

BY DAVE GUTKNECHT

Reviving Democracy, Spreading Cooperatives



The Occupy movement in the U.S. (there also are international manifestations) is one of the more encouraging recent developments in the present political environment. Most

of the Occupy sites have been suppressed by the police, but the new activism continues to spread. This revived democratic spirit likely will grow in its impact through other venues.

Occupy networks are articulating widespread outrage over the extreme concentration of wealth that is occurring at the expense of social justice and a sustainable future. Cooperatives offer an ownership structure and business methods that address many of the injustices that the Occupy movement is highlighting. For campaigns that aim to change this economic disorder, the values and principles articulated in the international “Statement of Cooperative Identity” constitute an excellent starting point.

Democratic and egalitarian movements sooner or later need to build institutions that embody and extend their founding spirit. Better ways of organizing enterprise, finance, and community services are already on hand, and co-ops are among the best of examples.

The opportunity to tell the story of cooperatives, the world’s largest social movement, is enhanced by the current global campaign, International Year of Cooperatives (IYC). Here again, there is a direct connection to the political and economic crises that are rocking the world. Cooperatives arose historically to defend workers and the commons against concentrated private wealth, and they continue to offer a means of democratically controlling capital and needed services. As the IYC campaign says, co-ops build a better world. They are building common wealth, in contrast to the pattern of financial gains going to the bigger investors.

Like other social movements and struggles—such as those seeking to win equal treatment under the law, or the right to organize in the workplace—cooperatives have had to fight for recognition. And they still need to be vigilant against having their way of conducting business undermined rather than extended. In laws and public policy, the scales are still tipped heavily toward large, investor-driven corporations—but cooperatives are getting

much more favorable attention.

Credit unions, the most widespread type of cooperative, are gaining members at a strong rate, while offering fair and secure financial services. Worker co-ops in the Bronx, Cleveland, the Bay Area, and elsewhere are demonstrating their potential for job creation and democratically owned industry. Low-income mobile home parks are being converted to cooperatives, allowing ownership and greater security for residents. Agricultural co-ops continue to offer producers essential mechanisms for value-added processing and marketing. And retail co-ops are helping lead a local food revolution.

These and a hundred other examples of cooperative performance and potential are available for telling cooperative stories and addressing the economic injustices that Occupy has made impossible to ignore. And notice that the Occupy protests, like most cooperative activity, have been conducted largely outside conventional political and media channels, forcing both participants and observers to consider how best to work for social and political change. Clearly, campaigns that devolve to focusing on the next election are selling short the potential for a deeper movement to reconstitute democracy.

Many cooperatives—while building a better food system, one based in community and in democratic ownership—have reached a stage of looking outside the box. Seeking major changes in the food system challenges dynamic retailers to build stronger relationships with local growers and distributors, other retailers, institutional allies, and public agencies. The market leadership that many food co-ops have achieved can be extended through long-term work with partners in rebuilding food economies.

This magazine will continue to highlight diverse local projects, and the cover section reports on two more examples of such partnerships. In Marquette, Mich., a small co-op is having a major impact in its remote region, initially through pioneering work on the fresh food supply and now with increasingly supportive institutional allies. In Seattle, PCC Natural Markets, our largest consumer food co-op, is partnering with a coalition of community kitchens that is strengthening local food resilience.

2012 promises to provide more than another year’s worth of cooperative success stories (find some at www.stories.coop). ■

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