CWCF Conference

November 8-10, 2012

In contrast to last year’s conference in Quebec, this year’s CWCF Conference was intimate and humble. As in previous years (I’m told, since this is only my second year going), the conference was held at a retreat centre - Canterbury Hills, in Ancaster, ON. With attendance numbers topping out at about 45, most attendees had a chance to interact over the weekend enough to wind up on a first-name basis.

Thursday morning started off at the relaxed hour of 10 a.m., giving out-of-towners enough time to arrive. Two of my co-workers and I took the GO train in from Toronto, and two others were already at the conference centre. Nancy Kendrew, a founding member of our co-op, excitedly told us about the Shift Change documentary [http://shiftchange.org/] that we had missed the night before. If you haven’t watched it or the trailer, you should definitely check it out ASAP.

Conference attendees were welcomed by friendly, informed and succinct speeches from Alain Bridault and Hazel Corcoran (CWCF), David Daughton (CoopZone), Mark Ventry (OnCoop), Lynne Markell (Canadian Co-operative Association). Then Atlantic Director Eric Tusz-King led some interesting and fun icebreaker activities. Participants were asked to arrange themselves by age, co-op age, and heritage, and in those groups we had co-op related questions to answer then present to the group.

After a short break we split up for regional caucus meetings. The Ontario meeting was further split up into members of CWCF and non-members. I participated in the CWCF members caucus meeting since Urbane Cyclist is a member (and Reba Plummer, one of our members, is on the board). Some attendees had issues with co-op developers taking part in the meeting, but co-op developers are members of CWCF too so they stayed. We discussed some interesting ideas to promote co-ops in Ontario such as business succession, getting youth involved, and lobbying the government for better tax incentives and programs such as allowing RRSP investments with member shares.

A presentation on Business Sustainability through Financial Viability was a real hit as it addressed core issues that concern all co-ops: money! Kelly Storie of La Siembra candidly shared stories of failed products and how to deal with those losses, while looking on the bright side of learning the benefits of market research. Russ Christianson, co-op developer, gave great advice to “do what you know really, really well,” urging us not to stray from our strengths while searching to grow our businesses. As much as possible, co-ops should be financially independent so as not to be vulnerable to debt. Co-ops should be taking advantage of options like stretching out payable deadlines and recognizing sweat equity to help manage payroll. Doing business with other co-ops is an important aspect of this too, Jamie Campbell of ParIT explained a new entity in Winnipeg made up of worker co-ops and other entities which collectively bought their building, the A-Zone. He underlined the importance of participating in your community and investing in resources such as buildings to create community space and shelter for co-op businesses.

La Siembra has consistent challenges in engaging their investors. The rest of Canada is jealous of Quebec’s Caise Solidaire that understands co-ops and makes it easier to access loans. The group collaboratively came up with the term “marketing the co-op difference” (rather than “advantage” which has been used in the past). This is in recognition that if we are going to use our co-op designation to separate us from our competitors, we must work hard for it to be an advantage for the consumer by operating smoothly and providing a better service or product in addition to being a local co-operative business.

The keynote speech was presented by two worker-owners from Come As You Are co-op- the world’s only co-operative sex store. Annanda DeSilva and Jack Lamon almost didn’t make it in their car that broke down on the way from Toronto to the conference, but eventually they arrived and presented a light-hearted but serious talk. Sprinkling their stories with sex jokes, Jack and Annanda took us on the adventure of struggling to make ends meet, realizing they need more members in the co-op, realizing that potential members might not take the responsibility as seriously as needed, and eventually finding something that works and satisfies their core values. We were all impressed with CAYA’s clarity of their core values and being able to stay on message. Annanda was a listener at the conference last year and asked for more diversity in presenters. She pointed out that with CAYA being the keynote this year that has been addressed in an unexpected but very satisfactory way. Just like one sex toy won’t work for everyone, one co-op structure doesn’t work for all co-ops, and diversity needs to be embraced in order to empower the movement.

Friday morning came on strong with a three hour presentation on Membership Development and Integrating New Members. I presented at this plenary along with Cory Bellhouse (Natural Cycle) and John Richmond (West End Food Co-op). Cory, who holds a degree in conflict resolution, presented some strategies that work for keeping members engaged such as having regular check-ins at meetings on how projects are going, sharing financial and administrative responsibilities, yearly evaluations and committee work. I presented Urbane Cyclist’s new Member Criteria Statement that we recently published in order to create clearer expectations of new members applying (to help vet applications when we receive them), as well as ongoing expectations of members that we’ll be evaluated on each year. John burst the bubble of co-ops being all about “peace, love and happiness” by acknowledging that ongoing conflict is a staple of the co-op model. Structures for responsibility and accountability are important but so hard to maintain because there are always some members who avoid conflict.

To mix it up a bit, Reba Plummer lead an hour-long hike in the Carolinian Forest on the grounds of Canterbury Hills Centre. The splendid fall colours made a great backdrop for the sharp rock gullies, tall trees and even the occasional waterfall. Most participants took advantage of the outdoor adventure time, using the walk to get thoughts circulating and chatting with each other.

At the second part of the AGM in the afternoon, financial statements and budgets were presented by Peter Hough.

Friday afternoon’s workshops covered Worker Co-ops 101, Growing Sales, and a co-op developer brainstorm on Integrating Co-op Principles into Governance and Operations. At the growing sales workshop by Jennifer Williams (La Siembra), participants worked together to brainstorm solutions for all of the businesses present. Common things we kept in mind were to choose your strengths and advertise them (quality, environmental impact or price to name a few) and try to avoid the “me too” syndrome. “Me too” is when you advertise your business as doing the same thing as another one. Instead, choose what sets you apart and focus on that.

At the solidarity supper later in the evening, Alain Roy was presented with the Worker Co-op Merit award. Alain Bridault made a long impassioned speech, translated to English from French by Hazel Corcoran, taking us all the way back to the Co-op masters program at Sherbrooke that they were both enrolled in during the ‘80’s. Hazel and Alain Bridault also said a few words, and there was a great round of applause. The celebrations continued into the night with live music by Allan Merovitz and Jennifer Lockman.

During the last day of the conference, Saturday November 10th, participants had options to watch Shift Change if they had missed it or participate in free consultation time with a developer. Peter Hough and Marty Frost were on hand to share their expertise and patient explanations of all things worker co-op. My group spoke to Peter about figuring out member shares and how to pay out dividends.

Afterward we finished the third and final portion of the AGM. First retiring board members were recognized. Lee Fuge and Claude Jourdain were both leaving the board. Hazel made a speech about how Lee usually avoids the spotlight (but when she talks listen up, she’s got great ideas!) and Lee characteristically declined to come to the front of the room for applause. Claude was absent but honoured. All of the directors who were nominated were acclaimed because they were running unopposed. The directors who were acclaimed are: Boris Schaffer (Canadian Ethical Restoration and Construction Cooperative) in the BC Region, Reba Plummer (Urbane Cyclist) in Ontario, and Jessica Provencher (La Barberie) in Quebec.

There were three resolutions on the table and they all passed. Dues for CWCF Regional Federation members were increased to $300, the CWCF pledged support for the National Co-op Development Fund, and research into indivisible reserve legislation will begin this year.

The last round of workshops included Setting Financial Benchmarks, Co-op Worker Guidelines (brainstorming the universal co-op handbook), Building International Solidarity and CoopZone Strategy re: Business Successions to Co-op. It was hard to choose with all the great options. I attended the Worker Guidelines workshop and we discussed some standards that can be used in all worker co-ops in order to create some groundwork to share with others.

Three Listeners (Paolo, Boris and Nancy) presented their observations of the conference to the rest of the attendees as part of the wrap-up plenary. All in all it was positive feedback with most comments about the intimacy of the small group. Alain Bridault referenced a plan to have 2000 worker co-ops in the country by 2022. Events like the CWCF conference can help by finding ways to support existing co-ops,. Everyone said their goodbyes and left the beautiful grounds of the conservation area. Next year the conference will be in Edmonton, Alberta.