

Workers Co-operatives -- Some Prospects

Approaches to Training

I TRAINING FOR CO-OPERATION

by

DR. M. MELLOR and J. STIRLING

A major handicap for anyone forming a workers Co-operative, or any other type of Co-operative, is that most of us have no relevant educational background or experience upon which to build. Schools, families, work-places all tend to be hierarchical. Active participation is not a 'natural' role; for most people, in fact, the opposite applies. Nor is entrepreneurial spirit a 'gift of grace' it is a skill that must be learned; at present it is a skill that is passed through families or cultures. The confidence to take risks and responsibility is particularly difficult for working class people, the young and women who form many of the producer Co-operatives. Public officials and banks are also suspicious. If one person creates 30 jobs for others he or she is praised for service to the community; if 30 workers decide to provide jobs for themselves they are treated in a far more circumspect way. For working class Co-operators interaction with such officials is something of a torture in itself.

Evidence from our work with a local clothing Co-operative indicated that training, albeit of an informal nature, was a very heavy cost imposed upon the Co-operative in its first year of operation. We would anticipate these costs to be the same for all new Co-operatives for the following reasons:

- (1) A workers Co-operative cannot always select its participants by skill, they come on the basis of commitment. After a factory sit-in a very small proportion of the workforce will want to form a Co-operative, typically a dozen or so, and there will not necessarily be a match between skill and commitment. An original start-up Co-op may be better placed but there is no certainty this would be the case. Enthusiasm may be judged more important than skill.
- (2) Management and business skills must be learned. For example, Co-operators will need a basic grounding in book-keeping, tax, marketing and employment law etc.
- (3) Co-operative skills must be learned. How to make decisions democratically, how to self-administer and control. How to de-fuse areas of conflict in the absence of a boss upon whom frustration may be focussed. How to separate decision-making from production. How to separate debate about the business from personal issues.

We feel strongly that Co-operative skills must be learned alongside traditional business skills. This is an argument we found difficult to sustain in discussion with traditional business trainers, no matter how sympathetic to the Co-operative cause. A typical comment would be that, 'all businesses have to have certain skills, we can sort out the Co-operative aspect later'. We would wish to argue that being an efficient book-keeper does not make someone a good Co-operator, in fact it may make them quite the opposite. Tensions and jealousies may arise if one Co-operator has skills the others do not possess. The ability to communicate a skill and to keep the rest of the Co-operative informed is as essential as the skill itself.

We found in the sad litany of management advisers and helpers that trudged through the doors of the Co-operative with which we were involved and confirmed by other Co-operatives such as Fakenham (1) that skills without the Co-operative spirit and the power to communicate in a democratic fashion are virtually worthless. This is as important for those inside the Co-operative as those outside. If some members of the Co-operative are seen as 'locking themselves in the office all day' resentments on the shopfloor will arise.

Co-operative alongside Business Skills

The Co-operator needs to be helped to be made aware of all these difficulties and of the problem of combining Co-operative principles with commercial viability, of efficiency with democracy. These problems are not easily solved but an awareness can help deflect future problems and frustrations. This awareness must also be available to those working with Co-operatives, the local agencies and officials with whom they interact. To meet this need there is the welcome development of Co-operative Development Agencies throughout the country, building a body of expertise and able to act as a conduit between the Co-operatives and the wider community.

Our solution to these difficulties outlined was to take the principle of Co-operation as the starting point of our training courses and develop other inputs from that basis. This meant that the course had to be part of Co-operative development locally and so we developed a close involvement with the Northern Region Co-operative Development Association and ICOM North. The NRCDA was not seen simply as a recruiting agency but as an integral part of the course. In this way an important educational objective was achieved. Participants did not study in an ivory tower, but had strong links with the practical development of local Co-operation. In this respect, outside speakers have an important role to play and we involved Co-operators, employees from local authorities, government, banks and other agencies to give practical advice. We found a 'panel' session at the end of the course was a very useful feature.

Course Organisation

Course organisation is a most important feature and we are aware of a number of different methods that have been adopted across the country (evening classes, one day a week and so on). Our decision was for a course that lasted for three full days (Monday-Wednesday) on two consecutive weeks.

Advantages:

- (1) It was below the 21 hours per week including meal times required by DHSS.
- (2) It provided a continuity and made the students feel temporarily part of the Polytechnic community.
- (3) The spare two days of the week could be used in the library; finding the relevant expertise in the Polytechnic, or talking to banks, local authorities etc.
- (4) There was more opportunity for continuous discussions among the participants, for example, over the lunch break.
- (5) We could bring in outside speakers more easily.

Disadvantages:

- (1) Working Co-ops could not come – the time needed was too high a cost.
- (2) There was not enough time to digest the material.

Course Programme

The following is an outline of our course programme based on two three hour sessions each day: –

- Day 1 Course introduction. The principles and practice of Co-operatives.
- Day 2 Sources of finance and financial control.
- Day 3 Business Administration.
- Day 4 Feasibility and marketing.
- Day 5 Co-operative organisation and decision making.
- Day 6 A.M. – Employment and Co-operative law, P.M. – Panel session to be addressed by representatives of local Co-operatives, local agencies and local authorities.

Given the wide variety of educational background that recruits to Co-operative courses are likely to have it is most important that the class is student centred. That is, that the teaching follows two principles. First, that classes begin at the students' point of departure and not at a level