

# Solidarity Networks

*Men brandishing assault rifles surround a building full of Black people. Groups of white men wearing biker's jackets bearing racist emblems roam the streets and make 'visits' to Mosques looking for signs of religious extremism. A right-wing media figure shows up to a protest, his pockets full of ammo rounds, and aims a gun at unarmed women and children. Refugees from economic collapse and brutal wars flood across borders, risking drowning or getting smashed by trains and trucks to sneak through tunnels or over oceans.*

None of these events take place in an imaginary future. This is our present world, one where all the illusions of peace, prosperity, and "civilization" are melting away. And this has always been the existence of the poor, of People of Color, First Nations, and occupied peoples in 'the West' and the rest of the world--the rest of us are only now beginning to notice.

And it can get much worse. Probably will, especially after the results of a recent election. We're watching an empire crumble, and it's not going down without a fight. But before you despair, let me tell you what else has been happening.

*Groups of people are smuggling fleeing refugees across borders--for free. Some show up when gangs of white supremacists gather in city centers and fight them off. Thousands of people are gathering on sacred land to help indigenous people fight off government-approved explosive pipelines. People are risking imprisonment and death to fight police, the military, corporate security, and fascists in order to protect others.*

There are many names for these sorts of groups. They transcend race and nationality, religion and family and community. They often also transcend class, and rarely fit squarely into usual political categories of left or right. And they seem to arise organically, always from the ground-up.

They're called Solidarity Networks, and they are crucial to our survival. They're also crucial for building a new world from the ruins of Capitalism and Empire.

## What's a Solidarity Network?

You're probably already familiar with Solidarity Networks, though you might not realise it. Actually, you already have the beginnings of one, but we'll get to that in a bit.

During the 1800's in the United States of America, abolitionists, former slaves, First Nations people, and sympathetic allies maintained safe houses and transportation for Blacks attempting to flee slavery into British/Canadian territory. This was The Underground Railroad. They did so without a specific hierarchy, and not only without help from the government, but in direct opposition to it. It was illegal to shelter fugitive slaves, even in so-called 'free states.' Another such network arose in Europe during the rise of the Nazi party and up to the end of World War II. Individuals and groups from many backgrounds and political persuasions sheltered, hid, and helped transport Jews out of Germany and Europe.

But helping fugitives is only one role of a solidarity network. In many cities in the United States, groups have been organised around helping immigrants and low-income folks (especially people of color) get wages from cheating employers or deposits back from deadbeat landlords. Similarly non-hierarchical, their members aren't just 'activists': in fact, many involved are people who've been helped by former actions.

One example is the Seattle Solidarity Network ([SeaSol](https://youtu.be/_unRLeFxTb8)): ([https://youtu.be/\\_unRLeFxTb8](https://youtu.be/_unRLeFxTb8))

Regardless of the specific purposes of any Solidarity Network, they tend to share the following traits

## *They are intentional*

While there are countless instances of people coming together to help others in need, a solidarity network isn't just a spontaneous action. Though they often arise organically, they are held together by shared principles and commitments and require organisation.

## *They are distributed, rather than authoritarian*

Solidarity networks have leaders and organisers, but the key to them is plurality. No one person is ever in charge of the network or the actions, but rather a group of people or, ideally, everyone involved. Not only does this prevent abuse, but it ensures that the network has more participation and can survive if something happens to core people.

## *They do not rely on government or the law*

Solidarity networks are never part of the government. In fact, they often arise in opposition to the government, or to fill a need that the government cannot fill (or has caused). For instance, both the Underground Railroad and the many people helping to hide Jews during World War II were engaged in illegal activities. Others, such as SeaSol, use direct action to get justice where the laws have so many loopholes that official channels (such as the courts) always fail the poor.

## *They are political, but do not demand political conformity*

The Underground Railroad was heavily supported by abolitionists, many who were early socialists. However, just as many were not socialists. You did not have to be a socialist or abolitionist to help, nor did you need to conform to any religious belief. Likewise, Socialists, Anarchists, Conservatives, and Liberals all worked together to get Jews out of Germany. While some political groups are much more likely to participate (and others likely to oppose the group), commitment to the cause is what is required, not identification with a party or political theory.

## *They make the most vulnerable their priority*

Solidarity networks don't help the oppressed as part of their work, *that is their work*. This makes them radically different from many other groups (like charities, churches, or unions) who come together for other purposes but include justice. Solidarity networks start with injustice and center all their other activities around it.

# What a Solidarity Network is not

As mentioned above, a solidarity network is different from other groups. It's important to keep these distinctions in mind.

## *They are not communities*

Community is a word used so often it doesn't really mean anything. We use it to describe both neighborhoods and identity-groups--like Pagan or LGBT 'communities'--as well as nebulous associations like the Online Gaming or Activist 'Community.' In all cases, community denotes a shared characteristic (living in the same neighborhood, playing online games) but not much else.

Solidarity networks are not based around identity, and do not rely on shared characteristics as a unifying principle.

## *They are not institutions*

This distinction is pretty important. Charities, non-governmental organisations, non-profits, or other groups certainly do good work. Their downside is that they are top-heavy, slow, inefficient, and often rely on large groups of people donating money rather than time. Though a solidarity network might pool resources or ask for donations, direct action is more important.

## They are not political parties

Though every single member of a solidarity network might be politically engaged and be active in political parties, the network is not a party. Political parties seek to gain power through the electoral process, rather than direct action. This always leads to compromise of their founding goals and direct-action work.

## They are not advocacy groups

A solidarity network doesn't try to 'raise awareness' about the plight of the oppressed: it does something about it. While advocacy is often part of the work of a solidarity network, attempts to raise awareness are specifically used to bring more people within the network and to support their actions. Activism and advocacy are part of the actions, but not the actions themselves.

# What Are The Principles of Solidarity Networks?

No two networks are identical, nor should they be. But they do share several core principles, regardless of their differences.

## Direct Action

Solidarity Networks do not rely on the electoral, legal, or political process to enact change. The people who hid Jews in their apartments in Berlin understood the political process wouldn't help them, just as the former slaves and abolitionists who hid and transported fugitive Blacks did not wait to win court battles or get the right people in office.

Direct action means **action**. It means doing something tangible to help others, rather than giving passive and indirect support. It isn't a Facebook like or a twitter re-tweet; it isn't holding a sign or writing to your senator. None of those 'actions' directly affect the situation of the oppressed. Likewise, Direct action is **direct**. It does not rely on the powerful, on representatives or officials or leaders.

We have become very accustomed to passive support: calling 911 when someone is in distress, giving money to large organisations like The Red Cross or Amnesty International. We cannot always directly help those in need, but when we can, we must. And because we've become so passive, we will need to relearn what we are actually capable of.

## Mutual Aid

Mutual aid is a principle very much forgotten in capitalist countries, and it's one we need to remember immediately.

Mutual aid is based on the idea that every person within a solidarity network is as valuable as every other, and each much be supported equally. This is seen best in the following two statements.

### **"An injury to one is an injury to all."**

Every act of violence, oppression, and harm that affects an individual also affects the group. As in anarcho-syndicalism, solidarity networks make a commitment to support each person and to come together in their defense.

This is best seen in solidarity networks like SeaSol. Sometimes, those who became involved at the beginning to help others find themselves in the same situations as those they've helped. An activist might find themselves losing their job for unfair reasons and suddenly find people they helped helping them.

This principle is essential to the coherence of the group. Unlike communities formed around identity, everyone within a solidarity network commits to the well-being of everyone else. They are all allies, all accomplices, supporting each other whenever needed. Many oppressors isolate and target individuals: a group is always much stronger.

### **"From each according to their ability, to each according to their need."**

Solidarity networks also recognise that each person has different abilities, wealth, privilege, vulnerabilities, and needs. Therefore, though they treat each person as important as every other person, they acknowledge some can give more while some will need more.

This is best seen in the networks who support fugitive Jews and Blacks. Escaped slaves had no property, often could not read or write, and often had nothing to offer. Similarly, fleeing Jews had few resources, no access to more, and

often didn't speak the language of their hosts outside Germany. In these cases, to expect the Jews or Blacks to carry their own weight or pay for rent or for food would have been more than unfair.

That doesn't mean they were unable to give back. Many escaped slaves returned to help others along the Underground Railroad routes, many Jews helped watch the children of their hosts or offered financial help in return. But since a solidarity network prioritizes the most vulnerable, it will acknowledge that those they help probably cannot help back during their greatest needs.

## The Risk of Solidarity

Before we look at how we can build solidarity networks, we need to have an honest talk about risk.

We're not used to taking risks. In fact, if there's anything Liberal Democracy has been very good at is assuring us that it's always better to be safe, comfortable, and secure. Risk is for the foolish people, or for gamblers or stock market investors, not for everyday folk.

That's never been true for everyone. Life has never been safe, though if you're white, able-bodied, straight, or otherwise privileged, you probably aren't accustomed to the idea that helping someone might throw you in jail or lead to your death.

Get over it. Now.

There's a massive chorus of Black, trans, queer, poor, disabled, First Nations, immigrant, and many other people who know that the safety and security promised by capitalism and democracy has always been a lie. It's never been safe for them, even if they toe the line, even if they obey all the laws, even if they pay their rent on time and never drive above the speed limit.

Right now, it's mostly just whites who still cling to this illusion. Worse, the refusal of whites to take risks on behalf of others is one of the reasons why oppression has continued for so long.

As Liberal Democracy collapses around us, whites are the only ones who really will have a choice to avoid risk. Stay silent, and you might be safe. Keep your head down, and you might not be targeted. Don't question oppression, and you might get to keep your jobs, your homes, and your normal life.

You might get to keep going as you did, while immigrants are rounded up and deported, more Blacks are murdered, vulnerable people die from lack of healthcare and medicine, trans people are beaten or kill themselves, First Nations people lose even more land and face down military-grade police forces...all for the chance that you might feel safe.

Do you really want that?

No, you don't. That's why you're still reading.

## Building Solidarity Networks

Ready? Good.

Every solidarity network is going to be different, and it'd be useless for me to give you a prescription for what you should do. Besides, it's time to give up our hope that leaders know any better than us and can get us out of this mess. You are the leader you've been waiting for.

Though I can't give you a prescription, I can outline a framework. Tinker with it at will, play with it, use your imagination. This is broad enough that you can adapt it any way you need to, but specific enough that you'll hopefully understand what's needed.

### 1. Start with your friends

I wrote earlier that you already have the beginnings of a solidarity network. They're called friends, and they're awesome.

Think about your closest friends. If you needed something right now, they'd be there for you, right? And if they needed something, you'd be there for them. Also, you don't expect them to do the very same things that you do. They need different things, and can do different things.

Mutual aid and solidarity are not abstract principles. They're the foundation of friendship, and you're already really good at it. In fact, solidarity networks are radical friendships.

Also, you don't agree with everything your friends think, believe, or do. Maybe they vote differently, have different views on capitalism or religion or politics. But that doesn't stop your friendship, because friendship isn't based on those things. Neither are solidarity networks.

Think of a friend of yours who is as worried as you are about the way things are, hopefully someone who lives near you. Then, talk to them about what they need right now. They're probably pretty upset after this election if they live in America, they could probably use a kind ear.

Ask them if they'd be willing to do something together to change stuff. Show them this essay if that helps. And then, together, talk about what you need from each other, what you can give to each other, and what you might be able to do together.

This may be an awkward conversation at first. Many people are not used to thinking of friendship this way. We take our friendships for granted, get lost in passivity of internet communication and the weight of the world's sorrows. But if you want to build something better, this will be your first step.

Don't worry, though. This is the easy part. They're your friends, after all.

## 2. Think about bodily and emotional needs

(DON'T SKIP THIS STEP!)

Another thing capitalism's been good at is distracting us from our bodies and emotions. We are often in our heads, thinking huge thoughts, worrying, fretting, plotting. So it's no surprise that so many people right now have been asking some very scary questions for the first time about how they'll survive all the chaos and violence as empire crumbles.

Ask the following questions of yourself first:

- What do you need to survive? Where does your food come from, your medicine, your shelter? How secure is all of that? What might happen if the way of getting that is disrupted?
- What do you need to feel safe? How many of the comforts in your life are only things that get you through the misery of your job? How much do you rely on police and the government for your bodily protection? What happens if that goes away?
- How do you deal with fear? Do you tend to shut down when crises happen, or do you put off emotions until the crisis is over? How do you manage panic, anxiety, depression, and despair? Do you rely on external sources (medications, entertainment, your friends and family) to get you through bad stuff, and what happens if they are not available in a crisis?
- What resources do you have? Do you have savings? A home, a car, other things that you might need if things get awful? Are you currently reliant on government income or benefits? What happens if those are taken away from you? Do you have any skills that don't pay the bills but could directly benefit someone in need?
- How do you care for yourself? Do you sometimes overextend your energy and resources? Are you good at communicating to people who support you when you need their help? Do you have trouble setting boundaries with people whom you support?

Once you've asked these questions of yourself, ask them of others. You don't necessarily need to directly ask them-- you probably already most of your friends' answers anyway. But to build a solidarity network, you need to understand not just your own abilities and needs, but those of others.

Thinking about your own situation and the precarious things that keep you safe will equip you to really understand the needs of others when they express them.

## 3. Extend out from your friends, and especially to people in need or danger

**Solidarity networks are not communities.** Communities are based on shared traits, while solidarity networks intentionally include oppressed people. Not only do they intentionally include them, they are built with them specifically in mind.

Here's the part where risk begins to come in. When you offer your support to someone in danger, you take on their danger. You share risk. Most friendships aren't based in unequal circumstances, but solidarity networks must be.

You don't need to go out looking for oppressed people. They are all around you. You are probably quite vulnerable yourself. Be careful of the white liberal tendency to 'adopt' tokenized oppressed people. That comes from living insulated lives, and only makes oppression worse.

Right now, you know someone who needs you. Maybe you know them only from work or the bar or your neighborhood. They might be the illegal immigrant who cleans your office or washes dishes at the restaurant where you work. They might be your Black neighbor, or the Muslim clerk at the convenience store where you buy your cigarettes. They might be the friend you haven't heard from in years, who you know suffers from deep depression, or your co-worker who just started transitioning gender.

Ask them what you can do to support them. Dare an awkward conversation, and risk the possibility that they might rebuff you or be facing problems so big you might be overwhelmed. Your network can't help anyone if it doesn't risk reaching out.

## 4. Use Your Privilege

You need to understand your privilege. That privilege might save someone's life.

If you're white, you should already know about your white privilege. If you don't, it's past time for you to learn. Most whites can walk by cops without getting shot, can walk into stores without getting followed. That's why many liberal whites don't take Black accounts of police oppression seriously--they don't experience it, and so have no reference point. Besides, they benefit from it.

To build solidarity networks, **you need to give that benefit to someone else.** You can't change the color of your skin, but you can acknowledge that your white skin can be used to protect the life of a person targeted because of their skin.

- If you're white, you can get away with stuff your immigrant or Black friend can't.
- If you're male, you're safer at night than your female friends.
- If you are healthy and have no medical problems, you can do things your disabled friends cannot.
- Straight and cis-gendered? Your body can be used to protect your gay and trans friends.

This will also help you dismantle your privilege. Really listen to the needs of those around you, recognise their vulnerabilities, and use your lack of them to help them. Use your white skin to protect a Black person from a cop, your male body to protect a woman from sexual assault, your abled body to gather resources and do work a disabled person cannot.

"From each according to their ability..." doesn't just refer to money or skill. Your privilege gives you access to things other people don't get. Use it to get it for them.

## 5. Grow, spread, seed

Keep going. The more of you there are, the more you can do. The more you succeed, the more other people will be inspired to do the same thing. And the more experienced you get at this, the more you'll be able to teach others.

There are some things to consider here, though.

### Secrecy

If you're doing very risky illegal actions such as hiding immigrants or dissidents, you need what's called a 'security culture.' Every person involved in your network must commit to keeping your activities secret, must think beforehand what they will say if they are arrested, and must honestly consider how 'an injury to one' will apply if they're being tortured in prison.

If your group gets large and relies on lots of people who are more 'allies' than participants, consider the security culture of the Underground Railroad. People who ran safehouses rarely knew the location of many more of them, guides didn't always know each other, and slaves who were smuggled out didn't always even know the names of people who were helping them.

Such secrecy protected the entire network, and also helped get more people involved. If a fugitive slave was caught, no matter how much they were tortured, they could not reveal who was 'behind' the Underground Railroad. The same for any guide or host of a safe house. The entire network could survive because no one person knew all the secrets.

### Beware of Authority

Your network is going to have organisers. More than likely, you'll be one of them if you started it. But there's a fine balance between being an organiser and being a central authority, and you must avoid the latter at all costs.

This isn't just a matter of principle, though there are plenty of principled reasons to avoid top-down networks. It's also a matter of survival for the entire group.

Police, military, mercenaries, and others will target the apparent leaders of a group. Being part of hierarchical, authoritarian groups themselves, they know how much chaos the loss of their own leaders would be. And if you have that kind of leader, the entire network can die when they are targeted.

As many people within the group as possible should share in the organising role. That doesn't mean everyone needs to be an organiser, only that there needs to be several people able to fulfill the role at a moment's notice. Too much all on the shoulders of one organiser will crush that person anyway, leading to burnout, bitterness, and even the end of the network.

## Prioritize Everyone's Needs--Including Yours

You can't save drowning people when you're drowning.

Every activist can tell you this, every organiser has a story. You'll be trying to help others, dedicating all your time and energy and resources, and then suddenly...you're done. You can't lift a finger, you can't be bothered to care. If it's bad enough, you actually start to resent or even hate the people you've been trying to help.

There are many reasons this happens, and it's a huge risk if you're one of the organisers of the network. If you have more 'ability' to begin with, you may forget your needs, especially if you're trying to keep up a strong mood of hope against a world of despair. When others are looking to you for help, it's really easy to ignore your own needs, especially if others aren't in a place to meet them.

The point of a solidarity network is that everyone is supported. Make sure you are too, whether that's setting stronger boundaries with people whose needs are too overwhelming for you at the moment or taking time away from organising, especially before you start to shut down.

## What now?

We've provided a very broad framework for solidarity networks, and used some specific examples to explain them. So you may be feeling a little overwhelmed. Are you capable of doing grand actions? Could you ever hope to be as courageous as others?

The examples provided were large for a reason. **You are capable of all of that.** You can save other people's lives, you can organise against bullies and the rich. And you may eventually have to.

But you don't have to start big. Here's a short list of places you might start.

- **Medication networks:** Many women, trans people, and medically-compromised folks may face a crisis over access to medications, birth control, and other necessary drugs. Do you have good health insurance? Don't need birth control but can get it? Access to pain, anxiety, or hormonal drugs that others might need? Build a network around this.
- **Emotional care networks:** Many, many minorities are terrified for their safety right now. Many are dealing with trauma and anxiety from what is happening and are feeling very isolated. Especially if you are worried but not yet directly affected by these crises, you can offer your emotional labor to them.
- **Skill, tool, and resource share networks:** These are very common already. You know how to do things that others don't, skills that may be life-saving to others. Most people don't know how to sew, to cook food from scratch, to garden—skills once basic to humanity but long forgotten by many. Self-defense is another one very essential, especially for women, trans people, and people of color. Even something as common as owning a car means you have access to something many people don't have and might need. Building transport networks for people in dangerous areas can save lives.
- **Protection networks:** Never underestimate the value of being physically present for someone in danger. Are you an intimidating-looking male? Imagine if you and four others all show up to stand in front of a Black or immigrant-owned shop that's being targeted by racists. You don't have to be armed (though it might be a good idea); physical presence alone can often stop attacks.

There are countless other ways of doing this, and your network might evolve as you continue. A group dedicated to teaching people how to cook might also be an emotional care network, or later commit to drive immigrant women home from their night-cleaning jobs.

Whatever you commit to, the most important thing to do is start now. And as you do, know that others are doing the exact same thing. Some of those networks will connect to others, some will be official, others clandestine. Several of us at Gods&Radicals are building them now.

And one final note. We mentioned at the beginning that solidarity networks are a key to building the world we want. This is how we can prove to others and to ourselves that we don't need authority, we don't need corporations, we don't need government and police. Not only are we standing up to violence and oppression, we're building a new world, one that is we know is possible, because we are from there.

## RESIST BEAUTIFULLY!

Your friends at Gods&Radicals  
([godsandrads.org](http://godsandrads.org))