
Interview with Matt Noyes of GEO

Steve: Tell us about your experience with both unions and co-ops.

Matt: I went to the New School for graduate school to study political economy, and it was through that experience that I got particularly interested in worker self-organization. I started out with a group of students doing strike support for unions that were on strike [the Student-Worker Solidarity Committee]. There was a wave of strikes in the late 1980s/early 2000s. And then I dropped out of graduate school and got into adult and worker education. I was lucky to meet a colleague who had learned about popular education in Nicaragua in the years after the revolution.

That really excited me because I realize that worker self-education was also a method for worker self-organization. That's what makes popular education interesting when it's done in a context with workers—in particular, at that time in

New York, lots of immigrant workers, some of them very experienced organizers, some brand new. All of them from countries that had stronger labor movements than the US. And so, there was a lot to learn from them.

Anyway, I was interested in unions, so I got involved in organizing, and we formed a teachers' union chapter. (Organizer, organize yourself!) That was a great hands-on experience in organizing, and then also in bargaining and grievances and all of the daily work of labor unionism. But, for me, it was always rooted in the idea of building collective capacity for something much more than just defending your immediate rights. The goal is to change society.

It's got to be real, it's got to be on the ground, it's got to be real democratic worker self-organization.

I was exposed to Labor Notes pretty early on, which was an important project, because Labor Notes operated on the same basis and had real work to show. On the one hand, it's got to be real, it's got to be on the ground, it's got to be actual democratic worker self-organization, but at the same time, it can't just be about slightly better contracts or only improving the conditions of workers in this one workplace or this one industry or this country. It has to be broader and more radical.

In the early 2000s I moved to Japan. I was a stay at home dad doing international labor solidarity activism and some

education work with great people there. I ended up getting a teaching job at a university in a faculty of business administration department, which was unexpected, given my background, but made sense if you think of worker organizing as a kind of reverse business administration... Anyway, in Japan, a faculty in a university is a kind of mini-college, with a wide range of courses. I was hired to teach undergraduate courses in English. They didn't really care what I taught, as long as it was in English. They gave a huge amount of freedom.

So, I've got all this experience with unions and with workers, but talking with my students, I found out that they had very little exposure to unions at all, because Japan's union density is very similar to the United States and the big unions there are bureaucratic and integrated into management.

This was not where I was could expect to find labor radicals. So, I figured out that we could talk about work, and democracy, and worker self-organization, and all that, by talking about worker cooperatives, taking on worker self-organization from another angle. There is a big cooperative movement in Japan, so it might be more familiar to students. My interest in worker co-ops started here.

I was able to – required to – take students on international field study trips. It was really a great job! Among other trips, I took groups to Mondragon twice to do a field study of worker co-ops. It was a great way to get exposed to that model and learn about both the incredibly strong points of the Mondragon experience and the big contradictions in their evolution. I participated in other co-op study tours in Korea and Spain, and every two years, I helped organize a group of people in Japan to go to the Labor Notes conference in the US. I also helped organize trips by labor activists in the US to Japan.

Because my interest in worker organizing wasn't about unions or co-ops as such, but about self-organization and

social transformation, those two things – unions and worker co-ops – were not contradictory to me.

Steve: And have you had the chance to actually join a worker co-op?

Matt: Yeah, I was a member of the Social Justice Learning Collective, in Tokyo and I am a member of social.coop, a cooperative social media platform/community. It's not a worker co-op in a technical sense. It's called a platform co-op, but it functions cooperatively. And, any day now, I will officially be a member of a farm worker cooperative here in Colorado. That will be my first experience being a member of a formal worker co-op.

Steve: So, having had a foot in two worlds, worker co-ops and labor unions, what do you think each one can learn from the other?

The same criticisms can be made of both.

Matt: They're very similar. I mean, I've many times had conversations with people who treat them as very different. I know really solid labor activists who see cooperatives as irrelevant to what they're trying to do. They see unions as potentially—not automatically, but potentially—really important class-struggle organizations against capitalism. And they see cooperatives as a distraction, they imagine that people create a co-op, start running their little business, and forget about the world. They just try to make their money and

go home, like little bosses. The worker-owner thing to them sounds like class collaboration.

People on the worker co-op side often see unions as big, bureaucratic, white male-dominated, backwards organizations that aren't changing the way the society functions. They're just bargaining for better wages in an existing system that sucks. So, there can be a kind of mutual distrust and critique. But... in my experience there's a profound similarity between the two organizations. The same criticisms can be made of both.

Steve: It sounds like you're saying each side thinks the other is just kind of self-serving and inwardly focused.

Matt: Yeah. Right. And both of them totally can be. So, one of the interesting things they can learn from each other is that solidarity is crucial for both, in different ways. A good, strong worker cooperative has to be centered in solidarity, because solidarity is what's going to make it work, and what's going to make it be effective as an organization. The same is true of a union, but one of the big differences is that unions don't own and control the workplace or the labor process. So they are structurally in a fight, they are antagonistic to the employers by their nature. If they're functioning as a legitimate union, they are forced into a kind of solidarity. If they don't fight, they don't need solidarity and they degenerate.

If you want to organize a union at Amazon, for example, you need solidarity desperately, because that's the only thing that's going to protect you from all the stuff the employers are going to do. Firing you, disciplining you, etc.—solidarity is life and death for a labor union. Even bureaucratic unions may get a run of 10 or even 20 years during which the employer doesn't try to destroy them, but eventually, they will. They'll come after pensions, health care, hours, working conditions, or they'll

screw the new tier of employees and wait for the higher paid workers to retire. Sooner or later, workers in unions get pushed into the need for solidarity and having to support each other. Their solidarity is solidarity against capital.

Whereas, if you're a worker co-op, solidarity is very different. you need solidarity because it allows you to function. Chilean theorist Luis Razeto Migliaro calls this the "C Factor," solidarity as a factor of production. But in a worker cooperative you're not under constant attack. It's a different relationship. So, one thing that union members have developed that could be helpful for people in worker co-ops are the tons of tools for organizing they have had to develop. There's a lot of good material out there about how to organize democratically from the grassroots up in the face of all kinds of difficulties. (One of my favorites is the Troublemaker's Handbook, published by Labor Notes.) Learning organizing from unionists could be really interesting for members of cooperatives, because cooperatives have a tendency to drift toward a sort of managerial perspective.

I saw this at Mondragon. Workers in their large industrial worker co-ops look a lot like workers in any other factory. They have certain powers and benefits that are very different from a capitalist firm, but day-to-day functioning can start to look pretty similar. So, I think there is a constant need to regenerate solidarity in worker co-ops, and workers in labor unions have good tools.

We don't need a boss.

The other thing is that, in unions, you need greater and greater and greater levels of solidarity. You're always going to

be against not only your employer, but a capitalist economy. You're at risk. The more and more and more solidarity you build in society, the stronger you are, the safer you are. So, in a way, the logic of unions is that you're kind of pushed toward solidarity beyond your workplace. The ultimate expression of that is the general strike, where unions unite against the capitalists as a whole.

In a worker cooperative, there is nothing that automatically pushes them into solidarity with other co-ops. I mean, it's better for them if they can build that solidarity, right? Inter-cooperation is really important. It's one of the co-op principles. But, how necessary is it in practice? That is the question. Of course, this is true in the union movement, too. Solidarity with other unions is a traditional principle. But, many unions don't practice it at all. The difference is that workers on strike need solidarity from other workers and unions in a very real, practical way.

What's interesting about worker co-ops is the assumption of the worker co-op is we can run production. We don't need a boss. And that perspective, I think, is really something that unions should have. The goal of a union should be to not have a boss, not just get better deals under the boss. The IWW has this great button and T-shirt and all that says "fire the boss." And I've always thought, that's the point of a union, right? The goal of a union is not to go on forever being exploited.

Steve: And yet, unions do seem to be stuck in that position. They're in this perpetually defensive mode, right? Even if it's an aggressive defense, it's still a defense, because there's no next step in that model. And, I don't know, maybe I'm reading too much into it, but it seems to me, that goes all the way back to the NLRA itself, where prior to that, there had been all this really radical union activism. And, it really scared the capitalist

class and the government. And so, the compromise was, you were guaranteed a place at the table, but you can only negotiate on these certain topics, and ownership of the means of production is never going to be one of those topics.

Matt: Yeah, I think that, by and large, that is true. But, I also think about the radical movements in unions. Organizers in that context, the best of them, have always seen the union as a vehicle; you're not intending to stay in that vehicle forever. Workers use unions to get where they need to go. And so, in the early days, the really radical labor unions definitely had this idea that the union isn't the end of the story. The union is just a part of building this larger workers' movement. And the overall goal is to transform the society, to get rid of capitalism and "bring to birth a new world."

If you look at the old union constitutions, like for the Electrical Workers or other unions, you'll see that they often start with a preamble that dates back to their founding. The preambles talk about creating a commonwealth of toil, a radical vision of a society that's controlled by workers. Interestingly, it reads a lot like Mondragon's Basic Values which call for "sovereignty of labor" and "the subordination of capital to labor."

Steve: Those are two separate principles. They don't combine them.

Matt: Exactly, and it's really interesting, those are pretty wild ideas. Those are not in the ICA principles.

Steve: That is very true.

Matt: Legally speaking, a worker co-op is just a form of corporation. There's nothing in the law that suggests a worker co-ops should be getting rid of capitalism. And you might even

run into trouble if you organize on that basis. I could see someone in the government trying to give you a hard time legally if you used a co-op that way, if a worker cooperative grew into something more ambitious.

Steve: Yeah, I think that if we ever really start threatening capitalism, that's exactly what's going to happen.

Who really knows how
things work around here?
We do.

Matt: Right! Yeah! So, in that sense, they're very similar. But, I think the lesson that unions could get from worker co-ops here is that workers are capable of running production. You don't need a boss at all. Whereas, for a union, I think a lot of unionists just sort of soak up the idea of, "oh, we can't run it." And it's a contradiction, because the language of unionism is often, "Who does the work? Who really knows how things work around here? We do. The bosses don't." And yet, in my experience, people's antagonism towards the employer doesn't necessarily translate into the attitude that we can run this without employers. Whereas in co-ops, the premise is that you can just run it yourself.

The big union lesson for co-ops is deep solidarity and the idea that you have to keep organizing to get stronger because you're up against capitalism. Inside a co-op, you have

democracy, but you're functioning in a market that has not been democratized. In that sense, they're sort of similar to unions, because, you can function democratically in your worker co-op, but the market is not subject to democratic control. So, you're going to get hammered by the forces of competition to make the decisions that a capitalist business would make.

Steve: And so, what do worker co-ops and unions need to be telling each other? How compatible are the models?

Matt: In theory, they seem to be very compatible. I don't see a lot of contradictions between how they function, assuming that they share some sort of common vision for social transformation. So, if you make that assumption, which is a great big assumption, then you can see how, yeah, both of these organizations make sense as vehicles for a common movement. The problem is, if you have a union that's not organized for social transformation, or a worker co-op that's not organized for social transformation, what's the basis of that relationship?

Steve: You're saying that the shared philosophy of the organizations could overcome any logistical hurdles.

Matt: Sure! One of the Japan groups we brought to the Labor Notes Conference in Chicago visited New Era windows, which used to be Republic Windows and Doors, where the UE famously organized factory occupations that led to the formation of a worker co-op. That case is a really interesting answer to the question, "what comes next? What's the logic of what we're doing?" (As the joke goes, what happens when the dog catches the car?) And the logic of their organizing led them to take over the factory. And then what? Keep it. So, in that

case, that's a really interesting union co-op model, where the two vehicles that they're using are completely focused on the same question, which is workers' power over the factory to take power over the production altogether. So, I think that's a pretty impressive example. There are many such examples in Latin America, of course.

Unions have to have that solidarity that goes beyond the workplace.

When we were visiting Republic Windows, I remember people asking them, "wait, what is the role of the union in this situation, now that you've formed your cooperative?" And it was interesting, because the union local operated a lot like the social councils at Mondragon. It is dealing with, you know, personal relations in the workplace, social dynamics. It was a vehicle for people who were working there to complain about conditions and to push back on the leadership of the cooperative around workplace issues. So, that was a useful function. You don't need a union, necessarily, to do that, but working with the union meant that you had these people who had a lot of experience in that type of organized collective pushback. So, that meant they're pretty good at it.

Steve: They're used to that combative culture.

Matt: Yeah. And the leadership of that cooperative, because they came up through this union struggle, definitely had a

much more militant outlook socially. They definitely saw the need for solidarity in a way that a typical worker cooperative founder probably wouldn't. So, that union, you know, people always say being part of a union connects you to a bigger struggles or connects you to bigger networks or makes you part of bigger movement. And I think that can be true, because unions, again, have an inherent need for solidarity that goes beyond the workplace.

Steve: Do you think that that would be an effective way to really scale up worker ownership? Just the sheer fact that unions are so big and also connected to each other?

Matt: In some cases. It could be like another example that really struck me from years ago. I went out to, Madison, Wisconsin to do a union democracy workshop. I was staying at the home of a carpenter who lives pretty far outside of Madison, in the countryside, a longtime carpenter, wonderful guy, kind of radical. He is a real grassroots organizer, a solid dude who published a great rank and file newsletter. He was a strong union democracy advocate in the Carpenters Union. – Democracy is vital for solidarity. – And his big frustration was that he couldn't convince his union to build housing and help create housing cooperatives to deal with homelessness. And he's like, we have the skills, we the money, we have the capacity, there's nothing standing in our way. Do it, create a real, serious movement to build housing for people.

Steve: That would be great, because I can tell you from personal experience that homelessness is a real issue here in Madison.

Matt: Yeah, and he couldn't get off the starting block in the union because, again, that's just totally foreign to the union's mission. "It's just not what we do."

My friend Nick Bedell, who's at the Writers Guild now, used to be with the Transport Workers Union in New York City. He got the union to do a couple of co-op projects, but the one that came to real fruition was a worker co-op of people who maintain the bikes for the Citibike program. The union helped them form a worker co-op to do the bike maintenance. In part that's because Nick was open to worker co-ops. He understood them as a vehicle. And he saw that this was logical, this is another tool you could use, and it made sense in that situation.

So, there's a lot of potential for that kind of adoption of cooperative models, I think. Unions could be very helpful in getting that started. On the other hand, co-op organizing is like union organizing: the more grassroots it is, the more bottom-up it is, the stronger it's gonna be.

I guess the way I think of it is that I want to spread and support democratic worker self-organization for radical social transformation. All those pieces. If you're working in, I don't know, the auto industry, you may want to build the UAW, or there may be a particular parts supplier that could be organized as a cooperative. As we know, there are many Mondragon auto-parts companies, some of them cooperatives.

Steve: Emilia Romagna [*a region in northern Italy*] has the same sort of a thing, where there's a lot of small worker co-ops that form supply chains for larger companies.

Matt: Yeah. So, that is possible. But, I guess what I'm saying is, if you're looking at big employers, where you're up against really big capital, I want people to be fighting against capital on

those big-scale fronts too. I don't think everything's going to be solved by forming small worker cooperatives.

You want militant unionism and/or militant cooperativism in those big companies. I think it can be done. I mean, that's the thing about Mondragon, they really do operate in major industries, doing some awfully big production.

Steve: So, the goal is not [union – cooperative] collaboration. Collaboration is the means. The goal is worker empowerment.

Matt: Yep. It's subordination of capital, sovereignty of labor. That's totally a good definition of the goal.

And to that end you wanna collaborate with everybody you can, right? That's the thing. If you can find creative ways to do that with an existing labor union or with an existing worker co-op, then by all means, that's what you would want to do.

