

Thousands flock to community pantries in the Philippines as COVID-19 rapidly spreads

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A grass-roots movement of mutual aid, in the form of community pantries, is spreading in the Philippines amid the raging COVID-19 pandemic and the continuation of the herd immunity policy of the ruling elites. The pantries are set up on the side of the street, often on just a wooden table laden with basic food items.

Sections of better off workers, the self-employed, and small businessmen have spontaneously mobilized to give the little extra they have to those desperately poor and the unemployed who, in the hundreds and thousands have endured long lines to obtain food supplies for themselves and their families.

The movement was sparked off on April 14 when Ana Patricia Non, 26-year-old business owner of a small furniture making shop, set up a wooden push cart on Maginhawa street in Quezon City. It had a few vegetables, oranges, canned goods and plastic bags of rice and two signs. One sign read, “Maginhawa Community Pantry” and the second, translated from Filipino, “Give what you can, take what you need.”

On the second day of Non’s initiative, *ABS-CBN* news reported that among her “customers” was a street sweeper. She had stopped during her cleaning and bagged one head of cabbage, one turnip, a chayote and an orange. She planned, she said, after her shift, to mix the vegetables with sardines for her children. It would be the first produce that she had brought home in two weeks, when she was last paid.

“It’s really been difficult these days. Instead of buying what we want, we have to squeeze it because I have so many children,” the news site quoted her.

The news site also reported that an elderly couple, who had been foraging through the garbage, took bananas, some greens, and a couple of vitamin capsules from the pantry. “I really have nothing, no hope,” said

the man, who was on crutches.

In her first post on Facebook announcing the opening of the pantry and calling for support, Non underscored, “This will not answer the root cause of hunger but this will serve for staving off the pangs of hunger of those in need. It’s hard to work, to study and struggle on a grumbling stomach...” [translation by this writer.]

To date, Non’s post has been shared over 15,000 times and has garnered 32,000 likes. In the weeks since then, this first pantry has served over 3,000 people. According to the *Saan May Community Pantry?* [Where is a Community Pantry?] website, 725 pantries have been set up around the Philippines. A report stated that a community pantry has even been set up in East Timor.

Images in the media reveal the degree of desperation for basic resources in the population. Crowds of hundreds line the pavement to try to get a few free vegetables and a canned good or two. The lines often begin forming at three in the morning. An old man, who worked as a roadside vendor, died of heatstroke last week while standing in a line to receive a few free items of food. He had been waiting since long before dawn.

The emergence of community pantries and the long lines of the desperate poor underscore the ongoing social calamity inflicted by the ruling elite on the workers and impoverished masses of the Philippines.

In March last year, the government of President Rodrigo Duterte imposed the longest militarized lockdown in the world. This was aimed not at ending the community transmission of the COVID-19 virus, but at regulating its impact on the country’s grossly inadequate and dilapidated health care system. Workers were kept on the job in unsafe factories and offices, ensuring that capitalist profits continued to be

generated while placing the financial, social, and economic costs of the catastrophe on the working masses.

Between January 2020 and February 2021, according to *ABS-CBN*, 500,451 workers were laid off in the wake of nationwide lockdowns. As of February 2021, 4.2 million people over the age of fifteen are unemployed, while 7.9 million are underemployed or worked reduced hours. When the strictest level of the militarized lockdown was re-imposed in late March this year on the National Capital Region and the four surrounding provinces, 118,210 workers were laid off as a result.

The survey group, Social Weather Station, reported that as of their last face-to-face polling in November 2020, an estimated 2 million families had fallen into poverty and 4 million families experienced involuntary hunger. In Metro Manila alone, the country's capital, 780,000 families were estimated to have experienced going hungry in 2020.

Yet while millions lost jobs and went hungry or were driven back to work despite a raging pandemic, the big Filipino capitalists, like their counterparts around the globe, are raking in record income. *Forbes* reported that the 17 billionaires in the Philippines increased their combined wealth to over \$US45.6 billion. The real estate tycoon and former Senator Manuel Villar, at the top of the billionaire list, increased his wealth by 28.6 percent to \$US7.2 billion. At number two, port terminal tycoon Enrique Razon Jr. increased his wealth by 43.3 percent to \$US5 billion. And at number three, Lucio Tan, with interests in tobacco, liquor, and banking, saw his wealth leap 94 percent to \$US3.3 billion.

As of May 1, the country had recorded 1,046,653 infected with the disease and 17,145 dead. The rate of infection is now higher than when the pandemic began over a year ago.

Despite a massive surge of new infections since an attempt to re-open malls and non-essential businesses in late February, the response of the government continues to be driven by the desire to save money, not lives.

Testing has been limited to around 50,000 a day, far from the 150,000 to 200,000 a day that health experts have stated is required in order to track viral transmission. The positivity rate, as a result, has never gone down to the 5 percent recommended by the World

Health Organization and, instead, has hovered at 20 percent. Contact tracing has also been exceedingly limited, at a rate of only 3 contacts for every infected person instead of the recommended 30-35 contacts per case.

The newly approved 2021 national budget allocated a criminally low 5 percent of the total \$US93 billion to the health department and only \$US42 million for the purchase of COVID-19 vaccines for over 70 million people, the target set by the government to attain herd immunity. Just how few resources are being allocated by the ruling class to deal with the pandemic was highlighted by a report published by *Rappler* which indicated that in even the best-case scenario over 36,000 doctors needed to be hired this year to meet the requirements of dealing with the pandemic. The national budget allocated funds for the hiring of just 744 doctors.

The willingness of ordinary working people to help out those who are less fortunate is in marked contrast to the malign neglect of the government, the political establishment as whole, and the big businesses that they represent.



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