,” said Woodall. “That’s why it’s important to work through [organizations] that communities trust.”

Ray said that DSA was especially proud of the work it has done with migrant farmworker communities, “distributing direct relief to those folks who are either ineligible or unwilling to seek state aid.”

Jimmy Dunson is a member of Mutual Aid Disaster Relief, a decentralized, grassroots relief network that draws inspiration from the Black Panther Party’s survival programs. The group looks to provide direct action assistance to victims while raising their consciousness. Dunson identified other underserved communities that the network was able to help. “We pressured prison officials to

evacuate prisoners to safer areas before the storm and checked on the status of prisoners for loved ones after the storm,” said Dunson. “We got people their oxygen tanks, colostomy bags, insulin needles, glucometers, diabetes care and other medical supply needs. We distributed supplies to every public housing facility in the greater Panama City area on a regular basis. We joined with residents to push back against evictions, and connected residents with legal support. We connected people displaced with temporary housing. We rescued non-human animals. We listened. And we made friends.”

Disaster Relief Under Climate Change

In addition to highlighting the plight of vulnerable communities, many of the autonomous organizations providing relief in Florida also recognize the importance of fighting climate change. Stronger hurricanes are a byproduct of warming, scientists have warned for years. [In 2017, there were six major hurricanes](#) and they all intensified rapidly. Michael transformed from a tropical storm to a major hurricane in a very short amount of time. Karthik Balaguru, an oceanographer who studies storms, [told Wired](#) that he believes warming is what strengthened Michael. “If I had to guess, I’d say it experienced perfect conditions for a hurricane — a lot of heat available in the ocean and favorable atmospheric conditions,” she said.

“A very visible disaster, such as a hurricane or earthquake, is different in magnitude and scope, but acts as a deepening and worsening of invisible disasters that people cope with every day,” Dunson told Truthout. “Band-Aids don’t work. We must apply pressure to stop the wounds of climate crisis, and also address and confront the political, economic, and social root causes at the same time if we are to avert a climate nightmare.”

“This entire effort is a testament to how left power has been organized over the last couple years,” said Ray while assessing the scope of DSA’s efforts. “We found that people want to give to folks in time of need, and they want to trust [the groups they give to] to carry out work in a way that is consistent with their morals. We have been spreading goodwill for socialism.”

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