

A World Without Bosses?

By Traci Hukill, Common Ground

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As pizza counter guys go, Willie Perez is unusually cheerful, especially for the middle of a lunch rush that, by all rights, should be tailing off. At half-past one on a spring Tuesday, a line of hungry customers is snaking out The Pizza Collective storefront on Berkeley's Shattuck Avenue, the ovens are gusting heat into the kitchen and flushed workers in aprons and tennis shoes are darting about in what appears to be barely organized bedlam. This is not the best time for an interview, I think, as I make my way to the front. But Perez's face breaks into a huge smile of welcome, he greets me like an honored guest and I am ushered to a table with a delicious slice of organic vegetarian pizza.

Thin and quick, with guileless blue eyes and Tiggerish enthusiasm, the 28-year-old father of two has good reason to be happy. He's making close to \$30 an hour, gets medical benefits for his family, enjoys four to five weeks paid time off each year and believes passionately in his work. Not the work of making pizza, particularly, but the work of running, along with 38 other people, a thriving worker-owned cooperative built on the principles of democracy and economic fairness. "I have a personal mission," Perez confesses. "I want to see more cooperatives."

Worker's Paradise?

It's easy to see why Perez is a tireless proselytizer who has worked to establish three spin-off coops, the Arizmendi bakeries in Oakland, San Francisco and Emeryville. To anyone who has slogged through a wage-slave job or had a domineering boss, a collectively run cooperative sounds like a workers' paradise. It has no hierarchy and no supervisors because everyone is an owner. Everyone makes the same amount of money and everyone is responsible for making the business work. Everyone does all the jobs. No one gets summarily fired. Decisions are

made by consensus. At the end of the year, some money goes to charity and some is invested back into the business. The rest of the profits, instead of enriching one or two individuals, are returned to all the worker-owners -- a rising tide lifting many boats.

This level of emotional and financial investment creates a radically different attitude toward work, Perez says, one emphasizing personal responsibility and flexibility. "If we don't have a boss and I tell you to turn out the lights when you leave, you're going to do it because it means more money for all of us," Perez says. "But if someone is breathing down your neck, you might not."

He says he used to work at a big-box retailer. "Corporate America, okay? They don't treat you like human beings. They treat you like robots. Your opinion is not appreciated."

Terry Baird, 59, a member of the Arizmendi Cooperative on Oakland's Lakeshore Drive since it opened in 1997, jokes (or not) about the effect of this. "If you work here and go somewhere else, you're kind of wrecked for the traditional work environment," he says. "The first time you say to your boss, 'Let's vote on this,' they're gonna look at you funny."

There's something else about cooperatives. In an economy with a lot of coops, the number of well-paid, self-directed workers would mean a larger, wealthier middle class, and therefore a healthier community. The goal is a society in which all people, not only the fittest, enjoy economic security.

The Pizza Collective and its parent coop, the Cheese Board, recently brought in a member in his sixties. "And it was, well, this is physical work. Do we want to bring in an older person?" Perez recalls. "But he helps us, we help him, we help his family -- and that's one less family left to the wolves of Corporate America."

The Miracle of Mondragon

In the United States, some 300 business concerns operate as worker-owned collectives, according to the National Cooperative Business Association. Some are relatively high-profile, like the Eugene, Ore.-based Burley Design Corporation, which manufactures distinctive yellow-and-blue bike trailers for children. Most, however, are local, and they are few and far between. Here, the worker-owned society is a dream, but in the Basque country of northern Spain it's become a reality.

The Bay Area's Arizmendi cooperative bakery/pizzerias take their name from a remarkable young Basque priest who ignited a movement from the rubble of Spain's ruinous civil war. A defeated revolutionary who had entered the priesthood, Jose Maria Arizmendiarrieta arrived in the Basque town of Mondragon in 1941 and soon set up a technical school where he taught the skills necessary for Spain's reconstruction. There he also taught Catholic Social Doctrine, with its emphasis on human dignity and better conditions for laborers.

In 1956, a handful of Arizmendi's students, determined to put those principles into action, opened a worker-owned stove factory. Three years later, they opened a credit union, and the seeds of the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation were born. Today the 500-plus cooperatives that make up the MCC employ 72,000 people (about half are worker-owners, with more in the pipeline as membership catches up to rapid growth). The group posted 15 percent growth in profits last year to reach \$612 million. It pours money into education, incubates new cooperatives, and provides worker benefits and collateral so members can buy houses.

When Perez visited Mondragon several years ago, he was stunned by the collective response to a fire that had leveled a refrigerator factory. The refrigerator factory workers were given jobs in other coops, even though that would almost surely mean lower profits for everyone at the other

coops. "They're so unselfish in the way they run their business," Perez marvels.

The Cheese Board, which started in 1967, and the Pizza Collective, which opened in 1990, are attempting to replicate the MCC on a very small scale. They have helped establish the three Bay Area Arizmendis through training and recipe sharing, but each coop functions independently. They all, however, shovel four percent of gross profits back into the Arizmendi Association -- seed money to help start other coops and cushion economic blows.

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All the Arizmendis have needed help in learning to function as collectives. Not all cooperatives are collectives. Sunkist, for example, is a typical agricultural cooperative; it consists of a number of citrus growers who market their products as a group under the Sunkist label. A collective, on the other hand, is a flat organization with no hierarchy, no fatherly arbiter to say: "You're right, and you're wrong," which means people have to cooperate. Which is hard.

Lisa Bruzoni, who at 50 has been at the Cheese Board for 15 years, acknowledges that the \$18 an hour the members make, plus the \$9.99-per-hour profit-sharing bonus everyone got last year, is attractive. "Twenty-eight dollars an hour sounds like a great amount of pay, especially for what we're doing," she says. "But there are certain people who would want to work in a cooperative and certain people who wouldn't. It can be very frustrating."

Without exception, all the people interviewed for this story said the hardest thing about their jobs was learning to get along with others in an environment where no one -- or everyone, really -- is the boss.

For one thing, big decisions at these businesses must be made by consensus (that means everyone must agree that they can live with

whatever is decided), and the only opportunity to do this is at monthly board meetings. Consequently, it takes a long time to get anything done. "It took us three years to write a book," says Bruzoni, who co-authored *The Cheese Board Collective Works* along with several other members. "Anywhere else, it would have taken a year and a half, but we kept having to check with the coop."

The gritty problem of personality conflicts is also wearing. Elizabeth Medina, 27, describes joining the Pizza Collective as "the most stressful thing I've ever done in my life." It was during her six-month probation period that some personality conflicts emerged. Knowing that any member could single-handedly block her bid to join, made the pressure that much worse. "It was so tough. I felt like I was totally under a microscope. I remember going home to my husband and crying and saying, 'Oh my God, this person doesn't like me.'"

Since most people join a collective for a long period of time -- the \$1,000 buy-in at the Cheese Board and Pizza Collective is meant to foster commitment -- there's a sense that the relationships cannot be escaped. That seems to force people to figure out how to get along. "This place will humble you," says Perez, "because a lot of people aren't willing to say, 'Hey, can you cut pizza for me today?' to someone they had an argument with yesterday."

Then there is the more deeply personal issue of self-motivation. "Everybody thinks they don't want to have a boss," says Baird of the Oakland Arizmendi. "But what they haven't thought about is they don't want to be a boss, either. That is maybe the most revolutionary aspect to what we do here. People have to become in charge of themselves, and not everybody's equipped to do that."

Cooperatives, especially the collectively run variety, are a rarity. Even in the Bay Area, as progressive as it is, there is only a handful. This begs the question of whether they can make a difference.

Baird has given this some thought. "Sometimes I wonder, what is the meaning of all this?" he muses. "I enjoy the work, and I can live on the pay. But is it really gonna change things? And I think it does. When I read biographies about exceptional people, it never comes from nowhere. Rosa Parks wasn't just some lady; she was active in the civil rights movement. So yeah, I think we do good work. We do work we like and in a democratic fashion, and maybe it rubs off on people."

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