

# Lessons for Building a Co-Operative Movement

Saturday, 24 November 2012 09:50

By [Michael Johnson](#), [Grassroots Economic Organizing](#) | [Interview](#)

*Pm Press has released a second edition of John Curl's 550 page history of "cooperation, cooperative movements, and communalism in America." In this interview, Michael Johnson talks with John about what is new in the second edition, the surprisingly long history of co-operatives here in the US, and what his history has to tell us about building a 21st century movement for a co-operative/solidarity economy.*

John's life has been steeped in co-operatives. He has been a member for over 30 years in the Heartwood Co-operative Woodshop in Berkeley, CA, where he lives. He has belonged to numerous other co-operatives and collectives. In addition to being a historian of extensive research, he is a poet, woodworker, social activist, and has even been a city planner. He is also co-writing a book on how worker co-operators in the [Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives](#) are harnessing the power of the co-operative difference. Janelle Cornwell and Adam Trott, VAWC staff person, are fellow co-writers.

*[Editor's Note: Throughout the text we will spell the word for "co-operative enterprises" with a hyphen and the word for "being cooperative" without it.]*

## **On the second edition of *For All the People***

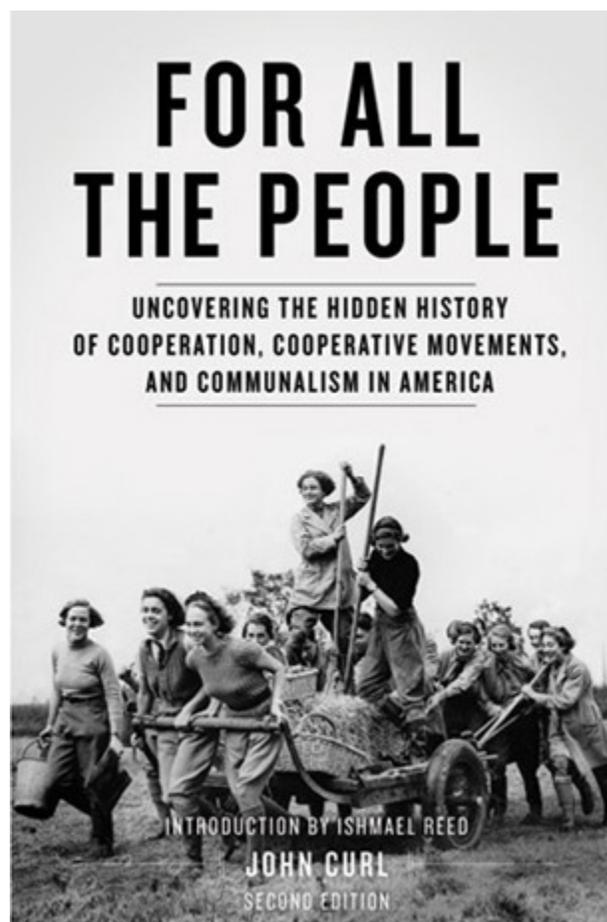
**MJ:** John, let's start with how the second edition of [For All the People](#) differs from the first one.

**JC:** The second edition has three additional pieces.

1) A foreword by novelist and essayist Ishmael Reed.

2) A new preface by myself that discusses developments of the last four years. The first edition came out just as the economy was collapsing into the Great Recession. In the second edition I discuss the United Nations study which shows that worker co-operatives and all cooperatives around the world have fared better than standard capitalist corporations during these hard times. I discuss the reasons why the UN declared 2012 the International Year of Cooperatives. I discuss the limited equity co-operatives created through squatting in the urban homestead movement in New York City. I discuss the Food Hub movement, a spontaneous rural cooperative movement on a national scale. I discuss the United Steel Workers Union's partnership with Basque Spain's Mondragon International to develop manufacturing cooperatives in the US and Canada. Finally I discuss the World Social Forum's movement to reclaim the world commons, and cooperative management of the commons.

3) The second edition has an additional section of almost 100 pages containing my in-depth investigative report on the rise and demise of the Food System movement of the 1970s, focused on its two most successful centers: the Bay Area and the Minneapolis Twin Cities. The Food System movement was integral to the beginnings of



natural and organic food in the US. This movement was particularly revealing because on the one hand it was a spontaneous grass-roots movement that arose in many locations around the country, and also because in those two urban centers it was entered into by small outside groups with ostensibly radical ideologies, which tried to take it over, and involved government undercover agents. Both of those entryist groups caused intense internal strife that sped the movement's demise in those locations. In comparison I also discuss the movement's rise and fall in locations not affected by those small radical groups. I look at the successes and shortcomings of that movement as a whole.

**MJ:** "Entryist?"

**JC:** Yes. A political group is accused of "entryism" when it enters into another group and tries to take it over or transform it.

**MJ:** How well would the metaphor of "the 1%" and "the 99%" fit the story you tell of the ups and downs of co-operative economics in the US?

**JC:** Leaving the 99% metaphor aside for the moment, I would say that **co-operative economics today can become an important option for about half the population**, those with more limited wealth or income. Co-operatives mean that people with insufficient resources pool what they have in order to get onto a more level economic playing field.

Historically, the metaphor of "the 1% and the 99%" is redolent of the decades after the American Civil War, an era of great social upheaval and strife. Wealth was being consolidated into increasingly fewer hands, while working people were becoming impoverished. American capitalism was consolidating its domination of the country, and that was emphatically opposed by the vast majority of the working population of industrial workers and farmers. The two latter groups set up organizations based in co-operatives, and at first challenged capitalism on economic terms, trying to build counter institutions that they hoped would supersede capitalism. When the plutocracy destroyed their co-operatives, they made an effort to gain power through electoral politics. This era culminated in the defeat of all the working people's organizations and the triumph of the "Robber Barons." Nonetheless, the era is filled with inspiring dramas of ordinary people daring to follow their dreams, endeavors that still resonate with relevance.

Today's metaphor of "the 1% and the 99%" arises from the reality that wealth in the US is quickly being redistributed again from a larger number of people into the hands of a tiny elite. While large numbers of people are increasingly impoverished and marginalized, a handful is amassing power in the form of money and capital.

**MJ:** I like the phrase you just used: "the working population of industrial workers and farmers." For two reasons. First, we tend to forget that both groups have very strong connections, which I am going to ask about later. Second, it's refreshing to hear them referred to beyond being an economic class without that fact being brushed aside.]

**JC:** Independent self-employed small farmers and wage earners had a close relationship throughout the later 19<sup>th</sup> century. That was before the age of corporate farming, and the overwhelming majority of farmers were very small. Today it's still hard to make a living as a small farmer, and many of them have another job on the side these days, so most still know what it's like to be a wage worker.

But, as you state, "the 1% and the 99%" is a metaphor. Those are not really statistics. The numbers are there to make certain points, and bear no relationship with any statistical class analysis. The concept of class in the US is subjective, tricky, and constantly changing. To imply that there are two economic classes in the US, the 1% and the 99%, is to muddy up the waters very badly, rather than shedding light where it is sorely needed. Does the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile have more in common with the upper 1% or the lowest 20%? Compare the metaphor of "the 1% and the 99%" with Romney's metaphor of "the 47%." If 99% were really opposed to the 1% seizing the wealth, then this could not possibly continue; but in fact a much larger percentile than 1% actually support it and just want to get in on the action. There are a lot more shameless predators out there than just 1%. To grossly underestimate the strength of the opposition seriously weakens you.

### **The long history of co-operatives in the US**

**MJ:** *One of the most interesting discoveries for me in reading **For All the People** was how early on co-operatives and worker co-operatives emerged in the US, even before 1800. Does this reflect something special about our history or just how integral cooperation is in human life?*

**JC:** Both. Cooperation is the basis of human society. However, most societies today have been deformed and oppressed by small authoritarian groups for a very long time. But the dynamics of cooperation do not die, because they are so essential to a decent life. I would say **cooperation is the norm because it can be suppressed but it cannot be destroyed**. The essential concepts of cooperation are instinctive to most people, particularly when they are young. Look at the way kids get together in the park and organize a game. Or groups of musicians get together regularly as improvised cooperatives. Or young parents form play groups for their kids. In all of these situations people spontaneously self-organize activities based on freedom, direct democracy, and a general equality. **Many people only experience cooperation outside of their work lives**, in their private lives, with family, friends, and associates. But cooperative instincts always remain there inside the human condition like seeds waiting for the right conditions. When an oppressive society reaches a dead end, a new generation rejects the dying husk and reinvents its world, and that creative act is always based on mutual aid and cooperation.

**MJ:** *Before you go on to your answer to the second part of the question—that is, how cooperation has been an important part of American history—I want to challenge you a bit on your saying “most societies today have been deformed and oppressed by small authoritarian groups for a very long time.” It touches an issue that is very central to how we strategize as a movement.*

*Basically, I find that thinking about oppression is a very tricky thing. Frequently we assume that it is the “oppressors” that cause oppression. Some very acute thinkers like Paulo Freire in his classic “The Pedagogy of the Oppressed” argue very strongly **that oppression is a joint project of the ‘oppressor’ and the ‘oppressed’**. And it would seem that every liberation movement—civil rights, gays and lesbians, women, etc.—is essentially the story of people empowering themselves by not accepting the role of the ‘oppressed.’*

**JC:** Human nature is very complex, and we all have seeds of the oppressor in us. Power really does corrupt. Historically many leaders of rebellions have wound up as oppressors. But that is no reason to eschew rebellion or power. Chickens really do have a pecking order. It is instinctive. Dogs really do run in packs, and become instinctively submissive to the pack leader. People, on the other hand, have many conflicting instincts. I agree that oppressed majorities are enablers of ruling elites. That is the role they have been educated to play. When large numbers of ordinary people refuse to accept the submissive role, societies change. But people need to believe that social change is possible. If they think their only option is to exchange one oppressor for another, they will usually choose to accept their victimization and try to make the best of it. That is why **counter institutions** are so important, because they **are living demonstrations that better social relationships are possible and within our grasp**. They are possible because, besides the seeds of the oppressor within us, we also have the seeds of mutual liberation within us, the instincts of cooperation, of sharing, democracy, equality, extended family.

Now, to your question about “how cooperation has been an important part of American history.” America’s unique history did encourage mutual aid and cooperation. Indigenous America was largely based on cooperation and tribal collectivity. Every wave of immigrants to America, arriving from different parts of the globe, had to start from scratch. They pooled their resources and through mutual aid lifted themselves from poverty and oppressive situations. **Most of the wagon trains headed west were cooperatives**. When settlers built new towns it was primarily through mutual aid and cooperation. No one came to America with the goal of becoming a wage slave. Industrial workers were trapped into oppressive situations by circumstance. They turned to mutual aid in order to form unions which were usually also cooperatives. Many workers saw a path to liberation through worker cooperatives in their industries. This culminated in the Knights of Labor’s plan to build a cooperative commonwealth that would supersede the capitalist system.

However, while the government eventually recognized the importance of co-operatives and promoted them in rural areas, particularly during the New Deal, government policy at the same time did not facilitate worker co-operatives in industrial areas, since worker co-ops challenge the wage system and thereby threaten the power of the establishment.

## Farmer and labor movements and Co-operatives

**MJ:** Another very interesting finding for me was a) the extensive connections between farmers and urban workers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when industrialization, the “Robber Barons,” and the dominance of bankers hit America full force, and b) the major role that both worker and consumer co-operatives played in connecting farmers and workers at that time. Can you expand on that a bit? Also, **what can we take from this history that would help us move out of our marginality?** For example, is there a way suggested by that history to connect the new, local, ecologically-minded farmers with today’s worker co-operatives and labor movements?

**JC:** Key to understanding the extensive connections between farmers and industrial workers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is the Homestead Act of 1862, when Abraham Lincoln, in the middle of the Civil War, opened hundreds of millions of acres of western land to people who were willing to settle and farm it. That was a payoff waiting for eastern workers fighting the war. After the war large numbers of returning Northern soldiers flooded west and became farmers. So these were people who knew both worlds. If not themselves, then others in their families had been industrial workers. Workers and farmers knew they were up against the same enemies. In the post-war world that emerged, Robber Baron industrialists were driving eastern workers into the pits of wage-slavery, while railroad barons held farmers hostage to exorbitant freight rates and banks manipulated them to steal their land. Meanwhile, new waves of immigrants filled the eastern factories. But these too did not come to America to be wage slaves, and the dream of large numbers was to become farmers. So they were natural allies.

Both groups turned to co-operatives in their struggle. The **farmers formed cooperatives in every aspect of supply, production, and distribution** that otherwise had been dominated by banks, corporations, and railroads. **Industrial workers turned to worker cooperatives in their industries, and consumer co-ops for home consumer goods**, in order to break out of the corner that employers and the business community had trapped them in. When the co-operatives of both groups came under fierce attack, they allied with each other, turned to electoral politics and came together in **the Populist Party, the most successful “third” party in American history.**

But we can’t re-create that history today. History is an always unique set of circumstances. Today ecologically-minded farmers, worker cooperatives and the labor movement meet in the larger movement for sustainable social and economic justice. For example, many ecologically-minded farmers are involved with the “food justice” movement to bring good food to today’s “food deserts” in poorer communities. Much of that is done through farmers markets and co-op stores. Farmers’ markets themselves are largely cooperative, usually in conjunction with local communities and community non-profits. It is unrealistic to expect a direct organizational connection between (for example) a small organic farm and a co-operative print shop. But both might have a natural tendency toward using each other’s products and services, and that is mutual aid. Organizational networks like the Bay Area Network of Worker Cooperatives (NoBAWC) organize email listservs where large amounts of information connecting groups closer together are distributed. Groups devoted to assisting connections between disparate cooperatives perform a very valuable role, but the connective tissues and channels are by nature in continuous flux.

## The mammals and the dinosaurs: getting down to the right size

**MJ:** Okay, drawing this cooperative connection between the working population of today and 125-50 years ago brings up another set of key questions. The co-operative movement and radical unionizing seemed to have peaked in the US in this same earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century period. For sure their vitality and size stands in stark contrast to what is happening now. Today worker co-ops play a minimal role socially and economically, and unions are in their 4<sup>th</sup> decade of steep decline.

- Is this an accurate reading?
- If so, are accurate future prospects bleak? Upbeat? Unknown?
- Or do we need to think about these kinds of questions in larger frames, like a multi-generational time frame?
- Also, is the recent collaboration between Mondragon and the United Steel Workers an indication of a new

*emerging vitality or just another positive effort?*

**JC:** Government promotion of rural and farm cooperatives became national policy as part of the recovery efforts of the New Deal. **Rural America was transformed by co-operatives in the 1930s.** Besides farmer supply and distribution, co-ops brought electricity and water for drinking and irrigation to most of the rural US. Co-operatives are still strong in many rural areas and a part of everyday life today, and are still promoted by the government there.

Yes, unions continue to be in steep decline, due in large part to anti-labor legislation. Severe legal restrictions keep unions weak. And the current electoral system, based on the domination of money, is geared to produce legislators dedicated to keeping it that way. Only a complete breakdown of the current system will open the window wide enough for large-scale change today.

Yet large-scale change is inevitable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The current economic system cannot deal with the population continuing to explode, with climate change severely altering the situation, with the accelerating disparity between rich and poor. An enormous gulf is opening between a tiny elite and a mass of marginalized people. It is among the marginalized that the new shape of the co-operative movement will emerge. They will form economic and political organizations based on mutual aid and cooperation, because they will have to, in order to survive.

Meanwhile, social activists and visionaries are creating the backup. Unified through auspices of the United Nations, **a world co-operative movement is emerging**, based on an alliance of co-op activists, the labor movement, civil society nonprofits, and governments promoting co-operatives as an economic development strategy. It is only through this type of mutual aid that the new century can shape a successful and sustainable world.

And yes, the recent collaboration between Mondragon and the United Steel Workers is an indication of a new emerging vitality. Many unions are rethinking their structure, goals and missions. The straight jackets that have suffocated unions can be broken by new creative strategies. After all, **unions are, at their core, organizations of mutual aid among workers.** Their larger goal is not to make the deck chairs on the Titanic a little more comfortable, but to create the bases for a good life for their members and for the entire working population.

**MJ:** *John, you're sketching some awesome pictures here: "Large-scale change is inevitable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century," and it will require "a complete breakdown of the current system." It seems terrible and wonderful at the same time. Please, say more.*

**JC:** The only way this economic system can be maintained in the long run, is through widespread repression. Repression can take place almost invisibly, behind closed doors, one person at a time. That's the way it's taking place today. Like all those people evicted one by one from their homes. There doesn't have to be tanks in the streets. The current world economic system is dysfunctional. The future it offers is increasing enrichment for the tiny elite at the top and increasing impoverishment for large numbers who were once "middle class."

Many social rebellions have started under similar circumstances, when large numbers who once knew a fairly good life find it suddenly pulled out from beneath them. On the other hand, **people will almost always accept bleak circumstances when they see no alternative.** Once in a while they may riot, but that is usually just a tantrum, and usually accomplishes almost nothing constructive. **Only when radical visionaries convince large numbers that another economic system is possible, can a constructive rebellion be set in motion.**

Ours is essentially a non-violent rebellion, because our means need to always reflect our ends. We need to build the new world and to the degree we are successful, the old system will collapse by its own weight. That is not to say that we will automatically win. In times of great social change there are no sure bets. The world could sink into an era of barbarism. But I don't think that will happen. **I think a generation will rise to the challenge and create a better world for our great grandchildren.**

**MJ:** *John, one last follow-up on this. You say that we need to be nonviolent and that "We need to build the new world and to the degree we are successful, the old system will collapse by its own weight." Are you pointing to*

*a strategy of building a “co-operative system”—if you will—parallel to the oppressive system we are struggling within right now. If so, does the way co-operatives transformed rural America in the 1930s suggest how to approach this?*

**JC: The worker cooperative movement in the US should follow the United Nations directive to forge a partnership with allies in government and civil society**, because only with deep backing from those sectors can cooperatives grow extensive enough to transform our world.

Yes, the New Deal alliance that institutionalized cooperatives in rural America is a role model. Even the banking sector participated constructively in it, with the rural Banks For Co-operatives program. **We need to build counter institutions not as an isolated sector, but integrated into the existing economy as we build them one by one.** They are basically institutions for the increasingly large numbers of our people who are being marginalized and excluded from the mainstream capitalist system, as well as people alienated and disgusted by the oppressive working conditions. When people learn to work together, pool resources and help each other through mutual aid institutions, we will all be stronger and more prosperous. A strong co-operative movement among marginalized people can be a transformative social force. I don't expect the mainstream capitalist system to disappear soon. We have to plan to live with it as much as possible. But it inevitably goes through cycles of boom and bust. The co-operative sector is affected by those booms and busts, but not as much as capitalist enterprises. **Bust times, like now, are a stimulus to the co-operative sector.** The Great Recession may be a new normal, a situation that will persist through this generation at least.

I'll try to clarify what I meant when I talked about the old system collapsing of its own weight. I think the world is changing so that the current mainstream economic system is becoming like those gigantic dinosaurs that became increasingly unable to cope. Scientists tell us that **during the age of dinosaurs mammals began as small furry creatures, and birds began as little feathered dinosaurs.** The gigantic dinosaurs collapsed of their own weight when they became irrelevant to the new emerging world. **This can be a model for the co-operative movement in this century.**

**MJ:** Your reference to the dinosaurs and mammals reminds me of something I have just been reading. It was a talk by John G. Bennett, who died in the 1970s. He was a guy who seems to have done a lot of deep thinking about almost everything. He refers to one of the overarching values in our culture being the conviction that “more is better.” He uses the example of the dinosaur not only to refute this idea, but, just as you have, to point to the inevitable collapse of our dinosaur institutions. He then goes on to identify the mammals as the alternative, again as you have. He emphasizes two things about the mammals. One is that it is driven to become the “right size,” not bigger and bigger. Evolution favors the “fittest” not the “biggest.” His second point is about community, that mammals are internally small communities of cells and organs that are the ‘right size’ and that the most evolved thrive in small communities that are of the right size.

**JC:** Maintaining growth at a sustainable size is a key to success for individual co-operatives and the movement. Capitalist enterprises are typically swept up into the unending spiral of “grow or die.” Historically many co-operatives have gotten caught in that destructive cycle, including the old Berkeley Co-op, which collapsed after 50 years in 1988. **[MJ: John tells this story in rich detail in the book.]** To be sustainably successful, the co-operative movement needs to reject that model. Centralized, top-down, vertical growth of any co-op system invariably leads to collapse, whether by bankruptcy or being swallowed by capitalism. The structure of an extensive and sustainable movement involves horizontal growth of interconnected autonomous co-ops. Each individual co-op needs to find its “right size,” and be satisfied with that important accomplishment. Co-operatives are a movement with not one but thousands of centers and an unlimited periphery. **Numerous people throughout America and around the world are now coming to realize the transformational possibilities of co-operatives, particularly worker co-operatives. It is a family of ideas whose time has come.** With thousands of creative minds approaching the work from different perspectives, a dynamic moment is upon us; where it will lead is limited by only our practical imagination.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century: bringing on a Co-operative America**

**MJ:** In a short section titled “Does It Have To Be This Way?” you raise **the issue of worker co-operatives**

**having in fact been not only marginalized but actually “planned out of the economy” in our country. *Planned out of the economy!*** *That’s a big claim. However, you didn’t expand on that. Can you do that here? I am asking for that because it cuts to the heart of a major issue for co-operative economy and all of the movements for a new kind of economy. Namely: Is it possible for our small, marginalized worker co-op movement here in the US to become more than a passionate outcry against economic injustice and become a real hope for creating an economy “for all the people”?*

**JC: *While urban and industrial worker co-operatives were planned out of the US economy, rural and farmer co-operatives were planned into the economy by the New Deal.*** The contrast is stark. In the rural case, there was a general national consensus that rural America could prosper only if the government promoted co-operatives. And so it happened. The opposite took place in urban and industrial areas, the stronghold of the wage system. The New Deal stopped their promotion of co-operatives at city limits. They were trying to save and revitalize industrial capitalism, not replace it, and that required not doing anything to threaten the labor pool.

Now we are in a very different situation. For many decades Americans have known a thriving flexible “middle” class and a general prosperity. That prosperity came about at the end of World War II, because all the other nations were flat on their backs and the US was the only one left standing. There was so much US wealth at the end of the war that for a while all ships rose. However, Americans were told the lie that prosperity was brought about by the capitalist system. Now that lie has finally played itself out. We are in the end game. Capitalism in America has always been geared to bringing prosperity to a tiny elite and oppression and poverty to everyone else. Now almost all ships are sinking and will continue to sink under this system. ***The system has to change,*** and the path of greatest benefits with least dangers is to promote mutual aid and worker co-operatives as national policy. ***That means opening the economic system to large numbers of worker co-operatives and other social enterprises,*** so that many more millions of people can have good jobs providing goods and services for each other. The worker co-operative movement of recent years may have started as a passionate marginalized voice crying in the wilderness, but we are now entering a world where large numbers of people realize that all the old answers have failed and if we want a decent world for our children and grandchildren, ***we must all become visionaries and reinvent the economic system of the future.***

If you examine areas in the world where cooperatives are a significant, permanent sector of the economy, such as the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy, you will see that the government there has organized the economic playing field to make that possible, with advantages granted to co-operatives in recognition of their promotion of social justice and prosperity. There is no such thing as a “free market.” Markets and economic systems are always organized and regulated by governments. In a just society, the government’s role is to level the playing field as much as possible. In this situation, where wealth is vastly unequal, the government can help to balance that inequality through advantages to co-operatives. It will be a struggle to get there from where we are today in the US, but at some point soon the social fabric will become explosive, and perhaps that will prompt the government to act.

**MJ: *John, I just want to go a little further into this because the possibilities you are discussing here are big. From the little that I know, it seems that the New Deal’s rural co-operative achievements got substantially reversed. For sure it has worked well in helping create credit unions and utility cooperatives in rural areas—electric, telephone, etc., and maybe some farmer co-ops. However, haven’t many, if not most, of the agricultural co-operatives the New Deal helped create been flipped into giant industrial agricultural businesses? Businesses that are undemocratic, wage-based “co-operatives?” This certainly seems to be the case just looking at the list on the [Wikipedia page](#).***

**JC:** Michael, even very large agricultural co-operatives are not corporate agribusiness farming as practiced by giant vertically integrated firms such as Monsanto, Dow, and DuPont, which dominate much of American agriculture today. Agricultural co-ops, small and large, are owned by their members for services, while agribusiness corporate farms are owned by investors and stockholders for profit, like all capitalist corporations. Typical members of farm co-ops are still family farms. Large agricultural co-ops can have organizational problems similar to those of all large democratic organizations. For efficiency sake they can concentrate power in a small board, which can sometimes act like a corporate board alienated from members. But a co-op doesn’t have to be enormous to have those kinds of problems. One of the knottiest issues is labor: a farmer co-op can wind up

acting in its narrow self-interest just as an employer. Even Mondragon in many of its international enterprises, where it has not been organizing workers to become member-owners, has slipped into that contradictory role as an employer, although it seems to be generally a benevolent boss.

That said, let's take a look at a few typical agricultural co-ops on the Wikipedia list:

"Southern States Cooperative is an agricultural supply cooperative owned by more than 300,000 farmers..."  
 "Ocean Spray... currently has over 600 member growers." "Dairy Farmers of America, Inc... is owned by and serves nearly 16,000 dairy farmer members representing more than 9,000 dairy farms in 48 states."  
 "Riceland Foods, Inc [has] 9,000 members who are farmers in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, and Texas." "The Tillamook County Creamery Association (TCCA)... includes 110 dairy farms, mostly within Tillamook County." Sunkist Growers, Incorporated is... composed of 6,000 members from California and Arizona." "Land O'Lakes is a member-owned agricultural cooperative [with] about 3200 producer-members, 1000 member-cooperatives..."

None of these, as far as I know, has abandoned its co-operative structure and been changed into a corporate farming operation. All are still serving real farmers. Co-operatives are still a core support of the continued viability of family farming.

Behind the familiar labels of those produce brands on the Wikipedia list, there really are numerous independent farms which use the co-operative structure to market their crops, and prevent corporate agribusiness from totally taking over.

***MJ:** Okay, let's move on. John, this may be a bit of a stretch for you in your role as a historian: if it is possible for worker co-ops and the co-operative/solidarity movement to become a significant force in American politics—if, for example, worker co-ops and other forms of urban co-operatives were a publicly supported economic institution as you were just suggesting—can you imagine what that would look like? You are a woodworking artist. Can you look at the raw wood of these co-operative institutions and the current American landscape and visualize what could be?*

**JC:** Actually it's not that much of a stretch for me. In my opinion the world economic system is collapsing and will continue to collapse in the near future. ***The existing system cannot deal with the magnitude of problems that confront us. Historically a state of collapse can often result in a stark authoritarian regime. But it can also result in an energized population re-envisioning and redesigning the system.*** In the US, where we have a highly developed civil society, the latter is very possible. I think the landscape would look complex and multi-sourced. I see nonprofits and foundations becoming a major supplier of back-up and organizational tools to help worker cooperatives get off the ground and be successful. I see communities getting involved, with social enterprises, mixed organizations where the worker co-operative is one stakeholder and the community is another. I see communities turning to these types of co-operatives as an economic development strategy, to reduce or eliminate poverty. I see major nonprofit institutions such as schools or hospitals in the interest of community giving preference to local worker co-ops for goods or services. I see cutting-edge environmental organizations helping worker co-ops to find and invent new niches to fill. I think it can be a broad project under a big umbrella that will inspire the youth, offer them new creative possibilities.

### **Accepting the difficulties of cooperating**

***MJ:** Finally, I have a question that looks at how the movement—co-operators, co-ops, and our networking institutions—have failed. How we contributed toward our own marginality.*

*My question has nothing to do with finding blame. It comes from wondering what might happen if we were learning more and more how to cooperate more deeply than we do. To manage our own rivalries and conflicts with each other better than we do. To empower ourselves personally and collectively in greater ways. I think our potential for cooperation and self-empowerment is far greater than we think, and we desperately need it to move forward.*

*For example, many co-operatives struggle with doing worker self-evaluations horizontally. That kind of*

*honesty is a real challenge, but failing at it can be very costly. Or: the tension between some managers in food co-ops and workers who want to form worker co-ops. This kind of situation can get real heavy.*

*So I am asking if you have thoughts on how this played out over the past 200 years here in the US, and how important it may be now. Also, please speak from your own long experience as a worker co-operator.*

**JC:** I think activists need to accept the reality that not everybody is very political, and never will be. You have to start with people as they are, and not demand more than they can freely contribute. This is, after all, mutual aid. In the variety of human consciousness, some people cannot see beyond their own skin. Those people are not good material for co-operatives. Some others just relate to their immediate family, or extended family, and everyone beyond those is an outsider to them. Some people identify strongly with groups such as ethnicity, nationality, religion, or even dog lovers or fans of a certain musician or a type of music or a certain sports team.

On the other extreme are people who are multi-cultural and international, who see themselves as part of a global human family. Or even larger, a great family of all life on earth. Or beyond earth: feeling at one with the universe. Most of us are somewhere in between. We each need to make the contributions that feel right to us and not be harsh on each other for shortcomings. Unrealistic expectations can result in bitter disappointment. And for no good reason since unrealistic expectations doom the situation from the beginning.

You have to accept that in a group or one-on-one not everybody is compatible. In my co-operative woodshop, which we started in 1974, I have seen quite a variety of personality types. Some fit in better than others. For example, one issue that was hard for a handful of people was territoriality. These people simply appeared to have a 'territorial gene,' and there was nothing they or anybody else could do about it. I'm talking about bench space. In my shop we share bench space. But that was extremely painful for these people. They appeared to need their own space clearly defined and had great difficulty sharing that space with anybody else. For the most part, these people just stayed in the shop briefly, and found another location where they did not have to share bench space. To generalize from that, members of a successful co-operative each need a space where they feel comfortable. Not every combination of people works. It's not very different from a sports team or a band. If two people can't work together, the group has to find another arrangement, or one of them should probably leave. That's not a big deal. It's just the way of human society. Co-operatives are not for everybody. Diversity is good, and there should be places in society for lone wolves, but they should not be permitted to take control of society.

Looking at the big picture, the option of working in a co-operative could improve the lives of the vast majority. Life passes too quickly to squander it in an oppressive work situation. In contrast, a life spent in cooperation and mutual aid in daily activities is a life well spent. Besides, it makes you feel good.

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## **MICHAEL JOHNSON**

Michael Johnson co-founded an intentional community in Staten Island, NY in '80, in part an experiential research center in democratic culture...still there 30 years later...immersed in the worker co-op and solidarity economy movements since 2007 with the Valley Alliance of Worker Co-operatives (New England), GEO, and the Community Economies Collective.

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