

CO-OPTING PRECARIOUSNESS: CAN WORKER COOPERATIVES BE  
ALTERNATIVES TO PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT?

CO-OPTING PRECARIOUSNESS: CAN WORKER COOPERATIVES BE  
ALTERNATIVES TO PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT FOR MARGINALIZED  
POPULATIONS? A CASE STUDY OF IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE WORKER  
COOPERATIVES IN CANADA

By

AMANDA WILSON, B.A.

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TITLE: Co-opting Precariousness: Can Worker Cooperatives be alternatives to precarious employment for marginalized populations? A case study of immigrant and refugee worker cooperatives in Canada

AUTHOR: Amanda Wilson, B.A. (Queen's University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Donna Baines

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration into the potential for worker cooperatives to be conceptualized and experienced as an alternative to precarious employment for immigrants and refugees. It argues that current analysis and responses to precarious employment fail to fully address the root causes of precarious employment and fail to suggest what forms of alternative employment relations we should be striving to build. It is argued that by tracing the roots of precarious employment to the organization of work, the worker cooperative model can be seen as a potential solution to these root problems. This hypothesis is explored through two case studies of immigrant worker cooperatives, analyzing the employment experiences of several of its members. It concludes that workers cooperatives appear to provide alternatives in the areas of control, security and social capital and empowerment. However, more work is needed to support and facilitate the development and sustainability of cooperatives in order to improve in the areas of wages and formal benefits. Despite the challenges of worker cooperatives, the author argues that they remain an important tool, invoking a politics of the act that seeks to build alternative spaces of employment without relying on government or employers.

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## INTRODUCTION

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I became interested in the two topics of worker cooperatives and precarious employment as a result of a desire to link an abstract, somewhat utopian vision with very real and prominent challenges in society. I am very interested in researching alternative, non-capitalist organizations of work, such as worker cooperatives, collectives etc, and trying to find ways to link that model to pressing, current issues in the world of work.

The objective of my project is to analyze whether, or to what degree, worker cooperatives are providing members of marginalized populations with a viable alternative to precarious employment, and if so, in what ways. I have examined cases where cooperatives were envisioned and organized as a mechanism to provide employment for members of immigrant and refugee communities. In doing so I have assessed how these employment opportunities have fared in comparison to forms of precarious employment which are often all that is available to immigrants and refugees. I hope to provide some insights into bridging the gaps in current research between the problem of precarious employment and the potential solution of cooperatives. My goal is to contribute to an alternative discourse on slowing the tide of precarious employment through promoting and supporting cooperative business models.

My desire to research worker cooperatives is in response to much of the current literature on precarious employment and the various responses put forth by academics and community activists to “stem the tide” of precarious employment relationships. The existing research is limited in that it fails to address the root causes of precarious employments and fails to offer solutions or alternatives that can be organized by workers themselves, today. Much has been written on the topic of precarious employment but

few solutions address the fundamental and underlying constraints of the current organization of work. There is a need for solutions which go beyond reforms to legislation and new organizing models, that offer a different model of work which provides people, particularly those most often trapped in precarious employment, with decent and fair employment opportunities.

Focusing on immigrant and refugee populations was in part a decision of practicality but also due to the higher incidence of precarious employment relations within these groups. There is an abundance of research documenting the lack of decent employment opportunities for immigrants and refugees, and the discrimination and marginalization they face in the job market (See Canadian CED Network; Jackson 2002, or Das Gupta, 2006). Throughout Canada, there are worker cooperatives organized by recent immigrants and refugees, low-income women and Aboriginal people, which are attempting to break the mould of precarious employment. Given this context, it becomes particularly important to assess the ability of worker cooperatives to provide alternatives to precarious employment to those segments of society who face these heightened risks and challenges.

My research analyzes worker cooperatives as a practice rather than a formal status. While legal status as a cooperative is important, I am more interested in the organization of work within coops, their practices of democracy, worker control, and collective decision-making within the organization; examining how work can be re-organized in ways that are empowering, healthy and fulfilling for workers. I am interested in exploring what alternative spaces of employment exist in the present, and

discovering what challenges they face, and how they might be better supported and facilitated.

Coming from a highly critical perspective of capitalism and capitalist work organizing, I am partly interested in worker cooperatives because I see them as an important element of building post or non-capital production spaces. I am also critical of the state-led and reform-based initiatives, which maintain power structures and hierarchy; and ones that fail to address, or attempt to address the fundamental root causes of problems. As such, I seek out radical solutions to challenges confronting workers that can be self-organized, self-implemented and self-empowering.

This research aims to provide a space for members of worker-coops to share their struggles and experiences in creating an alternative model that provides them and their fellow members decent and fulfilling employment in an increasingly exploitative and precarious employment environment. The experiences of those involved in these projects are explored to highlight their successes and challenges so that the experiences of the workers of these coops can be share with other worker cooperatives and communities, struggling to find ways of obtaining decent and fair employment.

Chapter One and Two make up the literature review portion, *Precarious Employment and the Labor Market Marginalization of Immigrants*, and *What it means to Cooperate on the Job*. Chapter Three, *Conceptualizing Worker Cooperatives as a Response to Precarious Employment*, outlines a framework through which to conceptualize worker cooperatives as a response to precarious employment. Chapter Four and Five present the two case studies, followed by Chapter Six, which is an analysis and discussion of the data.

## **Methodology**

My thesis is a qualitative analysis of worker cooperatives organized by immigrants and refugees in Canada. They will be examined through a literature review and qualitative interviews with two case study cooperatives. The research is presented using an ethnographic style, interweaving the primary research data into the literature where appropriate (Geertz 1973). This research project has received ethics approval from the McMaster Research Ethnic Board.

My research began with a literature review of relevant material on the topics of worker cooperatives, and connections to marginalized or vulnerable communities in society and their struggles to improve their working conditions and opportunities. In addition, literature on the topic of precarious employment and possible responses and solutions was explored, with specific reference to the labour market conditions for immigrants and refugees, as well as looking at some of the employment strategies utilized by social agencies. The literature included academic materials, publications from community organization and non-governmental organizations and documents published from the cooperative movement itself. This literature review served to ground my own primary research and to situate the individual case studies within the broader context of worker cooperatives in Canada and the nature and scope of precarious employment within the labour market.

My primary research consisted of a comparative case study analysis of two worker cooperatives in Canada, which were organized, by immigrants and refugees as a means of self-employment. A case study approach allows for access to a wide range of information sources, in addition case studies are well suited to research where the values

and perceptions of research participants are of great interest (Whitefield and Strauss 1998, 101). Cooperatives were selected through Internet searches of worker cooperatives in Canada, to identify those organized by immigrants and refugees. Cooperatives were contacted by email or phone to solicit the participation of individual members.

At each case study cooperative, interviews were conducted with cooperative members. Participants were invited to review the interview questions and make any comments or suggestions prior to the interview. Oakley writes that interviews seeking to be non-exploitative should treat participants as more than "an instrument of data", allowing both the researcher and participant to shape the process (1981:48, as quoted in Kirby et al. 138). The interviews were semi-structured, and composed of open-ended questions. These questions were used to encourage the participant to share their stories and experiences in a free manner (Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein, 1997: 234). Unstructured interviews are particularly useful in case studies and life history approaches because they allow for unanticipated information to come to light (Kirby et al, 134). Initial questions were more structured to elicit some basic facts about the research participant and the cooperative. Participants were asked to describe their experiences at their place of employment, and to compare these experiences with other opportunities held previously or that they believe to be available to them in a non-cooperative work setting; and to describe how their status as an immigrant or refugee has affected their employment. Participants were given the opportunity to "ask back"; which can create a "richer and more meaningful description" of the experiences of the participants (Oakley 1981, Kirby et al. 2006; 200). Participants were invited to review a transcript of the interview and a

summary of the overall data collection, referred to as member checks by Kirby et al., to give final input in the shaping and direction of the research findings.

In one case the interviews were conducted collectively, due to the preference of the research participants; the other set of interviews were conducted individually. They took place, at the choice of the participations, at the cooperative, in one case in an office, the other in a restaurant. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In total, five worker cooperative members were interviewed, three women and two men. Three of the research participants were at one cooperative and two at the other. All research participants had come to Canada as refugees during the 1980s and 1990s.

In addition, observations were made by the author during interviews to complement the interview data about the cooperative members and the physical cooperative business itself.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis was conducted, broadly using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Charmaz writes that grounded theory methods provide tools for analysis processes, particularly the interaction between human agency and social structures (Charmaz 2005, 508). Within the realm of social justice, grounded theory helps to move beyond description, to understand and locate “subjective and collective experience in larger structures and increase understanding of how these structures work” (Charmaz, 508).

Data were selected from within the transcripts utilizing open sampling, whereby portions of the transcript are identified and highlighted that facilitate greater understanding of the categories and their qualities (Glaser, 1978). Through open coding,

researchers are able to “uncover, name and develop concepts” (Strauss and Corbin 1998, 102); allowing the data to be broken down into minute parts, where they can be examined for similarities and differences (Strauss and Corbin, 102). The data from both case studies were analyzed and coded according to common themes and experiences, which were informed by suggested categories of the existing literature. Within grounded theory, instead of importing a set of rigid concepts into the field, such preconceptions should be treated as “sensitizing concepts” to explore during the research process, to understand how and why, and under what conditions these concepts exist (Charmaz, 512). The data from case studies were first analyzed separately, to develop a narrative of each cooperative, and then each narrative was compared to identify commonalities and differences in the experiences of the cooperatives. Grounded theory is inherently comparative, but it begins with a study of the data to understand the specific experience or situation (Charmaz, 514). This then suggests new questions and pursuits at the comparative level.

Throughout the analysis process, I gave particular focus to the social context of the research participant’s experiences, and how that has impacted or influenced the data (Kirby and McKenna 1989 129). In addition, the analysis was informed by intersubjectivity, whereby the voices of the research participants were given equal weight as any of the data obtained from academic or published sources, and I was careful that the experiences described by research participations were not overshadowed or discounted by existing theory or assumptions about workers cooperatives, or immigrants and refugees (Kirby and McKenna, 1989, 129)

### *Limitations*

There were several factors that must be noted that were limiting to my research in one sense or another. One was the time constraint presented by research participants. While cooperative members appeared interested in participating in the research, it was clear that the time they could give was limited and constrained by other demands on their time, given their comparatively marginalized position in society. In one case, interviews were conducted at the cooperative during business hours, at the request of participants, and interviews had to be interrupted in order to allow cooperative members to perform their duties.

A second constraint was that, given the limited research done on immigrant worker cooperatives previously, it was difficult to obtain much background research on the cooperatives prior to conducting interviews. What little was available consisted of newspaper articles and short, descriptive case studies produced by cooperative research institutes for educational purposes.

Finally, the small sample size limits the degree to which these findings can be used to make generalizations about the experiences of immigrants and refugees with worker cooperatives in general. While it does not take away from the insights obtained, it highlights the need for further research to confirm and elaborate on the findings.

## Literature Review

### **CHAPTER ONE: Precarious Employment and the labour market marginalization of Immigrants**

Precarious employment relations are defined by Vosko as: “atypical employment contracts, limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low wages, and high risks of ill health” (Vosko 2006a: 379). Growing precarious employment has aggravated the already tenuous position of many women, immigrants and people of colour who face marginalization in the labour market and in society at large (Cranford et al. 2006, 353). By 2002, one third of workers in Canada were working in jobs with elements of precariousness (part time, contract, temporary, own-account self-employed) (Lewchuk et al. 2003, 24). The rise in precarious employment reflects “a loss of control over employment by a larger groups of workers” (Lewchuk et al., 24). Precarious employment is a dynamic concept that encompasses considerations of job, person, household and community (Cranford and Vosko 2006, 48).

Contrary to the often-held assumption, the rise in precarious employment is not tied to the growth of the service sector, rather, its roots are found in transformations of the economy as a whole and the changing nature of labour market policies (Smith 2005, 71). Lewchuk et al. assert

...employers and policy makers have used fears about global competitiveness, and tools like the privatization of services, just-in-time production and flexible human resource management to create a climate where employers have permission to break the implicit agreements associated with standard employment relationships (Lewchuk et al., 25).

It is important to talk of precarious employment, not just precarious work. Much of the analysis of precarious employment focuses on non-standard *jobs*, but not necessarily the accompanying, and perhaps more significant employment relations

(Cranford and Vosko, 48). It is often these factors that fall outside the bounds of the legal contract of employment that have the greatest significance. Cranford and Vosko claim that “a narrow emphasis on employment forms and work arrangements fails to disclose these linkages and limits the possibilities for understanding the dynamics of precarious employment” (Cranford and Vosko, 66). As such, it is useful to view precarious employment as a multidimensional concept encompassing continuity, vulnerability, protection and income (Lewchuk et al., 2003). Each of these factors interacts and extends beyond the boundaries of a particular job, existing like a fog, trapping precarious workers in a set of oppressive and exploitative relations.

## **1.2 Marginalization of Immigrant and Refugee Populations in Labor Market**

Precarious employment is a highly racialized and gendered phenomenon (Cranford et al. 2006; Vosko 2006). Cranford and Vosko’s research shows that social location has significant implications for experiences of precarious employment. Simply put, white men are, generally, in less precarious employment relations than white women, and racialized men and women (Cranford and Vosko, 60). However, the dispersal of different forms of precariousness makes it more complex. Women of colour are more likely to hold part-time permanent employment than men of colour, while immigrant women of colour are more likely to work full-time than white women, but consistently earn less for their work (Cranford and Vosko, 59-60). Women of colour are most likely to be in and out of work, and to have less than one year on the job, an indicator of contingency (Cranford and Vosko, 65). Rather than a clear cut categorization of who experiences precarious employment relations, the reality is a complex web of overlapping and co-existing identities and circumstance.

Precarious employment is not a new phenomenon for many workers. For workers of colour, immigrants and refugee workers and Aboriginal workers, this is, unfortunately, familiar territory (Das Gupta 2006, 319). This systemic discrimination and exclusion has left workers of colour with the least desirable jobs, low pay, lack of security, and high exploitation, for decades (Das Gupta, 320). Aboriginal workers received similar treatment; “marginalized, disenfranchised, and relegated to precarious employment” (Das Gupta, 320). For Aboriginal workers and workers of colour, precarious employment is an extension of their precarious citizenship status and situation in society at large. They are constructed as the “other” against the white male citizen; they are seen as non-citizens, non-workers, and dependants (Das Gupta, 320).

### *Immigrants and Refugees*

Immigrants and refugees face particular barriers related to their status and experience as “newcomers” which often leads to a life of precarious employment. They are disadvantaged due to language skill requirements, an obsession for Canadian experience, leading to a lack of recognition of foreign credentials and skills, and the racist assumptions and beliefs of employers. Women racialized immigrants and refugees are particularly disadvantaged (Canadian CED Network, 3). All of these factors interact to create an environment in which it is extremely difficult to find decent and fair employment.<sup>1</sup>

Immigrants and refugees face both unemployment and underemployment. In 1998, only 58 percent of recent immigrants (arriving between 1991-96) had employment all year, compared to 70 percent of adult Canadians (Galabuzi 2004, 184). Immigrant

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<sup>1</sup> These are in addition to other barriers they face in other facets of their lives, including a lack of affordable housing and accessing healthcare (Canadian CED Network, 2).

women share the title of highest unemployment rate along with Canadian-born racialized men (Cheung 2005, 15). A study on the employment realities for immigrant women in Toronto found a high prevalence of underemployment among those interviewed (Working Skills Centre 2002). For many of the respondents, the work that was available to them entailed domestic work, physical labour and/or repetitive tasks requiring only basic skills and education. It was overwhelmingly low paid and without benefits. The women trapped in these types of jobs complained of strenuous work, harsh conditions, health problems and injuries due to rapid pace of work and vulnerability to being laid-off (Working Skills Centre 2002, 24). These are key elements of precarious employment relations.

Immigrants and refugees become caught in a vicious cycle of needing Canadian experience, but unable to get it anywhere (Brouwer 1999, 14). In a desperate attempt to obtain the required “Canadian experience” and receive an income, immigrants and refugees take whatever job they can get, often working with a temp agency, door-to-door salesperson, commission-based work, security guards and taxi drivers. Much of this work is often falsely labeled as self-employment or independent work (Das Gupta, 325). Jackson labels these jobs “survival jobs” which have no security and lead nowhere (Jackson 2002, 13).

Despite the fact that immigrants have, on average, higher levels of education, they are segregated into jobs requiring only basic skills and training. In 2003, of recent immigrants coming between 1996-2000, 63% had completed university education, compared to 23% of the Canadian population; and this number has been increasing (Galabuzi 188). A study conducted by the Working Skills Centre in Toronto highlighted

cases of women with university degrees taking jobs as cleaners and general laborers (Working Skills Centre, 24). Immigrants with high levels of education and experience end up as taxi drivers, security guards, janitors, and fast food delivery people (Galabuzi, 190).

As a result of not recognizing foreign credentials, only 56% of engineers who immigrated to Canada in the beginning of 1990s found work as engineers (Jackson, 13). Of the 10,729 immigrants that arrived to Canada between 1991-1994 who were classified as civil, mechanical, chemical or electrical engineering, only 5,770 had found jobs in their field by April 2006 (Brouwer, 5). The result of these systemic barriers is “a highly educated and experienced underclass of unemployed or underemployed immigrant professionals and tradespeople, with many finding only low-end, low-skill, contract, temporary or part-time, casualized employment” (Galabuzi, 190).

The poverty and marginal employment of racialized immigrants is not transitory or short-lived (Jackson, 10). In contrast to the “catch up” theory, that over the years, immigrant’s position in labour markets will improve as their skills and language improve, Cheung argues that “immigrant workers of colour who have been settled for many years still have higher unemployment rates and higher low-income rates than their white counterparts (Cheung, 24). Jackson concurs, noting that workers of colour who came to Canada in the 1980s are still trying to “catch up” (Jackson, 1). A study by the Canadian Council on Social Development found that, in 1996, recent (after 1991) immigrants had a poverty rate of 52.1%, immigrants who arrived in 1986 and after still had a poverty rate of 35.1% (Jackson, 9). Based on 1996 census data, the average income of a racialized immigrant family who arrived between 1991-95 was \$15,042 (Jackson, 9). Those who

came between 1986-1990 didn't fare much better at \$19,960 (Jackson, 9). Even after a decade of living and working in Canada, racialized immigrants are still struggling below the poverty line (Jackson, 10). And this is not a temporary set-back: "over 90% of those who fail to find work in their field in the first three years, tend to end up permanently in other sectors" (Galabuzi, 190).

The final piece of this puzzle, which has implications for all the above-mentioned factors, is racism. The barriers faced by immigrants and refugees are largely imposed; they do not naturally exist within the labour market to "unconsciously" segregate immigrants and refugees into certain types of jobs and occupations. Racist beliefs interact with these so-called requirements, creating a situation where it is assumed that racialized immigrants lack the necessary language skills, when in reality they may only lack an English free of accents; the supposed need for Canadian experience is based on an assumption that the education and training offered in the South is not of equal value to that of Western countries.

Racialized workers, both immigrant and Canadian born, continue to face racism in the labour market. A study done by the Canadian Labor Congress found that one in four racialized respondents said they were subject to workplace harassment or discrimination in the past year (Jackson, 13). They also experience lower levels of pay and employment compared to white workers (Jackson, 14). The earnings of racialized workers are 15% less than national average, with the biggest gap among recent racialized immigrants (Jackson, 3; 12). Racialized workers are disproportionately represented in low-income sectors and occupations, while they are under-represented in high income sectors and occupations (Galabuzi, 175). Galabuzi concludes that the emergence of non-

standard forms of work and the increased numbers of racialized members in the labour market through Canada's reliance on immigrants from the South have deepened sectoral segregation and helped racialize poverty" (Galabuzi, 197).

Li notes that non-white immigrants are particularly disadvantaged because of the added label of "racialized" which devalues them in the labour market (Li 2003, 13). This becomes increasingly significant given the rising proportion of racialized immigrants coming to Canada in the past 20 years (Jackson, 11). The restructuring of the global economy has shifted the identity of most immigrants coming to Canada, in terms of their country of origin and the conditions under which they immigrate. By the 1990s, over 75% of immigrants to Canada were people of colour, coming from countries in the South (Galabuzi, 176; Jackson, 2). The growth of the complex label of "racialized-newcomer" creates an added challenge for people of existing in a foreign space complicated by a hostile attitude by many employers and government policies.

Despite the mounting evidence of systemic barriers facing immigrant workers, the focus of government and employer strategies continues to be on the individual skills of immigrants, not on the structures of racism or precariousness in the labour market (Galabuzi, 190). Employment solutions for immigrants and refugees emphasize the need to "retrain", to learn English, and attend basic workshops on resume writing and job search skills. This approach is inconsistent with the realities of immigrant workers and largely ignores the deficit of decent jobs. A research report on the experience of marginalized immigrant women in the labour market by the Working Skills Centre is one of the few reports that address this inconsistency between policy and reality. They argue that joining "the ranks of the 'working poor'" is not an acceptable employment strategy

for immigrants, (Working Skills Centre, 58). Immigrants are not just looking for marginal jobs. They deserve decent jobs, a sense of community, and a space in which they can develop and expand their skills and knowledge.

Given this over-representation in precarious employment relations and the lack of solutions that address the fundamental, and more structural causes of precarious employment, worker coops organized by immigrant and refugee communities, as well as other marginalized groups, are in many senses at the forefront of the struggle against precarious employment.

## **CHAPTER TWO: What it means to Cooperate on the Job**

If you were to ask a person on the street what a worker cooperative is, you would most likely get a wide range of answers, many of them misguided or incorrect.

Cooperatives are commonly misconstrued as “small, unifunctional, closely managed, localized, ethical enterprises whose sole purpose is service” (McGillivray and Ish 1992, 1). Many believe that making money is not a real or legitimate purpose of cooperatives, their only purpose being to serve a need of the community. In reality, cooperatives serve a variety of social and business purposes; they are multifunctional (McGillivray and Ish 1). McGillivray and Ish argue that to fully understand cooperatives, one must “go beyond annual reports and public documents into the philosophy, both written and oral, of cooperative enterprise” (McGillivray and Ish, 1).

Worker cooperatives are founded upon the principles of worker ownership and control (Carter 1996, 57). The Canadian Worker Cooperative Federation defines worker cooperatives as “enterprises that are owned and democratically controlled by the employees.” The main purpose of a worker cooperative is to provide employment for its members; each member purchases a share in the cooperative or pays a membership fee and has an equal vote with all other members (CWCF). Worker-owners hold two basic rights: the voting right to elect a board of directors or management committee and the rights to the surplus or net income of the company (Axworthy and Perry 1988, 6).

Cooperative production is based on a critique of both liberal individualism and centralized socialism. It embodies the principles of “autonomy, participatory democracy, equality, equity and solidarity” (De Sousa Santos and Rodrigues-Garavito 2006, xxvii). According to Axworthy and Perry, the main objective of worker cooperatives should be

to “emancipate workers from the passive role of a commodity” (Axworthy and Perry, ch. 1, 9). It is part of a quest for ‘economic suffrage’, a more equitable distribution of economic responsibility and decision-making power. The cooperative model emphasizes service of its members, allowing for adaptability to local requirements and needs, and the local economic climate (McGillivray and Ish 2). McGillivray and Ish describe the cooperative form as “a fusion of ethical, at times Utopian, service-oriented collectivist goals and practical, market-oriented individualist goals” (McGillivray and Ish 29)

While we often only view worker cooperatives as “fringe” solutions, incapable of actually being large-scale solutions, there are several notable examples that call these assumptions into question. La Lega Cooperative in North Central Italy employs nearly 80,000 people and accounts for one eighth of the region’s GDP. The second example is the long established Mondragon Cooperative in the Basque region of Spain, with 40,000 owner-workers. It is the largest business group in the Basque region and the 9<sup>th</sup> largest in Spain. It is the largest exporter of machine tools, “white goods” and the third largest supplier of automotive components in Europe (Birchall 2004, 12).

#### *Worker Cooperatives within Anarchism and Marxism*

Discussions of worker ownership and management are found within Radical/Left theorists from several traditions. Anarchism has long argued for self-managed worker cooperatives or collectives as a key element of a new and transformed society based on autonomy and equality. Anarchists view worker cooperatives as part of a space of alternatives that exists beside, underneath and in the shadows of the hegemonic systems of the state and capitalism. Believing that the means of production and exchange must be controlled not by the state or capitalist enterprises, but by the workers; Proudhon argued

this was the only way to break free from the chains of alienation (Guerin 1970, 45).

Proudhon saw worker associations to be “the first components of a vast federation of associations and groups united in the common bond of the democratic and social republic” (Guerin, 45). Proudhon highlights the necessity for direct democracy within the workplace and individual worker control over his/her labour, something that, under the Cooperative principles, is encouraged but not explicitly mandated. Proudhon’s anarchist vision of worker self-management is based on a model of spontaneous horizontal relations and non-hierarchical political organization (Prychitko 1991, 4).

Worker cooperatives are also found within Marxist theory, however they are seen to fulfill a slightly different purpose. Marx was in favour of worker cooperatives, because they showed the capability of workers to organize production without capitalism, but he did not see them as enduring within a socialist society. Seeing them to be more of a short-term relief from capitalist relations of productions, Marx believed that independent worker cooperatives should, and would have to merge into nationalized industries. Common ownership was ultimately to be held at the national level (Hodgson 2006, 30). According to Prychitko, while Marx was supportive of workers’ self-management, he disagreed with the anarchists and utopia socialists on how and when to attain it. He insisted that worker self-management and participation in industry could only be achieved through a dictatorship of the proletariat and comprehensive economic planning (Prychitko, 2).

Bakunin took a slightly different approach than Proudhon, taking to heart some of Marx’s critiques, and argued that worker cooperatives would not survive the competitive pressures of a capitalist system, and required the collectivization of all land and capital.

So, while believing that cooperatives would fail to improve the conditions of the working masses, he nonetheless maintained that they were an important experiment to illustrate to workers what possibilities lie beyond the current system: “while cooperation cannot achieve the emancipation of the labouring masses under present socioeconomic conditions, it nevertheless had this advantage, that cooperation can habituate the workers to conduct their own affairs” (Bakunin, as quoted in Prychitko, 5).

### *History and Development*

The cooperative movement is generally said to have originated with the forming of the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1844, a consumer coop in England (McGillivray and Ish 5). However, there existed several important predecessors which helped mould many of the cooperative principles, including Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, who advocated for “villages of cooperation” where members would base their day-to-day relationships upon values of equality and equity (McGillivray and Ish 8). The first cooperatives in Canada were made up of rural agricultural producers. Many, if not all were short lived, as they encountered difficulties with management, recruitment and capitalization, and lack of cooperative expertise (McGillivray and Ish 12). The first real advancement of the cooperative movement in Canada was the establishment of the Prairie Wheat Pools in the 1920s (McGillivray and Ish 13).

The 1950s was a period of growth, but it brought with it a great variety of ideologies into the cooperative movement. There was a shift to a more conciliatory relationship with capitalism. The initial vision of a “world cooperative commonwealth composed of local cooperative communities” had shifted to a view of a cooperative sector existing alongside state and capitalist enterprises (McGillivray and Ish 7). There

was also a trend towards professional management, specifically in larger cooperatives. This has raised questions about the nature of the relationship between managers and boards, and the worker-owners (McGillivray and Ish 3). Schoening has highlighted that within many worker cooperatives established after 1970s, a tension has arisen between the social ideals of members and the pressure to conform to traditional business models; they felt pressure to compromise values in order to compete and survive in a market that values profit above all else (Schoening 2006, 294). This tension continued into the 1980s, when many of the large powerful cooperative businesses with professional management were critiqued for having lost the true nature of cooperatives and their principles (Birchall, 14). The use of professional management has led, in many cases, to members being distanced from the direct operation and direction of the cooperative, in a sense shifting democratic control away from the members to management and a board of directors (McGillivray and Ish 73).

Since the 1990s, there has been a resurgence of the cooperative movement in many ways. New policies and laws have facilitated and encouraged their development and have clarified what, legally, is meant by a cooperative (Birchall, 16). According to the Cooperatives Secretariat of the Government of Canada, as of 2004 there were 358 employee-owned enterprises in Canada. They have a total of 14,658 members, 10,792 employees and revenue of \$474 million. Worker cooperatives in Canada operate in almost all economic sectors: service, sales, manufacturing, forestry, fish processing etc (Mungall, 4), although forestry and financial services make up the majority (Coop Secretariat 2007, 3). Four out of every ten Canadians are members of a cooperative, be they worker, consumer or social (Coop Secretariat 2004, 3).

The Canadian cooperative movement, and Rochdale movement in general, are seen as liberal-democratic because of its relationship to capitalism, which demanded a certain reconciliation between cooperatives and the private sector (McGillivray and Ish 16). Rochdale cooperatives differ from Marxist/Socialist or communalist cooperative traditions because they carry a greater tolerance for capitalism and acknowledgement of private property (McGillivray and Ish, 16). The Rochdale founders did not object to capitalism per se, but criticized its emphasis on “economic relations by capital and profit rather than by the people involved in those relations” (McGillivray and Ish, 25). This difference can be seen in the principles of cooperation of the International Cooperative Association, based on a consumer model within the Rochdale movement, versus the Mondragon principles, based on a worker cooperative model, which contain a more anti-capitalist stance (Mondragon Cooperative Experience).

Many have concluded that this tolerance of capitalism has made the Rochdale movement a pragmatic and realistic model that has been able to succeed (McGillivray and Ish, 16). However, in light of the way cooperatives have evolved in recent decades, it seems clear that such pragmatism has come at a cost. In the context of providing alternatives to precarious employment, this pragmatism must be balanced against the goal of avoiding the replication of capitalist relations of exploitation and alienation within cooperatives.

## **2. 2 More than just a utopian Dream**

Worker cooperatives have made, and continue to make, unique contributions to the social and economic welfare of communities in Canada and throughout the world. Despite this fact, cooperatives are rarely brought up in mainstream discussions of social

problems and solutions. Cooperatives have a higher survival rate than investor-owned companies, almost twice as long, yet they are stereotyped as highly difficult to organize and sustain (Quebec Ministry of Industry and Commerce; Coop Secretariat 2004, 3). Finally, cooperatives have shown a higher employment growth rate than the Canadian economy in general. From 1991- 2001, employment within cooperatives rose 25%, versus the overall economy of only 13%; yet we do not include them in discussions of labour market shifts and how to adapt to them (Coop Secretariat 2004, 3). Existing literature has examined cooperatives in relation to their ability to take part in anti-poverty work and their role in improving the lives of marginalized populations.

In the past few years a growing body of literature has emerged which discusses cooperatives in the context of anti-poverty work as a tool to empower marginalized communities. This research has emphasized the ability of coops to meet both social and economic needs, to empower members and build social and human capital (Markell 2001; MacPherson 2001; Birchall 2001; Imbsen 2001). Cooperatives have proved to be a valuable tool for immigrant communities in meeting their social needs and in overcoming barriers to accessing social services (“Cooperatives and the Social Economy, 9). The report “Creating Opportunities- Optimizing Possibilities: Immigrant and Refugee Cooperatives in Canada” argues that cooperatives are powerful mechanisms against poverty, through the development of social, human and financial capital (Canadian CED Network, 5). It argues that cooperatives blend “opportunities for gainful employment, increased savings and individual and community capacity-building with equity and social justice principles.” Several notable examples, including EthniCity Catering in Calgary, The Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative in Edmonton and the Afgan Women’s

Catering Collective, are just a few examples of the ways in which immigrants and refugees have used the workers cooperative model to positively impact their lives (Canadian CED Network, 2006).

The above literature represents an important step in linking the discourses on cooperatives and precarious employment, specifically in the areas of building social capital and overcoming societal isolation. While this recognition of the value of cooperatives is encouraging and shows a growing realization that cooperatives should be seen as practical and realistic solutions to current social problems, there is still some way to go until we are at a point of viewing cooperatives, especially worker cooperatives as a mechanism to combat precarious employment. Several limitations illustrate the need for further research in these areas.

The literature about cooperatives and poverty is largely focused on cooperatives in the South, in the developing world, rather than on communities facing comparable conditions in Canada, North America etc (See Birchall 2004; Johnston 2001 and MacPherson 2001). This is not to say that discussing the experiences of cooperatives in the South is not important; the point is that in doing so, the discussion of coops as a tool for anti-poverty work becomes entangled with the development discourse, inserted into the context of international aid and the Millennium Development Goals (See Johnston 2001). In addition, the focus in both the anti-poverty literature and immigrant and refugee literature is on financial and service cooperatives, as opposed to worker cooperatives. There is a need for increased dialogue and research on the potential of cooperatives to combat poverty and other forms of oppression and marginalization because they provide employment and economic security, and not because they can be

valuable service providers or community associations. They exist; we just need to start talking about them.

Analyzing cooperatives on the basis of anti-poverty work fails to capture the full potential of cooperation. Low-income is but one element of precarious employment, other key indicators, such as security, stability, control and health, require further analysis in relation to the worker cooperative model in particular. We need a more detailed and dynamic concept to properly understand the complexity of what people are facing and how cooperatives may play a role. Precarious employment relations is one concept that provides such dynamism and allows for an examination of the organization of work and experiences of control and security.

There are reasons for why immigrant and refugee cooperatives in particular may be effective in providing alternative spaces of employment to precariousness. Schoening highlights research suggesting that cooperatives with a majority of members from a homogenous cultural background have a higher chance of long-term success due to more unified ideology compared to cooperatives with a more diverse membership (Schoening, 299). He argues that cultural homogeneity, characterized by shared vision and sense of purpose, helps the cooperative to operate with less friction (Schoening, 300). This suggests that there is value in developing cooperatives specifically of marginalized groups, such as immigrants and refugees, as opposed to simply trying to increase their participating in existing cooperatives (Schoening, 299).

In addition, the argument has been made that despite its commitment to equality, the coop sector often mirrors the dominant culture in their treatment of women and other marginalized groups and fails to challenge socio-economic structures that perpetuate the

inequalities of gender, race and class. Van Vilet argues that despite the expectation that cooperatives are organizations that promote equality, the reality is that women and under-represented groups have limited participation, particularly in areas of leadership and decision making of cooperatives (Van Vilet 2006, 6).

Despite these criticisms, Van Vilet believes that there is the potential for cooperatives to promote diversity and provide alternatives to those excluded from the (traditional) economy:

co-operatives have the opportunity to promote diversity, thereby strengthening their organizations and engaging marginalized peoples in meaningful employment, the result of which would be stronger communities from which everyone would benefit” (Van Vilet, 11).

She believes that cooperatives are a form of resistance to economic marginalization, because they enable members to take control of their situation (Van Vilet, 10).

These two arguments, the benefits of having a homogenous membership and the challenges of resisting the replication of societal power relations, highlight the benefit of cooperatives organized by a particular community that faces marginalization or oppression, helping ensure that those often pushed to the margins are front and centre, and in control of the cooperative.

### **CHAPTER THREE: Conceptualizing Worker Cooperatives as a Response to Precarious Employment**

As can be seen from the previous sections, much has been written on the topic of precarious employment relations. In Canada, the largest research project that has undertaken the task of understanding precarious employment is the Community University Research Alliance on Contingent Employment (Vosko 2003, 1). A coordinated effort of academics, community workers and activists, it has explored and examined the degree and nature of precarious employment in Canada and its effects. ACE does exceptionally well in this regard and provides a much-needed starting point to researching precarious employment. However, my interest lies beyond explaining the realities of precarious employment, to how we can move beyond these precarious relations and build new spaces of non-precarious work, particularly for those most often trapped in these forms of employment.

One question that remains unanswered is if we are against precarious employment relations, what type of employment relations are we for, and how do we get there? Precarious employment relations are often contrasted with standard employment relations, consisting of full-time, permanent status with social benefits and security, and often in a unionized environment (Vosko 2006, 7); however it is not clear if a return to this model is what is being sought. Attempting to rebuild the standard employment relationship may be tempting but it is fraught with potentially unrealistic nostalgia. Given the shifts in the global economy brought on by neoliberalism, such a return is doubtful.

In conceptualizing worker cooperatives as a response to precarious employment, I am attempting to contribute to a discussion about what types of alternative employment relationship we should be trying to build.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to say that there has not been discussion on how to combat or limit precarious employment relations; there has. However, few responses are presented which address what I would label fundamental and underlying constraints of the current organization of work. Much of the existing literature focuses on strategies such as extending union representation to these groups through new organizing tactics and strategies (social and community unionism)<sup>3</sup> and reforming labour relations and collective bargaining legislation to make them reflective of the realities of precarious work and to give workers the space and opportunity to organize<sup>4</sup>. While these reforms are desperately needed, and would certainly be of benefit to those in precarious employment relationships, we also need to try and address the fundamental causes of precariousness. We need to be looking for a different model of work which provides people, particularly those most often trapped in precarious employment, with decent and fair employment opportunities. By focusing in on a few key elements of precarious employment relations and their origins in the organization of work, a case can be made that worker cooperatives can provide a solution to many of them.

My primary argument is that important elements of precarious employment such as insecurity, lack of benefits, poor health and low wages can be traced to the way in

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<sup>2</sup> Clearly there are several authors that have engaged extensively in this topic, including Standing (2003); Albert and Hahnel (1991 and 1999).

<sup>3</sup> See Cranford et al. (2006) Ladd for an examination of the lack of union representation and the community unionism approach taken to address this.

<sup>4</sup> See Cranford et al. (2006) and Waskett (2007) for a discussion for collective bargaining legislation; see Fudge (2003) for an explanation on the ways self-employment or “independent contractor” has become a site of precariousness due to a lack of regulation and protection.

which work is organized under precarious employment relations. They are characteristic of a lack of control, autonomy and support in the workplace, and an inability of the business to be considerate of the social needs of workers.

Table: Organization of work under precarious employment relations

Symptoms of precarious employment	Sources of precarious employment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insecurity</li> <li>• No benefits</li> <li>• Poor Health</li> <li>• Poverty wages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A lack of control, autonomy over one’s job and work</li> <li>• No support in the workplace</li> <li>• No consideration of social needs of workers.</li> </ul>

By identifying these root causes of precarious employment, we can look to the cooperative model of work organization for solutions. The areas that will be focused on are Control, Support and Flexibility, Decent Wages, Security, Benefits and building Social Capital and Empowerment.

*Control*

Reinhart identifies the growing rise of contingent labour and precarious employment relations as an extension of both the scope and degree of working people’s alienation (Reinhart, 168). The increase in part-time, temporary and self-employment has led to a decrease in people’s power and control in their work (Reinhart, 165). According to Benach and Munatner, evidence suggests that non-permanent work leads to less job autonomy and control over one’s schedule (Benach and Munatner, 276).

Because of their democratic, one member, one vote structure, workers are able to control the direction of their place of work, giving them a sense of autonomy and security. Many worker cooperatives operate under a flat structure, without management or hierarchical powers. This gives the worker-owners control and autonomy over their work, there is no one telling them exactly how or when to do their work.

As Lewchuk et al. note, workplace control should not be thought of as exclusive to “decision authority, use of skills, capacity for collective action and supportive colleagues” (Lewchuk et al., 27). Rather it includes other components such as social power and is affected by outside support as well (Lewchuk et al., 27). Control can be understood both in relation to one’s job and work, but also as control over the balance between work and outside life. The cooperative model may allow us to move forward into what Halpern and Murphy call the work-life interaction, as opposed to searching for a work-life balance. They argue that we should approach them not as two separate categories that must be balanced against one another, but as two spheres that interact with one another and shape each other (Halpern and Murphy, 9). The coop model presents opportunities for a more positive work-family interaction, because workers can control and mediate that interaction.

### *Support and Flexibility*

A study conducted by Lewchuck et al. found that although there appears to be a complex relationship between precarious employment and health status, worse health outcomes arose when workers in precarious employment were isolated and were expending effort to remain employed. They concluded that “social support appears to be a significant buffer between less permanent employment and health” (Lewchuck et al. 2006, 19). Working in a workplace that is flexible to the needs of its workers can play an important role in relieving stress and stress-related illnesses. A core element of employment strain is a lack of control over skill use and job assignment and a lack of control over scheduling and hours (Lewchuk et al. 2003, 29).

Coops are better able to be sensitive to the diverse cultural and personal needs of their members (Canadian CED Network, 6). In Little's study of the Regina Women's Construction Cooperative, members felt that the cooperative was able to be flexible to their personal and family needs in a way that the traditional construction industry would not have tolerated (Little, 2005). The authors of "Cooperatives and the Social Economy" conclude that the greatest strength of cooperatives may be their ability to adapt to the specific needs of people through their membership structure: "the coop model is not a static entity, nor a thing of the part, but a flexible tool that continues to evolve in response to the needs of people and communities (Coop Secretariat 2004, 15). An Ontario-wide study of workers cooperatives found that, despite the fact that members said work hours increased, time off decreased and their pay was lower than previous jobs, 93% of members said the greater flexibility to one's one life, benefits of personal growth and contribution made worker cooperative a "worthwhile endeavor" (Stuart, 5).

### *Decent Wages*

While the cooperative sector has generally below average wages (Stuart, 3), many pay above minimum wage, at what we commonly call a "living wage."<sup>5</sup> This is in contrast to many precarious forms of employment. A critique of previous responses to precarious employment has been to focus on raising material gains rather than analyzing the organization of work. Material gains are most certainly an important element, yet when asked what they valued most, a group of female immigrants and refugees who participated in a study by the Worker Skills Centre, emphasized social and human capital over financial assets. They described their employment goals as economic self-

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<sup>5</sup> Their average annual salary for a cooperative worker-member in Ontario is \$23,256 (Stuart, 3).

sufficiency, increased family well being, increased self-esteem, increased security, and increased skill-building opportunities (Working Skills Centre, 22). Again, this is not to diminish the importance of income, but to see it in a broader social context of other elements.

### *Security*

Job insecurity has also been found to have adverse effects on both physical and mental health (Benach and Muntaner, 276). Temporary employment exposes workers to “strenuous and tiring positions, intense noise and repetitive movements, [and] have less freedom to choose when to take personal leave” (Benach and Muntaner, 276). The insecurity of precarious employment extends beyond a specific job or work site. In developing the concept of employment strain from Karasek’s notion of job strain, Lewchuk et al. note that insecurity permeates to one’s employment situation in general. It is not simply a specific job that holds insecurity, there is insecurity in the terms and conditions of work, but in keeping a job and in having to find a new one, in spending the time and energy being concerned about that (Lewchuk et al., 27).

The democratic structure of cooperatives has the potential to give workers a sense of security, meaning that decisions on the future of the business, the future of their enterprise, will be made by themselves, not in a closed-meeting of managers without their participation. Even if things are not going well, members will at least have the ability to decide their fate.

Part of security is routed in sustainability; there can be no security if one feels as though their place of work will close down at any moment. A study conducted by the Quebec Ministry of Industry and Commerce in 1999; found that cooperatives survive

longer than traditional business. Over 60% of cooperatives survive over five years, versus just under 40% of other businesses; and over 40% of cooperatives last longer than ten years, compared to 20% of other businesses (Ministry of Industry and Commerce, Government of Québec, 1999). These findings are supported by the conclusion of Mungall, who found that two years after her study, all sixteen of the worker cooperatives she interviewed were still in existence, with one having converted into a private business (Mungall, 1986). Similar statistics for traditional businesses show that only one third of businesses survive longer than 5 years, and only one fourth after nine (Industry Canada, Government of Canada, 2008).

### *Benefits*

In the workplace, benefits are generally assumed to be formal benefits consisting of health and dental insurance, paid vacation etc. While these are, without a doubt, important considerations in determining the conditions of work, there are other informal, “soft” benefits that are also of importance to workers. An Ontario-wide study found that cooperatives provide many benefits to its members and employees. Forty percent offered paid benefits in addition to “soft benefits, including: carpool to work, childcare, job sharing, domestic partner benefits, flex time, family leave, product discounts and other ways to meet specific needs of employees/members. Cooperatives spent on average of \$2,800 on employee and member training per year (Stuart, 12). Cooperatives also bring benefits to their communities, initiating and supporting social programs (Stuart, 4). Because cooperatives are commonly smaller businesses, it becomes financially difficult for the coop to provide paid benefits.

*Building Social Capital and Empowerment*

A commonly stated benefit of cooperatives is that they build social capital. A study conducted with immigrant women in the Toronto area found that the women interviewed gave high importance to the need for social capital, above the need to have financial capital or employable skills (Creating Opportunities- Optimizing Possibilities: Immigrant and Refugee Cooperatives in Canada, 5). A publication on cooperatives and the social economy argues that cooperatives build social capital by promoting citizenship engagement, social cohesion and trust, and democratic process leading to inclusion and empowerment (“Cooperatives and the Social Economy” 13). In addition, the cooperative model can help to reduce feelings and real experiences of isolation and exclusion (Canadian CED Network, 7).

Shifley presents a case study, similar to my own, of a worker cooperative that provides interesting insight into the role the organization of work places in creating a desirable workplace. The workers at the cooperative in question had sought to build an alternative space of employment for themselves through the cooperative model. He writes that “the organizational structure of the cooperative was and is considered by its members to be more just because it offers them greater control of both their work life and personal life by allowing them to choose what, when, where and how they will labour” (Shifley, 105). The coop was organized as a response to frustrations they felt in other jobs. It was an attempt to create an alternative to the hierarchically organized work settings found in most other jobs and an opportunity to have control over the co-existence of their work and non-work categories of activities (Shifley, 106). Shifley documents a real commitment on the part of the founding members to create a space that was free of

the alienation and exploitation found in their previous jobs. They wanted control over their work site and their work structure (Shifley, 111). He argues that the cooperative model offered many significant benefits to the members, including control over the work process, equality of wages, empowerment and the integration of ‘work and the rest of their lives’ (Shifley, 123).

### *Challenges*

There are several challenges to this approach that must be recognized. Axworthy and Perry are quick to note that the cooperative model is not a “magic formula” free of obstacles or challenges (Axworthy and Perry 12). It is a model that has particular strengths, but also weaknesses that must be acknowledged and addressed (Axworthy and Perry 12). Raising sufficient capital to begin and sustain the enterprise is a common challenge for cooperatives. In a study of worker cooperatives in Canada during the late 1980s, Mungall found that all had challenges with funding (Mungall, 3).

There is also a deficit of outside support for worker cooperatives, both from government bodies and civil society. While the Canadian cooperative sector is applauded for its autonomy from the Canadian state (McGillivray and Ish, 22), such independence can also cause difficulties. Only four provinces explicitly encourage the development of worker cooperatives through legislation, government staff, government loans and other forms of support: Quebec, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Newfoundland (Mungall, 8). The remaining provinces in the Maritimes, Ontario, Alberta and BC provide only marginal support for cooperative development. Ontario in particular was labeled a “legal nightmare” for incorporating cooperatives (Mungall, 9). There is a need for more

“cooperative friendly” incorporation and taxation legislation, to give cooperatives equal status under the law as traditional businesses (Stuart, 22).

### **3. 2 From a ‘politics of demand’ to a ‘politics of the act’**

In conceptualizing worker cooperatives as a response to precarious employment, I am implicitly calling for a shift from what Day calls a ‘politics of demand’, to a ‘politics of the act’ (Day, 2004). Day describes the politics of demand as “actions oriented to ameliorating the practices of states, corporations and everyday life, through either influencing or using state power to achieve irradiation effects” (Day 2004: 733). A politics of demand seeks to improve existing institutions and everyday experiences by “appealing to the benevolence of hegemonic forces and/or by altering the relations between these forces” (Day 2005, 80). Day recognizes the practical appeal of a politics of demand but insists that it is necessarily limited in scope, writing that “it can change the content of structures of domination and exploitation, but it cannot change their form” (Day 2005, 88). In making demands and waiting for responses, demanding responses, it in a sense perpetuates the existence of these structures by legitimating their existence (Day 2005, 89).

What much of the existing discourse on precarious employment focuses on, extending unionization and changes to legislation, is based within a politics of demand. They are “resistance strategies”, aimed at limiting precariousness through demands on the state and employers for improved legislation and regulation. Within these struggles little emphasis is placed on building new alternative spaces of employment that are decent and fair.<sup>6</sup> Vosko has argued that workers are “resisting” precarious employment, and

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<sup>6</sup> Community unionisms could be understood as a politics of the act, in that they are building new forms of unionism outside formal labour legislation and traditional trade unions. However, in the case of

demanding better from their employers and the state, but what is not said is how workers are, themselves, building new spaces of employment that challenge precarious employment by creating an alternative (Vosko 2003, 5). Day discusses the politics of demand in the context of Lacan's notion of an ethics of desire. A politics of demand is not about satisfying a need, rather its based on endless desire (Day 2005, 84). One can see this in the context of the debate about precarious employment, and the lack of articulation of what alternatives to precarious employment should be, just endless notions of what is should not be.

By contrast, a politics of the act is about breaking the cycle of demand and desire by "inventing a response that precludes the necessity of the demand" (Day 2004: 734). It is about creating an alterative here and now, taking direct action instead of demanding action of others. It is a shift from the "fantasy" to the "authentic", exposing the fantasy upon which the politics of demand is based; that hegemonic structures will recognize and validate the demands being made and respond in an appropriate way (Day 2005, 89). In making demands of employers and the state to improve the conditions of precarious workers, it is questionable whether they have any interest or desire to hear and act on these demands, yet they are made nonetheless.

The politics of the act seeks to simultaneously work against capitalism while being for the construction and building of alternatives (Day 2004: 735). Establishing worker cooperatives as an alternative to precarious employment employs a politics of the act, it seeks to create alternative spaces of work, rather than making demands on the state

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organizations such as the Workers Action Center and others, the emphasis remains on making demands, rather than building alternative forms of employment.

or employers. It is aimed at building alternatives along side those that are oppressive, simultaneously working against precarious employment.

It is not strictly a question of either/or, but a question of emphasizing one over the other. Clearly there are situations in which a politics of demand are necessary, workers need to resist precarious employment and we need to establish ways to assist that struggle. However, in order to change the organization of work under precarious employment, which creates these dismal and oppressive employment conditions, we must invoke a politics of the act that seeks to create spaces of non-precarious forms of employment, in the ‘here and now.’ If we are seeking practical responses to current challenges, that not only address the immediate but also built towards a further goal, it is not sufficient to merely call on states to improve legislation, or to call for new organizing forms and strategies to unionize precarious workers. Worker cooperatives have the potential to provide not only a practical response for workers in these forms of employment, but they build alternative spaces of post-capital production based on worker freedom, autonomy and control.

## Case Studies

Two immigrant worker cooperatives are presented below as case studies of how this model of work is providing alternatives to elements of precarious employment. Members of both cooperatives shared their experiences and opinions on the cooperative model and how it has impacted their life, and how it compares to other forms of work they have had since coming to Canada as refugees.

### **CHAPTER FOUR: Case Study #1 (Enviro-Safe Worker Cooperative)**

The Enviro-Safe Cooperative was started in 2006, in Winnipeg, Manitoba by a group of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo who were frustrated by the lack of decent employment opportunities that fit their skills and experiences. Working in factories, as security guards, and cleaners at hotels and schools did not provide them with the opportunities to make a decent living and have a decent life. Members believed that the coop model allowed them to create something they would have been unable to achieve on their own:

*“If I look at what I was getting when I was working in factory, or as a security guard I said I cannot do this by myself, that’s when we said let us put our effort together and let us create something that would belong to us...Something that will allow everybody to be a part of it, everybody to be a part of decision making... Something that will allow us to discuss peacefully, decide on our destiny.”*

Each of the members interviewed had lived in Canada for more than five years, one as long as fifteen, yet they were still trapped in marginal, precarious employment relations. After having saved portions of their paychecks for years, the five founding members were able to make their dream of collectively owning their own business; a reality. They established the Enviro-Safe Worker cooperative, a cleaning business that uses organic products to clean small factories, offices such as credit unions and municipal

government buildings. They currently have twenty-two contracts, providing part and full-time employment to eight people.

The coop members receive a wage of 11\$/h, most are receiving part-time work although two are working full-time through financial assistance from the Cooperative Development Initiative of the Cooperative Secretariat of the Government of Canada. While 11\$/hr may not seem like a significant improvement, the additional 3\$/hr from minimum wage is substantial, particularly in Winnipeg where living costs are relatively low, giving members a real opportunity to make decent living. They try to ensure an equal balance of work between members, so that they all share the work of their contracts.

### **Barriers to accessing non-precarious employment**

Before coming to Canada members had worked in hospital administration, UN Refugee camps and had attended various levels of post-secondary education. However, they were unable to access employment that reflected these skills and education. Members expressed frustration at having to learn English, or enroll in job search and employment workshops. While the government and community organizations presents these as valuable tools in order to successfully enter the Canadian labour market, in the words of one respondent: “When you finish you can’t get anything!” All of the members interviewed felt that these workshops or courses focused on resume writing and “job search” were relatively useless in helping them to find employment in their field, leaving them only jobs requiring no Canadian experience and little prior skills or education.

*“Learn English and resume writing and job search, doesn’t really help. Job search, and when you go to the website, you find a job [that needs] ten years of experience, Canadian experience... So what they [immigrant] do is they learn English and then they become taxi driver or security guard”*

## **Control and Flexibility over their work and their lives**

Coop members interviewed emphasized the difference in control and flexibility that the coop model provided in contrast to non-cooperative employment. One member talked about how working as a cleaner at a school, she was not able to pick her children up from school, but working in a coop model, she is able to incorporate her personal or social needs into her employment schedule. The coop model has allowed for consideration of the personal and social needs of members and has allowed members to achieve a desirable work-life balance.

A member noted that in a traditional business, there is no flexibility given to the workers, regardless of their situation. They recounted how when you work at a factory if you are even 15 minutes late you will be in trouble with your supervisor, or the supervisor will sometimes give you little notice about needing to work overtime, which in turn gives no opportunity to refuse. Another member described how several members were in the process of learning English. The coop is able to interact with those members in their native languages, as well as being flexible in their work schedule to accommodate their schooling.

*“We have three workers who are all from DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo] and they don’t speak English. They are learning English. We are able to deal with them in French or some of them we deal with them in Swahili... To me that is an advantage, being somewhere where at least they take into consideration what you are.”*

*“We have three people working with us that are going to English school. We have allowed them to go to English school, and if they say “okay listen, today we have lots of homework” and we can say, okay that’s fine, so you won’t come, do your homework, we can complete your job. So that flexibility, giving opportunity to people, not only work, work, work but giving them opportunity to progress.”*

## **Security**

In terms of security, members of the Enviro-Safe Coop felt that having ownership of their business in and of itself provided security and stability that was absent in other jobs.

*“When you are a member of a coop, you are a member of a business, you are a worker and at the same time you are an owner of the business. That is something that provides security.”*

One member felt that because you are an owner you will make that extra effort to insure it succeeds, or in their words “take it to the second level.” One argued that “even if you are not getting orders from supervisors or the private owner of the business, but your conscience is pushing you to work hard and to take your business to the second stage.”

Enviro-Safe members interviewed compared this feeling of security (drawn from ownership) to feelings of insecurity in traditional jobs, where there is fear that you could be fired should you make a mistake or do something wrong:

*“It’s different if I’m working for you, if I say or do something bad they will fire me...you don’t know what will happen tomorrow you are scared maybe if I do something bad, they will do that. It’s different from working for yourself, working for something that you are dreaming, that you created.”*

## **Benefits**

At the time of the interviews, the cooperative had scheduled a meeting with a health insurance broker to discuss the possibilities of extending some form of health coverage to the cooperative members; however, given their size, it is likely that such insurance would be very costly. Outside of the formal scope of benefits, members highlighted many important things that the cooperative brought them.

There was recognition amongst Enviro-Safe members of the importance of equality in the worker coop model and how that contrasted to non-cooperative

employment. One member believed that in both the coop model and the traditional business model:

*“We all want to make benefits right; the only difference is how we share that benefit. So, our benefits is shared among our members, based on the amount of time they put in the business, which is totally different from working for somebody, in factory. Even if they say ‘profit sharing’, they don’t really share with you the profit.”*

*“Coop to me is very important because everybody to be equal, and everybody to be important at the workplace, myself I think that’s very important. Also it’s important again, because you can’t do everything by yourself, its very hard. And instead of being someone standing there, bossing them or whatever... everybody feels the same, equal. That’s what is very important for coop.”*

### **Skill Development**

The Enviro-Safe Coop was meant to be more than simply a place of employment. Members appear committed to a continual process of learning and empowerment, to building a space where immigrants and refugees can take control of their lives, build meaningful relationships and develop new skills and interests. To that end, the coop participates in workshops on participatory management, meeting facilitation and business math. Workers participate in different elements of the business, and as a result learn new skills, from promotions to contract bidding, to the actual cleaning work.

### **Social Capital and Community Building**

Members felt that their coop had facilitated the building of social capital, and saw it as a vehicle for the empowerment of newcomers to Canada. One member talked about the coop model being a mechanism for people to come together to share their skills and knowledge, so that everyone can learn new things and have increased understanding of their work and their business. They highlighted that this was particularly important for immigrants, who often come to Canada not knowing English, having a place where people can help you and support you was very important. One member of the Enviro-

Safe Coop concluded by saying that “coop is very important for newcomers, it’s very, very good- so they feel like they are equal.”

They also felt that the coop had helped them overcome the isolation immigrants often experience:

*“it’s something that has helped to create those kinds relationships, that, as an immigrant- in this country I’ve seen, you can live in it fifteen years and still remain like a newcomer.”*

One member recounted how the coop has helped to expand their social network within Winnipeg, to meet new people and interact with new communities etc:

*“it has helped us to be open, to go out of the small community we belong to...If you see us in the city of Winnipeg, you would think it is our house!”*

More than one member described the coop as a family, a network of people who cared about each other:

*“That feeling like you are in a family, and you are surrounded by the people who cares, care for you and who are trying to assist you.”*

*“In this business we are a member of one family, right. We support each other- at work and sometimes out of the business.”*

### **Oppression in the Workplace**

When asked if they had experienced discrimination, racism or sexism in their previous jobs, members were hesitant to use those terms, but they were clear that the working environment of the coop was very positive and not racist or sexist. One member said:

*“that is something far behind, that is something we had a long time ago... we don’t even hear of something like that, its so far away. That’s one thing that I see as very good for this coop.”*

One member did not have any specific complaints about her previous employment at a hotel saying that “it was okay” but that she left to work with Enviro-Safe to “work for myself.”

Despite their reluctance to name their experiences as ones where they were subjected to discrimination, one member told a story about his past employment which seemed to involve racist behaviour of their co-workers. He talked about his first day at his first job in Canada; at lunch hour he was essentially excluded by his fellow co-workers, and left to eat lunch by himself. Even the person that had trained him did not seem interested in making him feel welcome. The same individual recounted an experience as a security guard:

*“I had job with security when you are reporting on the radio people are saying ‘we don’t understand his English’ ‘you don’t understand English.’ It’s like, maybe you don’t understand a certain accent, maybe because their first language is not English, do your best to understand. When they start complaining, I hear that, and I think, at this age should I change again, should I go back to school again?”*

### **Role of Outside Support**

Members of the Enviro-Safe coop were quite clear that the outside support was crucial in their ability to get started and their continued sustainability. One member thought that if they had not met people from SEED Winnipeg they might have “said good-bye” to their dream of a worker cooperative. Two of the members interviewed felt quite strongly that there should be increased support and training for immigrants and refugees coming to Canada about the coop model, how it works and to help them organize one for themselves.

### **Challenges of the Coop: present and future**

Several challenges were identified by the coop members; some pertaining to the organizing of the coop and others to its ongoing sustainability and growth. Members noted that because they were newcomers to Canada, a challenge was not having a lot of experience or knowledge of the worker coop model. They had some experience with consumer coops back in their home-countries but there were still a lot of things they did not know or immediately understand. In addition, they felt the process of developing a business plan and outlining bylaws to be a difficult process. They felt they lacked the necessary skills for these, and other, tasks.

A current challenge is the number of contracts they hold. One member talked of the frustration of not having enough contracts, but being perceived by potential clients as too small for larger contracts. This left them in a sort of catch-22, where they want to hire more people and give people full-time work, but cannot get the work that would allow them to do that.

Finances were also identified as a continual struggle. Banks did not want to take risks on a small business such as theirs. The struggle for capital was related to a lack of information about how and where to access funds; even when they had that information, they felt they lacked the skills to apply for grants and submit proposals.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: Case Study #2 (Taco Pica Worker Cooperative)**

The Taco Pica Worker Cooperative was formed by a group of Guatemalan refugees in 1991 in Saint John, New Brunswick. Unable to find work relevant to their education or experience “a group of Latin Americans got together and decided that we wanted to create our own source of employment.” Since they were unable to use their professional skills, the group members looked to other assets they had and came up with their culture and their language, and so they formed an authentic Latin American restaurant. Over fifteen years later, the cooperative has five members, two of which are in the process of becoming members and several additional employees. Of the members, three are full-time and two are part-time.

For both members interviewed the rationale for creating a coop was obvious. When asked why they wanted to create a worker cooperative restaurant, one member answered simply that it was “a dream.” A lack of finances was highlighted as one of the main reasons for choosing the cooperative model. Individually they did not have enough money or credit history to access the needed financing to start a business on their own. Another was the appeal of the one member, one vote structure. One member really liked how everyone had ownership over the business. The member saw this model as being preferable to having one sole owner of the business, with a communal ownership structure, everyone felt that everything they were doing was for *their* business. The idea of creating his or her own employment, as opposed to “taking jobs,” was seen as important to one member interviewed. They felt this had, implicitly, helped build community ties and relationships.

## **Barriers to accessing Non-Precarious Employment**

*“It’s a dream. First, like, a dream to come to Canada. You have like a big dream, and you say, oh I will do this, but when you get here you will have barriers. People don’t have the language; you don’t have the money, and everything’s against you.”*

For the first couple years that they were in Canada, it was not so much that there were barriers to finding employment, but that they were explicitly not allowed to find work. At the time that the coop members came to Canada as refugees, the late 1980s, refugees were not given work permits. Only once you received status as a landed immigrant were you given a work permit. However there were still several barriers to finding employment. Both members interviewed felt their lack of language skills was “barrier number one.” Again, at the time, as a refugee you did not receive any support or funding from the government to take English classes and they could not afford them on their own.

Unable to find work in their professions, as teachers and architects, they worked at carpentry, sanding picture frames, as a janitor, baker and security guard. One member said that when they first came to Canada they tried to find employment as professionals in their field, but that “the system” did not permit it:

*“We try to pursue our profession, as a professional in this country, but the system doesn’t allow you to pursue it.”*

Another barrier was a lack of familiarity with the area and culture. In Saint John, there were not any settlement services or agencies, they did not know where the hospital was, grocery store; they even had to relearn how to ride the bus.

However for at least one member, these barriers seem to invigorate them rather than dissuade them. All the challenges and obstacles only pushed them to try and work

harder at their dreams, saying that they give him more courage and energy. They described their philosophy in life as never giving up, continually trying to “fly high.”

### **Control and Flexibility over your work and over your life**

One member commented how being your own boss, you can decide what hours you can and cannot be at work. She said that people do not really abuse this, since if you “break the rules” you are only hurting yourself. Again the notion of having a more desirable work-life balance was articulated. One member lamented that when she worked full-time at the cooperative she had more time to spend with her children:

*“When I started the second job... I realized the big mistake I had made. Because now I am stuck from an office from 8-5:30, or different schedule because I was in a call centre. So I was like, oh what did I do? I used to have enough time with my kids and now I don't, what am I doing?”*

The other member felt that the coop gave them control over their work, but that there was also control from the coop, as an entity, over individual members. So in a sense there was a collective freedom and control, which constrained one's individual control to ensure everything balanced out.

One of the members talked of a “double standard” she experienced working at both the coop and in a non-cooperative model in terms of what power and control she had in the workplace:

*“I don't like the double standard, like anything I say just stays there, or probably goes into the file X box, the big “R” Blue Bin, but in here anything I say, it counts.”*

One element of control highlighted was that because you control decisions about the business, you can quickly overturn a decision that is not working:

*“We like the control [of] our workplace, and then we can switch it [a decision] immediately, we don't have to wait for some corporate person to tell us what to do, we just do [it].”*

The other member preferred using the idea of having the opportunity to express oneself, as opposed to a notion of control or freedom. According to this member, the coop gave the opportunity for members to express themselves in a unique way.

In addition, having control means that the coop can include the opinions of the community; they can be involved in the decisions about the coop. For example, when they first opened and were going to buy furniture, some members of the community suggested instead that they all donated some tables and chairs. Community members helped convince them to open in the first place and stay open when they were considering closing.

### **Security**

The issue of security was a bit more complex than with the Enviro-Safe Coop members, perhaps in part due to the length of existence of Taco Pica. One member's experience of security appeared initially to be contradictory. Despite the fact that they felt the need to get a second job, when asked if they felt secure in their employment with the coop, they answered "Absolutely, oh yes." They felt more secure in their employment with the coop than in their current other job and in previous jobs, despite the fact that some of the other jobs paid more. They had a strong faith in the coop, stating that

*"I know this business can provide for me, and it will provide for twelve more people who want to apply."*

They went as far as to think of the coop as a back up, should anything ever happen at her other job:

*"if something happens where I am right now, I'll have this place. Every hour that I work will benefit me, for the better."*

This member seemed to tie the idea of security to the fact that as coop member-owners they made their own decisions about what affected them. So both Enviro-Safe and Taco Pica members situated their feelings of security within the context of ownership.

One of the members interviewed was currently working part-time at the cooperative and part-time at a non-cooperative job. Her husband also worked at the cooperative, so the second job was in part a desire to have a second income for the family, but according to the member, it was primarily to give her and her husband something else to talk about, laughing that when she worked full-time at the coop “we kinda didn’t have any other conversation.” Despite the fact that she was only working part-time, she was adamant about her belief and faith in the coop model, stating,

*“my dream, my gut feeling is that I should be here all the time, full time. I mean, I believe in the worker coop and I think its possible.”*

However, that faith seemed to be constrained by a sense of uncertainty. The member believed that the cooperative could grow to have more members and even open a second restaurant, yet there was something holding them back from doing so. The other coop member felt that feeling secure in their employment with the coop was constrained by the fact that they were a small restaurant, referring to themselves as “small fish.” This is perhaps tied to their feeling of isolation or lack of support, which has mitigated or constrained their sense of security.

### **Benefits**

The cooperative provides no formal benefits in terms of health and dental for its employees and member-owners but it brings several interesting informal benefits. Members eat at the coop for free when they are working; for example if they are working over dinner, they get dinner free. In addition, the restaurant bulk orders milk and eggs to

divide amongst the coop members to take home. One member described how they might only need one case of eggs for the restaurant, but they will order many more for members to take home.

One member highlighted how the cooperative model has also benefited them in terms of financial security. Being a co-owner of a business was seen as desire by the bank when their family was looking to buy their first home. They were seen as “business people,” and their business had a history of quick repayment of loans. So, under the coop model, the coop members also share the credit history and financial capital of the coop, and the benefits and leverage that it brings.

One member saw the cooperative model and its networks of cooperatives as a way to overcome the barriers they faced in finding employment:

*“to be under the umbrella of coop, it’s a way we will get through the system.”*

Related to the control the cooperative model provides both over their work and their job, one member highlighted that the cooperative model has given her more opportunity to spend time with her children, even though the coop involved working additional volunteer hours. This control provided the benefit of having a work-life balance that was decided by the workers themselves.

### **Social Capital and Community Building**

One member noted that the community feels very attached to the cooperative. When they had considered selling the business and retiring, they said that a lot of community was upset:

*“Soon enough we realized what a big mistake that was; people are so attached to the place, they’re really attached and they were really hurt when they thought that we were getting rid of it.”*

Having the support of their customers and the community appeared very important. They saw them as more than people to earn an income off of, they saw them as part of their network, as people who helped and supported them:

*“People knew that we were refugees and immigrants who started it, so they supported us, it was a big risk. This is the reason we are here fourteen years later is we appreciate the support from the community.”*

They felt as though they had developed a network in Saint John and in New Brunswick through the cooperative. One member talked of the network that one develops through the coop. He said that there is a sense that the relationships and networks within and outside the coop are behind you, supporting you:

*“You have no idea how much that grows, like people know you in a different way. It’s not just the lady you see at the superstore, or the laundry mat, its this person- “oh ya, the Taco Pica lady”*

One member felt that coop had helped to build a sense of community and empower the coop members. Through the coop they had been very involved in the Latin American community in Saint John, providing space for benefit dances, donating gift certificates for fundraisers both in and outside Latin American community.<sup>7</sup> They saw it as an opportunity to give back to a community that had helped them to get started and to strengthen ties and cross-cultural understanding:

*“That definitely has given, has opened up the doors for other people to see what the small Latin American people are doing [laughs], what the community is, not just us.”*

They saw their coop restaurant as a way to share with the community their culture, having experienced their immigration to Canada where the community shared and helped them:

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<sup>7</sup> When I was there, there were posters for a Latin American themed benefit dance for the Saint John community radio station

*“when we build up Taco Pica, not for only ourselves, we build up for Saint John, we build up for Canada, to share our language, our culture, our food. That’s kind of the way, how we see it.”*

### **Skill Development**

It was clear from the interviews that the cooperative have been a space for members to learn new skills and develop existing ones. One member talked about having to learn about “all the different hats you wear”; from cook, to waitress to manager, everyone learned how to perform all those different tasks and rotates from one to the other<sup>8</sup>. One member talked of the benefits of the coop in terms of it being a challenge, a place where you developed new skills. As members of a cooperative they fulfill many different roles within the restaurant, which in a traditional business model you would never get. They felt that in a traditional business, you are not given the chance to develop or utilize “your talents”; it was almost as if they felt that traditional employment was boring and monotonous while the coop was exciting and challenging. The coop appeared to bring its members diversification instead of specialization.

### **Wages**

Both coop members and employees earn minimum wage, which in New Brunswick is \$7.75. One member noted that when they were drafting their bylaws, they had wanted to aim for wages double the minimum wage, but the reality has been that they have not been able to do that. The cost of a membership share is \$100, but that can be made that up through volunteer hours or sweat-equity. Living costs, according to the Province of New Brunswick are relatively low compared to other provinces (<http://www.gnb.ca/0356/english/live/house.htm>).

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<sup>8</sup> While I was there, I witnessed both people I was interviewing shift from hostess to cook to waiter to dishwasher.

## **Role of Outside Support**

During the approximately two years it took the group to plan, prepare and organize the cooperative, they appeared to have done much of it on their own. They did receive some support at the beginning from a delegation of cooperators from Nova Scotia and from government agencies who gave them direction on how to write their business plan. Based on other sources, the Red Cross offered them training in restaurant management and cooking (Coop Secretariat 2000, 19). While these organizations were certainly of benefit to Taco Pica, none of them have a particular focus on employment of immigrants and refugees or worker cooperatives, save the delegation from Nova Scotia.

The strongest area of support came from the local community itself and the churches. The community was very vocal in their support for the group to open the restaurant and the churches paid for an English teacher when, as refugees, they were not eligible to attend government-sponsored courses. When asked if this support was important, the coop member answered “*Yes, definitely.*” The other member felt that the support they received at the beginning from the churches, community and cooperative movement was important to their success but that ultimately it came down to their hard work and perseverance.

Currently, the Taco Pica Cooperative seems relatively isolated from the rest of the cooperative movement in Canada. While they are members of the Atlantic Cooperative Association and a local cooperative council, they stated they do not have the time to actively participate. They said they were too busy to attend meetings, but at the same time, they recognized the benefits of attending those meetings, to ask questions about financing of other cooperatives etc. One member said they felt they were not getting a lot

of support from other cooperatives or the cooperative association at the moment, in large part because they themselves did not have time to attend meetings or fill out membership.

One member articulated that they'd like to be the "support" for a new generation of members of the Taco Pica cooperative, something that they feel has been missing from their experience:

*"We're lacking that support person behind us right now, that's probably because we haven't searched anybody else to help us. But, where, how far do you go?"*

### **Challenges: Past and Present**

The biggest challenge articulated by members, both in the past and at present was access to finances. As refugees, the coop members did not have any credit history. One member noted that this was a huge barrier, as they could not get traditional loans from the bank. After securing a small Entrepreneur Loan of \$10,000, they turned to the community and the church for additional support and co-signors for larger loans. Another challenge was learning to cook for a restaurant. Even though they were all experienced cooks for their families, they had to learn to cook on a large-scale for a restaurant. One member noted that they had never cooked rice for a hundred people before, and they burned several pots of rice before they mastered it.

At the beginning they believed that they lacked the necessary information about restaurants, and cooperatives in general to create a cooperative on their own. They knew a bit about cooperatives from Guatemala where agricultural or food store coops are relatively common but they felt they lacked knowledge about workers cooperatives as a restaurant. One member noted that at the beginning the process of researching and drafting their bylaws and policies was quite difficult, in part because of the need to constantly translate back and forth between Spanish and English.

One member felt that it was sometimes difficult to come to a decision; at times there was a lot of discussion and it was hard to decide what to do. They felt that it was difficult because members knew that the decisions they were making were going to affect all of them, leading them to second-guess themselves. For example, they had at one point discussed opening a second location, but they could never get everyone to agree that it was the right decision at the moment.

From one member there was a general feeling that it took a lot just to keep things going, that the cooperative in itself was a challenge. During the interview this member noted that they did not have the time to recruit or build new membership; nor did they have time to fill out the paperwork to join cooperative networks, even though they recognized the potential benefit in doing so.

## **CHAPTER SIX: Analysis and Discussion**

While the research has illustrated many common employment and work conditions between the two worker cooperatives, they each have their own distinct characteristics related to the nature of their business, one an industrial cleaning company, the other a Latin American restaurant. Both the physical space, the nature of the work and length of existence play out in unique ways.

One important difference is the sense of space. The Taco Pica Worker Cooperative is very much a physical space for its member-owners, when they work they are working in a physical location of a coop. This contrasts with the experience of Enviro-Safe, where the coop exists in a much more social rather than physical sphere. When they go to work, they do not occupy a physical space that is a cooperative, the “cooperation” is built more heavily on the social relations between members and the way they organize their work.

There are also significant differences in terms of start up costs for the different businesses. Informal conversations with a staff member of an organization that supported the Enviro-Safe Coop noted that the reason the members choose industrial cleaning was because of its low start-up costs. They went through several other ideas of business, which were later discarded because of prohibitively high start up costs. In the case of Taco Pica, once they decided on a restaurant, they were intent on keeping that business venture, despite the difficulties they encountered in raising sufficient capital. Because of these challenges, it is likely that businesses models with low start-up costs, such as cleaning companies, are a more appropriate model to encourage and facilitate alternatives to precarious employment for immigrants and refugees.

Taco Pica has an added element of continuing their culture as Latin Americans, as a means to share with the broader community their language and culture. Envrio-Safe is much more about being a vehicle for employment for immigrants and refugees. Their vision is less about their specific occupations as cleaners, and more about creating spaces of empowerment and learning for newcomers to Canada.

One of the most important distinctions between the two is that they appear to be on opposite ends of their life span. While the Enviro-Safe Coop is barely two years old and eager to grow and build, Taco Pica is over 15 years old, and its members appear almost ready to retire and pass the cooperative on a new generation. The experiences and opinions of the cooperative members must be seen in the context of the different stages of their cooperative's development, and helps to explain the somewhat more resigned perspective of the Taco Pica workers.

#### *Developing cooperative entrepreneurialship*

One member of Taco Pica placed a lot of emphasis on one's personality and outlook on life, arguing that those who work hard and aim high will succeed while those who give in easily will not succeed. Despite recognizing and acknowledging that there were systematic barriers that had severely constrained their ability to find decent employment in their field, this member was determined to hang on to the belief that "if like you dream high and you know what you want, you will go far." This member seemed to have developed what Schoening describes as 'cooperative entrepreneurialship'. Rather than promoting civic engagement *or* a shopkeeper spirit, he argues that cooperatives often engender its members with a blend of both, whereby the cooperative is not averse to running efficiently but its reasons for doing business go beyond profit, emphasizing the

collective interest of all members (Schoening, 303). While members of the Enviro-Safe coop held perspectives more closely to civic engagement, emphasizing the importance of equality and the principles of cooperation, the members of Taco Pica, over time had created a compromise between the two.

Schoening writes that unless cooperatives are “rigorous” in their commitment to their social values and ideals, and not just the accumulation of profit, cooperatives often have the effect of “socializing workers into a capitalist mindset” (Schoening, 299). As a result, Schoening cautions against automatically concluding that cooperatives are agents of a more equitable economy, particularly when operating in a capitalist system (Schoening, 299).

*The importance of external support*

An important insight that was drawn from both case studies is the importance of external support. In the case of the cooperatives studies in this paper, one received significant support from outside organizations who have specific programs to help groups start a cooperative business, while the other primarily relied on community and religious groups for more general support. What appears to be the extra boost that keeps things going in one case, seems to be the one thing missing that could give cooperative members a bit of breathing room in the other.

Both the existing literature and data from interviews conducted with worker coop members illustrates the need for organizations that explicitly support the development of worker cooperatives within “marginalized” communities such as immigrant and refugee, First Nations people, disabled or low income individuals etc. Members of the Enviro-Safe coop were quite clear that the support from SEED was crucial in their ability to get

started and for their continued sustainability, and members of Taco-Pica appeared to lament that they had not received a high level of continuous support. Their experience is not unlike many other worker cooperatives organized by marginalized or oppressed communities, or worker cooperatives in general. Sixty percent of worker cooperatives surveyed in Ontario benefited from outside help in the previous year (Stuart, 5). While some may argue this is an indication of instability, I would argue it is more a sign of the strong links between cooperatives, who, through a social or solidarity economy have created a network of support and solidarity which leads to increase stability and sustainability of individual enterprises.

Nearly all of the worker cooperatives of immigrant and refugee communities that have been successful in sustaining themselves had the support of outside organizations. Having that support and encouragement is crucial, not only financial but logistical support and technical support etc (applying for grants, writing proposals, training members). CED(Community Economic Development) networks, community organizations, religious groups etc. have been instrumental in providing support and solidarity.

This should not necessarily be seen as a bad thing, nor as a weakness of the cooperative model. Many businesses, of all kinds, require a large amount of support to get started. In the traditional business sector this often occurs within the private sphere, family members giving loans, donating their time etc. or through government assistance. In the case of immigrants and refugees, those private networks are not always able to provide that, so there is a need to make sure that this support is available in the public

sphere. For the coop model to fully address precarious employment, it will require this support to achieve full-time work with formal benefits.

There are several organizations in the US that work to support the development of cooperative businesses within “marginalized” communities, such as immigrants and low-income women. We could look to these as possible models for comparable organizations in Canada. One is Cooperative Economies for Women, an organization that assists immigrant and refugee women of colour in establishing cooperative businesses. CEW provides on-going support for its member cooperatives through childcare, literacy training, and legal assistance, and food security assistance (<http://cooperativewomen.org>). Through their work, the CEW is bridging the need for an income to survive and the desire for control and autonomy in the workplace. Another similar organization is WAGES, whose mission is to “promote the social and economic empowerment of low-income women through cooperative business ownership” (Benner et al, 54). Benner et al. note “as worker-owners, women who may have previously been in low-paid, insecure, isolated, and unhealthy jobs now work in a safe environment, where they have educational opportunities and participate in decision making” (Benner et al, 54).

Another example is that of SEED Winnipeg, the organization that was instrumental in supporting Enviro-Safe. Their Community and Worker Ownership Program provides support and assistance to groups seeking to start or expand a cooperative business as a means to “create quality jobs for primarily low-income individuals.” They provide assistance in the areas of business plan development, organization structure, skill building workshops and financial strategic planning. While the CWOP advocates the cooperative model, SEED lacks a complete commitment to this

model, as other programs promote a traditional business model, including a business management training program for low-income earners (2006-2007 Annual Report SEED, 7). This creates somewhat of an internal contradiction within the organization, and perhaps illustrates the need for increased analysis on the part of SEED as to what kind of employment it is seeking to facilitate and encourage.

While only time will tell, it seems likely that the strong relationship the Enviro-Safe has developed with SEED Winnipeg and other immigrant and employment focused organizations, such as the Community Economic Development Network (Cednet) can only strengthen the cooperative and its ability to survive and continue to provide an alternative space of employment.

An important element that was not addressed in this research is the gender relations and dynamics within the cooperative. While both case studies included interviews with men and women coop members, it was difficult to assess the power dynamics, in part because one interview happened collectively, and in part because they seemed to be a desire on the part of research participants not to speak of their fellow members in a negative light. The female research participants appeared reluctant to discuss discrimination or sexism in the workplace, even at previous jobs. During one set of interviews the male participant did dominate the discussion; the two other women participants often deferred questions to the male participants or simply agreed with what he had said. In both worker cooperatives studied, women held prominent roles within the cooperative, however, without additional research and analysis, it is impossible to tell how these roles were experienced and viewed vis-à-vis the male members.

An analysis of the gender dynamics in cooperatives, and how that relates to, and impacts the potential as alternatives to precarious employment is something that should be addressed in further research.

## CONCLUSION

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It appears that on some level, the worker cooperative model is providing an alternative, or an escape, from elements of precarious employment. One research participant felt that the cooperative had “for sure” provided an alternative to forms of precarious employment, stating that she “saw the benefits from the beginning.” Most notably control and flexibility, both over their work but also over their lives, which allows for a work-life balance, and the ability to pursue education or other interests, were crucial factors articulated by research participants. Collective ownership was a source of security, and also an opportunity for capacity building, where workers can learn new skills and develop existing ones. Finally, the worker cooperative model provides more than just a job; it has shown to build social capital and a sense of community, both within the coop and the community at large. There are still some remaining issues, primarily in terms of providing full-time work and “hard” benefits. For worker cooperatives to fully succeed in providing alternatives to precarious employment, these two key issues will need to be addressed.

One insight that came out of the interviews was that worker cooperatives cannot be analyzed or understood as a stand alone entity in isolation of the broader network and community that exists. Their ability to be this alternative to precarious employment relies in part on the existence of networks and relationships of support and solidarity. This requires that outside organizations, such as immigrant and refugee settlement agencies, employment-assistance programs and a broad array of community organizations recognize the value and potential of workers cooperatives and work to facilitate and encourage their organization and sustainability. Cooperatives are a long-term solution,

not an immediate stop-gap measure. Nor are they a mass, broad based approach that can immediately be used by workers to change their lives. Day argues that we need to get beyond the obsession or the will to “save everyone at once” (Day 2005, 215) and focus on what can be done by and for a few, now. While this argument can also be interpreted as potentially elitist and disingenuous to the hundreds of thousands of workers trapped in precarious employment relations, what needs to be taken from Day’s argument is that small-scale or local radical actions that work can be just as important and meaningful as forever searching for “the” solution that can change everything at once. While cooperatives are often small, take time to build up, and require a lot of support for their establishment and continuity, in the end, they create alternative spaces of employment that have the potential to be empowering, satisfying and sustainable alternatives to precarious employment.

In order to tackle the issue of precarious employment relations, we must move beyond merely critiquing its existence and move toward a positive understanding of what kinds of work and employment relations are just and non-oppressive, not just “non-precarious.” My discussion of worker coops as a response to precarious employment has been an attempt to begin that discussion. I wanted to start talking about what types of employment should be supported and encouraged, instead of merely what needs to be reduced, reigned-in or controlled.

As Day notes, the politics of demand are very appealing, and appear on the surface to be more pragmatic. However, as Rinehart argues “there is one answer to alienated labour that deserves serious consideration: worker’s control.” He notes that “in contrast to participatory, stock purchase, or profit-sharing programs implemented by

management to lessen antagonisms between labour and capital, workers' control is initiated by workers for workers' purposes (Rinehart, 202). He views unions as incapable of dealing with the causes of alienated labour because they "operate within rather than challenge the essential boundaries of capitalist power" (Rinehart, 209). While alienated labour and precarious employment relations are separate and distinct concepts, their sources are similar, and, as such, the sources of their solution are likely similar as well.

While Rinehart concludes that worker ownership is "simply an unrealistic alternative" for most wage laborers (Rienhard, 208), I argue there is reason to be more optimistic. It is true that cooperatives are an imperfect proposal. They remained constrained within oppressive, racist, and sexist systems, and in many ways are forced to interact with a capitalist economy, which largely despises their very existence. It is also true that while the organization of work under these cooperatives is considerably better than the experiences of workers in comparable sectors, there are still additional improvements to be made to challenge the precarious and low-wage nature of their work. Despite all the challenges inherent in establishing and sustaining worker cooperatives, some have been successful. Even more inspiring is that communities who face additional oppression and discrimination, such as immigrants and refugees, have been successful. They are small spaces, but they are spaces nonetheless. Much can be learned from these examples, and built upon, to make it easier for others to follow in their footsteps.

As Gindin argues, capitalism has challenged our ability to imagine; we must set our imagination to see a world other than our own (Gindin, 99). We are so entrenched in a world plagued by precarious employment that it is difficult to articulate a vision of a

world without precarious employment. However, the two worker cooperatives and its members analyzed in this paper show that despite capitalism's ability to obscure the "real conditions of life" (Gindin, 81) and to leave us feeling hopeless, there are still spaces of hope, which can stimulate our imagination to build a different vision of work and to develop a new relationship between work and the rest of our lives.

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