

RINGING IN THE WILDERNESS -CO-OP CRISIS IN THE NORTH COUNTRY

North Country Anvil Issue 15 by Jack Miller

THE NEW CO-OPS, SOMETIMES CALLED the "peoples" co-op and sometimes known as the "hippy" co-ops, are the center of the movement in this part of the country for the creation of an alternative society. Begun in Minneapolis four years ago with a single back-porch food store, the co-ops now have grown to 35 units throughout the Minnesota-Wisconsin-Dakotas region. They include bakeries, a warehouse, several cafes, a garage and much more. The warehouse alone did close to \$900,000 in business last year, and a number of the co-op stores do in the hundreds of thousands. But what really makes the North Country co-ops distinctive is that they are so numerous and diverse. It is the most extensive alternative system in the nation. And while the co-ops all work together and make some policies together (particularly for the central warehouse), each co-op is independent, run by a collective and in most cases directed by its members.

But all has not been well with the co-ops. Many of them have been too much dominated by a single cultural group smoking, easy-going counter-culturist, or "hippy" - and have been slow to bring in other people, especially average working people. And the co-ops have failed to build strong links to other people's struggles in the region. They have seemed for some time, too, to lack a strong commonly felt set of ideas about the point of their efforts and how it related to other people's struggles.

In the last few months, a heavy debate has been going on in the co-ops about who they are, what they're doing and how they can do things better. On Monday, May 5 [1975], the controversy went beyond debate.... Members of a group calling themselves the Co-op Organization (CO), some carrying pipes as weapons, took over the Peoples Warehouse in Minneapolis. They told the 11 people who were peacefully gathered in the warehouse, "Work with us or get out!" - that they had 30 minutes to decide.

The occupation lasted for a week. In that time, most of the 30 plus co-ops that get food from the warehouse were getting it through a new network they had set up. The occupation ended in a negotiated settlement between the CO occupiers and representatives of the co-ops. But the occupation dramatically revealed crucial weaknesses in the co-ops, and the struggle over their future direction will probably go on for some time to come.

The CO is a recent name for a group of people who have been organizing in and around the Twin Cities co-ops for the last year or so and decided this spring to take action to re-shape the co-ops in what they said is the interest of the working class. They issued several papers criticizing the leadership of the co-ops as being hippy, middle class, bourgeois; they said "class cliques" had taken control of the co-ops and that the predominant philosophy was Utopian Socialism, which the CO identified with dreamy idealism, escapism and "puritan" ethics that keep people in the movement from getting involved with evil in order to overthrow the present system. They said the "cliques" in control of the co-ops have been running them as their own private property ignoring the needs of the "working people" and "the masses."

For their part, the CO people have identified themselves as anti-imperialists working for the overthrow of monopoly capitalism. Toward this end, they have raised the cry of "good, cheap food for the masses." In their analysis and approach, they seem to be old-fashioned Communists. They purport to believe in democratic centralism. They clearly are convinced that the revolution will be led by a tightly organized vanguard party in the manner of the Bolsheviks after the 1917 Russian Revolution. Several of them have acknowledged Stalin as one of their mentors, publishing and distributing one of his papers. And in one of them, they were taken seriously at all in the anti-authoritarian, decentralist territory of the Twin Cities co-ops.

But it has become clear that the CO is not to be taken lightly. It has demonstrated a powerful ability to win converts - and these include several of the most dedicated worker/organizers in the co-ops, people who in the later rounds of the debate they began, they justified Stalin's destruction of millions of kulak families (well-off peasants) on grounds that they were hoarding food during their resistance to the forced collectivization program of the Bolsheviks.

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At the same time, the CO has operated secretly in many respects. Its first organizing, during the last year, was through semi-secret study groups. When participants left a study group they were asked not to tell about it. The main leader of the group, Bob Haugen, has remained in the background most of the time. Many of the group's papers have been unsigned.

The CO has come wading into the diverse, loose counter-culture milieu of the Minnesota co-ops with a rigid line - essentially the old Communism. It has presented ideas that seem to deny that the Russian Revolution, and the events since, have happened. The group quotes Marx, Engels and Stalin and talks about class conflict as if this were still the turn of the century. I remember thinking that it is a wonder we considered, and still consider, to be our brothers and sisters people in spite of basic differences that have driven us apart.

The CO didn't come out of nowhere. By most accounts, Bob Haugen and a few others began to develop their analysis while working at Winding Road Farm, a small collective farm near Boyceville, Wisconsin, east of the Twin Cities. Most of the group were former Minneapolis co-op workers. They say their study, going back two years, included an attempt to understand the co-ops and find out how they could be made into a force for the "working class struggle." Returning to the city, Haugen and others took jobs and started organizing in the People's Bakery, the People's Warehouse and in co-op stores. "By last fall, an analysis of the co-op system had been pretty well completed and we knew what we had to do," the CO said in its much-disputed "History of the Twin City Food Co-ops."

The account continues: "First we needed a model, a place to test out our theories in practice. For this, the Beanery was chosen. It had the reputation of being the worst store in the co-op system, was so far in the hole economically that the warehouse wouldn't even deliver to it, and the atmosphere reeked of hippy cultism." After "going to the people" and finding out what the masses wanted, the group transformed the store into "a center for working class discussions and organization..."

Then came the opening round of the debate that became a struggle: the issuance, unsigned, of the CO's paper, "The Beanery Policy." The paper includes analyses that run thus: "It is a historical fact that anti-imperialism was the motivating factor behind the creation of the co-op stores," as shown by such present policies as the grape and lettuce boycott and (earlier) the boycott on Farah. But, it asks, "do the co-op stores' politics correspond to its political context? . . . The answer is NO!! In order to understand why, we must look at class ideology. From the inception of the co-op stores, they took on class snob - bishness, elitism and upper class domination of the lower classes. For instance, the capital that was used to set up the stores came from the middle and classes. . . . As you can see, the one who holds the money bag is the one who calls the shots. In order for the bourgeois leadership to maintain their class ideology and control over the co-op system, they instituted a deceitful line - "community control." And so on.

If the masses were unmoved, the direct targets of the CO assault were not. so on. At Mill City Co-op, one of the supposed strongholds of "Utopian Socialism," Jeb Cabbage and Emma Evechild issued a response - the second in a flood of mimeographed papers that spread through the co-op system in the weeks ahead. Rejecting the co-op history presented in the Beanery paper, Jeb and Emma called the assault "a pseudo-Marxist revision full of generalizations and accusations delivered in a divisive and vindictive tone."

Jeb and Emma acknowledged many poor practices in the early co-ops, saying: "Some came from good motives such as the desire to break through the stifling employee-customer relationship most people are used to in a store. This often resulted in a careless and flippant attitude towards people using the store and those people, especially the elderly, felt confused and unwelcomed. The intense dislike of conventional business practice led to attitudes about money and accounts such as, 'let things flow, be cool, it'll all work out.' And often the decision making process was not spelled out carefully enough to those using the store. Many co-op workers didn't (and don't now) fully comprehend the

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responsibility to relate to their neighbors' unfamiliarity with the unique situation of a co-op. Caught in the hassles of just maintaining the day-to-day operations, people let down in explaining what the store is about and how it works, the type of food carried, its nutrition and politics."

But they said, "many changes in the nature of the stores and the people working in them have occurred, mainly as a result of co-op workers also being residents of a neighborhood. A maturity, reflecting criticisms and analysis and a serious understanding of what we are about, is evident."

Taking up the Beanery paper's accusations, Jeb and Emma said, "One of the most general and sweeping charges is that the 'bourgeois leadership' in establishing its 'class ideology as supreme,' tried to establish the priorities of doing your own thing and eating organically. Now really. This sounds like so much bombast. Where exactly is the policy of do your own thing evident, unless one means the view that the individual should have the final say over what occurs in his/her life and not the State or the Party or even the Co-op.

Here the line was drawn. Jeb and Emma established themselves as liberationists their - as believing in people acting freely, together, under *their own* leadership. "The co-ops were born of the spirit of all liberation movements - to hell with the rich and the bosses - people working together can do it and do it better, they said. The CO, by contrast, has shown that it believes in tight central control, in order that "the leadership can take decisive and effective action *for* the working class" (emphasis added).

In early April the CO formalized itself as a group, announcing, "People who have been waging a lonely struggle against class cliquishness, snobbishness, isolationism and escapism, now have comrades. Their struggles are being unified into a common front. This is the Co op Organization."

On May 3, there was a meeting of the Policy Review Board (PRB), the policy-making and co-ordinating body for the region's co-ops. Before the meeting, the CO had sent out an 8-page proposal for re-structuring the co-ops. This paper should have made it clear, if the other material hadn't, that the CO was preparing to effect a coup d'co-op, seizing the co-ops power, including their "means of production." Acting (of course) *for* the working class and the masses, the CO was prepared to override the will of the co-ops in the name of "democratic centralism" and forcibly establish itself as the new revolutionary leadership. The last page of the proposal invited people to attend a meeting on May 4 at Walker Methodist Church to discuss this transformation. That's when the PRB was supposed to be in the second of its two-day meeting.

The People's Warehouse (by this time having a majority of Co people) was first on the agenda of the May 3 meeting of the PRB. Michael Biesanz of the PW collective (and the CO) presented a report on the financial position of the warehouse, suggesting, through the use of a number of capitalist business measures, that the warehouse was going broke. The report concluded that the warehouse was going to have to cut its expenses, just like any other business operation, either through wage cuts or layoffs. The PRB people were stunned.

On cue, as obviously planned, the CO began to provide the answer to the crisis. Michael Rachlin of the CO began reading from the CO paper on the co-ops' history in the Twin Cities. She read for a while, was interrupted by PRB people protesting the thing, then went on for another half an hour. Then she started reading the CO paper "Economic Facts of Life vs. Co-op Fantasies." In this paper the CO argues that the co-ops have to get over their anti-profit ideals - otherwise they are going to collapse economically. There's nothing wrong with profit, say the revolutionaries; it's just a question of how it's used either it will be used for the benefit of the working class or it will be used to perpetuate the ruling class. There are no other possibilities.

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Got it? Because the co-ops haven't built up ready-reserves, the CO says, they have to borrow from members and friends who lend the money (class clique) call the shots. Nobody who can lend the co-ops several thousand dollars can be "working class." (The collective that does *the Scoop*, the newsletter/magazine of the co-op movement, says flatly in its 48-page special issue on the controversy: "It is blatantly false to say that those persons who have loaned money 'own the co-ops' or have had exclusive control over the future of the co-ops.")

Back at the meeting, people were walking out, and the session was adjourned with a whimper. The PRB was impotent, if not ridiculous, and it didn't take any great talent for the CO to dramatize the fact. In the the hall in the back of the meeting room at the Oddfellows Hall, CO members were drumming up support for their meeting the following morning. And while many of the PRB people were having a boogie that night, members of the CO went to the warehouse and grabbed the financial records and checks.

When the second day of the PRB's regular two-day meeting opened Sunday, Mark Larson announced for the CO that the leadership of the PRB had failed to respond to the warehouse crisis. Therefore, he said, the CO - with a mandate of 600 signatures on petitions demanding an end to private ownership of the co-ops by class cliques - was taking over the warehouse. The PRB members were stunned, then outraged. But it took these 60 people until late afternoon to act. What they did was make a public statement; pick Tracy Landis, Terry Hokasinson, Kris Olson and Randy McLaughlin as "executive officers" to act in their behalf (while seeking guidance), and - if all else fails - to take legal action. *To take legal action*. . . that the co-op people would even consider such a move, especially in a dispute within their own movement, can hardly be seen as anything but a measure of its weakness as a part of the human liberation movement. Before long, the PRB "execs" would call the cops.

From here, I turn over the account to the Scoop collective:

". . . Word spreads that the stores will be gathering at the warehouse to hold a 'tactics' meeting. By dark, the PW is awash in people, with phone calls going out to notify more people of the meeting. Ken Baker from People's Bakery arrives in a cowboy hat brandishing a black banner of anarchy in one hand and a bag of popcorn in the other and wearing a 'make love not class war' button.

"People try to pull together a meeting to consider just what they are doing there. There is some feeling that people should spend the night in the warehouse so that, come morning, the warehouse can be kept open for business as usual. There is a question of what preparation should be made for possible confrontation with the CO during the night, but most people are not intending to stay the night anyway instead, a party atmosphere resumes, as Seward Cafe arrives with food.

"Upstairs the PRB 'executive officers' try to sort out what needs to be done the next day. By midnight the PW settles down. Eleven people decide to stay the night. A sleeping room is set up. The party is kept downstairs,

"*Monday, May 5th, 1:45 a.m.* Word has reached people in the CO that something is going on over at the warehouse, Gathering, what people they can, they make preparations to 'retake' the warehouse. Plans are made for various people to assume particular tasks once at the warehouse. Expecting a struggle, some CO people arm themselves with makeshift weapons, Plans are even made for the possibility that guns might be used in the struggle, though the general plan is to use only the force necessary to overpower the people in the warehouse,

"Armed with clubs and mentally hyped for struggle, the CO enters the PW without encountering any resistance. Instead, they find their 'enemy' just as they always have — sitting around talking (ironically their 'enemy' had just finished doing a dramatized reading of the 'Invasion of the Stalinoids,' a co-op comic created by Jon Havens) or upstairs asleep.

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"No matter. They disconnect the phones and order the 11 into the warehouse proper where the ultimatum is delivered - 'Work with us or get out. You have 30 minutes to decide.' But even total control over the situation doesn't abate the momentum that the CO has been priming in themselves over the months.

"They have brought along a woman, Vee, a member of the Selby community. Vee is riled up, lacing her rap with threats and epithets. She rails on at the 11, 'We want food. Give us food, not this wheat germ crap.' 'Right on!' comes her back-up from the CO people.

"Ah, I don't understand,' says Michelle, one of the 11. "Why don't you go to the co-op in Selby?"

"You shut up while I'm talking."

"Eventually Vee gets into it to the point where she hits Marcia, another of the 11, with a steel pipe, for not jumping on command. Though the resulting injury is slight, the incident crystallizes the

atmosphere created by the CO attitudes that night. The 11 are evicted, At the last moment two are permitted to stay and talk.

"Inside the question is asked, 'Are you going to refuse to sell food to the in-town co-ops? Kris Garwick thinks a moment and then, quietly: 'I think the stores will have to realize it's all different now.'

"8 a.m. Word spreads that the warehouse was seized during the night. People from the co-op community gather in the PW yard and at nearby Whole Foods co-op. Ed Winter from the PW collective shows up at the warehouse only to be told 'You're not coming here for business as usual. Come in if you're coming to get involved in the restructuring.'

" 'I've come for the PW collective meeting.' The collective, he is told by occupiers, has been abolished.

"Out in the yard, Mike Dunn, grizzled, aging, decides to break into the warehouse. Mark Sherman of the CO tries to intervene and catches a glancing blow off Mike's shovel. Dunn threatens and rails as friends pin him, kicking, to the ground. He calms down just long enough for people to let him up. Then he grabs a 4-by-4 and climbs up to a stack of pallets to stand over the crowd. Bob Haugen (the leader of the CO) moves toward him.

" 'Get back you fucker, or I'll kick you in the mouth,' says Dunn.

" 'Mike,' calls Haugen, 'I'm not after power for myself.'

" 'See these hands,' says Dunn, trembling, 'I work with these hands. You work with your mouth,' says Dunn, his voice cracking, and it's full of shit.'

Then he climbs up onto the roof of the warehouse and begins smashing windows. CO people charge back into the warehouse. "If he gets hurt,' someone shouts to the people in the warehouse, it's your ass."

"Within moments people from the warehouse charge out onto the roof and manage to wrestle Dunn down."

After that a lot of things got kind of ludicrous. The PRB execs went to the bank, found out that the warehouse occupiers had already withdrawn \$6,000; then they talked the bank into returning control of the account to the four of them, as legal representatives of the PRB. Later, two of the original incorporators of the PRB, both CO sympathizers, proved to the bank that *they* were the rightful trustees of the account. The bank froze the funds.

Later on Monday, the PRB "execs" took the advice of a lawyer and told the occupiers to give it up immediately or legal action would be taken. The occupiers said no. So the PRB execs went to the Model Cities Police Precinct to file a

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complaint. The cops were doubtful, but they agreed to send around a squad car. When the squad car arrived at the the warehouse, co-op people put heavy pressure on the PRB execs to keep the dispute "in the family."

At 7:00 that night co-op stores all over the Twin Cities held urgent meetings. The places were packed. The verdict came back: Don't call in the police, but use "civil action" if you have to. Score a point for the occupiers.

Late that night the "Third Force" came in with a proposal, supporting the CO criticisms, denouncing the CO tactics and calling for a structure in which "principled political struggle" could take place. It all got nowhere.

On Tuesday, a significant thing happened: An alternative distribution system started to form. This, together with a boycott of the warehouse by most of the stores, isolated the CO occupiers. The co op "masses" (Or were they mostly "bourgeois elements"?) had failed to rise to the call of the revolutionary leadership to seize power and create the new co-op movement.

But the CO people weren't giving up. The warehouse had been given a large quantity of potatoes by Red River Valley growers who decided to distribute potatoes free rather than sell at ridiculously low prices. So the CO set up a "cheap food" sale at the warehouse and sent trucks into poor neighborhoods to distribute food free. And on two days' notice, they announced a plan to dissolve the CO and create a new Mass Organization (at a mass meeting, of course) to carry on the transformation of the co-ops. On Monday, May 12, the "Mass Meeting" turned out about 100 people, many of them part of the CO. The (now former) CO people got through the appointment of a steering committee of seven to carry it on.

By Tuesday the alternative distribution was getting food to the Twin Cities co-ops without the warehouse. Presumably this would meant that the occupiers were beaten. But agreements reached during the next two days, ending the occupation, appear otherwise. CO people still controlled the warehouse, where they were in a majority in the collective. And the warehouse was, and is, *the* power in the regional co-op system. On Thursday, the occupation ended with the signing of a joint statement between the warehouse collective and the Steering Committee (both dominated by the CO people) and the PRB. And the statement endorsed the "restructuring" undertaken by the collective and steering committee and said only that these actions were subject to approval by the PRB at the June 21-22 meeting.

Though "restructuring" was not spelled out in the statement, it seemed to mean turning over the leadership and power of the co-ops to the several strong-handed CO leaders, notably Bob Haugen. And that presumably would mean making the co-ops at once more like profit-making capitalist businesses - and a centralized instrument for pressing on to revolution in the name of the working class. But what if the "masses" in the co-ops and the neighborhoods don't want to be "restructured"? Will it be necessary to get out the pipes again?

A major thrust of the CO effort after the occupation was the establishment of committees to carry out restructuring: Food, Farm Distribution, and Purchasing/Expansion. According to the Scoop, the purchasing/expansion plans are the most important. This committee is considering the addition of canned goods and meat. But this is part of a larger plan to expand the financial base of the warehouse (and other co-op units) and make it possible, among other things, to raise the wages to two or three times the \$40-\$50 a week now being paid in most of the co-ops, and to create more jobs. This would require large new sources of capital, and the Expansion Committee has been looking into the possibilities of foundation grants and government money through the CETA program. Of course, the people who hold the money bags call the shots. So it would seem important to pick foundations and government agencies that are interested in smashing monopoly capitalism and helping the working class seize the means of production. Right?