

The Cooperative Difference: Building Real Sustainability

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Green Worker Co-op is a co-op incubator in the South Bronx of NYC.

Background info on S. Bronx:

The “dictates of the market” have made all the things that people don’t want in their own backyards to be sent to the S. Bronx (ie: power plants, waste facilities, etc.)

1970’s-80’s: there was a gradual loss of jobs, government neglect, a decline in school performance, and an increase in pollution.

There have been many efforts to restore the community, but the constant problem is the need for work.

There is “environmental racism,” “environmental classism” that is occurring in the S. Bronx.

He has a desire to create work, but in a good, green way. Desire to create green businesses where pollution is the worst, and show the city that there’s another way to do business.

Why co-ops?

He started out his quest by talking with the traditional kinds of people (NGO’s, unions, other business people), but felt like the work structure was not “as far as we could go.” A main point of what he wanted to do was to have *community control*. People talk about empowerment, but what they’re really talking about is *control*.

His first introduction to cooperatives was learning about the Southern Federation of Co-ops (African American farmers). He was also familiar with consumer co-ops (grocery and housing), but not really worker co-ops. He asked: What can we do to transform the workplace, and make the workplace reflect the world we want to live in?

Community control is really a question of democracy. The elections we have in the US are not real democracy. Democracy is about having an influence over the things affecting us each and every day. For those of us who are of working age, it should be in the workplace. If you’re in school, you should have democratic control of your school.

His background is not in business or in co-ops, but in social justice work and organizing. So how did he come to be an advocate of cooperatives? (ReBuilders Source, Green Worker’s first co-op, opened three months ago, but he started thinking about it and working on it about 2-3 years ago.) He looks for the opportunity in “co-op.” Co-ops are typically seen as on the fringe of society, something that is stuck in the 70’s, but they are so much more than that. Now is the time to build the co-op movement. (Cites Wikipedia as an example of growing democratic culture.)

He is more comfortable with the idea that things can be done as a group, that you don’t need a boss or a hierarchy. All of the people here (in the room) have an incredible amount of knowledge. It is ironic to be a speaker here because he has learned so much from us, especially the ones that have been “at it” for a while.

How did he make it work?

“Creative financing” has made it possible. He used an economic model that allowed Green Worker (as a non-profit) to funnel money into ReBuilders Source. Good idea to check with a lawyer before you do this.

The hardest thing is to make it work on a personal level. How do you work together each and every day with out killing each other?

The big picture:

What we’re doing is changing the nature of work, the legal arrangement of work, and mostly, the social relations between people.

He has a lot of frustration with the economy because it makes the relations between people break down and become commodities. ReBuilders Source and Green Worker are learning to rebuild relationships. We didn’t grow up with the social skills needed to communicate directly, listen actively, and not to be passive aggressive and kill one another.

Schools are “messed up” because they’re designed to produce workers instead of empowered people. The old myth of the college dropout billionaire might have something to it (success=breaking out of the system). Reference to the potential goodness of “free schools.”

Green Worker is trying to create an opportunity for community control. It is about reshaping the economy and rebuilding social relationships.

Co-ops should help your personal/family life. If your involvement in a cooperative is not helping your personal life, then something needs to change at the cooperative.

Questions and answers

-How did it get started?

-We posted flyers saying “fire your boss” around town. There was a great response. (laughter)

-How many cooperatives has Green Worker started?

-Just one so far.

-What are your plans for the future?

-He can’t give a specific answer at the moment, but the next co-op should:

1. help the local community

2. create jobs

3. help the previous co-op (co-ops supporting each other as a community development strategy)

-Plans to expand?

-No. Focus is on the South Bronx.

-Plans to create a free school?

-Green Worker has collaborated with school(s) in the past, but they don’t have any immediate plans to start a free school. Omar’s wife is going to start to work at one in Brooklyn.

-How do new members join?

-In order to become a member of Rebuilders Source, you have to go through the “co-op academy” at Green Worker, which entails a couple hours per week (of education?) for about 8 weeks.

-Have you had to make any sacrifices in terms of wages, values, benefits etc?

-The key to not having to sacrifice your values/benefits is **planning**. When starting a new business, there is always a pressure to “just start” with what limited resources you have, but you should plan ahead and wait until you have raised enough funds to be able to do things right.