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Thinking Outside the Boss: Building Cooperatives in Pittsburgh

by Mary Sico

The Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperatives, founded by Ron Gaydos and Jeff Jaeger, is an exciting new resource for awareness, advocacy, and education about everything co-op in the Pittsburgh area. The Chamber of Cooperatives aims to provide hands-on guidance and training for those wishing to start co-ops, as well as existing businesses looking to make the transition into cooperative life.

Before the Chamber of Cooperatives, there was really no hands-on resource to guide people wishing to start small businesses with co-op aspirations. The Chamber aims to change this. They've been busy building connections throughout the city, recently becoming associated with groups diverse as the Ujamaa Collective, New Sun Rising, the University of Pittsburgh's Institute for Entrepreneurial Excellence, Duquesne University's Small Business Development Center, and Mayor Peduto's office—not to mention the Thomas Merton Center's own New Economy campaign. Ron and Jeff both come from backgrounds that include communal housing, co-op experience, and business development—strong skillsets that seem essential to the Chamber's stated goals.

Pittsburgh has a long history as a city of co-ops. The first co-op in Pittsburgh was founded in the 1840s, in response to the industrial revolution and its widespread effects on Pittsburgh's artisan community.

"[Co-ops are] always in response to some economic stress," says Ron. When industrialization came to the Pittsburgh area and threatened to squeeze out local artisans who could not keep up with the fast production and low cost of cheap manufactured goods, our local artisans decided to fight back. "They pooled resources to get a joint workspace," Ron says, and formed the Pittsburgh Manufacturing Cooperative. The strategy worked; for the next twenty years, the artisans were able to stay in business against the massive factories that had relegated others like them to the past.

Ron and the Chamber of Cooperatives aim to continue this tradition by fostering a sense of community that's not only good for people, but good for business. They encourage Pittsburgh area businesses to "Think Outside the Boss" in order to remain competitive in this economic climate. Some of the challenges facing workers today, like deflation of the value of work and widening income inequality, would have been familiar to the Chamber of Cooperatives' intellectual predecessors. There are, however, new challenges, like "giant platforms being built to exploit people" that weren't possible before the internet age. Ron aims to someday provide a "worker-owned platform" to compete against these exploitative models.

The Chamber of Cooperatives' relative youth as an organization doesn't mean they're without big goals. They've already begun working informally with several groups interested in becoming co-ops, and the organization doesn't want to stop there.

The most immediate—not to mention the most fun—event in the works aims to encourage cooperative recruitment and education by providing a space for community board games—to be called "Co-opoly Un-Tournaments." The games will be a fun way for people to play a cooperative version of Monopoly, and through doing so get an idea of what it would be like to live more cooperatively and make decisions as a team. As Ron says, "It's a great way of learning how to run a cooperative without having to go through all the expense at first." The Un-Tournament is scheduled for sometime this fall [January 2016].

Being planned for the future is the "Co-op Weekend," modeled after Startup Weekend, which will aim to have new co-ops up and running in a matter of days. The Co-op Weekend is tentatively scheduled for early 2016.

What can you do if you're interested in increasing workers' voices and continuing Pittsburgh's long tradition as a cooperative city? Educate yourself, keep up-to-date with the Chamber of Cooperatives, and challenge yourself to "think outside the boss." Learn more about the Un-Tournament, Co-op Weekend, and beyond by checking the Chamber of Cooperatives' website, <http://pittsburghchamber.coop/>, and by joining its mailing list.

Mary Sico is an intern with *The NewPeople* and a member of the Editorial Collective.



THINK OUTSIDE THE BOSS.