

The Society for Co-operative Studies

REPORT OF THE ELEVENTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

1st/2nd APRIL 1977

at the Co-operative College, Stanford Hall

1 Attendance

MR. R. E. ASHDOWN	MR. W. D. BECK
PROF. J. BEISHON	MR. J. S. BESTWICK
MR. T. BLAIZE	MR. K. BRADSHAW
DR. R. BRISCOE	MR. R. BRISCOE
DR. T. CARBERY	MR. M. CHARNOCK
MR. S. P. CLARKE	MR. G. N. COOKE
MR. F. DANIELS	MRS. S. M. DAY
MR. J. W. DEANE	MR. P. DERRICK
MR. E. DIXON	MR. R. DONNELLY
MR. W. A. EDWARDS	MR. T. R. GARRATT
MR. M. GIBSON	MRS. A. GRIFFIN
MR. L. A. HARRISON	MRS. M. W. HORNE
MR. M. T. HORNSBY	MRS. D. JEUDA
MR. W. JONES	MR. M. KIRKMAN
MR. D. McDOUGALL	MR. F. McMAHON
MR. A. W. MARSDEN	MR. R. L. MARSHALL
MR. R. W. S. MAYHEW	MR. D. G. F. MUNSON
MRS. D. G. F. MUNSON	MR. A. S. NEWENS
MR. J. NEWTON	MR. A. PEATTIE
MR. C. F. PRATT	MR. W. J. PRICHARD
MRS. W. J. PRICHARD	MR. A. RHODES
MRS. R. M. RHODES	MR. J. E. F. RIDDLE
MR. C. J. F. RINGROSE	MR. B. J. ROSE
MR. W. D. ROUNCE	MR. D. J. ROY
MR. W. SHEARER	MR. N. SIDDON
MRS. J. STANSFIELD	MR. M. THOMAS
MR. W. P. WATKINS	MRS. W. P. WATKINS
MRS. J. M. WHEELER	MR. P. V. WILKINSON
DR. A. WILSON	MISS G. M. WINCH
MR. A. W. WOOD	MR. J. M. WOOD

2 Chairman's Introduction

In his opening remarks Mr. Gibson drew particular attention to the following features of the year's record:-

(a) That the membership had been well maintained - and that a specially urgent need was some increase in the number of "academics" within the Society. He emphasized his view that this would depend on evidence for academics that study of the Movement and its problems was appropriate for them and welcomed by the Movement.

(b) That the Bulletins had continued to provide a very useful service.

(c) That Conference had attracted good support and appeared to have established a firm place in the Co-operative calendar.

3 Report of the National Officers for 1976-77

(a) The Chairman invited the Secretary/Treasurer to introduce the report and Mr. Marshall elaborated some of the main headings already raised by the Chairman:-

(i) Membership: In particular he urged the importance of the involvement of "academics" by localised "branch activity" including universities, colleges and societies in fairly close proximity.

(ii) Bulletin: This would gain from more editorial "input" by way of commentary and analysis and this in turn would depend on much more forward planning. The programme tentatively envisaged by the National Officers was outlined.

- (iii) Conference and Annual General Meeting. Like the Chairman, he spoke of the possibility of a conference in September/October based on a Bulletin which would deal with the present diversification of Co-operative organisation in Britain.
- (iv) Finance. He reported a quite healthy position - but drew attention to the fact that the Receipts within the Report of the National Officers included a grant of £120 by the Scottish Co-operative Educational Association reserved for use by the Scottish Region.
- (b) Discussion of the Report. In the discussion the following were among the points made:-
- (i) That for the AGM and Conference, conflict of dates with the Annual Meeting of the Secretarial Executive of the National Association of Co-operative Officials should be avoided if at all possible.
- (ii) That Scottish experience, where there had been an increase of numbers for the Society, indicated the value of support from members of societies and from participants in forms of Co-operative enterprise beyond the distributive Movement.
- (iii) Hope that some regional development in the Midlands could match the location there of both the Co-operative College and of some of the principal Officers of the Society.
- (iv) That examination of "equal rights and opportunities" for women in the Movement was an area in which the Society might well show interest.

- (v) That in the recruitment of "academics" we should look not only to universities but to other educational establishments, and that a good target for the Society in 1977-78 would be for each present member to recruit at least one additional member.
- (vi) That the Society could well show interest in building up material for the study of the Co-operative Movement in schools - and here the present ambitions of the Education Executive and Department were outlined.

At the conclusion of the discussion the report and accounts as presented were approved.

4 Relations with the Public Enterprise Group

The meeting extended a welcome to Mr. D. J. Roy, now Chairman of the Public Enterprise Group, the British Section of CIRIEC. He reviewed the background against which recently PEG had incorporated Public and Co-operative Enterprise. It was generally agreed that it would be worth while for the Officers of the Society and of PEG to explore possibilities of collaboration and in the meantime to exchange journals.

5 Election of Officers

It was agreed that the following be invited to take office for session 1977-78:-

- (a) Presidents: Mr. L. A. Harrison
 Lord Jacques of Portsea Island
 Mr. R. L. Marshall
 Professor S. Pollard
 Mr. W. P. Watkins
 Mr. J. M. Wood.

(b) Chairman: Professor J. A. Banks.

It was reported that Mr. T. R. Edmondson, Vice-Chairman for 1975-77, had expressed his regret that because of pressure of work he was not able to offer himself for consideration for office in 1977-8.

(c) Vice-Chairmen: Mr. R. Byrom and Mr. A. Rhodes.

(d) Secretary and Treasurer: Mr. R. L. Marshall - until his retirement, when it was hoped that his successor, Dr. R. Houlton, would assume the post.

(e) Editors: Dr. T. F. Carbery and
Mr. R. L. Marshall.

Appreciation was expressed to Mr. Marshall for his service as Secretary/Treasurer over the ten years since the inauguration of the Society and good wishes to him in his retirement.

Mr. M. Gibson was warmly thanked for his services as Chairman in 1976-77.

CONFERENCE SESSION I

"Co-operatives and Trade Unions"

Mrs. D. Jeuda and Mr. A. S. Newens

Mrs. Jeuda observed that there was a too easy assumption of common beliefs and objectives, and a lack of a defined relationship between trade unions and the Co-ops. She asked if there was a justified special relationship, and, if so, how it should develop. The objectives of trade unions were: to give assistance and protection to individual members; to assist the members

in collective bargaining with employers, and to seek a more equitable society. Trade unions saw the Co-ops. as an important part of this third objective, as embodying a form of social ownership, with its root purpose the ideal of democracy, and the trade unions should give the Co-ops. active support for this reason.

Thus there were two dimensions to trade union relationships with Co-ops., the first internal and related to conditions of service of members, and the second general, based upon the nature of Co-operative enterprise, and the Co-ops. should expect general support for their principles (perhaps qualified by T.U. ignorance of retail conditions) especially in the area of Co-operative productive enterprise.

There were mutual obligations, including an obligation to recognise Co-op. objectives, and on the part of the Co-ops. themselves, an obligation to produce and supply good products, fair prices and good consumer information. In this area, Mrs. Jeuda commented, there was the problem that the Co-ops. were not distinguishable enough from other retailers. The ideal was, obviously, that the Co-ops. should pursue social as well as economic objectives, in the location of shops, the availability of services and the education of consumers, members and employees. The T.U. Movement should ensure that these objectives were more widely understood, by encouraging the development of self-help and industrial Co-operatives.

The expectations of USDAW of the Co-ops. were that the Co-ops. should give their employees the best wages and conditions in British industry. They realised the problems of the present situation, but deplored the fact that the employees of Co-op. societies were badly paid and that this state was taken for granted. If it was difficult to pay good wages, there was no reason why a lead was not being given in the areas of training and

career development; health and safety; and equal opportunities for men and women.

Referring to the debate on industrial democracy, Mrs. Jeuda said that membership democracy was no substitute for industrial democracy and that there was a need for joint responsibility for the training of workers' representatives. She regretted that the Bullock Report omitted Co-ops, but she said that worker participation was a live issue in the retail Co-ops. and that 50% consumers and 50% workers might be a workable pattern, although the method and proportions in industrial democracy were less important than the net results, which should be joint regulation in all areas relating to work and social policies like location of shops. She said that trade unions were not doing much in the area of joint regulation, and neither were societies - there was little joint regulation at local level, which was wholly preoccupied with short-term problem solving.

Mr. A. S. Newens

Mr. Newens began by reminding the conference that the Co-operative, trade union and socialist Movements in modern Britain all derived from a common origin and a common tradition with deep roots in the history of this country. He referred to the focal position of Robert Owen as father of Co-operation; a key figure in a great movement of trades unionism and an early socialist theorist.

A study of 18th century trade clubs shows that they had many objectives besides wage levels, and therefore it is not surprising that early 19th century ~~century~~ trade union leaders were often deeply committed to Owenite ideas. This commitment ranged from John Doherty in the 1820's to William Newton in the 1860's and beyond.

One reason for trade union involvement in Co-operative activities was a belief in industrial as well as distributive Co-operation on the Rochdale model. Mr. Newens said that people were apt to think that a great new discovery had been made at Meriden and Kirkby, whereas he quoted from the CWS Annual 1883 that 224 Co-operative manufacturing or productive societies, in a very wide range of industries, had ceased to exist between 1850 and 1883, and every strike in London in the last 20 years of the 19th century had produced attempts at independent workers' Co-operatives. Industrial Co-ops. were a strong tradition in the 19th century, although most had failed through lack of capital. However, the trade unions still had close links with the Co-operative Movement.

Some manifestations of these links were that groups of organised workers, such as the Railwaymen in London, formed many of the retail Co-ops., and the Co-operative Movement had always helped men on strike, as in the case of the Dublin Strike of 1913, the General Strike and, more recently, the help given by the London Society to the 1972 Miners' Strike. Also, the Co-operative Societies supported a closed shop for its employees - based upon USDAW membership.

However, contact between trade unions and Co-ops. has greatly lessened in recent years, as societies have become bigger, and the responsibilities of Directors more consuming, relationships have declined, and trade unionists and Co-operators have become biased towards the secular interests of their own organisations - Co-ops. towards trade prosperity, and trade unions towards wages and conditions of employment. Machinery for joint consultation has become neglected, as for example the National Council of Labour, which meets rarely, and then behaves as a negotiating body rather than as a means for the joint promotion of common ends.

In the affluent 1950's, there was a tendency to move away from the idea of a new society towards acceptance of a high wage economy based upon private enterprise; with the common assumption that slumps were a thing of the past, and all their causes were understood and resolved. The 1960's and 70's have disproved this, and we can now see the flaws of the capitalist system. Therefore, trade unions now perceive wage militancy as not enough, and are considering more basic issues than wages and conditions. The old reluctance of trade unions to become involved in management was being overcome, and conditions were now pushing trade unions into becoming involved with industrial democracy; with incomes policy; the Bullock Report; trade union representation on pension schemes and a renewed interest in workers' Co-operatives.

Mr. Newens proposed that, although the trade unions must pursue their own concerns in relation to Co-ops., they should regard Co-operative enterprises in a special light, as socially owned enterprises, and should therefore seek to understand and come to terms with the problems of Co-ops., recognising that they had special purposes and pressures, as for instance the need to maintain small shops, going further than their competitors in meeting consumers' needs, and devoting money to working-class causes. They should therefore exercise special care to avoid using Co-ops. as an arena for industrial demonstrations of strength, and to be sure to subject competitors to the same pressures as those Co-ops. were accustomed to; and seek amongst private traders to build membership, stop extension of shopping hours and insist on comparable redundancy agreements and other conditions of service.

Trade unions should recognise the desirability of industrial democracy, of which several models exist, of which the Bullock formula was one, and the Co-operative system another. Trade unions should seek to persuade

members to play a part in democratic opportunities presented by Co-ops., not merely as a pressure group on trade union interests, but to help run the enterprise successfully. Further, trade unions should seek to persuade members to support shops which support trade union principles, especially Co-ops.

Trade unions should seek to persuade Co-ops. to support their ideals, as in the case of South African goods - but that it was no use criticising Co-ops. for selling South African goods whilst trade unions assent to unloading and delivering them.

Mr. Newens further expressed the need for Co-operators, socialists and trade unions to act in all three spheres, and to insist, jointly, upon the Government pursuing progressive policies. He instanced the conflict of interests shown in the Co-operative Union and Trade Union approaches to the Government on the activity of the proposed Co-operative Development Agency, suggesting that the agency should serve both retail societies and productive organisations. The NCL should be revived and made a centre of joint activity, and Trades Councils should consider accepting Co-op. delegates. We should not be Co-operators, trade unionists and socialists with differing interests and standpoints, but all of us should be equally all three. This sort of recognition would be the way forward for all of us.

Summary of Discussion

Among the comments and questions raised were:-

- Why a 50-50 split of seats of Boards should be given to trade union representatives and consumer representatives, when the proportions of workers to members might be more like 1:100.

- NACO members - so-called "career officials" - were different from other employees in being of superior

grade and with more enterprise. Was it proposed that they should be instructed by other employees in the new concept of management?

- Co-ops. and trade unions did not have the same interests. Sometimes it was necessary to close most of the branches in a Society to save the remainder. If a Society went broke, would trade unions contribute to save it?

- While it was emphasized constantly that trade union and consumer society interests were opposed, it was agreed that there was too little dialogue. The suggestion was made that trade unions could negotiate for time off for workers to act on Boards.

- The criticism was also made that the Co-ops. made no contribution to new thinking on women's problems, especially in the areas of training for promotion. It was suggested that trade unions should invest funds in Co-ops. to extend their industrial base.

- There was a need to train workers in Co-operative ideas and principles.

- The assumption was false that unions were not taking responsibility for unpleasant decisions like rationalisations. USDAW had co-operated to the limit of their ability on rationalisation - and they believed in responsible trade unionism which involved long-term decision making.

- The two sides should stop blaming each other and try to narrow areas of disagreement and maximise areas of agreement.

CONFERENCE SESSION II

"Co-operatives and Trade Unions"

Dr. T. F. Carbery

Dr. Carbery introduced himself as a worker in the Labour Party, a Co-op. activist and a trade union member and teacher.

There was a view current that the three elements of the National Council of Labour were a trinity in harmony - with a vague perception of conflict as an aberration. This view was held by happy, optimistic people and people whose minds worked in a grand vision of the three battalions of the working class marching forward to fulfil a grand design. Sidney Pollard's re-evaluation of the history of the origins of the Co-operative Party showed this "grand design" idea with the view of the Co-operative Movement joining in a general move to the left in the Labour Movement in 1917. The idea of a fusion of working class movements was simply happy naivety or a belief in a grand global design.

He dismissed assertions that trade unionists could function as representatives of consumers' interests, and stressed that the reality of history is that Co-operators were not simple working men but better-off workers and members of the lower middle class. Trade unions were increasingly bourgeois in modern times - as in the expansion of white-collar unionism - they were certainly not the proletariat on the march.

Trade unions and Co-ops. represent divergent economic interests; the trade unions represented the interests of producers - not those of all workers - and were reluctant to accept market forces. They were ignorant of Co-ops. - which were redesigned to represent the interests of consumers. Co-ops. were fairly good employers, but had a lack of sensitivity for the lower paid.

Co-ops. had fostered trade union membership - especially in the case of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers - and had sustained strikers - but there was still a basic conflict - and we should not minimise the differences.

Summary of Discussion

Among the comments and questions raised were:-

- There were basic conflicts between producers and consumers - workers as trade unionists put producer interests first, although the social contract reduced this difference.
- The consumer had been described as "the serf in modern society" and employers and trade unions came to an understanding often at the expense of the consumer. There was a need for consumer representatives in nationalised industries, but a problem of selection.
- Co-ops. were largely catering for non-member customers, and, whilst consumer interests were more important, Co-ops. were opting out of serving their interests to the full.
- The modern Co-op. needed more mutual aid and less self-help in its ideals. There was a need for some idea of justice for other people as well as for oneself.
- Co-ops. can establish the just price for commodities and, if they function well, these would become the market prices. Co-ops. must realise that they were not justified in imitating the labour relations of private employers and they never will be. The original Co-op. workers were fellow-members with a stake in the Society - there was a need to re-establish this position.
- The importance of the Co-ops. to trade unions as an alternative model of social ownership was stressed, and it was suggested that for trade unions there should be a different relationship with Co-ops. than with private employers.

- There was uneven development in a market economy which produced differential degrees of consumer power. In active market areas there was the problem of self-exploitation with the consumer so dominant as to create over-competition. The trade union function was to limit competition by setting minimum standards. At the other extreme - the area of market security sought by large firms - the firm could exploit weak consumers. Here trade unions could collaborate in developing market power.

- The Industrial Common Ownership Movement must link to independent trade unions to obtain market power and there should be more effective consumer representation to secure adequate standards of service.

- Effective consumer action demanded adequate research and information systems. At present consumer representatives cannot compete in the areas of information and research backup with industry. In some areas, as for instance the Poverty Action groups, surprising degrees of effectiveness were being achieved.

- Worker involvement should be developed - there must be some place on the Boards for workers - but it was hard to accept that employees should dominate the Boards.

- Consumer interests should be stressed by Co-ops. and we should try to make consumer interests and Co-op. interests closer together - this may mean denouncing Co-op. societies or the Co-operative Wholesale Society.

- The best advice was Candour without Rancour - persist with candour and eventually a dialogue will develop at a new level.

