

# SP-NYC Local Joins Occupy Sandy and Local Residents in Far Rockaway Relief Efforts

by Nick Pehlman & Charlie Kerr



Hurricane Sandy hit New York on October 29th, tragically ending at least 43 lives, leaving hundreds of thousands without power, and devastating working-class communities throughout the city. In the days following the storm, popular attention largely remained focused on the Lower East Side. Reports from some of the areas most affected, including Staten Island, Coney Island, and Far Rockaway were scant and sporadic at best. As the days stretched on, life in the Lower East Side largely returned to normal, with the vast majority of power and subway service finally be-

ing restored. However, while many of the Lower East Side's residents have the luxury of putting Sandy behind them, coastal neighborhoods throughout Brooklyn, Staten Island, and Queens remain in a state of emergency and destitution.

One of these areas is Far Rockaway, on Queens' Rockaway Peninsula at the farthest reaches of the A line. The majority of Far Rockaway's residents are working-class people, and they, unsurprisingly, have been among those hit hardest by the destruction wrought by Hurricane Sandy. In Breezy Point, a neighborhood in the

Rockaways, 111 homes were destroyed by out-of-control fire and flood water, while in nearby Far Rockaway, thousands remain without power, heat, and basic amenities. Relief efforts by the supposed authorities -- federal and state -- have been disorganized and woefully inadequate, creating a vacuum which has been filled by the courageous work of Occupy Sandy as well as allied organizations working alongside local community groups.

Members of the Socialist Party USA NYC Local have been traveling to Far Rockaway to assist relief efforts there and build relationships with local activists and community leaders. Coming from Bed-Stuy in central Brooklyn, which mercifully weathered the storm relatively unscathed, it became immediately apparent that, as we waited in the bumper-to-bumper traffic from Howard Beach to Far Rockaway, we were progressively entering a disaster area.

In the Rockaways, hordes of NGO volunteers and employees patrolled the streets alongside numerous military personnel and FEMA responders from around the country. The destruction was immediately apparent: crumbling houses and limitless sand lining the roads for as far as the eye could see.



We first stopped at YANA (You are Never Alone) Center in Rockaway Park, a community center that became an Occupy Sandy staging ground following the extensive damage wrought by the storm. Speaking with local residents and Occupy activists, it became immediately apparent that the situation in the Rockaways was still dire; volunteers reported still finding bodies while local residents shared stories with us of homes without power, FEMA and Red Cross incompetence, trapped relatives, and shortages. Sal, the proprietor of YANA, had spent years assembling the funds for the center only to lose the buildings to flood damage a week after its opening.

We assisted the Occupy Sandy volunteers with the demolition of the building's extensively damaged interior and then went to visit other contacts and centers on the Eastern portion of the Peninsula, home to the majority of Far Rockaways' many public housing projects. There, the damage was less immediately apparent but equally as insidious.

While the structural damage was much less severe and most buildings weathered the storm intact, many residents, especially the elderly and non-English speakers, were unable to receive necessary aid such as food and medications while trapped in the upper-floors of their buildings and a shortage of translators plagued the FEMA and NGO staff. Occupy Sandy was beginning to reach out to these communities, building connections to local people working on the ground.

After observing and participating in Occupy Sandy's mutual aid efforts in Far Rockaway, we remain confident that they are prepared to continue coordinating relief efforts with local community groups while also assisting them in advocating for their needs as this crisis continues into winter. The Socialist Party USA NYC Local is excited to continue working with Occupy Sandy in the coming weeks to provide aid to those workers most affected and least served in the wake of the storm.

