Supporting Searchers' Desire for Emplacement in Berlin: Informal Practices in Defiance of an (Im)mobility Regime[1]

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Abstract

The article traces the ways in which refugees in precarious legal and economic circumstances in Lagers (refugee camps) in Germany participate in informal practices to reverse their displaced positions. More specifically, the paper demonstrates how refugees work in conjunction with a Berlin-based solidarity group in order to find access to informally organized housing outside of the formal bureaucratic state system. The study shows that refugees' engagement with informal structures must be understood as struggles towards emplacement and formality. Much scholarship has discussed the economic aspects of informality in the global South and post-socialist countries. However, there is little discussion on how refugees may engage in informal practices within the nation-state in order to find emplacement and achieve formality. The article additionally demonstrates how informal acts are co-produced between citizens and refugees in the process of searching and offering of living places outside state defined formal systems. Thus, informality needs to be understood as resistance against displacement, struggles towards emplacement and formality. The study draws on ethnographic data and on-going participation in a Berlin-based grassroots group, Schlafplatzorga, which supports refugees on an informal level with temporary accommodation.

Keywords: *Berlin; informal practices; mobility regime*

Introduction: Informality and (Im)Mobility

When I met James at Daniela's party, he told me that he had been searching for rooms in Berlin for several months. James had an Italian nationality and was of Gambian origin and had the rights to work and live in Germany. He had stayed at Daniela's place for a few weeks. At the party, he chatted with the guests who were of various nationalities, ethnicities, and sexual orientation and seemed at ease. I asked him how he knew Daniela and he told me that he had met her through the solidarity group Schlafplatzorga. He pointed to the couch he had slept on.

This vignette illustrates James' search for accommodation in Berlin through informal channels and his refusal to contend with formal bureaucratic structures in order to find accommodation. This article interrogates how refugees comprehend their acts in relation to state powers and mobility regimes and which types of informal practices enable them to traverse regimes of mobility.

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The concept of informality has been largely discussed in the context of explaining the differences between the informal and the formal economy. The informal economy has been primarily understood as "a process of income generation characterized by one central feature: it is unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated" (Castells and Portes, 1989:12). Bromley and Wilson (2018) point out that in the neoliberal era, the persistence of the informal economy relates to the instability of labor markets that results from global environmental change, economic globalization, neoliberalism, financialization, rising socioeconomic inequalities and technological change. To this end Bromley and Wilson (2018) suggest that informality is a function of shifting economic and sociopolitical dynamics. Although there has been much discussion of the notion of informal economy, there has also been a focus on informality in the context of illegal organizations, kinship groups, interpersonal networks, as well as informal political and civic structures (Granovetter, 1973; Lomnitz, 1988; Shelley et al.,2007; Thelen, 2011; Aliyev, 2015). The field of informality has been additionally understood to 'take shape through the neglect, denial or challenge of a formal source of authority and rule-making, including the state and its prerogative to regulate a particular aspect of its social or economic life' (Polese et al 2019:8). Polese et al (2019) point to cases in which state institutions do not regulate a particular exchange and interaction, so citizens mobilize in response to make up for this deficiency. Refugees' accounts presented in this paper point to the value of understanding informal practices as insurgence against state power and involve struggles for emplacements and formalization, under conditions in which the state displaces them and neglects to care for their wellbeing, imposes internal border regimes and threatens them with deportation.

In the state assigned camps, such as in Germany, refugees experience 'displacement' which includes not only a range of mobilities including border-crossing migration, but also the increasing precarity of those considered locals who experience various forms of dispossession (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2015; Morell, 2014). Emplacement is understood as the social processes through which a dispossessed individual builds or rebuilds networks of connection within the constraints and opportunities of a specific city (Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013). To this end, the paper demonstrates how refugees who decided to locate to Berlin through informal networks contest displacement in assigned federal states and Lagers and struggle for emplacement.

The paper thus demonstrates that informal/'illegal' actions of refugees should be understood as subtle resistance against the state stemming from people's desire for emplacement, and to counter experiences of displacement related to 'mobility regimes' and everyday experiences of racism, bureaucracy and state power. According to Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) a 'regime of mobility' is connected to unequal globe-spanning relationships of power. Thus a 'regime of mobility' in this study is understood as 'confinements and modes of exploitation' (Salazar and Smart 2011) such that even when refugees manage to cross transnational borders, they find themselves in unequal power relations with the state because of Germany's restrictive laws with respect to mobility within the state and exploitative conditions in camps: they thus experience multiple layers of internal border regimes (El-Kayed and Ulrike Hamann 2018). Furthermore, many refugees who arrive from other EU countries and so called 'safe countries' experience deportation threats. Consequently, refugees try to find ways to move out of these camps using informal ways and means. While the state and official discourses criminalise such informal practices, we are of the view that informal practices need to be

understood as quests by refugees for emplacements and constitute resistance against restrictions on movement.

Methodology

The paper draws on ethnographic data from participation in a solidarity group, Schlafplatzorga (SPO), which has supported homeless refugees based in Berlin since the year 2014. During the so called refugee crisis of 2015, the group lent support to the numerous solidarity groups which had sprung up in Berlin, but the focus of the SPO remained on supporting refugees who had arrived prior to 2015 who were homeless because of deportation threats and were affected by the Dublin rules.[4] The authors of this paper participated regularly in shifts where refugees approached the group in search for housing in Berlin in fund-raising activities, and also offered counseling to refugees with respect to immigration laws. The first author conducted interviews with 10 refugees in the year 2018 in order to understand the reasons they left their state-assigned *Lager* (camps) and came to Berlin. The interlocutors were from various African countries, since the majority of refugees who approached SPO were from these regions. One of the interlocutors selected was of East Asian origin because he frequently accessed SPO and had resided in various EU countries. The author acquired verbal consent of refugees she interviewed. To ensure anonymity during the data write up, all participants were given pseudonyms. We were conscious of our respective privileges in relation to the people we worked with and there were regular discussions of our multiple privileges during our participation in the group as activists and in my case in the dual role of activist/researcher. One author was a German citizen of white middle class background and the other author was a person of color and of migration background but had British and EU citizenship and a stable work situation. The first author spoke multiple languages such as French, Spanish, Urdu and some German, which facilitated connection with the people who came to SPO in search of accommodation. Several of the people who came to the shifts were also Muslims and this author's Muslim background also facilitated some levels of connection. The second author was a University student and a German and EU citizen, was well versed in English and had resided in Berlin all her life, which helped in furthering links since she was accustomed to working with people from various migration backgrounds and was active in several groups supporting refugees. We tried to minimize hierarchies through including refugees in social and political events such as by inviting them to parties, dinners, picnics and demonstrations but it proved difficult to include the individuals in the decision making process of the day to day running of the group since many of them because could not attend the weekly plenary meetings on a regular basis because of various personal commitments. However, there were some refugees who also participated as full members of SPO from time to time. Members of SPO referred to refugees as 'searchers' and recognized the fact that 'refugees', and 'asylum-seekers' were state imposed categories and thus made a conscious decision not to use them in their everyday language. However, for the purpose of this paper, it was difficult not to employ such imposed categories and we decided to employ the term 'refugees'[5] and 'people'.

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[4] The Dublin agreement (first signed in 1990) states that people have to apply for asylum in the first EU member state they reach The Dublin rule were eased in 2015-2016 for Syrian refugees arriving from Greece, but it remained in effect for the refugees for many of refugees which SPO supported who arrived to Germany from countries other than Syria..

[5] See De Genova et al (2018) for the mobilization of the category of 'refugees'

Mobility Regimes and Refugee Camps in Germany

In Germany, refugees are assigned to the different Lagers (refugee camps) and accommodations in particular federal states by the system known as *EASY* (Initial Distribution of Asylum Seekers). Thus refugees, during the asylum procedure have no autonomy in the selection of their place of residence when they first arrive to the country. Each of the 16 federal states within Germany has considerable leeway with respect to the types of law they wish to impose with respect to refugee rights. In this way, the states can erect internal borders through control of their own districts (El Kayad and Hamann 2018). For example, the districts can impose the law called *Residenzpflicht,* (residence obligation) which restricts movement of refugees within German; this law is applied especially at the start of their asylum procedure even after the refugee manages to cross various national borders.

Conditions in the Lagers are very difficult and people who reside there confront bureaucracy on an everyday basis. Josiah Heyman understands bureaucracies as the following: "[…] they are means to an end, ways of carrying out the work of shaping and controlling other human beings. Files are records to track people and places; rules allow reference to legitimate and consistent standards beyond personal or kin relations to justify what is often, in fact, raw political calculation. […] Bureaucracies are, above all, instruments of power." (Heyman 2004: 488). To this end, through registrations at entrance on a regular basis, regimented mealtimes, regulations of work in the Lager, and frequent controlling and tracking of people--which may differ between the different types of Lagers across federal states and the different private companies owning the Lagers-- power was imposed upon the individuals residing there. In the case of refugee accommodation centres, the state delegates its' power to the federal state, the *Auslanderbehorde* (the foreigner's office)*,* the security guards at the refugee camps and the local police, all of whom then have the power to govern immigrants' lives. Thus, the experience of staying at the Lager should be understood as an imposition of state power, the contemporary novel character and intentions of which have attracted much discussion particularly in relation to refugees (see for example Bigo 2002; Darling 2011; Walters 2004). As Saltsman (2013) asserts state bureaucracies have thus rationalized increasingly oppressive methods to regulate migration and as representatives of bureaucracies, authorities can maintain the sort of rational-legal authority Weber describes; their institutional affiliation is, in itself, a source of power built on a solid foundation of rules, policies, and best practices.

It is easy to apprehend the reasons that refugees try to find ways to defy their situation and relocate to Berlin, especially given that certain sections of the city offer a different and cosmopolitan experience. Furthermore, and consequently in Berlin, refugees are able to informally network with the Left in German society, who support and welcome refugees; thus they are able to ultimately find support in ways which could potentially help them to formalise their status. Some refugees, upon having stayed in Germany for a certain amount of period, are allowed to search for their own flats in the specific federal state to which they are assigned and receive financial support for this. However, the process is rather complex, for even such individuals and refugees are forced to contend with bureaucratic institutions and racialization. As De Genoa notes,

Anyone concerned with questions of race and racism today must readily recognize that they present themselves in a particularly acute way in the European migration context, haunted as Europe's borders are by an appalling proliferation of almost exclusively non-European/ non-white migrant and refugee deaths and other forms of structural violence and generalized suffering. (2018:1768).

In Germany, the non-white refugees come to be racialized when they are isolated in the Lagers, when their movements are restricted within the state, when they face intense securitization, when they encounter language barriers when the state insists that they speak and understand German, but provides 'integration' courses to selected refugees with legal status. Thus, these forms of blatant structural inequalities make the flat searches and prolonged residence quite difficult for refugees within the federal state in which they are registered. Furthermore, the difficult of obtaining a flat is further exacerbated by bureaucracies. For example, in order to obtain a flat in Germany, one has to undergo several steps including online registration and presentation of a 'SCHUFA', which is a score based on the tenant's credit history and other documents.

Refugees additionally contend with the bureaucracy involved in seeking work in Germany. Refugees have the right to work following some months of residence, based on their individual circumstances and status. However, in order to obtain work, people need to first find ways to comprehend the bureaucratic nature of finding work such as accessing vocational training programs and German language classes. This proves to be difficult since they remain isolated in the Lagers --which as mentioned are often located in far-flung areas and towns and where anti-immigrant sentiments and fear of immigrants run high. Furthermore, it becomes potentially difficult to find vocational training and employment in smaller towns where refugees are put in competition with local residents.

Many refugees are threatened by deportation, since the Dublin agreement (first signed in 1990) states that people have to apply for asylum in the first EU member state they reach (Bhimji 2016). People in such situations try to not be visible to state institutions, and therefore they become dependent on informal housing and work possibilities, as the formal housing and working opportunities are always connected to making their own place of residence known to the state. Nevertheless, people are put under a lot of pressure to register with the state and enter the bureaucratic system. In this way, the state is presumably able to govern and remove the migrants. As access to housing in the formal way is only possible with papers and registration, people are pushed into informality and very precarious housing or they have to expose themselves to state power and contend with the power of bureaucracies. Thus many people try to leave the Lager system and their federal state and try to live and find work in the capital. However, to move to a different federal state entails an even more difficult bureaucratic process. The individual has to justify why they need to move. For example, they need to produce a work contract which in itself would be difficult if they had not lived in that state. Furthermore, they need to show that a family member is living there already and they additionally need to demonstrate to the authorities that they already have a place where they could live. As Ang who encountered homophobia in his assigned federal state and came to Berlin and who after a few years relocated to Malmö explained:

Ang: There is a strange rule in Germany for moving from a city to another city. Asylseeker can't move to another city. Or I have to have an Ausbildung (it's a lower step than Studium) but I studied in Germany. It's a strange situation. A guy who might have studied medicine also has to show a work contract. And for

moving this guy has to learn skill to work in Lidl (Supermarket). Moving from one part of Germany to another is harder than moving to another EU country.

Despite the difficulties of relocating from one state to another, many refugees resist the Lager system and elect to reside in Berlin which they understand as multicultural and relatively open towards refugees. Many end up on the streets of Berlin and it is through networking in informal ways that they find accommodation and work. We highlight in this paper how people who decided to move to Berlin networked with each other as well as with members of a solidarity group such as Schlafplatzorga.

Informal Endeavours and Solidarity

Schlafplatzorga emerged following the refugees' protests and the occupation of Oranienplatz in Berlin and the subsequent occupation of a school building between 2012 and 2014. One of the main demands of the movement was the abolition of the Lager systems and the *Residenzpflicht* (the law, that people could not move freely inside Germany). Following, the state eviction of refugees from their different spaces which they had occupied during the protests, Berlin residents started to offer their homes as places for refugees. In October 2014, following the city's eviction of people who were involved in the movement, people who had actively supported the political struggles at Oranienplatz started to organize emergency solutions, by collecting contacts of people who could possibly offer a place in their flats or a couch for a few days either free of cost or for minimum rent. The work of SPO should be understood as expressions of solidarity with refugees. In contrast to large-scale humanitarian organisations, solidarity groups aim to be less hierarchical and try to develop horizontal relations with the people they support. In this sense, it contrasts both hospitality[6] and bureaucratic frameworks of assistance to immigrants and refugees distinctive of the humanitarian realm (Rozakou 2016). Rozakou comprehends solidarity in terms of 'sociality such that solidarity resonates with potent moral ideals of how society should be, and how people should relate with one another.'

The aim of SPO was to provide solidarity with refugees who wanted to free themselves of the formal category of the term 'refugee', which in Zetter's (1991) understanding is in itself a bureaucratic identity. The decision by the mediating crew to start this work was from the group's perspective influenced by the 'common struggle' such that people were not so much random "poor" refugees anymore but rather 'comrades' with very different privileges. Thus, the group formed the anti-racist view that some of the initial motivations came from a different perspective than (just) an idea of "helping" "poor" people. Thus, an informal group Schlafplatzorga was formed. This group continues to function to date.

SPO is a group that has yet to attain and indeed debates the value limitations of having formal NGO status. The members of SPO include young people, University students, as well as the 'searchers.' Members are recruited during demonstrations, University orientations, during fund-raising activities and by word of mouth. The working structure of SPO was and continues to be relatively simple and informal. There is an opening hour three evenings a week, for people who are searching for a sleeping place for the same night, or for those who may simply need information. Two to three members of the group are generally present, who contact potential hosts, to find out if they could offer a room for the people who are searching.

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[6] See Didier Fassin's (2012) discussion on 'Ambivalent Hospitality' and protection of one's own 'hospitality.'

If there is an offer, then people are mediated there. The aim of SPO among other things is to build a community, obtain financial resources, and provide information to searchers and support them with accommodation. The group also collaborates with registered non-profit groups. In some instances, refugees also tried to raise funds informally. In one instance, Angela and the people she was residing with set up regular Facebook nail-art events with food and drinks, which became instantly popular. In other instances, members of the group (on an informal level), sell summer cocktails in parks. To this end, the work of SPO needs to be understood as taking place "in spite of the state" (Polese et al 2019) such as when the state does not care sufficiently about people's well-being and racializes them. Consequently citizens intervene and mobilise in order to make up for state neglect and deficiency (Polese et al. 2017a; Polese and Morris 2015).

There were some regulations within the SPO with respect to issuance of public transportation tickets. However, SPO's work was directly connected to the needs formulated by the searchers which eliminated some of the bureaucratic power structures. At the same time, there was the disadvantage that individuals within Schlafplatzorga yielded substantial power with regard to decision making such as whom to mention in a plenary and where best to invest their efforts and energies.

Now we turn to explain how refugees made decisions about leaving their Lagers and how they networked with the group and its members.

Leaving the State Assigned 'Lager'

Refugees, the majority of whom were men from countries such as the Gambia, Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Chad, Kenya and Cameroon and in some instances Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran heard about SPO and the shifts through word of mouth upon arrival in Berlin and in some instances even prior to their arrival in their camps. However, the asylum status of the 'searchers' as they were termed by the SPO members tended to vary. Refugees' decisions to leave their camps need to be understood as actions which pursued the dynamics of 'survival tactics and a strategy of enrichment' (Polese et al. 2018). Such practices demonstrate refugees' endeavours towards emplacements in Berlin and resistance against displacement, which they experienced in their state assigned Lagers.

The following paragraphs illustrate some of the reasons refugees offered for leaving their Lager and arriving in Berlin and seeking support of the organisation SPO:

Lamine: I decided to find a steady place where I could live and to move out from the 'Heim'. Because I am an activist doing a lot of activity. So for during those six months, I thought Berlin could be the best place for me and from there I tried to contact this association Schlafplatzorga. I was motivated to be in Berlin, Berlin is big. Berlin is multicultural. You are really isolated in the camp. So this is what inspired me to leave the 'Lager' and I say that okay, 'I cannot leave the 'Lager' legally because I was not allowed to leave then- but then I broke those so called rules.

Angela: We were at a workshop at the University and saw that they had a table with flyers up showing that had accommodation for refugees. We reached out to Beatte and her colleague. They told us that they could help us with temporary accommodation for a day or two or a few days in Berlin. We were with the 'Stop Deportation Group' and then we had a table where we were selling cocktails and so they had a table right opposite us and this is how we came to know SPO.

Mohammed: Until I was in Berlin I was in a small town. I heard SPO about through a friend. It was boring in the camp. You have nothing to do only eating and sleeping. I wanted to change that life and so I came to Berlin.

Omar: So the situation in the Lager is a bit complicated. There is no respect. There is also nothing there in Frankfurt Oder that people can do. So everybody who is registered there is coming here to find a job and live here. And I personally also came here to look for a job. There is also much racism there. So the people in Frankfurter Oder, they are in a box that they judge people. They don't feel comfortable with migrants. Especially when you have a black skin. They behave in a real bad way. It's not like the people in Berlin. They are more cultivated and open-minded. They know migrants from different time. They know people of different colours.

Thus, the people decided to come to Berlin to escape racism, to avoid deportations, to find work and to build connections and access and construct networks. But what is significant here is that none of the refugees went through any of the formal bureaucratic processes to relocate to Berlin from their federal state. Consequently, they did not try to find residence or work through formal means. They made their own way to Berlin, where they could potentially find work, possibly avoid deportations, bureaucratic powers, racialization and confinement and seek support of various groups. Such practices demonstrate refugees' subtle acts of defiance rather than overt forms of protests towards the state (see Scott 2012). Many of them understood their actions as 'illegal', but nevertheless considered it necessary in order to acquire basic rights and to formalise their status.

The excerpts thus demonstrate that the actions undertaken by refugees should be understood as struggle against the state's bureaucratic power, which limited the movement of refugees from one state to another and thus which ultimately resulted in their displacement. In addition, refugees relocated to avoid deportations in their respective accommodations and federal state. As it became increasingly difficult to attain recognised status in Germany, refugees were increasingly threatened with deportation. Deportation can be to the refugees' country of origin or if they faced Dublin regulations then they would be most likely to be deported to the first European country to which they had arrived in which they were likely to have been fingerprinted. Thus, in order to avoid deportations, several refugees left their respective federal states and Lagers, came to Berlin and in this context sought support of SPO. Thus, the refugees sought protection in the federal state, Berlin.

Networking and Mobility

The refugees, who formed part of this study, networked informally with the solidarity workers in order to further their objectives regarding finding longer-term accommodation in Berlin and acquiring formal status. Thus, the searchers' networking abilities played a significant role in their access to resources through SPO.

For example, Mohammed --who always seemed to have a place to stay--told me that the people whom he stayed with were very friendly and came to resemble a family. He said to me with confidence, 'they cannot tell me to leave and I can always stay there'. Similarly, Abudul Rehman managed to find a permanent place through his networking efforts and ultimately managed to stay at the same place for several years.

Networking with solidarians meant joining them in their social events, Küfas (solidarity dinners) solidarity parties, in some instances accompanying them to demonstrations and supporting the group with doing shifts. It was in such social and political encounters that many of the refugees managed to informally network with the people they stayed with. As some of the interlocutors explained to me:

Lamine: It was nice because it was kind of community to me. Because earlier I was in the Lager and it was a different experience. Since I came here, they could form a kind of community for me. A solidarity community for me. They asked me my problems and helped me with a lawyer. They orgainised everything for me and even the cost of the lawyer was managed. They organised Soli-Küfa for me. It was a kind of community and collaborating together. I could move freely.

Alif: When I went to the workshop to the bike I found Jon and Hörst. I also lived with them. I lived with Jon at the Wagonplatz. It is an interesting place with several anarchists living there. Because when I came here I didn't have a stable place. Just living with friends from one place to another. I really loved to live in a Wagon. It was a spontaneous way of living I would say so. So the group that are living there are 12. The main group of the society they are having. And now I am in Neukölln with Hörst.

Abdul Rehman: Now I am staying in Neukölln in a long-term situation. I have been staying there for two years. I met the host through Betty. I have my own room. And there are two cats. I feel very comfortable there.

Wilson (1998, 2009) recognises the dynamic aspect of social ties such that weak ties may develop into strong ties. The refugees who participated in the SPO group also developed strong and weak ties with their support network which changed over time such that in some cases strong ties weakened when refugees either relied less on their support network or strengthened over time because of mutual interests or even increased reliance. In this way, these informal social encounters between refugees and members of the SPO group helped the people to find more suitable and longer-term accommodation and many of them were able to avoid deportations and find longer-term solutions. Many people learned through various informal networks about various possibilities and worked with lawyers, received informal counselling, studied the German language outside the formal 'integration course', and entered into particular arrangements with citizens in ways that did help transform their lives in some instances. In some instances, they entered into romantic relationships with citizens, got married and received formal status. Thus, the refugees managed to

evade the formal system and resist the bureaucratic procedures of the asylum process in the German state. More significantly, it was through networking that they were able to defy prolonged stay in the Lagers with possible deportation threats upon rejection of their asylum cases. In some cases, participation in informal channels additionally helped refugees formalize their status, which they may not have been able to do so if they had continued to stay in their Lagers in their respective federal states. In this context, informality should be regarded as a social mechanism, which served to develop alternative trajectories of and for refugees living in Lagers in ways such that it enabled them to access services, accommodation, and work opportunities.

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that refugees' decisions to leave the Lagers can be understood as stemming from desire for employment and formalisation of residential status in relation to and defiance of displacement related to mobility regimes and confinement and racialization.

De Genoa et al (2018) have noted that migrant/refugee struggles in Europe are polarized around two on-going phenomena: on the one hand, the increasing criminalization of refugees as refugees and, on the other a politics of "incorrigibility." The state understands refugees' actions with respect to leaving their Lagers as breaches of law for which they could be potentially penalised, but in this context, we consider refugees' so called 'illegal' acts as struggles for emplacement and in defiance the state's aims to displace them. In this context, informality denotes a character and domain of practice which potentially facilitate emplacements, formalization, and lead to alternative life trajectories. The study has additionally demonstrated that refugees networked with an informally organised solidarity group, such that citizens and refugees together came to challenge state imposed formal systems. In this connection, it is evident that informality and formality need to be understood as 'co-constructed practices' between citizens and refugees in their anti-racist struggles propelling them toward emplacements and formality. Nevertheless, as a word of caution it needs to be recognised that refugees' precarious statuses did not necessarily always diminish since they ultimately ended up relying on the solidarity activists' generosity and political will to support them and to some extent hierarchies were thereby reproduced.

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