



Making it Happen: Cooperation Between Cooperatives.

The sixth principle is *cooperation between cooperatives*. Principles one through five are discussed in the New People online and at www.PittsburghChamber.coop/news.

You don't have to look very far to see that the working world is changing rapidly all around us. Technological innovation is overtaxing workers while eliminating traditional skilled jobs. In the Pittsburgh region from 2000 to 2014, employer-based jobs declined 5%, while non-employee full-time equivalent employment went up 85%. That's 9 new "gig economy" jobs for every 1 employer-based payroll job lost during that period. More jobs, maybe, but aren't Uber and Task Rabbit just race-to-the-bottom ways to pay people less?

Resilient and compassionate communities are already countering these intrusions with measures to reverse their effects. In the chaos, opportunities are emerging for new business models that give workers more autonomy, more room for creativity, more opportunities for voluntary participation, and more appreciation and respect. Sound like cooperatives? That's exactly what we're talking about!

As Dr. Jessica Gordon Nembhart, a national authority on Black cooperative enterprise, observes, "African Americans started using cooperative economics from the moment they were forcibly brought to the Americas from Africa, at first for practical reasons. They realized that their survival depended on working together and sharing resources. They had collective traditions from the African nations and civilizations they came from, that they applied in the Americas when they could."

Again, cooperativism has a long history in America and across the globe; but the “go-go” 1950’s and 60’s consumer economy distracted most from maintaining cooperative culture here in the U.S.

Here’s Charles Moore writing in the Wall Street Journal a few years ago, as income inequality came front and center in national news with the Occupy movement:

“The Victorians were more imaginative than we are about principles of mutuality—credit unions, building societies, the cooperative movement. Such organizations feel creakier in an age when people want larger sums, faster. But is it really beyond the skill of our great modern business brains to develop these concepts and adapt them to modernity?”

Technological disruption could work out well for us, if the right steps to take are recognized, if taking those positive steps is supported in communities, and the effort is inclusive. Marina Gorbis of the Institute of the Future suggests that new platforms will be developed that will facilitate more freedom and productivity for many workers. She paints a picture of a worker who can decide when and how they want to earn income, based on their skills, experiences, previous tasks, capabilities and interests. They are matched with an income opportunity, or directed to an online learning opportunity that will add just the right skill to maximize earning ability. There would be options about where and when work is completed, maybe in a co-working space or another socially connected setting. All their benefits are included in earnings, and they’re transportable. They would accrue to the individual's personal security account. It almost sounds like a more equitable version of gig economy businesses.

Why wait until the future, though? The Pittsburgh Chamber of Cooperative’s member-owned sales and service booking platform, Covivi (www.covivi.us), aims to be a one-stop shop among local businesses and freelancers, and cooperatives alike. Others around the world are building cooperative platforms to make the scenario above equitable and sustainable.

Gar Alperovitz, who spoke and met with new economy leaders in Pittsburgh a few years ago, describes the nuts and bolts of cooperation among cooperatives thus:

“some co-ops are beginning to buy from each other in order to widen and stabilize their markets. For instance, I’ve just been down to Texas, where there’s work being done to build a system of co-ops that buy from other co-ops, which in turn sell to regional public school systems. In general, as these co-op complexes group together, and get more sophisticated, they also become better able to withstand pressure from the market economy...Some degree of competition is healthy. But community stability is important too.”

Cooperation among cooperatives is happening now! The Ujamaa Collective established its “Cooperation Not Competition” program to create a larger market for each of its members to do business in. Reciprocal discounts and member status among food cooperatives is a long-standing practice. PCOC members Work Hard Pittsburgh (www.workhardpgh.com) and the Fourth River Workers Guild (www.fourthriver.coop) are dedicated to cooperative education in the Pittsburgh area. The New Economy Coalition’s network of cooperatively collaborating businesses and movement leaders quickly finds common ground – even between competitors. All of these are about building

and enhancing the cooperative economic and social ecosystem. It's a culture of mutual support – not charity!

It's also an infrastructure of HR, business operations, joint purchasing, training, and finance. New York City is in the second year of its Worker Cooperative Business Development Initiative, a \$2.2-million City Council-backed "Ecosystem Approach" venture involving 13 nonprofit partners – some cooperative, some not – to deliver services to New York's 60 co-ops, from grocery stores to cleaners to home health care providers. This is an effort that the PCOC and many similar organizations around the country aspire to.

This kind of cooperation develops meaningful relationships among neighbors, colleagues, and community members. It empowers flexible solutions for critical problems and makes possible transformative opportunities we need, like participatory budgeting, neighborhood land trusts, commercial land trusts, community supported industry, more cooperative businesses, and public banks to finance it all. We've done it before and we can do it again!

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