

BUILDING CO-OPERATIVE POWER

*Stories and Strategies from
Worker-Cooperatives in the
Connecticut River Valley*

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Levellers Press

AMHERST, MASSACHUSETTS

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Cover design: Design Action Collective

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Published by *Levellers Press*, Amherst, Massachusetts

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-937146-46-7

Dedicated to Julie Graham

INTRODUCTION

Building Co-operative Power!

THIS BOOK IS FOR EVERYONE who currently is, formerly was, or hopes to become a member in a worker co-operative. It's for members of all kinds of co-operatives everywhere including food co-operatives, credit unions, energy and water co-ops and agricultural producer co-operatives. It is for anyone who is curious about worker and other kinds of co-operatives, for those who want to know more about co-ops in the Connecticut River Valley and anyone interested in creating an economy that puts people and the planet before profit.

In 280 action-provoking pages, we introduce the history and concept of worker co-operation. We relay the past and present stories of Valley worker co-operatives (in their own words) including cautionary tales and sagas of personal transformation. We offer brief practical essays on topics like co-op governance and managing conflict, and outline a vision of building a fully co-operative regional economy in the Connecticut River Valley of Western Massachusetts and Southern Vermont. Actually, we do a lot of other things too—you'll find those hidden treasures as you read along. At the end you'll also find a history of co-operation in New England contributed by John Curl.

Why write a book about worker co-operatives now?

Three reasons: First of all, we face global economic and ecological crises that threaten the survival of all creatures and ecosystems worldwide. The co-operative business model has something to offer to communities and workers wanting stability and sustainability in their economic lives. While not immune to the ills that plague the larger economy, co-operatives have been remarkably resilient in the face of economic downturns, and their commitment to putting people and planet before profit makes them more likely to be “green” than regular capitalist businesses. After the 2008 economic crisis, while media and politicians didn’t seem to notice, co-operatives and credit unions were among “the *only* businesses to weather the storm” because they function on an entirely different model.¹

Second, there is now a vibrant global movement for economic autonomy, justice and self-determination. Waves of this movement have come together in the World Social Forum and its national and regional offshoots, the solidarity economy movement, the movement for re-localization and the recent Occupy movements that are all seeking and claiming spaces for new ways of meeting our economic needs. The worker co-operative movement is an active participant in the global push to build new economies. Mondragon Co-operative Corporation’s 2009 collaboration with the United Steel Workers Union sparked new interest among traditionally skeptical lefties.² Michael Moore’s 2009 *Capitalism: A Love Story* and Avi Lewis and Naomi Klein’s 2004 documentary *The Take* that shared the harrowing story of worker takeovers in the wake of Argentina’s economic crisis, inspired popular interest. We too are inspired by the Argentina Autonomista movement, and more recently, the United Nations declaration of 2012 as the International Year of Co-operatives.

Finally, there's our local and personal rationale—this book is part of an organizing project of the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (VAWC). We are raising awareness about the value and viability of creating a truly co-operative economy in Southern Vermont and Western Massachusetts. That's an economy in which co-operative businesses flourish in every sector, and individuals and co-operatives can meet all needs co-operatively. In such an economy, we believe the spirit of co-operation, democracy and economic security will permeate every economic interaction, transforming our work and our lives.

Who are we?

The authors of this book include the late Julie Graham, a former professor at the University of Massachusetts, two researchers and one worker co-op member. Under the sponsorship of the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (VAWC), we conducted some fifty interviews and attended five years of monthly meetings, conferences and social gatherings between 2005 and 2011. We didn't interview *all* co-operators in the Valley and surely some co-operators may not share the experiences of the authors or our interviewees. However, we hope to represent common themes from our interviews and common experiences of co-operation based on what we learned during research with the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives. That said, we are choosing to tell particular parts of the stories we've heard. As in any piece of writing or media, the views expressed here are strictly our own (the authors).

What is VAWC?

The Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (VAWC) is a co-operative of worker co-operatives based in the Connecticut River Valley and surrounding hill towns in Massachusetts and Southern Vermont. Locals often call the Massachusetts portion the "Pioneer Valley," a brand name adopted in the 1930s to

promote tourism, or (as we do in this book) just “The Valley” for short. VAWC members are all worker co-operatives but they vary greatly in the products and services they offer—from providing copy and design services, publishing, and farming to the production of body oils, massage therapy, education, diaper laundry and delivery, vegetable delivery and photovoltaic panel installation. The VAWC system of co-operative businesses (which is currently made up of twelve member co-ops) has increased revenue and employment over the last three years despite an economic downturn. At the time of this writing, VAWC co-operatives employed 70 worker-members and generated more than \$7 million in collective annual revenue.

VAWC’s mission is to “build a sustainable local economy by facilitating the growth, development and promotion of worker co-operatives.” This involves:

- **Providing support for member co-ops** including maintaining and sharing information, providing technical and organizational assistance, offering joint marketing and promotional services, developing group benefits, improving access to financial resources, strengthening ties among worker co-operatives, and developing relationships with other segments of the co-operative and labor community;
- **Developing** new worker co-operatives, helping to convert traditional businesses into worker co-ops; offering mentoring and skill-sharing to start-up co-operatives;
- **Promoting worker co-operatives** in the region through education and developing community awareness of worker co-operatives as sources of meaningful employment and economic empowerment, providers of quality goods and services, and viable alternatives to conventionally-owned and managed businesses.

That's a lot to do in the spare time of worker co-operators with full-time jobs and families! That's why in 2009, with the help of a matching grant from the Co-operative Fund of New England, VAWC developed a dues structure to pay for staff. You'll find the full story of VAWC in Chapter 7.

The VAWC project is moving from a social club to WOW! It's getting serious... We need to touch more people, more families, more businesses and have them understand that you deserve to have a say in your business!

Phillipe Rigollaud, February 24, 2009

What's in this book?

In this book, we share personal stories of co-operators and some of the experience, strategies, struggles and successes of worker co-operatives in our region. We touch on the stories of former co-operatives and co-operators who share cautionary tales about “founder's syndrome,” conflict, and the costs and benefits of governing by consensus versus majority rule. We also consider the bigger picture. We explore major obstacles to building coherent co-operative economies, along with practical solutions and exciting opportunities for building co-operative economies here in the Valley and beyond.

Part I focuses on the nitty gritty. In Chapter One we offer a bit of background, history, and a definition of co-operatives by sector to lay the groundwork and get us on the same page regarding basic terminology. Chapter Two explores the personal side of working co-operatively, with common themes from our interviews including the day-to-day experience of working without a boss. In Chapter Three, we address practical strategies for making cooperation in the workplace work—*despite* difficulties.

Building Co-operative Power is based on and inspired by some fifty interviews with current and former worker-members. So you'll find the words of those co-operators peppered throughout the book. You'll also encounter a cast of characters that includes existing and former Valley co-ops. Eleven co-operative businesses contributed co-authored profiles of their workplaces. In Part II, we present them, to the extent possible, in the collective voices of the co-operatives themselves. In chronological order of establishment, we meet Common Wealth Printing, Collective Copies, (PV)², Pedal People, Green Mountain Spinnery, GAIA Host Collective, Co-op 108, Valley Green Feast, Toolbox for Education and Social Action, Brattleborro Holistic Health Center and Simple Diaper & Linen.

In Part III, we step back to look at the bigger picture. We begin in Chapter Four with an exploration of what all co-operatives across sectors—worker, producer and consumer—and industries share in common and how that common identity makes co-operatives across sectors and industries radically different from “business as usual.” Chapter Five shows how the impact and viability of co-operatives as well as “the co-operative difference” has been wiped off the map of our economic imaginations. We argue that the invisibility of co-operatives has been a major obstacle to building co-operative economies and we outline the consequences of that invisibility in Chapter Six. Chapter Seven returns to the story of VAWC. We describe how VAWC is facing obstacles and taking advantage of opportunities for worker co-operation and worker co-operative development while reaching out to co-operatives across sectors to build an integrated co-operative economy in our region. Chapter Eight outlines a VAWC-inspired vision for a fully co-operative economy and introduces the Valley Co-operative Business Association (VCBA). It shares the stories of two founding VCBA members and concludes with an invitation to co-operatives across sectors in our region and beyond to initiate relationships with other co-ops.

They say that victors write history. Well, this book is evidence of daily victories spun by generations of co-operators in our region. In recounting their stories, we hope to inspire the current and next generation of co-operators and to share some of the knowledge and lessons that co-operators have shared with us about struggles and celebrations along the way. We are inspired by VAWC and with them envision an economy where a person can live the whole of their economic day co-operatively.

Notes

¹ See Restakis, J. 2010. *Humanizing the Economy: Co-operatives in the age of capital*. Society Publishers Gabriola Island, p. 9.

² Mondragon, the U.S. Steelworkers Union and the Ohio Employee Ownership Center announced a Union Co-op model in 2012. See http://www.uswork.org/our_union/co-ops (accessed 8/23/12).