

Pandemics — Organizing under lockdown: online activism, local solidarity

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As the pandemic forces us into lockdown, activists across Europe demonstrate that there are still ways to organize and practice solidarity at a safe social distance.

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The coronavirus pandemic is confronting us with unprecedented contradictions. The foundations of neoliberal capitalism are crumbling before our eyes, as governments in the EU are taking control over their economies in ways that would have been unthinkable just a few weeks ago. Restrictions on public spending have been [lifted](#), private hospitals are being [nationalized](#), wages are being temporarily [covered](#) by the state and universal basic income schemes are being drafted. At the same time, states are also implementing draconian emergency measures to restrict and monitor our mobility, which we cannot rightly oppose out of fear of spreading the virus.

This leaves the left in the predicament of having a unique opportunity to force a rapid transformation of our capitalist system yet lacking any way to do so through collective mobilization. Many of us have been left disoriented by this situation, not least because we have to reorganize our everyday lives on top of figuring out how to stay politically engaged. Across Europe, activists are already hard at work to find ways of organizing collective action even under conditions of lockdown.

NO SPACE TO MANEUVER?

Countries across Europe have [implemented measures](#) banning gatherings of more than a handful of people and many have mandated outright curfews that restrict any movement besides commuting to work and buying groceries. Most countries have also closed their borders — including the EU itself — halting international travel and migration completely. Certainly, many of these restrictions are necessary to prevent the further spread of COVID-19. However, they also carry the severe danger of permanently restraining our rights and curtailing our ability to mobilize political opposition.

When the immediate danger of the pandemic has passed, we now face a [dual threat](#) of either returning to the same neoliberal order that led us into this crisis, or seeing these “states of emergency” turn into permanent forms of authoritarian state capitalism.

This transformation is already underway. Hungary has effectively become a dictatorship, as Viktor

Orbán received carte blanche [to rule by executive decree](#) for as long as he wishes to. In Austria, the government has adopted cellphone tracking as a new surveillance practice to monitor the population. Many countries have introduced harsh punishments for curfew violations. The Danish government was only narrowly prevented by the far-left and liberal parliamentary factions from giving police the right to [force entry](#) into the homes of people suspected of infection.

There will also almost certainly be concerted efforts across the EU to keep heightened border security measures in place in order to further restrict the movement of migrants and diminish the ability of asylum seekers to enter Europe.

These developments are highly alarming. Without minimizing the need for social distancing, we should be very worried about the descent into authoritarianism unfolding around us. The fact that governments are acting out of a genuine need to cope with the threat of a global pandemic does not make their measures any less undemocratic. In fact, authoritarianism is quite often the reaction of a government fearing a loss of control during a phase of heightened uncertainty, such as an economic or political crisis.

However, such a loss of control is usually the result of growing social resistance against the government's rule, which is not the situation we are in today. Most governments are not threatened by any major social mobilizations in addition to the pandemic, so their implementation of authoritarian measures does not run into immediate opposition. Indeed, the need for social distancing prevents most forms of political mobilization, forcing activists around Europe to innovate.

FROM PROTESTS TO PODCASTS

Physical meetings and actions are largely out of the question at the moment. Some countries still permit demonstrations but these are quickly [shut down](#) if people do not keep a minimum distance from each other. Activists have therefore switched to digital communication and begun organizing political events online.

Housing movements originally planned to coordinate public actions across Europe for an international Housing Action Day on March 28. Instead of just canceling the event, they proceeded to protest from their individual balconies and windows, making noise and putting up banners. A day later German activists protested against the EU's treatment of refugees by simulating an [entire demonstration online](#), advising people to flood the social media feeds of various public institutions that they "passed" along their "route."

The climate movement Fridays for Future has shifted its [weekly climate strikes online](#) as well, sending millions of pictures and political demands across social media platforms. Activists from the movement have also started hosting the online show *Talks for Future*, where they engage in discussions with academic experts. Indeed, a whole congregation of [activist groups](#) and [critical think tanks](#) have taken this opportunity to start hosting their own podcasts and livestreaming political debates. On a more day-to-day basis, community organizers across Europe have shifted their consultation services to [phone conversations](#) and email.

This transition to online activism is certainly borne out of necessity rather than proactive political choice, but it can provide us with some important long-term benefits. For large sections of the left, particularly political parties and critical academics, the decision to invest more time and energy into their online presentation has been long overdue. Social distancing has effectively forced their hand to catch up with how most — especially young — people are already consuming media.

This is even more true under the current lockdown conditions, as almost everyone is forced to spend much more time at home — and therefore online. There is a good chance that this may lead to a heightened politicization across civil society, which makes it essential that the left is able to reach this captive audience. By making full use of the accessibility and flexibility of online activism, the left may expand the reach of progressive messages and quickly build up larger networks. At the same time, it needs to be aware and critical of the heightened surveillance risks posed by [online platforms like Zoom](#) and work towards building its own alternative online infrastructures.

SOLIDARITY AND THE COMMONS

Not all forms of activism can be done online, however. The current crisis highlights the urgent need for local mutual solidarity, not only to protect the most vulnerable communities but also to lay the foundation for the commons-based socioeconomic alternative that we so desperately need.

Local solidarity networks have provided mutual aid during humanitarian crises in the past and many continue to do so now. In Greece, activists have built a huge network of solidarity initiatives due to years of austerity and many of them are now organizing the distribution of food and other supplies to precarious communities under curfew conditions by sending individual volunteers to [shop for whole neighborhoods](#). This practice can be easily adopted anywhere else in Europe and could alleviate the strain on those who are less financially secure or mobile to sustain themselves. Solidarity with asylum seekers is particularly urgent, especially in the context of refugee camps whose conditions are quickly deteriorating. On the Greek island of Lesbos, [medical volunteers](#) are working around the clock to provide aid and stem the spread of COVID-19 among the refugees trapped in the camp.

But vulnerable groups require urgent help also in the urban centers of northern Europe. In Berlin, activists have been [occupying empty apartments](#) and turning them into improvised squats for the homeless population, while carefully abiding by medical safety conditions. Across the continent, there is also increasing domestic violence against women who are now forced to stay at home with abusive partners. Because of this, women's shelters continue to operate, albeit under strict sanitary conditions, and volunteers of [anti-violence networks](#) offer to hold consultations in person in case of emergencies.

These forms of solidarity work have to continue not *despite*, but *because* of the pandemic. Mutual solidarity, so long as it is provided under careful sanitary conditions, is a crucial way to support vulnerable and marginalized social groups for whom the virus and lack of mobility create existential threats. By creating local support networks, we can also continue engaging in political activism at a grassroots level, in a way that raises both the security and political consciousness of our communities.

The mutual ties we are now forging through neighborhood solidarity can be a basis for future collective mobilization, as well as convince people of the possibility of enacting more transformative political and economic changes. Since the sheer lethality of the globalized market economy and austerity politics is more obvious than at any other time in recent memory — at least in Europe — the left needs to double down on its struggle for a commons-based alternative. By making it obvious to everyone that local community-based solidarity is capable of helping us through this crisis, we can build a solid foundation for our struggle for the commons.

STRUGGLES FOR REDISTRIBUTION

Since the pandemic is deeply intertwined with a crisis of capitalist reproduction, we are already seeing new waves of redistributive struggles, which will only become more forceful as the economic crisis unfolds.

Many companies and public institutions still expect their employees to show up for work, especially in sectors that are deemed systemically essential like transportation, retail or public security. The increasingly unsafe working conditions in these areas have sparked a number of new labor struggles, even without the opportunity for collective mobilization.

Italian unions have called a [general strike](#) because multiple sectors are forced to continue operating even after the government initiated an economic shutdown. Amazon has been hit with [labor protests](#) due to the retailer's reckless endangerment of workers by forcing them to work with minimum safety protection. French unions have [announced a month-long strike notice](#) for the public sector in order to protest the government's "anti-social" relaxation of labor conditions under the guise of fighting the pandemic.

Tenants unions have called for an [international rent strike](#) to suspend living costs for people whose income has been compromised by the lockdown. These struggles are still few and far between, as many workers and employees have been sent into home office, temporary leave, or were laid off entirely. The conditions for labor mobilization will continue to be difficult, as the imminent threat of economic collapse and rapidly increasing unemployment will put workers under great financial pressure.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to be hopeful. The current crisis is radically changing our perception of which forms of labor are relevant for societal reproduction and which are not. Formerly undervalued professions like retail employees, delivery drivers and transport workers have transitioned from being labeled as "unskilled labor" to being "[essential](#)" to the survival of society. Healthcare staff in particular are increasingly regarded as playing an outright heroic role and their working conditions have become a central political talking point.

This experience of being indispensable for the survival of society will undoubtedly boost the collective class consciousness of people working in these sectors, which can greatly strengthen their ability to organize. So far, the public's appreciation for these professions has been mostly limited to symbolic gestures like collective applause, but the underlying shift in collective consciousness can be the foundation for long-term solidarity.

Similarly, the fact that many families now have to home-school their children may increase people's respect for educational staff and childcare employees. Although there is little reason to believe that the lockdowns are contributing to a more equal redistribution of gendered house and care work, the experience alone can provide additional fuel for future feminist struggles for collectivized social reproduction.

PREPARING FOR WHAT LIES AHEAD

In a few months, when hopefully the imminent threat of the pandemic subsides and we are hit by the full force of the economic crisis, the struggle for how to reorganize our political, social and economic systems will take center stage. As grim as the situation is, this provides us with a unique opportunity to fight for a fundamental emancipatory alternative. With the existential threat of neoliberal

capitalism being more evident than ever before, the European public is growing aware of the need for a massive expansion of social protection, collective control over the economy and the reorganization of labor.

As hundreds of billions of Euros are pumped into the failing economy, there is an opportunity to force companies to abide by new social and ecological standards and hand more democratic control to their employees. Governments can also take this a step further and transfer the companies' ownership into public hands entirely, which would finally allow us to initiate a transition towards the more socially equitable and ecologically sustainable economy that we desperately need. We now have proof that such a radical transformation is entirely feasible and only depends on the political will to make it happen.

For such a progressive change to become a reality, the left needs to hit the ground running. As soon as lockdown conditions are lifted, we need to organize broad social mobilizations, engage in struggles for redistribution and eventually achieve decisive political shifts in government.

We need to use the current phase to prepare for these struggles. Online activism can enable us to expand our networks and reach new audiences. Local solidarity can alleviate the worst impact of the pandemic and get new people engaged in a movement for collective social and economic reproduction. And by relying on the newfound structural power and public solidarity of "essential workers" we can put pressure on companies and governments to implement changes they would have never agreed to before.

As people across Europe are already demonstrating, we can do all of these things at a safe social distance. Even under quarantine, we can continue to fight capitalism.

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P.S.

- Roar Mag. April 9, 2020 :
<https://roarmag.org/essays/organizing-under-lockdown-online-activism-local-solidarity/>
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