

# **Contested Spaces 2018 – In What Society Do We Want to Live? Solidarity Cities as a Project for Freedom of Movement and Equal Social Rights for Everyone!**

This paper is the extended version of a text written in November 2017 for the Transnational Social Strike platform. Looking back to the experiences of the last years we put our focus on some fundamental issues for the antiracist left in order to outline some of the strategic issues and mid-term challenges for the struggles ahead, posing this essential question: In what society do we want to live?

The authors of this text, active in various local and transnational networks, want to initiate a discussion on perspectives, and fields of practice for the Solidarity City initiatives. In this concept we see potential for a rich and comprehensive field of social action. Our imagination is that this script might be modified and supplemented by various people and groups like a pad. Could this discussion lead to a sort of manifesto of the Solidarity City initiatives?

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## **I. Beyond 2015**

In the course of the last 10 years we have seen an incredible increase of struggles for Freedom of Movement and Social Rights in Europe which the younger comrades among us sometimes underestimate. The Summer of Migration, with the highlight #marchofhope in September 2015, was a historical breakthrough which fundamentally challenged the EU border regime. The determination of the migrants was the decisive factor. But the strong support by antiracist initiatives on the Balkan route and an unprecedented „Welcome-culture“ in the places of destination also were important factors in the Summer of Migrations. Today, in times of backlash and deportations and of militarization and externalization of the borders, it is important to keep in mind the epic events of 2015. Since then we have seen changes and developments that we had never even dreamed of before.

1. The great migration movement of 2015 had strong connections to the Arab Revolution – not only due to war and expulsions, but rather on grounds of social frictions and currents (“non-movements”) which had accumulated before. And also all over Africa, one can detect a spirit of aspiration and transformation. Despite of all the backlashes and suffering on the routes, the migrants from West Asia and Africa carry with them claims for participation and equal social rights.

There are still boat-people crossing the central Med, the Aegean Sea and, increasingly again, the Strait of Gibraltar. The gate to Europe was widely opened. This is the "real social movement" and our main point of reference. We are trying to find a perspective which understands the social ruptures and aspirations of the "periphery" as the consequences of a significant political force that has established a presence in Europe and creates reverberations.

2. For this reason it is of great importance to us to understand whether and how the social awakening and claims for participation in the existing global prosperity are being transported to Europe and how the determined struggle of the migrants can be prolonged and reproduced here in Europe, despite their oppressions through managerial regimes, integration pressures, and deportations. For this reason migrant communities take centre stage in this text.

3. When traveling in the Aegean region and on the Balkan route in Summer 2015, we were impressed not only of the high numbers of migrants, but even more of the composition of these migrant groups. There were incredibly many more women than in the years before. We met pregnant women and children, and also elderly people in wheel chairs or who were carried, and we met people suffering of cancer in an advanced stage. It was not by accident that these women and children often took the initiative and marched in the first rows, but it was also due to their experiences from Syria that the likelihood that women and children would be beaten or shot with tear gas or rubber bullet was lower.

There may be various reasons why the composition of migrants suddenly changed in 2015: first of all there was the increasing intensity of war in Syria and Iraq. Secondly, the European reunification system slowed down significantly for families from Syria. And many families (not only Syrians) moved on from exile and refugee camps because they now saw a chance for a better life and an easier passage.

4. 30 years of engaging in "refugee politics" and antiracist work were not in vain. The seeds planted through the various and continuous struggles such as No One Is Illegal and No Borders can be found in traces of the "Welcome Culture". We are too weak to really spark new cycles of transformation, but our work did have some effects.

When we speak of our "politics" in this paper, we don't mean party or state politics, but we talk about communalizing (making common and relating to communitarian agendas) the reference to migrants and radicalizing the "Welcome Culture".

## II. Roll-Back and Repression

The situation of the last 2 years is characterized by backlashes on all levels: restricting the asylum regulations, social cuts, racist discourses and right wing parties, strengthening border regimes and repression, criminalization of migrants, externalization of the European borders followed by disastrous results in North Africa and the Sahel.

Divide et Impera: A polarity is being constructed between Deportability and Exploitability. The majority of migrants is still anxiously waiting for the decisions on their individual cases (for asylum/the right to stay). They want integration as far as it concerns social rights and the right to have rights. Many of them are willing to sell their labor in the cheap segments of the labor markets, if they can leave the camps at all, and they do it for their children. Meanwhile more and more people all around Europe are pressed into the informal labor markets as well, and into bad and expensive accommodation. There is a new social sub-class being established in the metropolitan societies. The answer to this can not be a simple defense attitude. New answers can only be found in common struggles from below.

For this reason it is not at all sufficient to focus on resistance against Neo Nazis and populist parties. Although this remains necessary, we need positive visions and narratives in order to attract people from the "Welcome Culture" and to encourage migrants to self-organize in communities, claim their rights and protect their companions from deportations.

Instead of anti-fascist stereotypes we need good analysis of the sociotechnical technologies through which the migrants are being pushed back into the defensive:

- the humiliations on the route and the extreme dangers and forms of suffering experienced on the passage over the Med,
- the forced isolation in the camps and the hindrance of all self-organized means for surviving and moving on,
- the obstacles to family reunification,
- the restrictive "reforms" of asylum laws and Dublin regulations,
- the permanent threat of deportation and the construction of a polarity of deportability and integration,
- bad work, bad housing, limited education and access to health care,

- integration as a questionable aim and compulsion to give up personal history and constitution,
- the reaction of the media after new year's eve 2015 and the construction of a security-discourse.

All this is not a "fascism". Rather we see a process in which the national is reorganized as a "regime": regime of life, regime of mobility, regime of labor. We therefore need no new anti-fascism, but a good analysis and concepts to undermine the new regimes in every day struggles.

### **III. Contested Spaces and Left Ideologies**

We refer to every-day struggles and contested spaces for 30 years now, and we still do it. These spaces range from Afghanistan and sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa and Western Asia into the inner cities in Europe. In Germany, at the beginning of 2017 more than 500 thousand deportations were projected. Finally there were only 25 thousand deportations and twice as many "voluntary" returns. Only 5 percent of the expulsions were carried out - this reflects a partly open, but mostly subliminal and persistent resistance. There are still more than a thousand people per month coming through the Balkan route to Germany. In 2016, more than 280 thousand migrants made it to Germany, 2017 there were 189 thousand. The closure of the Central Mediterranean route by bribing Libyan militias stands on wobbly feet. 2017 there were 120 thousand passages over the central Mediterranean Sea, 30 thousand passages over the Aegean Sea. The passages on the western Mediterranean route are increasing: 17 thousand arrivals in Spain. It would be fatal if we fell in resignation now and declare dead this continued social movement too early.

The counterpart to this increasingly subliminal immigration is the continued resistance against the Dublin deportations. The fact that only a fraction of these deportations is actually carried out, has its foundation in an impenetrable, resistive strategies of struggle: Migrants don't sleep in the camp until time limits have elapsed, churches offer asylum, refugee law clinics and lawyers use their expertise for legal objections, court judgments are better than ever anticipated and migration offices are overloaded, the police officials see the exercise of their job hindered by rebellious crowds... Also the resistance against the establishment of central deportation prisons is of great importance in this context.

Many leftists of all stripes have some difficulties to speak positively about the large migration movement of 2015 and its consequences. On the one hand they

are often missing an appreciation of its importance and a recognition of the migrant's autonomy to make a lasting shift towards migration struggles and their support. Large parts of the radical left are stuck in short-term campaigning and do not manage to turn to "social anchoring" and to create forms of action and encounter that reach beyond their scene. On the other hand the left has been at least suspicious of the "welcome culture". There are good reasons to question the hype in 2015. But instead of critical interaction the distance to the civic spectrum is too much in the foreground. In both directions, the vast majority of the radical Left sticks to identity politics and to organizing on their own, instead of getting into the encounter in the social terrain.

In other parts of the left, there is a notion of "working class" in the background which can not get away from metropolitan or even national references. The fact that these working class has had a multi-national composition for more than 50 years, and that migrants were in the first row of important struggles, sometimes seems already forgotten. Talking about a proletariat of the south, however, misses the constitutive moments of social movements that we have learned about since E.P. Thompson. With the means of a "class analysis" you can no longer reflect on the global capital relationships. The digital formation of metropolitan subjects, the Smart Cities, the new regime of life, mobility and labor, and on the other side the destruction of the resources for survival of the lower classes of the south by hunger and climate crises, chronic wars, land grabbing and extractive economies require different responses.

Instead of starting anew too many leftist people turn to short-sighted anti-fascism as the way out. They talk themselves into aporias and complain about the resurgence of right-wing extremism and the repression. All of this relates to the surrounding of the current assault, which does influence the terrain of social. But together with parts of the left we shall pick up the positive content of leftist currents - their emancipatory content, the references to the egalitarianism and for inclusion, their reference to the lower strata and the proclamation of social rights - and to direct these themes towards the real social movements and the "welcome culture". Perhaps this would be the beginning of a "new social movement", which refers to social rights for all? In the metropolitan areas radicality can only be possible in relation to social rights of all people and to their social movements (including the migrations). Can we transfer the reference to the metropolitan "classes" or identitarian self-references towards a real reference to people, families, social movements, or must we provisionally refer to a radical humanism? And can we really absorb and implement even just these impulses? What are "Escape Routes" and what is "living in the cracks of capitalism" here in

the metropolis? And are there other concepts that we should discuss in this context?

#### **IV. New Migration Movements in Europe**

The Dublin System has triggered a variety of secondary migration processes and "Dublin IV" could very much enforce these movements. Calais and Ventimiglia are the places that first come into mind. But they are only the tip of the iceberg of thousands of other migrations. These include people who avoid deportation, people who try to find their family or a community, people who do not find accommodation in the first host country, more and more people from third countries who already have a residence permit, but are excluded from the labor market and the welfare system. This layer of the refugees in limbo overlaps with the migrants from south-eastern Europe who live in precarious circumstances and with migrants from Eastern Europe who live in the cold parks of Berlin.

It would be important to explore this "diffuse" migration (FFM) according to the principles of a no-border-research and to support them at the same time. All of these people carry different experiences, expectations, attitudes. They are not "smart" as to say optimized for self-valorization, but rather are stubborn and resistant. They invent their "mobile commons" and private networking, digitally inclusive. From their experience, mixed with updated traditions, they draw dimensions of resistance. The reference to their "moral economy", but also to their families and their perception of solidarity will lead us into unknown dimensions.

In light of all this, our struggle will be carried by different inputs, perspectives and horizons. From the Arab revolution comes the quest for a life in dignity and to a future for the children, from Africa comes the attempt to build up new diaspora communities in order to somehow take part in the global wealth. Perhaps the search for a future by migrants from the Maghreb is coined by "non-collective actors" while migrants from the Balkans and Eastern Europe feel excluded from a lifestyle that they regard as "normal" for a long time. All these different experiences and aspirations mix up in the cities and make up a new cultural and mental mix, and new inspirations, conflicts and forms of life will emanate. It is up to us to be open for these new dimensions of social conflictuality - and not only to open our minds, but also the places and chances in which we ourselves have set up.

In the metropolitan intermediate social layers - to which most of us belong – it would perhaps be a radical humanism linked to communal concepts, which is the most easily communicable projection. So this must, in our opinion, be the fundamental idea of Solidarity Cities.

## **V. New Gender Composition of Migrant Groups**

There are still (January 2018) arriving boats that have crossed the Aegean Sea in which the majority are children. With the AlarmPhone we have rarely seen cases in the Aegean Sea without children on board. There was no single boat in the past months only with men, as was very often the case before 2015. In November of 2017 (i.e. after the comparatively less risky time of the crossing in September/October) at Lesvos there arrived 38% men and 22% women and 40% (!) children. The composition varies since 2015, but the tendency is stable.

This change in the composition of migrants is mainly a phenomenon on the Aegean sea routes, but we are experiencing similar trends, although quantitatively less pronounced in the central and western Mediterranean Sea. Since 2015 there are also noticeably more women and children who cross over to Europe. This we observe with the AlarmPhone but also with the local consultation here in Germany. Here in 2017 we had so many women (especially from East Africa) in the Consulting Cafe like we never had before. The majority of them have taken the Central Med route – most of them in 2016 and 2017. Many of them have crossed the Med in the years before and stranded in Germany only after failed attempts to gain a foothold in other European countries. They all have experienced violence in a frightening scale and many of them made their way even though they knew how dangerous it was. Women have reported that they were advised by other women to take contraception before the trip in order to prevent pregnancies because rapes were seen as inevitable.

40% of the people who applied for asylum in Germany in 2017 were women and girls. Their share has increased by 5% compared to 2016. 45% - almost half! - of the refugees are minors. What is the meaning of these figures, what is the meaning of the strength and experience of these women and the high proportion of young migrants for the urban subcultures and for the self-organization in communities? And how will this new situation be represented in the concepts and visions for a Solidarity City?

## **VI. Communities**

Communities are places of resistance against the illegalization, but they can also be places of extreme exploitation and paternalistic structures. Probably 90% of the people who are threatened by deportation or those who are excluded from social allowances find shelter in such mostly ethnic networks. The classic illegalized people - especially visa-overstayers and silent immigrants mostly work in private households as cleaners, care workers or builders. There are no figures about the importance of the communities as places of informal exploitation, but they may be very high, for example in the gastronomy, the sweat shops in the small textile manufacturing and subcontract firms.

Communities are both places of protection and communication, and they are networks of mobility. While thinking about a network of centers of hospitality or an exchange of activists across borders, we should remember that many communities have networks of this kind, some of them worldwide, existing for a long time. Links to the communities and links among the communities themselves are highly important projects in the Solidarity Cities and are the basis of migrant self-organization.

Real perspectives of solidarity in the cities can only develop if the communities can overcome their ethnic boundaries, refer to each other, learn from each other and support each other. We are glad that in some cities first committees have grown which are not primarily about ethnic approaches but about migrant self-organization beyond ethnic borders. We'll come United is one of the approaches where different migrant groups, supporters and maybe soon also the urban lower classes find a common place to fight against housing shortages, overexploitation and social cuts.

## **VII. Migrants Struggles, Migrants Labor**

It is expected that Europe in the next few years will be populated by an increasingly mobile layer of informal and illegal workers. Additional to the previously mentioned "diffuse" migration there will be EU-native migrant workers from East, South-East and Southern Europe who leave their regions of origin in search of income. More and more of these migrants live in a double precariousness, because their right of residence is tied to a job.

However, mobility is but not necessarily a weakness, but also circulation of experiences and forms of resistance, in the cities, in the communities, and also on



the labor markets. We should look back to the struggles of the American Wobblies or to the Russian peasant workers in the time of the revolution to discuss how mobility can be turned into strength. Struggles out of precariousness can only be successful if they are embedded in local networks, if the workers find protection in their communities and if they are supported by radical structures.

Continuous work and a long-term commitment are necessary in order to build bridges into and between the communities to build common visions and fields of common struggles. "Undoing borders" does not only mean the borders between states or ethnic groups, but also between individuals and in our minds emanating out of common struggles like struggles for freedom of movement, an acceptable income, housing, education, health, and "fair" jobs. These are precisely the fields of activism in the Solidarity Cities. In the municipal context we understand these fields as "contested spaces", in which there are already specific conflicts and forms of resistance to which we want to connect. New ways of solidarity must be found: appropriation of the commons, alternative housing and educational projects, syndicalist self-organization in the informal labor markets and in the municipality.

## **VIII. Solidarity Cities**

Between the cities along the Balkan route , in the south of Europe and, even more, the cities around the Mediterranean Sea, there are huge differences - but there are also similarities: the revival of racism and social polarization, which extends itself in global capitalism on the one hand, and the struggles for self-determination, against the ubiquitous cuts in social spending under the Washington Consensus and against the ubiquitous land grabbing and expulsions on the other. In all these cities there are also struggles for the re-appropriation of social spaces and building solidarity spaces - and this only rarely takes place in the form of open field battles and rebellions, but much more often in the subliminal or invisible struggles of everyday life, in forms of "Quiet Encroachment" and in filling the "cracks of capitalism".

The concept of "Sanctuary Cities" comes from North America, where migrants organized for their right to stay (A day without us, 2006 and 2017), and where the cities want to protect their illegal labor markets - a mix of interests, theorised as "Re-Scaling" of the political terrain. This term describes the city as a terrain of participation and balancing of interests and the weakening of the national by local self-government and the emanation of "urban citizenship". However, the

"neighborhood relationships" of this concept to the concept of "Smart Cities", as a digital regime of urban life, has still too little been discussed.

No One Is Illegal Toronto has modified this model: as a grassroots initiative with campaigns against deportations and racist police controls, for the access to municipal services, social housing and for fair wages on the illegal labor markets. Solidarity Cities are not created by decisions of a city council, but by persistent practice and defense of solidarity spaces. We think that solidarity spaces and Solidarity Cities are not only a model for the global north, and that a network of initiatives might spread on the Balkan route in reverse and around the Mediterranean Sea. Already now the Charter of Palermo is one of our most important reference points. Such a network could at the same time become a network of migration and mobility. We need a new level of communication between the cities that develops from the bottom up. One of the first cross-regional projects could be, a network of 'Centers of Hospitality', in order to organize shelter and food for the growing number of homeless migrants, and natives.

In Western Europe, the concepts of Solidarity City and "City for All" for all must primarily refer to the new social mix which results from the continued immigration and the increased internal Schengen migration. Jörg Alt, Michael Bommers and others have already analyzed the problems of illegal migrants in cities such as Leipzig and Cologne more than 10 years ago. Housing, work, health care and education for children and young people are the basic problems and therefore also must be the essential fields of the work of solidarity city initiatives. Protection against deportation, however, is the prerequisite for all other struggles, and we have learned that it is above all the communities of migrants themselves that are central in this struggle. The supporters from the "welcome culture", the civil society and from the antiracist movement, in fact, only play a subordinate role. In this respect, we would do well to think first about the support of the communities, which carry the largest burden in the support of illegal people and which in past few years have come under strong pressure. As regards the needs and demands of the communities, the demand for access to education (especially for children) will certainly be a far higher priority than before 2015. In almost all families with children this claim ranks very highly, often this was the main reason for the decision to migrate. Certainly, also the gender-bias in access to health care and psychological care are important. How can Solidarity Cities also meet the needs of children, their right to equal rights and also their right to their own story?

## **IX. Fields of Action in the Solidarity Cities**

For the Solidarity City initiatives we see a number of the fields of action which only in their interaction can cause an opening and humanization of urban life. Solidarity City is not a short flash, but is based on a long-term commitment. First of all, Solidarity City is what is already going on, and this already before the term has made the round. We refer to exactly this with our initiatives - but not as an "umbrella organization", but with the attempt to refer to common themes and campaigns to build up concrete connections to real struggles. The people who are active in the "welcome culture" are relevant for us just like migrant structures and communities, friends in groups such as "right to the city", antiracist initiatives, initiatives for the right to stay, squatters, actors in struggles against precarity and many others.

In this practical cooperation we will find a number of difficulties and ambivalences - both in terms of the ethnic self-definition of migrant groups, as well as paternalistic, partly even racist articulations in actors in the welcome culture. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to exclude such people, instead of building on good will, common experiences and learning processes. The formulation of "Solidarity City Demands" might be a way to find a minimum consensus, which it is about inclusion, equal rights for all and a radical humanism.

We do not think that negotiations with politicians and the city administrations are the first priority, although on our way to the "urban citizenship" and the "City for all" we need contacts and exchange also with these actors. It is worth getting to know sympathetic contact persons, to keep the contact and to make it clear that we work for and not against the city. At least we work for what we think a city should be. We must, however, beware not to act as border guards for the administration, or be abused as a colorful alibi. The content of the relationship to politics and administration will develop in concrete initiatives and campaigns.

From no one is illegal Toronto we can learn that Solidarity City is not a vision or a sum of visions, but a material process in which campaigns find their forms of enforcement, claims become concrete and collective ideas develop. The most important thing is to create a climate in which forms of cooperation and concrete processes are possible, and visions can unfold.

The fields of action of Solidarity City initiatives follow the elementary needs of the marginalized, the urban lower classes and the illegalized migrants, and therewith the needs of all people in the city. That is why housing, school and education, jobs and income, health, transport, self-organization and cultural places are in the center. No deportations are the precondition for everything else. This is why in several cities campaigns against deportations and for a citizen asylum stand at the beginning, in order to gather force and to make contacts.

## **X. Outlook 2018**

In the last 20 years and again in 2013 and especially 2015 transnational networks have emerged, along the entire routes and in different fields of the struggle for freedom of movement and offering support for equal rights, "empowerment", and self-organization. Of course there were and there are setbacks, the number of activists is not very big and many are constantly working at the limit. But things are changing everywhere and there is an obstinate and sometimes inscrutable mix of initiatives, with the tenacity of the migratory movements as their engine.

Welcome to Europe and WatchTheMed AlarmPhone, networking on the Balkan route and Transnational Social Strike, Right to the City and the new municipalism – these platforms and networks are examples of established structures which refer to the concepts of solidarity within and between these cities. A black and red thread of solidarity working in the above fields of practice and with the aim of increasing mutual connections.

We'll come United offers - initially within Germany - the concept of visualization of everyday struggles and trans-community mobilization as a practically-oriented space in which solidarity city initiatives of all kinds can grow at the same time and can give new impulses (back).

"In what kind of society do we want to live?!" - last but not least in the approach of the Solidarity Cities we see the potential to contribute to a new narrative and dialogue of emancipatory movements. Towards a concrete vision of diverse and interconnected everyday struggles and social alternatives which may confront themselves with, the neoliberal austerity policy as well as the right-wing populism, but also with the regimes forthcoming.