



Canadian Worker Cooperative Federation  
Fédération canadienne des coopératives de travail

# The Rationale for Worker Co-operatives

by the Canadian Worker Co-op Federation

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## Table of contents

Introduction .....	2
Historical background of the cooperative movement.....	2
1. The Rochdale Pioneers in England.....	2
2. The Knights of Labour in the U.S.....	2
3. Mondragon in Spain.....	3
What is a worker co-operative? .....	4
1. Definition .....	4
2. Purposes .....	4
3. Functioning: the 7 co-operative principles.....	4
4. Some data about the co-operative movement.....	6
The Union movement.....	7
The advantages of the worker co-operative model.....	8
1. Democracy.....	8
2. Co-operation.....	10
3. Equality.....	11
4. Productivity .....	12
Conclusion: living one's values at work.....	13
References .....	15

Our history has been a struggle alternating between progressive developments leading to improvement in the quality of life for the majority of people, and regressive economic policy leading to the concentration of wealth into the hands of a smaller and smaller cadre; what Paul Simon referred to as “a loose affiliation of millionaires and billionaires”. In recent times, the pendulum has swung to the right with calamitous results: traditional business models, notably public corporations whose shareholders are disconnected from the communities where they are doing business, seem to be inherently incapable of being responsible to people and to life on earth in a long-term, sustainable way. It is time for us to become engaged in pushing the pendulum in the other direction: the worker co-operative is a model that can meet our most pressing needs. It is possible to live in a world that allows us to develop the gifts that each of us is born with and use those gifts in a co-operative way to build a better world for everyone.

Also known as the third way, co-operativism is an alternative model where enterprises are run by people and not capital. As will be shown, the cooperative model is based on several key principles, such as democracy, co-operation and equality, through which the renewal of the economic sphere is possible.

Most Canadians have not heard of worker co-operatives and therefore do not understand what they are. In spite of this, there are over 13,000 people in Canada who work in a worker co-operative. Around the world, examples where worker co-operatives are successful abound and have proven to be very resilient. Therefore, co-operatives must not be seen as a utopia, but as a practical alternative for workers who yearn for more at work. As Alfred Marshall, an English economist said, “Other movements have a high social aim; other movements have a broad business basis; Co-operation alone has both.”<sup>11</sup>

# Historical background of the cooperative movement

## 1. The Rochdale Pioneers in England

In 1817, Robert Owen tried to start a movement in England; he believed that “in spite of the machine, man should remain his own employer. Owen thought that the principle of co-operation or union would solve the problem of the machine without sacrificing either individual freedom or social solidarity, either man's dignity or his sympathy with his fellows.”<sup>2</sup>



Assaulted by the Industrial Revolution, but inspired by the ideas of Robert Owen, the Rochdale Pioneers, composed of 24 weavers, tried to build a self-sufficient community in 1844. By 1858 they had built a successful worker co-operative cotton mill, but when they later tried to expand, the only financing they could find was from private investors.

Soon the co-operative was privatized and one part of the utopian experiment was over in Rochdale. Because of a lack of capital, political economist Beatrice Potter-Webb said the Rochdale example was proof that “worker co-ops were doomed to fail.”

## 2. The Knights of Labour in the U.S.



The protection of workers' rights and the practice of democracy in the workplace has largely depended on the successful struggles of the union movement. In the United States, self managed businesses were being created by journeymen shoemakers in Philadelphia as early as 1806. By 1878, the creation of worker co-operatives became a central initiative of the Knights of Labor. Unfortunately banks refused to lend worker co-operatives money in times of need. The depression of the mid-to-late 1880s bankrupted most of these worker co-operatives, reinforcing Potter-Webb's beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Mondragon in Spain

Father Don Jose Arizmendiarieta opened a technical training school in Mondragon, Spain in 1943. Along with the technical component, Arizmendiarieta blended the ideas of social justice and democracy in his classes. Graduates were initially unsuccessful in implementing these ideas in their places of work when they suggested them to their employer. Then, with the support of Arizmendiarieta, five engineering graduates purchased a bankrupt paraffin oven factory in 1956. This factory was owned and democratically controlled by its members. Mondragon's goal was not only to create business success, but social success too.<sup>4</sup>



To get around the problem of capitalization, Arizmendiarieta came up with the idea for Mondragon to create its own banking system.<sup>5</sup> Mondragon re-invests 30% to 50% percent of its profits each year back into an indivisible reserve fund.<sup>6</sup> The Mondragon banking system, which is co-operatively run, has allowed profits to be used as both patient capital and technical assistance for Mondragon co-operatives, ensuring they survive and flourish.<sup>7</sup> In addition, if Mondragon or any single Mondragon co-op dissolves or is converted into a for-profit company, the indivisible reserve fund would not be divided among its members. Instead, the indivisible reserve fund would be donated to another co-operative. Therefore there is significantly less incentive for workers to sellout to private investors.

As of 2009 the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation had grown to 92,773 workers with sales of \$33 billion euros.<sup>8</sup> Mondragon is the largest business group in the Basque region and is the seventh largest business in Spain in terms of both sales and the number of workers.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the typical corporate approach, Mondragon's strategic plan includes job creation goals.<sup>10</sup> In 2003 Mondragon was ranked by Fortune magazine as one of the top ten places to work in Europe.<sup>11</sup> Overall Mondragon has outperformed most private business firms in Spain in almost all respects.<sup>12</sup>

*By learning from worker co-operative pitfalls of the past, Mondragon is a shining example that worker co-operatives can indeed be successful and has helped popularize the worker co-operative movement in many regions of the world.*



# What is a worker co-operative?

## 1. Definitions

- **Worker co-operatives** are businesses that are owned and democratically controlled by the worker-members.
- **Multi-stakeholder co-operatives**, also known as solidarity co-operatives, are a hybrid model where workers and community stakeholders share control of the co-operative.

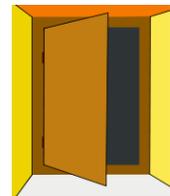
## 2. Purposes

- **Job creation:** the main purpose of a worker co-operative is to provide employment for its members.
- **Revenue redistribution:** the worker co-op is, in principle, designed to provide benefits not just to the founding members but also to all future employee/members.

## 3. Functioning: the 7 Co-operative Principles

Worker co-operatives operate under the international agreed-upon co-operative principles that also govern other types of co-operatives, except that the members are the workers, making for some differences in application.<sup>13</sup>

- **1st Principle: Voluntary and Open Membership:** Co-operatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political, or religious discrimination.



- **2nd Principle: Democratic Member Control:** Co-operatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives, members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote), and co-operatives at other levels are also organized in a democratic manner.

*Comment: many worker co-operatives are governed by consensus, while others are based on a one-member one-vote majority rule.*

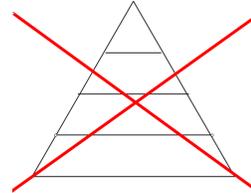


- **3rd Principle: Member Economic Participation:** Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. They usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

*Comment: surpluses can also be used to re-invest in the co-operative to create more jobs, increase workers' wages, decrease work hours, give to other fledgling or co-operatives in need, etc.*



- **4th Principle: Autonomy and Independence:** Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.



- **5th Principle: Education, Training and Information:** Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation.



- **6th Principle: Co-operation Among Co-operatives:** Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional, and international structures.



- **7th Principle: Concern for Community:** While focusing on member needs and wishes, co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities.



#### 4. Some data about the co-operative movement

- In Canada

As of 2006, there were about 345 worker co-operatives in Canada employing over 13,000 people, with revenues of \$470 million and assets of \$326 million. Revenue from the forestry sector alone, almost exclusively in Québec, was \$278 million.<sup>14</sup> An estimated two-thirds of worker co-operatives in Canada are in Québec, employing about 10,000 people.<sup>15</sup> Outside of Québec, there are higher concentrations per population in Atlantic Canada, while concentrations numerically are in Ontario, Nova Scotia and Winnipeg, with the rest widely spread.

- In Italy

Italy leads the world with over 800,000 people working in the co-operative sector, about half of which are in worker or social co-ops.<sup>16</sup> As of 2005, there were 7,363 social co-operatives employing over 244,000 people.<sup>17</sup> In Emilia Romagna, there are more than 7,500 co-ops, two-thirds of which are worker-owned. Ten percent of the workforce is employed by co-operatives in a region with some of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe.<sup>18</sup> Over 80,000 members here are employed in worker co-operatives,<sup>19</sup> equalling about 6% of the workforce.<sup>20</sup> Although it was one of the most devastated and poorest regions in Europe at the end of World War II, Emilia Romagna is now among the most prosperous regions in the world.

# The trade union movement

The protection of workers' rights and the practice of democracy in the workplace in the last century comes from the efforts of those who organized themselves collectively into unions and fought to change the conditions of working people. The struggles of union organizing, the strikes and the battles of working people from the Winnipeg General Strike to Bloody Thursday on the Waterfront of San Francisco to the battles of the South African Labour Unions in support of the African National Congress are part of our collective heritage.

The relationship between worker co-operatives and organized labour is a long one and has taken many forms. Here are three examples...

## The U.S.



The early union movement in North America featured the Knights of Labour who started many worker-owned co-operatives. Their motto: "an injury to one is a concern to all." Their declaration of principles included the following: *To establish co-operative institutions, such as will tend to supersede the wage system, by the introduction of a co-operative industrial system.*

## Canada



The Antigonish Movement, led by Moses Coady transformed rural communities in Atlantic Canada through the creation of co-operative enterprises. They were supported by Labour Unions and many of the Co-operatives and Credit Unions that exist today were originally organized with union support. The movement didn't actively pursue the organization of worker co-operatives because they viewed the unions as effectively providing a democratic voice for working people and effectively working

## The Spanish-U.S. partnership



Most recently, the Mondragon Co-operatives have created a partnership with the United Steelworkers with the goal of creating unionized co-operative workplaces in North America. Further, for the last several years the CWCF has worked with the United Steelworkers, Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada and the Canadian Labour Congress in the Western Labour-Worker Coop Council, with a goal of improving the lives of working people throughout the region, and to facilitate worker ownership.



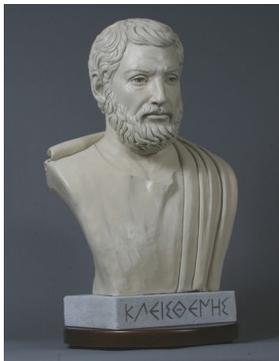
# The advantages of the worker co-operative model

## 1. Democracy

Democracy is a value that many of us cherish. Though its origins are old, democracy is a relatively new phenomenon. It has come far, but still has a long way to go.

- *Historical background*

The Greek experiment - Democracy had its first recorded beginnings in 508 BC: in response to particularly repressive rule,



Cleisthenes (picture) created a democratic constitution in Athens.<sup>21</sup> This first democratic experiment was very modest. Only men born in Athens who had both a mother and father born in Athens were given democratic citizenship. Just over 10% of the population in Athens was eligible and only an estimated 2% participated. The fledgling democratic experiment in Athens was snuffed out in 322 when Macedon took control of Athens.<sup>22</sup> Authoritarian rule was back.



### Did you know it?

The word “democracy” comes from the ancient Greek word *demokratia* which means “people-power”.

After the Greek experiment - The road back to democracy was a long one. It was not until the American Revolution in 1776 that democracy was again implemented as a form of government. However, it was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that democracy in many countries became an accepted and normal form of government where all adults, both male and female, were allowed to vote.<sup>23</sup>

(De)colonisation & independence - Up until late in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was vigorously debated whether certain countries were 'fit' for democracy. The British used this argument in India and many others brought it up when

other colonial nations aspired for independence.<sup>25</sup> Up until recently in South Africa, there were debates and also violence over whether blacks should be given the right to vote. With the emergence of China, even to this day there are arguments whether authoritarian governments are more beneficial in creating economic growth. This debate lingers on.<sup>26</sup>



### Did you know it?

From 1972 to 2002 there was the most dramatic increase of democratic countries in the world: from 43 to 89 – more than twice as many!<sup>24</sup>

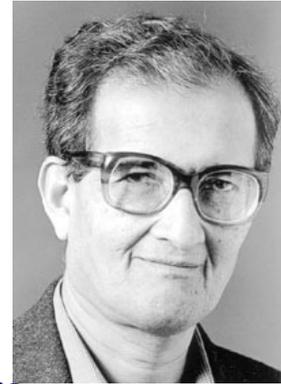
- *Political democracy today*

Amartya Sen says that...

“[Democracy] is a part of human freedom.”

“Exercising civil and political rights is a crucial part of good lives of individuals as social beings.”

“[Democracy] gives citizens an opportunity to learn from one another, and helps society to form its values and priorities.”<sup>27</sup>



Democracy adds value to our lives. Sen says that democracy allows for citizens to express themselves to keep “governments responsible and accountable”. Having a relatively free press allows for the expressions to be distributed on mass to other citizens. This is said to be the reason that no democratic country has ever had a famine. Questions remain as to the strength of our political

**Did you know it?**

Support for democracy does not vary depending on level of wealth, culture or even religion. Instead, surveys suggest that democracy has strong support at relatively similar levels in every region of the world.



democracy. How much say do people really have in major political decisions compared to the elite and to corporations? Many believe democracy still has a long way to go before we get government as Abraham Lincoln said, “of the people, by the people, for the people.”

- *Co-operatives: to “extend political democracy to the economic sphere (Stefano Zamagni)”<sup>28</sup>*

Democracy in the workplace - Most workplaces are undemocratic. We are told that it is because workers are not ‘fit’ to make responsible and accountable decisions. Aren’t these the same arguments that were countered against political democracy? Remember when women, Aborigines, blacks, those without property etc. were deemed unfit for democracy. Workers are deemed the same in the economic sphere. One day this will change, too.

Accountability in the workplace - One of the problems of many for-profit and not-for-profit organizations is that front line workers have no way of holding upper management accountable. In worker co-operatives, accountability is a two-way street: accountability comes from workers, but also from the board of directors (and from community stakeholders in multi-stakeholder co-operatives). Besides, cooperatives do not only ensures that businesses are responsible and accountable to their workers, but also to their customers, to their community and to the earth.

## 2. Co-operation

- *The benefits of competition: a "cultural prejudice" (Gould)*



The evidence from science - We are constantly told that competition is in our nature and therefore is the best way to operate an economy and to run a business. However, even one of the leading evolutionary biologists, Stephen Jay Gould, disputed this. Gould said, "The equation of competition with success in natural selection is merely a cultural prejudice....Success can be attained by a large variety of strategies....that we could call co-operative."<sup>30</sup> In fact, many animals use co-operative strategies to survive. For example, baboons and gazelles communicate with each other when in danger and chimpanzees, dolphins and pelicans hunt together.<sup>31</sup>



### Did you know it?

Studies of children show that they are the most receptive to co-operative games and initiatives—: this is the evidence that naturally, human beings are not selfish individualists, but on the contrary that their primary inclination is to collaborate.



The evidence from history - Humans have co-operated throughout our history to survive. On the Great Plains, the Lakota "understood that (buffalo) herd was the prey of the entire community and that the chase was to be a united, group activity. Hunters could win a larger share of the kill by their prowess, but no one went without. Preparing the great feasts that followed were co-operative and collective endeavours." Similarly, since their beginning, the Southwest Pueblos have practiced co-operative and collective farming, while the Northwest coast tribes collectively fished<sup>33</sup>; the Iroquois from an early age were taught the value of sharing possessions.<sup>34</sup> Finally, early European settlers in North America had to co-operate with their neighbours to survive a new environment and often harsh winters. These settlers were not the rugged individualists we have been led to believe.

- *The benefits of co-operation*

Competition is adversarial, increases anxiety and can undermine relationships. Moreover, its cost of competition is enormous: as noted by Alfie Kohn in his book "No Contest: The Case Against Competition (1986)...

“*[Competition implies business failures, copious litigation, idle equipment, a reduction in quality, unsafe working conditions, and the need to regulate the private sector in order to keep all of these problems under control.]*<sup>35</sup>

”

It does not have to be this way. We can do better: in a cooperative, because the membership, through the board of directors it elects, develops the policies that determine the co-operative's daily and long-term operations, it follows that trust, communication and co-operation among members are vital to the co-op's success. As a result, cooperatives help create a humane and respectful workplace.

At the same time, collective ownership and decision-making do not mean that the individual, as opposed to the group, has no responsibility: as the founder of Mondragon, José Maria Arizmendiarieta, said:

“Co-operation summons people to a collective project, but leaves each person with his or her own responsibility. Co-operation is the development of the individual, not against others, but with others.”<sup>36</sup>

### 3. Equality

- *Some date on economic (in)equality*



In 2005, CEOs of corporations in the United States with over \$1 billion in annual sales on average made \$10.9 million a year, compared to the average worker who made \$41,861, a ratio of 262:1.<sup>37</sup>



At Mondragon, despite sales of 33 billion euros, the difference in pay between the lowest and highest paid worker is only 6:1.<sup>38</sup> Many worker co-operatives in Canada have a flat pay scale, where every member earns the same rate of pay. Those worker co-operatives who have a tiered pay scale typically have pay scale ratios much lower than is even seen at Mondragon.

- *Equal society = healthy society*

The advantage of the co-operative model is that it does not let inequalities settle down and shape the economic system: as Stefano Zamagni says...

“By the time government redistributes income, it is too late. The moment you produce income in a co-operative, you redistribute it.”<sup>39</sup>

This equitable mechanism inherent to cooperatives' functioning is particularly benefic: former politician Ed Broadbent says that the more equal a society is, the healthier, the more stable, civically engaged and just it is.<sup>40</sup> The worker co-operative is precisely the vehicle to create this more equal society here in Canada. It is not an utopia, it is a practical alternative:

“There has never been a better time in recent history when the core democratic value of equality can be seen as both an ethical and practical option (ibid.)”

#### 4. Productivity

It has been proved that workers are most productive if the work is autonomous, involves a sense of mastery (of getting better) and has a meaningful purpose<sup>41</sup>. Therefore, the success of an enterprise is based on the skills of its human resources. And as outlined by Alain Bridault, President of the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation and member of the *Coopérative de travail Orion*, only under the co-operative framework can this success be fully achieved:

*[Mobilizing the intelligence of [an enterprise's] employees] means developing their sense of belonging, implementing participatory management practices, leaving ample room for innovation, and increasingly involving them in company performance. But all this is the very paradigm of a worker co-operative as the only form of business which, by nature, is intelligent, which has the potential of mobilizing understanding of its human resources through its purpose and its way of being.*<sup>42</sup>



# Conclusion:

## Living one's values at work

A labour market trend is that younger workers in particular are seeking to work for companies aligned with their values, while 60% of baby-boomer workers are wanting more meaning in their work.<sup>43</sup> The worker cooperative model, through the principles that govern its functioning, can offer workers this meaningful, autonomous and value-based work they are seeking:

- **Democracy:** whereas most workplaces are undemocratic, a cooperative is democratically controlled by its workers and is responsible to them. Democracy builds workers' commitment, since all members have an opportunity to affect the way the business is run and to offer input into the decisions affecting their everyday work lives. 
- **Co-operation:** the idea that economic prosperity is inherently linked to competition is a prejudice. On the contrary, historic and scientific evidences show that cooperation has long been the best way to success: it is a true and tried strategy in a world with scarce resources. 
- **Community:** co-operation is directly link to the rebuilding of social links between human beings. We are not selfish individualists by nature, we need each other and we need to belong to a group. Moreover, cooperatives are also beneficial to the community outside the workers' circle: because they are not primarily driven by the search for profits, they are more concerned with the sustainable development of their community. Workers and multi-stakeholder co-operatives are models that can be used to deliver renewable energy, health care, food, and other goods and services in a way that meets the needs of everyone. 
- **Equality:** in a cooperative, the equitable redistribution of profits avoids the concentration of wealth in a few hands, and generates fairness in the workplace. The cooperative provides incentives for workers to be productive, accountable and innovative, because they all benefit from their enterprise's success. 

*Around the world it has been shown that businesses based on these principles are not only possible, but also successful. Co-operation ensures more human, healthy and also more productive workplaces.*

*By co-operating, we can meet our greatest challenges and reach our potential as human beings.*



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