

# WORKER CO-OPS

volume 3 / number 1

NEWSLETTER

## Short cut could help bring Mondragon to North America

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### Robert Oakeshott

Some years ago, when he was still its economics editor and before his subsequent spells as Britain's ambassador in Washington and chief executive of the private capitalist channel of his country's breakfast TV, Peter Jay wrote two articles in the (London) Times. Both had excellent titles. The first, "St George and Mondragon", and the second, "Till we have built Mondragon". Their essential purpose was to summarise and comment upon a report, which had just appeared in draft and was later published by the Anglo-German Foundation for the Study of Industrial Society, on the astonishing Mondragon co-ops. However, despite the title of the second article, Mr Jay never really addressed the crucial question: if an initiative were to be planned with the eventual objective of replicating elsewhere what has been achieved at Mondragon, what would be the best starting point?

Very likely there is no single answer which would be correct in all possible environments of time and place. But the starting point of the Mondragon co-ops themselves can be clearly identified in the technical apprentice school launched in the early 1940s by the man who later inspired and guided the whole Mondragon development: Fr Jose Maria Arizmendiarieta. There is no evidence that, when he took that first step of launching the new technical training institution, Fr Arizmendiarieta remotely foresaw the creation, a dozen years later, of the first actual Mondragon co-op: ULGOR. Still less would it be plausible to argue that, at the time of his

first move, he was already looking ahead to the organization, started some five years after ULGOR, which is widely seen as the key to all subsequent growth: the Caja Laboral Popular (CLP) — the bank and management services agency which has come to occupy a position at the centre of the whole co-operative grouping. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that these successive steps — the technical school, the first production co-op, the bank — did not evolve according to a pre-conceived plan. It was much more a case, as most worthwhile developments so often are, of one good thing leading on to another.

On the other hand, it is clear that among the crucial pre-conditions which made all subsequent developments possible (though in no way pre-determined) was the local supply of highly skilled and well-motivated

— Continued on page 2

### Tory MP attacks NDP support for federally assisted co-ops

#### J.J. Forrestal

Tory MP Benno Friesen has likened worker co-ops to inefficient, state-run manufacturing and distribution systems in the Soviet Union, its satellites and in the Peoples' Republic of China.

Friesen, who represents the riding of Surrey-White Rock-North Delta, was objecting to the unqualified support for worker co-ops expressed by NDP MP Margaret Mitchell, Vancouver East, in the House of Commons. Mitchell criticized Federal Bill C-143 which authorizes the borrow-

ing of an additional \$19 billion. She encouraged the Liberal government to allocate a portion of the Bill's job creation funds to the development of worker co-ops for long-term employment creation and for economic development.

— Continued on page 3

### Worker Ownership Bid at Consolidated Bathurst

#### Bob Schutte

In April of this year, Consolidated Bathurst Ltd. decided to close its cardboard container plant in Hamilton. The reasons given were that the plant was obsolete, inefficient, and non-competitive. The 200 workers of the International Woodworkers Union, Local 269, didn't buy the reasons. They offered to buy the plant instead.

According to Mr. J.M. Badard of the I.W.A.'s Toronto office, the union contacted Joe Mason, Montreal entrepreneur who has made a career of assisting worker buyouts of plants about to be shut down. The Mason group, which always retains a controlling 51% interest in its ventures, put together a purchase proposal to set up a new company, 'Hamilton Bay Containers', with the union members as minority partners. The purchase pro-

— Continued on page 3

### Worker Co-op Newsletter Grows Again

To celebrate two years of publication, we have given 'Worker Co-ops' a new look. We hope you like it.

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## Mondragon

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manpower. One of ULGOR's founders told me, in the early 1970s, that technical training and the progressive social teaching of the Catholic church were the two foundations on which, at the beginning, the co-ops had been constructed. We need to remember too that the more technically gifted and energetic of the apprentices at the original technical school were enabled by Fr Arizmendiarieta to go on from artisan-level training to acquire high level engineering and management skills. In other words, by the time the first actual co-op started production, the skilled manpower needed to make it succeed was locally to hand.

Does this analysis provide a clue to a likely good starting point for a Mondragon initiative? If it does, then the promoters of such initiatives may have to accept that the time scale involved before an actual group of co-ops can come into existence will be that much longer. But one of the last of Fr Arizmendiarieta's creations may suggest something of a short cut. It may not be necessary to start at the very beginning with a new artisan-training institution on its own.

In the late 1960s and against considerable opposition, Fr Arizmendiarieta launched what was, in effect, a part-time co-op for students at Mondragon's technical college the Escuela Profesional Politecnica (ESP). The new venture was called ALECO-OP (Actividad Laboral Escalor Co-operativa). Students at the ESP, once they complete their initial craft level training, can choose a programme which involves roughly five hours daily with ALECO-OP and five hours of higher level technical training. Moreover what they can earn in working for ALECO-OP is sufficient to cover tuition fees and board and lodging at the ESP with a modest additional element for free-spending. Though the students do not manage it themselves, and though they elect only one third of its board of directors, ALECO-OP is identical in all other respects with the industrial co-ops in the Mondragon group. In other words, as well as an experience of real work for the market it gives a genuine taste of working in an actual co-op.

This is not the place for a detailed account of ALECO-OP's workings. But three points may be made. The

first is implicit in any arrangement of this kind. There is, and can be, no necessary connection between the higher levels of skill training with which ALECO-OP's student members are provided by the ESP and the productive work in which they engage under its auspices. For the latter, but not the former, is determined by the immediate needs of the market.

Second, it is worth emphasizing that neither in ALECO-OP nor in the ESP is much time devoted to education in co-operative principles. In this way, as in so many others, Mondragon differs from traditional co-operative groupings. Fr Arizmendiarieta himself had little time for abstract co-operative principles and he would never have supported the kind of Co-operative College which exists to teach them. He believed, by contrast, that the only way to learn about co-operation was to work in co-operatives. And in any discussion about the relative balance in a training programme between technical subjects and what one might call 'co-operative software', he would argue for much greater emphasis on the first.

The final point can best be put as a question. Given a reasonably developed and at least medium-sized community in the Atlantic world, and one in which some technical training institution already exists, is it realistic to suggest that would-be Mondragon builders might consider an ALECO-OP initiative? Of course, those responsible for the technical college would have to agree if any programme which involved part-time training and part-time productive work was to be launched. Of course, too, a market would have to be found which would pay members of the students' co-operative for the work they would undertake. But these look like problems which, given the requisite will, could be overcome. And an initiative of this kind might well quite quickly create a local supply of high skilled and well-motivated manpower.

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### Co-ordinating Committee

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Mitchell urged the government to set up regional resource groups to develop worker co-ops on the model of the Co-operative Housing Foundation, with start-up funds to assist them.

Friesen countered: "There is an absolute paucity, a barrenness of consumer products in these countries, and the consumer products of the West are used as currency in the East Bloc countries where those workers' co-operatives work so well."

The following is an abridged excerpt of Mitchell's remarks in the House of Commons Debates for March 29, 1983:

*In European countries, workers' co-ops are flourishing. Some of them are community kinds of co-operatives and self-help services. Others are building co-operatives to help extend housing. Many workers' co-ops are very sophisticated high-tech industries which include a good deal of research and development into new technologies.*

*This past fall, Mr. Speaker, I joined with over 20 co-operators from across Canada to study workers' co-operatives in Britain, France, and Spain.*

*In England, Co-operative Development Agencies in local municipalities receive Government grants to assist workers to form co-operatives, as well as to conduct feasibility studies and to learn successful business techniques. The Wales Trade Union Council is assisting in promoting workers' co-ops, and these in turn become a trade union affiliate.*

*In France we found very modern, sophisticated, co-ops that were working successfully in the high technology field. But of major interest to co-operators was the co-operative developments in the Mondragon region of northern Spain, the Basque area of Spain. In that area there are 80 industrial workers' co-ops. They produce a very wide range of industrial products such as furniture, bicycles, auto parts, tools and computers, some of which are exported to Canada. These co-ops are supported by a major co-operative bank.*

*There is a very significant research and development component which helps to develop high technology products for export. These co-operatives form a network that provides jobs for almost 22,000 workers in the Mondragon community. They are worker*

*owners.*

*There have been no business failures in workers' co-operatives since 1956 ... There have been no failures in over 100 industrial firms during that period.*

*Research studies of workers' co-ops have concluded that industrial democracy results in higher productivity than in either private or public-owned enterprises. We found that an investment of labour effort far beyond usual working hours was common in most of these co-op developments.*

*There should be Government support for co-operative enterprises, just as there is for small business. Eventually networks of workers' co-ops would be developed. There would be national and regional support organizations such as have developed in the co-op housing field.*

*Through this Bill the Government is asking for blanket approval to borrow \$19 billion. This is a typical Liberal tactic. We would like to know on what this money will be spent. Canadians would also like to know. We would like to see some of it spent on productive investment in workers' co-operatives in order to assist improvement in our economy and put workers back to work.*

## Worker Ownership Bid

Continued from page 1

posal was swiftly and unconditionally rejected by the company, Consolidated Bathurst, in a manner characterized as "arrogant" by Mr. Badard.

In an effort to salvage the purchase plan, the union arranged for a meeting of union and company representatives, together with Ontario Labour Minister Russell Ramsay. According to Mr. Badard, the company first agreed to meet, and then "renege". Minister Ramsay stated that he was "disappointed" by Consolidated Bathurst's unwillingness to discuss the possible purchase of the plant by the workers.

Meanwhile, the company pressed ahead with the shutdown, stripping the plant of its inventory and machinery. Obsolete, non-competitive plants are usually for sale. Competitive ones are a different matter. The company had evidently decided that it could produce all it could sell with 17 rather than 18 plants, and the last thing it wanted was another competitor in the marketplace.

Having accomplished its economic purpose, the company has belatedly agreed to meet with union and

government representatives to negotiate the terms of the closing. Worker ownership is not on the agenda.

## INTERNATIONAL

John Jordan

### Phoenix Co-operatives: A New Film

The Scottish Co-operatives Development Committee Ltd. has just released a half-hour video tape featuring four industrial rescues. It presents the co-operators discussing in their own words the problems and opportunities of this approach. The SCDC has successfully midwived a number of worker co-ops including some in heavy and precision engineering and manufacturing. Phoenix Co-operatives is available in VHS or Beta formats at a cost of £25.00 (about Can\$50.00) from SCDC, Templeton Business Centre, Templeton Street, Bridgeton, Glasgow, Scotland, G40 1DA.

### Weirton

A small town in West Virginia is poised to establish what will be, by a considerable margin, America's largest employee owned firm — National Steel's Weirton division. The proposed deal involves 7,000 workers and a price tag of over \$300 million. The complex plan has been drawn up by blue chip, New York lawyers and consultants in the usual secretive manner. Labour activist and lawyer Staughton Lynd comments "what I love about this is here are 7,000 workers in West Virginia whose destiny is at stake, and the three copies of this information (the proposal) are in New York City." Because of its scale and backing, the deal has drawn press coverage in *The New York Times*, *Business Week*, and *Time* — which may have put it best — by titling its story "An ESOP Fable". Only two of the board of ten will represent workers; two will represent management; and the balance will be financial backers — nominated by Lazard Frères.

### A New English Model.

Baxi Heating is a 117 year old British firm still owned by the family of the founder. Its 900 staff make household heating appliances, and its annual sales exceed \$Can60 million. For

## International News

some time, the owner has been searching for an ownership model which would preserve jobs and the character of the firm. The proposal represents a rather new type of structure, one which tries to build in a measure of both collective and individual ownership. Thus, it avoids the limitations of either the purely collective or the purely individual approach. Under the Baxi proposal, 51 percent of the shares will be held by a collective trust, while the remaining 49 percent will be owned by "partners", that is, by individual members of the work force. An elected partnership council will represent worker interests, while the role of the trustees will be to act as guardians of the long-term perspective. Baxi has had a profit sharing scheme since 1965 for all those who have worked there for more than one year. This program will be continued, but employee involvement will be extended by all staff becoming partners as well. The firm sees this as the appropriate move both to strengthen workers' interest in the success of the firm and to retain more profits for reinvestment. As a new model which tackles a real problem, Baxi will bear watching.

## BOOKS & ARTICLES

### WORKPLACE DEMOCRATIZATION Its Internal Dynamics

by Paul Bernstein

#### Book Review

**Workplace Democratization: Its Internal Dynamics**, by Paul Bernstein, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, N.J. 08903; 1980; \$6.70 paper. 133 pp.

The impulse to democratize the workplace has led to wide variety of

experiences. Paul Bernstein, an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Boston College, analyzes a wide variety of those experiences and "begins construction of a model" that will tell us what works, what doesn't work, and what real democratization involves.

The first part of the book uses case histories to present methods to make workplaces more democratic. In the northwest U.S., a number of worker-owned plywood firms have been pretty successful in devising and maintaining democratic structures; at ACIPCO, a cast iron firm in Alabama, paternalism seems to have caused them to fail. And in the huge John Lewis Partnership in Britain, with its 17,000 retail workers ("partners"), solid progress has been made, but still there are gaps.

Part II, the meat of the book, isolates six "components that enable organizations to move towards greater democratization": Participation in decision-making; economic feedback in the form of money; full sharing of information; and individual rights (the basic liberties); an independent board to settle disputes; and an appropriate consciousness.

Each component gets a chapter where it is analyzed and clarified. In the best of these chapters, on participation in decisions, Bernstein examines several "dimensions": degree of control over decisions, range of issues subject to control, organizational level. By comparing these factors, he shows clearly that being high up in an organization doesn't mean a worker has much real influence, and that having a big say in one aspect of work life does not mean that a worker has much overall power.

If there is a weakness in this clearly written, instructive, and mercifully short book, it is in the chapter on "consciousness", which says nothing new and says it in rather forced sociological terms. On the whole, though, the book is a pretty good guide to some of the techniques — and pitfalls — of building democracy at work.

*Lee Zaslofsky lives in Toronto. His Master's thesis at the University of Toronto was on Workers' Control in Russia in 1917-1918.*

#### Recent Publications Paul Jones

Listed below are publications, some recent and some not so recent, that might be of interest to our readers.

Hopefully, we will be able to review the more important works in forthcoming issues of the newsletter. If you are interested in reviewing any of these items, please contact me at the address listed below. Wherever possible, we provide reviewers with complimentary copies from the publishers, but sometimes we have to loan our personal copies. If you have any items you think we should mention, please send me a description of the publication:

**Paul Jones**  
167 Carlton Street  
Toronto, Ontario  
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Tel. (416)961-0114

**La Cooperation Ouvriere de Production**, by Antoine Antoni, Confederation generale des Societes cooperatives ouvrieres de production, 37, rue Jean-Leclaire, 75017 Paris, 1980, 182 pp.

This is a revised edition of a basic text by the leader of the French worker co-operative movement. Older editions have been published in English. It is more technically oriented than the booklet, *La Vie dans une SCOP*, but it is still written simply for a non-academic audience. It has a very useful discussion of the relevant legislation and the recent modifications in 1978, as well as the operations of a SCOP as a co-operative and as a business.

**Co-ops: A Directory of Industrial and Service Co-operatives**, published by the Co-operative Development Agency, 20 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7TJ, November 1982, 102 pp., £6.90.

We have often heard of the spectacular recent growth of worker co-operatives in the U.K., but this directory, listing over 500 of the existing co-ops gives some idea of the breadth and depth of the movement. As well as name and address, the directory lists the activity, registration date, form of organization, number of workers, and number of members. Most appear to be 3-4 years old, use the ICOM rules, and have under 20 members. It is an interesting snapshot of the movement at one point in time.

**Setting up an Industrial Co-operative: An Interim Guide**, published by the Co-operative Development Agency, 20 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7TJ, 1980, 54 pp., £1.30.

The booklet is a practical guide to the methods of setting up an indus-

trial or service co-operative in the United Kingdom. It is closer to being a cookbook of forms and procedures than a discussion of alternative methods of setting up a co-op. For those who are interested, the booklet reprints several useful documents, such as Memorandum F. 617 of Registrar of Friendly Societies, ICOM model rules 1980, and the CDA model rules 1980 and 1982.

**Organizing Production Cooperatives: A Strategy for Community Economic Development**, by William Alvarado-Greenwood, Steven Habersfeld, and Lloyd Lee, National Economic Development and Law Center, 2150 Shattuck Avenue #300, Berkeley, California 94704, 1978, 220 pp., \$10.63 U.S. (Also available from NASCO).

This is a manual describing the basic structural and procedural features of production co-operatives, based partially on the work of some of the authors with new agricultural production co-operatives in California. As well as the definition and financing of co-operatives, there is considerable discussion of the problems of organizing a business — quality control and marketing, feasibility studies, sharing managerial responsibility, cost control, pricing, etc.

**Workplace Democracy and Social Change**, edited by Frank Lindenfeld and Joyce Rothshild-Whitt, Porter Sargent Publishers, 11 Beacon St., Boston, 1982, 447 pp., \$21.70.

This collection of 21 articles by various authors such as Paul Bernstein, Tove Hammer, Katrina Berman, Ana Johnson and William Whyte, Daniel Zwerdling and David Ellerman, is divided into five parts: Characteristics of Organizational Democracy; Organizational Democracy and the Individual; Large-Scale Workers' Cooperatives; Case Studies of Self-Managed Collectives; Case Studies of Workplace Democracy and Social Change. Most of the articles have been published elsewhere, but not usually in readily accessible journals, so the book represents a handy collection of some of the classics.

**A Study of Industrial Workers' Cooperatives**, by Robert O'Connor and Philip Kelly, Broadsheet No. 19 Economic and Social Research Institute, 4 Burlington Road, Dublin 4, Eire, 1980, 222 pp., IR £5.00. (IR £2.50 for students).

The unique contribution of this work is the discussion of some 15

worker co-operatives and related operations in Ireland. As well, the survey of developments in Great Britain, Spain, Israel, Yugoslavia, France, Italy, and Denmark, though brief, is quite informative. The concluding chapter is a discussion of some of the issues arising from the survey.

**Management consulting: A guide to the profession**, edited by M. Kubr, International Labour Office, Geneva (available from Renouf Publishing, Toronto) 1976, 369 pp., \$30.00. Produced by the ILO Management Development Branch, this book is intended as a guide to those wishing to commence or improve their consulting activities. It has become the basic text in a field in which little has been written. It covers a wide variety of topics, including five chapters on preparing and controlling assignments, three chapters on internal organization of consulting services, and a series of chapters on consulting in various areas of management such as finance, marketing etc.

**Cooperative Laws in the U.S.A.: Federal Legislation 1890-1980**, by Laszlo Valko, Bulletin 0902, 1981, Washington State University, College of Agriculture, Research Center

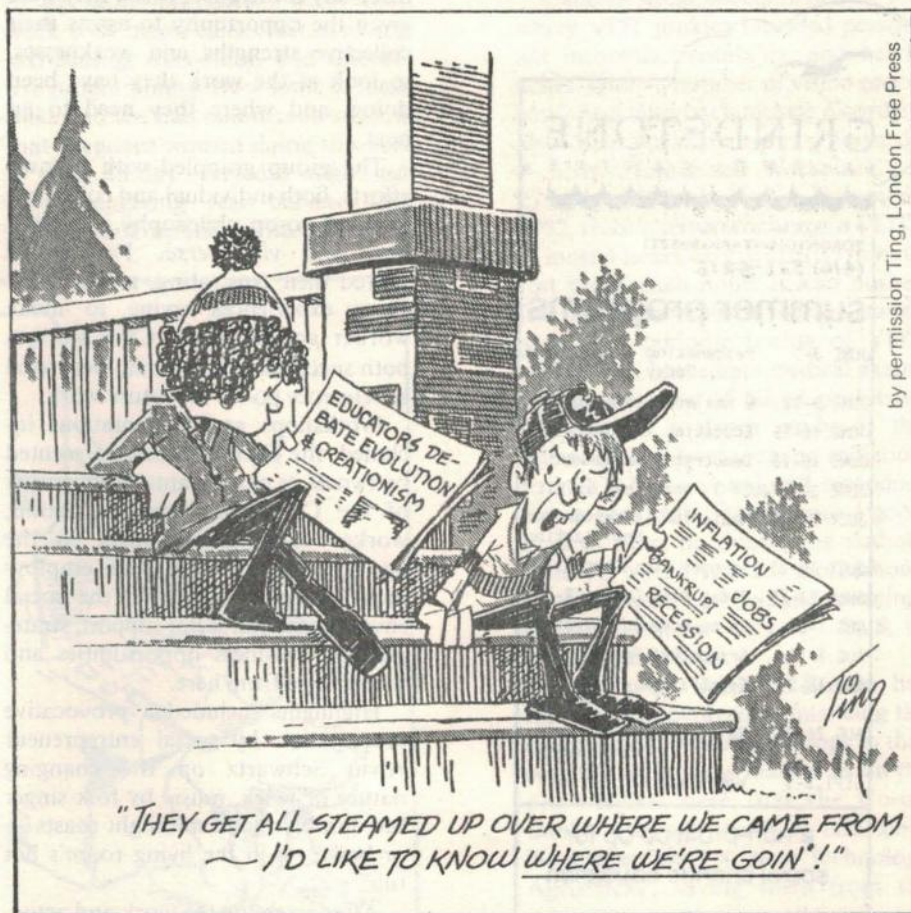
(available from the American Institute of Cooperation, 1800 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036 for \$1.00 U.S.), 81 pp.

This is not an analytical work, but a simple and useful overview of the relevant U.S. legislation. It is illustrated with reproductions of key pieces of legislation, such as Michigan's first state co-operative law, the first one in North America, and photographs of Presidents signing legislation.

**Ten Lectures on Co-operative Law**, by Hans-H. Münkner, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Godesberger Allee 149, 5300 Bonn 2, West Germany, 1982, 148 pp.

Designed as a textbook on co-operative law for non-lawyers, the ten lectures are practical descriptions and simple analyses of various components of co-operative law and principles. The book's objective is to explain the law as practical applications of co-operative principles. The ten "lectures" are: the development of co-op law, incorporation, by-laws, member status, organizational structure, directors and officers, financing, audits, amalgamation and dissolutions.

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Continued from page 5

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**The Priority of Labor**, by Gregory Baum. New York: Paulist Press, 1982. About \$8.00 in Canada.

Gregory Baum is a Catholic theologian at the University of Toronto. In the late 1960s, this highly regarded and prolific writer turned his attention

to social thought and analysis. He has used this perspective to enrich his critical interpretation of theology in the current crisis. This short book is an introduction and commentary on the 1981 letter of Pope John Paul II which criticized the inadequacies of capitalism and argued for an economy based on Christian socialism and co-operation. This book, together with Baum's earlier **Catholics and Canadian Socialism** (Paulist 1980), helps fill a gap in understanding Mondragon or Poland.

## EVENTS

### The Network Expands— Worker Co-ops Conference

**Joanne Lindsay  
and J.J. Forrestal**

Familiar faces mixed with the new at the worker co-op conference at Econiche in Quebec, near Ottawa, organized by Grindstone Island Co-op.

Some 30 participants attended the three-day conference, where they were given the opportunity to assess their collective strengths and weaknesses, to look at the work they have been doing, and where they need to go next.

The group grappled with its own efforts, both individual and collective, to inject co-op philosophy into business and *vice versa*. Participants shared their frustrating, and encouraging experiences trying to make worker co-ops work. Case studies, both successes and failures, were used as reference points for future work.

Workshops and presentations included: the European tour, presented by two of its participants; an overview of the Canadian scene; legislation; worker co-op development in the north; worker co-ops as an employment alternative; politics; the social environment and sector support; strategies and business opportunities and where to go from here.

Highlights included a provocative presentation by social entrepreneur Alvin Schwartz on the changing nature of work, music by folk singer Ian Tamblin, and midnight roasts — or boils? — in the living room's hot tub.

After assessing the work and activi-

ties they are now involved in — the worker co-op resource group, this newsletter, outreach and development, legal research, the venture capital co-op, community development, and much more — participants expressed reluctance to become involved in any new worker co-op efforts.

Instead, they determined to carry out the activities they are now working on. The conference gave them the energy and revitalization to continue their work with renewed spirit and commitment.

### Tour Worker Co-ops

**Worker Co-ops** has gathered feedback about last September's worker co-op tour of England, France, and Spain from its participants. They expressed their views on the organizational aspects of the tour — both good and bad.

All participants we spoke with commended CHF and its director, Glenn Haddrell, for initiating such a fruitful experience and for the commendable organizational work Haddrell carried out. They also mentioned pointers for next time.

Several thought the itinerary was very crowded.

**There wasn't enough time to digest everything.**

*Mary Kehoe, assistant publicity director, Canadian Labour Congress*

**There could have been more selectivity about the types of co-ops. Some were storefront operations; others were large industries. There was no theme, no homogeneity, no consistency to hold them together, just anything that said it was a co-op.**

*Trevor Rock, research officer, Department of Energy and Mines, Saskatchewan*

**It was a great tour. The accommodations were fine. They were modest, and each was different. A few little mix-ups are to be expected with 35 to 40 people.**

*Joan Swain, office manager  
Communitas, Edmonton*

Many mentioned the language barrier in the European countries and the confusion generated by the provision in France of a tour guide unfamiliar with co-ops. The error was an administrative one and beyond the group's control. It was suggested by several participants that any future tours provide their own translators.



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**summer programs**

JUNE 3-5	Peacemaking - Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow
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JULY 8-10	Media for Education and Mobilization
JULY 10-23	Younger Kids Camp (7-13)
JULY 23-29	Older Kids Camp (12-15)
AUG. 1-5	Co-op Movement Strategy
AUG. 7-12	Grindstone Peace School
AUG. 19-21	Celebration - A Women's Retreat
AUG. 26-29	Raising Children for a Better World
SEPT. 2-5	Women and Militarism

**a non-profit co-op for  
social change education**

The Spanish guides did well. But was there something lost in the translation? They were polite but restrained. They have so many groups coming through — 15 to 20 a year! And you got the PR people, not the shop floor people.

*Sam Keane, director of co-operatives and credit unions, Department of rural, agricultural and northern development, Newfoundland*

I was impressed by the commitment to the co-op ideology of the leadership, which we're losing in this country. The discipline of the philosophy is almost required to join. It established the realm of the possible as far as worker co-ops are concerned.

*Stan Hovdebo, NDP MP, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan*

Some of the most insightful comments were expressed by *Penny Bethke, a housing project co-ordinator with the Metro Toronto Labour Council Development Foundation*. She has been on an educational tour of China.

People were there for a lot of different reasons. You have to recognize that when you're talking three weeks and several thousand dollars, you have to look at it as a study tour.

With a group that large you need two translators to communicate effectively. There was one person from the Mondragon bank who spoke English. He was our whole channel of communication.

Bethke says she would have liked the information sharing to be more

“egalitarian” and that there was “competition” for the time and attention of key people.

It was by asserting themselves that people got their questions asked and answered. It helps to have just a few people ask questions and have some plan to them, a standard set or format and then compare replies.

It's a way of getting people to give a little thought to the situation rather than free wheeling it and not get at what you want to get at.

The range of people who went made it attractive. Future promotion should encourage this kind of diversity. Find different ways to get at different kinds of people.

Glenn did well. That he did all the organizing is mind boggling.

## OPINION

### Micro-Technology and quality of work life

**Robby Codswallop**

Recently deprived of honest work, and so reduced to mere scribbling for his beer, y'r correspondent has it on good authority that electronically mediated pencil-pushing of all kinds is in the offing. Without ever setting

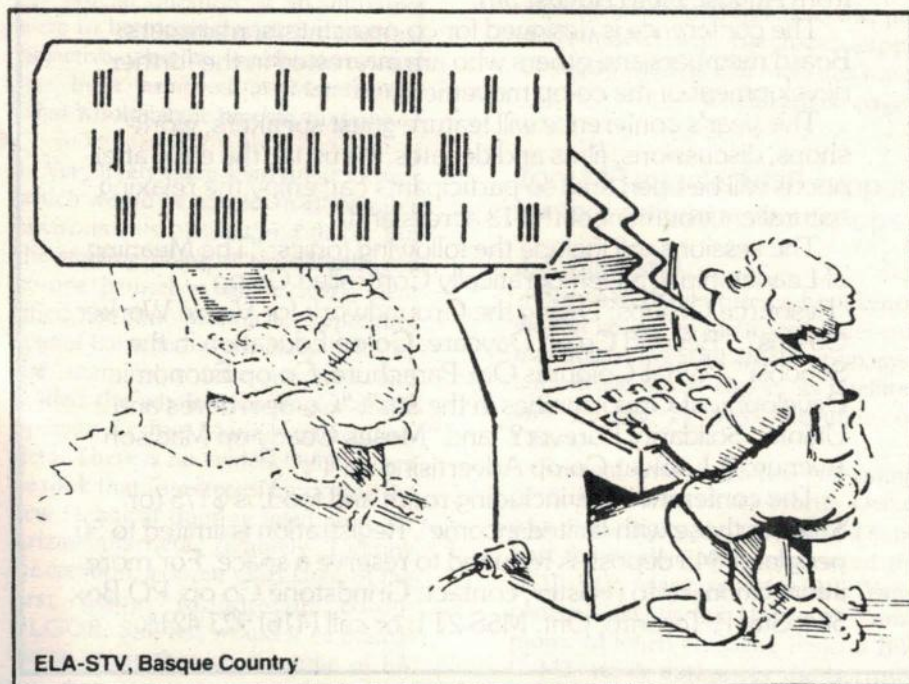
quill to parchment, it can now be recorded, edited, and reported that Mrs. Murphy's cat had seven kittens down home. Soon it will be possible to completely automate the conception and reading of all such twaddle as well.

Meanwhile, however, workers doing other people's pencil-pushing are said to be more productive when they work with boxes called VDTs, doing text-editing, data-entry, and interactive programming. Now some of these folks had the bad manners to suggest that pregnant women doing this sort of work all day every day might just be endangering real babies. This doesn't rank up there with the fate of

baby seals of course, but unusual numbers of miscarriages in some shops have raised questions about the possible costs of this 'productivity'. So some of the boys down at the Canadian Labour Congress went out fishing last year, and studied 2,336 VDT workers in 15 workplaces across Canada.

General stress effects netted in for heavy VDT junkies included persistent insomnia, irritability, and headaches. Quite a number of vision problems, neck and back muscle disorders also came up in the trawl. "Towards A More Humanized Workplace", a 275 page catch, landed in December 1982, recommends workers use VDTs at most 4 hours/day, with a 15 minute rest break each hour. It also pushes for better government design standards, and periodic testing of VDT equipment, immediate medical examination in cases of visual problems, and further in-depth study of the effects of low-level ionizing radiation from VDTs on visual and reproductive organs. After getting into a good load of beer, no doubt, the authors wind up with a vote for motherhood in recommending "real and meaningful INPUT from workers". Back to y'r keyboards boys.

The Co-op Bank in Britain has recently got involved in financing the development of worker co-ops in that country. Word now reaches us on the old wireless here that the Co-op Bank's own workers have had, since November 1982, a 'New Technology Agreement', saving them from the arbitrary introduction of 'productiv-



ELA-STV, Basque Country

ity' technology. Negotiated by the Banking, Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU), the agreement applies to computer based organization, methods, systems and equipment, including visual display units, micro-processors, word processors, micro computers, electronic mail, remote terminals and associated electronic systems using integrated circuits. These lazy, gold-bricking, feather-bedding logic workers must think some new 'productivity' technology can turn a job that used to require skill, judgement, and problem solving ability into a health hazard, and a bore. As long as they have enough money to get three sheets to the wind every night, y'r correspondent here doesn't see a problem.

This teatotal bunch of loonies over the pond have got the lily-livered employer to agree "no deskilling or downgrading of jobs resulting in loss of status ... affecting existing employees will take place as the result of the introduction of new technology without agreement". They also get a guarantee of retraining, or redeployment, of displaced workers when they agree to allow some new-fangled box into their tea party. And all they are up for in return is their so-called "continued co-operation with the improvement of organization methods, systems, and equipment".

It's plain that the labour organizations responsible for all this are mighty ignorant of the basic values of data-processing machismo. The worse the quality of work life, in fact, the more erratic and unreasonable the demands, the greater the heroism felt by the true logic worker in staving off disaster. Work of this sort is its own reward. Clearly, what's needed in this trade are more real he-men; yes, and more he-women too.

#### References:

1. "L.E.S.C. Report On VDT Problems", *Canadian Labour*, Nov. - Dec. 1982, p. 4
2. "Labour VDT Study Shows Numerous Health Problems", *Ontario Labour*, Jan. 1983, p. 6
3. "New Technology Agreement", *Frank Nelson, BIFU Report*, Feb. 1983

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## Co-op Movement Strategy Conference

The 4th annual "Co-op Movement Strategy Conference" will be held at the Grindstone Island Centre, near Portland, Ont., from August 1st to August 5th.

The conference is designed for co-op activists, managers, Board members and others who are interested in the further development of the co-op movement.

This year's conference will feature guest speakers, workshops, discussions, films and debates. As usual, the early afternoons will be open time so participants can enjoy the relaxing natural environment of the 13 acre island.

The sessions will include the following topics: "The Meaning of Leadership in a Democratically Controlled Co-op", "Resource Groups: Laying the Groundwork for Viable Worker Co-ops", "Beyond Co-op Daycare: Co-op Education in the Schools", "What Colour is Our Parachute: Co-op Economic Development Opportunities in the 80s", "Co-operatives and Unions: Solidarity Forever?" and "Moses Coady on Madison Avenue: A Look at Co-op Advertising on TV".

The conference fee, including room and food, is \$175 (or \$150 for those with limited income). Registration is limited to 50 people. A \$45 deposit is required to reserve a space. For more information, or to register, contact: Grindstone Co-op, PO Box 564, Sta. P, Toronto, Ont. M5S 2T1; or call (416) 923-4215.