

For Immediate Release

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***Public Invited to Take Part in
Worker Co-op Events in
New York City, Oct. 13-15, 2006***

Good News for US Workers

When a Regional Field Administrator of the AFL-CIO's largest union proposed recently that its members use worker cooperatives as an alternative organizing strategy, it caused a stir in the rapidly organizing worker co-op world.

The statement, from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), describes co-ops as "an alternative that reaches outside of the limitations of [unions], converting workplaces into democratically run institutions owned by the workers."

The first such cooperatives in the American Colonies were started by immigrants in New York and Philadelphia, whose only alternative to their horrible working conditions was to walk off the job and set up shop together. Union organizing came later.

Today, no one knows how many worker co-ops there are in the U.S., because until recently they have made little effort to organize. But several years ago, regional and local networking among co-ops began to accelerate.

Many of them will be in New York City this October for a national conference on worker co-ops and the first Annual Membership Meeting of the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives. (Program, registration at: www.usworker.coop)

Co-op Hot Shots

These include San Francisco's Rainbow Grocery whose 200 worker owners share a significant pot of gold and exercise enormous autonomy at the department level, and the hugely successful pioneer in organic Fair Trade coffee, Equal Exchange.

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Hot Shots, cont'd.

Many other cooperatives will be represented in New York City October 13-15, 2006, such as Green Worker Co-ops in the South Bronx, an initiative to create sustainable employment in one of the nation's most devastated communities. In 2005, GWC won the prestigious Union Square award, named for a NYC nexus of social change movements.

In Wisconsin, several rural homecare co-ops have been started by care givers eager to support one another, to give their clients' superior care to that of profit-driven agencies, and to upgrade jobs that return too little in wages or respect.

In Philadelphia, workers have formed preschool co-ops. In Minneapolis, Minnesota and Ithaca, New York, they've started restaurants. In Madison, Wisconsin they own a taxi company. Across the country, workers have joined forces to operate construction, service and manufacturing businesses that improve their wages and working conditions.

In return they must be willing to exercise the rights and responsibilities of owners, including how to run a successful business. The October conference offers them a chance to share resources, to teach and learn from one another.

Highlights

Participants at the worker co-op conference will be welcomed by Paul Hazen, CEO of the National Cooperative Business Association, the co-op community's national legislative watchdog and information clearinghouse. The reception will be held at the popular East Village eatery Colors, whose worker-owners include former employees of Windows on the World (Trade Center) restaurant.

Keynote speaker Rick Surpin is a founder of Bronx-based Cooperative Home Care Associates. The 950 members of CHCA--mostly low-income women of color, many immigrants--have repositioned their profession in the healthcare industry, and in the process they are proving that clients receive better care when the workers also do.

Other highlights include Spanish translation for all sessions (by a worker co-op) and hearing from co-op organizers who have been organizing in the African-American tradition in New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta. Co-op organizers from Argentina and Venezuela have also been invited to share their experience.

Community development financial institutions and co-op funds will offer mini-consultations about loans and grants, and participants can learn about everything from the basics of starting a cooperative to the role co-ops can play in a global economy.

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Highlights, cont'd.

Avi Lewis, who with his wife, author Naomi Klein (*No Logo*, etc.), produced the film 'The Take' about Argentina's post-2001 co-op movement, will be on hand for a public screening of the film at the conference finale on Sunday, October 15th at Anthology Film Archives.

Workers Converge on Wall Street

By getting together, co-ops in vastly different industries have discovered they face many similar issues and problems. Increased networking and peer mentoring have paid off for their separate co-ops, in implementing better policies and practices, renewing enthusiasm and reducing costs. Local, state and regional alliances are forming across the country.

In 2004, a number of co-ops and ally organizations met in Minneapolis to form the United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives, whose mission is to strengthen and expand workplace democracy through cooperative enterprise.

Many of the men and women who launched this movement will be at Millennium High School in the heart of Manhattan's Financial District this October. An appropriate place, they say, to focus on creating an economy for the 21st century.

Co-ops Cooperate

In addition to the worker co-op of interpreters, consumer food co-ops have offered their resources to make the event a success. Some of New York's housing co-ops are seeking host families for out-of-town participants.

At the first Annual Membership Meeting of the Federation, an ambitious agenda will be guided by some of the superb facilitators who populate the world of worker cooperatives.

There will be discussion and debate, and Federation members will again have an opportunity to demonstrate a favorite co-op aphorism: 'Democracy is not the same thing as getting your own way.'

For a society indoctrinated in the cult of individualism, therein lies the rub. In New York City this October, at Millennium High, a pioneering group of American workers—all sizes, shapes, colors, religions, genders, ages and cultures--will once again show the world what participatory democracy can achieve.

The public is welcome to attend. Anyone can pay to come to just one session or the whole weekend (a bargain at \$100). Inexpensive accommodations are booked at two local Ys. Childcare and scholarships are available.

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