



North American Co-op Educators Plan for International Year of Cooperatives

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The Association of Cooperative Educators, an association of co-op educators in Canada, the United States, and Puerto Rico, gathered in Winnipeg, Manitoba from July 27 through July 29. Titled “Opening New Doors,” the conference aimed to examine new forms of cooperative enterprise, with an eye towards the United Nations-designation of 2012 as the International Year of the Cooperative. The designation marks only the second time in UN history that the United Nations bestowed such a designation on an economic model. The other time it did so, in 2002, was the International Year of Microcredit, which gave new visibility to the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh and helped spawn the proliferation of microcredit approaches throughout the world.

Christopher Kopka, Vice President of Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, delivered the keynote address. Kopka noted that while his organization was a fraternal organization rather than a cooperative, there were many similar features – not the least of which was member control over a revenue-generating business. Thrivent is an illustration of the long-term viability of the member-owned business model. Started by 500 farmers who created the insurance company in 1902 in response to a grain mill accident the previous year, the company now has 2.5 million members, \$80 billion in insurance policies, and is a Fortune-500 company. Kopka noted that cooperatives and fraternal organizations in North America are both “ubiquitous and anonymous.” Kopka urged attendees to build a movement that applies mutual aid and cooperation to solve pressing social problems today. “Go back to the problems,” Kopka urged. “Tease out the stories. Teach this generation how to use this model. And then we will see it blossom.”

Discussion of cooperative education methods was a centerpiece of the first day’s speakers. Colette Lobel, Cooperative Director of La Coop fédérée in Quebec emphasized the value of participatory education approaches in effective teaching cooperative values. For example, Lobel talked about how she had participants write a skill they have on a piece of paper and throw that paper into the hat. Participants then have to guess who has what skills as they draw the papers out of the hat – this helps participants break out beyond status roles and understand the different skills that each participant brings to the discussion.

Richard Fortier described the efforts of the Desjardins Group. Desjardin, based in Quebec, is one of the world’s largest credit unions, with more than 5.8 million members, 5,900 elected officers (each of its 451 branches has its own board) and 42,500 employees. The co-op budgets one percent of its annual income or roughly \$15 million a year for education. This includes financial literacy programs, but also has comprehensive co-op education program, which includes short introductory seminars for all new employees and a 4-session, 2-day training program for new managers and officers. José Julián Ramírez Ruiz of the Liga de Cooperativas de Puerto Rico spoke of the role of public education and communication efforts, which in the case of the Puerto

Rico federation included both a regular newsletter and a weekly hour-long radio program.

Others spoke of efforts to develop cooperative education in an academic setting. Monica Adeler, a business professor at the University of Winnipeg spoke about her work creating a new course in cooperative development at her campus, incorporating guest speakers from local co-ops into the course. Greg McKee, Director of the Quentin Burdick Center for Cooperatives at North Dakota State University explained how working with an advisory board that, combined with the use of distance learning techniques, in addition to guiding his research to provide solutions to “real world” problems, has facilitated the development of co-op business courses at a number of North Dakota campuses. McKee explained his approach, which begins with meeting with co-ops that already exist in the city where class will begin. Likely Adeler, McKee employs guest speakers. The response of business leaders, McKee adds, “borders on the effusive. Members in the co-op community have often said: “it is about time,” remarked McKee. Some business, McKee added, have even offered scholarships to support the effort.

The following day focused more on the economic role of cooperatives. John Restakis, Executive Director of the British Columbia Co-operative Association and Erin Olin Wright, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin talked about the role of cooperatives in the global economy. Restakis talked about his research on Italian cooperatives, especially in the region of Emilia-Romagna, a region of 4 million people, which has become one of Europe’s most successful regions economically, both in terms of income equality and income per capita, in large part because of the presence of 8,000 cooperatives. “The co-op model has migrated beyond the cooperative movement itself to have a definitive impact on how the mainstream capitalist economy is functioning as well,” Restakis noted.

Wright asked the provocative question of whether worker cooperatives are “a niche in capitalism or a pathway beyond.” According to Wright, worker co-ops, although not sufficient in themselves to transform the economy, could play “a key role” in that process. Wright also called for a more nuanced understanding of what transformation involves – noting that all economic systems are “hybrids” that combine different elements. “The United States is not a pure capitalist economy, it is a capitalist-dominated economy,” Wright said. In this vein, worker co-ops, Wright suggested, could help cause a shift the balance of the economy to one where capital faces greater subordination to democratic control.

Following the theoretical discussion of the economy writ large, two speakers examined the intersection of co-ops and food. Yoni Landau, the executive director of CoFed (Cooperative Food Empowerment Directive), a group organizing food co-ops on U.S. college campuses, noted that CoFed began with a student organizing effort at the University of California, Berkeley, to replace a plan to put a fast food restaurant in the Student Union with a student-run food co-op. Landau noted that two additional organizing efforts at Seattle and Santa Barbara have since had success and that additional rapid expansion is anticipated in future years. In Winnipeg, Cindy Coker, Executive Director of a nonprofit organization, Supporting Employment and Economic Development (SEED) Winnipeg, and Lydia Warkentin of the University of Winnipeg described how the university and the nonprofit had teamed together to incubate a multi-stakeholder cooperative (both worker and consumer members), Diversity Foods, which now provides living wage jobs and ownership for a staff of nearly 50 people.

Two co-op consultants, Margaret Lund (working on behalf of the Ohio Employee Ownership Center) and Jean-Pierre Girard, based in Quebec, spoke in more detail about multi-stakeholder cooperatives. Lund highlighted the rise of multi-stakeholder co-ops in the United States, which she said were becoming particularly prominent in the food industry. Girard focused on the rise of multi-stakeholder co-ops in Italy and Quebec. In Italy, Girard noted that as of the end of 2009 there were 9,000 social cooperatives that provide 327,000 jobs. In Quebec, Girard said that co-ops with more than one class of owners are now so common that in 2010 of the 116 new co-ops formed, 70 were “solidarity co-ops” (the formal Quebec category for multi-stakeholder co-ops).

The last day of the conference focused on ways to grow the cooperative movement.. Sherida Ryan of the University of Toronto talking about using social media as a tactic to build cooperative support. Vera Goussaert, Executive Director of the Manitoba Cooperative Association legislation recently approved in Manitoba to create tax incentives for cooperatives to help fund the development of new co-ops. Cherie Beninger of The Co-operators Group Making an Impact talked about how small grants made by the Canadian insurance co-op’s foundation had helped spawn cooperative development. Roy Messing of the Ohio Employee Ownership Center noted that with the baby boom generation, “Over the next 20 years, 80 million baby boomers will retire and more than 70% of privately owned businesses will be changing hands.” This, Messing, emphasized, required the development of succession planning, since only 15 percent of privately owned businesses today make it to the second generation. Worker co-ops, Messing said, could seize some of these opportunities. Messing highlighted the case of Select Machine, an Ohio privately owned business that the Ohio Employee Ownership Center helped gradually convert into a worker-owned co-op (the conversion began in 2005 and will be completed this year).

Discussion of the United Nations’ upcoming (2012) International Year of the Cooperative topped off the last day of the conference. Tanya Gracie of the Canadian Co-operative Association and Eric DeLuca of the National Cooperative Business Association discussed ways that Canadian and U.S. co-ops were preparing for the year-long celebration. The International Co-operative Association, they noted, would feature one new co-op each day for the 366 days of the year. In Canada, co-ops raised over \$1 million to support “International Year of the Cooperatives” activities. In the United States, a U.S. Senate resolution (Resolution 87) to support the International Year passed by unanimous consent – 19 Democrats and 12 Republicans co-sponsored the bill. Gracie noted that co-op movement aims to take advantage of the UN attention to highlight co-op values. Among these, Gracie noted, were the fact that co-ops do not maximize profit, but instead aim to use profit to meet member needs and reinvest in those needs. Co-op values, Gracie added, also are to build wealth and keep that wealth in the local community.

For more information on the Association of Cooperative Educators, see: <http://www.ace.coop>.