

**A Conversation with Dean Spade**
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Jenny: Hello! We are so pleased to introduce a conversation between Dean Spade and Sam Trotman. First broadcast live on Lumsden Live, a radio station running from Scottish Sculpture Workshop in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, in May 2021. Dean Spade has been working to build queer and trans liberation based in racial and economic justice for the past two decades. He's the author of 'Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of Law'. The director of the documentary 'Pinkwashing Exposed: Seattle Fights Back!' And the creator of the Mutual Aid Toolkit at bigdoorbrigade.com. His latest book, 'Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the next)' was published by Verso Press in October 2020. In this conversation, Dean and Sam discussed the practices and tools Dean has developed through years of experience working in community activism and mutual aid. They explore how mutual aid principles can make the world a more equitable and just place for all.

Dean: A lot of things, like a lot of work in the US that we're doing all over to stop new jails and prisons from being built, to decriminalise things, just to address our huge, outrageous system of criminalisation that I know is world famous. Ehm and ehm for the last year, I mean, I think I've been in what most people have been in one version or another you know, deep and different kinds of mutual aid work. For me, a lot of that is about directly supporting people coming out of prisons and jails into a pandemic. Also ehm you know support ehm... around things related to the uprisings that we've seen in the US and more broadly. Especially in 2020, against racism and police violence. So a lot of direct work with like bail funds. Trying to get people out of jails and prisons who are protesting work. Trying to get people out of prison because covid has been so terrible inside US prisons and jails. And, yeah, just like a range of things and I came out with this book that you mentioned about mutual aid, which obviously was in the works before the last year, because ehm it takes a while to write and publish books.

But that work, you know, basically mutual aid, in my view is central to social movements; it's what builds and grows social movements; it's what social movements are always doing and it's what I've always been part of as a person involved in social movements. But it's also narrated out, like the story, especially that I see in the US but I think this is true elsewhere also, the story that's told about how social change happens is the story about how you have to change laws and you have to get legislatures to do things and you have to get judges to do things. And you have to elect people to do things and it's a story about elite solutions. And in my view, like living in this like capitalist; white supremacist; colonial project that is the US. We know that like- just this is not going to be delivered from those places. And also like, disaster relief isn't going to be delivered from those places. Like we've seen how it fails us every time there's a fire, flood, storm, etc.. And so it's a really big deal that we- that we narrate social change in a way that erases mutual aid and so. Especially since Trump was elected, I've been really focused on just trying to popularise the idea of Mutual Aid. Like I made a little animated video about mutual aid, like things to try to get people to think about this part of social change work that is really at the centre but that gets narrated out. Because I saw that so many people were like really ready to be mobilised and really angry and scared when Trump was elected and with all the things he was doing. But then the message they're getting is just like 'wait to vote' or like 'post something on social media' or 'go to a protest once a year'. And so there was this kind of demobilisation, this pushing us into these passive roles and I think mutual aid is the reverse of that. So that's why I've been doing this work around, just trying to like narrate and popularise the idea of mutual aid.

And then in 2020, mutual aid as a concept really went mainstream and a lot more people started talking about it and including in mainstream media because so much covid mutual aid popped off. And so ehm, it's just been a really important moment to to talk about mutual aid, especially to try to talk about it as part of a radical and transformative movements because, of course, like the mainstream media is going to try to narrate it as just like friendly volunteerism that's you know not threatening to the systems we live under. So that's kind of a bit about the context-

Sam: I think that's amazing because I think what what would be really great to hear a bit more about from you is about the difference between volunteering and mutual aid. Cause I think sometimes it can come from a similar place for communities. Like ehm here, when when Covid hit, it was really like everyone just went, "Right, what can I do? Let's just, like, get out there. Let's just do this. What needs to happen here?" And there wasn't a kind of infrastructure by the council or by the state to to be able to deliver to a, you know, really rural community. And there's a lot of services that can't be delivered, you know, here. It has to happen through people doing it. So it'd be really great to hear that difference really. What happens there? What was the- I love the bit, sorry, just eh this one bit where you say, "Mutual aid is the radical act of caring for each other while working to change the world." And I just would love to hear more from you on that.

Dean: Ya totally. I love what you said about how... people's first instinct during crisis or disaster is to want to help each other. And that is so beautiful and I really think that there is like a lot in place to try to stop us from doing that you know. And so, yeah. The difference between mutual aid and what I might call like charity or social services or government service, the big difference is that mutual aid is directly doing survival work with an invitation to collective action. It's based in a broader ecosystem that's like, you know what, this crisis is coming from systems that are put in place by state and capital and we want to get to the root causes of that. Whereas, government services and charity is aimed at like... giving sort of a few crumbs to the people who the government or the charity decides are like the deserving poor, or the deserving people in crisis. It usually comes with a lot of like eligibility criteria, like, 'well, you can't get this if you have a criminal record' or 'you're not eligible unless you have children' or 'you're not eligible unless you are sober' you know. Like charity and social services are all about kind of managing and policing and controlling and surveilling people in crisis. And there's an implied idea that if you're in crisis, there's something wrong with you and that we should, like, fix you and intervene on you, ehm, to try to rehabilitate you into our system. Whereas in mutual aid the assumption is, if you're in crisis there's something wrong with systems that put people in crisis; that make people poor; that make people unhoused; that make people- that concentrate wealth; that produce climate change et cetera, and that we need to directly support you and also invite you to take collective action with others facing these ehm- these crises. And mutual aid is always tied to those broader collective action strategies and tactics. And so it's you know, in some ways, I would say charity is about sustaining the existing unequal systems and passing out a few crumbs along the way that often kind of ehm, also give good PR to the systems. Like to the corporations that are saying, "We donated." Or to the government that says, "We did something." Where as mutual aid is is ehm, like a vital part of of a movement to transform the root causes of crisis.

Sam: And I think that what's really nice to hear- pick up on is, later today we we have Marwa Arsanios, eh Yazan Khalili and Lara Khaldi, and they're all speaking from a position as cultural workers who are working out of Palestine and out of Lebanon. And they talk about how crisis is utilised by eh countries, by states to ehm kind of maintain the crisis. Like the funding, you know, ehm- I think Marwa speaks that when the explosion happened in Lebanon, like all of a sudden it was like, "Oh, we won't have sanctions anymore." All of a sudden we can get more aid in so the crisis maintains itself. And that crisis is a system where we have to always work very quickly and eh we're not able to change because we're always in crisis. So I think there's something quite interesting there about trying to fix mutual aid to a bigger struggle that's kind of trying to get out of this crisis and not try to use the systems that are making the crisis, kind of, happen more.

Dean: Yeah, and the crises are used as an excuse for more policing always and for greater lockdown. I mean, there's a book that ehm an author I really admire wrote, and his name is Todd Miller, and it's called 'Storming the Wall'. And what he looks at is how, in the face of climate crisis and increase in climate refugees, what the US government has been doing for a number of years is simultaneously like sort of denying climate change while building up Department of Homela- Homeland Security capacity to round people up. Doing all these, you know, exercises where they practice, like caging climate refugees. Like they they use crisis to build greater levels of security state, greater levels of those apparatuses of state violence. Ehm you know and also I think Naomi Klein's work is useful here about disaster capitalism. How in the face of big disasters, earthquakes, hurricanes, pandemics, you always see like the wealth gap increase. You see billionaires get richer because they find new ways to displa- permanently displace people. To do land grabs, to do ehm government funding grabs. Like, ultimately like, you know, crises are moments of rupture that are really important for social movements, but we're in a battle against our opposition. They're going to try to use that to further increase the global ehm wealth divide and to further concentrate wealth. And we're going to try to use it to like, take back people power and those are deeply at odds.

Sam: Yeah, I think that that moment now where some people maybe feel like we've just passed it and other people feel like we're we're in it. This gap, this gap that crisis creates feels ehm very important an- and a moment where we can utilise kind of that that time. Ehm but equally, like you say, it's that feeling of urgency and ehm... Yeah, I'm interested in about the kind of mechanisms of mutual aid and how they often come together in these moments where you need to happen. Ehm but what happens next? You know, like ehm, what what are you seeing happening say in the states, for example, around mutual aid? We have some small mutual aid groups that are working here, and they've started to sort of slowly shut down ehm over sort of the last few months. So how are you sort of seeing mutual aid sustain itself, or or mutual aid efforts sustain itself?

Dean: Yeah, I mean, ideally, what happens when there's moments where more people, ehm, come into mutual aid, I have seen this a lot in the last year, like a lot of people who've never done any kind of organising or activism before have joined mutual aid efforts so that's really amazing. So mobilisation is one of the big things which mutual aid can offer is more people mobilised. And then when you get mobilised through doing mutual aid work, you usually end up learning about just stuff about how systems really work and your politics and solidarities expand. You know you show up because you're upset about one part of it or because you feel urgent about one part of it. You get there and you encounter when you're doing real work to people's survival needs, you encounter like more about it that you didn't know. The part you hadn't experienced. You're like, "Oh like you know, I never really thought about how this affects elders. I haven't actually, I never thought about how this affects people in my own neighbourhood who use wheelchairs and need elevators and what happens when the lights go out. Or I never- you find out more than what you knew and so your solidarities and your political capacities expand. And so what I've seen for a lot of people is like, they got involved in a Covid-19 mutual aid, and found themselves also involved in tenants' union; are also in the fight around transit in their town; are also trying to help get people out of prison who were facing Covid. You know they- their capacities for understanding the interconnection of the issues and taking action in multiple sites expanded even if they were deeply involved, like in a grocery delivery or something you know. I think it's really great to be deeply involved in a particular mutual aid projects, but also have it be a site from which your solidarities expand. So I've seen a lot of that. I've seen that some some mutual aid projects you know of course they they wax and wane. I think that that's OK. Even if they wax and wane, people have increased their capacities. Cause part of what we're doing is we're preparing for the next disaster.

So if we've been doing grocery delivery in our neighbourhood and we've learned a lot about where people who can't leave the house are, and who different people who are really vulnerable are, then when the next blackout comes or the storm or the fire, we're actually more prepared. Because at least in the US, like our Federal Emergency Management and State Emergency Management Systems, they don't show up. They show up really late. They mostly send people with guns. And they- and when they do show up they only offer help that that reaches people who are like homeowners and they get like loans for fixing their house. They don't offer things that ehm that reach the poorest people.

So we really are in the front line of disaster support in our own communities. Both the ongoing disasters of people being so poor and criminalised and also the kind of moments of crisis, disaster like the pandemic or the storm or the fire. Ehm and so I think the more we practice mutual aid, the more we're prepared for that. We also are preparing by learning how to do stuff like coordinate with each other; make decisions together; ehm share things; like learning who has what resources in the community; like who has a generator; and who has ehm- you know who's who's most likely to need to be able to plug in a medical device if the lights go out. Like having that kind of knowledge about our capacities. Ideally, people plug into long term mutual aid work.

So people are maybe doing covid mutual aid, but then as as if - if the need for that wanes in some communities that are- that have access to vaccines, which we know some people in the world do not, then it maybe it means that we are also working on how are we supporting undocumented migrants in our community? Or people [inaudible] disrupted by criminalisation of some family member. How are we supporting- how are we doing childcare collective in our community? Or how are we doing, ehm, you know any of supporting elders who are becoming really isolated? Like how can we do- cause you know mutual aid- the disasters are ongoing, even though the pandemic was a really visible disaster happening everywhere at once. And I think we should be preparing for the pandemic to be an ongoing part of our lives, because, of course, there's been an incredibly uneven vaccine distribution. We're going to be continuing to see new waves and new strains unless the whole world gets vaccine access. And so I think we should also be thinking like, 'OK, what do we wish we had in place for the next wave of the pandemic and for all of its impacts'?

And so, I think it's like- it's good to know that in ehm in social justice work, we don't need the exact same formations to last forever. We don't need to try to set up mutual aids like charities, like last for one hundred years and have these funding streams that are really institutionalised. Actually those things are often very not responsive, like I see those kinds of NGOs and charities like fail to respond in emergencies and mutual aid. And people volunteering and through mutual aid is what people- is what is more responsive. But we can also be like, OK, so maybe you and I were in a project together that did covid mutual aid for a while and it waned or people got burnt out, we can think, OK, what are the lessons learned? What could we have done differently to bring more people in so we didn't burn out? How did it become hard to enter this project? Did anybody kind of dominate? Ehm, you know, was it conflict that broke us up, like what broke us up and how could we shift it next time? And then also keep starting new projects together and with others and just continuing to be really responsive.

Sam: Yeah, and I think it's really- I think that's really important when you talk about these models of waxing and waning. I actually think it's a super important part of how you can, like, care for that work. Like everyone can't be delivering full tilt all the time, like responding, responding. And actually, when you have that time to reflect and that downtime, actually that's where these sort of, like you say it could be Covid, kind of could reach into other areas and you sort of learn from other struggles and other ways of working. And I think what's really interesting to hear, although you're like operating in a super different context to us here as a as a geographically rural organisation, mutual aid is one of those things that kind of enables people to live in really geographically dislocated places where there isn't you know-. There is no transport or there is no ability to move between places that easily, and I don't think it's ever seen as kind of do-gooding or volunteering, it's just how you survive. And this idea of survival work feels really important as well. I think it's a term we've only just sort of come across recently, but eh... the idea of, especially when we think about the oncoming climbing- climate crisis, actually, what are we doing to survive? How are we going to live through these next crises is really important.

Dean: Yeah, I mean, I think when think about the rural context, it's useful to think about the fact- cause I think it's fascinating to think about like how- the more the more densely people live and the more people live in cities, the more they have like, their life is mediated through capital and city services. Like do you have trash pickup? And lots of people in rural areas don't. Or do you have mail service? Like the more rural you get, the kind of further in some ways you get from certain forms of state control and corporate control. And I think it's useful to think about how I mean, obviously we're all still under state control, but just in terms of like different amounts it touches your day-to-day survival needs.

And I- it's interesting to think about, one, how much what people are trying to do now is rebuild things like food sovereignty because we know that under climate crisis, where the systems that have been set up to do things like feed us or bring us electricity, are you know toxic for the Earth and in danger. Like the grid's likely to go because it's being terribly maintained by a horrible corporation, if you're in one of the US states. Or the food- the food ehm system is incredibly fragile because it's so unsustainable. So you can see the the sort of ways in which I think a lot of rural people ehm... ha- have more ideas and methods around food sovereignty and things like that. And I also think it's interesting just to think about how mutual aid is just like, another term for like how everyone survived before capitalism and colonialism disrupted our life ways and forced us to rely on its systems for food or energy or education or whatever right.

So like, if you just think about like the ways people lived in subsistence agriculture or nomadically and have lived, and many still do live in indigenous cultures around the world like, like that kind of collective self governance over our life ways and over our survival needs and that kind of like just reliance on each other to get by. Like if we don't collaborate, we're not going to like get through this winter. Like that is actually something we're trying to restore because that's coming for us anyway with climate change and with the bottom falling out of the very unsustainable systems we live under so.

I think it- I really appreciate what you're saying, like our mutual aid projects, our figuring out how to care for old people in our county or whatever it is, is practice for what's already happening all over the world. The impacts of climate weather. I mean I'm sure people like last winter in Texas where there was suddenly this extreme winter weather and nobody was prepared for it. None of their houses were insulated. People died of cold. And it's like, well, what would we want to have in place in our communities for that when that comes again? Because we know the government doesn't show up and people just die of cold. Like, OK, what do we need? Or when the fires come or whatever. And I think that this is like the kind of thinking, if we are in sober reality about climate change, that we really need to be doing.

Sam: Definitely and I think these conversations where we can join up these understandings of struggles of ehm-. You know people might say, "Oh, well why would this small community here be looking to the states for something? There's such a different kind of culture and systems that are happening?" But actually, we're under a global system that is trying to kind of work in one way and we're saying, "No, it's working in another." So, for example, the work that's happening here around community energy, for example, is super interesting right. That we can see communities in Torry who are building their own hydroelectricity kind of works that are owned by the community, which means that we're not reliant on the kind of massive oil and gas kind of systems that we know in the area are not sustaining us anymore, that we're trying to find just solutions to. So these kind of small ways that we might be able to work are able to kind of- we could look at that as one example but then look to another, how mutual aid's developing; how other systems are working in other places. And I think that, being able to try and keep these links of joining up feels so important eh for thinking about this survival work.

Dean: I think that that- I think that that kind of local energy project is a mutual aid project. It's meeting an immediate survival need with an awareness, like based out of an awareness the systems that exist are harmful. Right. Like that's- that's mutual aid. Right. So we're like, you know, let's get to the root causes. Let's not rely on coal or fracked gas or whatever it is to get our energy and I think that's the-. I mean, I love that example, because that's that's really what we need. When Hurricane Maria came through Puerto Rico, the only places people could charge their medical devices or places where community centres, people had solar panels, you know. The only food available, since 90 percent of Puerto Rico's food comes from off island, was the food people were growing at community centres and community gardens. Like it really does come down to that. And when I see things like, you know, in California, there's been this horrible, horrible fires and some of the most deadly ones were started by failures of the private energy company that doesn't maintain its lines and so it's starting fires with its terrible energy problem that are killing people. And then the state, the state's response is it passes laws that say you can't sue the energy company for killing people in the fires. Right, like- the state is going to protect these very murderous conditions. And part of that is like the state's energy company, the corporate energy company the state is protecting, is too big. It can't maintain its infrastructure because it's... huge. Right.

And so what's actually a much more sustainable way of doing energy is to do it at a very local level and to have people governing it who live where the energy is being made and who can say, "That's [inaudible] dirty. We won't do that. We won't accept pipelines going through for energy. We want energy that can be made and distributed in a way that's just and sustainable." And so I think another piece of mutual aid is moving from big centralised efforts at getting survival needs met, to local sustainable community government efforts to meet survival needs. And that's a huge difference. And that's very against what capitalism wants to do, which is like centralise in order to extract as much as possible.

Sam: Absolutely, and I think ehm... I guess I came to work through the Sylvia Rivera Law Project and the work that you've worked with collectives there years ago now I'm aware. But the way in which, ehm, like your handbook or you're just writing about this project which is amazing, really centralises, the organising and the way in which you organise to make sure the uses of that organisation are central to how it works, has been so inspiring to me thinking about what sort of organisation is and how we talk about it, you know, think about it here. And it'd be amazing to hear a bit more about your- how you've worked with setting up structures that are looking to do that, that aren't just set up to be like, oh, here's a community, we can serve them, but actually, how can this community serve itself?

Dean: Totally. A huge like principle for me of mutual aid is that it's like by-people-for-people, right. And that it- and that it sees people whose survival needs are being met as like the people who have the most wisdom about what is needed and what ehm-. And so it's- I'm really- you know, I think it's- I'm opposing that to charity and what charity is, kind of this idea that, like, 'these outside experts are going to come in and tell these communities what they need to do to be more moral' or whatever, and are going to decide who gets the crumbs they're handing out and it's very top down, right. Mutual aid is bottom up and very horizontal. So one thing that's really central to mutual aid projects is to be set up in ways that they where we're practicing co-governance and co-stewardship of resources, right. So we're practicing making decisions together. So a lot of mutual aid projects use consensus decision making, meaning that you know, people in the group together decide how it's going to work instead of having a boss. Like it doesn't really make sense to have a boss when everybody is volunteering, because if you come in and you're just like, "I'm gonna boss you all around." Like we're just going to leave because they're not paying us.

But most of us are used to working in capitalism and having a boss or having a teacher at school or a dad at home or whatever, everything is hierarchical. And there's kind of like, somebody is the decision maker and everybody else has to just kind of like go along to get along right. And you just have to kind of like numb to the pain of that to like survive in these jobs and these schools et cetera. Mutual aid is us practicing a really different set of skills which is like, what if we make decisions together? What if we care about the wisdom of everyone in the group?

What if instead of trying to, you know, out vote each other and have a majority of us say, "We're doing it this way and other people just have to live with it." Like that's not going to work if we're all volunteers. Those people are just going to leave if we don't listen to them, right. So how do we create decision making processes that are actually interested in finding like the wisest solutions that everyone in the group can live with?

And so a lot of what my book is about is just the kind of these basic things like, how do we make decisions together? How do you create efficient ways of making decisions together that are still sufficiently consultative that everyone knows what's going on? Everyone understands like if we spent some money where it went. There's transparency, there's participation and democracy. And most of us haven't got to practice this in any groups we've been in because it's not how churches, or schools, or families, or jobs work. And and the other pieces like, who do we have to become to be able to do that? Like how do we the kind of... change like the socialisation we get? Living in capitalism and white supremacy and patriarchy, you know these are all systems that tell us to try to become the boss; and to try to be the one who pushes our ideas forward; and dominate others; and be really like ego bound about how about our reputation.

And what this can look like in mutual aid groups is it can mean that like people who founded it can become really bossy and bad at transparency. Or it can mean that people are really interested in like only the outside view of the group, like how many services we deliver and then don't really attend to, like, what's the inside culture of the group? Are people being kind to each other? Are people having like deep experiences of like belonging and purpose and connection? And so a lot of the book is about how to really make sure the group is attending to the internal dynamics of the group, because that's really what's going to determine whether the group keeps going. And also, like, is the group being welcoming to new people? It's easy for people to start something and then just be like, ehm you know, not very welcoming to new people. And then those original people burn out because these crises we're dealing with are big! Like we've got- like there's a lot of need and so if we don't keep bringing in lots and lots of new people, then it's just going to be small and people are going to burn out.

And so, a lot of what I think about and have spent years working on and a lot of what I do these days is like talk to different mutual aid groups about, like, kind of how to do this; how to kind of troubleshoot some of the conflicts that I'm in groups because if we do work we care about other people, we will encounter conflicts. And that doesn't mean anything's wrong, but it's just like how do we kind of become the kind of people-. I mean if we're imagining a world in which we all co-govern energy in our communities and food and like all the basics, then we need to become the kind of people who can work together in groups and do that and not just be trying to boss each other or just disappearing and letting someone else boss us, you know. We need to become people who have the capacity for deeply consensual co-stewardship and collective self determination. And so mutual aid groups are a place we can practice those skills and find out what that's like and find out what's beautiful and hard about it and like, move towards it.

Sam: Yeah, and I think that that kind of how we navigate conflict and coming together, I think often a lot of the time, whether it's in art or group dynamics, you're talking to a lot of people who might be the same as you, right. The same group of people, the same politics and actually when you move into something like mutual aid, or you move into responding to something really in a hyper local level, you're coming up against people who might have really different party politics to you, for example, or things like this. And I wondered how you have seen that navigated or how you try and navigate that? You know I think that's really clear lines. You know, if you're a fascist, then you just don't need to exist in this, like you don't need to be part of this group. That's fine. But ehm, you know, there- there's this breath of people, you know. Folk are folk and not everyone should be the same in a group and that's a great thing when you have it. So your work is so deeply practical, which I love, that you can just pick something up and use it, not just think about it and write something to sound clever you know. You you can use a tool in the mutual aid book or or the the handbook. So, yeah. Could you tell us some of those things that you've you've seen happen to help navigate that working together?

Dean: Yeah, I mean, I think that part of the problem is that even when we're in groups where we think people are the same, we're usually forcing people to hide parts of themselves. You know like, this is like, so much of like Black feminist and women of colour feminists’ thought is about this. It's about like getting together a group of women and then and then the white women wanting everyone to pretend that white women’s like story is a story about women right. And that white women’s struggles are the struggles of all women; and white women's solutions are the solutions of all women; and women of colour being like, actually, there's a 'but' much missing here.

So I think one of the first things is like knowing that any group we are in has intra group difference. And if we're like kind of addicted to the idea that we're all the same, then we're really missing like the wisdom of the group and we're probably pushing people out or making people not be attracted to join. So I think starting, it's useful for groups to have some kind of shared principle. That principle could just be like 'we all want to deliver groceries during Covid'. [chuckles with Sam] Like really basic right. And then and then you say, "OK, well, what does it mean to build more shared analysis? So how are we going to-." I think most mutual aid ends up being a base of political education for people on a number of levels. One, there's kind of the organic political education I mentioned earlier where you get to the problem and you find out things you didn't know, like, "Oh, I never thought about the obstacles to people with disabilities to getting groceries before Covid and now, with Covid." Or, "I never thought about what- how this part of the county has worse roads." Or whatever it was that... ehm, because you were just seeing it in the abstract and not actually getting your hands dirty, you have people you didn't get to know. So part of- some political ed comes from encountering each other in our differences and like seeing what the conditions really are and how they're uneven. And then a lot of mutual aid groups just do political ed workshops together as part of it. So it's like, "Oh, let's do a disability justice workshop because we realise not all of us know that much about disability. And some people with disabilities might be being excluded from participating in our group because of the way that we're communicating or the way that we're calling our meetings or whatever." Or let's do a- let's do a political ed workshop about some histories of mutual aid in our region that help us know more about the kinds of fights people have fought.

And, you know, for those of us who are in political movements, the goal here is to further mobilise people It is to further radicalise people, it's to have people grow more solidarity. Like, "Oh, I didn't know I cared about trans people actually, I thought they were kind of weird." Or, "I didn't know I cared for people with disabilities, I just was told they were disposable." Or, "I actually have anti-immigrant ideas that came in through the media, through my family, that I need to kind of like shake-off and this group is a space where I can have those conversations." So a lot of what that looks like in the-day-to-day is like, people being willing to have those brave conversations and also being like... kind and non-judgemental. Like there has to be room for people to grow. It can't just be like you said, the thing once and now you're out. "We all hate Jenny. And Jenny's, you know, on our shit list." Like it has to be like, ehm, "Oh, like people can show up as who they are and they can, you know be invited into conversations where they might learn new things. And we're going to stick with them while they learn new things. And we're gonna be open to being influenced by them and to influencing them." And so it's not about people being super nice-y and hiding that there actually are really serious conflicts. Like in so many mutual aid groups I've been in there've been people who don't know about Palestine.

Of course, because in the United States, you know we fund that whole deal. We're not supposed to know about Palestine; we're supposed to not have an opinion; or so to only know what our Zionist media says. And so, in those groups it's always a chance to be like, "How does what we're doing here in Seattle," or wherever I am at the time, "how does this connect to what's happening in Palestine? Let's talk about it. Well, our Seattle police go train in Israel. Why is that? Why would our local police train with a foreign governments military?" Let's talk about you know like how having these moments where we can actually be with those political differences and not be afraid to try to influence each other and also have a level of compassion and space for people to do learning. I think that's like a balance that a lot of people don't have. You know they're afraid to bring it up at all or they're like, if you don't already think what I think you're out. And that's- that's just not going to work for- that doesn't- that's not good organising practice, but it's very common.

To a lot of groups I know are like working on putting together like good political ed opportunities in their groups that help people like move along that question. Even moving along the question of the difference between charity and mutual aid is really important for a lot of groups, because you'll have somebody the group thinks, 'let's not give money to anybody who's going to use it for drugs'. And so we have to, "Oh let's really talk about, like what is this narrative we have about drugs and about the war on drugs and about people who use drugs being bad? Who- how is that been racist? And why does that get replicated in social services? And why is mutual aid different than social services?" Like just getting to have those deep conversations, especially where it's coming up organically in the work, ehm I think can be really useful because of the work that people are doing and the differences between the people doing it.

Sam: Yeah, and I think being able to find those spaces to ask those brave questions is so important as well, because that is where you are enable that space to grow. For people to grow, to be able to see these things and like that feels so super important. Ehm one of the things that I also wanted to ask you about is, is as soon as you say like working collectively or you're talking about a beautiful term, 'the inter-group wisdom', like the the idea of working together. Ehm I think the instant sort of ehm response back is people are like, "Well, who's accountable? Who's responsible?" Like, What happens?" Like, "Hang on, hold on a second. Let's hold on to some- let's grasp hold of something here." Like, we can't we can't let that exist just as a collective because it's uncontrollable, right. It's like ehm, if I can't hold someone to account, then how can I make this- how can I how can it be managed? And I think it'd be good to hear your ideas around how collectives work with accountability and to whom, and responsibility.

Dean: I actually think that collections are way more accountable than-. Like when you just have, like, for example, an executive director of an NGO, I don't know if that's a term ya'll use as a typical term of the boss of an NGO here, ehm that person like that person can steal the money and like get away with it. That person can be getting paid more than everyone else. The group cannot really do what it says it does. Like most- I'd say most NGOs in the US, like they say they serve all the queer youth of Chicago or they say they whatever they serve like five people or whatever. Nobody knows. I mean like that lack of accountability is much more severe in hierarchies because one person has the information about where the money came from or is going, or one person can fire people or whatever it is.

So I find the collectives are much more accountable because you've got a lot of people looking at what's going on and a lot of people who are like, "I'm not saying unless this lives up to my values because I'm here because I want to be." And so what that looks like on a day to day is, in most organisations most orgs- projects that I know that work collectively, there's like a lot of effort to have clarity around how decisions are made and how we know when decisions are made. So everything from like, making sure we take notes at our meetings so that if you miss the meeting, you can see what happens, so that level of transparency and also just making decisions together about important things. So a lot of groups work like big decisions happen together and then smaller decisions to implement can happen in teams. So maybe there's a grocery team and there's a childcare team and those teams can do specific implementation of decisions about things in their work zone. But if there's a big decision that's going to happen, like we're going to add a whole new day to our clinic or we're going to stop doing Thursday deliveries, then the whole group will talk about it. Well, who would that affect most? Actually, there's a lot more immigrants who come on Thursdays then I'd rather we stopped the Wednesday deliveries or just like so. And so, the way that works, a lot of groups use like some kind of decision making chart where we know, like, OK, which decisions can be made by the whole group, which decisions can be made by people in teams or who are doing implementing work. That can be a really good accountability source.

But I think the main mechanism of accountability when we're working collectively, particularly as volunteers, is just like I'm not going to stick around if we're not doing what we said we were going to do or if you if you just, like, try to run off with everything. And also there's usually many people like looking at something like if we've collected money, there's lots of us who know how much the money is.

And so you can't just run off with it and use it for your own ends. And so I think that in many ways, I think like NGOs are for the most part, kind of scams, like they're scams for their funders because the philanthropists get to say, like, look, I care about world hunger or whatever and just kind of brand themselves as good PR while they continue to produce the crises in their actual profit generating work. And a lot of NGOs are just like elites, like people who have graduated from elite institutions, like getting to like get high salaries to basically put a Band-Aid on poverty that is not really doing that much. It is not changing the likelihood of increasing wealth concentration in our societies at all. So, yeah, so to me, like there's a lot more accountability in Mutual Aid projects. Mutual Aid projects also like have almost no money and have like a lot less resources. So there's most of what most of what we're being accountable to is our own labour, which we're doing because we believe in the well-being of all people. And so, yeah, I'd say that like the mythology that any kind of capitalist or hierarchical method is the most efficient or accountable, to me that's definitely just a huge lie that we've been told that covers over like massive theft. That is what our, the elites in our society actually do.

Sam: And I think what's really great is also you bring up like when you take money out of the equation, it's like who's sticking around now? Like, where is this needed? And we've been talking to a few kind of local, trying to chart a bit about the local democracy and how it works, how volunteer groups end up working with councillors who then go to like a political party, MPs, MSPs here. And how when you get to like a council level, often it's like, so for example, somebody makes a decision that transport routes will be cut through rural communities. And then eh, then there's like, well, it cost too much money. There's no more money. That's the answer. And there's something when you're doing community work, you're like, nah, that's not a good enough answer anymore, because we know it can be done in a different way. And of course, there's no money. If people are being paid two hundred grand a year, it's like we know a third of our salary or however much, 20 percent of the money, if we work is there. We know the money's there. So when you take it out, actually, it's kind of amazing when you think about how these things sustain, where the work happens.

Dean: Yeah, and I love what you're saying because you're pointing out that the crises themselves are created by the system, by these systems of domination. So it's like I think a lot of times what response I get to my work from people in the US is like, but wait, you know, mutual aid will never be able to cover the kinds of problems we have in our communities, like all these little startup groups that are so small, they can't possibly address the levels of crisis in our communities. That crisis is because we have the boot of the state on our neck, like taking all of our resources and putting it towards the police and the military and, you know. And we have corporations like draining our communities of everything so that they can sell their energy or their food the way they want to. Like, there's actually, there's plenty of abundance. There's plenty to go around. It's only because there's a system strangling everybody that it seems like there's these crises that require austerity. And I feel like I just appreciate you here the way you name that.

Sam: And that's. Yeah, exactly. And I think. Thank you, Dean. I mean, we're coming to the end of our time now. But the fact that you name these things and you're able to articulate them so clearly and the interconnectedness of all these things feels so important. So thank you. And could you tell us a bit about what you're working on now and what you're kind of going to be doing in the future?

Dean: One thing I'm working on is some new books that are more specifically about the interpersonal dynamics between us when we're trying to work together in groups and some of the ways in which we see conflict emerge between people. So one book is all about like the dramas and trials and tribulations between us around, like sex, dating and romance and how that's an area of unethical practice for a lot of people and how we can kind of get more centered and ethical together as that is part of our lives. And the other book is a lot about like overwork and the ways in which we kind of do 'take down culture' on the Internet. And and just just a lot of the internalised capitalism, white supremacy stuff that really impacts our work together as, as people trying to make a new way of being. So they're both kind of about this level that I think you and I went to in this conversation a bit around, like the social relations between us and how we become the people who can live in a society grounded in collective self determination and liberation.

Sam: That's totally amazing. Dean, thank you so much for your time today, and if anyone in the area is wanting to be able to pick up a copy of the mutual aid book of yours, we have one in the studio, so people are more than welcome to come by and borrow a copy as well. We can also photocopy it and I'm sure Verso won't mind too much. Thank you so much, Dean.

Jenny: Thank you so much to Dean and Sam for such an inspiring conversation. This has been recorded and broadcast as part of Lumsden Live, the first international assembly for the EU large collaboration project Art Beyond Participation or BE PART for short- a network formed around 10 arts organisations across Europe. BEPART is made possible with the support of the Creative Europe programme of the European Union.

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