

IV ENCUENTRO DE COOPERATIVAS DE TRABAJO ASOCIADO

EJE: CONTRIBUCION DE LAS COOPERATIVAS A LOS OBJETIVOS DE DESARROLLO SOSTENIBLE

Por Rebecca KEMBLE, USWCF, Estados Unidos

Thank you, Luis, for starting our time together with a story about revolutionary struggle rooted in the collective will of the people. Thank you for keeping that history and that knowledge alive for us. I think we all sense that we are entering into dark, uncertain times when we will be called upon to either join the fight for liberation of all people, or stand on the sidelines while the world literally burns.

As many people have mentioned, our institutions have failed us. And by us I mean all people, all living things, and the planet itself. Alfonzo gave us a good example of this, explaining how the TozopanTitanakisque coop does a better job of cooperative education than formal institutions of higher education.

The outcome of the recent Presidential elections in my country, while surprising to some, reflect a division of the ruling class between the extractive and war industry on the one hand, and the financial industry on the other. The capitalist class has reached the limits of extraction of both natural resources like fossil fuels, as well as labor, which is why United States had developed what is now called “the prison industrial complex”. Between automation in manufacturing, service industries and retail, humans have become disposable. In the US right now there are more black people in jail than were enslaved in the 17th and 18th centuries.

We need to keep in mind we’re talking about a system that has dispossessed and brutalized indigenous people on this continent for 500 years. This is about a system that has dispossessed and brutalized African people and exploited their labor for profit for more than 500 years. The wealth that is in the banks, in the multinationals, in the private family foundations was created by the blood of our indigenous and black brothers and sisters.

That is the wealth that is funding the rape of the land and the extraction of fossil fuels that is the main cause of the climate crisis facing the planet today. And what is that fuel used for? For waging war. The US is currently waging war in 7 countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Libya and Syria. Not to mention the proxy war on Palestine, in Turkey, and on our own soil in the State of North Dakota. And why are we at war? To secure more access to fossil fuels. What’s wrong with this picture?

The US invests 54% of discretionary funding on war - \$600 billion a year.

What does this mean for education? For infrastructure in our cities? For housing, health care and social security? What does it mean for labor rights? It means they are no longer necessary to support a disposable population, and so we are seeing

historic budget cuts, austerity and a wholesale gutting of the social safety net. I recently learned that Canadian insurance companies have created product called “travelers insurance” which, in part, insures their citizens against potential catastrophic costs incurred should they require medical treatment while visiting the USA.

Listening to Denise Cook’s presentation this morning about the achievements of the Millenium Development Goals, I reflected that while advances may have been made in areas of access to quality education, maternal mortality, poverty reduction, access to clean drinking water in the rest of the world, in the US we have seen significant declines in these areas, especially within the black, indigenous and immigrant communities.

We can’t fight with the same tools they have. We can’t fight for working people – for most of us on the planet – using the same values and tools that they have. But what we have is far more strong, enduring and historically proven, which is love and solidarity based in trust and relationships.

And yes, we live in a market economy. We live in a dying capitalism, so we have to, to a certain extent, operate within that context. But because we’re rooted in these deeper values, in these deeper cultural values of solidarity and deep belief in the dignity of everyone, and deep belief in the capacity for each person to bring their genius to a collective, that’s really where our power is.

In my taxi coop, we successfully defended not only our business, but the whole industry in our region by refusing to sign a contract with a company that had been contracted by the state to broker non emergency medical rides. Our general assembly directed the manager to refuse the contract, which represented 25% of our business, because of the below-market terms and requirements for drug testing of all drivers. Based on the collective action of our membership, all but one transportation provider in the region refused to sign the contract, and the only one that did cancelled it after the first day. The company was forced to do business with us on our terms.

We have also made other decisions not based in the logic of the market but based on concern for community and the environment. Our business is based on the internal combustion engine. We burn fossil fuel. Against the financial advice of our manager, our membership decided to convert our fleet into hybrid vehicles, and to install solar panels on our garage in anticipation of converting to plug-in electric cars when they become available in the future. These investments have paid back in lower operating costs, as well as increased public visibility and an increase in business amongst those who appreciate clean energy.

What we’ve done in the worker coop movement around the world is developed organizational technology to support that development in every person and to support that development in community. This is what we have to bring to ourselves,

to struggling workers, to people on the frontlines of the resource wars. We've seen that in the last 5 years in the Occupy movement, in the Idle No More movement, in the Black Lives Matter movement - cooperative economics is in all of their platforms. We have a lot to share as far as technical assistance, research, and best practices.

Earlier today we agreed that intercooperation and the development of networks, alliances and value chains are urgently needed. We also talked about the role of the state.

In the USA national and state governments have become predatory and captured by industry. They no longer serve the people. The democratic spaces left to us are at the local levels, and that's why I ran for the City Council in my city, Madison, WI.

In response to issues of racial and gender disparities in wealth and income in the city, Madison has dedicated \$3 million to support the development of worker coops. The approach we are taking is for the city to play a convening role, supporting the capacity of already existing cooperative and NGO organizations in our community to focus their efforts on supporting people who face barriers to formal employment to form worker cooperative businesses.

Half of the money is being used as a high-risk loan fund, which other credit unions and cooperative finance organizations are also supporting, and the other half is being used to develop public education materials, curriculum, and training in coop development for people working directly with the populations we hope to impact. The program is designed to end after 5 years, by which time a new second level cooperative of organizations supporting coop development will have been formed and will have the capacity to do the work without city support.

New York City and Oakland, CA are also using public money and political power to invest in worker cooperatives. New York is taking a slightly different approach from Madison, developing a permanent budget line within their economic development department for coops. And Oakland has passed resolutions favoring cooperatives in their public procurement processes.

The reason worker cooperatives are such potent tools for promoting the SDGs is this: They are formed around the actual needs of the community while centering the humanity of workers. They are responsive to the existing conditions on the ground, and they are able to make decisions based on values that are more enduring and sustainable than the profit motive. Coops can operate in the context of a globalized market economy, but they don't have to. Because they're based on the needs and skills of people in community, they can easily reorganize around another kind of logic when the next, inevitable financial crisis hits.