



The Rationale For Worker Co-operatives

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Contents

Executive Summary	1
I Introduction	3
II. What Is A Worker Co-operative?	5
III. The Union Movement	8
IV. What Are The Advantages Of The Worker Co-operative Model?	9
1. Living Your Values At Work	9
2. Democracy	9
3. Economic Democracy	10
4. Co-operation	11
5. Equality	12
V. Conclusion	14
References	15

Executive Summary

Our history has been a struggle alternating between progressive developments leading to improvement in the quality of life for the majority of people, and regressive economic policy leading to the concentration of wealth into the hands of a smaller and smaller cadre; what Paul Simon referred to as “a loose affiliation of millionaires and billionaires.” In recent times, the pendulum has swung to the right with calamitous results. It is time for us to become engaged in pushing the pendulum in the other direction. It is possible to live in a world that allows us to develop the gifts that each of us is born with and use those gifts in a co-operative way to build a better world for everyone.

Corporate business models seem to be inherently incapable of being responsible to people and to life on earth in a long-term, sustainable way. Based on democracy, co-operation and equality, the worker co-operative is a model that can meet our most pressing needs.

Democracy

Most workplaces are undemocratic. We are constantly told that democracy in the workplace is inefficient and that workers are not ‘fit’ to make responsible and accountable decisions. Aren’t these the same arguments that were countered against political democracy? Remember when women, Aboriginals, blacks, those without property etc. were deemed unfit for democracy. Workers are deemed the same in the economic sphere. One day this will change, too.

Democracy better ensures that worker co-operatives are responsible to their workers, their customers, their community and to the earth. At a time when many Canadians are searching for more meaningful work, worker co-operatives allow people to live their values at work. Democracy in the workplace builds worker commitment. This is important because now more than ever, the success of an enterprise in a knowledge economy is based on mobilizing the intelligence of its workers. Worker co-operatives are able to do this by providing incentives for workers to be productive, accountable, flexible and innovative.

Co-operation

We are constantly told that competition is the best way to operate an economy and to run a business. However, one of the leading evolutionary biologists, Stephen Jay Gould, disputed this. Gould said that equating competition with success is just a cultural prejudice. He noted that success

can be achieved through a number of strategies, including co-operation. Co-operation has been central in many cultures throughout human history. In particular, many Indigenous cultures around the world are based around the values of co-operation and sharing of resources for the common good. In addition, the cost of competition is enormous; it does not have to be this way. We can do better. By co-operating, we can meet our greatest challenges and reach our potential as human beings. In a worker co-operative, you can do this every day at work.

Equality

As a rule, no single person or elite group gets all the profits in a worker co-operative, which leads to greater economic equality. Profits can instead be re-invested into the co-operative to create more jobs, to increase workers' wages, to decrease work hours or to be given to other fledgling co-operatives.

To meet the needs of people and life on earth it is imperative that we create democratic, co-operative and equal workplaces.

We are at a crossroads in history. Traditional business models, notably public corporations whose shareholders are disconnected from the communities where they are doing business, seem to be inherently incapable of being responsible to people and to life on earth in a long-term, sustainable way. Based on democracy, co-operation and equality, the worker co-operative is a model that can meet our most pressing needs.

Most Canadians though have not heard of worker co-operatives and therefore do not understand what they are. In spite of this, there are over 13,000 people in Canada who work in a worker co-operative. Around the world there are numerous examples where worker co-operatives are successful.

In 1817, Robert Owen tried to start a movement in England that believed that “in spite of the machine, man should remain his own employer. Owen thought that the principle of co-operation or union would solve the problem of the machine without sacrificing either individual freedom or social solidarity, either man's dignity or his sympathy with his fellows.”¹

Assaulted by the Industrial Revolution, but inspired by the ideas of Robert Owen, the Rochdale Pioneers, composed of 24 weavers, tried to build a self-sufficient community in 1844. By 1858 they had built a successful worker co-operative cotton mill, but when they later tried to expand, the only financing they could find was from private investors. Soon the co-operative was privatized and one part of the utopian experiment was over in Rochdale. Because of a lack of capital, political economist Beatrice Potter-Webb said the Rochdale example was proof that “worker co-ops were doomed to fail.”

The protection of workers' rights and the practice of democracy in the workplace has largely depended on the successful struggles of the union movement. In the United States, self managed businesses were being created by journeymen shoemakers in Philadelphia as early as 1806. By 1878, the creation of worker co-operatives became a central initiative of the Knights of Labor. Unfortunately banks refused to lend worker co-operatives money in times of need. The depression of the mid-to-late 1880s was the final nail in the coffin for most of these worker co-operatives, reinforcing Potter-Webb's beliefs.²

Father Don Jose Arizmendiarieta opened a technical training school in Mondragon, Spain in 1943. Along with the technical component,

Arizmendiarieta blended the ideas of social justice and democracy in his classes. Graduates were initially unsuccessful in implementing these ideas in their places of work when they suggested them to their employer. Then, with the support of Arizmendiarieta, five engineering graduates purchased a bankrupt paraffin oven factory in 1956. This factory was owned and democratically controlled by its members. Mondragon's goal was not only to create business success, but social success too.³

To get around the problem of capitalization, Arizmendiarieta came up with the idea for Mondragon to create its own banking system.⁴ Mondragon re-invests 30% to 50% percent of its profits each year back into an indivisible reserve fund.⁵ The Mondragon banking system, which is co-operatively run, has allowed profits to be used as both patient capital and technical assistance for Mondragon co-operatives, ensuring they survive and flourish.⁶ In addition, if Mondragon or any single Mondragon co-op dissolves or is converted into a for-profit company, the indivisible reserve fund would not be divided among its members. Instead, the indivisible reserve fund would be donated to another co-operative. Therefore there is significantly less incentive for workers to sell out to private investors.

As of 2009 the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation had grown to 92,773 workers with sales of \$33 billion euros.⁷ Mondragon is the largest business group in the Basque region and is the seventh largest business in Spain in terms of both sales and the number of workers.⁸ Unlike the typical corporate approach, Mondragon's strategic plan includes job creation goals.⁹ In 2003 Mondragon was ranked by Fortune magazine as one of the top ten places to work in Europe.¹⁰ Overall Mondragon has outperformed most private business firms in Spain in almost all respects.¹¹ Mondragon is run on a one member-worker one vote system. Its slogan is "Humanity at Work." By learning from worker co-operative pitfalls of the past, Mondragon is a shining example that worker co-operatives can indeed be successful and has helped resurrect the worker co-operative movement.

Mondragon is just one of many examples of worker controlled, democratic enterprises throughout the world. Also known as the third way, co-operativism is an alternative economy where enterprises are run by people. Co-operatives are not a utopia, but are a practical alternative for workers who yearn for more at work. As Alfred Marshall, an English economist said, "Other movements have a high social aim; other movements have a broad business basis; Co-operation alone has both."¹²

What Is A Worker Co-operative?

II

Worker co-operatives are businesses that are owned and democratically controlled by the worker-members. Multi-stakeholder co-operatives, also known as solidarity co-operatives, are a hybrid model where workers and community stakeholders share control of the board.

The main purpose of a worker co-operative is to provide employment for its members through operating an enterprise owned by its workers and that follows the Co-operative Principles and Values. The worker co-op is, in principle, designed to provide benefits not just to the founding members but also to all future employee/members. When new employees join the business, after a successful probationary period they are encouraged to apply for membership and become member/owners.

On becoming a member, each person pays a membership fee, or purchases a membership share to become a member/owner. Through the democratic governance of the co-op, all members have an opportunity to affect the way the business is run and to offer input into the decisions affecting their everyday work lives. The members decide how to make decisions democratically. Many worker co-operatives are governed by consensus, while others are based on a one-member one-vote majority rule. Because the membership, through the board of directors it elects, develops the policies that determine the co-operative's daily and long-term operations, it follows that trust, communication and co-operation among members are vital to the co-op's success. The co-op's assets are collectively owned and surplus earnings are often allocated to the workers according to the bylaws and policies established by the co-op (i.e. the membership), often in proportion to hours worked by members and with limited return on shares and member loans.

Worker co-operatives operate under the international agreed-upon co-operative principles that also govern all other types of co-operatives.¹³

- 1st Principle: Voluntary and Open Membership: Co-operatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political, or religious discrimination.
- 2nd Principle: Democratic Member Control: Co-operatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives, members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote), and co-operatives at other levels are

- also organized in a democratic manner.
- 3rd Principle: Member Economic Participation: Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. They usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.
- 4th Principle: Autonomy and Independence: Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.
- 5th Principle: Education, Training and Information: Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation.
- 6th Principle: Co-operation Among Co-operatives: Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional, and international structures.
- 7th Principle: Concern for Community: While focusing on member needs and wishes, co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities.

As of 2006, there were about 345 worker co-operatives in Canada employing over 13,000 people, with revenues of \$470 million and assets of \$326 million. Revenue from the forestry sector alone, almost exclusively in Québec, was \$278 million.¹⁴ An estimated two-thirds of worker co-operatives in Canada reside in Québec, employing about 10,000 people.¹⁵ Outside of Québec, there are higher concentrations per population in Atlantic Canada, while concentrations numerically are in Ontario, Nova Scotia and Winnipeg, with the rest widely spread.

Italy leads the world with over 800,000 people working in the co-operative sector, about half of which are in worker or social co-ops.¹⁶ As of 2005, there were 7,363 social co-operatives employing over 244,000 people.¹⁷ In Emilia Romagna, there are more than 7,500 co-ops, two-thirds of which are worker-owned. Ten percent of the workforce is employed by co-operatives in a region with some of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe.¹⁸ Over 80,000 members here are employed in worker co-operatives,¹⁹ equalling about 6% of the workforce.²⁰ Although it was one of the most devastated

and poorest regions in Europe at the end of World War II, Emilia Romagna is now among the most prosperous regions in the world.

The protection of workers' rights and the practice of democracy in the workplace in the last century has depended on the successful struggles of the union movement.

Much of the abundant life that we enjoy today came from the efforts of those who organized themselves collectively into unions and fought to change the conditions of working people. The struggles of union organizing, the strikes and the battles of working people from the Winnipeg General Strike to Bloody Thursday on the Waterfront of San Francisco to the battles of the South African Labour Unions in support of the African National Congress are part of our collective heritage.

The relationship between worker co-operatives and organized labour is a long one and has taken many forms. The early union movement in North America featured the Knights of Labour who started many worker-owned co-operatives. Their motto: "an injury to one is a concern to all." Their declaration of principles included the following: To establish co-operative institutions, such as will tend to supercede the wage system, by the introduction of a co-operative industrial system.

The Antigonish Movement, led by Moses Coady transformed rural communities in Atlantic Canada through the creation of co-operative enterprises. They were supported by Labour Unions and many of the Co-operatives and Credit Unions that exist today were originally organized with union support. The movement didn't actively pursue the organization of worker co-operatives because they viewed the unions as effectively providing a democratic voice for working people and effectively working for economic justice in the industrial workplace.

Most recently, the Mondragon Co-operatives have created a partnership with the United Steelworkers with the goal of creating unionized co-operative workplaces in North America. Further, for the last several years the CWCF has worked with the United Steelworkers, the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada and the Canadian Labour Congress in the Western Labour-Worker Coop Council, with a goal of improving the lives of working people throughout the region, and to facilitate worker ownership.

What Are The Advantages Of The Worker Co-operative Model?

IV

1. Living Your Values At Work

A labour market trend is that younger workers in particular are seeking to work for companies aligned with their values, while 60% of baby-boomer workers are wanting more meaning in their work.²¹ Science has shown that when humans are engaged in cognitive initiatives we are motivated, not by more money, but by self-directed action that has a meaningful purpose. Workers are most productive if the work is autonomous, involves a sense of mastery (of getting better) and has a meaningful purpose.²² The worker co-operative is the model to do this together with other people.

2. Democracy

Democracy is a value that many of us cherish. Though its origins are old, democracy is a relatively new phenomenon. It has come far, but still has a long way to go.

The ancient Greek word *demokratia* means “people-power.” The debate from the beginning of democracy has been what “people power” means. Democracy had its first recorded beginnings in 508 BC. In response to particularly repressive rule, Cleisthenes created a democratic constitution in Athens.²³

The first democratic experiment was very modest. Only men born in Athens who had both a mother and father born in Athens were given democratic citizenship. Just over 10% of the population in Athens was eligible and only an estimated 2% participated. The fledgling democratic experiment in Athens was snuffed out in 322 when Macedon took control of Athens.²⁴ Authoritarian rule was back.

The road back to democracy was a long one. It was not until the American Revolution in 1776 that democracy was again implemented as a form of government. However, it was not until the 20th Century that democracy in many countries became an accepted and normal form of government where all adults, both male and female, were allowed to vote.²⁵ From 1972 to 2002 there was a dramatic increase in the number of countries in the world that had democratic governments.²⁶

Up until late in the 20th Century, it was vigorously debated whether certain

countries were 'fit' for democracy. The British used this argument in India and many others brought it up when other colonial nations aspired for independence.²⁷ Up until recently in South Africa, there were debates and also violence over whether blacks should be given the right to vote. With the emergence of China, even to this day there are arguments whether authoritarian governments are more beneficial in creating economic growth. This debate lingers on.²⁸

Amartya Sen believes that democracy adds value to our lives. Sen says that democracy "is a part of human freedom" and that "exercising civil and political rights is a crucial part of good lives of individuals as social beings." Democracy allows for citizens to express themselves to keep "governments responsible and accountable." Having a relatively free press allows for the expressions to be distributed en masse to other citizens. This is said to be the reason that no democratic country has ever had a famine. Sen also believes that democracy "gives citizens an opportunity to learn from one another, and helps society to form its values and priorities."²⁹

Surveys have shown that in all the major geographic regions in the world, democracy has strong support.³⁰ Democracy is now a universal value in the world. Questions remain as to the strength of our political democracy. How much say do people really have in major political decisions compared to the elite and to corporations? Many believe democracy still has a long way to go before we get government as Abraham Lincoln said, "of the people, by the people, for the people."

3. Economic Democracy

Most workplaces are undemocratic. We are told that democracy in the workplace is inefficient and that workers are not 'fit' to make responsible and accountable decisions. Aren't these the same arguments that were countered against political democracy? Remember when women, Aborigines, blacks, those without property etc. were deemed unfit for democracy. Workers are deemed the same in the economic sphere. One day this will change, too.

Stefano Zamagni, an economist from the University of Bologna, Italy advocates that worker co-operatives are about "extending democracy from the political sphere to the economic sphere."³¹ Building on Sen's benefits of democracy, democracy in the workplace adds value to workplaces. It better ensures that businesses are more responsible and accountable to their workers, their customers, their community and to the earth.

Now more than ever, the success of an enterprise is based on mobilizing the intelligence of its workers. Worker co-operatives are able to do this by providing incentives for workers to be productive, accountable, flexible and

innovative. This is not only profitable, but smart. Democracy in the workplace is the next evolutionary leap in democracy.

Alain Bridault, President of the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation and member of the Coopérative de travail Orion, adds that,

“Indeed, the success of businesses in the new economy is now based on the skills of their human resources. Today’s businesses and more in the future will be smart companies offering products and services with high intelligence added. Management practices change. The management of human resources is now more important than other aspects of management, because the competitiveness of enterprises depends on their capacity to mobilize the intelligence of their employees. This means developing their sense of belonging, implementing participatory management practices, leaving ample room for innovation, and increasingly involving them in company performance. But all this is the very paradigm of a worker co-operative as the only form of business which, by nature, is intelligent, which has the potential of mobilizing understanding of its human resources through its purpose and its way of being.”³²

We are not talking about business lingo like “empowerment” where empowerment is extremely narrowly defined. One of the problems of many for-profit and not-for-profit organizations is that front line workers have no way of holding upper management accountable. In worker co-operatives, accountability is a two-way street. In a multi-stakeholder co-operative, accountability also comes from community stakeholders. Worker co-operatives expand democracy to a one worker-member one vote. The workers equally together control the strategic direction of the co-operative. Worker and multi-stakeholder co-operatives are models that can be used to deliver renewable energy, health care, food, and other goods and services in a way that meets the needs of workers and the community.

4. Co-operation

As the founder of Mondragon, José Maria Arizmendiarieta, said, “Co-operation summons people to a collective project, but leaves each person with his or her own responsibility. Co-operation is the development of the individual, not against others, but with others.”³³

We are constantly told that competition is the best way to operate an economy and to run a business. However, even one of the leading evolutionary biologists, Stephen Jay Gould, disputed this. Gould said, “The equation of competition with success in natural selection is merely a cultural prejudice....Success can be attained by a large variety of strategies....that we could call co-operative.”³⁴ In fact, many animals use co-operative

strategies to survive. For example, baboons and gazelles communicate with each other when in danger. In addition, chimpanzees, dolphins and pelicans hunt together.³⁵

Humans have co-operated throughout our history to survive. On the Great Plains, the Lakota “understood that (buffalo) herd was the prey of the entire community and that the chase was to be a united, group activity. Hunters could win a larger share of the kill by their prowess, but no one went without. Preparing the great feasts that followed were co-operative and collective endeavours.” Since their beginning, the Southwest Pueblos have practiced co-operative and collective farming, while the Northwest coast tribes collectively fished.³⁶ The Iroquois from an early age were taught the value of sharing possessions.³⁷

Early European settlers in North America had to co-operate with their neighbours to survive a new environment and often harsh winters. These settlers were not the rugged individualists we have been led to believe. Co-operation is a tried and true strategy in a world with scarce resources. Studies of children show that they are the most receptive to co-operative games and initiatives.³⁸ Contrary to our dominant ideology, competition is not inevitable.

The cost of competition is enormous. As noted by Alfie Kohn in his book “No Contest: The Case Against Competition (1986), there are “business failures, copious litigation, idle equipment, a reduction in quality, unsafe working conditions, and the need to regulate the private sector in order to keep all of these problems under control.” Competition is constantly adversarial, increases anxiety and can undermine relationships.³⁹

It does not have to be this way. We can do better. By co-operating together, we can meet our greatest challenges and reach our potential as human beings. In a worker co-operative, you can do this every day at work.

5. Equality

Former politician Ed Broadbent, in a paper recently published by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, said that, “There has never been a better time in recent history when the core democratic value of equality can be seen as both an ethical and practical option.” The more equal a society is, the healthier, the more stable, civically engaged and just it is.⁴⁰

A great feature about co-operatives is that they are as a rule set up so no single person or elite group gets all the profits. No great amassing of wealth can occur which leads to greater economic equality. Profits can instead be re-invested into the co-operative to create more jobs, increase workers’ wages, decrease work hours, be given to other fledgling or co-operatives in

need, be given to the community whereby citizens decide on how they want to use the money, etc.

In 2005, CEOs of corporations in the United States with over \$1 billion in annual sales on average made \$10.9 million a year, compared to the average worker who made \$41,861, a ratio of 262:1.⁴¹ At Mondragon, despite sales of 33 billion euros, the difference in pay between the lowest and highest paid worker is only 6:1.⁴² Many worker co-operatives in Canada have a flat pay scale, where every member earns the same rate of pay. Those worker co-operatives who have a tiered pay scale typically have pay scale ratios much lower than is even seen at Mondragon.

The worker co-operative is just the vehicle to create more equality here in Canada. The worker-members decide workplace policies and procedures, the amount they are paid, and even how surplus earnings are distributed. This helps create a humane, respectful and equitable workplace. As Stefano Zamagni says, "Inequality is not only unethical. By the time government redistributes income, it is too late. The moment you produce income in a co-operative, you redistribute it."⁴³

Conclusion

V

Around the world it has been shown that workplaces based on democracy, co-operation and equality are not only possible, but they can be successful too. At a time when many Canadians are searching for more meaningful work, worker co-operatives allow people to live their values at work.

One cherished value is democracy. Most workplaces though are still undemocratic. Democracy is a model that can allow worker co-operatives to be more responsible to their workers, their customers, their community and to the earth. Democracy in the workplace builds worker commitment. This is important because now more than ever, the success of an enterprise in a knowledge economy is based on mobilizing the intelligence of its workers.

Co-operation and equality are also important values. The cost of competition is enormous, but it does not have to be this way. We can do better. By co-operating together, we can meet our greatest challenges and reach our potential as human beings. In a worker co-operative, you can do this everyday at work. In addition, worker co-operatives create more equal and just workplaces and societies.

Worker and multi-stakeholder co-operatives are models that can be used to deliver renewable energy, health care, food, and other goods and services in a way that meets the needs of both workers and the community. To meet the needs of people and life on earth it is imperative that we create democratic, co-operative and equal workplaces.

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The Rationale For Worker Co-operatives

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