

Training for Democracy

by Andrew McLeod

Many forms of activism have sprung out of the effort to replace the current capitalist political system. One way of dividing these diverse efforts is between political and cooperative activism. In the overtly political realm, we have organizations that focus their energies on a specific problem in society. On the other hand, worker-collectives are primarily concerned with providing a livelihood to their members, with social transformation being a secondary effect. While this picture is overly simplified, my intention in creating this dichotomy is to illustrate how cooperatives may still be important vehicles for social change.

Political organizations generally do more to confront what is wrong in society than do worker-collectives, but they tend to be less useful in providing examples of what could be right. They tend to have much overlap among themselves and turnover within their membership, and therefore do not tend to function as model societies.

In contrast, collective workplaces tend to be independent entities with relatively stable populations. They are often a primary venue of social interaction for their members. Therefore, worker-cooperatives can provide a prototype for society as a whole, and training in how to behave as equals.

In showing how an individual can earn a living without a boss, a co-op will provide an education in how to behave as a citizen in a democracy, at the same time diverting energy from the capitalist economy by creating an alternative. This will help members to avoid the routine indoctrination of giving and taking orders. But more important, the small size of the typical collective workplace is useful practice at decision-making in a project with easily defined boundaries.

This practice is critical because it provides a continual process of trial and error that will help us to develop a plan for a democratic society. Once collective members get the hang of behaving as equals in small groups where everyone knows each other, they can build on these baby steps. As we gain practice at democracy in its most simple forms, we may attempt more complex projects. We can use our collective experiences to create direct democracy at the community and regional levels with each level developing organically, according to the aggregate needs and desires of its constituents.

Every concrete example of people living together as equals undermines the myth that things can only be as they are under capitalism, and combats the fatalism that plagues modern life. We can lessen our dependence on banks, chain stores, mass media and the like by linking cooperative projects that satisfy the same needs.

Many examples of small-scale democracy already exist, but we should always keep an eye toward the next step, while patiently realizing that we can only see a little ways ahead. The current simple forms of democracy practiced in collectives are critical prerequisites to the finished products. And just like the clunky and dangerous early bicycles barely resemble today's two-wheeled wonders, we can now hardly imagine the potential and problems of collectivism applied to entire cities. It is beyond the scope of this article to speculate on the specifics of how to make the transition from small collectives to regional councils and beyond.

But once the creation of democratic projects reaches a point of critical mass, these micro-democracies will be able to flow together into larger systems by way of second-level service cooperatives and federations of similar collectives within a region. Each will continue to learn from the others and grow into more complex forms. And even as we run into the upper size limits of direct democracy, an increase in democratic forms on the micro level will assist us in creating more egalitarian replacements for larger forms of governance. In our collectives are the seed of a new society.

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