

The Story of Collective Copies

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My name is Adam Trott, and I work at Collective Copies, a twenty-five year-old print shop in Massachusetts. Collective Copies was formed in 1982 workers at Gnomon Copy, a Boston area copy chain, went on strike to form a union. After months of striking Gnomon closed its doors. The workers and their union, the United Electrical Workers, turned their efforts to forming a worker collective and with money given in advance for copies by community members doors opened in 1983.

I would like to address three things. 1) What a worker cooperative is and why it is distinct from other types of cooperatives, 2) How Collective Copies as an example of worker cooperatives is a transformative business for workers, and 3) How Collective Copies, again as an example, is transformative for communities and regional social movements.

Part I: What is a worker cooperative, and why is it distinct from other types of co-ops?

One of the beautiful things about working in a cooperative is that it means different things to different people. Among the 300 or so worker cooperatives in the United States*, worker cooperators experience many unique benefits: the dynamics and challenges of a cooperative business, shared control over conditions and compensation, ability to gain expertise in new areas, application of ideology or politics, or just a feeling of sharing the experience of work. I feel there are two things that make all these things possible in worker cooperatives and worker collectives (Worker collectives are one form of worker cooperatives, typically smaller in size-less than twenty people-and decisions made by consensus). First is one member, one vote, and this is true for each of the approximately 4,000 worker-owners in the US*. In worker cooperatives, only workers are members, and all own an equal share. This ensures that those who are affected by decisions of the organization or business are the only ones who make them. One share per worker maintains a sense of equality and protects against some workers having less investment than others. Furthermore Collective Copies, as well as most collectives, operates on consensus where everyone has to agree or abstain from the decision in order for it to pass. The second principle is that workers decide where the surplus goes, that is what is left over, or what in a capitalist firm is called profit. It is the control of the surplus where we are offered the chance to apply our beliefs in the process of what we do.

So what makes worker cooperatives unique from other types of cooperatives - consumer, producer, and purchasing? It is important and useful to cooperate around renting or owning a home, as in housing co-ops. Purchasing co-ops benefit members through lower cost items, like in a buying club or business association. Just as important is to cooperate around what food we buy, where members in food co-ops have a real say. But what about the product or service itself? Worker cooperatives are unique and exciting in that they do not focus on where we spend our money, but rather on how we earn our money. Worker co-ops operate on multiple bottom lines – environmental impact, workers’ rights and compensation, anti-sexist-, anti-racist movements, etc – prices are decided by workers earning that living in tune with their beliefs and not owners maximizing a profit. At Collective Copies we interact on a community basis and cultivate local relationships to create a business to meet our community’s needs. Workers controlling the surplus of a business makes a difference in these powerful parts of a business. At Collective Copies we use our surplus to offer worker a great benefits package: medical, dental benefits, Simple IRA retirement contribution, vacation, sick days, and holidays. For our work

we use nearly exclusively recycled paper, and we use 100% post-consumer recycled paper for our self-serve machines used by the public. We also donate 10% of our surplus to local organizations. I feel that our structure has as much to do with these aspects of our business as we do. In the cooperative our beliefs and the mission of the business support each other.

Part II: Collective Copies as an example of a transformative business

Work is consuming, and it takes up a large part of our lives. The day-to-day life of work and the influences it has on our lives make up a big part of our outlook and our contribution to society. In speaking with another worker cooperator I was asked how can we have a democratic society when most people work outside of a democratic process? Worker co-ops may be alone in succeeding to transform workers into worker-owners who have a real say and true benefit in their daily working lives. This transformation is very powerful with tangible results. Using recycled paper, compensating workers with medical benefits, having paid time off- all costly choices that we feel are the right things to do. A little research (using the National Resources Defense Council's facts) into our use of recycled paper tells us that in a year we save over 300 trees, 70,000 gallons of water, 40,000 kilowatts of electricity and 600 pounds of air pollution.

A less tangible transformation, and perhaps my favorite to try to unravel, is how people in a cooperative grow and challenge themselves. The difficulties and demands of running a business give plenty of opportunity to challenge yourself as a worker-owner: marketing, retirement plans, customer service, accounting, etc., sometimes the list is overwhelming. As we're learning together, I see we're trying different parts of ourselves out, sometimes taking certain parts of ourselves seriously for the first time. Many people characterize consensus as arduous or too difficult and slow, and this is true at times. I insist, however, it is worth it all for that powerful and motivating moment of having 13 people behind a decision. Learning about our business and how I can benefit it has been a wonderful road towards learning about myself. I see it as one of the best opportunities I have during my day to try to push myself, and in this practice, with the support of my co-workers, I have become my better and truer self. It is more than the work my co-workers and I perform. It is ourselves that are changing and improving, being pushed as we are supported. I cherish this process of finding myself as much as my work being the subject of transformation as I work cooperatively.

Part III: How Collective Copies, again just as an example, is transformative for communities and regional social movements.

I see Collective Copies and worker cooperatives in general as transformative agents in two major ways. The first way is through our donation programs. Collective Copies is one of many worker cooperatives whose donation method is based off of the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation, though many cooperatives choose their own donation processes. We give 10% of our gross profits away each year to community organizations from animal shelters and health clinics to the Valley Alliance of Worker Cooperatives and Save the Redwoods. We also make donations monthly, usually for organizations trying to make their printing budget or to improve on their printing choices. Secondly, I find many of my co-workers and friends within the worker cooperative movement are very active. Whether it is the democratic atmosphere carrying over, or the flexibility of our schedules, many of us volunteer our time in organizations fighting for social or economic change in our neighborhoods. In working at Collective Copies I have the time and energy for the meetings, conference calls and work for the projects that I care about.

Conclusion

It strikes me that worker cooperatives work so well for so many of those involved that there aren't more of them. At Collective Copies we spend more money on paper, more money on workers, use what is considered a slow, difficult decision-making process with no accounting or business degrees awarded to any of us, and we are succeeding. So far Collective Copies has not had a money-losing year, no lay-offs, better pay and benefits for workers than industry average, and steady growth resulting in a \$1.5 million dollar year in 2007. I wonder if a little copy shop, by introducing equal, fair and transparent practices in their business makes such a difference, what else we can do? What about our schooling or public transport? What about agriculture? Or restaurants for that matter? If this is what can happen with thirteen people in one shop, what would happen if instead of the 4,000 worker owners in the US there were 4 or 5 million? Worker cooperation is in a growing fresh new wave of organizing, and is a prime model for transforming their members and their communities. The economic equality that worker cooperatives strive on is a constant, vibrant catalyst for equality among politics, sexes, nations, races, relationships, and neighborhoods.

* Facts concerning the worker cooperative movement, as well as lots of other great information, came from the United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives-
www.usworker.coop.