

COOPERATIVES AT WORK

The Future of Work

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COOPERATIVES AT WORK

BY

GEORGE CHENEY

University of Colorado, USA

MATT NOYES

*Solidarity Economy Educator and Organizer,
USA*

EMI DO

*Cooperative Educator and Organizer,
Canada*

MARCELO VIETA

University of Toronto, Canada

JOSEBA AZKARRAGA

University of the Basque Country, Spain

And

CHARLIE MICHEL

*Mission West Community Development
Partners, USA*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

George Cheney (PhD, Purdue University, 1985) is Professor Emeritus in communication at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs. He has published extensively on issues of identity, democracy, marketization, and ethics at work; also on economic justice, peace studies, and environmental issues. He has taught at and visited numerous universities in the United States, Western Europe, Latin America, and New Zealand. Currently, he is a facilitator and consultant, focused on equitable food systems, affordable housing/land access, and cooperative work solutions. He resides in Cortez, Colorado, in the Four Corners region of the US Southwest. He is a frequent contributor of op-eds and essays to newspapers and other outlets.

Matt Noyes (MA, Mondragon University, 2017) is a social movement educator and organizer living in Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA. He is a writer and translator of books and articles on solidarity economy, popular education, worker cooperatives, and union democracy and reform. He is a member of the Grassroots Economic Organizing Collective and several cooperatives, including Social.Coop, May-First.Coop, and the Colorado Solidarity Fund. Matt studied political economy at the New School for Social Research and cooperative organization and social economy at Mondragon

University, and has taught in unions, worker centers, and other movement organizations and universities in the United States and Japan.

Emi Do (PhD, Tokyo University of Agriculture, 2020) is a cooperative educator and organizer living in Vancouver, BC, Canada. Formerly an Assistant Professor in the Department of International Food and Agriculture Science at Tokyo University of Agriculture, she has taught and presented about agricultural cooperatives, cooperative education and governance. Her other areas of research include urban agriculture, local food systems, and food literacy initiatives. She is a member of *unfiltered.coop* and *social.coop*, and sits on the editorial board of the Asia Pacific Cooperative Research Partnership.

Marcelo Vieta (PhD, York University, Canada, 2012) is Associate Professor in the Adult Education and Community Development program and Director of the Centre for Learning, Social Economy & Work at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Marcelo has published on the social and solidarity economy, workplace democracy, and labor activism in the Global North and South, including *Workers' Self-Management in Argentina* (Brill/Haymarket, 2020) and *The Italian Road to Recuperating Enterprises and the Legge Marcora Framework* (EURICSE, 2017). Marcelo serves on the Canadian Association for Studies in Cooperation board and is an Americas representative on the International Cooperative Alliance's Committee on Cooperative Research.

Joseba Azkarraga, PhD in Sociology (University of the Basque Country, 2006) and in Psychology (Universitat Ramon Llull, Catalunya, 2021). He was a member of the cooperative movement of Mondragón for 15 years, as a professor and

researcher at the University of Mondragon. Currently, he is Professor in sociology at the University of the Basque Country (Department of Sociology and Social Work, Education Faculty of Bilbao). He has published on issues of social economy, education, socioecological transition, food sovereignty, and postgrowth/degrowth. His focus is on the radical cultural change required for postgrowth societies. He resides in Durango (Basque Country, in Spain) and participates in the Basque ecological movement.

Charlie Michel (MS, Case Western Reserve University, 2017) is Regional Food Systems Program Coordinator for Mission West Community Development Partners (Ronan, Montana, USA). His background encompasses field work, advocacy, and education in agriculture, sustainability, and cooperatives. He is currently pursuing a Master of Management in Cooperatives and Credit Unions through Saint Mary's University (Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada) using his work with the Northwest Food Hub Network as the focal point of his research. He currently resides in Spokane, Washington where he is active in the local food system and cooperative economy.

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PREFACE

Worker cooperatives have held great promise since they first appeared on the economic scene almost two centuries ago. Interestingly, they have roots with *both* organized labor and social reformers at the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. Worker co-ops also stem from efforts by groups of people to control their own economic and social destinies in line with humanitarian, democratic, egalitarian, and sometimes revolutionary values. This vision has been made concrete in countless cases of people taking their work and social futures into their own hands, working against many obstacles and fashioning possibilities that many politicians and business leaders said were unrealistic or even impossible.

Worker co-ops represent one important way to address the multiple, interrelated crises of our times. Social, economic, political, health, and environmental crises have become even more apparent with the persistent pandemic of COVID-19 and its variants. For instance, the crisis of democracy today is bound up with economic inequality, racial injustice, and environmental degradation. The inadequacy of the coordinated global response to the pandemic is due to a variety of factors, but among those are inequitable distribution of resources as well as social and political divisions that

undermine deep cooperation on public health, environmental stewardship, and the dignity of labor.

Worker co-ops have the capacity to maximize democratic practice and provide economic security for workers and their communities. Worker cooperatives at their best maximize shared ownership and self-governance. In places such as Emilia Romagna (Italy), The Basque Country (Spain), Québec (Canada), South Korea, Argentina, Brazil, and India, high concentrations of cooperatives, including worker co-ops, have made significant and well-documented contributions to the health and well-being of individuals, households, and communities.

Some of the most exciting experiments in worker cooperativism are embedded in larger projects and networks that involve community and movement organizing as well as focused development of an enterprise. These efforts are part of a much larger tapestry of initiatives and new organizational forms, including commoning, mutual aid, time banks, bartering, and informal neighborhood organizing. In recent years, many of these efforts have relied heavily on information and communication technology. Still, today, *worker-owned-and-managed* cooperatives remain a small segment of what can loosely be called “the cooperative economy,” which is itself not yet the major force it could be. There is a remarkable array of organizations and initiatives that merge cooperation and work, mostly under the radar of mainstream media. Worker co-ops are thriving on every continent. In this book we step outside comfortable circles and familiar sources to open ourselves and our readers to the true diversity of cooperative enterprises, including related models that fall under different labels.

We have long been intrigued by worker co-ops as a space for robust workplace participation and the democratization of economic life. In the early 1990s, George Cheney decided to

delve deeply into forms of workplace participation, ranging from historical labor movements to business models like quality circles and total quality management to European codetermination models to cooperatives at work. This path led George to the Mondragón cooperatives in the Basque Country, Spain and then back to cooperatives around the United States, then to international comparative studies of worker and other types of co-ops (including consumer, land, and housing). George is formally retired as an academic, but he continues to pursue applied research while also working on cooperative development; wider organizational consulting and community work; and communication about social, economic, and environmental justice.

Matt Noyes began to study worker cooperatives in 2010 – while living in Japan. After years of practical work in union democracy and worker education in the United States, it was the need to engage undergraduate students in a business administration program and a desire to open a dialogue with them on democracy and social transformation that led him to worker cooperatives. Like George, Matt ended up at Mondragón in the Basque Country, where he encountered the MTA and LEINN programs (which will be discussed later in this book), establishing relationships with young cooperative entrepreneurs. Platform cooperativism also became a focus for him that continues today, as does solidarity economy. After moving back to the United States in 2018, he was a caregiver for several years and is now pursuing solidarity economy education and organizing.

Emi Do came to cooperatives as a small-scale urban farmer trying to find a viable alternative to the dominant food distribution chain. The sense of empowerment, mutuality, and solidarity that the experience provided sparked an interest in the cooperative model as a means to democratize and transform relationships across different workplaces and contexts.

Through studying the largest agricultural cooperative federation in Japan for her PhD studies and incubating different worker cooperative enterprises under a new worker cooperative law there, Emi explored organizational practices that foster novel, collaborative ways for people to work together. Recently, she has returned to Canada. She continues to explore forms of solidarity in urban food systems and in environmental advocacy.

Marcelo Vieta arrived at worker cooperatives during his PhD studies. He was taken by the audaciousness of Argentines' taking over streets and companies, seizing plazas, and running entire neighborhoods via direct democracy during the crisis of its neoliberal economic system in 2001. Argentina's *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* movement (ERTs) became the subject of his dissertation. Since then, he has researched all forms of cooperatives, especially worker co-ops; collaborated with the co-op sector in Canada, Argentina, and Italy; worked with community-based labor initiatives; studied other business conversions to cooperatives; and investigated avenues to scale up economic democracy and expand the solidarity economy. He now teaches and researches on these and other issues and the emancipative learning that takes place in participatory and solidarity-based organizations.

Joseba Azkarraga has been a member of the cooperative movement of Mondragón for 15 years, as a professor at Mondragon University. He focused on strengthening cooperative identity in a time of globalization (his doctoral dissertation received the Basque Government Research Award). In addition, he consulted for the Mondragon Corporation. Recently, he has explored socioecological resilience, analyzing social movements such as the Transition Movement. Along the same lines, he has been examining food sovereignty and agroecology, with a special emphasis on the pathbreaking work of young Basques immersed in agroecology. In general,

his work addresses the fundamental cultural change required for postgrowth societies to emerge.

Charlie Michel found his way to cooperative studies via agriculture, volunteering through the Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms program and working a season in a peach orchard before stepping into a role as an educator and advocate with National Farmers Union. He is Regional Food Systems Program Coordinator for the Northwest Food Hub Network, a project in intercooperation among farmer-owned food hubs in the United States. He is also a master's student in the International Center for Cooperative Management at St. Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

All of us find inspiration in cases such as: DisCOs, distributed cooperatives pursuing commons-based socioeconomic activity that incorporates feminist economic principles; *Unión Solidaria de Trabajadores* (UST), a construction and parks maintenance worker-recuperated co-op in Buenos Aires that redirects portions of surpluses to aiding surrounding communities; and recent efforts in the United States to bring together labor unions and cooperatives in fields like agriculture, energy, and social services. These initiatives show revolutionary approaches to work, governance, and communication that are not always aimed at a preset outcome but that have mutual support and the broader community at heart. We visit these, and many other organizations like them, throughout the book.

The multiple – and interconnected – global crises of the past few years are leading both to significant shifts in employment patterns and to a deeper rethinking of what jobs, careers, productivity, and organizations mean. COVID-19 brought our attention to other crises and their interrelationships such as the crucial role of “essential” care and service work marginalized by dominant discourses and the inability

of the current market system to respond effectively to immediate local needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also called attention to the acceleration of climate change, mass extinctions, and associated disasters; the pressures and turbulence caused by severe economic inequality; and overdue reckoning and reparations for racial oppression. With these problems at the fore, accustomed socioeconomic and organizational structures are being challenged.

Many workers' and other cooperatives, especially in the Global North, have stepped up to these challenges, rewriting their policies and redirecting their practices in terms of stronger, more proactive principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion – far beyond accustomed public statements of values and principles.

The perspective for this book is multidisciplinary and multitheoretic, meaning that we draw upon a variety of traditions in the analysis of work, business, organizations, and broader institutions, especially when addressing umbrella concepts such as capitalism, democracy, and technology. We strive to be open to diverse viewpoints, frameworks, and types of evidence.

We have also tried to suspend our own biases, preferences, and expectations enough to see potential surprises, contradictions, and different ways of achieving the same goal, even where it concerns our primary focus on worker co-ops. Many of our interviews, for example, revealed long-standing cooperative cases that were new to us and uncovered the importance of cultural traditions that, while falling under many different names, manifest parallel cooperative principles. A few examples are the pre-Incan, Indigenous Andean notion of the *ayllu* (interfamily productive organizing and labor sharing); the Zapatistas' local self-managed councils and governance *caracoles* in Chiapas, México; cooperative health

and educational initiatives in North America; and cooperatives rooted in fair trade and fair work practices in South Asia.

Listening, understanding, and learning are key to a vibrant, ongoing democratic process. In our engagements with the many people and writings represented in this volume, we have tried to exercise a provocative playfulness, especially with terminology and labels. If a co-op board member or manager claims that “the market is driving our decision,” then we ask, “Who or what is the market?” If certain forms of capitalism are claimed to be kinder and gentler, if you will, then we ask, “Specifically how is this being realized?” If a business – whether incorporated as a worker cooperative or as some other form – claims to be deeply democratic, then we ask, “By what practices, what measures, and what outcomes?”

Our sources and methods are also pluralistic. We have consulted many different resources, from academic research, to reports by practitioners, to news and commentary, to popular culture. When reflecting on the present and future it is important to look for signs, trends, and conceivable options in many different locations. Surveys and studies all around the world testify to the persistence of workers’ desires for autonomy, or the ability to shape their own work situation to a significant extent; and voice, or the capacity to contribute not only to discussions about the firm’s future but also to actual decision-making.

For this book and related projects, we have conducted over 100 moderately structured interviews, mostly via telephone or videoconferencing, and hundreds of email exchanges, to ensure we are capturing a wide range of experiences and views of worker co-ops on a global level. We do not pretend to be comprehensive – there is much happening around the world that cannot be easily uncovered – but we do our best to represent diverse types of initiatives and trends. We term the interviews “expert” in the sense of seeking people who are

well-positioned to speak about individual co-ops and communities as well as about wider trends. By following up on referrals from interviewees about others to contact and tracing posts and websites, we have encountered many co-ops and initiatives around the world that have not been much publicized or examined. Still, there are many more conversations that did not occur and cases of which we are still unaware.

There have been important lessons for us along the way of creating this book. Although we began with a bias toward the value of the worker-cooperative model, we sought to reopen a wide investigation about the advantages, limits, and creative possibilities for worker co-ops. We do not view them as democratic and egalitarian business *islands*. In fact, as our interviews have consistently shown, worker co-ops represent an important path for labor, economic, and community justice that are, more than ever, part of a web of formal and informal initiatives all over the world. Thus, we widened our lens to take in many other related business and organizational forms, all in the interest of tracking what work, and the economy would be like if both were profoundly cooperative.

It is impossible in a short book to do justice to our theme, but shortcomings stand out. While we tried to include sources from around the world, the cases we feature and the literature on which we draw remain weighted toward the United States, Europe, and Latin America. There are still too few cases from Asia and the Pacific (only Japan, Korea, Australia, and New Zealand), Africa (only Kenya and Rwanda), and especially, South Asia (India). Most of the literature we cite is in English, Spanish, or French. We are also aware that the Mondragón cooperatives, in Euskadi, the Basque Country (Spain), loom large. This is due to our familiarity with that experience, and the major contributions to practice and theory they have made over their 65 years of existence.

Feminist economics and organizational theory is important to our analysis, but we did not sufficiently address the specific challenge of organizing for women's liberation in the context of worker cooperativism. The same is true for the struggles of BIPOC, LGBTQ+ people, and others, which are important to so many of the people we were fortunate to interview. While we were not able to give many of the cases and interviews the in-depth treatment they deserve, we hope we have sparked curiosity in readers to pursue them and seek out others in their own communities and through their networks.

This volume is part of a series on the future of work, and that focus guides many of the questions that we address. How do worker co-ops figure into the future of work? What unique or at least distinctive benefits do they offer? How can they be part of a larger "eco-system" of cooperative and solidarity-based ventures? How can worker co-ops anticipate still other democratizing forces in the economy and society at large? What cultural, political, and economic conditions favor conversions of existing businesses to worker co-ops in addition to the establishment of wholly new enterprises in local and regional economies? These questions need thoughtful, informed, and timely responses, especially given the relative rarity of worker-owned-and-managed firms in today's economy.

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organizations are not mentioned in the text. The same is true for the groups and organizations to which we belong. We also wish to thank our families, friends, and colleagues who have offered crucial forms of support since this project began in January 2019. Ryan Wenzel generously assisted us with tracking down important references. Dean Ritz read the manuscript at the final stage and offered helpful suggestions. Sally Planalp did several rounds of careful proofreading and editing, offering sound advice. Thank you to the staff at Emerald Publishing for assistance and encouragement through every phase of this process.