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HOW MUTUAL AID AND COMMUNITY CARE IGNITE FURTHER GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING POSSIBILITIES FOR LONG-TERM CHANGE: REFLECTIONS FROM THE CASE OF KAPIT-BISIG LABAN COVID MONTREAL (LINKED ARMS IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST COVID)

Jacqueline Colting-Stol

This presentation centres around reflections and responses of a local chapter of a national mutual aid network Kapit-Bisig Laban COVID (linked arms in the struggle against COVID) in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. The questions I reflect on are:

How and why do we care (and have we always cared?) for each other among our communities, in our neighbourhoods, among our kin, and in times of crises when the State again and again shows the holes, gaps, and neglect in social welfare, immigration and health policies and responses?

What can we learn from the mutual aid organizing among Filipino and migrant groups that took place during COVID-19 in specific localities, tied to transnational lives and livelihoods? How are mutual aid and grassroots organizing reinforcing and compatible, if they are? What makes mutual aid and care revolutionary? *What are we building and how are we building it?*

Being Essential, But Not Being Cared for by the State

Kapit-Bisig Laban COVID was a Canada-wide community care and mutual aid network organized by Filipinos, allies, and concerned members of the community who believe that collective care, solidarity building, and mutual aid are the best way for us to overcome the hardships caused by COVID-19 and the inequities that the pandemic has further entrenched.

The initiative was launched in BAYAN Canada, a multi-sectoral

alliance of grassroots organizations and groups. The network started in Toronto by members of BAYAN Canada in April 2020 and soon it had spread within the span of a month to four provinces and nine cities. It was primarily volunteer-led with some funding by monetary and in-kind donations within our communities, as well as various chapters receiving small grants from local institutions.

In Montreal, the initiative was developed by Migrante Quebec, the Immigrant Workers' Centre of Montreal (IWC), PINAY Quebec (the Philippines Women's Organization of Quebec), the Filipino Parents' Support Group, Anakbayan Montreal and the Centre for Philippine Concerns.

We were able to receive a stipend to gather stories from 12 essential and community workers to understand their challenges, support, and mobilization during the pandemic, which have been drawn from and weaved throughout this presentation. We quickly could see and were affirmed by city data showing that the neighbourhoods in which high numbers of Filipinos live are the most impacted by COVID-19¹ but they were not getting the information and support needed or fast enough.

Many of these families and community members come to Canada through the Temporary Foreign Worker Program.² Through these programs, in the wider Canadian context and globally, Filipinos disproportionately hold frontline and essential jobs as live-in caregivers/domestic workers, personal support workers, nurses, and health care providers. The program also feeds into meat plantations, distribution and packaging centres and truck driving, and a plethora of service jobs in a wide range of industries that have been heavily hit by COVID-19 but have kept the economy going during the pandemic—keeping food on our tables, the shelves stocked, groceries and packages delivered.³⁴⁵⁶

1. Janet Cleveland, Jill Hanley, Annie Jaimes and Tamar Wolofsky, "Impacts de la crise de la COVID-19 sur les « communautés culturelles » montréalaises. Enquête sur les facteurs socioculturels et structurels affectant les groupes vulnérables," Institut universitaire SHERPA, August 2020, <https://sherpa-recherche.com/en/publication/impacts-de-la-crise-de-la-covid-19-sur-les-communautes-culturelles-montrealaises-enquete-sur-les-facteurs-socioculturels-et-structurels-affectant-les-groupes-vulnerables/>.

2. Tyler Chartrand & Leah F. Vosko, "Canada's temporary foreign worker and international mobility programs: charting change and continuity among source countries," *International Migration* 59, no. 2 (2021): 89.

3. Marshia Akbar, "Who are Canada's temporary foreign workers? Policy evolution and a pandemic reality" *International Migration Early View*, Special Issue Article (2022): 1.

4. Ysh Cabana, "Filipino Health Care Workers are Bearing the Brunt of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Canadian Dimension*, May 14, 2020 <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/filipinos-on-the-frontlines-and-the-cost-of-covid-19-in-canada>.

5. Ysh Cabana, "Under the Shadow of Contagion: Abuse of Filipino Workers in Alberta's Largest COVID-19 Outbreak," *Canadian Dimension*, May 1, 2020, <https://canadiandimension.com/articles/view/under-the-shadow-of-contagion-abuse-of-filipino-workers-in-albertas-largest-covid-19-outbreak> (accessed Mar. 16, 2022).

6. Ethel Tungohan, "Filipino Healthcare Workers During COVID-19 and the Importance of Race-based Data Analysis." *Broadbent Institute*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.broadbentinstitute.org/2020/05/01/filipino-healthcare-workers-during-covid-19-and-the-importance-of-race-based-data-analysis/>.

Emerging research and grassroots organizations were showing how the pandemic placed those facing precariousness due to having temporary status or lack of documentation, or who are isolated and more vulnerable to COVID-19, in heightened positions of being exposed to exploitation or rights abuses, deeper insecurity or a lack of safety. These issues occurred especially in their employment settings, which are now understood to be one of the most common places for people to be exposed to COVID-19.⁷⁸⁹

The organizations that regularly work with Filipino migrant workers, and broadly among the Filipino community, recognized the need for coordinated and organized efforts as a part of our ongoing responses to material needs which, in turn, help inform advocacy and campaign initiatives.

Mutual aid networks burgeoned during the pandemic—but what has been learned, strengthened, and continued from these creative, oftentimes neighbourhood-, community- and worker-led initiatives? They are broadly understood as a form of cooperation and unity against common struggle that occurs outside of the State that have been going on for centuries. These forms of support challenge individualism and competition as a form of advancement and instead focuses on solidarity—the acts of alliances being built between all kinds of people who each have something to give, while responding to people’s material needs in a form of consensual, voluntary giving and exchange.

Our view was that these mutual aid networks can build a broader base toward strengthening our capacities, collective empowerment, action and resilience toward the future. So, what are some of the reflections and lessons we can glean from the process and from the interviews?

Lesson 1: Growing From and Within Our Grassroots Capacities for the Long-Term

In this grassroots effort, we had prioritized those whom our organisations have been serving for decades and who many of the elder or longer-term community workers already had deep knowledge about or trust with.

In the short term, our support drew from a common organizing principle of casework. The casework and practical support we provided went beyond the one-sided charity model which closes the door on

broadbentinstitute.ca/filipino_healthcare_workers_during_covid19_and_the_importance_of_race_based_analysis.

7. Akbar, “Who are Canada’s temporary foreign workers?” 1.

8. Cleveland et al., “Impact de la crise de la COVID-19,” Institut universitaire SHERPA

9. Migrant Workers Alliance for Change, “Unheeded Warnings: COVID-19 & Migrant Workers in Canada,” June 8, 2020, <https://migrantworkersalliance.org/policy/unheededwarnings/>.

our way out; rather, they are moments to strengthen relations and collectivize the individual experiences toward common struggles—a process well-documented in migrant worker organizing literature.¹⁰¹¹ Collective action grows here toward social and political change.

The interviews revealed the main and important role of friends, community groups, peers and networks and social media in receiving information about resources, COVID-19 protocols and relief programs even in getting access to basic goods like food and medicine.

We established an online database and communication system to do follow-ups, outreach, and provide translated and easy to follow information online and in-person about employment and health and safety rights, government relief programs, and the constantly changing COVID-19 policies.

The diversity of skills and resources that were pooled together, backed by a migrant-worker-focused and led institution that had a consistent and ongoing knowledge base of changing policies and community resources were critical. Some were donating graphic design skills, driving to drop off food, some were contributing their knowledge of social and community resources.

These combined case work and collective action models could be avenues to transform our community institutions from the ground-up, having proliferated during the pandemic. We might ask: What bonds have been strengthened and renewed during the pandemic so that we can continue to build a culture of opposition and resistance against exploitative or exclusionary practices of the State? Who can we trust to show up, and how do they show up in times of crisis in our everyday lives and maintain those collective models of care?

A vision of long-term change centred on building relationships and alliances in this process has been key in migrant organizing, but can be constrained by our own capacities to work together and balance time, our own restrictions on health and movements, and familial, financial, school and career priorities. This network and the interviews suggest that centering these relationships can help build more sustainable and long-term infrastructures and networks that can weather the storms of crises. These bonds of solidarity are forged and based on trust, knowing each other's strengths, contexts, capacities and skills. The more we know, trust, support, and build with our neighbours, the wider our mutual aid can grow.

At the same time, our efforts look to long-term possibilities of transforming the roots of these inequities and exploitative conditions. This mobilization and organizing are part of what we've always done from the local to the global. We continue to ask and mobilize around

10. Aziz Choudry and Mark Thomas, "Labour Struggles for Workplace Justice: Migrant and Immigrant Worker Organizing in Canada," *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 55, no. 2 (2013): 212.

11. Aziz Choudry, Jill Hanley and Eric Shragge, eds. *Organize!: Building from the local for global justice* (PM Press, 2012).

the question: What are the roots of the TFWP placing our kin in exploitative and precarious positions abroad?

Lily, an organizer of Kapit-Bisig and Filipino parents' support group shared with us what she hopes will come from these organizing efforts in the long-term, linking to this question of the roots of the issues to guide us:

I hope that you know, with the organizing and relief efforts, we can reach out to more compatriots that are here in Canada and to be able to talk to them and make them realize what's happening in the Philippines and here in Canada... and the reason why we left our country and why we are here.

Lesson 2: Facing and Looking Beyond the Contradictions of Funding Constraints

Short-term, emergency-based funding projects become a source of capacity but are not the “be all and end all.” While the contributions of many individuals, groups, and alliances help to grow the strength of support, not having consistent core funding and charitable status to apply for many funding options means that there are also major time and pressures on people doing this outreach and organizing, oftentimes outside of their regular working hours, combined with local and transnational caretaking responsibilities or differing abilities.

As has been critiqued by many, if we continue to rely on the limits and restrictions of the funding sources, we may be stuck in a charitable, emergency response mode—faced with supporting the economic and political interests of the State over the “on-the-ground” struggles faced by our communities.¹²

In what ways can these grassroots projects look to long-term alliances that support their ongoing mutual aid infrastructures, so that the initiatives are not limited to the beginning or end of funding but leverage that funding for the longer term? Perhaps it's more of a question of how these mutual aid processes are already embedded in our daily lives to ease those pressures and collectivize in our workplaces, educational institutions, and caretaking responsibilities?

Lesson 3: Choosing to Look “On-the-Ground” for Legitimization, Consent and Accountability

This line of questioning draws from organizing principles, the interviews and theories that are growing a culture of opposition,

12. Aziz Choudry, “Global justice? Contesting NGOization: Knowledge Politics and Containment in Antiglobalization Networks,” in *Learning from the Ground Up*, eds. Aziz Choudry & Dip Kapoor (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 20.

dignity, and rights from the ground-up.¹³ In what ways do we centre the material and social needs of those most impacted by the policies we want to change? Highlighted as a key concern in our interviews—How do we consider in our mutual aid the notion of “double provision” through a transnational lens of those caring for people here and in the Philippines?

This network works to gain its legitimacy not from looking up toward permission and funding from the State or larger bureaucratic institutions—but through our accountability to those facing heightened precarity and vulnerabilities. It’s a not-so-seamless process, though, as we navigate our relations and resources intergenerationally and transnationally.

Jeffries and Ridgley¹⁵ describes the ways in which we aim to transform harmful State practices and build stronger relations in our everyday lives as an experimentation of alternative visions for our communities:

...building everyday relationships and support across struggles and among people is a vital part of building abolitionist sanctuary from the ground up. This work nurtures infrastructures of mutual aid and builds social bonds of solidarity in the fabric of everyday life in the city... it also provides opportunities to experiment with alternatives to dominant state-centric visions of safety and social provisioning that legitimise migration controls, borders and the citizenship system more broadly.

In building this vision within our communities, an interview participant reminded us how important it is for our communities to recognize themselves as an essential part of this society she said “I want Filipinos to... know they’re important. They’re not invisible and their voices can be heard.”

As we choose to look “on-the-ground” for these alternatives of community care and support, I refer to Madonna Thunder Hawk, writing about native organizing before the non-profit industrial complex and putting forth how organizing continues without asking permission from the State, compelling us to question: What limits the imagination of what we could do?¹⁶

13. Choudry et al. *Organize! Building from the local*, 2.

14. Harsha Walia, ed., introduction to *Undoing Border Imperialism*, (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2014). 7-21.

15. Fiona Jeffries and Jennifer Ridgley, “Building the Sanctuary City from the Ground Up: Abolitionist Solidarity and Transformative Reform,” *Citizenship Studies*, 24, no. 4 (2020): 562.

16. Madonna Thunder Hawk, “Native Organizing Before the Non-Profit Industrial Complex,” in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, (North Carolina: Duke University Press): 105.