

A View from a Worker Co-operative

by Martin Meteyard

I never got round to doing a spot check among worker Co-ops in the UK to see what they knew about the ICA. However it's a fair bet that most of them would have professed complete ignorance, while the rest would at best have known only of the ICA's existence rather than any of its activities (except, perhaps, for the forthcoming Manchester Congress).

Perhaps this is not so surprising. After all, how many members of the Labour Party know that it is affiliated to the Socialist International - let alone what that organisation gets up to? Perhaps it is just a reflection of the undeniable insularity of people and organisations in the UK.

Sometimes I wonder if the way that such international organisations operate - their remoteness and apparent lack of accountability - does not in turn reinforce that insularity. If the ICA or any other international organisation has no apparent relevance to what we do, and if it doesn't cost us anything either (a point to which I will return), then does it really matter?

Yet to my mind it does matter - a great deal, in fact. As all the background documentation to the ICA Congress makes clear, we live in an increasingly international world, dominated by global companies and institutions - and the challenge for Co-operators is for humanity around the globe. And if that is so, we need our own international organisations which are representative, responsive, flexible, and above all effective in influencing events and promoting change.

Has the ICA the potential to become such an organisation (which sadly it is not at present - at least in the perception of worker Co-ops in the UK)? Perhaps, perhaps not. My doubts are as much a product of my own ignorance here as anything else.

However, what would it have to do to become such an organisation? Let me outline at least some of the changes I see as necessary to achieve such a transformation.

1. Bringing the Structure Closer to Home

At the moment the Co-operative Union, which is, of course, predominantly based on the consumer Co-operative sector in the UK, is under its rules, the coordinating agent for the four UK organisations with representatives

on the ICA General Assembly - the others are the CWS, CIS and Plunkett Foundation. The Union does pass on information, from its rôle in the ICA, to other sectors - (eg. to ICOM in the case of worker Co-operatives). There are also mechanisms for at least some sectors to participate independently in particular aspects of the ICA's work: e.g. ICOM is a member of CICOPA, the producer/worker Co-op section of the ICA, which meant that I was able to attend the CICOPA conference in Vitoria last year as an ICOM delegate.

And yet, and yet . . . while it's very nice for me to be able to go to Vitoria, or attend the CICOPA plenary in Manchester prior to the ICA Congress, it doesn't really mean very much to the vast majority of worker Co-operative members in the UK. The link is there, but it's not exactly powerful. So what improvements can be made?

First, we probably need to look at how the co-ordinating function for the ICA in the UK could be carried out in a way that truly involves all sectors. We need a good information flow so that all are up-to-date with and feel involved in international developments. This undoubtedly needs to include use of relevant information technology and electronic mail systems - an area where the worker Co-operative sector already has much experience.

Still, as I know from my own experience, it is very, very difficult to extend contact and involvement beyond representative bodies into the constituent Co-operative organisations themselves (let alone their individual members). Perhaps there needs also to be some sort of modest financial contribution from interested Co-operatives - possibly built into the membership fee of representative organisations such as ICOM - which would be passed on to the ICA in exchange for copies of its official journals and access to other exchange and networking possibilities (see below). In this way, individual Co-operatives would at least have an opportunity and a choice about involvement in the international Co-operative community.

2. Promoting Co-operation as an International Solution

The downfall of Soviet communism was pronounced by one prominent US historian as signifying "the end of history" - capitalism was finally triumphant, there were no pages left to be written in the social evolution of humanity.

Yet as some of the background papers for the forthcoming ICA Congress underline, the social problems of the world are becoming more and more challenging as we move into the 21st century - with some potential consequences which are truly frightening.

With our great knowledge and experience of the effectiveness of Co-operative solutions in almost all areas of life and work, is it not incumbent upon us - and our international organisation, the ICA - to promote their relevance much more vigorously in today's world?

One of the key problems experienced by worker Co-operatives in the UK today is a sense of isolation, a failure to identify with the wider movement or feel that they are part of something bigger. Indeed, many worker Co-ops tend to downplay their Co-operative status in business dealings for fear it may give the wrong impression!

Co-operatives and Co-operation need to become part of global political debate on the future. There needs to be a new recognition and pride as to their relevance - the warm glow that I suspect most of us experience when we see the advertisements for the Co-operative Bank on television is a small example of the sense of common identity we need to recreate.

And who better to take on this role than the ICA, strengthened as it will be by the debate and documentation leading up to the Manchester Congress? Only if Co-operative organisations of all descriptions can feel, not just comfortable, but inspired by coming together within the framework of a common vision for humanity can we really say that we are starting to tackle this task with the determination which it requires.

3. Promoting Greater Awareness within the Movement Itself

Knowledge of the different types and branches of Co-operation is still poor - poorly communicated, and poorly understood. This is true not just in the UK but also overseas.

Recently my own worker Co-operative, GreenCity Wholefoods in Glasgow, played host to a group of overseas students who were visiting in Scotland after completing their courses at Stanford Hall. It quickly became evident that, although we were all Co-operators, we were in real danger of talking completely at cross purposes.

"You have been trading for 17 years and you only have 20 members - that's not very good, is it?" No, it wasn't really a criticism of our economic performance, our turnover of £1.8m, or our creation of 20 jobs - it was just a fundamental inability to connect the issue of membership with that of employment, to understand that in the case of a worker Co-operative the number of members is limited to the number of employees who can draw a living wage from the business.

For these visitors, successful Co-operative organisation was all about maximising the number of members - and we were the first example of a worker Co-operative which they had ever come across. From that point of view, I suppose it was an important visit and exchange of ideas and experiences. But at the same time, is it not worrying that these "students" - mostly, in fact, senior managers and government officials sponsored to attend the College - should have remained in such ignorance of a major branch of Co-operation until that moment?

It worries me that with an international, UN-affiliated organisation such as the ICA - and with successful travel organisations such as Co-op Travel - we don't really seem to offer ordinary Co-operators the chance to see and understand Co-operation at work in other countries and other branches.

Of course, individual initiatives are taken from time to time to offer one-off study tours, visits, and exchanges. but there does not seem to be any systematic effort to offer ongoing programmes using the undoubted resources of the worldwide Co-operative movement. Another area for possible improvement?

4. The Business of Co-operation - Trade

Finally, it is perhaps worth asking whether the ICA could be doing more in terms of influencing the patterns of what Co-operatives are basically all about - trading.

Co-operation amongst Co-operatives is all very fine as a principle. However, the ICA Congress itself, perhaps, will miss something if it holds its discussions under the banner of 'From Values to Principles'? What about 'From Values to Principles to Actions'?

The sad reality is that co-operation amongst Co-operatives seems to be more notable by its absence than by anything else, even within particular branches or countries, let alone internationally.

Let me refer again to an observation and example given by the late *Will Watkins* in *Co-operative Principles Today & Tomorrow* (page 33):

"A special case of the problem of welding Co-operative consumers' and producers' organisations together in a common, coherent system is presented by the growth of Co-operation in the developing regions and clamant needs of the latter to market their products in the economically advanced countries. To expect the newly-liberated nations to make progress without enabling them to obtain a steadily increasing share of world trade is to ask them to lift themselves by their own boot-strings.

“The young Co-operatives of those countries expect more than good advice and technical assistance from the older movements; they want exchanges of goods and services on an equal business footing.

“But between the consumers’ Co-operative movements in the temperate zones, working their way back to the sources of raw materials, and the Co-operative movements of tropical producers of raw materials, working their way forward to their ultimate export markets, there exist, for example in the soap and edible oil industries, mammoth capitalist combines competing with each in its own sphere and only likely to be circumvented, to say nothing of dislodged, by the inter-locking of the two forms of Co-operation and co-ordinated action at both ends of the productive process.”

Why is this not happening? Why is the ICA apparently doing very little (if anything) to promote this sort of trading relationship? Why do Co-operative managers and directors at the most senior level continue to be at best ignorant or at worst dismissive when issues such as fair trade and Co-operative sourcing are raised with them?

Why do successful ethical initiatives such as the Cafedirect brand of coffee (grown by producer Co-operatives in Central America, marketed by a worker Co-op in the UK) arise from ad hoc encounters involving aid agencies and development workers, and not as part of a sustained and systematic approach supported at all levels of the Co-operative movement?

Documentation, Discussion - and Action

The ICA is celebrating its centenary, and deserves our best wishes on this occasion. The documentation produced for the Manchester Congress gives grounds for hope that it will re-assert its relevance to Co-operators everywhere. But it is the actions which follow that Congress and lead on towards the 21st century which will determine whether that hope is ultimately false or real.

The Author

MARTIN METEYARD has been a member of GreenCity Wholefoods Worker Co-operative in Glasgow since 1983, and is currently its General Manager. He has served on the General Council of ICOM (Industrial Common Ownership Movement - UK federation of worker Co-operatives) since 1986, and is one of its representatives on the editorial board of *New Sector* magazine. He chaired the conferences of the International Federation for Alternative Trade (IFAT) in 1991 and 1993, and is also active in CWS Scottish Co-op as chair of its Glasgow divisional committee and a member of its new Central Board.