



## **Worker Co-op Conference Addresses Challenges of Growth**

Steve Dubb, Research Director, Democracy Collaborative, University of Maryland, July 2011  
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Worker co-op member-owners and technical assistance providers from across the eastern United States came together for the fifth biennial conference of the Eastern Conference for Workplace Democracy, held in Baltimore, Maryland from July 8<sup>th</sup> through July 10<sup>th</sup>.

The conference, which brought together a record number of more than 200 worker co-op members and developers aimed to address some of the new challenges that are arising from the worker co-op movement's growing prominence and diversity.

A plenary session examined some of these new efforts in the working cooperative movement. Ted DeBarbieri of the Urban Justice Center in New York City, for instance, highlighted the importance of what he called "community-based lawyering" in supporting worker co-op development.

Vanessa Bransburg, Center for Family Life, talked about her organization's work in supporting the development of the Sí, se puede! cooperative, which has successfully organized Latina housecleaners in the Bronx. The business started servicing residential customers, but now also has commercial customers. A number of the immigrant women who are member-owners of the cooperative stem from the area of Puebla in Mexico, but the co-op includes members from throughout Latin America.

Ajamu Nangwaya of the University of Toronto (and formerly of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives), talked about the need to develop movement infrastructure. Four areas of priority, Nangwaya argued, are to develop stronger linkages between urban and rural communities, foster training programs at universities, build grassroots linkages with labor unions, and create a cooperative fund that can provide start-up financing to support new worker co-op development.

LaKeisha Wolf, Ujamaa Collective, based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, talked about her group's work. "Our original idea," Wolf said, was to "create our own market place in the Hill District, a historic black neighborhood with a history of black business that was totally transformed due to urban redevelopment." Since 2009, Ujamaa's work has led to the creation of an open-air marketplace, a small farm, a retail boutique store, a farm preparation program, and wealth and labor sharing.

Jessica Gordon Nembhard, a co-op scholar and Professor at John Jay College in New York City, noted that there is a growing "focus to do co-op development in low-income communities, but we still don't do this well." Nembhard highlighted the work of Sojourner Douglass College, a historically black college located in the conference host city of Baltimore. Nembhard noted that the college wants to create a "community wealth center" on community-based economic

development and also to train people to be community economists and entrepreneurs. Nembhard also noted that a central challenge of the worker co-op movement is that worker co-op leaders “need to think more directly about race in co-op development.”

A highlight of the conference was the keynote address, delivered by Melissa Hoover, Executive Director of the United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives. Hoover noted that the worker co-op movement, although small (there are perhaps 300 worker co-ops throughout the United States) have many strengths. Because of the cooperative penchant for “open source information” and cooperative training and impulses, worker co-ops, Hoover said, benefit from “distributed intelligence. It is our collective power that pulls us through.”

The national worker co-op association is getting “bigger in numbers,” Hoover noted. “We’re maturing as a movement. In 2009, a ton of new co-ops joined.” Hoover added that as worker co-ops have grown in the United States, the movement has become more prominent and visible. “We wrote an op-ed that was published in the *Christian Science Monitor*. We do radio and press interviews,” Hoover said.” The movement’s ability to support new worker co-ops has also grown. “We’ve created a network of peer advisors,” Hoover said. “We give experienced worker co-op members the time and space to get trained on how to share their knowledge.”

Hoover added that now is a “pretty exciting time for worker co-ops. The challenge,” Hoover said, “is to manage that interest.” Hoover cautioned that: “success, growth, largeness, and scale have their own dynamic and raise a new set of problems.” Hoover said that, “Creative solutions are legion, but they need to be generated.” Issues facing worker co-ops, Hoover indicated, include building up the national federation’s staff capacity, promoting diversity in the movement, developing worker co-ops in manufacturing, and build economic partnerships among worker cooperatives.

Hoover called on conference participants to allow “room for a diversity of approaches, perspectives, and people. It is easy to say, but actually doing it is the challenge. There is a strand of purism that is both really positive and can be very limiting ... purism of democracy, purism of worker ownership.” Hoover added, “I don’t have answers, but I do think we need to talk about these things pretty fearlessly... The utopian notion that the worker cooperative can be perfected, Hoover concluded, “really misses the point. The problem is itself beautiful.”

*For more information on the Eastern Conference for Workplace Democracy, see:*  
[www.east.usworker.coop](http://www.east.usworker.coop)