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Digital photos available
Call for interviews with co-ops

*Employees create better companies
when they own the shop*

Offering workers a future

BURLINGTON, VT –Rep. Bernie Sanders received a standing ovation at Vermont Employee Ownership Center's fourth annual conference last week at the Wyndham Hotel. Addressing the 185 participants he noted, "The subject of how we create a more democratic economy is on the minds of many, many people."

The wealth gap between the richest families and the rest of the population is widening in the U.S., Sanders explained, and as a result many people feel alienated from most aspects of their lives, including their jobs.

"Their lives begin when they leave work and go home," Sanders stated. "That is not the vision we should have for America."

Support from Capitol Hill

Instead, Vermont's famous Independent Congressman asked, "Wouldn't it be good to have a company where all the workers' best ideas can be used, rather than have one person sitting on top of the company calling the shots?"

"I believe that all over the country you will see more and more people receptive to this idea, and this state has an important role to play in making that happen," he concluded.

Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy sent his video greetings to the conference from his office in Washington, D.C. Last December, Sen. Leahy was instrumental in directing \$500,000 of federal funds to the Vermont Employee Ownership Center (VEOC) to support their work with ESOPs (employee stock ownership plans) and worker-owned cooperatives.

(MORE)

Success Stories from the Shop Floor

Whether they started from scratch or bought out a previous owner, the stories shared by worker-owners at Tuesday's conference should make business and community development professionals sit up and take notice.

Vermont offers some remarkable examples of worker ownership. These include Carris Reels, maker of spools and reels for all types of wire and cable, with 450 worker-owners in six locations, and King Arthur Flour, headquartered in Norwich.

Both started life as family businesses whose owners chose to sell the company to their workers. King Arthur Flour's 135 employee-owners recently received the Deane C. Davis Vermont Business of the Year Award.

Other Vermont co-ops and ESOPs participating in the conference included Green Mountain Spinnery, Chroma Technology, Red House construction firm and Gardener's Supply, whose COO Cindy Turcot is the current president of the VEOC board of directors.

Much of the time was devoted to intense information exchange on creating a culture of cooperation, democratic decision-making, setting up a co-op or ESOP, integrating new member-owners, paying off departing ones, and all manner of legal and financial issues.

The Power of Worker-Owners

The big picture was brought sharply into focus by keynote speaker Gar Alperovitz. Alperovitz currently heads up the Democracy Collaborative, a progressive think tank located at the University of Maryland where he teaches Political Science.

"This is the richest country in the world," Alperovitz stated. "There is no reason why we shouldn't have a decent quality of life for everyone. We need to get ourselves organized in a different way." He noted that throughout the nation's history, ordinary people have ushered in monumental changes without recognizing the implications of their actions.

"There is a stage in development which allows people to think about the next stage. You can't do that until the conditions are right. I think that is what the people in this room are doing. The possibilities of building on this base are extraordinary if we can see ourselves doing it."

New National Federation to Meet in NYC

In fact, the worker ownership movement has been accelerating for several years. After nearly a decade of grassroots organizing, in 2004 three regional groups came together in Madison, Wisconsin to form the United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives.

In October, the new Federation will hold its first Annual Membership Meeting in New York City. It will take advantage of the Big Apple's strong cooperative culture, and will be bilingual (Spanish-English).

Cooperative development activists working in New Orleans and the hard-hit Delta region will be on hand to share their struggles and achievements. Plans are in the works to bring cooperators from Latin America and elsewhere to the New York gathering.

The popular documentary 'The Take' will be presented by Avi Lewis, the Canadian filmmaker who produced it with his wife, author and activist Naomi Klein. The film looks at the birth of Argentina's co-op revolution.

Since the 2001 crash of Argentina's free trade poster-child economy, more than 3,000 cooperatives have been started, with help from the government.

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For more information on Vermont Worker Co-ops:

www.veoc.org

For more information on the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives:

www.usworker.coop

For more information about all types of cooperatives in the U.S.:

www.cooperationworks.coop

For information about the international co-op movement:

www.ica.coop