

~~Internal~~
And God Knows We Have Made Mistakes
--G. Dean Zimmermann

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Sometime in 1974 I was becoming aware of certain shortcomings in the Co-op Movement. Earlier we had started North Country as a tool for bringing unity to our community. It was, however, becoming more and more clear to me that while the objective conditions for unity were very favorable, the Co-op was not aiding in this effort, and in fact was becoming a wedge which divided the community along the lines of diet and life style. I was always concerned that my working class neighbors did not use the Co-op more. At first I thought that there was something wrong with them and only very gradually came to the understanding that the error was in the Co-op. There were similar shortcomings in other co-ops, but I think we are already aware of them.

I remember remarking to Haugen that I felt there needed to be a two line struggle in the co-ops in order to combat the snobishness of certain elements. At that time I had no understanding of the scientific tools needed to do an effective job of launching a two line struggle and was so heavy into smoking dope that I couldn't muster the resolve to anything so serious. Thus I muddled along being vaguely dissatisfied. Then came the Beanery papers and the struggles. My first reaction was that they were very harsh and full of mis-used rhetoric. The papers did however speak to the very shortcomings that I had been aware of in the co-ops. Thus I found myself riding the fence--a most painful experience. On the one hand I supported the criticisms of the CO and on the other I was appalled by their crude abrasive style of struggle. I was impressed by the discipline and organization of the CO and I liked their clear class stand. I was appalled by the reaction at North Country to Bob Malles' April fools joke. The events around the May PRB forced me to get off the fence. I sided with the CO feeling that the abrasive style was the result of inexperience and would be corrected in time. It was clear to me that I did not want to be lined up with the anarchist turkeys.

I have now been in the CO one year. During this time my knowledge of revolutionary theory has leaped forward--a qualitative change has taken place in this regard. The CO has placed in my hands a tool without which I could not wage effective revolutionary struggle. During the past year I have seen the dialectical method put into practice and have used this tool myself with impressive results. The CO gave me this tool.

For the first six months of my association with the CO I worked in the co-op struggles in Mpls-St. Paul. I saw many mistakes being made. When I sent an analysis (that Mo Burton has a history of opportunism) up the tube, the analysis was ignored and the person who made it was trashed. I was guilt tripped because the person making the analysis (not a CO member) was an old friend of mine. --OK, we all make mistakes. I spent a great deal of time during this period defending the CO in co-ops where my past work and personal

associations acted to lend credibility to my propaganda effort. Yet even with a correct analysis, my own personal reputation among many co-op people, and our apparent success at capturing the warehouse, the abusiveness and abrasiveness of our style appeared to be making us enemies rather than allies. During this time I called for public self-criticism. I envisioned a paper which would recap the struggle pointing out our strategies and tactics and then explaining where we had mis-judged the situation and pursued an incorrect strategy, where we pursued correct strategy and made mistakes putting it into effect, and where we had been successful. No public self-criticism was forthcoming, despite assurances to me at the time I left the area that it would take place.

Since I have returned to Mpls-St. Paul I have spent a great deal of time visiting people I know to be progressive and/or revolutionaries and who are not part of the CO. I have combined and analyzed the information from them, my experience in the CO before and my experience doing political work elsewhere of the past six months to put together a few comments on the CO.

The Contridiction Between Mass Organizations and cadre organizations

I find there exists a great deal of confusion within the CO (and OL, RU, etc.) on the relationship of a cadre (revolutionary) organization and a mass (open) organization. A cadre organization finds unity first around a desire to build proletarian revolution and thru practice, study and struggle comes to more clearly define what it means to build a proletarian revolution--how one establishes the democratic-dictatorship of the proletariat. A mass organization of the other hand is unified around a much less grandiose goal such as "to provide ourselves with good quality low cost food"--as in the case of a food co-op or "To fight rent increases and evictions"--as in the case of a tenants union or "To build active and lasting friendship based on mutual understanding between the peoples of the U.S. and China"--as in the case of an ~~ore~~ organization in which I recently worked called US-China People's Friendship Association. Sometimes the goals are specific and sometimes vague, but in all cases are something that large numbers of people can rally behind. A revolutionary individual or group when considering whether or not to work within any particular mass organization must first determine whether or not the basis of unity of that organization objectively benefits the working class in the long run. The basis of unity of the KKK which is based on racism and therefore sets sections of the working class against one another is clearly contrary to the interests of that class--this type of organization must be isolated. Thus I recently participated in a drive to keep the KKK from using a ~~mun~~ municipal auditorium.

What I have been speaking of is the basis of unity--not the social practice of a mass organization. If the basis of unity of an organization is objectively progressive, but its social practice is not progressive, then there is room for struggle within the organization. The role of revolutionaries within these organizations is not to "take them over", but to struggle to get the organization and its members to live up to their own goals and standards--to help uncover the problems(contridictions) that stand in the way of an organization

achieving its own progressive goals. Cure the sickness and save the patient. Now, if certain revolutionary cadre are elected to high positions within this organization, it must be based on the good work they do within the mass organization, not because they have a special knowledge of the truth.

Now in the process of this work some elements (with proper leadership) will come to understand that the realization of their goal (in the extreme) will call for a proletarian revolution. They will seek revolutionaries out and ask for more knowledge of Marxism-Leninism--this can't be helped. In fact it is desirable to link up with the more progressive elements and help them with their revolutionary theory and even recruit them into cadre organizations, but if one were to allow this by-product of the struggle within the progressive mass organization in any way to interfere with the progressive work of that organization or create sectarianism within it or try to change it into a cadre organization, this would be a serious error. Mass organizations must be allowed to have a life of their own, for it is thru them that the masses take their first steps toward a proletarian consciousness.

The role of the cadre organization is to help revolutionaries maintain a broad picture of the whole struggle while working on one small part of it. What we are trying to build is not the dictatorship of the advanced vanguard party, but the democratic-dictatorship of the working class.

The Everlasting Contridiction Between Winning and Democracy

The history of the struggles on the West Bank is replete with lessons for all serious revolutionaries. Within this microcosm can be clearly seen the struggle between the tendencies toward secrecy and propaganda (the need to win) and the tendencies toward openness and telling the complex truth, however confusing (the need for democracy).

In retrospect, it can be clearly seen that both sides in the West Bank Struggles were far more interested in winning a leadership fight than in moving the masses. Thus, the CO used hippy-baiting and accusations of under-the-table deals by the Tenants Union and the Board of Directors made snide remarks about the "kids" and "true believers" who were being duped by a "gang of faceless fanatics in far away places".

Not to say that when the CO attempted a serious analysis it was not valid and valuable--only to suggest that while much of the analysis was good the attendant practice was so bad as to make worse the side tone of the analysis. Clearly the slick-packaged propaganda in the anti-CO papers was deliberately misleading and of little revolutionary merit. However, in an atmosphere of hysteria, where all you care about is preserving the power balance, you go out to win--and so red-baiting takes the place of responsible socialist thought.

Now we all know that pure intellectual writing devoid of practice or direction is a waste of time for revolutionaries and lest anyone think I advocate that, let me say that practice is, I believe, where it is at. And practice of democracy (informing the people of all the aspects of the situation, making recommendations, and letting the people decide) is emphatically not what was being practiced.

The people are tired of being sold political lines like they are sold toothpaste. Scare tactics (quick, let's get them class enemies before they get us), half-truths (the flatlanders are all bourgeois), racist-style smears (all lon-hairs are filthy parasites on working class people) and ad hominem logic (attacking ideas by attacking the people expounding them) DID NOT WORK ON THE WEST BANK.

I agree that the primary directive is to win. I do not agree that bad practice wins lasting victories. I do not agree that one can win at any price--you lose while winning if the price is too high.

Democracy can't work without free flow of information. Undemocratic organizations are unfit to lead the masses to revolution. At the same time secrecy is needed in certain circumstances, e.g., to keep the organization from getting trashed, and also the need for speedy decision-making is likewise primary. The balancing of these two elements must be seen as the essence of democratic-centralism.

The failure of the CO to understand these delicate balances has led to a number of mistakes in practice:

(1) We have become so certain of the ultimate correctness of our line that we have attacked otherwise progressive people for taking exception to our line. Thus, Ed Felien was labeled a class enemy because he had the temerity to publicly criticize our practice. This error of left-dogmatist thinking resulted in alienating many potential supporters who saw us using "class enemy" as a pejorative put down in much the same way that "communist sympathiser" was used to smear Joe McCarthy's enemies.

(2) We have shown our contempt for the ability of the masses to grasp fundamental issues and then act on that knowledge to change the nature of their organization. Thus, the paper on co-op history, which was a valid and valuable analysis, was wasted. No time was given the PRB delegates, let alone the stores they represented, to digest, criticize, and adopt the analysis presented in the co-op history. Instead, the books and negotiable assets of Peopple's Warehouse had already been seized when the History was presented to the PRB. Thus, instead of becoming a living guideline to discussions leading to transformation, the History became rhetoric used to justify undemocratic practice.

(3) We do not regard agreements made with "less progressive" organizations as binding. Thus, the CO co-ordinators at North Country Foods; in a community meeting, agreed to follow certain procedures in the transformation of the store, and broke that agreement the very next day. The result of such behavior is that we are regarded as untrustworthy by our friends as well as those against whom we struggle.

(4) We have substituted agit/prop for grass-roots organizing. We spent a few days knocking on a lot of doors in Cedar Square West, got a few people excited, and then left the field clear for the people we were supposedly organizing against. No ongoing effort was made to CSW, and the failure to get the people there organized into the process of organizing resulted in making it harder for the next group of progressives to work there--or to be more accurate: made it hard on the people who have been organizing there for two years.

(5) We have substituted wishful thinking (if only we make enough noise the masses will hear us), (we know we are right, therefore the masses must and will follow us) for considered tactics. Thus we became spread too thin and this has resulted in entering into too many battles we couldn't win.

(6) We have failed to practice democratic centralism. Central to this shortcoming is our continuous rejection of both formal and informal self-criticism. Thus, Ed Felien's paper "What's Happening in the Co-op Movement" was not dealt with on its merits, and instead Ed was attacked personally in a response which was irrelevant, rude, smug and stupid. Our paper "Learn From Mistakes and Move Forward" could be subtitled "Talk is Cheap". Furthermore, as many of you may not be aware, the Felien document was the fourth critical submission he made, and was taken to the public only after it became clear to him that it would otherwise never be made available to the membership--and that is precisely what will happen to this paper if I find even one person in the organization who has been denied the chance to read it.

(7) We have developed a cult of secrecy, amounting almost to fetishism, and it has acted to stifle the flow of information within the organization to the point where things that are "common knowledge" on the street are unknown among the membership. A corollary result of this compulsive paranoid behavior is that we appear "sneaky" because we deny (honestly in many cases) knowledge of common-knowledge events.

(8) Finally, our isolation from the masses of the people has become so complete that in the East 7th Street "Co-op", a group of "political heavies" are creating a store without involving the community at all.

In summary, it appears to me that the primary result of the CO's work has been to create anti-communism. The practice has been so far off base and has isolated us so completely from the masses that the damage is irreparable. I consider most of the people in the organization to be good people, most will make an important contribution to the struggle in the years ahead. There is a victory to be won, there is work to be done, I don't think we have time to be saddled to an organization so counter productive. I quit.

I would recommend that you read a three page article by Papa Joe called "Organize Mass Criticism From Below" and also his article called "Foundations of Leninism" (the second section: Method)

I spent my high school and jr. high school summers working as an auto-mechanic with my father. Being active in church activities, I served as the North Dakota state president of the youth group of our denomination and later as a national officer of the United Campus Christian Fellowship. I was influenced by certain progressive individuals in the church who got me involved in the Ban The Bomb Movement. While in college, in 1963, I became involved in the civil rights struggle, working off and on in Tennessee and Mississippi thru 1965. This included working on the Mississippi Mock Elections and the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party--and the struggles around the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Also during this period I worked as a fund raiser for SNCC in North Dakota--all while working my way thru college as an auto-mechanic, flunky in a newspaper mailing room, unloading coal and as a lay preacher serving a rural parish.

In December of 1965 I took a job teaching geography, economics, sociology and general math in the Larimore, N.D. public schools. I taught geography and German at Olivia, Minnesota during the 1967-68 school term--I resigned from this job to protest the firing of another teacher.

The summer of 1968 found me driving a Blue and White cab in Minneapolis. In the fall I began substitute teaching in the Minneapolis Public School system and ended up with a three year stint at Jordan Junior High on the North Side..

During the first three years in Minneapolis I ran an underground runaway-house for teenagers in my home on the West Bank. This was a small part of a network that dealt with alienated youth before the opening of the Bridge.

During this period I did limited work in organizing the West Bank Tenants Union to fight Heller-Segal. I also did some anti-war work--mostly participating in mass protests and barracading the streets.

While still teaching I became active on the Board of Directors of the People's Centre, working closely with Jim Belka to expand and improve the services.

While I was working with the People's Centre, the People's Pantry was growing by leaps and bounds and other people were organizing a coop grocery store--these two energies merged in the spring of 1971 as North Country Co-op. I served on the first board of directors of North Country and later as a full time worker.

Re-organizing the office--keeping track of bills and orders, etc. was my main focus at North Country. In the fall of 1971 I authored a plan that divided our collective into North Country Co-op and The People's Warehouse. I continued to work at North Country for another year. From 1971 thru 1975 I met with dozens of groups of people in the cities, out state and in the Dakotas to start food co-ops, and

spent much time visiting existing co-ops to help them improve their organizations and service. This was part of my work at People's Warehouse. Also during this time I organized two work-study projects which brought people from around the nation to Minneapolis for seminars and work experience in our co-op network.

Much confusion existed around the question of who owned the People's Warehouse. The all co-op meeting (from which our collective had taken some leadership) had died. Because we were buying a building we needed to incorporate. On behalf of the collective I drew up a proposed set of by-laws for the new corporation and organized a meeting for some 37 co-ops around the region to discuss, amend and adopt these bylaws which placed the ownership of the warehouse in the hands of the member co-ops.

I worked at the warehouse until the time of troubles (1975-76). During the struggles in the co-ops I made many mistakes of a leftist nature which helped me to reach a more mature understanding of mass organizations.

The winter of 1975-76 found me working in the oil fields of the Gulf of Mexico as a roughneck. While living in New Orleans I became active in the US-China People's Friendship Association. In the Summer of 1976 I returned to my hometown of Carrington, North Dakota where I worked as an auto-mechanic with my father for three years. While living in North Dakota I organized a chapter of the US-China People's Friendship Association and visited China in February 1978. I visited 35 schools around North Dakota in the winter of 1978-79 showing slides and talking about New China.

In September of 1979 I went to San Diego to evaluate an co-op land and healing centre project. Upon returning to the Twin Cities I have taken a job with the National Farmers Organization.