



Towards Class-Struggle Cooperatives in the Bay Area

ASCENT —
Organizing
Committee

Association of
Socialist
Cooperative
Enterprises

This booklet describes our conception of **class-struggle cooperativism**, and serves as an invitation to collaborate in building this vision here in the Bay Area as ASCENT – an organization of cooperatives acting in coordination with the broader struggle for a better world. Skip to the last section if you want to cut to the chase, and **email info@ascentcoop.org if you would like to get involved.**

The context of capitalism

There are a lot of problems in the world: homelessness, poverty, the death and destruction of war, the humiliations of imperialism, the destabilization of the biosphere, police violence, violence motivated by racial, ethnic, or nationalistic hatred, and every other manner of deprivation and suffering inflicted upon people daily.

It is beyond our scope to prove the point here, but one of the root causes of all these realities are capitalist social relations, embodied in the capitalist system with its institutions (legislatures, the private property legal regime enforced by courts and the police, banks, other firms, schools, prisons, etc.), its ideologies (race, nationality, gender, egoism, consumerism, etc.), and its technologies (mass media, the global supply chain, factory machinery, gig-economy apps, the fossil fuel system, highways, etc.)

The capitalists are few but they are well-resourced and well-organized, which means any group of people going against them needs to be very large and very organized. The vast majority of people within capitalism are proletarians: those who own little, forced to work for capitalists or otherwise scrape together some money to live. If you're reading this, this probably means you or at least most of your friends (if you happen to be rich). Such a person at least potentially has an interest in changing the system, as long as they come to understand that their pain is a consequence of the system.

Therefore, **since (a) we need a lot of people to change things, (b) proletarians are the majority of society, and (c) proletarians potentially have an interest in changing society, any successful effort to change society will require a large portion of the proletariat fighting in a coordinated way.** The aim would be to build a democratically-controlled society whose organizing principle is meeting human needs, rather than producing profits and maximally exploiting natural resources and human beings. This is called **socialism**.

For those on the side of humanity, this means our task is to aid in the organization of the proletariat into a force ready and willing to replace this broken system with a new one.

Our focus here is on the role that cooperatives can play in this process of proletarian organization and struggle.

Cooperatives

A cooperative (“co-op” for short) is

an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.¹

There are many kinds of cooperatives, depending on which group of people has democratic control. There are worker cooperatives (like Cheeseboard, Arizmendi, Rainbow Grocery, Mondragon, or Cooperative Home Care Associates), consumer cooperatives (like REI, or most credit unions), and producer cooperatives (organizations where small-producers pool resources for e.g., common marketing and distribution, like Land O’Lakes or Ocean Spray).

Co-ops can even be hybrids, where both workers and consumers have some say in how things are run. **For the purpose of this article, a “cooperative” will mean a worker cooperative**, perhaps with some consumer input as well.

Cooperatives arise naturally in capitalism. Whenever a group of workers happens to get access to some capital, it is a pretty natural impulse to want to start a cooperative enterprise rather than becoming bosses. Of course, the capitalists cannot let this cannot happen too often – or they would lose their ability to exploit workers en masse – but it does happen sometimes, by luck.

Cooperatives on their own do not constitute a revolutionary force, or a path to socialism. This is ultimately because from the outside, cooperative firms tend to behave similarly to capitalist firms. They still compete on the capitalist market, which shapes both their internal organization, the good they produce, and pushes them toward growth. The core logic of capital (the exponential accumulation of material goods and exploitation of labor and nature) as the organizing principle of society is not challenged. Of course this is not to diminish cooperatives: they often succeed in creating a positive working environment, stable employment, wonderful products, and a sense of camaraderie which capitalist firms would never produce.

Moreover, and of particular interest to us here, **cooperatives have attributes that have the potential to make them important auxiliary organizations in the struggle for socialism.**

Class-struggle cooperatives

First, let’s define class-struggle cooperativism. Broadly speaking, a class-struggle cooperative is a cooperative that aims to put as much of its resources and energy as possible toward the struggle of the working-class to transform society as a whole. Let’s draw out what this means with a few principles.

¹“Statement on the Cooperative Identity”. *International Cooperative Alliance*.

1. **Engagement with the broader workers' movement, social movements, and the struggle for socialism.** We recognize that one of our roles as cooperators is to provide fuel for the fire of other struggles. This would include: political education for ourselves as worker-owners, membership of worker-owners in unions to strike alongside other workers, reduced-cost access to the cooperative's products for other militant workers and their organizations, material support "during strikes, lock-outs, political persecution"², participation in tenants' struggles, popular anti-imperialist struggles, social movements, etc.
2. **Expansion.** Cooperatives must decide what to do with the profits that in a capitalist firm go to the boss and to reinvestment. Often worker-owners give this profit to themselves. This is of course perfectly legitimate, but class-struggle cooperators instead redirect as much of their profit as possible towards support for external left groups *and* reinvestment, to grow alongside the rest of the capitalist economy.
3. **The production of a beautiful world in the here and now.** We live in a world stamped with the bland gray mark of capital: ugly "luxury" condos, old buildings that may have once beautiful but are falling apart, cafes that look as though they were 3D-printed, cheap plastic products. These things are the logical consequence of capital's imperative for profit and stifling of workers' individuality. We will not wait until capitalism is six-feet under to reshape the world. We will do our best (within the oft-exaggerated constraints of the market) produce the beautiful working-lives, spaces, experiences, and objects which we deserve; and a world in which our work can be a partial expression of our humanity and creativity.

The potential of class-struggle cooperatives

Now that we understand what class-struggle co-ops are, let's explore what they can add to the struggle.

- **Cooperatives produce a surplus of time and equipment that can be put to political ends.** For many workers, the stress and uncertainty of life make it difficult to organize. Cooperative workers on the other hand, tend to have reasonable schedules, good job security, and adequate pay coming from the profit that would usually flow to the owner. This produces a surplus of time and attention which can be dedicated to organizing activity. Moreover, co-ops can acquire space and equipment that can be used for political purposes outside of working hours. For example, a cooperative cafe could be used as a meeting space for a socialist group outside of business hours, or a cooperative printshop could give access to its equipment for political posters and literature for free or reduced cost.

²Lenin, The Question of Co-Operative Societies at the International Socialist Congress in Copenhagen

- **Cooperatives can be economically in symbiosis with other left groups.** Suppose a cooperative cafe were to make agreements with unions and socialist parties to provide discounts to their members. In this way, the cooperative would be provided with a customer base and members of the aforementioned groups would receive a material benefit, which could even serve as an incentive to joining.
- **Cooperatives can produce political consciousness.** Cooperatives can produce a belief in worker-owners in the possibility of worker-control of society rooted in their experience cooperating. This experience can serve as motivation for militants as they engage in political activity. Of course, apolitical cooperative workers are the rule, so clearly education is necessary for the experience of cooperating to be interpreted in a politicizing way.
- **Relatedly, cooperatives serve a useful publicity function for socialism.** Socialist society will not be composed of cooperatives buying and selling to each other on the market. Nonetheless, the positive example of a firm controlled by its workers can give credence to the idea of worker-control of society, disproving the capitalists' claims that we need them.

ASCENT: Building class-struggle co-ops in the Bay Area

Association of Socialist Cooperative Enterprises (ASCENT) is a new organization, currently in planning stages. The aim is to build a class-struggle cooperative based initially here in the Bay Area. It would contain various production units (e.g., a cafe, a bathhouse, a software consultancy, a movie theater, etc.) depending on the interests of the cooperators, who would pool their profits and democratically decide to invest them in the creation of new production units, or the expansion of existing ones. It would also act in solidarity with workers' organizations: providing goods at reduced rates for members of partner orgs, and providing access to equipment and space for organizing activity outside work hours.

We are currently looking for people interested in starting cooperative production units, contributing capital, and building the democratic governance institutions of the organization outside the individual production units.

Please email info@ascentcoop.org if you would like to discuss getting involved.