

Q&A Shiri Shalmy

by Jonny Gordon-Farleigh

Shiri Shalmy is a founder and co-organiser of Cooperation Town and Antiuniversity Now and an organiser with United Sex Workers and the Women's Strike Assembly.

In a recent interview you've said, "we want to turn every food bank into a food co-op and every recipient into an organiser." Can you outline the problems with food banks and how Cooperation Town approaches food poverty?

The Cooperation Town model is based on the principle of 'solidarity, not charity.' It's explicitly designed to move away from the donor-recipient model of food banks (many of which are set up as charities), in which the provision of supplies depends entirely on the good will of kind philanthropists on the one hand and the validation of deservedness (based on the donor's criteria) on the other. This gives a sense of agency to the former, while taking it away from the latter. This can, of course, be effective in providing emergency relief during times of crisis. It can also help see some families through a temporary shortfall, or large numbers of people during lockdown, for example. But, for many, food poverty is not a temporary inconvenience brought on or exacerbated by COVID-19. Rather, the never-ending state of emergency experienced by many is caused by the ongoing crisis of capitalism: poverty wages, job insecurity, excruciating rent for substandard, precarious housing, unaffordable childcare, insufficient benefits, and a mental health crisis. The solution for this can't be a temporary fix - it's got to be strategic and has to be led by the people most affected.

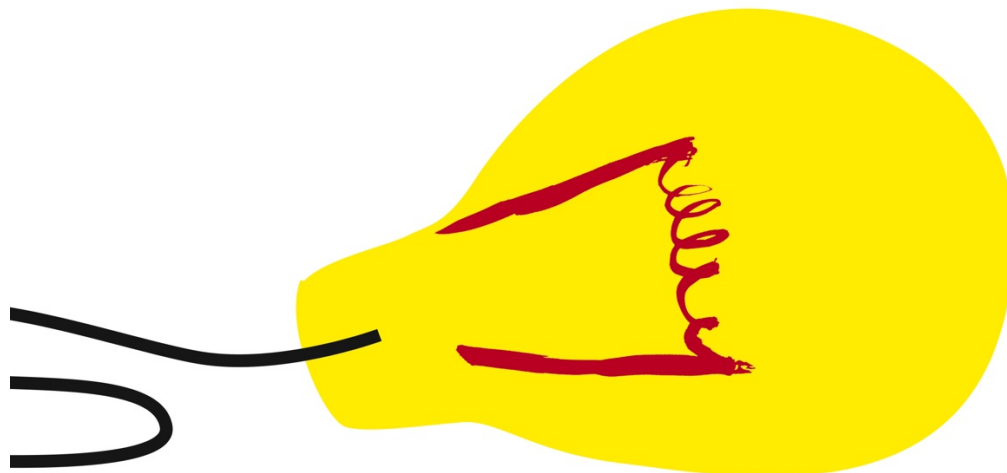
The co-op model offers a community-led, self organised, sustainable solution to food

poverty, delivered through structures designed, owned, and managed by those who benefit from them. It is based on the assumption that people (even poor people!) are able to articulate our own conditions of poverty, the reasons for our situation, and the solutions to our problems.

As a new network of community-led food co-ops, providing free and affordable food, can you explain how your model works in communities?

Cooperation Town co-ops are small buying groups that bring neighbours together to purchase food in bulk, while tapping into the vast amounts of supermarket surplus. Members pay a regular small amount (that they collectively decide on) and contribute up to one hour a week to run the co-op. They are not open to the public, which means that people have to commit when they join, as the co-op depends on members' regular time and money investment.

But how do we turn disparate, independent buying groups into a movement? By keeping it small and keeping it local, members retain collective ownership, responsibility, and autonomy. It's up to them to find ways in which they can rely on and trust each other, develop and use each others' skills and collective strengths to ensure that the co-op functions. We suggest each co-op has no more than 20 household members, who all live within 15 minutes walk (or a short bus ride) from a central meeting place. A small locally based group means that everyone has a role, meetings are kept short, can happen easily,



that childcare, school runs and other responsibilities can be shared collectively, as members are all neighbours. If the co-op grows significantly beyond 20 households, current members can start a new co-op nearby, pass on their skills to new organisers and continue to co-operate as part of the Cooperation Town network. That way the ethos and practical experience are shared amongst interconnected groups, who, together, form part of a growing proportion of society able to organise by and for themselves, outside of the state and capital, neither of which have their interests at heart.

In terms of community organising, you talk about Cooperation Town as a form of direct action. Can you explain how you position these efforts in respect to 'movement spaces' and 'performative street action'?

When people hear the term direct action, they often tend to think of 'spiky' activities - banner-drops, occupations, blocking deportation vans. But direct action doesn't have to be antagonistic or disruptive. It shouldn't only involve smashing, it can also involve building. For every upturned police car, we should have independent activist legal advice, for every campus occupation, we should have mutual education programmes, and for every rent strike, we should have mutual aid solidarity funds. What these actions have in common, is they take place outside of the state mandated structures of participation (for example, voting or petition writing) by people who autonomously organise outside of formal institutions (for example, local councils or

NGOs) and without asking for permission to take action. They happen, because the people who organise them feel that they have the right to act on their needs and ideas. Cooperation Town falls into this latter category: self organised action, outside of existing structures, and without waiting for permission. We do it because we need to and because we can.

Much of what we tend to call direct action tends to be planned and carried out in specific contexts: in 'movement' spaces, where people share, beyond a particular type of politics, also a social code based on background, education, access to information, and a certain set of behaviours.

Cooperation Town food co-operatives are made of neighbours who struggle with household costs and realise that one solution is access to more affordable food through being organised. They directly serve the people affected by the problem - the members. As they are designed to tackle a specific problem, they don't rely on social bonds (although that can be a marvelous reward!), so they are relatively resilient to conflict. There is a high level of internal interdependence, with little room or need for external influences. Most importantly, they are spaces where people who don't consider themselves 'organisers', who have no interest in or access to 'movement' spaces, because of class or education, work together around an issue that directly affect their lives. In the process, we learn from each other about collective decision making, commonising resources, our fucked up food system, and a fairer distribution system - through taking collective action.