# The Pursuit of Alternatives

## Stories of Peoples' Economic and Political Struggles Around the World

Edited by **Melisa R. Serrano and Edlira Xhafa**

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(Eds.)

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# Contents

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# List of Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| ADS | Agência de Desenvolvimento Solidário (Solidarity Development Agency) |
| AGM | Annual General Meeting |
| ANTEAG | Associação Nacional dos Trabalhadores em Empresas de Autogestão |
| BWC | Busan Workers' Cooperative |
| CAW | Canadian Autoworkers Union |
| CC | Coordinating Committee |
| CD | Campaign for Democracy |
| CGSI | Community Garden Society of Inuvik |
| CHB | Corporação Holding do Brazil |
| CMP | Central de Movimentos Populares |
| CNES | Conselho Nacional de Economia Solidária (National and Solidarity Economy Council) |
| CNL | Chevron Nigeria Limited |
| CNQ | Confederação Nacional do ramo Químico (National Confederation of Chemical Trade Union) |
| CONAN | Confederação Nacional das Associações de Moradores (National Confederation of the Housing Associations) |
| Coomuna | Cooperativa Multiactiva del Nare (Multi-active Cooperative of Nare) |
| CPFL | Companhia Paulista de Força e Luz |
| CUT | Central Unica dos Trabalhadores |
| DIEESE | Departamento Intersindical de Estatísticas e Estudos Socioeconômicos (Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies) |
| FASE | Federação de Órgãos para Assistência Social e Educacional (Federation of Institutions for Social and Educational Assistance) |

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|---|---|
| FBES | Forum Brasileiro de Economia Solidaria (Brazilian Forum of Solidarity Economy) |
| FGTS | Fundo de Garantia por Tempo de Serviço |
| FLM | Frente de Luta por Moradia, or the Front for Housing Struggle |
| GLU | Global Labour University |
| GMoU | Global Memorandums of Understanding |
| GTWA | Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| INDS | Instituto para o Desenvolvimento Sustentavel (Institute for the Sustainable Development) |
| KCCF | Korea Consumers' Cooperative Federation |
| KCTU | Korean Confederation of Trade Unions |
| KPL | Korean Peasant's League |
| La CUT | National Trade Union Confederation of Colombian Workers |
| MNLM | Movimento Nacional de Luta pela Moradia (National Movement for the Housing Struggle) |
| MNOC | Multinational Oil Companies |
| MST | Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers' Movement) |
| MSTRU | Movimento Sem Teto Reforma Urbano (Homeless Movement for Urban Reform) |
| MTD | Moviemento de Trabajadores Desocupados (Unemployed Workers' Movement) |
| MTST | Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto (Homeless Workers' Movement) |
| NATTCO | National Confederation of Cooperatives |
| NDP | New Democratic Party |
| NDWJ | Niger Delta Women for Justice |
| NGO | Non-government organizations |
| NHCP | NOAVDECI Health Care Programme |
| NNPC | Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation |
| NOVADECI | Novaliches Development Cooperative, Inc. |

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|---|---|
| NPF | National Confederation of Chemicals |
| OCAP | Ontario Coalition Against Poverty |
| OPP | Ontario Provincial Police |
| PT | Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party) |
| SAMWU | South African Municipal Workers' Union |
| SUTIMAC | Sindicato Unitario de Trabajadores De La Industria De Materiales Para Construccion (United Trade Union of Workers of Construction Materials) |
| TCH | Toronto Community Housing |
| TINA | There-Is-No-Alternative |
| UNICAMP | University of Campinas |
| UNMP | União Nacional pela Moradia Popular (National Union for Popular Housing) |
| UP | Unión Patriótica |
| WA | Workers Assembly |
| WC | Workers' Council |

# Introduction: The 'Process of Becoming' Alternatives

*Melisa R. Serrano*
*Edlira Xhafa*

In Brazil, workers occupied a bankrupt factory that manufactures container barrels and container tanks. These workers have been running this factory, albeit with many challenges, for eight years now. The rise of 'popular ventures' such as worker-run factories and other forms of solidarity economy, and the recognition of the need to imagine and construct alternative forms of work and social relations in production, prompted the Brazilian trade union *Central Unica dos Trabalhadores* (CUT-Brazil), in 1999, to establish an agency for the development of solidarity economy. On another front, poor working people occupied several empty, abandoned and decrepit buildings in Sao Paolo and transformed them into livable dwellings, as a way of drawing the government's attention, and that of the public in general, to their struggle for the 'right to the city', a concept outlined in this country's 1988 National Constitution.

In the Department of Antioquia, Colombia, despite decades of union repression, persecution, and systematic union assassination campaigns, in 1994 a rural-based trade union took over the running of a manufacturing factory. This factory, however, is presently facing a reversion to its past private enterprise status due to overwhelming debt and a lack of internal organizational cohesion.

Such initiatives, taking place right across South America, underscore this region's seismic national government shift 'leftwards'. However, while such political redirections have not, as yet, gained momentum elsewhere, many grass-roots and worker-propelled emancipatory projects have begun in various parts of the world. Right across the Latin American continent, a 'new' left formation is unfolding. In Canada, disappointed at the historical fragmentation of the left and its weak responses to the financial crisis and the ensuing assault on workers and the poor, many activists and intellectuals from various trade unions, traditional left organizations, and community groups in Toronto established in 2009 a workers' assembly, an explicitly anti-capitalist, broad-based workers' organization. The

assembly aims to increase working class capacities to 'fight back'. Prior to the establishment of the workers' assembly, an anti-poverty movement had already emerged in the 1980s in Ontario. This movement empowers the poor and the disenfranchised to fight for themselves, individually and collectively, via direct actions. Meanwhile, in a First Nations' community in Canada's freezing Northwest Territories, a group of aboriginal peoples and immigrants began initiating and running community greenhouse gardens as efforts towards guaranteeing food sovereignty and food security in the region.

Crossing the Pacific, in Southeast Asia, the process of building solidarity economies is also taking place. In South Korea, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), like the CUT-Brazil, has recently embarked on a political project of building a workers' cooperative movement to create a stronger link between trade unions, communities and peasant organizations, and as a stepping stone towards a broader vision of creating an alternative economic system to that of neoliberal capitalist globalization. In Metro Manila, The Philippines, a successful multi-purpose cooperative organized by informal workers (i.e. market vendors) has ventured into providing health care and health insurance to its members and their communities, as a response to their exclusion from the public and private health care system of their country.

In Nigeria, angered at the continued despoliation of their lands and the profound state of poverty which they and their families lived in, women in communities around the Niger Delta located themselves at the center of popular struggles, resisting economic exploitation, socio-political oppression including traditions of patriarchy, and environmental degradation. The so-called 'women wars' of 2002 have led women from the margins of politics to grasp a new lease of power as a means of affecting change, challenging the traditionally-ascribed, second-fiddle role of women in their societies.

All these snapshots of stories of peoples' on-going struggles across the globe are testaments to the determination of people to resist exploitation and injustice, and imagine and construct their own narratives of economic and political difference; to demonstrate that there is a different alternative that can arise out of and beyond capitalism.

This book critically engages with and evaluates, via 10 case studies, how various forms of people's economic and political initiatives and struggles in six countries – namely Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Nigeria, Philippines, and South Korea – might become spaces of or provide 'actually existing' opportunities or moments for the development of consciousness and capacities which are critical in challenging the dominant social, economic and political relations, and also in pursuing projects and initiatives beyond the capitalist canon. By doing so, the book aims to contribute to the debate on alternatives to capitalism by identifying indicators or expressions of critical consciousness and transformative capacities from the struggles studied, as well as uncovering the factors that influence the

development (or the stunted growth) of critical consciousness and transformative capacities. Finally, via the 10 case studies, this book brings to light the language of peoples' struggles; what inspires them to take action to change their material conditions.

We regard the cases as spaces – both material and symbolic – "within which something radically different in terms of dominant social relations, way of life, productive capacities and mental conceptions of the world can flourish" (Harvey, 2010: par 25, lines 11-13). Many of these spaces hold the promise of facilitating and enabling the 'process of becoming' alternatives. In an earlier paper, we conceptualize an alternative as "an ongoing, non-deterministic process of economic and political struggle of people trying to move beyond the capitalist logic, be it at the macro, meso or micro level, and simultaneously transforming themselves in the process" (Serrano and Xhafa, 2012: 289). At the core of any alternative is "the pursuit of the full development of human potential based on equality, solidarity and sustainability, and through democratic participatory processes" (ibid).

Here, we identified different socio-economic arrangements that go against and beyond the main tenets of (neoliberal) capitalism: collective ownership and management of production as against private ownership and capitalist-controlled production; the market as a redistributive mechanism rather than being a tool for private accumulation; the solidarity economy rather than the market-dictated economy (or the economy of expropriation); decent and socially-useful labour, instead of fragmented and alienated labour; flexibility for workers to balance work-time and free-time against the contemporary paradigm of work intensification; a broad-based and democratic working class politics instead of politics based on vanguardism and sectarianism; city space as part of the commons rather than grounded in models of urbanization that exclude the poor; female empowerment and self-determination as against women's exploitation and oppression; and reclaiming the commons and environmental justice as against industrialization based on the exploitation of fossil fuels.

Hence, spaces for transformation and for building alternatives that challenge the predominant captive consciousness shaped by capitalism and its institutions may well fit into what Panitch and Gindin (2000: 6) have in mind when they highlight 'possibility as capacity' as being at the core of Bloch's concept of 'concrete utopias':

> And what is especially important is that conceiving freedom and justice on the terrain of capacities leads beyond mere dreaming: it links the ideal to the possibility of change and so to what is politically achievable. This is what Bloch meant by 'concrete utopias' which, always operating on the level of *possibility as capacity,'* incorporate the objective contradictions that create an opening for socialist goals ('capability-of-being-done'), the subjective element of agency ('capability-of-doing-other'), and therefore the

possibility of changing ourselves and the world ('capability-of-becoming-other'). (Underscoring ours)

For Panitch and Gindin, building capacities and finding the organizational means to accumulate the capacities to develop an alternative to capitalism are fundamental steps along the path to realizing 'concrete utopias.'

The 10 case studies included here are or have the potential to become 'actually existing' spaces for the development of critical consciousness, a concept which we perceive as encompassing the following intertwined dimensions: an understanding of the systemic nature of oppression and injustice based on the lived experiences of people; an understanding of the need to resist the underlying causes of peoples' oppression and exploitation; and a recognition that people have the capacity to act to change their circumstances. This critical consciousness propels people to struggle and in the process they transform themselves and develop capacities to become agents for social change. It is in this light that we place an emphasis on the emancipatory and transformative potential of the struggles analyzed in the case studies.

In analyzing the case studies, we were guided by the analytical framework illustrated in Figure 1.
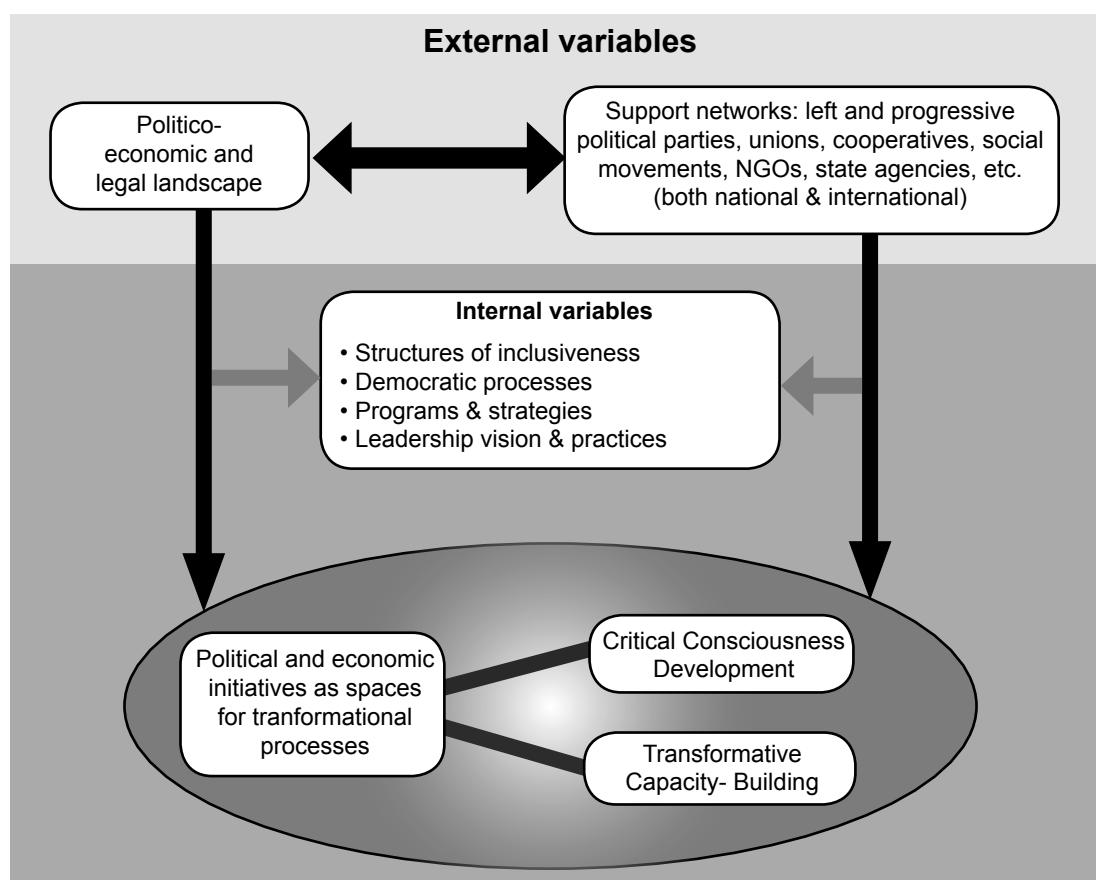


Source: Adapted from Serrano, Melisa and Xhafa, Edlira (2011) 'Beyond the Capitalist Logic: Theoretical Debates and Social Experiences', Serrano, M. et al. (eds) *Trade Unions and The Global Crisis: Labour's Visions, Strategies and Responses,* Geneva. International Labour Organization (ILO), 26.

There are two sets of variables that, depending on a specific context, may either constrain or facilitate the emancipatory and transformative potential of these initiatives. The two major external variables are: a) the politico-economic and legal landscape, and b) the extent of support given by solidarity networks such as leftist organizations and other progressive groups and activists, trade unions, cooperatives, social movements, the Church, and State agencies. The concrete politico-economic and legal landscapes, without doubt, have an effect not only on the existence of solidarity networks but also on their scope and degree of operation.

A number of internal variables also affect the emancipatory and transformative potential of the initiatives studied. These variables include: structures (degree of inclusiveness), processes (internal democracy), programs and strategies, and leadership. The dynamics of these internal variables may either facilitate or inhibit emancipatory and transformational processes in these spaces. These internal variables may also be influenced by the two external variables. For example, the possibilities provided by a law that enables workers to take over and self-manage either bankrupt or abandoned factories expropriated by the State may have an influence on programs and strategies, and leadership vision and practices. Similarly, the same internal variables may be influenced by a law that provides an enabling environment for forms of solidarity economy to access financial, technical, and marketing support designed according to their needs. Similarly, as Harvey (2010a) argues, non-government organizations (NGOs) may have contributed to improvements in specific areas such as women's rights, immigrants' rights, health care, and others, but their work, particularly that of the donor-driven ones, is at best ameliorative. Also, the existence of a broader alliance of social movements engaged in protest politics may open up spaces for the further radicalization of autonomous grassroots initiatives and organizations and help them understand that their specific problems are systemic in nature.

The book is organized into two parts. Part I discusses and analyzes: the emancipatory moments of the 10 initiatives; several indicators of and factors influencing the development of critical consciousness and transformative capacities in and through these initiatives; the emancipatory elements that the initiatives embody; and several lessons and insights drawn from the case studies. Finally, Part I highlights contemporary themes of resistance, representing the language of struggle of the cases studied and sums up the main points and arguments put forward in this book. Part II presents the 10 case studies in full. These case studies were directly undertaken by some alumni of the Global Labour University (GLU) and their colleagues, as part of the research project "Visions, Constructs and Capacities beyond the Capitalist Canon". This research project was coordinated by the editors of this book and was funded by the Bureau of Workers' Activities of the International Labour Office in Geneva.

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**PART I**

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**Emancipatory Moments, Critical Consciousness and Transformative Capacities**

# The Emancipatory Moments of Struggles and Social Experiments

1

*Melisa R. Serrano*
*Edlira Xhafa*

Despite the dominant there-is-no-alternative (TINA) dictum, political and economic struggles and social experiments are sweeping across countries. This indicates that people continue to imagine and construct different political, economic and social relations beyond the capitalist canon. The 10 case studies presented in this book show that despite apparent differences of motivations and spheres of struggle in contesting the dominant ideology, people can gradually develop critical consciousness and transformative capacities. In short, people can create their own spaces or emancipatory moments for transformative self-change.

The following sections provide an overview of the case studies presented in this book. The last part of this chapter identifies and examines the emancipatory moments in each of the initiatives studied.

*Chapter 3* by Lygia Sabbag Fares is a case study of a worker-run factory (Flaskô) in Brazil.

Flaskô produces plastic container barrels and tanks for water, perfume and other liquids. Like many factories in Brazil, the severe economic and social crises of the 1990s fomented by the harsh neoliberal policies of the time and coupled with bad management, led to Flaskô's bankruptcy and its subsequent abandonment by the owners. Inspired by other factory occupations that had taken place earlier in Brazil the workers occupied the factory in June 2003.

As Flaskô struggled against various attempts by the State to put the factory into bankruptcy trusteeship and to auction the factory's machineries, not to mention paying off the debts of the former owners, the initial goal of preserving workers' jobs and ensuring workers' salaries was broadened to demanding the nationalization of the factory under workers' control. Corollary to this goal, Flaskô workers also endeavored to organize the community and to provide support to social movements to support their daily fight.

More than merely focusing on factory production, Flaskô maintains links to the local community, integrating these workers' struggle with the community's broader struggles. The community, as such, has been strongly involved in supporting the Flaskô workers' petitions and demands concerning the nationalization of the factory. Flaskô workers assisted in organizing a neighborhood association to fight for the community's basic needs (e.g. put pressure on local government to provide basic services such as water). Furthermore, Flaskô workers continue to work with a variety of social movements such as: MTST (homeless workers movement), MTD (unemployed workers movement) and the MST (landless workers movement).

To date, the workers continue to run the factory, enabling them to keep their jobs, earn income, and pay the pension arrearages left by the former owners. They have been able to reduce wage gaps (the highest wage is 3 times the lowest) and reduce working time from 44 to 30 hours per week without reducing productivity. The six-hour shift allowed workers to have more free time with their family and to join Flaskô's political and educational activities. Moreover, the workers built a workers' village on the factory's land to address not only the housing needs of workers but those of other members of the community as well. At the same time, they have transformed empty factory spaces into a variety of arenas: a 'sports factory' where workers, their children, and the whole community could participate in free or very cheap sports classes; and a 'cultural factory' where cultural activities like cartoon drawing classes and dance classes are provided. Flaskô also holds important political and academic activities such as lectures by leftist academics, conferences about worker-run factories, political movies, and the like.

*Chapter 4* by Daniel Hawkins presents another case of a worker-run factory (Caldesa) in Colombia.

While Flaskô may well represent what workers can do to run what might be a radically different model of an industrial factory, Caldesa could be seen as a recipe of what to avoid doing in the process of developing a worker-owned and run initiative. Founded in 1994, Cales y Derivados de la Sierra S.A. (Caldesa) is a lime producing factory largely owned and controlled (84.7%) by the trade union Sintracaldesa. The state owns 15.3% of the factory.

Economic and socio-political crises and a general climate of fear and persecution of left-leaning trade unionists extended well into the 1980s and 1990s in Colombia, forcing many union and social movement activists to flee the region. In 1993, Sintracolcarburos (later on called Sintracaldesa) began a strike after an at-work assassination of three trade unionists. The strike lasted three months and ended with the company entering a process of bankruptcy, owing workers' back pay and social security defaults totaling US$2.175M. The *Superintendencia de Sociedades*, the autonomous administrative governmental entity that inspects, monitors and controls commercial enterprises in Colombia, decided to pass

ownership to workers after negotiating with lawyers from the National Trade Union Confederation of Colombian Workers (La CUT).

The climate of fear and union persecution resulted in the death or internal exile of some of the union's most promising leaders, leaving in their wake many union leaders who lacked a sufficient degree of worker legitimacy and empathy as well as any coherent program to ensure the success of the planned worker-owned and run factory initiative.

Today, although Caldesa has been able to employ around 120 workers from an initial 26 employees in 1997, its debts have also grown exponentially over the years. Most of the factory's capital equipment remains antiquated, leading to declining productivity and efficiency. Overall, these factors have led to the present situation in which this trade union-led enterprise has not been able to link the factory's development with that of the local community. At the time of writing, many workers had not received their wages for seven months. The firm is on the brink of bankruptcy and the union seems to be content to await a new process of take-over and restructuring, in the hope of landing a good payout package for the workers' shareholder actions.

*Chapter 5* by Bulend Karadag and Claire Siobhan Ruppert presents a case study of how a trade union organization in Brazil – *Central Unica dos Trabalhadores* (CUT) – directly and actively promotes a solidarity economy.

The difficult economic landscape in Brazil as a result of the economic crisis that hit the country in the 1990s gave rise to various forms of solidarity economy also known as 'popular ventures': cooperatives, associations, and informal groups or micro-businesses. These popular ventures, which include workers' cooperatives established in recovered bankrupt and troubled companies, provide alternative sources of stable employment and income.

It is in the light of these developments that Brazil's CUT started a debate in the labor movement on the need for labor to assume a more active role in the economy and to propose alternative ways of defending workers' interests and rights. Thus in 1999, CUT, in collaboration with other institutions, established *Agência de Desenvolvimento Solidário* (Solidarity Development Agency) or ADS. As part of CUT's structure, ADS does not have affiliates. Its executive body is composed of members of CUT representing different sectors, i.e. industry, services, family agriculture, etc.

ADS's overall goal is to contribute to building a democratic society organized in a solidarity and participative way. To realize this goal, ADS seeks to promote the solidarity economy and sustainable development by strengthening the creation of cooperatives and self-managed joint ventures so that workers can seek alternative forms of social inclusion. This is done through the provision of technical training, preparation of feasibility studies and marketing studies, assistance in business planning and business and environmental diagnostics, assistance in the

registration of solidarity economy organizations, assistance in the sourcing of funds for start-up cooperatives, and assistance in the marketing and trading of cooperatives' products.

ADS has contributed to the establishment of many cooperatives in different sectors and it has provided various forms of support to new and existing popular ventures (e.g. recycling, crafts, family agriculture, bio-diesel, sheep and goat farming, honey production, fruit production, shellfish, etc.). It has forged a partnership with *Petrobrás*, the main Brazilian State oil company, in a project involving the marketing and trading of solidarity economy products. It is also engaged in the establishment of cooperative complexes – local concentrations of economic enterprises that act in solidarity and in close cooperation among themselves according to principles of solidarity economy and connected to local development – ensuring their sustainability, autonomy and capacity for endogenous innovations. These complexes are composed of cooperative production ventures, services and credit, with integrated and collective policies of education, trading and marketing, technological development and others. These forms of cooperation pressure for an increase in the value of end products as well as strengthening the cooperatives involved in this process.

Similarly, in *Chapter 6* Kim Mijeoung elaborates on a recent initiative by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) to organize a workers' cooperative – the Busan Workers' Cooperative (BWC) – in the Busan region.

KCTU's initiative came out of a critical analysis of the challenges posed by neoliberal globalization to workers and unions in South Korea. Work intensification along with increasing job insecurity and a weakened social security system has led to further worker alienation at the workplace and less time for family. As a result, there has been a breakdown of workers' solidarity as workers compete against each other. Meanwhile, many trade unions have become far removed from their members' daily realities. Against this backdrop, KCTU decided to focus more on regional level projects meant to create a stronger link between trade unions and the communities. Thus, in 2009 the Busan branch of KCTU established the BWC, the first attempt of the KCTU regional council to build a workers' cooperative.

BWC is also viewed as a vehicle for expanding the influence of unions throughout society, mainly by encouraging that the values of trade unions are taken into the members' homes. As its first venture, BWC has embarked on distributing, through a cooperative store, locally (home) grown food directly sourced from peasants and their organizations. This enables BWC members and their families to have access to and develop confidence to consume locally grown food at reasonable prices (and at the same time paying peasants at a fair price) instead of imported food. Moreover, this enables BWC to have face-to-face contact with the families of union members. In this way, BWC seeks to strengthen the link between union members, their families and the trade union.

In its attempt to organize a different system of food production, distribution and consumption, BWC focuses on strengthening its network with local peasant organizations that belong to the Korean Peasants League (KPL). By supporting local agriculture, BWC also nurtures the supportive coexistence between rural and urban communities, and subsequently contributes to regional economic development.

*Chapter 7* by Patricia Chong presents the case of the Community Garden Society of Inuvik (CGSI) in Northwest Territories, Canada.

Inuvik, a town with a population of 3,430 of which about 63% are of Aboriginal ethnicity, is known as the 'land of the midnight sun' because it gets 56 days of 24 hour daylight in the summer and alternatively, 30 days of darkness in the winter. Its average temperature of -9.7 degrees Celsius prohibits the regular and normal cultivation and affordable provision of fruits and vegetables. Most of the food is shipped in from other places.

In order to address the limited availability of fresh and affordable fruits and vegetables, people in the Inuvik community established CGSI in 1998, as a democratic community-based means of food production with the goal of using the greenhouse as a focal point for community development through recreational gardening, food production, knowledge sharing, and volunteer support.

In the greenhouse garden, family garden plots have been made available for Inuvik residents and community plots provided to community groups such as the Inuvik day care center, a local food bank, an elderly group, and others. The family plots are rented out for US$100 for those members who, aside from paying US$25 membership fee, also commit 15 hours of volunteer work in the greenhouse. The community plots, however, are provided for free to community groups. There is also a commercial garden that sells plants in order to cover operational costs.

Residents now have a better food supply with a lot more being grown in and shared with the community. Also, the greenhouse has provided a space for members of the community to come together and develop closer relations. At the same time, the greenhouse is supporting other communities in the North such as Fort McPherson, Tuktoyaktuk and Tsiigehtchic by providing them with advice and seedlings. Iqaluit, the capital of the Nunavut territory, also built its own community greenhouse based on the Inuvik example.

*Chapter 8* by Rosalinda Mercado and Ramon Certeza elaborates on the innovative Health Care Programme (NHCP) of the Novaliches Development Cooperative, Inc. (NOVADECI) in the Philippines.

NOVADECI started as a credit cooperative of 70 members in 1976 in the town of Novaliches. It was born out of desperation and necessity for a small group of market vendors who were struggling to keep their businesses afloat in the face of a number of factors: changing market conditions, a lack of support from or access to government and banking institutions, and perennial dependence on usurious

money lenders. Today, NOVADECI is a multi-purpose cooperative of nearly 28,000 members providing a variety of services ranging from savings and loans; training, livelihood and legal services; sports activities; educational, literacy and scholarship programs; and disability, mortuary and old age benefits and health care.

The sorry state of health care for informal workers prompted NOVADECI to establish the NHCP in 1993 to serve as a health care provider and an insurance system to its members, their families, and communities. Under the micro-insurance scheme, each member is obliged to pay a one-time membership fee and a minimal regular annual fee to avail the health care program costs. In return, cooperative members with their immediate families and dependents are provided with free medical consultations, free maternity and annual medical check-ups, discounted laboratory examinations, dental and optical services and financial aid in the case of hospitalization. Today, NOVADECI has its own medical and dental clinics, laboratory facilities, and a pharmacy. More serious cases are referred to accredited hospitals with members given cash reimbursements of their medical expenses. To date, there are 7,000 NHCP members out of the nearly 28,000 members of the cooperative.

In *Chapter 9*, Bulend Karadag and Clair Siobhan Ruppert present a case study of the struggle for housing by the *Frente de Luta por Moradia*, or FLM (Front for Housing Struggle) in Brazil.

The endemic housing problem in the cities of Brazil has given rise to umbrella organizations of local autonomous movements dealing with the housing problems of low income families in São Paulo. One of these organizations is the FLM which is comprised of 13 local autonomous movements.

FLM began to organize occupations of empty and abandoned buildings in São Paulo as the main instrument of struggle through which they could call the attention of the government to the problems of homeless people. By engaging in building occupation and other forms of direct action (e.g. camp-out or tent protests in front of government offices), FLM seeks to compel the government to: allocate the maximum possible resources for housing programs for the poor; provide basic services to shanty-towns such as electricity, water, sewage, garbage, telephone, etc. at subsidized prices; increase the number of families who benefit from rent support programs; extend the scale of *Programa de Locação Social* of the Municipality of São Paulo which aims to rent houses or buildings abandoned more than one year for low-income families; and exempt low-income families from real-estate taxes.

While some occupations were mainly meant to call the government's attention and to amplify in the media the problems of the homeless, in other occupations local movements rehabilitated abandoned buildings left to ruin by the owners. An example is MSTRU's occupation of an abandoned hotel (for more than two decades) in the old town of São Paulo. There are currently 81 families living in the building. They were originally living in the east part of the city, but they

moved to the downtown area because they believe the downtown should also be a place to live for them and their families. The occupation is their way of reclaiming their right to the city.

Today, FLM has organized more than 10,000 homeless families in São Paulo. It has organized around 50 occupations and it is currently involved in six occupations. The most recent and well-known occupation was a 14-storey building in the old downtown of São Paulo, which sheltered around 840 families. On 25 November of 2010, after two months of occupation, these families were forced out of the building by police by virtue of a court decision. In this case, FLM did not resist, as the occupation was seen as a way of strengthening their struggle.

*Chapter 10* by Babatunde Ayelabola critically examines the 2002 women's resistance against the big oil multinationals in the Niger Delta in Nigeria and the impact of such resistance on women's empowerment and the transformation of their role in the communities.

While the Niger Delta region generates over 90% of Nigeria's revenues through crude oil earnings, its population of 30 million people, comprising 40 minority nationalities (spread across 6,000 communities), live in abject poverty. Their lands and rivers are despoiled and ravaged by oil exploration, rendering them largely useless for their traditional means of sustenance like farming and fishing.

The region became a center of resistance, from the pre-Independence era and was the first site of a bid for secession after Independence in 1966. Women's groups have been part of the broader Niger Delta people's struggle for self-determination since its onset. It should be noted that the organized women's resistance – the 'gendered ethnicized class struggle' – through sustained sit-ins, shutdowns of Big Oil's facilities, and protest marches in the Niger Delta was not only fueled by women's anger at the continued despoliation of their lands by the multi-national oil corporations (MNOCs) with state backing and the prevalent state of poverty which they and their families lived in. It was also an expression of their distrust of the sincerity of the male chiefs, elders and youths who had more often than not turned negotiations with the MNOCs, supposedly on behalf of the communities, into a means of feathering their own nests. In a way, the rising up of women represents their quest for respect from the state, the MNOCs and their male peers.

The transformative resistance of women represents a strand within the broader complex of self-determination struggles of the peoples in the region. It challenged traditions of patriarchy and the might of the state and MNOCs, and simultaneously re-configured old forms of struggles and introduced new elements of gender, economic and political solidarity amongst working people in that region in their demands for socio-economic rights and environmental justice.

*Chapter 11* by Rob Butz and Laura Roberts presents a case study of an anti-poverty organization – the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) in Canada.

The increasing poverty in Ontario following the province's rush towards a neoliberal mode of capitalist urban development was the backdrop for the mobilization of the week-long *March against Poverty* in 1989. The march was the main event leading to the formation of OCAP in the autumn of 1990.

As an anti-poverty organization, OCAP is committed to anti-capitalist and class-based politics. It explicitly rejects traditional forms of advocacy for the poor that relies on consultation and negotiation, and undertakes direct action, spectacular political theatre, and often confrontational mobilization as its main sources of political power.

OCAP's direct action casework has become a staple of its day-to-day work: seeking relief for the unemployed, welfare recipients, tenants, immigrants, and workers being denied entitlements or pay by governments or employers. The casework tactic is an adaptation of methods from the Great Depression where unemployed worker delegations often stormed social agency offices.

While OCAP's efforts over the years have not brought about wholesale changes nor had a major influence in policy, they have often changed situations on the ground, such as forcibly occupying buildings which are converted into social housing.

Finally, *Chapter 12* by Euan Gibb examines how the Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly (GTWA) in Canada provides a space for alternative politics among the left in the country.

GTWA is a non-sectarian, anti-capitalist workers' organization explicitly organized with the goal of increasing working class capacities to fight back. It emerged out of the disappointment of a small group of activists at the weakness of the response from the left during the 2007/2008 financial crisis.

GTWA includes unionized workers, unorganized workers, workers with and without status, workers that are either retired or active, and those workers unable to work. Many are political veterans; others are younger, including organizers and activists from immigrant rights and anti-poverty community organizations. GTWA seeks to establish a network of activists that is anti-capitalist, democratic, non-sectarian, and dedicated to building, through coordinated campaign work and political education, a broad multi-racial working class movement that is militant and effective. It aims to address the problem of workers' division – a legacy and to some extent a reason for neoliberal economic and social policies – by broadening the scope of worker activism beyond organized union members and by creating a substantial organizational space on the anti-capitalist left for trade unionists and social movement activists to engage with each other in a sustained manner. At the same time, it increases focus on the local instead of far-off meetings – one of the basic weaknesses of the anti (counter) globalization movement that arose in dramatic fashion throughout the 1990s.

Merely two years since its formation, GTWA is gradually becoming a space where activists from typically sectarian organizations that, in the past, could barely been seen in the same room, are now volunteering to work together on various committees and campaigns. People are learning how to conduct political debates in a way that moves them all forward. And instead of preaching, it seems like people are willing to take the time to try and figure things out together.

GTWA also undertakes direct actions such as campaigns (e.g. Free Transit Campaign), demonstrations, and sending flying squads (i.e. groups of workers going to demonstrations and picket lines of other workers). As it puts strong emphasis on political education, GTWA organizes various educational activities such as the ongoing series of 'coffee house discussions'.

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## The Emancipatory Moments in the Initiatives

The 10 case studies represent different material expressions of how the people involved conceive of and (struggle to) implement a different social and economic arrangement as a response to their specific experiences of exploitation, injustice and oppression. To some extent, the initiatives studied can be taken as small initial steps to answer Harvey's insistent call that Lenin's famous question "what is to be done" (and why) demands an answer (Harvey, 2010: par 27, lines 1&12).

Harvey identifies seven moments within the dialectical relations which result in social change. These are:

a) technological and organizational forms of production, exchange and consumption;
b) relations to nature;
c) social relations between people;
d) mental conceptions of the world, embracing knowledge and cultural understandings and beliefs;
e) labor processes and the production of specific goods, geographies, services or affects;
f) institutional, legal and governmental arrangements; and
g) the conduct of daily life that underpins social reproduction. (ibid: par 30, lines 6-13)

Calling it a 'co-revolutionary theory' based on an understanding of Marx's account of how capitalism arose out of feudalism, Harvey explains that each of the moments "[are] internally dynamic and internally marked by tensions and contradictions (just think of mental conceptions of the world) but all of them are co-dependent and co-evolve in relation to each other" (ibid: par 31, lines 1-3). For

Harvey, although an anti-capitalist political movement can start in any of these moments, "the trick is to keep the political movement moving from one moment to another in mutually reinforcing ways" (ibid: par 33, 1, 5-6). He further argues that:

> Change arises, of course, out of an existing state of affairs and it has to harness the possibilities immanent within an existing situation…so all manner of experiments in social change in different places and at different geographical scales are both likely and potentially illuminating as ways to make (or not make) another world possible.  And in each instance it may seem as if one or other aspect of the existing situation holds the key to a different political future. But the first rule for a global anti-capitalist movement must be: never rely on the unfolding dynamics of one moment without carefully calibrating how relations with all the others are adapting and reverberating. (ibid: par 34, lines 1-2, 5-11)

Following Harvey's proposed theorization of social change, the 10 case studies could be seen in the light of the seven moments he identified. In fact, as discussed later in this book, the initiatives or struggles analyzed in the case studies cut across, albeit in varying degrees, several of these moments, indicating movement from one moment to another and the co-dependence and co-evolution of these moments.  Each of the initiatives struggles or have struggled to crack through the dominant social, economic and political relations by pushing the boundaries of what is perceived as possible in specific contexts. In varying degrees, each of these initiatives engages in one or more of the following moments:

> …respect for nature, radical egalitarianism in social relations, institutional arrangements based in some sense of common interests and common property, democratic administrative procedures (as opposed to the monetized shams that now exist), labor processes organized by the direct producers, daily life as the free exploration of new kinds of social relations and living arrangements, mental conceptions that focus on self-realization in service to others and technological and organizational innovations oriented to the pursuit of the common good rather than to supporting militarized power, surveillance and corporate greed. (Harvey, 2010: par 37, lines 3-10)

Based on the case studies presented above, we attempt to capture in Table 1 the moments that each initiative is struggling (or has struggled) to break through.

Table 1. The 'Moments' of Harvey in the Case Studies

| Moments ======== Case studies | Labour processes | Mental conceptions | Relation to nature | Social relations | Technologies & organizational forms | Daily life | Institutional & administrative structures |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Flaskô | ✓ | ✓ |  | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Caldesa | ✓ |  |  |  | ✓ |  | ✓ |
| ADS-CUT | ✓ | ✓ |  | ✓ | ✓ |  | ✓ |
| BWC-KCTU | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Inuvik | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| NHCP | ✓ | ✓ |  |  | ✓ |  | ✓ |
| FLM |  | ✓ |  | ✓ | ✓ |  | ✓ |
| Niger Delta women's movement |  | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |  | ✓ | ✓ |
| OCAP |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| GTWA |  | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |  | ✓ |

The movement through the seven moments listed by Harvey to some extent may explain our idea of the multidimensionality of potentially transformative initiatives.

> Though initially they have overt economic objectives, they eventually acquire political as well as social dimensions. The development of a political dimension (transformative consciousness) counters the tendency for complacency to set in when material gains have been met, helping to prevent any reversion to "capitalist common sense" with cessation of the struggle for social transformation. (Serrano and Xhafa, 2011: 27-28)

By pursuing several moments, each initiative and struggle embodies and creates 'new' spaces – both material and symbolic – for the contestation of the dominant ideology and the development of critical consciousness and transformative capacities.

How are the moments listed in Table 1 taken up, either intentionally or unintentionally, by the initiatives studied?

A worker-run factory like *Flaskô* has an organizational form that is oriented towards the pursuit of its workers' common interests and those of the immediate community. As a worker-run factory, the workers in Flaskô are directly involved in organizing the labour process. All phases of production and the way production is organized are collectively decided upon and undertaken by the workers themselves. There is collective decision-making on how to organize work. Job rotation is pursued to broaden workers' skills. Moreover, democratic institutional and administrative structures have been built and democratic processes have been put in place based on principles of common interest and common property, principles which promote egalitarian social relations within and outside the factory. The

shortening of working hours, in particular, has given workers the chance to spend more time with their families, to develop their talents, pursue further education, and attend various activities (sport, political and community). Also, Flaskô organized and supported a workers' village which gives shelter not only to its workers but also to homeless people in the region. It supports other factory occupations and the struggles of other movements. All these actions and relations have had an impact on the daily life of workers and other people Flaskô engages with, providing them spaces for gradually developing new mental conceptions that focus on service to others and the common good.

In contrast, although the *Caldesa* workers were able to transform a privately-owned factory into a worker-controlled and run factory, democratic structures and processes that were put in place earlier were later on supplanted by the self-perpetuating entrenched leadership. In some ways, this entrenched leadership has stymied the pursuit by Caldesa of other initiatives or moments that could have deepened the transformative potential of the worker-run factory.

The establishment of *ADS* as a structure within the CUT-Brazil may be considered as an organizational innovation towards CUT's vision of an alternative economy based on values of democracy and solidarity. Thus, the establishment of ADS in a way reflects an emerging new mental conception or realization within CUT of the need to actively support the development of solidarity economy as an alternative to the capitalist ways of organizing economy. By organizing and supporting worker-run factory cooperatives and other grassroots-oriented socio-economic ventures through the provision of organizational, technical and financial resources, as well as trading and marketing support, ADS-CUT engages, albeit indirectly, in several transformative moments: promoting labour processes organized by the direct producers themselves; developing egalitarian social relations through the promotion of cooperative principles and values; and promoting democratic institutional and administrative structures based on common interests and common property, principles that are at the core of solidarity economy. Moreover, the establishment of cooperative complexes and the task of ensuring their sustainability, autonomy and capacity for endogenous innovations suggest that ADS is likewise into exploring the development of alternative organizational forms that are oriented towards the common good. Finally, as economic relations underpin people's daily lives, the active promotion and development of solidarity economy by ADS may strongly impact on the conduct of daily life of its beneficiaries, in terms of the development of new types of social relations based on solidarity and equality.

Like CUT-Brazil, albeit in a more direct way, KCTU established *BWC* as a way of building an alternative economic system through solidarity with diverse groups in the labour movement, and of challenging the price-setting and distributional function of the market by directly sourcing food products from local peasant organizations. BWC, in a way, mirrors KCTU's desire to engage

in developing new mental conceptions based on solidarity and service to others, at least among its members and their families. The BWC project suggests that KCTU's is consciously 'experimenting' on the development of new labour processes directly organized by producers, new organizational forms of production, exchange and consumption (directly sourcing from local producers and promoting consumption of locally-produced food). By focusing on the direct sourcing of food and local consumption, BWC-KCTU hopes to contribute to environmental protection. Through BWC, KCTU aims to help in the building of local communities by strengthening relationships between trade union members, their families, and other people in the region, with the hope of eventually building new social relations and conducting daily life based on solidarity and equality.

*Inuvik's* greenhouse garden represents an alternative way of food production and social reproduction which is community-based and not-for-profit. To some extent, the Inuvik initiative cuts across several moments: daily life in terms of new kinds of social relations, labour processes organized directly by producers; egalitarian social relations, and technological and organizational innovations oriented towards the common good.

There are institutional and administrative structures in Inuvik that uphold democratic processes, i.e. general assembly, and common interests, i.e. family plots and community organizations' plots. By producing affordable, healthy, locally-produced food through community gardening, Inuvik encourages environmental awareness and respect for nature. Inuvik's initiative in which people contribute with voluntary work to the development of their community and economy reflects to some extent people's new mental conceptions of organizing various aspects of their lives from food production to social relations. Inuvik has been able to establish an ongoing relationship with the Aurora College for its technical needs.

*NHCP-NOVADECI* represents an organizational innovation which extends beyond the traditional functions of cooperatives by providing health services to its members many of whom are informal workers excluded from the formal health care system (reflecting new mental conceptions). By self-organizing the provision of health care services to its members and the immediate community, NOVADECI-NHCP takes up the challenge of directly organizing the labour processes involved in the provision of this critical public good. As a cooperative, NHCP-NOVADECI, similarly to BWC-KCTU and Inuvik, is an organizational form oriented towards the common good of its members and the immediate community. It is based on common property (members are owners of the cooperative), and common interests are pursued through the principle of one-person-one vote (regardless of share capital) in the General Assembly. Thus, like BWC-KCTU and Inuvik, NHCP-NOVADECI tries to promote egalitarian social relations. NHCP's services have a direct impact on the daily life (social reproduction) of its members. New social relations with the community are also being built based on solidarity by extending

health care services to non-members. The cooperative also tries to influence policy at the national level by maintaining close ties with the National Confederation of Cooperatives (NATTCO), which has representation as a party-list in the Philippine parliament.

*FLM* is an organizational innovation of homeless people's movement which aims to draw attention of the government and the wider public to the struggle of homeless through direct occupation of abandoned building in cities. Linking their situation to broader systemic issues of exclusions and poverty and struggling with other movements; building egalitarian social relations among the oppressed and excluded; expressing environmental concerns (living in the cities where most of them work reduces the use of fossil fuel generated transportation); fighting for their right to quality life, i.e. shorter travel time to and from work affords more time for non-work activities such as schooling, cultural activities, and family (social reproduction and conduct of daily life based on new kinds of social relations); and building housing collectives in occupied buildings (egalitarian living arrangements) – all affect and shape the mental conceptions of the FLM members.

The *2002 women's resistance in the Niger Delta* strongly expresses women's concern for nature as they were able to link their abject poverty to the activities of big oil companies and the corollary despoliation of nature as a result of the companies' economic activities. In their 'gendered, ethnicized class struggle,' women rose up against state power, multinationals and the male folk and patriarchal traditions by building egalitarian social relations to forge unity among women across ethnic divisions. In the process of their all-women struggle, they were able to build innovative organizational forms by using traditional networks of women in the communities, and organizing and networking across ethnic barriers to shut down sophisticated facilities despite lack of technical expertise. More importantly, they have come to realize that their role in daily life is not only confined to family responsibilities, but extends to the fight for the common good of the community as well. Through their sit-in struggles, women were able to develop new mental conceptions of their role and power in society, winning respect and entrenching self-confidence. They were able to transform themselves from a rather politically marginal, traditionally ascribed women's associative collective to a power for effecting change. Their struggles consequently resulted in the granting of some concessions from the state-oil complex.

Like many of the initiatives, *OCAP's* case touches upon several of the moments as well. While it builds up the capacity of its members to act collectively, OCAP has helped to build solidarity among various excluded and oppressed groups – the poor, homeless, migrant, First Nations people and those impacted by austerity measures – by demonstrating the ways their issues are related and by organizing them as a class. This, in a way, is OCAP's attempt to build social relations based on solidarity and equality. OCAP's direct action casework is not limited to enforcing

the law; it often attempts to alter the behavior and social norms that informally keep precarious and poor persons marginalized. This is done through the participation of not only the aggrieved person but also of other people in direct action casework initiatives. Direct action casework, thus, represents an organizational strategy, oriented towards the common interests and common good of the poor comprising OCAP's membership. Through OCAP's struggles, people's resistance is seen not only as struggles for the control of the production of wealth and resources, but also for the control of their social reproduction. This, to some extent, impacts the way the poor conduct their daily life. By standing up to persons and institutions of power, groups that were seen as voiceless and powerless (migrants, First Nations, racialized groups, homeless etc.) develop new mental conceptions of the possibilities they have when they are willing to act collectively in solidarity with people in need.

Finally, in the context of a highly fragmented left in Canada, the *GTWA* case touches mainly on the moment of building social relations based on common interests and solidarity. In GTWA, activists from various left and progressive organizations volunteer their time and energy in creating a substantial organizational space for the anti-capitalist left to engage with one another in a sustained manner, and to "create a layer of politics beyond coalition politics"[1]. Institutional and administrative structures that are non-hierarchical, such as the coordinating committee and various other committees, are put up based on common interests and consensus-based decision-making. The various campaigns and activities of GTWA gradually seek to develop non-sectarian spaces where activists, many of whom for many years opted not to work together, learn to do so, thereby gradually facilitating self-realization among the left of the need to nurture a new mental conception that is focused on solidarity and the common good (service to others). The GTWA sees this as key to the collective pursuit of a common vision of social transformation.

Overall, our analysis on how the moments identified by Harvey are being pursued or taken up, either intentionally or unintentionally, by the initiatives we studied, indicate that these moments overlap – the pursuit of one opens up possibilities or spaces for the pursuit of the others. This is expected as Harvey stresses that these moments are co-dependent and co-evolving. In short, they mutually reinforce each other. What really counts, argues Harvey, "is the dialectical motion across the moments", although there may be "uneven development in that motion" (Harvey, 2010: par 49, lines 6-8). Each of these moments certainly offer spaces and are actually in themselves spaces for critical consciousness and transformative capacities to develop and flourish. The movement from one moment to another in mutually reinforcing ways and the deepening of engagement in each of these moments may likewise hold the key to the sustainability or continuity of an initiative.

## Note

[1] Sam Gindin interview, 2011 (Chapter 12).

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# Critical Consciousness, Transformative Capacities and Emancipatory Elements: Indicators, Critical Factors and Lessons and Insights

# 2

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## Consciousness and Consciousness Transformation

Understanding consciousness and processes of consciousness transformation has formed an important part of the work around social change. In *A Contribution to the Theory of Political Economy* (1859), Marx argues: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness." As people change their circumstances, they also transform themselves. This is the concept of revolutionary practice. Marx (1845: par 4) sees it as "the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change." Echoing Marx, Harnecker stresses that "it is only through the process of experimentation undertaken by the masses that the move is made from the economic to the political through *circumstances and people themselves being changed simultaneously*. It is in this revolutionary practice that this process of the development of consciousness becomes entrenched" (Harnecker, 2007: 59).

Gramsci uses the term *common sense* to describe the general perception that every human being carries about the world. The concept is rather broad and often "confused and contradictory, containing ideas absorbed from a variety of sources, which tend to make and accept inequality and oppression as natural and unchangeable" (Simon, 1991: 26). But *common sense* for Gramsci also contains positive elements such as people's practical activity and their resistance to oppression, making it a space in which the dominant ideology is not only constructed but also contested.

Following Marx and Gramsci, Freire talks of conscientization or critical consciousness, "as the ability to analyze, problematize (pose questions), and affect

the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural realities that shape our lives" (Pepi, 2004: par 2, lines 2-3). In the same vein, Freire maintains that "we all inherit beliefs, values, and thus ideologies that need to be critically understood and transformed if necessary" (ibid: par 2, lines 6-7). For such transformation to happen, Freire suggests praxis and dialogue: praxis referring "to the ongoing relationship between theoretical understanding and critique of society and action that seeks to transform individuals and their environments" (Pepi, 2004: par 2, lines 8-10). Pepi points to Freire's argument that "people cannot change a given situation simply through awareness or the best of intentions, or through unguided action" but "we, as active subjects, must continuously move from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to a new action" (Ibid: par 2, lines 10-13).

Gramsci's conceptualization of *common sense* reverberates in Cohen and Moody's argument on the essentially incoherent and contradictory nature of workers' consciousness with "its many-stranded character which both resists and admits the potential of a wider conceptualization of existing socio-economic structures" (1998: 118). They emphasize economistic' struggles as the central element in the development of a more explicit class consciousness and the potential of deeper politicization. In this regard, they argue that the Marxist conception of 'class for itself' "refers to a *transitional* dynamic, a *pull* through the materially-based necessity of basic struggles for what are *objectively* class interests towards the beginnings of a conscious, *subjective* awareness of class identity" (ibid: 107).

Cohen and Moody argue that a 'dull compulsion' to accept the apparently inevitable among workers is impermanent, unstable and fragile, because 'actually existing' working-class consciousness, "rather than active 'legitimisation' of the status quo", is "a more complex mix; one characterized less by undifferentiated ideological domination than by inconsistency, contradiction, and lack of information" (ibid: 109). This contradictory nature of workers' consciousness "allows a corresponding potential for struggle and subversion of the dominant ideology" (ibid: 110).

According to Dale Forbes, National Bargaining Officer of the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU), "critical consciousness is an ability to identify contradictory elements within a whole and apply those in deconstructing and reconstructing a new whole. Transformative capacity represents the power of certain social classes at certain historical points to change the social and material world, i.e. to affect a change in the mode of production".[1]

Some of our case study writers have also defined critical consciousness and transformative capacities. In his case study on the 2002 women's resistance in the Niger Delta, Baba Aye explains:

> Critical consciousness comprises two intertwined strands. On the one hand,
> it entails oppressed people, *from their lived experiences*, grasping the *reality*
> behind the state of their subjugation, within the power relations that they are

part of, thus identifying the representative personages, structures, mechanisms and processes that effect their domination. On the other hand, it equally involves their awakening to the need to seize their fate in their hands towards transforming their lives and with it society itself. Transformative capacities relate to their ability for praxis in relation to critical consciousness.

In their case study on OCAP, Rob Butz and Laura Roberts explain that critical consciousness involves rearticulating and reframing economic and colonial violence that directly affect a participant as 1) systemic, 2) related to other issues/ groups, and 3) something that can be overcome with co-operative struggle. Among OCAP participants, the development of a 'critical consciousness' is based less on becoming 'aware' of problems they experience, and more on  developing individual willingness and collective capacity to act on them.

In this book, we regard critical consciousness as the ability to understand and analyze the systemic nature of the fundamental (as well as day-to-day) problems confronting people and society under capitalism (poverty, inequality, injustice, oppression, deprivation, exclusion and fragmentation), the interconnectedness of various struggles, and the individual willingness of people to act collectively to change their present circumstances and in the process affecting changes in society as a whole. Transformative capacities are the material and concrete expressions of critical consciousness in terms of 'new' abilities and actions that seek to transform 'realities' and sustain the process of transformation. Transformative capacities may well be possessed by an organization or an initiative in its totality or by an individual.

Transformative capacities carry with them a bundle of critical skills which people acquire and develop in the course of their struggle. Some of these are: organizing, mobilizing, educating, critical analysis, debating, mounting campaigns, lobbying, doing research, managing enterprises in a democratic way (including all skills involved in production, exchange and distribution), socially useful work skills, networking and negotiation, community-building, cooperating across political differences, and many more. What is important is that critical consciousness is embodied in these skills.

We conceptualize critical consciousness and transformative capacities as "co-dependent and co-evolving in relation to each other" in the same manner that Harvey characterizes the relation between and among the seven moments (Harvey, 2010: par 31, line 2&3).

## Identifying Critical Consciousness and Transformative Capacities in the Initiatives

As we underlined earlier, the initiatives presented and analyzed in our case studies provide spaces, albeit in varying degrees, for the gradual development of critical consciousness and transformative capacities. Several indicators of the emergence of critical consciousness and transformative capacities could be traced from the case studies.

In *Flaskô*, critical consciousness and transformative capacities are demonstrated by:

- The factory occupation by the workers themselves and their struggle to run the factory despite many challenges;
- Workers' rejection of private property and capitalist laws inside and outside the factory;
- Workers' acknowledgment that they should run the factory politically and the importance of organization and sustained political mobilization inside and outside the factory (mobilization, petitions and demonstrations);
- The building of democratic structures and running the factory democratically;
- Shortening work-time not only to hire more workers but also to allow more time for family, personal development and for community activities, reflecting a new mental conception of life;
- Broadening skills through on-the-job acquisition and through peer mentoring;
- Developing strong bonds of solidarity among workers in the factory and others outside the factory;
- The workers' active involvement in other factory occupation initiatives; and
- The active and sustained mutual support between Flaskô workers and the community and social movements.

In *Caldesa,* which we regard here as a case of what not to do, the continued struggle of the workers – the three-months strike and the eventual worker takeover of the factory – despite violent union repression and persecution, indicates a strong measure of the initial commitment of the workers involved to follow an alternative consciousness, shaped by their desire to improve their conditions. Although it developed into something corrupt and inept, it began very much as an economic and social struggle against the capitalist class and political repression.

The experience in Caldesa provides important lessons in terms of identifying what might have impeded the development of critical consciousness and transformative capacities. These may include:

- The specificities of the region and its horrifically violent past;
- The rigid segmentation of roles and authority within the firm which completely subverted democratic mechanisms; and
- The lack of democracy as evidenced by the control of the 'union directive elite' which prevented the cultivation of alternative discourses within the firm and the broader community.

Thus in the case of Caldesa, the political landscape has largely influenced the trajectory of the initiative by narrowing the space for the development of critical consciousness and transformative capacities. At the same time, several internal dynamics and processes, such as those listed above reinforced the limiting impact of the political landscape.

In *ADS-CUT*, strands of critical consciousness and transformative capacities are demonstrated by:

- The establishment of ADS by CUT as a reflection of the latter's critique of the neoliberal model of economic development and as a way of contributing to building an alternative economy based on democracy and solidarity;
- Challenging capitalist relations by directly engaging in the establishment and strengthening of solidarity economy initiatives;
- Recognizing and experiencing the viability of various forms of solidarity economy as alternative ways of arranging production and social relations; and
- Promoting the development of the solidarity economy sector (including worker-run factory cooperatives) by providing organizational, technical, financial intermediation, trading and marketing support.

In *BWC-KCTU*, manifestations of critical consciousness and transformative capacities are reflected by:

- The creation of a workers' cooperative movement as a way of building an alternative society to that of neoliberal globalization, and on alternative economic system based on the principle of solidarity with diverse groups in the labour movement;
- Building a sense of local community by strengthening relationships between trade union members, their families, and other people in the region;
- Challenging the price-setting and distribution function of the market by directly sourcing food products from local peasant organizations; and
- Providing a direct and an alternative source of affordable, healthy, and locally-produced food.

In *Inuvik*, critical consciousness and transformative capacities are captured by:

- The establishment of the greenhouse as an alternative, community-based, not-for-profit way of food production and social reproduction which provides a space for a different conceptualization of 'work'; an initiative in which people who are not formally engaged in 'paid work' are still contributing to the development of their community and economy. Thus, the greenhouse allows community members to re-imagine better and more equitable ways of arranging their social lives and the division of labour;
- Ensuring the supply of affordable, healthy, locally-produced food through community gardening and at the same time encouraging environmental awareness and respect for nature; and
- The recognition of the possibility of being an active participant in a community-based food production initiative.

In *NHCP-NOVADECI*, the following may indicate some semblance of critical consciousness and transformative capacities:

- The realization that community-based, self-help collective schemes like a cooperative of informal workers can go beyond traditionally-ascribed functions and push forth more ambitious programs like health care and health insurance originally seen as the purview of private business;
- The recognition that cooperatives are not just for short-term economic benefits but that they are there for greater social roles (social value added), i.e. to provide health care service for those excluded from formal health care programs;
- Building solidarity with the community by extending health care services and programs to non-members; and
- Members' ability to participate in decision-making to shape policies and come up with desired programs.

In *FLM*, critical consciousness and transformative capacities are demonstrated by:

- The poor's recognition of the linkage between their inability to have decent dwelling and the anti-poor policies of the government;
- Linking the struggle for the right to the city with environmental concerns (as there would be less use of transportation and consequently less pollution);
- Linking their struggle for the right to live in the city with quality of life issues (i.e. shorter travel time to and from work, more time for non-work activities such as schooling, cultural activities, and family);

- Reclaiming the right of poor people to the city through direct struggle and action: participation in organized occupations, tent or camp-out protests (they put up tents in front of public buildings), etc.;
- Internalization of the cause of their struggle as many of the poor continue to be involved in the struggle even after they attain their own home;
- The capacity to renovate, rehabilitate, run and maintain an occupied building; and
- The homeless' recognition that their struggle is linked to the struggle of other groups (women's struggle, health struggle etc.) and that social transformation is possible only through a common struggle.

In the *2002 women's resistance in Niger Delta*, several elements of the emergence of critical consciousness and transformative capacities have been noted:

- The identification by women of the linkages between the pauperization of the community and the endangerment of their health, and the despoliation of the environment;
- The identification of the intertwined relations between the violation of nature and the exploration activities of Big Oil;
- The realization that MNOCs' investments in their community have not translated into enhanced employment or better livelihood for the populations;
- The realization of the need for struggle to turn things around;
- The recognition of the importance for unity of struggle considering the commonality of their fates, irrespective of ethnic differences;
- The realization of the might of their power through the earlier successes of their resistance;
- The commitment to die if necessary, in defiance of the suppression of their earlier upsurge;
- The transformation of women from a rather politically marginal, traditionally ascribed women's associative collective to a power for affecting change;
- Organizing and networking across ethnic barriers to shut down sophisticated facilities despite the lack of technical expertise, consequently affecting the granting of some concessions from the state-oil complex;
- Acquiring technical skills from networking with progressive NGOs; and
- Winning respect and entrenching self-confidence.

In *OCAP*, many of the people OCAP organizes and works with are very aware of the causes of their dire situation. Many migrants come from a history of struggle and organizing in their country of origin. Hence for OCAP the main objective is not so much raising critical consciousness, as it is to create a space for people to discuss their issues and to develop individual willingness and capacities to

act collectively. Some of the indicators of the development of critical consciousness and transformative capacities are expressed in:

- The individual and collective ability to resist disciplinary dimensions related to poverty;
- Developing leadership and organizing capacities of members has made them better equipped to fight for their rights and demands, and in many cases mobilize their communities;
- Linking disruptive actions to broader systemic issues in such a way that they do not merely become (or remain) protests aimed at filling in for the services left behind by the State's neoliberal's withdrawal;
- The growth of OCAP, albeit slow, into new communities and the eager participation of people between struggles indicates the popularity of resistance that works through solidarity and direct action;
- The courage to face authority and institutions that appear mysterious or impenetrable overcomes intimidation and fear, and ensures that people can challenge them altogether and build a movement that fundamentally challenges the existing systemic arrangement;
- The ability to mitigate the outcome of state actions and affect state agencies at the point where they exercise power;
- The ability to undertake innovative forms of protest which make visible the role of poverty and to articulate systemic relations between issues;
- The ability to link geographically and emotionally the dispersed elements of the working class;
- The ability to broaden the struggle to incorporate newcomers of colour and First Nations people against racism and colonial oppression;
- The understanding of the importance of building a meaningful, lasting solidarity relationship rather than just a moment of the convergence of interests; and
- Engaging and joining other's struggles to broaden collective capacity among other segments of the poor and the working class.

In *GTWA*, critical consciousness and transformative capacities are largely reflected in the avowed goal of addressing the problem of workers' division – a legacy and, to some extent, a reason for neoliberal economic and social policies – by creating a substantial organizational space on the anti-capitalist left for trade unionists and social movement activists to engage with each other in a sustained manner. In concrete terms:

- People are learning how to conduct political debates in a way that moves them all forward;
- Groups and individuals that would not previously work together are now involved in ongoing joint political/organizing work;

- Workers in struggle (on strike/locked out) have increasingly recognized that GTWA can be relied upon to intervene at the grassroots level in neighbourhoods, on picket lines/demonstrations and in available political forums;
- The fact that the participation of historically divisive groups has been sustained despite differences, is an indicator that many on the left recognize the need to work together and build something greater than any of the groups can do individually;
- Demonstrations and picket lines have become more organized;
- The GTWA has been able to intervene at official public consultations (e.g. free transit campaign);
- Inter-linkages of community activists and trade union activists have deepened; and
- The capacity of activists to do neighborhood organizing has increased.

Table 1 summarizes the indicators of critical consciousness and transformative capacity in the initiatives studied.

Table 1: Indicators of Critical Consciousness and Transformative Capacities

| Indicators | Initiatives |
|---|---|
| Rejection of private property: factory/building occupation and workers running the factory/buildings | Flaskô, FLM, Caldesa |
| Building democratic structures and running the organization democratically: grassroots capacity to participate in decision-making | Flaskô, BWC-KCTU, Inuvik, NHCP-NOVADECI, FLM, OCAP, GTWA, 2002 Niger Delta women's resistance |
| Different conceptualization of work: shortened work-time, voluntary work for the community | Flaskô, Inuvik |
| Building an alternative economy based on democracy and solidarity: solidarity economy as an alternative way of arranging production and social relations; building a sense of local community | Flaskô , ADS-CUT, BWC-KCTU, Inuvik Community Garden, NHCP-NOVADECI |
| Linking multiple issues related to oppression, exclusion and injustice; connecting and supporting other struggles of workers, the community, and social movements | Flaskô, FLM, OCAP, 2002 Niger Delta women's resistance, GTWA |
| Challenging the market: non-market dictated pricing system, direct sourcing, focus on local production | ADS-CUT, BWC-KCTU, Inuvik, NHCP-NOVADECI |
| Encouraging environmental awareness and respect for nature | Inuvik, BWC-KCTU, 2002 Niger Delta women's resistance |
| Reclaiming the right to the city; challenging gentrification | FLM |
| Overcoming fragmentation and sectarianism among the left | GTWA |

## Critical Factors to the Development and Sustainability of Critical Consciousness and Transformative Capacities

In an earlier paper, we argued that:

> Multiple factors are likely to be responsible for particular emancipatory outcomes in a given place, even among similar forms of economic solidarity…; similarly, multiple factors may constrain the economic, political and social outcomes of these initiatives. The more significant of these factors include the role of the state and the existence of political opportunities for the development of alternative economic organizations; the multidimensionality of an initiative and its breadth of inclusiveness; the existence or absence of mutual support networks (local, national and international); and the degree to which participatory democracy is exercised. (Serrano and Xhafa, 2011: 28)

In our case studies, we attempted to explore some of the key factors and events that might have influenced, either positively or negatively, the development of critical consciousness and transformative capacities and what we perceive as the overall trajectory of each initiative. We identified more than what we earlier noted.

### *The political-economic landscape*

In all of the case studies, the politico-economic landscape, particularly the state and its policies, has influenced, in varying degrees, the development of critical consciousness and transformative capacities and the overall state (at the time of writing) of the initiatives. However, the political-economic landscape's influence is rather mixed and contradictory – certain aspects may have a positive effect; and other aspects may have a negative effect even on the same initiative.

In *Flaskô*, the rise to a position of political leadership of the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil inspired, to a great degree, the workers to take over a bankrupt factory. While the general climate of economic uncertainty and the lack of government support (e.g. constant threats from state authorities of taking over the factory, auctioning its assets, power cuts, lack of access to credit, etc.) to worker-run factories may have impeded the progress of Flaskô, at the same time these conditions may have deepened the workers' understanding of the systemic nature of their problems (a major element of critical consciousness), consequently fueling their resolve to pursue their initiative. This hostile landscape prompted workers to become more innovative and inclusive in their strategies, as discussed in the case

study, and in the process they have developed and acquired deeper skills that build up transformative capacities.

However, in the case of *Caldesa*, the political economic landscape has largely influenced the apparent failure of the worker-run factory. The perpetual regional economic crisis of the zone in question (Puerto Nare) and a general climate of fear and persecution of left-leaning trade unionists and activists have constrained whatever kernel of critical consciousness and transformative capacities that might had been flourishing at the time of the initial struggles of the workers.

In *ADS-CUT*, the dire economic situation in Brazil during the 1990s was a major push factor for CUT to establish ADS as a way of contributing to building an alternative economy based on democracy and solidarity. The coming to power of Lula and his policies of promoting the development of the solidarity economy sector has given further impetus to this initiative. Nonetheless, ADS and the solidarity economy sector in general continue to face several problems, such as the lack of credit support schemes tailored to the sector's needs and specificities, and the lack of state infrastructure for the marketing and distribution of products and services of the sector. Like Flaskô, however, these limitations in a way strengthened the determination of CUT to seriously challenge capitalist relations by continuing to experiment on and enact alternative ways of creating jobs and of struggling for another model of development. Also, these limitations somehow compelled ADS to be more creative in their strategies, as discussed later in this book.

Similarly, in *BWC-KCTU* the neoliberal offensive that has alienated workers from their work and from their trade unions, and fragmented family and social relations, provided the backdrop for KCTU to look beyond its traditional union functions thus establishing a workers' cooperative with the goal of building an alternative economic system through solidarity with a diverse set of groups in the labour movement. Cognizant of the need to build and strengthen the labour movement to fend off the neoliberal attack, BWC is seen as a vehicle to build solidarity between workers and peasants through direct interaction, making common space for people in the community for a better understanding of the labour movement.

In *NHCP-NOVADECI*, the exclusion of informal workers from any formal health care system and the exorbitantly priced private health care system made people organize and run their own health care program which subsequently was made available to the community.

In *FLM*, the neoliberal model of urbanization based on exclusion (making the poor 'invisible') gave rise to the homeless organizing themselves into local autonomous movements. An understanding of the systemic nature of the housing problem – government policies which give low priority to the housing needs of the poor as well bureaucratic and legal challenges which favor property owners – has sustained their struggle for housing by developing new strategies. While setbacks

outnumber gains, the homeless people's direct action of occupying buildings is a reflection of their confidence that they themselves could affect changes in their concrete circumstances.

In the *2002 women's resistance in the Niger Delta*, a confluence of factors in the political economy in Nigeria and big oil industry has both fueled and quelled women's resistance as an expression of critical consciousness. The transformative resistance of women was largely a response to the state-Big Oil complex coercion and the traditions of patriarchy that relegated women, as a force for change in the region, to the sidelines.

At the same time, state-directed violence that was often accompanied by rape and the plundering of the homes of activists, in combination with promised concessions from MNOCs, suppressed the momentum of the resistance. Moreover, the rise of 'ethnic militias' led by the youth, a result of the use of brute force by the state in collaboration with MNOCs as a response to the non-violent popular struggle of peoples in the Niger Delta in the 1980s and in the mid-1990s, saw women being caught in the crossfire. The consequence was, predictably, the disempowering of the women's movement.

In *OCAP*, the contradictory influence of the political economy of poverty in Ontario on the trajectory of the movement is also evident. The retrenchment of the welfare state and the increasing inequality throughout the 1980s, and the realization that the state's austerity agenda is there for the long haul were at the root of the emergence and consolidation of OCAP. The attack against the poor from all fronts has made the movement more aware of the systemic link of poverty to class warfare, urban neoliberalism and colonialism and hence the need to organize and link various struggles to overcome isolation, cynicism and despair. Linking struggles has broadened collective capacity and has been crucial for the growth of the organization. However, neoliberalization, which literally attacks the bodies of people who resist, also has a way of sustaining OCAP's work and making the numbers of allies grow.

Finally, the creation of *GTWA* was largely a response to the problem of workers' division – a legacy and, to some extent, a reason for neoliberal economic and social policies. The continuing and intensifying neoliberal attack on workers and the poor and their organizations has pushed various historically divided groups in the left to come and work together to build a broad, multi-racial, anti-capitalist, democratic, and non-sectarian working class movement.

## Structures and processes of democratic participation

In all the initiatives, democratic structures and other spaces were or have been put in place to allow for the fullest direct participation of all the people involved.

Democratic processes were or have been pursued in varying depths in nine of the cases.

The most common structure or space through which direct participation is exercised is the general assembly which is comprised of all the members of the organization or the participants of an initiative. This structure or its variants (i.e. it may be called a workers' assembly, general membership meeting, women's collectives, etc.) is found in Flaskô, Caldesa, the 2002 Niger Delta's women's resistance, in each of the 13 local autonomous movements comprising FLM, GTWA, Inuvik, NHCP-NOVADECI, and BWC-KCTU. ADS-CUT is not a representative organization; it functions as CUT's arm in the solidarity economy sector. It does have, however, an executive body composed of CUT affiliates representing the union's different sectors, i.e. industry, services, family agriculture, etc. The executive body along with a general coordinator and an administrative-financial coordinator comprise the directors of ADS. Meanwhile, anyone from each of FLM's local autonomous organizations who is interested in joining FLM's regional coordination may do so; there is no specific election for this body. For FLM, this is the best way to involve those who are most committed.

As the highest decision-making body, the general (membership) assembly/ meetings are convened regularly: monthly or more often as the need arises (Flaskô), or annually (BWC-KCTU, NHCP, Inuvik), or at least twice a year (GTWA).

In the case of *OCAP*, its 'base' membership is made up of generally poor or homeless persons and allies who are active in planning OCAP's actions and campaigns. Membership in OCAP is informal, with the strength of one's membership determined by participation. As of 2005, OCAP had about 200-300 base membership. This number fluctuates depending on OCAP's actions and campaigns. The bi-weekly general meeting of the organization is open to all members. In this meeting, majority-type votes are taken in a participatory, democratic and effective manner Time is always made for lengthy and vigorous debate and all sides are heard regardless of perspective or ideological bent. Debate is regularly carried over several meetings where further discussion is required. Ideological fetishes are left at the door and meetings generally maintain a focus on developing effective, winning strategies and tactics. OCAP also convenes an annual general meeting (AGM) where all major policy and strategy decisions are set by the general membership. The AGM also elects a staff of typically five people: three organizers, one administrator and one case worker.

The *2002 women's resistance in the Niger Delta* followed the traditional women's collective where women in each community held meetings regularly: weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. At the height of the 2002 women's struggles (i.e. sit-ins), women met every day; the opinions of those who were not able to come to the meetings were always sought. Decisions in these meetings were reached by consensus. During the planning stage for the sit-ins, the women kept the meetings

to themselves as a matter of strategy given their past experiences of self-serving men colluding with MNOCs. As their struggle progressed and deepened, they kept the lines of communication open with elderly men and youth, although they refused to budge without concrete responses to their demands.

The traditional structure of regular all-women meetings during the planning stages, involving virtually all the women, without males in the community and the management of the MNOCs becoming aware during the planning stages, not only provided the space for women to discover and develop their various capacities at a much earlier stage, but distilled out 'natural leaders' as well. This was a case of pre-capitalist structures as means for activating and deepening anti-capitalist activities with possibilities for post-capitalist ends.

In the case of Caldesa, although the workers' assembly is convened annually to elect the board of directors, in the first nine years of the worker-run factory's existence, the board has not changed at all. This is coupled with a suspicious tendency indicating a conflict of interest as directors also hold managerial and administrative roles. In short, participative democracy was more rhetoric than substantive. Caldesa's case is a concrete example that having structures purportedly to encourage democratic participation is not enough. Having people experience democratic processes matters more.

There are other structures or spaces in the initiatives that try to embed more radical forms of democratic processes. In *Flaskô*, a Workers' Council (WC) elected by the general assembly (and in which every section and department of the factory is represented) meets weekly to discuss organizational matters and implement the decisions taken by the assembly. The WC delegates the general, commercial, administrative and production coordination to a worker or a group of workers who have the relevant skills. In a way, there is an absence of organizational hierarchies, as an open system of communication is in place and there is direct participation of workers in production and decision making. The worker responsible for the technical aspect of production planning and management consults and provides relevant information in a way that is understandable to co-workers. In this way, workers not only build their capacity in production but they also deepen their sense of ownership of the initiative.

In the *Inuvik* case, a board of directors elected by the general assembly (GA) meets monthly and every two weeks in the growing season. All members get to discuss and vote on important issues at monthly meetings and at the GA. Institutional representatives (i.e. partners) can attend meetings but are not eligible to vote. Also, members form their own committees and organize their own events. Through these processes, members' full control is ensured.

Similarly, the GA elects the board of directors in the *NHCP* case. A management team and the Board committees implement the plans agreed upon in the GA meetings and oversee the day-to-day operations of NHCP among others.

As a cooperative, each member, regardless of the amount of shares subscribed, gets one vote in the GA. The cooperative also makes use of surveys to determine the needs and proposals of members. NHCP members are regularly informed about new services, upgrading of facilities, additional program costs or new policies or regulations. These are done via the distribution of newsletters, flyers and postings on bulletin boards and recently the installation of an internet website where members could interact and post their opinions. Orientation seminars and refresher courses are also given regularly to NHCP members.

Like the Inuvik and the NHCP initiatives, the GA of *BWC-KCTU* elects a 16-member governing body for a one-year term. The GA meets once a year. All members enjoy equal rights independent of their monetary contribution to the cooperative.

In the case of *GTWA*, the assembly agreed on the principle of individual membership which allowed a much larger group of volunteers to commit to the assembly. Non-hierarchical structures in the form of permanent committees (coordinating committee, membership/finance/outreach committee, political development and education committee, international solidarity committee, cultural committee, labour caucus) and ad hoc committees (Free and Accessible Transit campaign, G20 solidarity committee) mostly peopled by volunteers are preferred.

The goals and actual work of GTWA committees are decided upon and prioritized by the active members of the committees themselves. Anyone is welcome to volunteer on any of the committees.

The basic founding premise of the assembly has been that no single individual has a monopoly recipe for a democratic participative model that involves and engages membership and the broader community. Democratic procedures for election to the coordinating committee, policies in discrimination and harassment, participation, voting and disruption policies and finally, a statement of principles were adopted by the broad assembly aimed at guiding the work of the coordinating committee.

Simple majority rules voting procedures were ruled out. These are found to be too alienating and divisive. Genuine attempts to deal with political differences were agreed upon. Any time a vote is close, it is considered to be suspended, not adopted and to be revisited.

Clear policies on disruption were articulated, as this was viewed as a necessary addition due to the appeal of disruption to historic sectarian actors committed to sabotage a meeting or even an organization. Policies adopted were an attempt to confront and prevent previous mistakes and address organizational weaknesses. The disruption policy has been used on a couple of occasions where it has proven to be highly effective. By initiating an open process that attempts to deal

with the reasons underlying disruption, nobody is simply 'kicked out'. Therefore, good faith is preserved and meetings can quickly resume and progress continues.

GTWA tries to nurture a culture of open debate – long abandoned by many in the left – by engaging in serious, rigorous debates around campaigns and other important issues. Recently, GTWA conducted an open-ended telephone survey among its members in order to get their views about the assembly's strong points, new areas to focus on, as well as existing practices that require further improvement and/or that need to be done differently.  The survey was a genuine attempt to provoke and shape a form of self-critical organizational introspection.

In the case of the secondary organizations or formations: ADS, FLM and OCAP, there are processes that seek to elicit as much direct participation as possible from primarily grassroots organizations, formations or movements.

*ADS's* relation with the cooperatives is built through the demands of the labour movement of CUT. These demands are usually presented by a group of workers that contact local structures of CUT to get some support or help on how to get better organized or how to create a cooperative. The idea is to build a solution with the local people and ADS collectively. Although decisions are taken principally by the executive body, mainly the coordinators, the strategic planning of ADS is organized with the national body of ADS and also with the regional actors involved in ADS.

*FLM's* non-hierarchical regional coordination groups, which are populated by people from the community-based local movements, organize meetings every week to analyze the political, economic and social scenario. Each year, on the first and second month, FLM plans and organizes their struggle calendar.

In *OCAP*, organizers and long-term participants facilitate biweekly meetings in which their strategy is discussed. Votes are taken on final decisions, but in all other respects regard is given to consensus-based decision making (all are given opportunities to participate). To some extent, democratic participation is embodied in the actual struggles themselves: involvement is often initiated and sustained at the level of struggle.  For example, someone contacts OCAP for assistance and she or he is brought into a 'direct casework' action. Mass occupations and assemblies are other ways people participate.

Summing up, a number of our initiatives practice radical democracy by both adopting non-hierarchical structures and eliciting direct participation of all people in decision-making (i.e. Flaskô, GTWA, 2002 Niger Delta women's resistance, and to some extent OCAP and FLM). Also, we note a strong link between democratic structures and processes and expressions of critical consciousness and transformative capacities. The less hierarchical the organization and the more intense the processes of democratic participation (in terms of frequency, span of inclusiveness within and outside the organization or formation, depth and breadth of issues, capacity to move from and link one moment to another, forms of direct

action), the more developed and 'visible' critical consciousness and transformative capacities are in terms of a broader and deeper understanding of contradictions and the scope of change being sought.

## The role of NGOs and social movements

Harvey (2010: pars 50-60 ff) suggests five broad tendencies of opposition and/ or organizational templates for political action, among which are: 1) the great number of NGOs, many of which are dedicated to single-issue questions (environment, poverty, women's rights, anti-racism, etc.); 2) autonomous, democratic grassroots movements that often refuse to accept outside funding; 3) social movements that are not so much guided by any particular political philosophy or leanings but by the pragmatic need to resist displacement and dispossession (through gentrification, industrial development, the construction of dams, the dismantling of social services and access to public education, etc.); 4) emancipatory movements focused on questions of identity (women, children, gays, ethnic and religious minorities); and (5) the organizations of the labor movement (above all, trade unions). In this section, we focus on the first four tendencies.

In several of our case studies, we note the varying impact of the first four broad tendencies.

In the case of *Flaskô*, its well developed engagement and cooperative undertakings with radical social movements such as the MST (landless workers' movement), MTD (unemployed workers' movement), and the MTST (homeless workers' movement), have further radicalized Flaskô workers and deepened their understanding of the need to confront the systemic forces that underpin the particularities of their struggle.

In the case of *FLM*, the coming together, through 'horizontal networking', of various grassroots, community-based autonomous organizations of homeless people scaled up its activism into large-scale organizational forms capable of confronting wider societal problems. FLM's joining of the *Central de Movimentos Populares* (CMP), a multi-sector national social movement articulation, provides "a widespread base for experimentation with anti-capitalist politics" (Harvey, 2010: par 52, lines 20-21). CMP sees the need for social transformation in view of the enormity of problems and challenges imposed by the capitalism system.

In the case of *OCAP*, the development of critical consciousness is reflected in its analysis linking poverty to class warfare, urban neoliberalism and colonialism, and its intentional effort to link struggles. In engaging and joining the struggles of others, OCAP has broadened the collective capacity among other segments of the poor and working class.

In the Free Transit campaign of *GTWA*, one of the strategies pursued is forging partnership with a couple of other public transit advocacy groups in the city of Toronto.

In the case of the *2002 women's resistance in the Niger Delta*, NGOs have had a contradictory impact. NGOs, particularly those concerned with feminist issues of which the Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ) was at the fore: linked up with the women at the vanguard of the 'wars' in the Delta; helped publicize the viewpoint of the women in both the national and international media; helped in building the women's capacity for organizing and mobilizing through training; and sharpened their understanding of the linkages of their situation to the global onslaught of neoliberalism and the consequent alter-global resistance.

However, the proposal-driven nature of NGO activism denudes the transformative nature of their politics. With the dearth of radical Left organizing, NGOs were the first and major contacts the militant women had with broader alternative political structures, values and traditions. A concomitant development was the subsequent flourishing of NGO-like politics in a number of these communities, as evidenced by the growth of a number of pro-*status quo* community based associations. The adverse effect on dependence on NGOs (NGOism) not only created fissures in the women's resistance movement, but also contributed greatly to the withering of radical groupings of women.

The ambivalent role of NGOs in the case of the women's resistance in the Niger Delta echoes the analysis of Harvey (2010: par 52, lines 1-5) on the limited role of NGOs:

> [T]heir work is at best ameliorative. Collectively, they have a spotty record of progressive achievements, although in certain arenas, such as women's rights, health care and environmental preservation, they can reasonably claim to have made major contributions to human betterment.  But revolutionary change by NGO is impossible. They are too constrained by the political and policy stances of their donors.

## The role of trade unions and other labour organizations

As identified in the preceding section, organizations of labour, particularly trade unions, are among the five broad tendencies of opposition or organizational template identified by Harvey. In a number of our case studies, trade unions are either taking an explicit leading role or directly or indirectly taking a supportive role. In some of the initiatives, unions were off the radar. In one case (i.e. *Caldesa*), the trade union's role is rather ambivalent. While it took the lead role in the transformation of the factory into a worker-run trade union enterprise, it fell short of continuing the transformation process (in terms of democratic processes, production processes,

social relations, etc.) as the trade union leaders-turned-directors perpetuated themselves in power. Moreover, CUT-Antioquia's failure to develop broad-based support for these initiatives and to publicize them as alternatives to capitalist exploitation also limited the potential of the initiative. CUT-Antioquia was only involved in providing legal advice in resolving the impasse between the private owners and the trade union. There was no concerted collaboration thereafter.

In contrast, *ADS* and *BWC*, which are likewise explicitly initiated by the CUT and KCTU, respectively, continue to pursue their avowed goals of challenging the dominant economic relations by directly supporting various forms of solidarity economy (in the case of ADS) or providing the space for a different form of economic relations (in the case of BWC). In fact, these two initiatives are part and parcel of these two national labour confederations. In this regard, the unions are directly and actively providing spaces for the transformation of consciousness.

In *Flaskô*, while the chemical workers' trade union supported the occupation early on and even had a representative in the Workers' Council, by 2004 it had distanced itself due to some differences in the understanding of workers' control. In fact, it never took its seat in the Council. Although the union continues to support Flaskô's struggles from time to time, such support appears to be marginal (e.g. financial support to hire a bus to take the workers to Brasilia or to print some handouts).  Moreover, the trade union does not take up Flaskô's 30-hours working week model. Be that as it may, the union's important contribution in developing critical consciousness and transformative capacities during the occupation cannot be underestimated. As we have argued earlier in this book struggles are in themselves spaces for people's transformation.

Meanwhile, Flaskô maintains a good relationship with CUT. It is among the major drivers of CUT's campaign of reducing working hours to 40 hours per week. However, Flaskô and CUT differ in their respective views on worker control, as Flaskô refuses to be transformed into a cooperative which CUT actively promotes. Flaskô holds that a cooperative runs the risk of falling into the capitalist logic of seeking greater productivity, subsequently attacking the workers themselves.

The relationship between *OCAP* and trade unions appears to be mutually supportive, albeit not without problems. In the *Ontario Days of Action* in mid-1995, while the trade unions initiated the series of city-wide strikes and protests, OCAP participated in all of them by carrying out serious picket line actions. In a way, at least in the Days of Action, the trade unions provided the space for OCAP to materialize its radicalism and along with it, furthering the development of radical consciousness among OCAP participants. While the trade unions never used the potential of these days of action "as a weapon to challenge the ability of the Tories to govern", OCAP "agitated strongly for the struggle to be taken to a new level" (OCAP website).

In the *2002 women's resistance in the Niger Delta*, as well as in the *Inuvik* and *NHCP* cases, trade unions were clearly absent.

In an earlier paper, we argued that "(u)nions can play a critical role in the development of spaces that nurture counter-consciousness and transformative capacities" (Serrano and Xhafa, 2011: 28). As shown in several of our case studies, trade unions played a critical role in the construction of organizations of opposition which may have the potential to become 'epicenters of social change'. Save the case of Caldesa, the continuity of an initiative appears to be more certain when trade unions have played a direct, active and more transformative role. This may be ascribed in part by the recognition of the historical and institutional role of trade unions in emancipatory movements.

## *The role of leadership*

In this book, leadership means visioning, organizing, motivating and empowering people to achieve a common goal; leadership is about creating opportunities for people to contribute to making something different or extraordinary happen.

While only three of our case studies dealt with the role of leadership in the initiative, this is not to say that leadership did not play a critical role in the others.

In the *2002 women's resistance in the Niger Delta* case, it was through the traditional structure of regular all-women meetings that 'natural leaders' emerged. The women leaders were bold and inspired the other women to audacious acts. Networks that had been established over time between women in the different communities, such as through common markets at which they traded and other social relations which subsisted despite the frictions between their contending ethnic nationalities, made it possible for the July 2002 singular 'wars' to morph into the August 2002 united upsurge.

In *Flaskô*, the occupation and the subsequent running of the factory by the workers themselves have come under the 'stewardship' of a young activist (a university student at the time of factory occupation) who was not a worker in the factory. As a firm advocate and supporter of the worker-run factory movement, this young activist, later on joined by another young lawyer-activist, provided the kind of activist and visionary leadership required for such a radical endeavour. These young activists introduced radical organizational innovations – the political mobilization department and the cultural department – which have imbibed a political dimension to the initially economic initiative and have kept alive the movement. The idealism of young intellectuals has, in a way, contributed greatly

to the progress of the initiative. At the same time, the initiative has provided young activist intellectuals with actual experiences to grow as 'organic' leaders.

In contrast, *Caldesa* is a clear case of the lack of a visionary trade union leadership. As pointed out in the case study, the violent persecution of unionists during the 1980s and 1990s significantly inhibited this kind of leadership from emerging. Many local and regional leaders who possessed strong visions and politics aimed at promoting effective alternatives to the capitalist logic were murdered by ultra-rightist factions. Nowadays, the very existence of political factions within the firm which led to its further deterioration, and the lack of trade union solidarity are clear indicators of Caldesa's leadership vacuum.

In both Flaskô and the 2002 Niger Delta women's resistance, and likewise in FLM, OCAP and GTWA, we observe that a system of collective leadership goes hand in hand with non-hierarchical structures of decision-making. Arguably, these conditions allow for more voice and broader participation in leadership and decision-making, hence providing a greater number of people the opportunity to experience an elevated level of empowerment which deepens critical consciousness and transformative capacities.

## Dissecting the Emancipatory Elements

Despite their limitations and the constraints they are facing, these initiatives embody several emancipatory elements some of which we have identified in an earlier paper (Serrano and Xhafa, 2011: 27). Although there might be no ideological unity among these initiatives, and most may not be even aware of the other's existence, they all share a common desire to break with the logic of capital. These initiatives seek to:

1.  Develop new modes of production and institutional arrangements based on common interests and common property;
2.  Increase self-organization among workers and the poor;
3.  Sustain workers' and the poor's political activism;
4.  Enhance direct participation and decision-making among workers and the poor;
5.  Reduce alienation among workers;
6.  Enhance exercise of 'citizenship' at the workplace and in the community;
7.  Develop a new form of labour politics that addresses the traditional fragmentation in the Left;
8.  Develop a new form of relationship between cooperatives, unions, popular organizations, state apparatuses, and the community based on cooperation, mutuality and democracy;

9. Transform the rather politically marginal role of grassroots organizations of women, the homeless, the poor, and the indigenous people, the ethnic and racialized groups, and other groups to a power for effecting change;
10. Establish greater concern and respect for nature; and
11. Develop new mental conceptions of the world.

Of equal importance is the extent of social recognition or visibility of perceived alternatives, as conceptualized by Graham-Gibson (2006). Visibility may have a domino effect to the extent that existing initiatives, projects and schemes motivate the pursuit of similar undertakings (ibid: 28). This is very clear in almost all of the initiatives studied.

## Generalized Lessons and Insights

Several generalized lessons and insights are drawn from the case studies.

*Firstly*, multiple factors, such as the politico-economic landscape, structures and processes of participation, role of NGOs and social movements, role of trade unions and labour organizations, and role of leadership, are responsible for particular emancipatory outcomes. We observe a strong link between democratic structures and processes and expressions of critical consciousness and transformative capacities: the less hierarchical the organization is and the more intense the processes of democratic participation are, the more developed and 'visible' critical consciousness and transformative capacities. Also, the role of trade unions in some of the initiatives is mixed or varied. However, the continuity of an initiative appears to be more certain when trade unions have played a direct, active and more transformative role.

*Secondly*, as stressed by Cohen and Moody (1998), economistic struggles are central in the development of a more explicit critical consciousness and for deeper politicization. A process of political consciousness-raising can occur in and through solidarity-based and democratic forms of alternative economies. Such a process involves empowering the workers and the poor to become aware of existing inequalities and injustices so that they themselves can actively change their present circumstances, i.e. change the existing mode of production or production systems in their workplace, through collective action (counter consciousness) and participation.

Indeed, as we have argued in an earlier paper, "These initiatives and projects are multi-dimensional in nature. Though initially they have overt economic objectives, they eventually acquire political as well as social dimensions. The development of a political dimension (transformative consciousness) counters the tendency of complacency to set in when material gains have been met, helping to

prevent any reversion to 'capitalist common sense' with cessation of the struggle for social transformation" (Serrano and Xhafa, 2011: 27-28).

*Thirdly*, these initiatives serve as spaces in which working people and the poor can find and develop hope "which can displace a lot of their fears", as McNally (2011) pointed out in a recent talk. While failures of past actions and everyday experiences of oppression, exclusion and exploitation tend to make people feel insecure, hopeless and fearful, their participation in collective resistance and action provides the possibility to overcome these conditions and build new experiences of empowerment, possibility and hope. This echoes what Connolly sees "as a micro-political process that makes macro-political settlements possible" (Gibson-Graham, 2003: 57). This process of self-transformation is entrenched in the conceptualization of the subject "as a being that is already shaped and as one that is always (and sometimes deliberately) becoming" (ibid).

*Fourthly*, we see the initiatives as what Nappalos calls 'intermediate level organizations'. According to him, an intermediate level organization is "the memory, training ground and nursery of developing consciousness in struggle" (Nappalos, 2010: par 17, line 3), and provides activists the coordination, resources, education and continuity to allow for ongoing resistance and the development of new activists between struggles in the context of low points of struggle. Also, "intermediate organizations could draw out and develop the anti-capitalist logic and tendencies within these struggles and consolidate gains" (ibid: par 26, lines 3-4) becoming in this way "potential forces for presenting alternatives" (ibid: par 24, line 4).

*Fifth*, the insights from these initiatives allow us to engage with Harvey's argument of the double blockage: "the lack of an alternative vision prevents the formation of an oppositional movement, while the absence of such a movement precludes the articulation of an alternative" (Harvey, 2010: par 26, lines 3-6). In our case studies, we have shown that people build their visions while they are also building and strengthening their movement. Here again, the building or articulation of a vision or an alternative and the building and strengthening of an oppositional movement are co-dependent and co-evolving.


## The Language of Struggle:
## Contemporary Themes of Resistance

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given the inherited…

> The social revolution [of the nineteenth century] cannot create its poetry from the past but only from the future. [Marx, 1996, 32-34]

In our initiatives, the language of struggle is often captured by the very slogans or mottos embraced and espoused by the people involved.

Flaskô's slogans such as "Flaskô: a worker-run factory" and "We don't want to be anyone's boss" speak of a language of economic difference, of workers' capacity to collectively own, run and manage an enterprise.

FLM's *Quem não Luta, Tá Morto!* ("Who does not struggle, is dead!"), GTWA's "Solidarity. Resistance. Change. Organizing Working Class Communities", and OCAP's "We believe in the power of resistance. We believe in the power of people to organize themselves" exhort the need to take direct action by the people to change their circumstances and changing themselves in the process, reflecting Marx's concept of self-change.

The language of struggle of Flaskô, GTWA, OCAP and FLM is explicitly class-based and anti-capitalist.

The women's resistance in Niger Delta in 2002 is considered as a 'gendered ethnicized class struggle' seeking equality, respect, dignity, self-determination and environmental justice.

Meanwhile, ADS, Inuvik, Busan and NHCP convey that 'other economies are possible' through the pursuit of various forms of solidarity economy.

Just as how Marx conceived political struggle in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, the initiatives presented here embody the 'language' of struggle and resistance based on people's lived experiences. This language of struggle reflects people's aspirations as much as it inspires people to act collectively to change their conditions and with it society itself. It communicates the possibility of economic and political difference, new mental conceptions of social relations and relations with nature, and people's refusal to define their lives in capitalist terms. Instead, people's struggle are defining their lives in terms of solidarity, justice, dignity, equality, radical democracy, respect for nature, and self-determination, among others. Their language of struggle carries with it the imperative of people seizing their fate in their own hands.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In this book, we critically analyzed and examined, through 10 case studies, the ways in which various forms of people's economic and political initiatives and struggles across several countries become 'actually existing' spaces and moments for the development of consciousness and capacities critical to challenge the dominant social, economic and political relations and pursue projects and initiatives beyond the capitalist canon. We (re)conceptualized critical consciousness as the ability of people to understand and analyze the systemic nature of the fundamental problems confronting people and society under capitalism, the interconnectedness of various struggles, and the individual willingness of people to act collectively to

change their present circumstances and in the process affecting changes in society as a whole. With this (re)conceptualization, critical consciousness is understood to possess the following intertwined dimensions: an understanding of the systemic nature of oppression and injustice based on the lived experiences of people; an understanding of the need to resist the underlying causes of their oppression and exploitation; and the recognition that people have the capacity to act to change their circumstances. Transformative capacities are the material and concrete expressions of critical consciousness in terms of 'new' abilities and actions that seek to transform 'realities' and sustain the process of transformation.

We identified several indicators or expressions of critical consciousness and transformative capacities from the struggles studied, as well as factors that influence the development (or the stunted growth) of critical consciousness and transformative capacities. Also, we highlighted the language of struggles, what inspires people involved in the initiatives to take action to change their conditions.

While we do not aim to propose an alternative to capitalism per se, we are nonetheless engaging with the problematic of the 'process of becoming' alternatives, focusing on critical consciousness and transformative capacities as critical emancipatory elements. Through the 10 case studies, we attempted to identify different paths people take to experience this 'process of becoming', given specific conditions. To the extent that we showed the ways in which our case studies develop critical consciousness and transformative capacity, we argue that these social experiments, although fragile and incipient at the moment, imbibe values and offer socio-economic arrangements that are not within the capitalist canon. Though they are not dramatic breaks from capitalism (and the survival of a number of them depends on competing successfully in local and global markets in a predominantly capitalist regime), their achievements "embody forms of production and sociability beyond the capitalist values and institutions" (De Sousa Santos and Rodriguez-Garavito, 2006: xxi). In other words, they open spaces for the further transformation of capitalist socio-economic arrangements. Hence, to deny the significance of such initiatives to people's lives can be detrimental to the strengthening of an alternative framework as "it can close doors to proposals that might gradually bring changes" and "create pockets of solidarity within the heart of capitalism" (ibid: xxii).

In a recent talk, McNally (2011) reminded us that "one of the most difficult things that all of us have in understanding is making sense of the present as history. We tend to think of history as past events that are compiled in books and we tend to forget that what is happening in our lives right now is history in the making." The people's struggles in our case studies are making their history; while telling stories of resistance, they are also offering alternative narratives to 'capitalocentric' conceptions and interpretations of the world. Once again, these struggles demonstrate how people in themselves and for themselves are able

to develop critical consciousness and transformative capacities to change their objective conditions and in the process bring about social change.

## Note

[1] This point was made via email correspondence on 5 September 2011.

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# Case studies on the Development of Critical Consciousness and Transformative Capacities

# Flaskô: A Worker-run Factory

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*Lygia Sabbag Fares*

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## General Background

Flaskô is a factory located in Sumaré, a poor city close to Campinas, in the State of São Paulo, Brazil. The factory produces plastic barrels and tanks for water, perfume and other liquids. This factory belonged to a bigger group called *Corporação Holding do Brazil* (CHB). CIPLA, Interfibra, Profiplast and Brakofix are other companies that belong to the same group.

CHB was also part of another group called *Grupo Hansen Indústria SA*. For a thirty year period (1958-1989), this holding was extremely profitable. Flaskô itself was established in September 1988. A year after its founding, the holding owner, João Hansen Jr., decided to share his wealth among his children. The CHB was passed on to his daughter, Eliseth Hansen and her husband Luis Batschauer, and soon thereafter, the holding began to face financial problems due to a lack of resources and poor administration. In 1994, CIPLA, the biggest factory in CHB, located in Joinville in the state of Santa Catarina (south of Brazil, approximately 600km from Sumaré) was close to filing for bankruptcy due to excessive labor debt.

The 1990s in Brazil were characterized by a general economic and social crisis which had begun in the previous decade. The neoliberal policies implemented by the government of Fernando Collor de Mello (1990-1992) were deepened with the adoption of the 'Real' plan in 1994 (a liberal-conservative monetary plan in which national currency stabilization and credibility were based on a currency anchor; the US dollar). This plan was coordinated by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the Minister of finance, who, later that year was elected Brazil's president and re-elected four years later. Cardoso governed from 1995 to 2002.

The 'Real' plan was the face of neoliberalism in Brazil. It was composed of trade and financial liberalization, a push for the revaluation of the Brazilian Real, increases in the interest rates aimed at attracting foreign investment, privatization of public companies, and allowing state companies to be acquired by private foreign enterprises. The result was an explosion of public debt and the withdrawal of public and private investment. This all led to the partial destruction of national industry, economic stagnation, and rising unemployment.

Together with many other Brazilian companies, the circumstances in CIPLA and Flaskô worsened throughout this period. By 24 October, 2002 the situation had become unbearable. Since the beginning of the year, workers had been receiving only R$30.00–50.00[1] per week. The trade union claimed that the owners could not pay the workers and that the workers' alternative was to sue the company. In a situation of very limited options, the workers decided to go on strike.

When a company is declared bankrupt in Brazil, a common workers' reaction, led by their trade union, is to take the company to court in the hope that after a relatively prolonged court case, the judge in question may reward the back payment of the workers' salaries and social security payments. In practice, the long period of time it takes to receive a Court sentence, often pressures (now unemployed) workers to accept unfavorable settlements.

If CIPLA (and Flaskô) workers had reacted as workers normally do, they would have been unemployed the next morning. Due to Brazil's high unemployment rates at the time, and the specific economic scenario, many of them would have been unemployed for more than one year[2]. However, during the discussions in CIPLA, a worker suggested that the workers occupy the factory and operate it, as a means of saving their jobs and income. The strike commission discussed the options with the CIPLA and Interfibra workers. The idea of running the factory was appealing to many workers and was considered a better and a more practical alternative than joining the lines of the unemployed and possibly waiting years for a court ruling in their favor.

The political scenario in 2002 was favorable for such an action. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva was running for president. The strike commission went to Lula's last election rally in Santa Catarina and he promised them that, if he won the election, he would save their jobs and that the commission should meet him in Brasília (Brazil's capital). Lula was elected as President in the second round of presidential elections and five days later, the workers occupied CIPLA.

The action started by CIPLA workers was a positive development for the Flaskô workers. The situation in Flaskô had deteriorated markedly. The year 2002 commenced without energy at the factory. The supply was interrupted due to overdue payments. By the end of that year, the factory was in ruin; there was no raw material, the managers had left, the machinery had been scrapped, and the employees' salaries remained unpaid. The workers were well-aware of the situation

despite the administration's attempts to hide it. By 2003 workers at the factory had not received their salaries for three months running and social security installments had not been paid for five years.

Pedro Alem Santinho, a social science student from UNICAMP (University of Campinas) and a worker-run factory movement advocate, was the first person to actively propose a worker-run factory at Flaskô. As the CIPLA Commission passed through Campinas on its way to Brasília, it was welcomed by supporters. Due to his militancy in the worker-run factory movement, Pedro asked the chemical workers trade union in Campinas to support them. The trade union leader, Vladimir, considered union's involvement, since the owners had already abandoned the factory. Pedro then proposed that Flaskô workers join CIPLA's commission in their meeting with the current president, Lula. Two workers from Flaskô decided to join the commission.

Pedro soon became very involved with the Flaskô workers and their cause and they asked him to organize an assembly to be held on 12 June, 2003, after the workers' representatives returned from Brasília. The results from the meeting with Lula were not promising. No practical solution or way forward was given by the president. However, the movement in Brasília was big. Coordinated by public sector unions, the demonstration, called *Marcha dos 30 mil* (The March of 30 Thousand), demanded changes in the pension fund using a constitutional amendment. CIPLA and Flaskô workers presented their situation at this event and all workers unanimously supported them. Also on this trip, Flaskô and CIPLA workers discovered the connection between the two companies; they belong to the same holding, CHB, which made a joint action feasible.

The whole process and possible outcomes were explained to the Flaskô workers in the assembly and although they did not feel very confident with those results, Pedro reminded them that it was useful to have a communication channel with the president, particularly when this president was himself an ex-trade union leader and co-founder of the coalition Workers Party (PT) Government. On 12 June, 2003, at the Flaskô workers general assembly, the workers voted to occupy the factory. This occupation was different from CIPLA's. There was neither a strike nor were police involved in trying to break up the picket lines, because at that point the owners of Flaskô had already abandoned the factory.

Workers have occupied the factory and maintained operational, administrative and financial control since the day they took that vote. Though their initial goal was to keep their jobs and ensure that they received some form of income, over the past eight years, they have faced and overcome numerous problems. Additionally, they have acquired new skills and learned a considerable amount about the capitalist system in which they live.

One of the processes they initiated during this time was the creation of a workers' village on the factory's land. In Alexandre Mandl's (the workers' lawyer) words:

> After Flaskô's occupation, we looked upon a huge area with no social use. That space was used by organized crime for trafficking, rape, etc. On the other hand, there was a clear housing shortage in the region. Thus, there was a social demand for the area. At the same time, there remained an unstable situation in the factory: the workers had years of FGTS *Fundo de Garantiapor Tempo de Serviço* (Employee's Dismissal Fund) from the former administration that had not been paid and no one knew if it would ever be paid. We had a meeting with the factory workers (many said that we should occupy the land) and some neighborhood leaders (some even said that they would occupy anyway), then we organized the occupation on 12 February, 2005. Initially, 50 women occupied the area. We had an assembly, we had the support of an architect (a militant from the Esquerda Marxista[3]), who designed an occupation plan. The criteria for being granted a piece of land was that a house should be built immediately. We used the Mayor's register to check which families were living in the neighborhood and needed a plot. Every Flaskô worker got a land share (as a way to pay the FGTS due), but they were required to either build or to give it to a relative. Today there are 564 registered families (information obtained from the Mayor's office). The area has not yet been regularized, and together with the factory (it is only one area) it encompasses 140 million square meters. Unfortunately, like almost all housing movements, it has degenerated, but they still mobilize when we (Flaskô) push them (the village people). We are together in the campaign for the declaration of social interest.[4]

The families living in the workers' village do not have a regular connection to running water, sanitation, or energy in the houses. The water and the energy they have are obtained from outside the official power system. To the community's demands for water, energy, and other needs, the Mayor's office has responded that nothing can be done because it is an irregular occupation; the Mayor's office cannot supply water for houses that are settled on privately-owned property. They also do not have an address, thus, they cannot receive a letter or a bill. Flaskô has joined this village community's fight for redress. As Alexandre says, Flaskô always involves the village in their petitions and demands regarding nationalization. Flaskô has helped the village residents organize a neighborhood association to fight for their needs. Fernando, a Flasko worker from the political mobilization department recounts that recently they (Flaskô and the association) forced the municipality to approve a law that water companies can install water to any house in the city regardless of its 'legal' situation.

Flaskô workers also decided to transform one empty factory shed into a 'sports factory'; a place where teachers hired by the mayor's office or volunteers offer sport classes for free or at a very low price to workers, their children, and the whole community. The old factory restaurant was turned into a 'cultural factory', a space where cultural activities like cartoon drawing classes and dance classes are offered (also by teachers hired by the local government or volunteers). Flaskô also holds important political and academic activities such as lectures by leftist academics, conferences about worker-run factories and workers and social production, political movie sessions; there is also a worker-run factory movement archive.

Following their development as a social movement, the goals of Flaskô workers changed. Today, they fight for the nationalization of the factory under workers' control. It means that they want the factory to be nationalized while they would retain administrative and operational control.

Their strategy of pressuring the government to nationalize the factory consists of efforts to convince the Mayor, the state power (Governor), or the federal government to declare the factory an 'institution of social interest.' This declaration would allow a public power to expropriate the factory. The expropriation would mean that the State would purchase the factory from its owners, and the owners could not refuse to sell it, since the acquisition is of public interest. The workers say that the factory's expropriation could take place without spending any State money because the factory is worth less than its tax debts. The same holds true for the workers' village.

This strategy seems viable because it is easy to prove the social interest of Flaskô when one looks at the jobs and salaries it supplies, the workers' village, and the sports and cultural factories. However, the political cost for the government seems to be high. Fernando, from the political mobilization department, sees the political cost clearly. He says: "They (the government and the capitalists) want to 'criminalize' our movement so we do not become an example to anyone."[5]

The workers explain that nationalization is a counterpoint to the possibility of becoming a cooperative, which is the option that is favored by Brazil's chemical trade union. Flaskô workers do not see a cooperative as an option for two major reasons. First, they would lose their workers' rights; their stability as workers. Second, they are afraid of turning the factory into just another capitalist enterprise, with capitalist goals (profit maximization), guided by capitalist values and, in the end, exploiting themselves as workers and exploiting each other in a kind of capital-labor relation. As one worker emphasizes, "We do not want to become rich here, nor do we want to be anyone's boss. We just want to keep our right to work".[6]

In sum, the initiative was led by several people. The workers in CIPLA started a motion for factory occupation in their workplace. Pedro helped to bring the factory occupation alternative to Flaskô, and the general assembly decided

to occupy the factory. Additionally, ongoing support comes from the families of all those workers that have helped them to survive during strikes, delays in the payment of salaries, the occupation process, as well as in the implicit State tactic of criminalizing the Flaskô alternative process.

## Structures, Processes and Strategies

Flaskô's occupation was decided upon by the workers' assembly. From the moment of occupation, the general assembly has been the highest decision making body. It meets once a month ordinarily, and extraordinary assemblies are called as needed.

The assembly elects a workers' council, composed of representatives from every sector. However, 90% of them have to be blue-collar workers. Nowadays, the composition is: two workers from each shift,[7] one from the janitorial department, one from security, one from the department of administration and one each from the political mobilization and legal departments. The legal department has always existed in the factory while the mobilization department is, of course, from the workers' council. In a written interview Alexandre explains that:

> As with CIPLA in Santa Catarina, and even with the historical experiences of workers' control, there is need for a section which organizes workers' mobilization, which involves: internal communication, external media, training, trade union and political relationship. The department was created in the same day we occupied the factory, June 12, 2003, following a decision of the workers' council and reflecting on the experiences of other workers' control, such as CIPLA and Interfibra.[8] When we occupied the factory, we elected a workers' council. This council was composed of one member of each sector as well as a trade union representative. Since the occupation, the person responsible for the workers' council and the mobilization is Pedro Santinho. The union supported this at the beginning, so much so that one of its leaders was appointed to be the first workers' council representative. Its function was to spread a workers' control perspective for the whole industry and to defend Flaskô workers against a possible attack from their former employer. However, already in 2004 the trade union had distanced itself from the workers' council, due to some differences in understanding regarding the situation, trade union action, and even the workers' control. Basically, this difference can be expressed in the trade union's disaffiliation with CUT, some of its leaders' disaffiliation with the PT (Workers Party), and the lack of support from the trade union in other factory occupations. The trade union decided to withdraw from the council in 2004, and from 2005 on our relationship with the trade union somehow dwindled, but they still support us

formally. About the workers' council, Pedro is still in charge of it and since the end of 2006 Fernando has been helping him with the mobilization.

The main objective of the mobilization department is to organize Flaskô workers, as well as the community and social movements that support Flaskô in their daily fight. This council meets weekly to discuss organizational matters, to implement what was decided by the assembly and to keep their movement going. The council delegates the general, commercial, administrative and production coordination to a worker or a group of workers, who have the necessary skills for each function. A coordinator is not necessarily a council representative.

Pedro explains that if a worker sees something that is not working, s/he can either go to the workers' council and report it, or if s/he is a representative, s/he can speak at the council meeting and, if the problem is deemed pertinent, the council will look into it and give orders to the coordinator of that area. In sum, they have to find a solution to the issue. If, in the worker's view, the problem is not solved for any reason, s/he can report it in the general assembly, where it will be discussed.

Workers' participation is highly important both inside and outside the factory. Since they are constantly threatened by the Mayor and the federal government (which keeps trying to sell their machines to cover tax debts) and they are trying to become a social interest initiative, the involvement of Flaskô workers in demonstrations and political acts is very important. Thus, they have to maintain a bottom-up approach, keeping the rank-and-file (production) workers organized and mobilized, so they are able to call for community help either to stop an auction of machinery or to pressure for the factory's nationalization.

The process of hiring is also important in the factory. First, they have to be careful not to hire someone sent by the federal police. They normally hire people referred by someone known to the group. After three months (experience period),[9] the council decides if the newcomer should stay or not. The worker is assessed according to his/her work skills and involvement with Flaskô's cause.

Pedro recounts that, on one occasion, a recently hired worker was fired because in the council's opinion he did not fill either of the two requirements. However, the workers sympathized with him because he had a wife and children. So a general assembly was called right at the moment he was being fired and the workers started saying to him: "They are right, you did not work well nor participate in our political activities and those things are key to the factory continuity, however if you compromise with us, we may give you a chance to improve." The new worker accepted and expressed his wish to stay at Flaskô and his job was maintained.

Another process which the workers are trying to improve is planning and accountability. Bruno, who works in the production and management department, explains how it works. He says that the worker needs a working plan; s/he cannot decide individually what to produce, so his job is to plan the production. He is also responsible for accessing the production numbers, controlling how much

each machine produces in each shift, how much raw material is consumed and how much wasted. He has a file of information for each machine. He says that it is a challenge for him to find a way to provide this information in a simple way to the workers' council and the assembly. He is trying different forms and workers are getting used to the idea; he created an index that pleased many workers and made them feel a part of the process. He said that now workers are worried about waste and the amount of time each machine stops working and why. It is a capacity building and ownership building process.

## After the Occupation

In the last eight years many things have occurred. Some were very important to Flaskô's development and also to the workers' learning and consciousness building process. These events are very important in deepening the understanding of the Flaskô workers' fight and their current situation.

The first attempt to challenge Flaskô's general assembly decisions came from the Flaskô administration. This happened only one month after the occupation. The assembly had decided that the Flaskô budget would first cover salary payments, since workers had not been paid for months at that time. However, the administration gave some of Flasko's products to truck drivers as a form of 'payment' of Flasko's debt to them.

The workers, unpaid since the occupation, questioned where the money from production was. When they figured out that instead of following the assembly directive (first, pay the salaries, second pay the former administration debts), the administration was paying the debts, the other workers rebelled and Pedro once again was called to help solve the issue. He was not a Flaskô worker at that time. However, since the workers had asked for his help, he called the CIPLA workers' administrator for help and, following his advice, the workers stopped production. Then, the assembly itself took control and stopped the trucks from leaving the factory. The workers also decided to hire Pedro. His responsibility was to ensure that the factory would be kept in workers' hands. At the time Pedro was hired, neither he nor the workers knew that he would be the first worker in a soon-to-be established department called 'political mobilization'.

Another event which had a strong impact on Flaskô was the federal intervention in CIPLA in 2007. It had two major repercussions. First, Flaskô felt the same threat. The workers felt threatened because at any time a government-appointed trustee in bankruptcy[10] could enter and fire everyone and ruin all that they had built. Second, CIPLA was calling too much attention. It was an example of a successful worker-run factory. The media started a very negative campaign against the worker-run factory movement. A very conservative and one of the country's

biggest magazine *VEJA* published a cover report against the movement. The magazine accused the movement of ruining the factory. It also said that occupied factories would coerce and pressure workers who did not take the communist courses offered by the factory, and that the workers were forced to contribute to a political fund (the fund really exists but donation is optional). Those lies were taken seriously by a large part of the population and the workers had no real access to a media source to offer a rebuttal of such false claims.

CIPLA workers were ultimately expelled from the factory in 2007 (this was captured on TV). It was a huge loss for the whole movement but there were many supporters. The workers decided to keep the general assembly, even if the boss took power again, they would demand employment stability for all workers for one year and two years for the council's members.

Meanwhile, at Flaskô, Cezar, a worker who was hired by the workers' assembly to help Pedro administrater the factory, had called a general assembly. This move took the workers by surprise, and created fear among them that Cezar may be working with the federal government to eventually take over the factory. More specifically, anxiety was high among the workers that at any time soon the federal government would send its representative (a trustee in bankruptcy) to intervene in Flaskô, as what befell CIPLA.

True enough, after several days, a government-appointed trustee in bankruptcy arrived in Flaskô. His first action was to fire Pedro. Upon learning this, the workers stopped the factory machines and went on strike.

A general assembly was immediately convened where the government-appointed trustee tried to impress upon the workers that Pedro was a guerilla from the MST (landless movement) and was just manipulating them. But the workers refused to be deceived, and instead questioned the trustee's intentions and plans about the factory and the workers. It was evident that he had no interest in the continued and successful operation of the factory, nor money to invest in the factory. The workers discovered that the trustee's sole intention was to sell-off the factory's assets to pay off its creditors.

The trustee did not act alone. Five Flaskô workers supported him. Two of them worked in the commercial department. They wanted to deliver some tanks and barrels to customers but the workers were on strike, so those five workers and the trustee began taking these commodities to the delivery trucks. The workers stopped them by declaring that they would only go back to work if the trustee overturned his decision to fire Pedro and other members of the workers' council. Although the trustee did so, the workers refused to return to work that day.

The trustee left and then returned the next day with the intention of running the factory. The workers also left, but the council's members stayed on and in a meeting they decided to expel the trustee in bankruptcy. The next morning, with the help of 200 people, both Flaskô workers and Flaskô supporters, they barred

his entry into the factory. The trustee in bankruptcy called Pedro and threatened him, saying that he would come back with the federal police, navy and air force. In the following days, Pedro received anonymous calls threatening the life of his son. No one was able to find out whether the threat was serious or some kind of a bad joke.

From then on, Flaskô workers faced a continuing series of obstacles. At the end of June the energy supply was interrupted. According to all workers interviewed, this was the single biggest challenge that they faced. The first problem that the energy stoppage brought about had to do with the fact that the raw material inputs were inside the machinery; if it was left there, the machines would be damaged. At first, the workers believed that there had been a technical problem with the energy supply. However, they soon realized that the rest of the neighborhood had power. The workers did not understand what was going on. They had just had a meeting with the energy company to negotiate their debt and there was no mention of their energy provision being cut. In a subsequent meeting with CPFL (the energy provider), they were informed that the trustee had ordered that the energy be turned off. Soon, they also discovered that the trustee, with the help of some Flaskô workers had called all of Flaskô's suppliers and customers asking them not to continue negotiating with Flaskô.

To restore power, the workers first signed a petition together with their supporters (the electrical workers union also helped this time) and then used a very shrewd maneuver: Alexandre realized that the order for the electricity stoppage had come from a different state, Santa Catarina, and as such it should not be valid for a factory located in the state of São Paulo. After resolving this problem, Flaskô negotiated the debt with CPFL. The R$ 40.000[11] was borrowed from some customers and would be paid for via production. After about one month, the workers, who were sleeping in shifts every night in the factory in order to avoid theft and pillage, and who were surviving from outside community assistance started to work again. The five workers who were conniving with the trustee in bankruptcy were fired. They had abandoned their jobs for more than 30 days without explanation. Those workers forfeited their legal rights to any severance compensation when they abandoned their jobs. Despite the absence of legal obligations, Flaskô workers generously made the decision to pay those workers severance.

In October 2008, there was another energy cut. This time it was due to lack of payment. After sometime power was restored, but the workers' confidence was worn every time this kind of things happened.

Another big challenge frequently faced by Flaskô workers were auctions. Throughout the years since the occupation, there have been more than 200. As explained above, the government tried to sell Flaskô's equipment and machines in an auction in order to cover Flaskô's debts with the government. The organized workers went to every auction and to the municipal court to protest. The workers

used tanks and barrels (that they themselves had produced) as drums and loudly proclaimed that, "If you buy, you won't take it!!" This action helped ensure that the demand for the machinery was low, and despite the government's insistence on using auctions to cover back-debt, at the time of writing, no machine had been successfully sold. This is an ongoing problem. Although the threat remains real, Flaskô workers have used demonstrations and protests to counter any auction attempt.

## Current Situation

Many positive changes have taken place since workers began managing the factory. First, the workers' administration has successfully kept the factory working. Their initial goal of maintaining paid jobs (from 60 to 70 depending on the period) was achieved. They also reduced the wage gap (the highest wage is only three times the lowest[12]) and when they face resource shortages every worker receives the lowest wage. Only when, and if, there is budget leftover will they pay the difference to the workers that normally receive more.

In 2004, working time was reduced from 44 to 40 hours per week, meaning that they would no longer work on Saturdays. In 2008 there was a further reduction, with the weekly shift falling to 30 hours. The work week was divided into five six-hour shifts in order to allow workers to have more free time either to join Flaskô activities or to rest and spend more time with their families. Workers realized that this reduction did not decrease productivity. The opposite actually occurred. Productivity increased following the reduction of hours. Additionally, workers would work only six hours per day and consequently, the factory would not have to provide lunch (or payment in lieu).

Workers are making critically important decisions that directly impact their lives. They are practicing democracy. Pre-existing pension and salary debts for current and former workers have been made the priority for the workers' administration. Also, the workers have strong links with the community around the factory. They run cultural and sports events and they support the workers' village. It is important to highlight that all decisions, from payment of debts to how community events are organized, are taken by the workers' council and approved by the assembly.

## Main Obstacles

The formal administration and the legal recognition of the worker-run factory is one of the main obstacles Flaskô workers continue to face. The government deals with

Flaskô whenever it is convenient to the former. On the one hand, Flaskô workers cannot get credit or negotiate debts or even issue checkbook invoices because the government claims they do not have the authority. On the other hand, Flaskô workers, under Pedro's responsible representation, have been made responsible for Flaskô's prior debts.

However, Pedro has always claimed that he is responsible and accountable only to the decisions taken by the general assembly and signs as the Flaskô assembly representative, not as Flaskô's owner. Similarly, Alexandre is not a factory lawyer. Thus, when the government wants to make Pedro responsible for Flaskô's former debt, he claims he is not responsible for the factory per se, but for the general assembly's decisions only. This is how they deal with the problem.

Here, it is important to emphasize the relationship of Flaskô workers with the chemical workers trade union in Campinas and the surrounding region, of which Sumaré is a part. The chemical workers trade union has not actively participated in Flaskô's daily fight since their early support in 2003. They never occupy the seat reserved for them in the workers' council. Occasionally, they help when workers are confronted with significant challenges and they ask for support. When asked about trade union involvement with Flaskô, Pedro replies, "none, there is no relation". He mentions that their help is restricted to some financial support (hiring a bus to take workers to Brasília or printing handouts). Pedro regrets that the trade union does not use them as an example.

Besides the fact that Flaskô workers believe in the trade union and the workers' movement, they need the trade union to legitimize assembly decisions, since the assembly is not recognized by the government authorities while the trade union is. For example, the 30 hour work week is followed in Flaskô but, it is not recognized in collective bargaining. Collective bargaining in Brazil is enforced as law. None of those interviewed said that the trade unions did not want to recognize the 30 hour week in collective bargaining. However, it was implicit that if they were closer this would not be an issue. Alexandre explains this in the following way:

> We wrote a draft collective bargaining agreement, in the first days of May 2008, the 3rd I guess, but on the day it should be signed, they (the trade union) did not come. After this day we still insisted but it 'cooled down'. We took this issue up in 2011 again, explaining the importance of reducing the working hours without reducing salaries, showing a brief example. We know how important it would be to have it institutionalized as a right in case workers lose factory control. CUT and the CNQ[13] also know that, they have always been with us, as the trade union, they know that our working week is 30 hours but we cannot 'legalize' it. We must fight for it again. In CIPLA, when they reduced the working hours, a collective bargaining agreement was signed by the NPF (National Confederation of Chemicals)

and Serge Goulart, coordinator of the works council of CIPLA, who signed as 'employer'. Here we would do something like this, with Pedro signing as 'employer', but the trade union questions this, without understanding what it means politically. We'll see how they will stand with the campaign we intend to do this semester.[14]

Concerning the relationship between the Flasko project and CUT confederation, Alexandre says:

We have a good relationship with CUT, mainly because the Esquerda Marxista (Marxist Left) advocates for CUT trade union coverage. CUT has followed our position from the beginning, but it's true that we think the relation could be better. CUT support is strong regarding the issue of working hours. CUT is campaigning for the 40 hour week, and we in Flaskô are drivers in this campaign, because we have a 30 hour work week implemented. Our say in this regard, and CUT understands its importance, is that if we work only 30 hours in Flaskô, it is possible to reduce working hours without payment reduction. On the general situation (workers' control) we had meetings with the national leadership of CUT and Lula (Former Brazilian president) in order to get their support for workers' control. But, unfortunately, it was not successful. CUT supports the workers' control initiative through ANTEAG, Unisol, Uniforja (support to cooperatives). However, our perspective is different, we think that if we accept being a cooperative it will eventually become a trap, we may end up adopting the capitalist logic of seeking greater productivity, attacking the workers themselves, a fact that their data shows (data from research about cooperatives).[15]

The political environment is another important challenge. When CIPLA and then Flaskô were occupied, Lula had just won the election and the workers were more confident that better days would come. However, Lula never really helped those movements, which caused some to lose faith in the movement. When the economic situation improved and the unemployment rate decreased (from 2005 on) the workers, who never saw fighting the police and occupying the factory as very attractive events, had less motivation to occupy or to continue in the occupation because s/he could simply look for another job.

However, it is important to note that very few Flaskô workers have left the factory for another job. Tosinho, another Flaskô worker, says: "I would only leave when they close the door". Some workers that were off work due to occupational disease came to the workers' administration to say that they would prefer to work if they could do something different from the function that made them sick.[16]

The intervention in CIPLA, the continued presence of the trustee in bankruptcy there and the various failed attempts to occupy factories all over the country, have weakened the worker-run factory movement.

The daily life and the daily struggles are also highlighted as challenges. Pedro says that the workers' fight for their immediate needs is the main issue although the socialist goal is always in mind. Moreover, after six, eight, ten or 12 hour-shifts a worker just wants to go home to rest and enjoy some time with the family. So it is not easy to encourage everyone to go to a political meeting or to participate in a 'political formation' course after work.

## Development of Critical Consciousness, Capacities and the 'Language' of Struggle

The growth and development of a critical consciousness is clear from interviews with Flaskô workers. They understand their situation and how they connect to other movements as well. Manú, one of the workers mentioned above, says:

> Before, when I would see the MST on TV, I would agree with the media (Globo) that always says that MST people are lazy bums that want to invade someone else's land. I would say, 'someone should kill these people.' But now I know, they fight for land because they do not have anywhere to live or to grow their food and that 'the capitalist law' forces them to fight.[17]

On Flaskô's relationship with the MST and other social movements, Alexandre states:

> Our relationship with social movements is quite interesting. Most significantly, we have a great relationship with MTST (homeless workers movement), MTD (unemployed workers movement) and the MST (landless workers movement). With all other movements, we publish a popular newspaper for the whole region, which is called *Atenção* (Attention). It is written collectively in weekly meetings. We have joint occupation actions with other factories, planning, checking areas, logistics, everything. We have a strong bond of solidarity in campaigns with petitions, comrades' defenses, etc. Flaskô makes its infrastructure available, such as our telephone, computer, internet, fax, photocopier, printer, etc. for all social movements. We have a small accommodation, which all social movements can make use of, especially when holding meetings in Flaskô. We offer the space for the movements to organize. With the MST this has been strengthened, so much that they have a space in the factory where they are building a training center for MST youth. There will be a first meeting in 20 to 22 July 2011. We are clear, "When the country and city come together, the bourgeoisie will not resist".[18]

Manú is a simple man. He worked in the factory before the occupation. He can compare the two moments – before and after the worker administration initiative. Manú explains that when the factory was still controlled by the employer, there were no salaries, but now under the workers' management, he receives his salary on time every month. He works fewer hours than before and he understands 'the capitalist law'. He also understands that they need to be organized because, as he says, they "run the factory politically."

The problems and challenges the workers have faced and the political courses and activities developed by them inside and outside the factory have led to the development of this critical consciousness. The courses are a joint action with *Escola Floresta Fernandes*[19] (a popular university of social movements); they include political economy, labor movement history and economics lectures.

The solidarity built among the workers is also clear. For example, when João felt and responded as if the firing on Pedro by the trustee was a personal attack, this built solidarity among workers and ensured that they defend each other.

Pedro also provided an example of solidarity building when he explained the wage campaign. When the chemical workers have a wage campaign, it is important for Flaskô workers to support them, although they do not have a capitalist boss to fight against. They participate and want workers' wages to be raised not only because they support the workers' causes, but to assure their own survival. If Flaskô workers raise wages and the competitors do not, they will lose competitiveness. And they understand that their wages in the end come from the sale of the barrels and tanks that they produce.

In addition to developing critical consciousness, the initiative creates space for the workers to develop their labor skills. The way Fernando developed his skills and political involvement is a good example of how capacities and consciousness developed together. He was hired as a machine operator because he is the son of a former worker. He had no experience but he learned his functions and others very quickly. During an interview, he explains that he is very curious and always asks a co-worker to teach him his/her job. He helps when one needs to leave the front door for a while or when a worker is absent. When a worker leaves the factory, it is usual to first do an internal call for the vacancy. When Vinicius, from the political mobilization sector, found another opportunity outside Flaskô and left the factory, Fernando and three more fellows applied for the vacancy, and Fernando was chosen.

Fernando now works in mobilization. He designs brochures for political mobilization and takes care of the communication inside and outside the factory. He told us that their journal (they have printed and published on-line) *Atenção* started to gain importance in the neighborhood and also in the city; "the citizens call us to report on bad living conditions, lack of infrastructure," he says. Fernando is responsible for the documentaries and movies about Flaskô and other movements

they support. He is also the voice one listens to on Flaskô's radio station, *Radio Luta* (Radio Fight). He gives information about Flaskô's fight (in June 2011 the most important news concerned the public audience they will have in the State Senate). The radio also plays good popular music. Fernando intimates that he is a self-taught cameraman and during the researcher's time at the factory, he was very curious asking tips to the cameraman.

The development of Pedro through Flaskô's struggles is also a good example of how capacities are developed in Flaskô. When he got involved with Flaskô, he was a first year social science student. He had previously studied psychology; however, he knew nothing about administration or law. Now he had to learn how to manage a factory. He stresses that at the beginning of the occupation period no other worker had any university degree. He says that his experience in Flaskô also helped him to look at social science through 'another lens.'

Alexandre, who just became a lawyer, is another example. He had his first job at Flaskô. He was to start on 1 of October, but Pedro called him the night before saying that he should instead go, at 4am, to another factory in a nearby city that the Flaskô movement was helping to occupy. Alexandre's first case as a lawyer, trained by a traditional law school, was to face the police in an occupation. Apart from that, he has to deal with laws that disadvantage workers. He would never get this kind of practical information and labour skills in an ordinary law office or working as a lawyer for an ordinary company. It is also interesting to note that he is now doing a masters course in social economics and labour at the UNICAMP while continuing to work part-time for Flaskô.

Tosinho, another blue-collar worker interviewed, was asked about his learning process in the factory. Tosinho mentions how much he had learned about plastic (the raw material they use). He says proudly that now he knows how to distinguish the good from the bad plastic. He also adds, "I learned about the fight and I started to like it. Many people help us and we help other workers too, like in the factory in Caieiras".[20]

In terms of analysis, a clear 'language' has developed and has been used in the struggle.  Interviews show that workers all know the factory's history and although interviews were conducted individually, they all have a coherent discourse. Every person interviewed can explain each step of their strategy to nationalize the factory. Their slogan is "Flaskô: a worker-run factory" and those interviewed feel this slogan in their daily life.  They clearly feel that they manage the factory and they make the decisions. On a tour of the factory, Manú showed the researcher a machine that they had fixed.  They had no money to pay a company to get it fixed so they did it themselves, with the guidance of an engineer. The words he used, such as 'guidance', show that they had control of that action and participated in the repair work.

Another slogan easily perceptible in Flaskô workers' discourse is, "We don't want to be anyone's boss." This goes side by side with their main goal: they want to be a national factory under workers' control and not a cooperative or Flaskô shareholders, because, as explained above, they do not want to become one more capitalist enterprise. Alexandre recalls a meeting in which a cooperative member told him that they were going the wrong way with the cooperative; that the cooperative members were exploiting their kids, making them work to get more money, and that the cooperative members were competing among themselves.

Flaskô workers' strength is their political action. Therefore, the main challenge to the continuity of Flaskô is to keep their movement, to strengthen their mobilization power inside and outside the factory. As Manú says, they run the factory politically. It is by political means that they avoid the selling of the factory machines. And it is politically, through mobilization, petitions, demonstrations, that they may be able to obtain the declaration of public interest from the municipality in order to meet their main objective of becoming a national factory under workers' control. While there is no company quite like this (in legal terms), it is not forbidden. They also know that even if they achieve this, they will have to keep struggling. Otherwise, they may lose control of the factory and become a national company like any other – run by capitalist laws.

## Final Remarks

When one looks from the outside, Flaskô seems like an ordinary factory. However, when one reaches the main gate one can see the banner declaring, "Flaskô: A Worker-run Factory." The political mobilization, law and culture departments are run by well-educated and politicized people.

Visiting the factory, it is possible to realize that this factory has financial problems; some machines are not working, some rooms and other areas stand empty and silent. However, one can also see that blue-collar workers are there operating the machines, producing tanks and barrels. When you ask them about their job they know how to explain it. The same holds for the goods they produce and how the factory is managed.

Young politicized people are also part of Flaskô; Flaskô needs them because they contribute to Flaskô's sustainability. Also, if capital can hire the best engineers and think-tanks, why shouldn't Flaskô workers wish to have skilled and educated people committed to their cause, on their side? They are all in the same boat and they open their door to everyone that wants to join their struggle. This is probably the way it should be; workers, activists, leftists, academics, all on one side – the workers' side – against capitalism.

Nonetheless, Flaskô is forced to follow some capitalist rules. If they do not have a competitive price they will not sell, so, before raising workers' wages, they have to consider if they will have resources available to keep paying water and energy bills. Moreover, they are also paying for the former administration's debts, although in installments. This 'concession' was necessary, because the risk was that the State would close the factory. Thus, the workers understand that they are still working within the capitalist system but they do their best to fight against it.

Flaskô may not be 'the alternative' that alone will overcome the capitalist system, but workers have managed to keep their jobs and income, improve their living conditions by working less while continuously questioning private propriety and capitalist laws, inside and outside the factory. At the moment, Flaskô is the only worker-run factory in Brazil. It may be small but it is a very real experience for the workers who make their living in Flaskô, and a very inspiring initiative for those who get the chance to know their fight.

## Acknowledgement

## Notes

[1] From US$8.00 to US$13.33 (exchange rate at that time).

[2] According to DIEESE the average time a worker is unemployed and looking for job in Brazil varies from 10 to 15 months in the last decade, depending on the period. For more info http://www.dieese.org.br/pedbd/DadosPed?acao=CONSULTA&tabela=9.

[3] *Corrente Sindical da Esquerda Marxista* is a leftist pro-labor group inside PT (workers party). Although they disagree with the main group (in power nowadays) they understand that one should fight inside because CUT is still the biggest Confederation and has key principles although they have been slightly cast to the side. (Alexandre's explanation via email interview on 8 August 2011).

[4] Interview via email on 22 July, 2011.

[5] Interview in April 2011.

[6] Translation from João's speech in Flaskô.

[7] There are three shifts, from 6am to 12pm, from 12pm to 6pm and from 12am to 6am; the shift from 6PM to 12AM was abolished because energy provision is much more expensive in this period.

[8] Interview via email on 12 and 22 July2011.

[9] In Brazil the company can fire a worker up until three months after hiring without reason and without paying any compensation. Those three months are called the 'experience period'.

[10] A bankruptcy trustee is a person appointed by the government or by the creditors involved in a bankruptcy case. The trustee gathers the debtor's non-exempt property, manages the funds from the sale of those assets, and then pays expenses and distributes the balance to creditors.

[11] Equivalent to the sum of US$20,738.29 (calculating the exchange rate at that time).

[12] According to IPEA (2007), the difference between the lowest and the highest wages in developed countries is 20 times (OECD) and in Brazil it is 1714 times. The highest salary is R$120.000 and the lowest is R$70.00.

[13] *Confederação Nacional do ramo Químico* – National Confederation of Chemical Trade Union.

[14] Interview via email on the 12 and 22 of July 2011.
[15] Interview via email on 22 July 2011.
[16] The majority of them were off work due to repetitive strain injury.
[17] Interview conducted in April 2011.
[18] Interview via email on 22 July 2011.
[19] See: http://www.universidadepopular.org/pages/en/homepage.php.
[20] Caieiras is a city in which Flasko supported another factory occupation. Interview conducted in April 2011.

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# Worker's Self-Management Initiative: Caldesa

# 4

*Daniel Hawkins*

## Background Context

The Colombian company, Carburo y Derivados[1] S.A. (Colcarburo), was founded in 1961 by the Mexican *multilatina*, Industria Petroquímica, in the township of La Sierra, in the municipality of Nare, department of Antioquia[2], sub-region of the Magdalena Medio.[3] The company, like its counterpart, Cementos del Nare, quickly became the economic mainstay of the local community, generating much of the social and organizational dynamics of the municipality of Nare. Colcarburo, as one of the two principal companies of the zone, quickly became a focal point within the broader socio-political developments of the region. On one side, the considerable material benefits the company's production and distribution of carbide and on a smaller scale lime ensured that it became a key sphere of influence for political factions, most especially the Conservative Party which was ultra right-wing and counted on considerable support in the area. On the other side, the company's employees quickly recognized the strategic importance of the firm in the wider community as well as the need to ensure that the management of the firm and the working conditions were more beneficial to the workers and, more generally, the community as a whole.

The workers formed the trade union, Sintracolcarburos which worked in close collaboration with the national trade union, SUTIMAC[4]. The former grouped together many of the Colombian workers in the cement industry, including those labouring in Cementos Nare. Despite the important presence of both these firms in their respective industries, the municipality of Puerto Nare was gripped by a state of seemingly perpetual economic crisis, a fact which led to more militancy from the respective trade unions and, on the opposite side, to further repression and violence against them.

Indeed, the decades-long civil war that engulfed much of the country after the assassination of the left-leaning Liberal politician, Jorge Elicier Gaitán in 1948, leading to what was termed *La Violencia* left deep gashes on the population inhabiting the Magdalena Medio region of the country.

The persecution of leftist-leaning trade unionists, a feature of the period of *La Violencia* was extended in the mid 1980s after the founding of the *Unión Patriótica* (UP),[5] a political party that was tied to the Guerrilla Group, Las FARC as a means of entering the democratic terrain of Colombian life. In the following decade, alongside the assassination of dozens of trade unionists from SUTIMAC, at least 11 union representatives or workers from *Colcarburos*,[6] many of whom were also members of the UP, were killed by right-wing paramilitary factions together with members of the Colombian Armed Forces.[7] But more than the direct slaying of trade unionists who pressured for a different socio-political and economic order in the country, the climate of fear that prevailed in the region ensured that many union activists, alongside other social movement actors, were forced to flee to different regions of Colombia, ensuring that the trade unions endured a significant decrease not only in terms of their organizational capacity but also in terms of their ability to foster new community leaders.

In the democratic mayoral and councilor elections of 1986, the UP managed to win 2 council seats in Puerto Nare, a major political rupture which led to a seismic increase in the political persecution aimed at all UP-sympathetic groups and organizations. The assassinations and disappearances exacerbated the socio-political conflict in the region, leading directly to a collective work stoppage, in January 1988, organized by SUTIMAC at Cementos Nare and Sintracolcarburos, involving more than 19000 workers in total across the country.[8] In the ensuing three weeks, a further five union directives and/or workers were murdered and one was seriously wounded.

In February of the same year, the collective group of workers (approximately 900 from Cementos Nare and Colcarburos), supported by over 100 from the Proyecto Carare – Opón decided to undertake a complete stoppage of the firms until further notice. Two other cement firms also underwent a work stoppage due to the support of their employees.

The stoppage lasted until mid March after which the different parties agreed to a deal in which the companies assured the unions that they would not take reprisals against the workers' organizations involved while the workers agreed not to initiate more stoppages. Unfortunately, this agreement was never applied in full. Worker persecution continued, especially that directed against the trade union directives. In the following years, numerous unionists from the two main firms in Puerto Nare were assassinated while the productivity of Colcarburos fell exponentially.

Finally, in 1993, the across-the-board tensions rose to a climax and Sintracolcarburos voted unanimously to begin a strike. This came after the at-work assassination of three of the company's unionists, who were approached at their work spots, taken outside and murdered in cold blood in front of their working comrades. The strike lasted six months and ended with the company entering a process of bankruptcy. During the strike, the numerous attempts to negotiate with the firm were ruptured by internal conflicts within the trade union. On one side, the classist, militant elements refused to enter a definite process of conciliation while worker persecution continued. On the other side, the management-leaning unionists pushed for a conciliated end to the strike and a recommencement of normal production.

During the roughly ten years of heightened union and social movement persecution in the region, the Sintracolcarburos trade union experienced a dramatic internal restructuring, as many of the most militant and classist members were either killed, wounded or forced to flee the area. As a consequence, the ideological stance of the union gradually changed and as such its internal unity began to fragment. The two plants of the firm, the main one in La Sierra (Puerto Nare) and the other in Zipiquirá, Cundinamarca, roughly shared numerical parity in terms of union-affiliated workers, with 150 affiliates in Nare and roughly 110 in Zipiquirá, at the end of the 1980s.

More than demanding an end to union repression, the workers at the two plants called for a 35% increase in their salary, and an end to the growing trend of the subcontracting of workers. Nonetheless, not one of the demands was met and with the growing dislocation within the union, any hope of conciliation was cast aside. The firm, which in its heyday produced 90% of the country's carbide utilized in the national metal-mechanic industry,[9] had now been left to waste away, leaving in its wake 160 families in the Sierra as well as a similar number at its plant in Cundinamarca all with very uncertain futures.

## The period between the firm's demise and its reemergence as a worker-run enterprise

The socio-economic importance of the firm ensured that its demise and liquidation would bring with it significant political upheaval in the area and beyond. Numerous ex-workers and unionists interviewed for this research spoke of the moral demise both in terms of managerial conduct and that of the workers during the last decade of the firm's existence. While the administrative team had long implemented the precarious practice of 'milking the books', many workers engaged in practices ranging from the loitering and stealing of materials to dual production as a means of increasing their daily 'booty'.

At the time of the firm's liquidation, there were 86 pensioners, who had not received their pensions for six months. They would become the main losers in the ensuing debate about what to do with the firm and the workers in light of the vital role it had played in the sustenance and reproduction of the local community in The Sierra. Another point of concern had to do with the economic focus of the firm if and when it returned to production. While carbide had been the principal product since the plant began operations, due to technological advances and the gradual wear-and-tear of machinery, without any project of capital renovation the firm's capital base had become almost completely obsolete. This, combined with the highly energy intense process of carbide processing, and its rising cost, also led to the need for a reformulated economic strategy for the firm.

## The political negotiation to restructure and reopen the plants of Colcarburos

The high local and departmental political costs of letting one of the principal economic sources of a region fall apart at its seams ensured that the government would at least study any possibilities available to reinitiate production at Colcarburos.

The governmental Institute for Industrial Promotion (*Instituto de Fomento Industrial, IFI*), after consultation with the firm's trade union, decided to contract a feasibility study to determine whether the plant at Puerto Nare was in fact viable as an economic business. The study, supported by both the Mayoral office of Puerto Nare and the Departmental Government of Antioquia, concluded by way of justifying the continuity of the firm, under different parameters and with a different productive focus.

The negotiation process, directed by the *Superintendencia de Sociedades*,[10] based on the excessive accumulation of worker's back pay and social security defaults, estimated the firm's debts at approximately $3 thousand 900 million Colombian pesos.[11] As there was no private or public business interested in purchasing the firm and paying off the worker's debt, the Superintendencia, after negotiating with lawyers from the National Trade Union Confederation of Colombian Workers (La CUT), decided that the only feasible option would be to pass the firm and its assets over to the workers.

The newly restructured 'worker-owned' firm, called *Cales y Derivados de la Sierra S.A.* (Caldesa) was founded in 1994 with the workers becoming the shareholders to the tune of 84.7% with the remaining 15.3% being owned by the State. However, there would still be a considerable amount of clarification and conciliation to be done before actual production could recommence, this time based not on carbide but on lime, used for the fabrication of citric acid, paper, asphalt,

potable water, in the steel industry, paints and leather, as well as the elaboration of sugar. Indeed, it was not until 1997 that the new firm, assisted by a capital injection to the tune of $400 million Colombian pesos by the IFI, actually recommenced production.

# Organization/Formation

The newly formed firm was organized according to traditional trade union structural coherence. The company directors were elected in the Trade Union's Assembly; the Directors thereafter nominated, after consultation with the State's representatives, a Managing Director and the administrative personnel.

Although the new firm, Caldesa, is predominantly worker-owned it is not a Cooperative but rather a private enterprise controlled by the trade union, Sintracaldesa with minority State shares. The firm's market base is 100% domestic.

## *Structures, processes and strategies*

Although the new firm is formally structured on a democratic, trade union, representative model, in practice, this structure is riddled with contradictions and power hierarchies. Firstly, the interviews conducted by the research team evidenced that ever since the new firm commenced production, there has been a significant lack of rotation of the Directing Board coupled with a suspicious tendency in which certain Directors also hold administrative, managerial roles, leading to worrying conflicts of interests in terms of the firm's daily management. As well as this, the Managing Director, Rodrigo Echeverri, elected by the Board of Directors (which includes the government representative), was granted the governmental award (promoted by the Ex President, Álvaro Uribe Vélez, at that time, Governor of Antioquia) of the region's Manager of the Year, even though he had utilized the highly questionable practice of *decapitalizing* the new firm via handing out its utilities in the form of credits to workers as a means of obtaining cheap political points.

The productive restructuring of the company was, sadly, not accompanied by any meaningful process of worker training in terms of mapping the firm's economic development and there was an obvious lack of leadership within the trade union thereby ensuring that "the firm's reigns were left to ail about aimlessly in the wind".[12]

In the words of the appointed Manager of the worker's firm, Echeverri: "The most difficult part of initiating the firm was the governance issues. We knew how to do things but the participative process is difficult. Entrepreneurial formation was

the key for us."[13]  Such a quote illustrates that it takes more than merely a change from individual private ownership and control of production to a collective form of ownership to actually restructure the 'nature' of a productive enterprise. More than to speak of the abstract nature of a productive enterprise, one needs to analyze the nature of the product produced and the process of its production to see if indeed there is a difference between a capitalist-owned and controlled enterprise in which social relations of exploitation underlie the creation and exchange of the products made and a worker-controlled enterprise in which, theoretically, the end product is not the result of a double-edged process of exploitation.[14] This, more than any other 'formal' differences in production relations is the key issue when evaluating the extent to which any workers' self-management (*auto-gestión*) enterprise actually constitutes an alternative mode of production.

While one can never expect that conflicts of power completely disappear after the initiation of a collective worker owned and run enterprise, one would assume that such an alternative form of production would bring with it new visions, identities and strategies that are completely at odds with the privately-run profit motive that is embedded in the capitalist productive relation.

The institutional mechanisms set up to enable a transparent form of monitoring of the decisions taken by the Board of Directors, the Management and the administrative personnel did not fulfill their functions and as such, despite the economic projections of the company being quite promising, its debts grew precipitously, illustrating the lack of compromise of the administrative staff who while employees of the company were not shareholders and displayed no substantive link to its fortunes.

## The problems of accountability and decision-making at Caldesa

As already briefly outlined, the firm's organizational structure, rooted in a form of participative democracy, was more rhetorical than substantive. The Directors, voted into their position by the workers via the trade union assembly, soon began ignoring such democratic processes by organizing their perpetuation in directive positions. Two workers stated that although the worker's assembly convened once a year to elect the Board of Directors, in the first nine years of the firm's existence the board had not changed at all.

This complete division of roles within the company and the constitution of the worker's firm along the lines of a privately-run, rigidly hierarchical enterprise, in which the democratic participative process came to reflect one similar to a bourgeois parliamentary system rather than one grounded in direct democracy, gradually shook the foundations of the 'collective basis' to this worker's project.

Although quantitatively, the firm grew notably in terms of its ability to hire workers: moving from the 26 original employees in 1997 to over a 120 at the mid-point of the first decade of the 21st century, its debts also grew exponentially and there was no policy put in place to remedy one of the most structural problems that had plagued Colcarburos in its over thirty years of production: archaic machinery and a consequent drain on productivity and efficiency in production.

## Connecting the firm to the local community

Sadly, from the point of view of strengthening a worker's owned and controlled enterprise, the Caldesa firm and its shareholders have never thought to initiate a project that took the firm beyond the factory's doors as a means of linking it with the wider community. Although the SUTIMAC trade union which affiliated workers from Cementos Nare had founded a local initiative as far back as 1979, the Multi-active Cooperative of Nare (Coomuna), which sought to alleviate the economic depression of the municipality via the trade union offering community services to the local population, as we have narrated, this initiative fell before the plague of union and leftist repression in the following years. Caldesa managed to expand its workforce but, so far, it has not thought to develop a strategy of social development alongside one of economic development.

## Outcomes

After conducting in-depth interviews with numerous workers either directly involved in the Caldesa enterprise or highly knowledgeable about its experiences as well as a two-day visit to the plant in La Sierra, it became evident that, at least at the beginning of the birth of the worker's firm, the only 'vision' that had been created was one that ensured that the firm could produce and sell lime sufficiently to be able to pay salaries, bonuses and running costs so as to be able to continue functioning. The numerous workers' interviewed stated that there was a structural lack of know-how in terms of how to manage a company on the part of the Board of Directors. Many of the shareholders were illiterate or when they were not, they did not have any professional formation. Rather than basing the management of the firm along lines of efficiency, the Board of Directors took decisions based on political alliances, leading to a misuse of both human resources and time.

Such political factions also led to further deterioration of the firm in terms of being an alternative and 'collective' initiative. At one stage, due to discontent with the way the firm was being run, numerous worker-shareholders attempted to

form a new trade union within the company but this effort was thwarted by political maneuvers within the Board of Directors.

In terms of broader union involvement in the development of the Caldesa initiative, while there was an initial burst of collaborative energy, this lasted only until the new firm was officially consecrated. Indeed, CUT-Antioquia was involved in the negotiation process of the constitution of Caldesa, mainly through its assistance with legal advisors who helped resolve the impasse that had been historic between the private owners and the trade union. Nonetheless, this collaboration did not continue thereon after, at least in a concerted manner. Rather, the new firm set about on its path and there was little further association with the broader Colombian trade union movement, given that the new firm was one of only a few long-lasting worker-owned and run businesses in the country.

## An Analysis of the Constraining Factors of the Caldesa Experience

In terms of a concrete list of the principle setbacks that have faced the Caldesa experience, we would need to include numerous factors:

1. The lack of a trade union leadership and activist basis, something that has its roots in the violent persecution of unionists during the 1980s and 1990s which, as noted, led to the almost total decimation of union organization and autonomy within Colcarburos. Thereinafter, there was a great degree of improvisation on the part of the worker shareholders in terms of how to set up and effectively run their new enterprise.

2. A lack of start-up capital. Although the IFI injected a relatively small sum into the new firm, this was not spent effectively and nor was its use regulated by the workers' assembly. Consequently, the firm could not capitalize on its lucrative position in the lime production industry via efficient lines of production and distribution. One interviewee spoke of the continued reliance on one oven fabricated in 1928 and now completely obsolete in terms of its appropriateness for the type of production and client demand the company now faces.

3. A lack of worker-union solidarity and collectivity. Instead of trying to develop workers' consciousness around a collective and alternative workers' project, the old lines of fast individual gain proved to be stronger and the firm was gradually driven into economic degeneration. One interviewee told the story of how on one occasion a lorry driver transporting a large load of lime for

sale 'arranged' for his own robbery as a means of 'splitting the profits of the load'; something the firm absorbed with no further inquiry into the matter.

4. A lack of interest, within the broader trade union movement, of trying to train and educate workers in developing and running alternative productive strategies. Numerous union sources spoke of the continuous pattern according to which, a firm gets into significant economic difficulties, resulting in huge sums of workers' back-pay accumulating. Later, after State intervention, the firm may be passed over to the workers but thereon after, the only policy that is usually adopted is either to search for a new buyer at agreeable terms or to begin temporal production to sustain incomes until a buyer finally emerges.

Nonetheless, examining many of the Argentinian experiences of worker self-management, this lack of technical and administrative know-how on the part of previously manual labourers does not appear to be a negative factor. On the contrary, one Argentinian worker stated that it was a true plus of such initiatives that they could eliminate the division between manual and intellectual labour. This was based in the implicit eradication of the hierarchies that usually go hand-in-hand with such different productive or managerial roles. In the words of one labourer from a metal-industrial worker's owned firm in Argentina: "Nobody is walking behind you, watching you, following you. I believe that you have more freedom and you work better because you're relaxed" (Bialakowsky et al., 2004: 241).

## Development of Critical Consciousness, Transformative Capacities and 'Language' of Struggle

Many of the older, ex-workers and trade unionists of the Colcarburos firm spoke of the high levels of worker solidarity and collective consciousness during the years of intense struggle and union persecution in the area. *Compañero,* a remnant of the Cuban Revolution and still the most common manner of inter-unionist salutation maintained, in those days, its revolutionary links to definitive social change. However, it seems that the now ingrained structural and organizational hierarchies of Caldesa ensure that rather than a collective vision of worker solidarity and hopes to take small concrete steps to gradually change the entire social system of productive relations, in this firm, any concerted attempts to reinvigorate the initiative so that it assumes its 'formal' mark of a collective social experience, are usually co-opted by the managerial structures of hierarchy.

Workers' assemblies have turned into formalistic steps to ensure a nominal degree of democracy within the enterprise but there is not a profound sense of worker dynamism; the discussions, proposals and heated debate that are generally

associated with progressive and collective initiatives, rooted in direct participation of the subjects involved are notoriously missing from the Caldesa experience.

Of course, one cannot completely negate any existence of a collective form of consciousness in the Caldesa enterprise. Obviously, the specificities of the region and its horrifically violent past, lead to different and less explicit demonstrations of 'alternative' identities and worker consciousness. In Colombia in general, the almost culturally-ingrained anti-unionist sentiment, carefully cultivated by over a century of ultra-conservative, pro-business ideology, especially in the Antioquian department, exacerbated by a practice of unionist annihilation in the past 25 years — which has resulted in the murder of 2.857 unionists and 218 cases of forced displacement, or 63% of world unionist murders in the last decade[15] — has led to a climate of fear in which normal unionism does not exist. Consequently, being able to cultivate a sense of collective worker consciousness in the country is a highly onerous task.

The sole fact that Colombian trade unionists and specifically, unionists in the paramilitary-usurped region of the Magdalena Medio, have continued their struggle despite the material threats to their lives that this entails, is a strong measure of their commitment to following an alternative consciousness, grounded in the emancipation of their objective and subjective subaltern agency in "actually existing" productive relations. A few of the ex and present workers and unionists at the Caldesa plant reiterated this fact during interviews, stating that, unfortunately, one thing is to project a worker-centred consciousness, another is to see that this prospers in concrete conditions. These conditions, structured in historic relations and practices of "winner gets all", and a culture propelled by flagrant violence and persecution instills a general sense that one must cheat in order to get ahead and that loyalties lie only in family.

In the concrete context of the Caldesa, worker-owned enterprise, it is safe to conclude that while a critical consciousness may exist for specific subjects, this has not moved into the general sphere and definitely has not managed to penetrate the predominant aura of business as usual at the plant over the past 14 years. Sadly, the internal disputes that were evident during the long drawn-out period of Colcarburo's bankruptcy and restructuring, were never adequately confronted: the 86 pensioners who were implicitly excluded from the negotiation process of the old firm's liquidation, became vocal dissidents of the new project; the organizational hierarchies set in place to 'manage' the new Caldesa enterprise, over time, brought about a rigid segmentation of roles and authority within the firm, completely subverting the democratic mechanisms that had been set-in-place to attempt to counter the innate logic of unequal power distribution that corrupts many collective development initiatives.

Alongside these organizational regressions, there was never a coherent strategy developed to confront the multifaceted complications that inevitably seep

into an alternative 'non-capitalist' production experience. There were no attempts made to cultivate alternative discourses amongst both the workers and within the broader community and the Colombian trade union movement in general. Consequently, the workers'-owned enterprise of Caldesa never really set out to consummate a truly radical and alternative form of social-production. While ownership passed 'formally' from the private capitalist to the collective trade union organization, the firm's managerial debacle and the autonomy gradually obtained by the 'union directive elite' ensured that there would be no conclusive change in how and why the enterprise would operate.

At the time of writing Caldesa is facing a major internal economic crisis. The 120 workers laboring at the firm are seven months behind in their wage payments and the firm is on the brink of liquidation. Various activists mentioned that the powerful Antioquian-based ANDI business sindicate is interested in purchasing the firm as a means of strengthening its grip on the zone and linking the enterprise to Cementos del Nare. The union, for its part, after years of facing internal disputes, production and salary shortages and internal practices of deceit and extortion, seems to be content to await a new process of take-over and restructuring, in the hope of landing a good payout package for the shareholder's actions.

It seems that one of Colombia's longest-running workers'-owned productive initiatives could be on the brink of its own self-annihilation.

## Conclusions

Reflecting on the Caldesa experience of workers' self-management, it is important to delve into the workers' thoughts on lessons learnt, the success and/or failure of the initiative and why and what the near future holds for the enterprise.

Firstly, as already mentioned numerous times during the case-study report, on a general note the Caldesa initiative, now in its 14th year, has not been as successful a project as perhaps was first indicated, especially when one considers that, contrary to most of the Colombian *autogestión* experiments, Caldesa has never suffered from not having buyers for the lime it produces. Indeed, the various workers' interviewed in the case study all emphasized the point that whatever the firm produces is bought in the Colombian market. Rather than suffering from a lack of buyers or delayed payment, the firm has been hit by its inability to produce sufficient and stable quantities of lime. Indeed, for the year 2011, due to antiquated machinery as well as poor production management practices, the firm has only managed to produce an average of roughly 200 thousand tones of lime per month, way below what it could produce and sell when all its machinery is functioning and all of its workers are labouring.

Apart from the quite alluring market place within which the firm operates, the overall management and direction of Caldesa has been a failure, continuing on from the troubled economic existence of the previous privately-owned Colcarburos company. This has been a result, primarily, of the weak and merely formalistic democratic structures that were set up at the company's birth in 1997. Indeed, as emphasized in interviews with two workers-shareholders in the firm, the Workers' Assembly, supposedly the grounding structure of the firm functions discursively but not in practice;[16] it was stated that the assemblies were formed not as open spaces in which each and every worker and shareholder voiced his/her concerns or opinions but rather as a small amphitheatre for power struggles between different shareholder factions, i.e. shareholders elect a representative for the assemblies and these representatives are widely spread across the country (they come from Medellín, Bogotá, Boyacá and even further) and so at the actual assembly the 'actual workers-shareholders' presently labouring at the company form a minority, being outmuscled by the representatives who are either now pensioners whom have moved into different spheres of the economy. Consequently, most decisions reached, in terms of electing the new Directive Board are taken due to particular regional interests rather than the concrete needs facing the company and its continuation.

The semi exclusion of the workers in the key decisions of the company also stems from the sharp divisions between the shareholders in terms of what the future holds for Caldesa. While many of the present workers wish to undertake new processes to increase production — for instance there are plans underway to construct a new oven that would considerably bolster production in the coming months — many shareholders simply wish to sell the firm to the first company that makes a reasonable offer and await their hand out.

An event that highlights the gradual manner in which Caldesa's workers have been excluded from the main decision-making processes of the firm is the fact that in 2010 a group of workers, completely disenchanted with the firm's precarious economic situation, attempted to form a trade union within the firm, as a means of opening-up space for the workers to participate in the decision-making processes of the Board of Directors.[17] This effort, although thwarted by sleek management maneuvers, as well as its inability to convince at least 25 workers to join (a numerical constraint supported by Colombia's Substantive Work Code), expresses the far-from 'transparent' way in which the firm is run: why would a workers'-run enterprise need a trade union through which to protect workers' rights and working conditions?

Perhaps the flaw in the firm's supposedly democratic structure stems from the fact that it was built and directed, from the beginning, by the very leaders of Colcarburo's trade union, *Sintracolcarburo*, many of whom had a history of questionable practices in terms of how they conducted union business.[18] Of course, the poor or questionable decision-making of these long-term union leaders could stem from the systematic annihilation of the most promising union and political

leaders of the firm and region in the intermittent twenty or more years, a fact well illustrated in the report's beginnings.

## Reflections on Future Initiatives

While the failure of the Caldesa experience, in terms of its inability to create a true "alternative" model of production based on open and direct democracy, shared control and community involvement, appears too evident to doubt, three of the workers involved in the experiment spoke of the manner in which it has taught many lessons in terms of what not to do.

The experience, as a whole, has been most worthwhile in their experience because at least it has opened up the workers' eyes to the difficulties of running an enterprise and the need to really plan for a company's founding, rather than going along 'for the ride' as has been the case for so many involved. The main problem with this concrete initiative has been with the huge gap between the workers' formal position as shareholders and co-owners and their implicit sidelining from the back-door deals conducted by the union elite and their managerial pawns. Despite the firm's solid prospects at its beginning, it has been gradually enveloped in debt, presently being unable to pay workers on the due date in kind. A good but sad illustration of this economic demise is the fact that for the last 10 months workers have received a type of 'food coupon' redeemable at local stores due to the inability of the firm to actually pay the wages. Meanwhile, a particular transporting firm, with dubious ties to one of Caldesa's directors, has received its payments without any delay or questions being asked.

Concerning the question of whether the workers involved in the Caldesa experiment would repeat the episode, the three workers interviewed at the end of June 2011 stated that they would because, fundamentally, it was a question of "let the boat sink without a whimper or get in and try and save what one could".[19] There was no other alternative available except to maybe migrate and look for work elsewhere. While the decisions concerning the way in which the new firm would be organized and run have been highly controversial, this does not take away from the experiment as a whole.

Regarding the position of La CUT vis-à-vis the diverse experiences of processes of *autogestión*, it is not correct that the Trade Union Confederation has been completely absent from these processes but rather that its stance has been one of legal-juridical accompaniment rather than trying to develop broad-based support for these initiatives and to publicize them as alternatives to capitalist exploitation. In the words of the President of the CUT's Antioquian Subdirective, Carlos Julio Díaz, most of these cases have had the primordial goal of "salvaging employment temporally or salvaging workers' pensions";[20] they have not been

radical and/or revolutionary attempts to restructure the paradigm of production or to empower workers to take hold of their destinies collectively, beyond the capitalist logic, as was the case in many of the Argentinean experiments of *autogestión*. Nevertheless, at the national level of the CUT, there has been an attempt to put together a data base of processes of *autogestión* as well as an effort to strengthen the economic possibilities of many of these firms, so that they could withstand the hostile entrepreneurial context that faced most of them, especially concerning a lack of capital and a lack of administrative know-how. A study conducted on behalf of the CUT by researchers at the *Universidad de los Andes*, Bogotá offered an economic diagnosis of firms under worker management or co-management as a means of delineating the possibilities each firm had to continue production.

## Notes

[1] Spanish for carbide and its derivatives.

[2] Colombia is divided politically into 32 departments, Antioquia is the biggest in terms of landmass.

[3] The Magdalena River is Colombia's longest running river, beginning from the Caribbean Ocean and running until the municipality of Honda, passing in its stretch through ten of Colombia's departments and covering more than 20% of the national territory.

[4] In Spanish: Sindicato Único de Trabajadores de la Industria de Materiales de la Construcción (Sole Trade Union of Workers in the Industrial and Construction Sectors).

[5] In English: the Patriotic Union.

[6] Alfonso Miguel Lozano Pérez, Pablo Emilio Córdoba Madrigal, Carlos Alfonzo Tobón Zapata, Juan Rivera, Gustavo Alberto Bedoya Duque, Jorge Iván Bedoya Gómez, Ángel Parra Zapata, Orlando Gaviria Reina Ester Escobar Parra and Rubén Darío Cádavid.

[7] For a brief overview of the unionist persecution in the 1980s and 1990s in the municipality of Nare, see: http://www.sutimac.org/php/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=151&Itemid=49 (consulted, 25 May 2011).

[8] Information obtained via worker interviews, conducted in December 2010.

[9] See: "Asesinado otro trabajador de Colcarburos", in: El Tiempo, Nación, 6 May 1993.

[10] This is the autonomous administrative governmental entity that inspects, monitors and controls commercial enterprises in Colombia.

[11] An amount roughly equivalent to: US$2.175, 000.00.

[12] This comment was made by one of the former workers, Ricardo, in the Caldesa firm, interview conducted in December 2010, in Puerto Nare.

[13] Cited in: Correa, Juliana H. "Una de cal y otras de arena", El Colombiano, 2004.

[14] See: Bialakowsky, Alberto et al., (2004), "Empresas recuperadas: cooperación y conflicto en las nuevas formas de autogestión de los trabajadores", in: Revista Venezolana de Gerencia (RVG), Año 9. N°26, pp.229-253.

[15] Data taken from the Human Rights' Violation database of the Escuela Nacional Sindical (ENS): www.ens.org.co.

[16] Specifically, in reference to the interviews with Domingo Ciro and Carlos Saez, conducted in Puerto Nare, 3 May 2011.

[17] This point was made by Alberto, a worker at the firm, via a telephone interview made on 6 May 2011.

[18] One of the worker interviewed spoke of the manner in which the union leaders, after collecting the dues or other benefits obtained from the old firm, would then head off to Medellín to "party it up at the union's expense".

[19] A statement attributable to one of the workers initially envolved in the bankruptcy of Colcarburos and its reappearance as the workers' run, Caldesa firm.

[20] Interview with Carlos Julio Díaz, 4 November 2010, in Medellín.

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### *Interviews*

Domingo Ciro and Carlos Saez, 3 May 2011, Puerto Nare.

Alberto Giraldo, via telephone, 6 May 2011.

Carlos Julio Díaz, 4 November 2010, Medellín.

Ricardo Velasquez, December 2010, Puerto Nare.

# Agência de Desenvolvimento Solidário (Solidarity Development Agency)

<div style="text-align: right">5</div>

*Bulend Karadag*
*Clair Siobhan Ruppert*

## Economic and Political Context

The deeper integration of Brazil in the global economy in the early 1990s placed the country's industries in stiff competition with the industries of other countries and led to a dramatic restructuring of the Brazilian economy. The need to increase the level of competitiveness of industries amidst rapid changes in technology drove companies to pursue flexibility measures in terms of work and production processes which resulted in job losses. During this period, Brazil adopted several neoliberal policies, such as inflation stabilization, high interest rates and low wages. These policies fueled a decline in domestic consumption and in investment levels which, in turn, led to rising unemployment.

Against this difficult economic situation for the working class in Brazil, a debate within the trade union movement on solidarity economy emerged in 1997, as an alternative to the closure of many companies and the high rates of unemployment. The *Central Unica dos Trabalhadores* (CUT) was among the main actors promoting this debate. CUT believes that the labour movement should have not only a reactive role, but also it should propose alternatives defending workers' interests and rights.

The recovery of bankrupt companies or companies facing liquidity problems and the creation of cooperatives in different sectors as a means of maintaining employment and income has proven to be a successful experience in Brazil. This means workers' knowledge, even if restricted only to labor and to the fragmented logic of production, is essential. With the appropriate training and qualification, workers can also assume management activities in an efficient way, starting from the knowledge of their operative activities. Currently, there are many examples

showing that by organizing in self-managed cooperatives, workers can maintain and generate dignified jobs and income.

Thousands of initiatives known as 'popular ventures' have been constituted in Brazil in the form of cooperatives, associations, informal groups or micro-businesses. Serving as alternative sources of employment and income, they have combined workers' expertise and willingness to participate in the transformation of the reality of unemployment, and precarious economic and social conditions.

In 2003, during Lula's first period as president, the so-called solidarity economy was transformed into a governmental policy and the National Secretariat for Solidarity Economy (SENAES) was created under the Brazilian Ministry of Labour and Employment. In 2006, the Solidarity Economy Atlas of the SENAES identified 14,954 enterprises (cooperatives, associations, micro-businesses, etc) of solidarity economy in 2,274 municipalities, directly involving 1,251,882 workers, with official revenue of more than US$3.3 billion.

## Type of Initiative and Mission

The *Agência de Desenvolvimento Solidário* or ADS (Solidarity Development Agency) was created in 1999 by CUT, together with *Rede Interuniversitária de Estudos e Pesquisas sobre o Trabalho - Unitrabalho* (Interuniversity Labor Study and Research Network); *Departamento Intersindical de Estatísticas e Estudos Socioeconômicos* or DIEESE (Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies); *Federação de Órgãos para Assistência Social e Educacional* or FASE (Federation of Institutions for Social and Educational Assistance) and other organizations, as a permanent structure of CUT.

ADS was the result of several discussions about the new configuration of the labour market and organization of production in Brazil, the need to constitute new references of creating jobs and income, and alternatives of development based on the principles of the solidarity economy and sustainable development.

According to Almir Alves, advisor of ADS, ADS is a 'promoting' agency and not a representative organization, so it does not have affiliates and it is part of CUT's structure. The ADS's relation with the cooperatives is built through the demands of the labour movement of CUT.[1] Usually these demands come from various groups of workers that contact local structures of CUT and seek support or help on how to get better organized or on how to create a cooperative. Sometimes, they have already heard about the work that ADS does and sometimes not.

The main mission of ADS is to promote the establishment, strengthening and self-management of joint ventures, aiming at generating jobs and income through the social, economic and political organization of workers in a process of solidarity economy and sustainable development.

In order to implement its mission, ADS provides technical training, feasibility studies, market studies, business planning, and business and environmental diagnostics. At the same time, it assists in the registration of solidarity economy organizations, in the sourcing of funds for starting-up cooperatives, in marketing and in trading of the cooperative products. Overall, ADS aims at contributing to a democratic society, organized on the basis of solidarity and participation.

Since its creation, ADS has helped in the establishment of many cooperatives in different sectors and regions of the country. To date, a few cooperatives are directly involved with ADS and more than 80 only indirectly. This is so because the main strategy of ADS is to strengthen the commercialization center for solidarity economy products. According to the CUT's 12th National Plenary Resolution, the main challenge of solidarity economy is to create and strengthen the production flow of cooperatives.

ADS has been engaging in different sectors in various regions in Brazil (Table 1).

Table 1: Sectoral Involvement of ADS

| BRAZILIAN STATE | SECTOR |
| --- | --- |
| Rio Grande do Sul | Recycling and crafts |
| Paraná | Recycling |
| Minas Gerais | Recycling, family agriculture |
| Bahia | Crafts, biodiesel, sheep and goat farming |
| Alagoas | Honey |
| Pernambuco | Fruits, goat farming, honey and cattle |
| Paraíba | Shellfish and honey |
| Piauí | Honey |
| Ceará | Crafts, recycling and biodiesel |
| Rio Grande do Norte | Biodiesel and sheep and goat farming |
| Maranhão | Honey |
| Acre | Crafts |

## Internal Structure of ADS

The Executive Body of ADS is composed of members of CUT representating the different sectors, such as industry, services, family agriculture, etc. ADS has a General Coordinator and an Administrative-Financial Coordinator. The members of the Executive Body act as Directors of ADS.

Today there are seven people working specifically on the ADS's national headquarters. ADS has no regional structures, but the regional requests are organized by the local structure of CUT (CUT has 27 regional CUTs, one in each Brazilian

state). As pointed out in the previous section, the local CUTs send these requests to the national headquarters of ADS. The idea is to build a solution with the local people and ADS collectively. These requests are mainly related to the interests of workers on how to build and/or maintain a solidarity economy cooperative. Such requests come from diverse sectors.

Decisions are taken principally by the Executive Body, but the strategic planning of ADS is organized with the national body of ADS which includes the regional actors involved in ADS.

## Strategies and Partners

ADS is a member of the *Conselho Nacional de Economia Solidária* or CNES (National and Solidarity Economy Council) of the Brazilian Labour Ministry. It also joins the *Forum Brasileiro de Economia Solidaria* or FBES (Brazilian Forum of Solidarity Economy) and maintains a dialogue with other partners such as church organizations, Caritas, Faces do Brasil and others.

CNES which was created in June 2003 is a consultative body intended to discuss proposals and to ensure a permanent dialogue between the governmental sectors and those civil society groups involved in the solidarity economy. Its main task is to suggest policies and actions to be implemented to the ministries which participate in the Council and to other organs of the Federal Government. It is also responsible for the following up of these policies and actions. The Council is composed of 56 organizations, divided into three sectors: government, organizations of solidarity economy, and non-governmental organizations that give support and/or advice to the solidarity economy.[2]

FBES is organized throughout the country in more than 130 forums at the municipal, regional and state level. These forums involve directly more than 3,000 solidarity economy organizations, 500 advisory bodies, 12 state governments and 200 municipalities. FBES is a result of a historical process which culminated with the 1st World Social Forum (WSF) in January, 2001. Since the 1st WSF, there were many meetings and discussions which led to the 3rd Brazilian Plenary of Solidarity Economy in June 2003. More than 900 people from 17 Brazilian states participated in this event, which gave rise to FBES.

ADS and the other organizations that participate in FBES discuss and formulate their collective strategies to be presented in the CNES. So, FBES is used as a space for creating alliances and for building collective strategies, while CNES is the governmental body where these demands and strategies are transformed into reality.

It is important to mention that ADS also develops projects and programs with some public banks, such as the *Fundação Banco do Brasi* (Foundation of

the Brazilian Bank) and also with some other governmental bodies such as the Institute of Labour Development in the State of Ceará in the Northeast region of Brazil. Currently the main partner of ADS is Petrobras, the main Brazilian state oil company. The two are working together in a project, called *Conexao Solidaria* (Solidarity Connection), which focuses on the commercialization/trading of solidarity economy products.

ADS's main strategy is to create cooperative complexes, which are local concentrations of economic enterprises that act in solidarity and in close cooperation among themselves according to principles of solidarity economy. Being connected to local development, these complexes ensure the sustainability, autonomy and the capacity for endogenous innovations of the cooperatives and other initiatives. The complexes include cooperative production ventures, services and credit institutions, and policies of education, trading/marketing and technological development, among others.

For example, in the state of Santa Catarina, a plastic producer cooperative works together with recycling cooperatives. Another example is the cooperation between a cooperative that produces colored cotton and another one that produces clothes in the Northeast of Brazil, in the state of Ceara. In this way, the cooperation also promotes the incorporation of value-added to the final product and it strengthens the cooperatives involved in this process. According to Almir[3], the trading between cooperatives is very low, only around 5% of Brazil's total trade.

ADS also engages in influencing the implementation of public policies, through its participation in the CNES and FBES, in order to create an institutional environment which is more favorable to the development of the solidarity economy.

ADS organizes its educational assistance through diverse activities, such as training programs and advisory assistance to workers. Since 2001, ADS has organized and provided various courses, workshops, meetings and seminars tailored to the specificities of a cooperative or a complex. Almir also notes that the educational and capacity programs that ADS develops are generally one of the first activities that ADS organizes in projects with cooperatives. These projects include, among other issues, topics such as collective/community sense, political empowerment and project management.

Together with these educational/training/advisory activities, ADS also performs diagnostic analysis of the economic, social, institutional, political and environmental situation of cooperatives. It organizes market studies and assists in the formulation of local development plans and the strategic and business planning of cooperatives.

In accordance with the mission of promoting and organizing solidarity economy initiatives, ADS has created two centers responsible for their own political organization and for the implementation of their own projects: Unisol

Brazil deals mainly with issues of self-management of production and services, while Ecosol is the center which deals mainly with credit cooperatives. For example, ADS does not engage directly with the recovery of bankrupt and/or troubled companies, as Unisol is responsible for undertaking such task.

# The Impact of ADS Work on Solidarity Economy Initiatives

The *Instituto para o Desenvolvimento Sustentavel* or INDS (Institute for the Sustainable Development) is based in Fortaleza, Ceara and is a beneficiary NGO of ADS. Marilda Libia from INDS explains that their goal is to work with organizations that are excluded from the labour market.[4] They work with associations of women, with HIV-AIDS groups, women that have breast cancer, people living in occupations, and other excluded groups.

Marilda says that these excluded groups received assistance from ADS, mainly in the educational field, to create and strengthen capacities in order to improve the quality of the solidarity economy products that they deal with. They also receive assistance in participative administration and in creating solidarity economy networks of products. She also notes that she has been acting in the field of crafts for more than 30 years and so far, the ADS's way is the best one. This is due to the fact that no other agency helps in the sourcing of the raw materials that will be used in the solidarity economy products as ADS does.

ADS does not only promote educational capacity for associations and cooperatives that produce solidarity economy products; it also does so for the producers of the raw materials. ADS offers much-needed support in the process of formalizing cooperatives, so that they can attain autonomy and learn to commercialize their products independently.

Matilda believes that ADS offers a different type of assistance from other governmental agencies. Besides the producer-focused educational and capacity based programs, ADS also assists in the commercialization of the products, helping not only to sell them, but also in terms of product design and other strategies aimed at ensuring the products remain competitively placed in the market. ADS preserves traditional types of production, but it also gives technical assistance to the producers which aims at promoting innovation.

For INDS, working with ADS has been a unique experience as most of the private or governmental agencies only develop projects in one of the phases of the product, not in all of them. All the partners involved, according to Marilda, are impressed and very happy. Through a project called *Conexao Solidaria*, a cooperative of ADS with Petrobras, Unisol, and Ecosol, bags produced sell for US$2 each, instead of selling it for US$0.30 as they did before. This was possible

because the ADS project avoids the 'intermediaries' who exploit the producers and earn most of the profit. "Giving an opportunity to a cooperative to know about the origin of the material they use and giving assistance in the planning of the prodcuts' costs  and in selling those products is a dream for most of the partners involved; people are very happy", explains Marilda.[5]

In the future, INDS expects this marketing assistance to continue.   INDS also hopes to receive ADS's support in the innovation of their products, so that they can participate in the market in a competitive way.  This would enable them to generate income for  those people in need who are constantly excluded from the labour market.

## Challenges

ADS and cooperatives face several constraints, as they do not always have the public policies supporting their initiatives. For example, cooperatives are faced with lack of working capital, and although credit loans for cooperatives exist, the requirements are not suitable for them, as they require financial guarantees that a cooperative does not have. Other challenges include: lack of infrastructural organization, the need to train producers, lack of technical assistance, and limited opportunities for marketing and trading.

According to Almir, currently, the main challenge of ADS is to sell the products of cooperatives and associations. It is for this reason that ADS has engaged with Petrobras, Unisol and Ecosol, to create a network of markets for solidarity economy products. The challenge is based on overcoming the limits that temporary trading has in markets, for example. The objective has been to achieve a more permanent form of trading, not only to trade the products on markets, but also to create supermarkets and other private commercial places.

In facing up with this challenge, ADS organized the 1st National Exhibition on the Commercialization of Solidarity Economy Products and Services in 2009 in Sao Paulo. The Exhibition brought together 160 exhibitors, most of them from the state of Ceara. More than 3,000 people joined the exhibition, coming from different sectors such as the government, NGOs, social movements, public and private organizations and others.

ADS also joined a fashion show called Dragon Fashion where solidarity economy products the 'Eco-design' clothes were presented.

Almir believes that these experiences are extremely important  to strengthen the productive potential of the cooperatives and to promote the commercialization of their products.

## Perspectives and Final Remarks

ADS is a genuine experience in Brazil. It is genuine because it is a trade union initiative to create alternatives 'beyond the capitalist canon' for workers and other important organizations in the Brazilian context. In fact, the impact of the ADS's work on CUT's agenda is clear as CUT adopts resolutions of its Congresses and Plenaries about solidarity economy and about the work and initiatives that ADS has been undertaking.

The ADS initiative brought to bear the importance of creating internal democratic structures and processes to prevent cooperatives from being 'converted' into capitalist enterprises, a transformation which can occur easily. However, there is no clear-cut 'recipe' for averting such transformation. What the ADS initiative underscores nonetheless is the centrality of embedding a political attitude of collectivity throughout the solidarity economy sector.

### Notes

[1] Interview conducted in June 2011.
[2] See: http://www.mte.gov.br/ecosolidaria/cons_default.asp, accessed June 2011.
[3] Interview conducted in August 2011.
[4] Interview conducted in August 2011.
[5] Taken from an interview conducted in August 2011.

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# The Busan Workers' Cooperative

<div style="text-align:right; font-size:2em;">6</div>

*Kim Mijeoung*

## Background

Trade union members may be actively involved in the labor movement at the workplace, but when they are home, trade union work is not on their minds. Instead, they worry about how they will manage to send their kids to private education institutions (which trade unions oppose), which consume more than half of their salaries. And the little that remains of their income is spent on Samsung products (which trade unions actively boycott)[1]. Korean trade unionists eat imported food even though their trade unions emphasize food sovereignty, because imported food is cheaper and easier to obtain. These are a few examples of just how far removed trade unions are becoming from the daily lives of their members. Why is this occurring?

Shin (2007) points to the phenomenon of the neoliberal globalization offensive. As part of this offensive, capitalist corporations have adopted the so-called *new management strategy* which seeks to reorganize the workplace. After the 1998 Asian economic crisis, the new management strategy began its invasion of South Korean workplaces, dramatically restructuring the workplace environment and the previous relations set therein. For example, competition has become a key part of assembly-line production. Workers receive different salaries in accordance with the new management strategy and as such, they attempt to hide these income disparities from one another. If workers do not receive a salary that is on par with fellow workers, they blame themselves, believing that it must be due to their lesser capabilities.

Another consequence is that today's workers need and want to work more and more. This is the result not only of the new management strategy, but also due to the fragility of the Korean social security system. Workers are constantly suffering from job insecurity and the social security system provides low rates of

coverage. Thus, workers only have their salaries to rely on. For this reason, workers are willing to work more and more every day in order to receive overtime pay even as they suffer from occupational accidents and find themselves with increasingly less time to spend with their families. Workers believe they should earn as much money as possible while they are still physically able to work.

Part of this is born out of necessity, as today's workers need to devote themselves fully to their jobs in order to survive. Consequently, their salary is their prime and sometimes only concern. Because of this situation, the labor movement has faced limitations in defending workers' livelihood against the new management strategy. As a result, Korean workers feel distanced from their trade unions and while they may believe that trade unions are important, they are perceived as being so only at the workplace. For example, a trade union leader may be a highly respectable and motivated unionist while at work, but at home, he/she may adopt an entirely different persona, making invisible, to a degree, his/her role as a trade unionist in front of family members.

It is against this backdrop that the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) decided in 2009, among other things, to focus more on regional level projects. These projects are meant to create a stronger link between trade unions and those workers who live in the union's respective area. For example, the KCTU proposed that regular workers, company owners, and others, support the idea of conducting a solidarity fund-raising campaign for irregular workers. Also, the KCTU along with the labor party plans to build an institution for irregular workers at the regional level.

The shift to regional level projects led the Busan branch of the KCTU to form the Busan Workers' Cooperative.

## The Meaning of a Co-operative in South Korea

According to the Work Together foundation (2009), rapid industrialization policies in South Korea have been ongoing since the 1970s. But not all of South Korea has benefited from this process. Many traditional small towns and agricultural areas have been excluded and their socio-cultural fabric torn to pieces as a consequence of rapid industrialization.

Activists who were involved in the cooperative movement (which is based in rural areas) believed that the movement faced serious constraints due to the destruction of rural villages. As such, activists have attempted to create a new model for cooperatives, based on cultivating and organizing solidarity and forging links between urban consumers and rural producers, via direct transactions between them.

In particular, since the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s, the livelihoods of people have worsened while the neoliberal restructuring process has been accelerated. Activists have shared awareness about the need for joint responses to issues, such as the decline of agriculture and the seriousness of environmental pollution. Activists have been defining a model of socio-economic activities which focused on the value of life, something which could be expressed as 'Life first': that life is the most important thing.

Currently, the Korea Consumers' Cooperative Federation (KCCF),[2] Life Co-op, developed by the Korean Womens' link,[3] Hansalim,[4] and iCOOP KOREA[5] are all focusing on building consumer cooperatives. In 2009, 370,000 households (out of a total of 17 million households) were members of these four purchasing cooperatives. This number only amounts to 2.2 percent. The sales value of these cooperatives amounts to approximately 468 billion KRW, or 0.5 percent of the national food market. The volume of their agricultural products accounts for approximately 10 percent of all environmentally friendly agricultural products.

There are less than 3,000 members in any single cooperative. Annual sales amount to around 3.4 billion KRW (roughly US$103 million). In this situation, cooperatives cannot have any significant influence on local society. Furthermore, most of the cooperatives in South Korea deal only with environmentally friendly food or organic food – both niche markets. These reasons help explain why food sold by cooperatives is more expensive than other foods which people can purchase in a retail store or a supermarket. The average monthly salary of cooperative members is 4 million KRW. Most of them are university graduates, with education levels that are higher than the average person.

According to iCOOP (2010), the consumer cooperative movement in South Korea draws much of its ideological goals from the idea of community, or the 'Life first' concept that was centered on activities concerning ecology, environment, community, and food safety. The iCOOP KOREA network supports the founding of new cooperatives, and has worked towards improving the price competitiveness of iCOOP products and food safety in local communities.

iCOOP envisages that its 'Eco-friendly Organic Food Cluster and iCOOP Vally Project' will bring about positive changes in Korea's agro-production and consumption mechanisms. iCOOP KOREA also hopes to carry out its social responsibility mission in seeking solutions to the global food crisis, economic crises, and global warming.

## The Busan Workers' Cooperative

The Busan Workers' Cooperative (BWC) was established in 2009. Although many workers' cooperatives exist at the company level in Korea (usually sponsored and

organized by individual companies, e.g. Hyundai motors cooperative), BWC is the KCTU Regional Council's first attempt to build a workers' cooperative. It is part of the KCTU Busan Regional Council's[6] plan of building a regional community for workers and farmers in their region.

BWC's main objectives include: providing safe food through an agreement with a regional peasant organization; creating practical and alternative educational activities in collaboration with teachers' trade unions; and building a regional public health-care system through an agreement with health care unions and related organizations. The BWC also deals with other issues such as gender, child-care, the environment, and agriculture. Overall, the BWC aims to create an alternative regional community.

KCTU Busan Regional Council started the workers' cooperative movement as a method of building an alternative society to that of neoliberal globalization. The council strives to strengthen relationships between trade union members, their families, and other people in the region by building a sense of local community through various projects aimed at improving the lives of people.

Ever since the initial launching of BWC, there has been a lot of discussion on its aims and future. After discussions within the cooperative, it was decided to establish a network with a local peasant organization. BWC tries not to rely on a centralized system of production, distribution, or consumption, even though this system is easy and cheap to utilize. Instead, BWC has attempted to create a new system of production, distribution and consumption in the region. Even if the practice of new alternative systems is not easy, BWC is still willing to strengthen the network by affiliating local peasant organizations.

By protecting agriculture, BWC also promotes coexistence between rural and urban communities. This is done by promoting the consumption of home-grown products. BWC believes that the consumption of home-grown products provides an impetus for positive economic circulation in its region. For example, the joint purchasing of food has been an important campaign within BWC's project.

BWC promotes the building of an alternative economic system via enhancing solidarity with a diverse set of groups in the movement. People can have many experiences as a member of BWC. Trade union members develop common interests with their family through participation in BWC. In this case, the trade union members' families begin to practice the policies of the trade union.

As mentioned earlier, it is a national trade union policy to maintain food sovereignty. If a trade union members' family is a member of BWC, they eat home grown food instead of eating imported food. The family can also see the process of delivery and production in their region. In this way, families can gain greater confidence in home grown foods as they are simultaneously educated about the process. Thus, a family develops confidence in BWC and consequently in the policies of the trade union movement as a whole.

BWC believes that the development of sustainable alternative systems should be organized around solidarity with people in various fields. How can one build such systems? The answers can be found within the various interests and demands of the people in a particular region.

Generally, trade unions organize strikes to safeguard their members' employment, but it can also play an important role in promoting regional interests. During the last decade, KCTU Busan Regional Council searched for ways to address this role. For example, KCTU Busan Regional Council joined the movement for environmentally friendly school meals.

The labor movement, represented by KCTU, together with the peasant movement, represented by the Korean Peasant's League (KPL), can deepen their understanding of, and provide greater support to, the people in their region. In this process they can discover ways to get people involved in their activities. Historically, KCTU and KPL had promised to build a good and strong partnership at the national level. In reality, however, such a partnership has yet to materialize. The BWC tried to expand its peasant food purchase system but with too few members included in this initiative, this has not been possible. Nonetheless, with increased membership, KPL could easily become the BWC's food supplier.

In the past, trade unions and peasant organizations tried to undertake joint projects aimed at building relationships between a trade union at the company level and a farmer's organization in the region. It is called *One Trade Union, One Village*. However, the project has not really been fully implemented. It was short-lived due to unionists' negative perception of cooperatives. From the 1960s through the 1980s, members of trade unions had many frustrated experiences with the cooperative movement. At that time, trade unions were deeply focused on political issues. They understood the cooperative movement as a middle class movement. And they did not believe that the cooperative movement could be an important part of working class struggles. However, as the labor movement has faced many limitations in today's economy, it has begun a process of self-reflection. This time it is learning alternatives. Activists in the labor movement are trying to find a variety of alternatives. The case of BWC is one of many attempts to seek out alternatives to the limited role of how trade unions interact with working people.

Through BWC, Busan trade union activists are expecting to forge a relationship of sustainable solidarity between workers and farmers. KCTU Busan Regional Council believes that small scale farmers have the right to cultivate land and to distribute their products. Farmers have the right to receive a fair price. Consumers too have the right to purchase these goods at a fair price. A reasonable price would ensure suitable earnings for farmers. The workers' cooperative could thus provide reasonable prices for farmers and consumers (who are members of trade unions) and their families.

## The Significance of the Busan Workers' Cooperative

For BWC, in order for the cooperative movement to recreate the public infrastructure destroyed by neoliberal globalization and also expand the socio-economic arena, it must strengthen workers' solidarity and transform the consciousness of its members. Even though people as members of a cooperative might make efforts to change their lives, fully transforming their lives is impossible within a system of capitalism. Because of this, the BWC recognizes that the cooperative movement must be expanded to all sectors of society such as in production, consumption, finance, education, culture, health care, welfare, and public services.

BWC sees the need to have a comprehensive system for its members through the use of a network. It should mobilize all available resources of production, consumption, finance, education, culture, health care, welfare, and public services in the community. It is aware that it should create goods and services which are adequate for people's needs, and that these goods and services should cover all sectors.

The day-to-day life of a citizen is political whether she/he desires it or not. At present however, the spheres for political transformation are limited in the wake of capitalism's systemic dominance of most aspects of people's daily lives. However, people can practice voluntary participation, and participate in direct democracy through self-organization. At BWC, participatory politics is practiced as members vote directly in an assembly to make decisions.

## The Purpose and Goal of BWC[7]

KCTU regional council considers BWC as one of its methods to overcome the current difficulties of the labor movement.

Korean trade unionism is mainly enterprise-based and the employment situation is unstable. Unions have chosen to concentrate on the employment security of their own members at each company where they represented workers. They have not made many efforts on social issues.

Many trade unions which belong to KCTU have been able to retain their members' job security within their companies. However, many companies have laid employees off and/or have changed workers' status from that of regular to irregular. Many companies have outsourced a part of the company's functions, which has led to an increasing number of irregular workers. The problem is that KCTU could not retain the employment security for all workers - especially for unorganized workers. When examining the worker's situation at this point in time, we can discern two categories: one is comprised of regular workers and the other of irregular workers. Members of trade unions are typically regular workers.

Union members care only about their employment security because of the serious job insecurity brought about by neoliberal globalization. The current labor movement has been limited because the system of enterprise-union bargaining focuses only on negotiation of members' wages and employment at the company level. In other words, activities of this kind of unionism have been limited to the confines of the company where their members work. The social impact of the labor movement is waning and the power of mobilizing trade union members is declining. In effect, trade unions have been isolated in society.

The labor movement needs to take a step forward towards people through communication and solidarity. Against this reality, leaders of trade unions have proposed strategies to counter policies of neoliberal globalization. However, mobilizing members is difficult. Members and their families think that fighting neoliberal policies is too difficult for them to deal with.

KCTU Busan regional council has decided to reduce the gap between activists in the labor movement and their family members who are ordinary people by creating workers' cooperatives.

It sees workers' cooperatives embodying progressive values, building solidarity between workers and peasants through direct interaction, and making common space for people in community for understanding of the labor movement.

KCTU recognizes that businesses of workers' cooperatives should target the average person in the community; that trade unions should expand their influence to society through workers' cooperatives. Workers' cooperatives should play the role of providing information to people in the community. For example, workers' cooperatives can provide consumers and producers with information on reasonable prices. Currently, the price of products is distorted due to the distribution process. However, the price of produce is not distorted in workers' cooperatives because of the strong trust between the consumers and the cooperatives. Workers' cooperatives can offer consumers products with a reasonable price by reducing the costs of the distribution process while also paying fair prices to the peasants.

## BWC and Other Cooperatives in South Korea[8]

Other cooperatives in South Korea focus on environmentally friendly food. However, workers' cooperatives focus on reasonable prices for both consumers and peasants and try to fill the needs of all members of the community. Although BWC has not been able to offer diverse foods and products, it does plan to do so in the future. The reason for the inability to offer diverse foods and products is due to the limited number of members in workers' cooperatives. For instance, a peasant needs to sell 8,000 heads of *napa* cabbage per year. However, so far the cooperative could only purchase 5,000 heads. Thus, the peasant has to sell the

rest of the vegetables in the market.  This situation limits BWC's ability to offer reasonable prices to its members. As a result, BWC has depended on peasants who have a strong relationship with existing cooperatives.

## The Difficulty of Recruiting New Members[9]

There is some bias that the price of foods and goods in a cooperative would be too expensive. People are accustomed to buying everything in big supermarkets just as they are accustomed to spending time and money in complex markets. Because BWC has only one small store, members order their goods over the phone. It takes time to buy stuff via telephone ordering and most people do not like to buy products without seeing them. The average consumer does not like these limitations. This is the reason why BWC has encountered difficulty in recruiting members.

Despite the short history of BWC, having been founded in 2009, there are currently 520 members. Now BWC is interested in expanding the size of its store and in fact wants to build additional stores. BWC is in particular trying to build an alternative model store to existing mega stores. Large scale stores would solve many of BWC's obstacles.

## BWC's Price-Setting Mechanism[10]

Members of BWC feel comfortable with reasonable prices. For example, even if pork prices suddenly go up, members of the BWC can purchase the product at previously set prices. Even if pork prices suddenly slumped, BWC members would purchase the product at the previously set prices. The reason for this is that BWC upholds the principle of ensuring the cost of production to the producers. BWC emphasizes to its members that they will have a different experience with the cooperative – that of building solidarity with peasants.

## Decision-making at BWC

BWC has a different operating system. There are founding members that have contributed 30 million won, some that have contributed 300,000 won, and others that have contributed 30,000 won. Even if a founding member contributed a greater amount of money, s/he would have the same rights as another member that did not put in as much money.

Currently, BWC's decision making process is run by its founders. A general assembly of all members meets once a year to make major decisions. As BWC

was only established in 2009, at the time of writing, they had only met once. A governing body consists of 16 elected executives who each serve for one year. The inaugural meeting decided upon the cooperative's aims and strategies. During this meeting the members also decided to expand the cooperative's projects into the education, health care, and manufactured goods sectors. For instance, the Korean education system has serious problems. Most people in South Korea believe that the educational system needs to be overhauled. So BWC has a plan to make an alternative school that aims at the full development of students rather than merely awarding a license or a diploma. Making an alternative school is difficult. BWC is going to start with after-school classes, since many elementary students who do not have a space to go after school join and play together in safe spaces such as schools.

## Achievements, Limitations and Lessons[11]

The realization of BWC's initial goals has not occurred as yet. At the beginning, BWC had emphasized the value of a workers' cooperative rather than its practical benefits. Therefore, people felt that joining BWC would be a major commitment in their lives. They thought that they would have to change their whole lifestyle. However, this is not true. BWC has changed its motto to: "You can gain more practical benefits and live more safely with workers' cooperatives."

BWC is making an effort to go to the field to meet face-to-face with trade union members. BWC is focusing on publicity activities in the field. Over the course of the next 10 years, BWC has set a target goal of building its membership in the cooperative to between 1,000 and 2,000 members. At the same time, it is looking for new investors and prefers to have many small investors from trade unions. If BWC does not undertake more proactive activities, the enthusiasm on the workers' cooperative movement will lose steam. In this regard, there is even a thinking in the BWC leadership to mount a more aggressive membership recruitment campaign: to recruit more than 5,000 members in five years. In the short run, BWC plans to directly run a tofu factory, which is an important part of the traditional diet of Koreans. BWC is also mulling forming a business relationship with a company that does not repress workers.

For BWC representatives, the most rewarding part is being able to communicate face-to-face with union members' families, as BWC directly delivers to each family. Though it is still in its initial stage, BWC provides a space for its members and their families to become aware of the workings and, at the same time, be part of an on-going process of building a new community in their region.

In the meantime, the lesson for BWC is to focus on the value of workers' cooperative. BWC is learning every day. The executive of BWC did not know

much about the daily life of union members' families. They did not have experience running a workers' cooperative against many multinational corporations. Some trade union members may view BWC as just another small business, no different from the others. The size of BWC is small and the prices of products it offers are relatively expensive. Many workers, especially low wage workers, usually unfavorably compare BWC to large supermarkets where they have all kinds of things.

BWC tries to offer fresh and good food for people in the region. However, BWC needs to lower the prices of goods for members through collaboration with local peasant organizations and small and medium sized factories in the region. After one year and half since its founding, the main task of BWC is to gain people's trust.

According to Jang, the general secretary of KCTU Busan Regional Council and member of the traffic service workers' union, while leaders of the Council think that BWC is important, they consider it as just one of the many projects for trade union members. But it has strong potential. In particular, members of the teachers union are very interested in BWC. BWC expects teachers to exert greater influence upon students and their families to become members of the cooperative. However, one main difficulty for BWC is finding a stable supply-chain for workers' cooperatives, although this is gradually stabilizing. KCTU Busan Regional Council believes that the main aim of BWC is to offer safe and good food to its members. The next step is to establish workers' restaurants that provide safe and good food in factories.

While recruiting members is the most important activity, many trade union members that are interested in workers' cooperatives are already involved in other cooperatives. This poses a serious obstacle to recruiting members.

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Through interviews, we have seen some of the different ideas and strategies that BWC has undertaken. Jang considers BWC as one of many diverse activities. He views the cooperative simply as a source of good and healthy food for people rather than being a foundation for change. He thinks that BWC could offer good and healthy food through restaurants for workers in the factories. He only sees a narrow meaning of BWC. However, Choi who is a representative of BWC believes that BWC could be a foundation for changing society from the bottom-up. Changing society would start from within the community. Many people would experience alternative systems by joining BWC. BWC helps people understand the idea of what a local community can really entail. Members of BWC can have trust in consumption through the cooperative.

Choi also agrees that building workers' cooperatives is not enough to create an alternative society. Especially now, many trade unions are suppressed by capital and by a conservative government. Trade unions should definitely still concentrate their energies in resisting this suppression. However, if the labor movement fails to bridge the gap between its activities and those of its members' families and those of average people, the labor movement will face further difficulties even if it succeeds in preventing suppression by capital and a conservative government. That is why BWC is critical for bridging this gap.

## Implications

Consumption is part of everything we do on a daily basis. People become machines for consumption. They are isolated and individualized and sit in front of a home-shopping channel on television. They want to have a job and earn money for more consumption. People thus spend their days in a state of torpor.

It is not possible for people to change their lives just by joining a workers' cooperative. People have to accumulate practical experiences of democratic participation, and develop specific and direct relationships in the formation of society. The experience of collectively developing rules based on consensus can create a fairer and more just community. A fair and equal society which guarantees people's participation can be built through the whole process of accumulating experiences. Workers' cooperatives consider the democratic decision making process and people's direct participation in daily life as starting points in building a fair and equal society.

Workers' cooperatives are good starting points in which to practice direct democracy as they are rooted in the power of citizens. If a workers' cooperative was not run by its members, then its members would degenerate into passive people that are mere consumers. Once that happens, bureaucracy develops inside the organization.

The workers' cooperative should maintain a strong focus on changing the daily lives of members in the community. People can realize their reasonable demands for economic and political power through collective practices. Such practices, through collaboration with other regional movements, could take the workers' cooperative movement agenda and help it to become universal. Moreover, the workers' cooperative movement could expand to encompass international solidarity. It could help create a fair and equal society.

## Notes

1  Samsung is a very well-known anti-union company in South Korea.
2  KCCF was established in 1982. KCCF has activated the cooperatives movement in Korea and supports the operation and activities of member cooperatives with diverse projects.
3  Korean Womens' link was established in 1987. Its aims are to promote gender equality and a participatory democratic society.
4  Hansalim was established in 1986. Hansalim is a nonprofit organization that focuses on agricultureand ecosystems. Hansalim is operated as a cooperative according to its principles. Hansalim's goal is to restore solidarity between producer members in rural communities and consumer members in cities through the sharing of the food of life.
5  iCOOP KOREA began with six local cooperatives in the Seoul-Gyeonggi area in 1997. Since then it has contributed greatly in popularizing the consumer cooperatives movement in Korea, and its cooperatives membership has grown to 74 as of 2009.
6  KCTU has 16 regional branches. KCTU Busan Regional Council is one of them.
7  This section draws from an interview with Choi, a representative of the Busan workers' cooperative and former chairperson of KCTU Busan Regional Council.
8  Ibid.
9  Ibid.
10  Ibid.
11  Interviews with Choi and Jang, general secretary of the Busan regional council and member of the traffic service workers' union.

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# Inuvik Community Greenhouse

# 7

*Patricia Chong*

## Introduction

In the Marxist tradition, *social reproduction* has two interconnected meanings. First, there is the 'biological reproduction of the species,' and thus the continued 'reproduction' of the source of labour power. Second, there are the "institutions, processes and social relations associated with the *creation and maintenance of communities* and upon which, ultimately, all production and exchange rests" (Bakker and Gill, 2003: 17, 21).

In the biological sense, it is obvious how food, or more precisely, the production of food, is central to the reproduction of people. In terms of the reproduction of society and its 'institutions, processes and social relations,' the production and access to food has become increasingly commodified. Prior to capitalism,[1] people were able to meet basic needs through self-produced goods, bartering, etc., whereas the only way to meet such needs now depends on earning a wage (Bakker and Gill, 2003: 21). Thus, there is a "cycle of dependence" in which "the market actually comes to dominate social reproduction in general" (ibid).

## Food Security versus Food Sovereignty

Food is a political issue from the perspective of social reproduction. *Food security* is a popular term that needs to be contrasted to the more political term *food sovereignty*. The Canadian Government accepted the following definition of food security at the World Food Summit (1996):

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (cited in Power, 2008: 95).

Hence, access, availability and utilization are the main three parts of food security that make up Canadian public health practice (Power, 2008: 96). Canada's international commitments to food security include the *International Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), and, more recently, the *Declaration on World Food Security* (2002) (ibid). As McMichael argues in a recent article, food security was associated with development discourse starting after World War II, then redefined as a 'market good' in the 1990s as corporate globalization took hold. What was the result of such an association? The largely unexamined assumption that the best way to guarantee food security was through the so-called 'free market'. Thus, the question of "who decides what is produced for whom and under what conditions," is not asked (McMichael, 2003: 169).

However, the term *food sovereignty* is being more commonly used in 'reframing' the issue of food in more overtly political terms. *Food sovereignty* is about a conscious shift away from corporate globalization discourse to "a substantive political, social, cultural and ecological program to restore and revitalize forms of social reproduction anchored in democratic community organization" (ibid: 188). Thus, *food sovereignty* is a social and environmental justice issue. "'[E]ating has become a political act,'" and thus its production, distribution and consumption is inherently political as well (ibid: 186). It is within this framework that the Inuvik Community Greenhouse is an inspiring example of a small step toward food sovereignty that is anchored in democratic, community participation in the Canadian North.

## Canada

Canada had a population of 34,278,400 as of January 2011.[2] This North American country consists of ten provinces and three territories. From west to east, the three territories are the Yukon, Northwest and Nunavut. While the Northern part of Canada consists of these territories and only has a population of 100,000 people, it makes up over a third of the country's land mass. In discussing the 'Great White North' of Canada, one must note that more than half of the Northwest Territories population is Aboriginal (Inuit, First Nations and Métis) and Nunavut's population is over 85% Inuit. Thus, it is important to address the relationship of the Aboriginal population and food sovereignty.[3]

The concept of *food security* is especially inadequate when applied to the Aboriginal population as it does not measure access to traditional food systems. *The National Population Health Survey* and other country-wide surveys conducted in

Canada fail to pose any questions about access to traditional food (Lambden et al., 2006),which includes fish, wildfowl, terrestrial mammals, etc., (Erber et al., 2010). Such an exclusionary practice entails that social reproduction is only counted if it is tied to the market. As such, non-commodified means of meeting social reproduction needs are not measured. Furthermore, traditional food provides cultural meaning and is a more nutritious source of protein, vitamins, etc. than market-geared food (ibid: 63). Therefore, the accuracy of these surveys is questionable.

## Aboriginal Context

Canada's international commitment to Aboriginal peoples includes the *International Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) *Convention 169* which recognizes the link between food security and Indigenous land rights. More recently, the *Action Plan for Food Security* (1998) recognizes that food security includes the right of Aboriginal peoples to obtain traditional food. However, many argue that Canada has failed to follow through on such international commitments and has even failed to provide more basic rights.

For example, the median income for Aboriginals was only about US$19,000 in comparison to US$27,300 for the rest of Canadians in 2006.[4] To put this in perspective, the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) union reported in 2008 the following shocking facts:

- Diabetes among First Nations people is at least three times the national average;
- More than 100 First Nations communities are under boil water advisories . . . meaning they have little or no access to clean water for drinking and sanitation;
- First Nations people suffer from diseases generally associated with low-income countries, such as tuberculosis at eight to ten times the rate of Canadians in general; and
- The majority of Inuit people in Canada live in remote arctic communities that make it difficult for them to access medical services and consumer goods. A 2005 Statistics Canada report found that 56 % of Nunavut respondents stated that their household lacked the money over the past year to buy enough quality food to eat. In the North, junk food is often cheaper than nutritious food because it is so much easier to ship (Public Service Alliance of Canada, 2008).

Aboriginal peoples face higher underemployment and unemployment rates, especially those that reside in remote areas, such as the North where the cost of living is 48% to 68% higher than those living in Edmonton, Alberta, the closest metropolitan city (Lambden et al., 2006: 332). Thus, it is not surprising then that

food insecurity is reported to be 28% in the Northwest Territories compared to the 15% average across Canada (Erber et al., 2010: 64). The negative psychological impacts of food insecurity includes feelings of "lack of control . . . social exclusion, distress, reduced ability to learn, and depression . . . which impact the family and community at large" (Lambden et al., 2006: 332).

## Inuvik, Northwest Territories, Canada

Inuvik is a town that is located in the Northwest Territories of Canada and is just north of the Arctic Circle. According to the 2006 Canadian Census, the town of Inuvik has a population of 3,430 with 2,170 being of Aboriginal identity and 1,260 of non-Aboriginal identity.[5] The Aboriginal population consists mostly of Inuit (specifically Inuvialuit). One-third of Inuvialuit living in the Northwest Territories have *at least* one chronic disease and a life expectancy nearly a decade lower the average Canadian (Erber et al., 2010: 60).

Inuvik is also known as the 'land of the midnight sun' because it gets 56 days of 24 hour daylight in the summer and alternatively, 30 days of darkness in the winter.[6] The average temperature is -9.7 degrees Celsius (14.54 degrees Fahrenheit). Its highest temperature was recorded at +31.7 degrees Celsius (89.06 degrees Fahrenheit) whereas its lowest temperate was – 56.7 degrees Celsius (-70.06 degrees Fahrenheit). Due to its location, temperatures, etc., the availability of fresh and affordable fruits and vegetables is limited. Most of the food is brought in by trucks and barges, i.e. major ship orders.

## The Inuvik Community Greenhouse

The Inuvik Community Greenhouse is a democratic community-based means of food production with the goal of strengthening the community through gardening and is inspiring similar initiatives in the North.

The Inuvik Community Garden is a project of the not-for-profit Community Garden Society of Inuvik (CGSI) formed in 1998. Grollier Hall (originally a residential school) was slated to be demolished; however the community came together to petition that the hockey arena portion of it be made into a community garden. Eventually, *Aurora College* donated the land and the building to the CGSI. The CGSI Board consists of six to ten elected members. Aside from being a member of the community, there are no other requirements to join the Board.

Even in this early stage, the idea for the greenhouse was to use it as a 'focal point for community development.' The CGSI's commitment to "building a strong sense of community through recreational gardening, food production, knowledge

sharing, and volunteer support" (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2009) has led to some inspiring outcomes.[7]  More specifically, a community greenhouse was needed in Inuvik for the following reasons:

- Limited availability of fresh and affordable fruits and vegetables;
- People can grow vegetables unavailable in grocery stores;
- Food security;
- Serve as a role model for the North in recycling and composting; and
- Many people live in apartments and do not have access to their own garden. Those who do have garden space have to deal with permafrost.

In 1999, the recycling/building process started. The CGSI partnered with the *Aurora College Trades Access Program* whose students assisted in converting the arena into a greenhouse and these students continue to provide general upkeep, i.e. carpentry, plumbing. Approximately US$60,800 worth of arena materials was recycled to create the greenhouse including much of the original framework, windows, doors, etc. Apparently, there are even still hockey puck marks on the walls!

On the main floor of the greenhouse are the community and family garden plots. There are 74 plots measuring 10 feet by 4 feet. Family garden plots are made available to residents of Inuvik. Members commit to doing 15 volunteer hours per year and pay a US$25 membership fee per year in addition to a US$101 rental fee for a full-sized plot.

Plots are provided on a first come, first served basis and gardeners choose their own plot depending on what is available.

There are also community plots which are provided to community groups at no cost. For the 2011 gardening season (from mid-May to the end of September) community plots have been provided to the following groups:

- Quilters and Dyers garden (1 plot)
- Kids Club (2 plots)
- Inuvik Day Care (2 plots)
- Community Group Home (1 plot)
- Food bank sponsored by Meadowlands Inc. (10 plots)
- High School Club (2 plots)
- Elders Garden (4 plots)

The second floor of the greenhouse is a 4,000 square foot commercial garden that sells plants in order to cover operational costs. There is also a market held at the greenhouse every Saturday.

Outside of the greenhouse are the composting facility and display gardens.

## Structures, Processes and Strategies

The greenhouse is run by volunteers: the volunteer Board of Directors and a paid part-time coordinator.

The greenhouse part-time co-coordinator for the 2011 season, Sheena Adams, is responsible for the day-to-day running of the greenhouse.[8] This includes taking care of the commercial plots, picking up mail, keeping track of plots, etc.

The Inuvik Community Greenhouse is run by the Inuvik Garden Society Board of Directors which makes the major decisions, e.g. how money is spent as well as hiring. The Board consists of six to ten elected members who are from the community. It has typical positions such as a chairperson, vice chair, secretary, treasurer, etc. The Board meets regularly (every two weeks in the growing season and slowing down to about once a month thereafter).

There is a simple eight-page constitution that outlines roles, responsibilities and policies.[9] Section 2.1 reads: "The mission of the Organization as a not-for-profit organization is to utilize the space that we occupy to allow for the production of a variety of crops in an area where fresh, economical produce is often unavailable."

Section 2.2 reads: "The motto of the Organization is 'promoting community through gardens' or 'civitatifaventeshortis.'" All individual members get to vote at meetings that occur on a monthly basis and at the Annual General Meeting. Institutional representatives can attend meetings but are not eligible to vote. Members also make requests and suggestions at meetings, form their own committees, organize their own events, etc. In other words, members are in full control of this.

## Outcomes

According to Sheena Adams, the goal of strengthening the community through social gardening is being met. The first indicator of success is that all the plots have been rented out to the community and there are now waiting lists. Sheena stressed that the greenhouse is making a positive impact for the community as a whole, not just for those who have plots. For example, volunteer hours also take place outside of the greenhouse. Recently, volunteers cleaned up two zones of garbage in Inuvik and put the money they earned collectively toward the greenhouse. Outside of the greenhouse is the compost bin where people can drop off materials such as coffee grounds, vegetable scraps, tea bags, egg shells, etc.

Furthermore, the greenhouse will have a booth at the *Inuvik Petroleum Show* (a major trade and conference event) to outreach to the community and to sell their flower baskets which are made by volunteers. As the roads to Inuvik are sometimes

closed, the greenhouse is sometimes the only source of plants for the town. All the flower baskets that hang around the town are purchased for hotels, etc.

The 2010 season was especially productive as the greenhouse raised about US$80,000 through plant sales, sponsorships, etc., and nearly US$4,000 through their gift shop. With profits of about US$32,000 and an additional grant from the Government of the Northwest Territories' Department of Industry, Tourism and Investment, the greenhouse built a seedling room, installed a bathroom, and hired Sheena as the part-time coordinator for 2011, among other things (Stokell, 2011). Sheena has a personal financial goal to grow and sell around US$35,000 worth of plants (she is already close to it) and to rent out all of the plots (already done).

The greenhouse does not keep track of member demographics but Sheena says the members are very diverse and 'across the board.'[10] There are single people, families, First Nations, immigrants, etc. Furthermore, membership makeup changes every year as the community population is transient.

The Chair of the Inuvik Garden Society Board of Directors stressed the importance of the community's perception of the garden: "We have a limited membership and a limited number of plots, so you have to work hard to make sure the community understands that the Greenhouse is for them. You do not want to make it look like a 100 member exclusive club".[11] This is achieved by the various partnerships, workshops and volunteers going out into the community.

Greenhouse workshops are created based on member direction, skill and participation. Workshops have included basic gardening, basket making, plot preparation, nutrition, etc. Some more non-traditional workshops that have been led by members include yoga for gardeners, quilt displays, the use of greenhouse-grown plants to dye fabrics and bake goods, lady bug release, a kids club, fiddles classes, birdhouse making, dyeing fish scales to make art (Aboriginal art form), etc. Other skills that have been developed by members include money handling, event planning, small repairs and maintenance and tourism leadership.

It is important to highlight that the greenhouse is run by the community volunteers because community and economic development research often frames the community as being incapable of helping itself (Cameron and Gibson, 2005). However, here the members are making decisions, developing skills, sharing their skills, etc.

While the greenhouse does not conduct any official measurement of the health outcomes, residents now have a better food supply with a lot more being grown in the community. For example, the greenhouse partnered with the local food bank and *Meadowlands Horticulture Incorporated* in British Columbia, Canada. The greenhouse provided plots to the food bank at no cost. Meadowlands Horticulture Inc. provided over 2,000 of its *Tried & True* plants to the greenhouse. *Air North* provided free cargo transportation for the plants and other gardening materials. The greenhouse volunteers take care of the plants and keep records of these 'trial'

plants. Then the food (e.g. strawberries, lettuce, herbs, squash, and tomatoes) is harvested and given to the local food bank.

The greenhouse also holds an open market every Saturday. Members and non-members can come to buy produce and their children can play in the weekly carnival. This has become a popular weekly event for all community members and has developed more of a 'family culture' in the community.[12]

For all of these reasons and more, the greenhouse has become an Inuvik tourist attraction.

## Unexpected Outcomes

The Town of Inuvik has a very transient population and so the greenhouse's success depends on continually outreaching and tapping into the skills of the community members. An example of this is a pre-natal nutritionist who recently moved to Inuvik and will be hosting a nutrition class using the vegetables from the greenhouse. There is also the *Dyers Plot* where the *Inuvik Quilting Guild* grows plants to be used for dyeing. They have been displaying their dyed quilts on a clothesline at the greenhouse and are going to run a workshop on how to use plant dyes.

On a personal level, Sheena provided an example of a young girl who volunteered at the greenhouse and put that time toward her probation hours. Although her probation period came to an end, her sisters continued to volunteer with the greenhouse.

The influence of the Inuvik Community Greenhouse has gone beyond the town's borders as the greenhouse is supporting other communities in the North such as Fort McPherson, Tuktoyaktuk and Tsiigehtchic by providing them with advice and seedlings. Sheena will be traveling to these other communities with plants initially grown in Inuvik. Iqaluit, the capital of the Nunavut territory, also built its own community greenhouse based on the Inuvik example.

## Constraining Factors

As the greenhouse is a not-for-profit initiative, continual funding remains an issue. As one board member said: "We need to generate revenue. We can't sustain on handouts . . . We're a non-profit society, but we need to run a profit" (Stokell, 2011).

There are funders such as the federal and territorial government, community sponsors, corporate sponsors but none provide funding on a consistent basis. With the transient nature of Inuvik, the volunteer/membership turn-over is high. Due to this, the relationships that have been fostered with sponsors are sometimes lost.

However, one can imagine that without the greenhouse, there would be less of a sense of community.

Furthermore, since funding is not allowed to be used to pay for the greenhouse coordinator, the CGSI made the position part-time. This raises the question if the next coordinator can afford to do the same.

Sheena identified the biggest greenhouse expense being the shipping of gardening supplies such as pots and soil to Inuvik. Heating is also very expensive. However, the CGSI does not want to raise plot fees. Nevertheless, Sheena is full of ideas including diversifying their products such as compost and chemical-free fertilizers. She also proposed and pushed forth the cultivation of a *Proven Winner* brand of seeds that is meant to survive in the tough environment of the North (Stokell, 2011).

In terms of the success and long-term sustainability of the community greenhouse, the volunteers are key. As one board member put it: "The greenhouse is volunteer driven and volunteer led. We need the volunteers" (ibid).

## Development of Critical Consciousness and Capacities

Even if a certain initiative is not explicitly anti-capitalist , a political anti-capitalist movement can be born of certain 'moments.' More specifically, the following 'moments' as outlined in David Harvey's talk at the 2010 World Social Forum in Port Alegre, are applicable to the greenhouse (Harvey, 2010):

- Relations to nature;
- Mental conceptions of the world, embracing knowledge and cultural understandings and beliefs; and
- Institutional, legal and governmental arrangements, and the conduct of daily life and the activities of social reproduction.

Clearly, the greenhouse has provided the opportunity for the Inuvik community to strengthen their relationship with nature. Whereas before many were unable to garden due to the permafrost, heating expenses, etc., the community has come together to pool resources, energy and time to run this facility and to provide access to affordable, healthy, locally-produced food. While these three 'moments' are not formally recognized, such moments were simply not a wide-spread option before.

The constraints of gardening in the North are not necessarily negative. Due to limited supplies and financial resources, the greenhouse is forced to recycle as much as possible. The greenhouse also encourages environmental awareness and social sustainability as it only gardens organically (no chemical fertilizers are allowed).

There is also awareness about the need to reduce the production of methane gas and landfill waste.

The community took the lead in creating the greenhouse from its very inception (petitioning for the hockey rink to be recycled rather than demolished) to its continued operation today. The community was able to obtain funding from the federal and territorial government, various partners, etc. and established an ongoing relationship with *Aurora College*. Thus, the greenhouse is a tangible example of what the community can accomplish with profit not being the primary goal.

Again, it is the community aspect of the greenhouse that excites people. Sheena moved to Inuvik from British Columbia exactly because of this: "If it was just a commercial greenhouse, I wouldn't have come" (Stokell, 2011). A volunteer who was interviewed by the local newspaper about the greenhouse said: "It's a nice place to escape to. It's work, but it's good work." This quote illustrates that 'work' does not have to be an alienating exercise.

Lastly, the greenhouse is as an alternative, community-based, not-for-profit example of food production and social reproduction. The greenhouse operates partially outside of a capitalist market as it primarily depends on volunteer work to function. Thus, it is an example of a 'diverse economy' in which people who are not formally engaged in 'paid work' are still contributing to the development of their community and economy (Cameron and Gibson, 2005: 276). In a small way, this greenhouse allows us to re-imagine better and more equitable ways of arranging our social lives and the social division of labour in which we are positioned.

## Notes

[1] Capitalism: "An economic system in which privately-owned companies and businesses undertake most economic activity (with the goal of generating private profit), and most work is performed by employed workers who are paid wages or salaries." Jim Stanford, "Economics for Everyone On-line Glossary of Terms and Concepts," http://www.economicsforeveryone.ca/node/22.

[2] See: http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/110324/dq110324b-eng.htm.

[3] Information on how Statistics Canada defines the term 'Aboriginal' can be found here: http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/12-592-x/12-592-x2007001-eng.htm.

[4] See: Wilson, Dan, "Income gap for Aboriginal peoples stubbornly high: Report," Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives http://www.policyalternatives.ca/newsroom/news-releases/income-gap-aboriginals-stubbornly-high-report.

[5] See: Statistics Canada, "2006 Community Profiles: Inuvik" http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2006/dp-pd/prof/92-591/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=6107017&Geo2=PR&Code2=61&Data=Count&SearchText=inuvik&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&Custom=.

6  See: Town of Inuvik, "Facts and Figures," http://inuvik.ca/living-in-inuvik/community-profile/facts-figures/.
7  See: Public Health Agency of Canada, "Northwest Territories: Inuvik Community Greenhouse – Building a strong sense of community through recreational gardening, food production, knowledge sharing, and volunteer support," http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/2009/be-eb/nwt-tno-eng.php.
8  Telephone interview with Sheena Adams, 8 June 2011.
9  Available at http://www.inuvikgreenhouse.com/members.html.
10  Telephone interview with Sheena Adams, op cit.
11  Public Health Agency of Canada, op cit.
12  Public Health Agency of Canada, op cit.

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# NOVADECI Health Care Program in the Philippines

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## Introduction

This case study focuses on the role of the Novaliches Development Cooperative (NOVADECI) in providing health care and medical services to its members. NOVADECI is a cooperative initiated by market vendors in 1976 in a bustling urban community. It started its operations in the town of Novaliches and has since then widened its scope of operation to include the areas of Caloocan and Quezon City, two highly urbanized and populous cities in the Philippines. Quezon City is home to many government entities, private offices, shopping malls, public markets, schools and universities as well as sprawling residential areas for both the rich and the poor.

NOVADECI had a very rocky beginning, borne out of desperation and necessity for a small group of market vendors who were struggling to keep their businesses afloat in the face of changing market conditions, lack of support from or access to government and banking institutions, and structural dependence on usurious money lenders. Over many years these vendors realized that their profit margins were being eaten away by the high interest rates they had to pay on loans. In 1976, a tipping point came when the slaughter house on which they were getting their meat supplies was ordered closed by the city government due to poor sanitation practices. A small group of 15 market vendors decided to close ranks and come up with a collective solution. Together they voiced their collective grievances and brainstormed on alternative solutions. With the assistance of leaders from a marketing cooperative, The National Market Vendors Cooperative (NAMVESCO), these vendors endorsed the idea of forming a cooperative. Thus NOVADECI was born. In the beginning NOVADECI assumed the primary role of a credit cooperative to meet the financial needs of its members. But gradually

it diversified its services, offering, among others, a health care program called NOVADECI Health Care Program (NHCP) to respond to the health care needs of its members.

NOVADECI grew to become one of the premier cooperatives in the country. 2009 data released during the 34th General Assembly of 2010 showed that the small membership of 70 in 1976 has grown to 27,960; its meager earning of US$43.91[1] on fixed deposits has ballooned to US$11 million; from employing just one staff member initially, NOVADECI presently employs 140 workers. Its total assets stood at US$28 million for the year 2009. The cooperative offers a variety of services ranging from: savings and loans; training, livelihood and legal services; sports activities; an educational, literacy and scholarship program; disability, mortuary and old-age benefits and health care. NOVADECI operates eight branches in Caloocan and Quezon City. It owns two buildings which house the main office, a cooperative-run supermarket (prior to its recent closure), medical and dental clinics, laboratory facilities, pharmacy and training venues, among others.

## An Overview of the NOVADECI Health Care Program (NHCP)

This study focuses on the dynamics and processes undertaken by NOVADECI in putting up a medical and health care component utilizing a micro-insurance scheme known as NHCP. Founded in 1993, NHCP was a realization of the cooperative's mission of promoting the values of social responsibility, mutual help, caring and concern among its members. Through the NHCP the cooperative works towards the ideals of 'equality' and 'solidarity', two principles which are recognized by the International Cooperative Movement as bedrocks of genuine cooperativism.

NHCP plays a twin role: that of a health care provider and an insurance system. Under the micro-insurance scheme, each member is obliged to pay a one-time membership fee and a regular annual fee to be able to access the health care program. In return, cooperative members, together with their immediate families and dependents, are provided with free medical consultations, free maternity and annual medical check-ups, discounted laboratory examinations, dental and optical services and financial aid for hospitalization. The clinic offers preventive care, immunization and surgical intervention. More serious cases are referred to accredited hospitals with members given cash reimbursements to cover their medical expenses. The health and medical benefits package that a member can use is proportional to the amount of the member's contribution, his/her length of membership and the extent to which he/she uses the cooperative's services.

## Why the Need for a Health Care Program?

Health should be of priority concern for everyone, but it becomes a critical issue when a given society is poorly equipped to deal with the onset of sickness and disease.  The health situation in Quezon City, where NOVADECI operates, is a microcosm of the over-all situation in the Philippines.  Despite the presence of a few modern medical establishments in major cities, the state of this nation's population, in terms of health, is said to be among the worst in Asia.  A World Health Organization (WHO) study, in 2002, estimated that there were only 1.16 doctors and one hospital per 1,000 people in the country. More recent statistical data revealed that there are 12 physicians (2004) and five hospital beds (2006) per 10,000 people (WHO, Philippines Country Statistics). The scarcity of doctors is attributed to the continuous flight of physicians, nurses and medical personnel to the US, Europe and Middle East from the 1960s to the present, obviously to seek greener pastures.  Nowadays in many provinces there are only one or two remaining physicians in hospitals. Nurses, who are often overworked and underpaid, cannot wait to leave the Philippines and change their luck abroad. It is no wonder that medical treatment remains quite high, compounded as it is by the exorbitant cost of drugs and laboratory procedures. The Department of Health admitted that the prices of medicines in the Philippines are among the highest in the region. Moreover the thrust of health care is curative rather than preventive.

Given the low budget allocation for health and social services by the government (Philippines Special Report, 2001), many congested and unsanitary urban poor and squatter communities in the country suffer from the perennial problem of air and water borne diseases and outbreaks of dengue, cholera, diarrhea and respiratory diseases.  Most urban and rural residents resort to self-medications, herbal medicines and local medicine men to cure their ailments, sometimes resulting in dire consequences.

## The Informal Sector in Relation to the Health Problem

NOVADECI operates in urban centers where the majority of the population belongs to the so-called informal sector. When the cooperative was founded in Novaliches in 1976, business activities in the area were mostly confined to wholesale and commercial trading.  Enterprise development, in such a setting, was quite stagnant. As such, there was little job creation and unemployment and underemployment gradually became structural problems. The 2010 census of the labor force, undertaken by the National Statistics Office (NSO) posted the unemployment rate in the National Capital Region, an area where NOVADECI operates, at 7.1% and underemployment at 19.6%. A social stratification mapping

of the NOVADECI membership reveals that the majority of its members work in the informal sector. Data obtained from NOVADECI ending June 2011 shows the following composition of members by sector: employees 24.69%; vendors 4.12%; transport 5.65%; small and medium enterprises or sme's/sari-sari store 22.36%; services 3.58%; professionals 2.96%; food 2.19% and others 34.45%.

The population of Quezon City may be roughly divided into two working sectors. Firstly, there are workers employed in the government and private sector, receiving salaries and wages. These workers are mostly covered by labor and social protection. Secondly, we find the people grouped within the generic classification of informal sector workers. These people are either self-employed or working with family labor or apprentices. One of the key characteristics of informal sector workers the world over is the manner in which they are generally excluded from social security systems. As such, many experts conflate informal work with 'unprotected' work, where workers remain outside the regulatory purview of the state (see: Portes, 1994). Having contributed little or no direct taxes to the state, governments pays little attention to them in terms of policies, services and social insurance. Thus they have no other recourse but to fend for themselves or rely for support from friends, neighbors, patrons, politicians in a spirit of kinship and damayan (mutual help) to pull them through hard times.

The cities of Quezon and Caloocan do not lack health providers. In 1993, prior to the launching of the NHCP, there were 14 health establishments in the Novaliches area which offered various health care services. Six of these establishments were privately-owned hospitals while the remaining eight were government-run health care centers. Although local health centers provide sufficient primary health care they lack the essential equipment and clinical laboratories for serious cases that require continuous monitoring, recuperation and therapy (NCHP Case Study; ILO, 2001).

The informal sector can access private and state-led health insurance policies but many of them are prevented from doing so due to factors like ignorance, lack of exposure or information and fear that they may not be able to afford the premiums and/or monthly contributions of health insurances. Philhealth, the Philippine government's national insurance program covers all citizens, including informal sector workers. In 2000, the Insurance Commission (IC), the country's regulatory body for life and non-life insurance companies, said only 13.5 percent of the country's 78.5 million residents had insurance coverage. Health care spending constituted a measly 3.4 percent of the gross national product (GNP) in 1999, below the 5 percent standard set by WHO for developing countries. IC further stated that although the country has a national health insurance program, pension funds and private insurance plans, personal expenses still account for 57% of all health expenditures (Philippines Special Report, 2001:8). More recent data for 2009 puts the life insurance coverage at 13.90 percent for a population of 92.2 million (Insurance economic indicators 2005-2009).

NOVADECI's creation of an affordable health program helped to fill the gaping hole in the country's health insurance system. NOVADECI staff worker, Myrna Ramos (March 2011 interview) said that NHCP has alleviated the suffering of members with heavy financial burdens. Those who joined NHCP are less worried about where to get the money to pay for hospital bills especially in emergencies. The lack of at-hand resources is a particularly pressing issue for vendors, who usually put all their profits not needed for daily expenses back into the businesses, leaving them with no money to cover unexpected health problems. Health care is of extra benefit for women, who comprise 70 percent of NOVADECI members. They are in most need of pre-natal and maternity care. They are more vulnerable to health risks due to the triple burden of raising children, maintaining households and having to work at the same time.

In its 18 years of operation, NHCP has achieved a certain measure of success but much remains to be done. In the 2010 General Assembly, NOVADECI reported having 7,000 NHCP members out of 29,000 plus cooperative members, roughly 30 percent of total members. Management reported that as of 31 December, 2009, a total of more or less US$104,444 had been expended for hospitalization benefit claims (HBC) and annual physical examination (APE) benefits. Of the total 844 HBC claims, 62 percent are members' claims, while the remaining 38 percent are claims made for beneficiaries/dependents. These statistics however reveal only part of the story. NHCP had a sluggish recruitment pace around its formative years, encountering a low degree of reception from members. Former Manager Tita Viesca[2] recalled that when NOVADECI introduced the idea of health care there was little consciousness among members regarding the benefit of health insurance, as they had no prior experience or exposure to this kind of activity. In the first year, only 198 out of the 3,277 coop members signed up for the program. This was compounded by the co-op's lack of an aggressive marketing strategy unlike private health insurance companies who had an army of effective agents to sell their health plans. Marketing was only done by word of mouth and among walk-in customers of the cooperative.

When NOVADECI launched its health care program in September 1993, its stated objectives were enumerated as follows (ILO, 2001):

- Provide health care services to Novadeci members by creating a relevant health program;
- Extend health care services to families/dependents of NOVADECI members;
- Extend health care services to the community; and
- Create and mobilize funds for the NOVADECI Health Care Fund, specifically by creating the cooperative's own medical laboratory, lying-in clinic, pharmacy, medical clinic and hospital.

## Stages of Growth and Development of NHCP

### *Historical and philosophical underpinnings*

The drive towards cooperative formation was ascribed historically as a reaction to the ill-effects of capitalism during the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The first ever documented pioneers of the cooperative movement, known as Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, were ordinary and uneducated folks from England who decided to form a cooperative to escape the slavish working conditions and pitiful wages in factories at the height of the Industrial Revolution in mid-19th century. They put up a commodity store and experimented on a new approach that put service above profit, gave primacy to labor over capital and gave every member equal power in decision making. But equal power sharing comes with equal responsibility. Each person was responsible for the welfare and well-being of its members and in sharing the risks and burdens that came with managing the store's operations. In the process, the pioneers institutionalized their experience and condensed them into a set of principles that guided their management operations. These principles are still used today as guidelines for cooperative living.

The cooperative movement has come a long way from its origins in the 1850s. Big and small cooperatives are growing and thriving in many countries across the globe, both in capitalist and socialist systems. Cooperatives were first introduced in the Philippines in the early 1900's mainly by missionaries from Europe and America and have been thriving ever since. There are cooperatives in every conceivable economic sector or activity: be it credit, consumer, producer, marketing, service, housing, agriculture, education, electric, fisheries, health, housing, insurance, transport, water, etc. They are firmly established in rural and urban areas, in government and private institutions, in companies big and small. Cooperatives are built on the synergy of a small group, often by some spirited and well-meaning individuals and from thereon they rapidly expand to draw into their circle more and more individuals. But the road to cooperative formation is also littered with failures. There are many cooperatives that flounder after a few years of operation due to mismanagement, financial imprudence or because their founders and members lack the appropriate mindset and attitude to build a genuine cooperative. There are also pseudo cooperatives masquerading as genuine ones for self-serving reasons or to escape government accountability or taxation.

Official reports from the Philippine's Cooperative Development Authority (CDA) documents the number of registered cooperatives under Art. 144 of RA 9520 at 18,484, as of 31 December, 2010. From 1 January to 31 December, 2010 the total number of newly-registered cooperatives came to 1,376. Out of this total, 416 or 30.23% are credit coops, 228 or 16.57% are consumer co-ops, 291 or 21.15%

are producer coops, 190 or 13.81% are marketing coops, 234 or 17.01% are service coops and the rest are multi-purpose, insurance and secondary cooperatives (CDA-DOF Selected Statistics, 2010).

The philosophical foundation of cooperatives has been crystallized over the last 150 years. They are embodied in a set of cooperative values, ethics and principles; they are guides to action for the entire cooperative world. They are supposed to give cooperatives their true and distinct identity. Values and ethics are the animating spirit while principles are its actualization. In the words of the International Cooperative Alliance "cooperatives are governed by the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity and reflected in the ethics of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. The seven cooperative principles are voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, education-training-and-information, concern for community and cooperation among cooperators" (Hoyt Ann, 1996).

## Organizing phase of NHCP

Just like the cooperative pioneers before them, the founders of NOVADECI were driven by the desire to end perceived injustices. The members wanted to end their dependence on usurious money lenders by relying on their collective efforts. In the process they met stiff resistance from the market owner who owned the stalls they were renting. The market owner, fearing the threat of competition, resorted to harassment, the eviction of the cooperative founders from the market, as well as putting together law suits against these leaders, on the bases of various charges, one of which included arson. Nonetheless, such obstacles only worked to unify the cooperative founders. Former Manager Tita Viesca said the first ten years of growth were the most difficult. But their persistence worked when eventually the market owner, who became a congresswoman, made peace with the leaders and later, became an active supporter of their cause.

## One Woman's Campaign to Set-up a Health Program

The idea of developing a health care program was attributed to the zeal and passion of Ms Maria Theresa Tawag, a former company nurse of Rebisco Company, as well as being an idealist and former union organizer. Tawag was hired as a company nurse by NOVADECI around 1990. At that time she had some experience working as a health insurance agent. Using her background knowledge and skills, Tawag presented her initial concept and operational plan for a health care program to the

Board and Management of NOVADECI. Tawag had big plans, one of which was to persuade the Board to buy a vacant lot on which they could build a hospital. Alternatively, she also proposed to buy out a bankrupt hospital just across the NOVADECI building. Both plans did not prosper for two reasons. One was the sheer magnitude of the project which would put a strain on the manpower and technical capability of the cooperative. Second, was the limited term of office of coop leaders which prevented continuity in project planning and implementation. The next set of officers would often shelf previous project planning in favor of their own. Besides, board members were not willing to risk their credibility for a project that could backfire on them in the event of failure. In the end, Tawag settled for the more viable and workable health care program.

Tawag's job involved taking the blood pressure of walk-in members. A room was converted into a makeshift clinic and a small cabinet was turned into a mini-pharmacy. This small initiative started the ball rolling. NOVADECI began collecting voluntary contributions, with gradual and incremental increases until each member's fee was pegged at US$6.67 annually. It was a period of trial and error. They were blazing a new path with no rules or procedures to follow. Initially there were no coverage limits such that a member could collect as much as ten thousand pesos for a minor ailment. Management realized that parameters had to be put in place to ensure that the health program would not go bankrupt.

## Informal Survey

Cooperative decision making is based on democratic participation, and in pursuit of this goal the board members consulted the opinion of the members over the proposed health program. Management could not easily convene a General Assembly to make a ruling so they conducted an informal survey. Walk-in members were interviewed and asked a set of questions about the type of medical and health care services they need and how much they would be willing to pay for it. Results of the survey showed that members opted for a one-stop-shop arrangement where they could consult with doctors, do their laboratory tests and analysis and purchase their medicines at the same time. They wanted a streamlined system without the complicated procedures involved in health financing. Using the results of the survey, Tawag made a formal recommendation to the NOVADECI Board and management personnel for a health insurance program. Upon closer evaluation the Board found the scheme financially feasible. At this time NOVADECI possessed sufficient reserve funds to jump start the program. Coincidentally, the construction of the six story building they had financed had been completed and it therefore could provide the space for the clinic. Consequently, the program was approved and the National Health Care Program (NHCP) was underway.

NHCP was officially opened on 1 September 1993, with an initial capital base of US$4,444 taken from the NOVADECI reserve fund. A clinic was opened on the ground floor of the building. The annual premium fee was set at US$6.67 and was made exclusive for regular members only. The wider public could also walkin to the medical clinic and receive treatment at a discounted price. The medical staff consisted of seven personnel: two alternating doctors, one pharmacist, one medical technician, one secretary, one janitor and one dispenser of medicines who operated from a small area in the clinic.

NHCP was quite dependent on NOVADECI during its early stages. The logistics, personnel and facilities of NHCP were all subsidized by the Co-op reserve fund. The co-op had to shoulder everything, especially in the setting-up of facilities. A loss of US$1,773 was reported in the first year given the low collection and recruitment of members to the program.

## Period of Expansion and Consolidation

NHCP serves NOVADECI two ways. Primarily, it takes care of the health needs of the members. Secondly, it serves as a marketing strategy to attract more members. New recruits were drawn to NOVADECI because of the easy and affordable health benefit package. For existing members, NHCP reduced their need to apply for emergency loans.

Two problems had to be overcome to ensure the survival of the program. One, without a continuous recruitment campaign, the program's sustainability would be in danger. And two, related to the first, without the infusion of new members, there is a danger of depleting the reserve fund for health care. Several options and strategies were taken to entice more members.

One strategy was to push for a more aggressive recruitment campaign. This was made possible through the hiring of women to serve as *purok* (a small area or zone) leaders. The *purok* leaders represent the organizational arm of the cooperative. They are recruited on the basis of their exemplary record as regular coop members of good standing. Each *purok* leader is paid between US$33 to US$66 monthly allowance and her territorial coverage consists of around one to two thousand households. Among the manifold tasks of *purok* leaders, they must strive to: a) recruit potential cooperative members and conduct recruitment campaigns that include house-to-house campaigns and leaflet posting; b) disseminate information about meetings, activities, projects, and notices for General Assemblies; c) monitor members with loans that are past their due payment date; and d) recruit members to the health program and inform them about seminars on health related issues and medical missions. Jurisdiction over *purok* leaders fall to the directors of the Education Committee. They are required to attend three to four briefings a

week. Some *purok* leaders are sometimes overwhelmed by the pressure of their job, as they have a quota to recruit ten members per month. Failure to meet the quota may entail the reduction of their monthly allowances.

Another option was to engage in more social service activities involving health awareness and consciousness-raising. NOVADECI conducted regular activities at the Barangay level where people could directly benefit from new health services such as feeding programs, year round medical missions, bloodletting, free papsmears, free dental clinics, etc. These programs serve to embody the principle of 'concern for community' and indirectly promote the ideas and ideals of the cooperative.

Seminars and training sessions have proven to be an effective way of recruiting members and more importantly, developing their potential of becoming good well-rounded citizens capable of contributing their talent, leadership, skills and capabilities to the local community and society at large. Livelihood and entrepreneurial seminars, computer and financial literacy, product development, lakbay aral (study-tour), talakayan (discussion) sessions, etc. are regularly held, in and out of the premises, creating goodwill and positive feedback from old and new members.

## Period of Relative Stability

NOVADECI began to introduce an array of much sought after services like dental, optical and laboratory tests. The annual check-ups were made comprehensive and included ECG, CBC, Urinalysis, FBS, BUN, BUA, Cholesterol Screening, Pap Smears, ECG, immunization and minor surgeries. This health care package is normally provided by private health care providers and is way beyond the reach of low-income earning citizens.

The latest statistics provided by NOVADECI showed the percentage distribution of preponderant diseases consulted by members: cardiovascular diseases 27%; respiratory disease 18%; renal/kidney disease 17%; gastro-intestinal tract 8%; O.B. Gynecology 5%; endocrine disease 2% and genito-urinary disease 3%.

As membership began to grow, NHCP generated enough earnings to cover some of the salaries of the staff. By the end of 1994, around 670 members had signed up for the program. But with their membership, came the demand for better services and facilities. Thus a pharmacy was opened in 1995 followed by a lying-in clinic. The latter, however, was forced to close down after only two years of operation due to lack of available doctors to man the round-the-clock operation. Laboratory, x-ray and ultra sound facilities were installed that catered not only to members but to the general public as well. Office spaces were rented out to a partner internist, optometrist and pediatrician, further expanding health

services and generating extra income as well. NHCP maintains that its laboratory facilities are run at a lower cost than the standard market rate. CBC and ECG cost only US$4 compared to the prevailing outside rate of US$5.55. Medicines are also comparatively cheaper since the pharmacy only maintains a five percent mark-up profit. But NHCP is far from being financially sound. Most of the medical staff salaries including the Medical Coordinator and the retainer fees of the doctors are still subsidized by the cooperative.

In its first year of operations, NHCP disbursed nearly US$ 5,882 in benefit claims. The following year, disbursements amounted close to US$11,088. Since then, the annual disbursements have varied between US$8,888 to US$10,444. In 2000, more than US$10,044 in benefits was spent by NHCP. However, this figure excluded operational and management costs, which amounted to over US$17,333.

By 2005, there had been a huge leap in terms of the number of beneficiaries, as can be seen in the figures below:

| NOVADECI HEALTH CARE PROGRAM MEMBERSHIP, CLAIMS AND FUND MOVEMENT (In Dollars) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Year | No. of NHCP Members | No. of Beneficiaries | Expenses | NHCP Balance |
| 2005 | 6354 | 2304 | 69,378 | 124,914 |
| 2008 | 7043 | 2440 | 78,589 | 140,636 |
| 2007 | 7409 | 2589 | 84,413 | 142,809 |
| 2008 | 8134 | 3000 | 99,431 | 160,076 |
| 2009 | 7656 | 2914 | 103,503 | 128,017 |

| TOTAL HEALTH CARE FUND FOR A PERIOD OF FIVE YEARS | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
| US$ 122,222 | US$ 128,889 | US$ 142,222 | US$ 160,000 | US$ 128,889 |

## Setting-up the Administrative Mechanism

The organizational and managerial structures of NHCP and NOVADECI are tightly integrated into a kind of division of labor based on a delineation of roles, which must be followed in order to ensure the smooth running of daily operations. Part of this systematization involved the establishment of a Medical Services Department, created to specifically handle NHCP. Whereas before, the Medical Coordinator used to report to NOVADECI's marketing department, it now runs its own separate entity. NHCP is composed of the Medical Clinic Staff that runs its operations. It consists of the medical coordinator, medical technologist, pharmacist, nurse, attendants,

book-keeper and specialist doctors such as pediatricians, internist, pathologists, cardiologists as well as dentists. The work of the staff involves attending to walk-in patients, producing daily accounting records and updating clinic inventory. The over-all responsibility for coordinating and supervising NHCP is assigned to the Medical Coordinator and the General Manager.

The medical clinic staff is made up of professionals and semi-professionals hired by NOVADECI on a full-time or retainer basis (in the case of doctors). But they can be hired and fired by management unlike the board members who are elected for a fixed term period by the General Assembly. They are, therefore, directly accountable to the management and the Board but only indirectly to the General Assembly.

## Democratic Processes of NOVADECI

Cooperatives generally have built-in democratic processes that are enshrined in their Constitutions and By-Laws. Cooperatives should be democratically controlled by the members via the one member one vote principle regardless of the member's capital share. This ensures that no one person or group can wield political control and monopolize decisions. This is a process strictly adhered to by genuine cooperatives. In the case of NOVADECI, the General Assembly makes the final decision of all financial matters and development plans and projects, while the Board of Directors provide policy directions and formulate strategic development plans. The Management and the Board Committees oversee the day-to-day operations and actualize the plans and directions set out by the General Assembly and its elected officials.

There is a parallelism between cooperatives and Western-style democracies in that the legislative function is vested on the General Assembly while the executive function is vested on the board of directors which rely on the different committees and management to run daily operations. But there is also a huge difference which gives cooperatives a real taste of true democracy. Unlike Western democracies that are representative in character, cooperatives rely on the direct and active participation of all members through their General Assemblies. Thus, genuine democratic participation is assured. However, this does not rule out the possibility that the board or management may not be in complete alignment or agreement with the wishes of the general members. Disagreements may manifest themselves by way of omission or negligence. Such possibilities do exist and may endanger or subvert democratic processes.

Thus, if the General Assembly is not satisfied with the services of NHCP it may choose to slash its budget or give it a slightly reduced amount. The Board, Management and Medical Services Department are obliged to update, inform

and report to the GA as well as consult with them in various ways, such as via feedback mechanisms, informal interactions, and consultations, soliciting comments and suggestions. For instance, in 2000, Management conducted a survey among members regarding their evaluation of NHCP services. Findings showed that members wanted more health services but without a corresponding increase in their annual contributions. In another instance, members demanded more specific medical treatment that the clinic with its limited capacities could not deliver. Management was prompted to take action and offered the following solutions. One was to make it compulsory for incoming members to join NHCP and the other was to form partnerships with tertiary hospitals which are capable of providing more specific and special medical attention that require advanced laboratory equipment and facilities.

Cooperatives have to live by another operative principle: education, training and information. In pursuit of this, NOVADECI sees to it that NHCP members are routinely informed about new services, the upgrading of facilities, additional program costs or new policies or regulations. These are done via the distribution of newsletters, flyers and postings on bulletin boards and recently the installation of an internet website where members could interact and post their opinions. Orientation seminars and refresher courses are also given regularly to NHCP members. But more importantly there are regular training programs related to livelihood, skills development, computer literacy, and a variety of how-to's from rug making to food preservation. There are also study-tours to more advanced cooperatives in the cities and countryside and regular discussion sessions on cooperative issues.

Establishing the mechanics, policies, rules and regulations governing the health program were crystallized, gradually, but in a manner that was always based on consultation with and obtaining the prior approval of the highest governing body, the General Assembly. In the past, several landmark decisions pertaining to NHCP were put before the General Assembly meetings for debate, discussion and approval. Here is a sampling of key policies that made it to the GA.

1. To avail of medical services, NHCP members were required to pay a one-time fee US$4.44 and an annual fee of US$6.66. In 1995, the General Assembly approved an increase of US$13.33 in the annual fee which can be paid in part or in full in one year depending on the member's capacity to pay. Correspondingly, the amount of medical benefit was made proportional to the amount paid. The increase was necessary to stem NHCP's financial losses and maintain the sustainability of the program. In another GA meeting, the management tried to convince the members to increase the annual fee to US$22.22 but it was overwhelmingly rejected by members.

2. From 1993 to 2000 membership to NHCP was voluntary. But in 2000 the Board in consultation with the General Assembly ruled to make membership

to NHCP compulsory for all. The enabling mechanism in pursuit of this was to make it compulsory for members to join NHCP as a prerequisite for approval of their loans. Thereafter, the annual fee would be automatically deducted from their loan. This became a contentious issue for some members who already had or would rather have access to a private or government health insurance plan.  However, at the time of writing, the co-op had not been able to enforce this decision for technical reasons. There is no updated computerized data base that gives information as to who are NHCP members and non-members.

3.  Earlier in the program, all NHCP members were required to have a physical examination as a pre-requisite to membership. Later this was abandoned because it discouraged the members from joining due to the hassle of going through the physical examination. But in its place a two-year waiting period was required before one could accede the full benefits of the health coverage for specific types of illnesses such as tuberculosis, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, asthma, hyperthyroidism, cataract, glaucoma, epilepsy and kidney disease.

4.  A plan was put before the General Assembly to purchase a bankrupt hospital put up for sale by its owners. Although the General Assembly liked the idea they did not want to share in the cost.  At that time, the cooperative had enough funds to bankroll the project but discussions were frequently stalled because of the regular turnover of the leadership of the coop.

## Analysis and Conclusions

Cooperatives are built to empower people in communities through the use of pooled resources to meet their common needs. Two main resources are at their disposal: social capital and man-made capital. Social capital, loosely defined, refers to the cumulative goodwill, trust and loyalty that people in communities cultivate over time from living together. Man-made capital is the combination of money, talents, skills, and knowledge (latent or acquired), which when utilized in a purposive way can bring about substantial changes in people's lives.

But for social and man-made capital to bear its desired fruit, cooperatives must adhere to the fundamental principles of cooperativism. There are seven of them but two core principles stand out. The principle of 'member economic participation' dictates that no one person can invest an amount that is more than 20% of the total cooperative's capital (Republic Act 6938). This is to ensure that surplus income generated by the cooperative will not fall in the hands of a few but will be fairly distributed to the bulk of members.  Corollary to this, the principle

of 'democratic member control' rules that each member, regardless of capital investment or ownership is entitled to only one vote during in General Assembly meetings. 'One member one vote' ensures that the will of the majority gets the upper hand in decision making and not swayed in favor of those with larger vested interests to promote or protect.

In the case of NOVADECI, compliance with these two core principles made it possible for the cooperative to generate considerable excess funds which are channeled so that they can meet services that are essential for the well-being of members. Cooperatives like NOVADECI are mandated to funnel a percentage of surplus earnings into a reserve fund account. Through prudent, wise and disciplined allocation of reserved resources, NOVADECI has been able to venture into a variety of welfare and services, among the most important of which are: 1) *damayan* (mutual help), a pension fund for death, old age, and disability; 2) a housing project that sheltered more than 200 members; 3) education, seminar and training programs centered on skills training and the improvement of one's capabilities; 4) regular medical and dental missions in desperate residential areas that require urgent health care, and 5) the health program. Surplus earnings enabled the cooperative to build a six-story building, expand its territorial coverage to create eight satellite offices and as this study shows, create a health care program which members can rely on for their health and medical needs.

NHCP has been operating for more than twenty years despite the many difficulties that have sprung up along the way. It was an uphill climb all the way, as the founders and collaborators had to continuously confront skepticism and struggle to ensure its survival. But it has always depended on a cooperative subsidy. Thus, the health program primarily functions to render service and profit-making has become a by-product of it. While service is its prime motivation, it still needs to come up with innovative and bright ideas to attract and maintain its membership. The NHCP team has had to constantly upgrade its laboratory facilities and design a more comprehensive health and medical package suited to member needs.

In the task of reenergizing NHCP's services, there is an overriding need to bring together the 'consciousness and awareness' of the members with the cooperative's mission, vision and philosophical underpinnings. Cooperatives by design are created around a set of values, ethics and principles which members must internalize as a pre-condition for their empowerment. Attention must be paid to the task of demonstrating to each member that being part of a cooperative should not rest on a desire for short-term economic gains, but rather, for a greater cause, the blueprint of which was laid out by the founding fathers of the cooperative movement. We know that historically cooperatives were founded as a way to circumvent the profit amassing character of capitalist enterprises and as a vehicle for collective empowerment.

But theoretical suppositions must be backed up by a reality check. When we interviewed some of the officers and asked them if there is congruence between ideals and practices i.e. for example, if there are efforts to infuse values, ethics and principles with the actual attitudes and behavior of members, the responses were rather tentative. Both Viesca and Ramos in the interviews admitted that teaching cooperative values, ethics and principles is not a priority as much as teaching them survival and livelihood skills. Moreover, they reasoned that most members, particularly vendors are too busy making a living to worry about the transference of values. Most members primarily join the cooperative as a means of obtaining loans and/or saving money to earn interest. Beyond the economic expediency of joining a cooperative, the arena of imparting cooperative philosophy is a gray area for most members.

Of course, the process of endearing members to the cooperative philosophy is not something that can be taught directly or passed on simply by sharing quotes from textbooks. Cultural change and the process of acquiring new inter-subjectivities require time and patience, before its fruits can be harvested. It is a living process which is imperceptible to untrained eyes. On this note, there is substantial evidence which shows the NOVADECI's progress. Certain reports also indicate that the leaders do not miss the opportunity of forging closer bonds with members. A feedback mechanism is in place to obtain the member's views and sentiments on important issues. Surveys are routinely conducted during GA meetings on a sundry of issues and suggestion boxes are made available for members to air their grievances. *Purok* volunteers are also constantly briefed and trained to become 'the voice of the cooperative' to the communities at large. *Balik-Aral* or re-orientation programs are regularly conducted to inform members of new or additional policies. *Lakbay-Aral* or field trips to other successful cooperatives are also conducted to strengthen cooperative spirit and foster understanding and cooperation among cooperatives.

Cooperative values have a strong kinship with traditional values that have a rich history in Philippine communities. The cooperative values of solidarity, equality and equity have their equivalents in the Filipino value-system. In Filipino solidarity means *pagkakaisa* (unity), *pagkakapatiran* means brotherhood and *pagdadamayan* means mutual help. The Filipino practice of *pakikipag-kapwa* has been identified by an eminent Filipino psychologist Virgilio Enriquez as a core Filipino value. It means unity-of-self-with-others, a strong sense of identification and bonding in which the self is not seen or taken apart from others. This may explain why Filipinos are constantly involved in social mingling and social festivities. One is also reminded of an age-old practice called *bayanihan* wherein neighbors in a community mobilize their collective labor for free when someone is asking for help.

The cooperative value of equity in Western parlance means equal distribution of wealth. But when equity is translated using the Filipino value system it goes

further than mere wealth distribution, taken as always in the form of money. The operative word is *pagpapaka-tao* or *pagpapakamaka-tao*, a striving to become fully human in the true sense of the word. *Pagpapaka-tao* means treating others the way one would like to be treated, the golden rule itself. It is not a material striving, but has a different cosmological connotation, much like a spiritual striving to be the person one was intended to be.

The cooperative value of equality is a direct translation of a Filipino value called *pagkakapantay-pantay* which again is not merely equality in wealth or social status but equality in the way one is treated and looked upon, as a human being complete unto his or herself. It may also be that we are all equal in the eyes of a greater being, often found within the kernel of one's self or *kalooban*, the gateway where one meets his/her Maker.

The cooperative ethics of social responsibility and caring are quite akin to the Filipino spirit of *pagkalinga* and *pag-aaruga*, a form of nurturing often learned from a very young age as when a mother tells an older child *"alagaan mo ang kapatid mo"* (look after your younger sibling). This admonishment is quite often heard among people in rural areas and perhaps may also explain why Filipino migrants are scattered all over the world to become caretakers. *Pagkalinga* also translates to playing 'big brother' to those who are suffering.

But all these extolling of Filipino values must not blind us to the fact that values have changed considerably over the past century or so. Values are fluid and integrated with and change alongside other values. Among the values striving for dominance are the values of gross materialism and individualism which assert that material satisfaction and sensorial gratification give the individual an edge above the rest. Sadly many Filipinos have adapted to this kind of thinking, propelled as it is by the overwhelming entry of foreign goods and services in the country.

NOVADECI must always be vigilant to protect the niche it has built in the community and the formation of values has a large role to play. This is where social capital comes in; the ideal ways of relating-to-each-other, which incorporate many Filipino values, which despite their relative erosion in the face of the indomitable rise of commercialism, do remain pertinent and continue to have resonance within society. At times, indeed, these values can be mobilized into action when the necessity arises. Market forces are unpredictable and competition whether it is between big players, both local and foreign, may render even well-entrenched cooperatives irrelevant in the future. One obvious threat to NOVADECI is the 'invasion' of super malls in local communities. SM and Robinsons supermarkets (two big retail chains owned by Chinese tycoons) have established their presence in local communities and have captured the hearts and minds of consumers everywhere. They have absorbed a great part of the retail business and are in direct competition with the vendors who are the primary customers of NOVADECI. These giant malls are conveyors of foreign goods and services that are superior in quality, packaging

and workmanship. In Novaliches, as in many other places, buses are rerouted to pick up and drop off passengers in the vicinity of these supermarkets. SM owners are the biggest patrons of local officials in Quezon City. They are billed as crown jewels for their contribution to the city's business tax revenues. They are slowly forcing market vendors out of the market with their competitively priced retails goods. Small vendors whose products are often locally sourced are no match for them in every aspect of salesmanship and marketing. In the Philippines 'malling' is a favorite pastime and a cultural phenomenon. To be able to survive in such a dire situation, cooperatives would require nothing less than government intervention. NOVADECI used to operate a grocery store but this was closed down due to insufficient sales. It has utilized various incentives like the 'score sheet' to rally members to patronize the store but they were largely ineffective.

## The Way Forward

Both local and national government must work together to come up with legislative measures to ensure the survival of cooperatives. But, alongside government assistance, cooperatives must also take the initiative and combat political inertia. This is where the principle of cooperation among cooperators must come into full play. Cooperatives must continue to maintain close coordination and maintain linkages with other cooperatives as part of their effort to affect policy changes at the national level. Fortunately, NOVADECI maintains close ties with the National Confederation of Cooperatives (NATTCO) and has been actively participating in the election campaigns which may have contributed to their victory in the party-list election and occupying seats in the Philippines' parliament.

In ending, we must return to our definition of social capital as something which must be nurtured by constant training, education, and information. Cooperative values, ethics and principles must come alive by being replenished with new meanings. Given that we are now living in a global environment whether we like it or not, cooperatives must be equipped with the power to confront larger issues above and beyond the agenda laid out before General Assemblies. And that can only be possible by continuous awareness-raising until they have risen to a higher level of consciousness and have a mastery of the resources at their disposal to engage the powers and structures that have the power to control their lives.

**Appendices**

I. NHCP Policies and Guidelines

Objectives:
1. Take care of the health needs of members and their immediate dependents.
2. Continue to develop and pursue the various health program of Novadeci.
3. To source funds for its implementation and accomplishments.

Membership:
- Must be a member of the Novadeci cooperative with a share capital of US33.33 or more.

Disqualification:
- Those covered under pension plan
- Those receiving disability benefits
- Terminally ill beneficiaries of the death, disability and old age benefit program called Damayan

Who are Covered:  Regular Members:  if single (with parents) and if married (with children)

Benefits and Services:
- Free consultation and annual check-up
- Financial assistance for hospitalization, confinement, minor and major surgeries

Benefits and Services Package (falls under two categories)

| Plan A | Plan B |
|---|---|
| Yearly payment of US13.33 for member, spouse and two children | Yearly Payment of US13.33 for member, spouse, two children; and US$8 for each additional child |
| Single Member | Parent Member |
| Maximum benefit per year | Maximum Benefit per year |
| US$ 222  Member | US$222  Member |
| US$111  Spouse/Parents | US$111  Spouse/Parents |
| US$111  Two Children | US$111  Two Children (single) |
|  | US$44.44 Additional child (no waiting |
| (Waiting period of six months for dependents) | period |

Premium Payment: In order to get full benefit of the program, a member has to pay the complete annual payment of US$13.33 in advance. If not, the benefits will be affected in proportion to the payment made. Thus:

Amount of Payment and Corresponding Benefit for One Year (In Dollars)

| Amount Paid | Benefit |
|---|---|
| .00 – 3.33 | No benefit |
| 3.33 – 6.66 | 25% of benefit |
| 6.66 – 9.99 | 50% of benefit |
| 10 – 13.33 | 75% of benefit |
| 13.33 or more | 100% full benefit |

Stated amount of benefit

| Type of Illness/Operation | Member Benefit | Dependent Benefit |
|---|---|---|
| Major Operation<br>Heart Surgery<br>Appendectomy<br>Mastectomy etc. | Equivalent to hospital expense but not to exceed US$222 | Equivalent to hospital expense but not to exceed US$111 |
| Cancer (severe cases) | Equivalent to hospital expense but not to exceed US$222 | Equivalent to hospital expense but not to exceed US$111 |
| Caesarian Section | Equivalent to hospital expense but not to exceed US$111 | No benefit |
| Minor Operation<br>Excision (Cyst)<br>Hemmorrhoidectomy | Equivalent to hospital expense but not to exceed US$111 | Equivalent to hospital expense but not to exceed US$55 |
| Normal Delivery | Equivalent to hospital expense but not to exceed US$55 | No benefit |
| Medical Illness<br>Rehydration<br>H. Fever<br>Bronchopneumonia, etc. | Equivalent to hospital expense but not to exceed US$111 | Equivalent to hospital expense but not to exceed US$55 |

Free annual physical check-up for members who did not avail of the hospitalization (member or dependents) for the following examination:

1. ECG
2. CBC
3. URINALYSIS
4. FBS
5. BUN
6. BUA
7. CHOLESTEROL
8. HEPA SCREENING
9. PAP'S SMEAR (for females)
10. X-RAY (for males)

## Notes

[1] Conversion rate during time period of case study was at US$ 1 to P45.00.
[2] Interview conducted in March 2011.

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*Interviews*

Myrna Ramos, Medical Coordinator and Ms. Leonisa Fausto, General Manager on 4 March, 2011, NOVADECI Office, Novaliches.

Tita Viesca, former General Manager, March 17, 2011, NATTCO Office, Project 4, Quezon City.

# Frente de Luta por Moradia (Front for Housing Struggle)

# 9

*Bulend Karadag*
*Clair Siobhan Ruppert*

## The Brazilian Political and Economic Context

With the end of the military dictatorship in 1985, Brazil made a formal return to democracy with popular elections. In the decade of the 1990s, many neoliberal policies were implemented and Brazil faced many economic and social crises, during which there was a tendency of the State to criminalize popular social movements.

Nevertheless, with the rise to the presidency of Lula in 2002 and sustained economic growth, there has been a noticeable improvement in Brazil's socio-economic context. According to the Brazilian Labour Ministry, 13.8 million jobs were created between 2003 and 2010. During these years, a 'new middle class' emerged, evidenced by the growth in the purchasing power of a broad cross-section of the Brazilian population; from 2002 to 2009, there was an increase of 31.2% for the classes C and D, an increase also of 7.7% for classes A and B. There was a significant decrease in absolute poverty as 25.5% left the classes D and E. The minimum wage also had a real increase of 53.4% between 2003 and 2010.

These changes were based on fundamental political reforms and policy redirections, implemented during the two-term presidential period of Lula, which focused on prioritizing job creation, social inclusion, income distribution, an increase in State investment and the reconsolidation of a strong and interventionist State.While these figures demonstrate a quantifiable and positive change in the living and working conditions of many Brazilians, there remains much ground for improvement, particularly in terms of the legacy of economic exclusion and structural income inequality, both of which have plagued Brazil for years.

In recent years, inflation has remained steady at around 5%. While GDP growth was negative in 2009 (-0.2%), the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) has estimated that from 2011 until 2014, national GDP growth will be of an average annual rate of approximately 5.5%.

These developments have certainly improved the living conditions and working opportunities for many Brazilians. However, in terms of the national housing situation, despite the Federal government creating a very active national housing program called *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* (My House, My Life), people still face severe challenges and limited access to decent housing, especially homeless people and low income families.

Indeed, according to the Municipal Housing Secretariat of São Paulo, there are 130,000 families that do not have a place to live. It is important to emphasize here that people who are living in bad or terrible conditions are not considered in this calculation. At the same time, the IBGE has estimated that there are 290,000 houses classified as unoccupied in São Paulo alone. This enormous housing deficit in Brazil's most populous metropolitan city stands in stark contrast to the Brazilian Constitution of 1988, which stipulates  the right to housing as a 'fundamental right'. As such, the struggle for housing in Brazil, especially the right to housing in the city, is socially and politically legitimate.


## The History of Housing Policies in Brazil

After the military coup in 1964, the *Banco Nacional de Habitacao* - BNH (National Housing Bank) was created. This entity was considered by the military junta of the time to be an appropriate response to Brazil's housing crisis of that era.

Sandra Cavalcanti, the first President of BNH, used to argue that possessing one's own home is a good way of making workers more conservative and more concerned with defending property rights. In this understanding, housing policy was an implicit tool of ideological indoctrination, utilized as a means of combating the profusion of communist and/or progressive ideas in the country. In any event, the policies developed by BNH excluded a great portion of the lower income classes.

Despite the negative effects of the policies devised by BNH, it should be stressed that the breadth of the housing policy helped diversify Brazil's economy, contribute to job creation and strengthen the country's construction sector.  As such, housing policy became one of the main elements of the military governments (Bonduki, 2008: 72).

The end of BNH came about with the emergence of the broader struggle for a new Constitution and for direct elections in Brazil. In this context, many social movements that focused on the struggle for housing became more organized with

the end of BNH in 1986. At the same time, the need for more housing became even stronger in the face of an enormous increase in Brazil's rate of urbanization.

In the 1980s and 1990s the availability of housing finance for many people decreased and as expected, access to housing became more limited. In this context, many municipal-based housing initiatives were created, especially after the return to democracy, but such experiences were isolated and fragmented due to the lack of a national housing policy.

In 2001, after 13 years of discussion, the Federal Parliament approved the City Constitution. One of the most important contributions of this Constitution was the definition of the social role of a property (a house or land), determining that property must be used by people for residential or commercial use and not for speculation and/or for uses that have no social basis. Currently, the housing market in Brazil is overheated, and as such, many people buy houses as an investment. Instead of using such houses for social purposes, many buildings are unoccupied and as such unused, existing solely as a means of market speculation, in direct contradiction to the mandates of the City Constitution.

In São Paulo there are also many empty buildings because of taxing issues. The owners of properties are supposed to pay taxes annually according to the size (constructed area) of the building. Many of those buildings were initially built for commercial reasons.[1]

Substantive changes in Brazilian housing policy began to take place from 2003 onwards, with the creation of the City Ministry and also with the creation of the National Council of Cities. At the same time, there was also an increase in the availability of credit and subsidies for housing. These Councils, at the three different government levels – federal, state and municipal – were designed to create more social control, and as such they should be comprised of representatives of social and public segments that acted in the housing area, which included: social movements, public actors, employers and professional organizations as well as universities and research institutes.

In April 2003, former President Lula organized the National Conference of Cities at which more than 2,500 delegates participated; this was the moment when the national policy of urban development was discussed within the society and with all interested actors. Indeed, at this conference there was a diverse range of actor participation from all levels, including social movements, trade unions, universities, NGOs, research institutes, professional associations, parliament representatives and public actors. This process of diverse sector-wide participation continued and in 2005 the government held the Second National Conference of the Cities.

One of the main demands of the social movements was the creation of a fund, so that the housing policy could develop in a more autonomous fashion and not always depend on other elements. However, this proposal was not entirely approved. After 13 years of discussion, the Parliament approved a National Housing Fund for

Social Interest. But the main problem has been that the economic spheres within the Lula coalition government were against the creation of funds that were beyond their control. The officials responsible for economic policy argued that having an autonomous housing fund would have limited their freedom to coordinate economic policy as they deemed appropriate. Another point worth mentioning is that the main bank that finances housing is subordinated to the Treasury Ministry and not to the Ministry of Cities. So housing was structurally tied to the economic policy adopted by the government which prioritized high interest rates and lower investments for housing, as the principal economic goal was to increase the primary surplus, via orthodox monetary policy.

The creation of the Cities Housing Ministry recognized the importance of housing and urban policies in the development strategy of Lula's government. The idea was to unite in a single ministry policies related to housing, urban transportation, and sanitation, which could provide a real possibility of planning and organizing a National Policy of Urban Development. The Ministry would not have an executive role; it would have a coordinating role for urban and housing policy in the country. The idea was that the states and municipalities that did not have departments of urban and housing development should create them so that they could participate in this National Housing Plan.

Apart from these advancements, the already mentioned problem of unoccupied buildings remains to be resolved. According to Bonduki (2008: 78), if all the empty buildings would be used to accommodate homeless families, 83% of the national deficit of urban units would be resolved. It is clear from here that the housing question cannot be solved only by offering new homes, as the military government did in the past. Thus, depopulation of areas where there are plenty of jobs and facilities is a mistake. At the same time, the new homes are built outside the city creating also a need for more investments in many different areas in these outskirts of the regions.

The fast and enormous formation of slums/shantytowns and of irregular houses reinforces the already serious problem of housing in Brazil. According to *Censo* (the demographic research of IBGE), the Brazilian population grew around 2% per year in the last decade and the population living in slums increased by more than 7% a year. And this does not include the shantytowns that have less than 50 people living in them, thereby excluding a considerable number of slums. In other words, between 1991 and 2000 the number of people living in slums increased by 84%, while the general population increased by only around 15%.[2]

As already mentioned, Lula's initiative, *Minha Casa, Minha Vida,* was launched in March 2009 to support families who had a combined monthly income of less than around 800 US dollars per month. The total amount of subsidies guaranteed by the Federal government in this program was US$19.5 million and the goal was to build one million houses. The participants can pay for the house

via a financing system with a State Bank called *Caixa Economica Federal*. This program is also developed in partnership with states and municipalities and is coordinated by the City Ministry and the *Caixa* bank.

The houses are built in the states' capitals and in their respective metropolitan regions and also in municipalities that have a population equal to or over 50,000 residents. The budget of the Federal government is distributed among the 27 states in Brazil and they take into consideration the housing deficit of the municipalities for this distribution.

In March 2010, the Federal government launched the *Minha Casa, Minha Vida* number 2. This program plans to build 2 million houses by 2014. According to the program's objectives, 1.2 million of the units will be for families that have a combined monthly income of up to US$800 (as was the case in program number 1); 600,000 housing units for families that have a combined income of between US$800 and US$1,600, and the other 200,000 units will be for families with a collective monthly income of between US$1,600 and US$2,660.

This second program will include Federal government subsidies of approximately US$40.2 billion. Interestingly, all the houses built in the second program will have a solar heating system, an improvement in favor of sustainable development.

## The FLM

In the city of São Paulo, there are dozens of local autonomous movements that deal with the housing problems of low income families. They are organized according to districts, regions or zones. In São Paulo, there are three umbrella organizations in which these local autonomous movements come together: *União dos Movimentos de Moradia* or UMM (Union of Housing Movement); *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto* or MTST (Homeless Workers Movement); and *Frente de Luta por Moradia* or FLM (Front for Housing Struggle). They are divided with respect to their political position according to the dynamics of Brazilian politics. For example, while UMM has a very close engagement with the Workers Party (the PT) in power, MTST has a tendency for ideological struggle. Consequently, from FLM's point of view, while UMM seems pacifist, in the sense that it prefers dialogue to explicit struggle, MTST seems more radical, as it prefers to give more importance to ideological questions.

There are three main organizations at the national level: *União Nacional pela Moradia Popular* or UNMP (National Union for Popular Housing);  *Movimento Nacional de Luta pela Moradia* - MNLM (National Movement for the Housing Struggle); and *Confederação Nacional das Associações de Moradores* or CONAN (National Confederation of the Housing Associations).

FLM is a movement that is composed of 13 local autonomous movements collaborating to solve the housing problems of the low-income population. These autonomous movements are local movements struggling for housing in different parts of the city of São Paulo. The occupation where the interviews for this project were conducted is organized by the *Movimento Sem Teto Reforma Urbano* or MSTRU (Homeless Movement for Urban Reform), which is one of the 13 local autonomous movements. This was actually a movement constituted in the east zone of the city, but most of the occupied buildings are located in the old down town area of São Paulo. The reason why MSTRU prefers to occupy a building outside the east zone of the city is to call the attention of the authorities.

The principles of this movement are, among others, to achieve better living conditions for low income families. The members believe this will only happen when these families will participate in a process of permanent struggle to defend their social, economic and political interests.

FLM understands that popular participation and grassroots organization are key elements in meeting the movement's goal and as such, FLM gives priority to the organization of groups in different parts of the city, oriented in line with a system of internal democracy. The role of FLM is to facilitate the popular struggles in the most comprehensive way. FLM's website emphasizes that all the successes achieved in terms of housing will be divided proportionally, according to the qualitative and quantitative participation of its organized movements.

FLM defends three main points in order to consolidate improvements in living conditions of low income families: (1) an integrated plan of social development; (2) popular participation; and (3) instruments for urban development policies.

FLM believes that it is necessary to apply most of its resources in the implementation of a housing program that benefits low income families, in which workers can live in urban areas, close to the labour market, and in which they can also attain access to complementary State-funded social programs. They also defend that public policies be reformulated in favor of 'poor' families with combined incomes of less than three legal minimum wages[3] (currently the Brazilian minimum wage is 545 reais per month, roughly around US$300).

FLM defends the position that already existing instruments of urban development policies should be implemented and that new instruments should be created in order to organize the appropriate use of urban properties. The movement contends that these urban properties can be used in favor of the collective, according them a real social function, instead of having only market, capital and trade functions.

According to Osmar Borges, the General Coordinator of FLM, the movement organizes today more than 10,000 homeless families in São Paulo. So far, they have organized around 50 occupations and currently they are involved in six occupations.[4]

## History of FLM

The history of FLM goes back to the beginning of 1980s but the movement crystallized between 1984 and 1988 when the government of São Paulo offered materials and territories to families for them to build their own homes. The movement played a major role in organizing families to work and build their homes during the weekends. This initiative was called *joint efforts of self-management.*

From 1989 to 1993 when Luiza Erundina, nominated by the Workers Party, was elected as mayor of São Paulo, all these practices and experiences were transformed into public housing policies. After this, more than 10,000 units were built with this method of self-management. Beyond these direct actions, the movements also intensified their struggle for the creation of housing laws, councils and funds.

The people interviewed in this research[5] perceived the decade of 1993-2003 as being a rather quiet period where, in terms of housing policy, nothing really happened. From 2003 onwards, although the PT Workers Party was in power at the Federal level, São Paulo's government (city and state) has mainly been governed by conservative political factions, and as such, there has been no adequate participatory budget set in place there.

In June 2003, the movement was revived again by organizing the occupation of three different buildings in the downtown of São Paulo during the same night. They were successful in gaining the attention of the authorities and the media. Afterwards, in February 2004, the structure of the organization was formalized at the first meeting of FLM with the decision being taken to increase the number of occupations. Since then, FLM's main instrument of struggle has become the occupations of buildings and spaces in the city.

Their most recent (and well known) occupation was a building of 14 floors in the old downtown of São Paulo, which was a shelter for around 840 families. Unfortunately, on the 25 November, 2010 these families were forced out of the building by the police after almost two months of occupation. This occurred because the owner of the building won a law suit. FLM did not resist, as they use the occupation as a way of strengthening their struggle, but they know that generally, they will not stay at these occupied buildings, especially if they lose a court case.

Through these occupations, FLM's main objectives can be listed as follows:

1. Call the government's attention to the problems of homeless people;
2. Compel the government to allocate the maximum possible resources for housing programs;
3. Re-urbanize shanty-towns and provide for the basic needs of low-income families (electricity and  water provision, sewage treatment, garbage recollection, telephone line installation, etc.), at subsidized prices;

4. Increase the number of families who benefit from *Programa Bolsa Aluguel* (Program Rental Aid, which is a temporary program) with the aim of solving the urgent housing problems of families that live in precarious situations;

5. Extend the scale of *Programa de Locação Social* (run by the Municipality of São Paulo) which rents houses or buildings, that have been abandoned for more than one year to low-income families;

6. Appropriate the maximum number of abandoned houses or buildings for homeless families especially in areas where these families need to work, using the instruments provided in *Programa de Locação Social*;

7. Exempt low-income families from real-estate taxes; and

8. Develop new residential programs, together with the government, in order to avoid similar problems in different regions.

## *The current situation and the struggle for housing in the old downtown of São Paulo*

Antonia, one of FLM's coordinators, explains: "Our goal is not to take something which is not ours; our objective is to occupy empty buildings, especially in the old downtown of São Paulo, and to call the attention of the government and society in general." Antonia notes that: "If we occupy a building outside downtown, it does not have the same impact".[6]

According to Antonia, today there are more than 4,000 empty buildings in the downtown of São Paulo. The occupied building where the interview was conducted used to be a hotel. For many years the building was left unused, due to debts of the owner. Antonia explains that there are many buildings in the same area that have the same problem. Some owners do not pay taxes or they have other debts and then the building is left vacant. Others leave the buildings empty, because they are waiting for an increase in their market value, a trend of the last years which has seen property prices in some areas increased by more than 200 percent.

"This building was a big garbage; there was stagnant water for more than 20 years", explains Antonia.[7] When they occupied the building, they had to clean it, paint it partially and even change and re-adapt the water and electrical systems, as they were too old and much of them damaged and useless.

There are currently 81 families living in this building. They are actually from the east part of the city, but they moved to the downtown area because they believe the downtown should also be a place to live. The occupation has also an environmental impact, argues Antonia: if more people lived in the downtown area, there would be less need for more cars and/or public transportation, and consequently there would be less pollution.

Their strategy is to organize migration from the suburbs to the downtown area, but governments are insisting on the other way around: expelling people from downtown and moving them to the suburbs.

When we asked about the neighbors, in terms of their reaction to the occupation, FLM interviewees explain that in the beginning they were not that friendly, as they thought most of the people were homeless and also unemployed. But when they started to live there, the neighbors realized that the majority of the people worked and their children went to school. Thus, they gradually changed their attitude towards the new residents. Now, neighbors are quite sensitive about the homeless' cause and they also help the new residents when possible.

The downtown struggle is different than in other areas, according to Osmar. In greater São Paulo there are more than 400,000 empty buildings/houses and almost 100,000 of them are in the downtown area. Their goal is to transform these empty buildings into places with a social use. According to him, the people that work and go downtown are not the middle or upper classes. It is the working class people who are most engaged with the old downtown area of São Paulo. Thus, if they could also live there, their living conditions will improve because then they will not have to face any more the long hours of transporation to, and from work. Moreover, they could use these hours to go to school/university or to attend cultural activities, or even spend more time with their families. This, points out Antonia, would also imply less pollution, as well as a better and more compact city.

Osmar also explains that the current mayor of the city has informed them that 3,000 houses would be soon available in the downtown region of São Paulo. But FLM is worried, as its members have heard that most of the houses would be made available for artists who want to live in the downtown area, due to the old, big and beautiful buildings. So far there is no guarantee in terms of how many of these homes will be allocated to these families who have been struggling for more than 20 years for adequate housing. "The government prefers to have relations with the middle and upper classes, they only converse with us, because we have been struggling with great determination", says Osmar.

One occupation, known as *Prestes Maia*, could be classified as a successful case. FLM occupied this building for around five years, during which there were 12 judicial sentences that went against the occupation, but FLM was able to appeal all of them. This process ended with the presence of the Mayor of São Paulo City giving clear proposals on how to solve the housing problem of occupant families. In this case, the Mayor offered 160 new homes partly subsidized by the government, while the other families were provided credit opportunities (also partly subsidized) to buy homes in the downtown area of São Paulo. So specifically in this case, Osmar believes they had succeeded because they managed to find solutions for the 512 families in that occupation.

According to Osmar, usually most of the occupations are successful because they at least manage to call the attention of the government and people in general to the housing problem in São Paulo. However, there are many bureaucratic challenges and some legal problems as well. For example, during one FLM building occupation, FLM's lawyers had only directed their actions to the building's owner, despite the fact that the building was legally rented. Due to this oversight, the person renting the building brought a case against FLM which was at the time busy negotiating with the owner. As a consequence, FLM was not able to meet the 15 days deadline for an appeal to be made, in the event of a judicial decision against an occupation. Due to FLM's lack of procedural rigour, the occupation had to be called off.

## Structures of Democratic Participation and Financial Sustainability

The regional coordinators of FLM organize meetings every week to analyze the political, economic and social situation. They also analyze the actions of the government and how FLM can move forward. Each year, in January and February, FLM organizes its calender of struggle and the planning for the year.

The regional coordinators represent the diverse movements linked to FLM. These people are personally interested in joining the coordination, so they volunteer rather than being elected. Osmar sees this as almost a natural consequence. Within the different group assemblies that form part of FLM, there are always some leaders who are more active and who want to take a leading role. "Our organization is bottom-up driven", explains Osmar, "the leadership is built out of the process of struggle". The leaders in the diverse FLM affiliated movements are elected by their respective assemblies and they are community-based. The people engaging in such movements are homeless people. However, some leaders, just like others in the movement, have managed to gain a home, . Osmar, for example, today has his own home, but he has been in the struggle for more than 10 years and he continues to defend homeless people's interests, independent of his current situation. It is important to emphasize that FLM gives priority to people who are struggling to get their first home.

In terms of membership fees, the FLM recommends that each family should pay an amount equivalent to the price of a bus ticket (currently in São Paulo each bus ticket costs three reais – around US$1.60). It is a voluntary fee, but most of them contribute with 10 reais (around US$5-6) per family each month. This money is used to cover FLM's expenditure costs. Some movements can contribute a higher amount, but this has to be approved by that movement's assembly.

## Strategies and Actions

The main strategies utilized by FLM are occupations, press-releases, demonstrations, camping (they organize camping in front of public buildings to demand negotiation and for their demands to be heard) and newsletters. FLM defends direct struggle as its members believe that this is the only way they will be listened to and respected. According to Osmar, no agreement has ever been made without the pressure of direct struggle: "The government only negotiates with us, because we are constantly acting."[8]

Sometimes they organize campings in front of the municipal government offices, especially when they are obliged to leave a building where they were living. These camping events are not only a way of calling the attention of the government, media and society; they are also a means of exposing the real situation of many people who do not have a place to go after they are evicted from their homes.

Another strategy is the development of members' critical consciousness through educational activities as a means of sustaining and supporting their activities. To this end, FLM also organizes educational courses which deal with many different topics such as the right for housing, the history of property in the capitalist system, as well as courses that offer explanations for the huge structural inequalities in Brazil.

These courses are mainly for the leadership of the movement and they only take place sporadically. In the 1980s, FLM used to organize courses about basic notions of economics and politics and also on public speaking. Nonetheless, such initiatives did not endure. The present FLM courses are organized and run by some leaders within the movement.

The meetings of the regional coordination groups are also used as instruments through which members can analyze the current scenario and develop critical consciousness. They discuss and propose critical actions that can be used as tools to ensure that the family members of FLM can attain their right to housing.

A slogan created by FLM for their struggle is: *Quemnão Luta, Tá Morto!* (The person who does not struggle is dead!). This is also the name of their newsletter.

## Relations with Other Social Movements and the Media

There have been continuous attempts by different political parties and some mass media chains to criminalize social movements. The *Movimento Sem Terra* or MST (the Landless Movement) also suffers from this persecution.

In general, FLM members view the governing Workers Party (PT), led by Dilma, in a positive light. Nevertheless, FLM and its members believe there is still so much more to be done.

More recently Brazilian media began to show FLM's and other similar movements' struggle in a different light. Whereas in the past the media criminalized the occupation of buildings, in recent times, journalists have sought to get in contact with the people involved in such occupations and from there, they have portrayed their struggle for decent housing along the lines of their socio-economic and systematic exclusion from the Brazilian market-based housing regime. As well, this change in terms of media perception, the advances of technology, more open access to internet and the creation of blogs and alternative media groups, have made general communication easier.

Today FLM has its own website.[9] It seems that the story of housing struggle in Brazil is gaining importance and provoking interest; so far two documentaries about the housing struggle are in production, one in partnership and with the financial support of the European Union.

According to Osmar, the main reason why the media has recently modified its perception of the homeless people's movement in Brazil has to do with the ascendancy of Lula to the presidency in 2003, and the gradual change this has brought in regards to popular opinion of activists and social movements. Another reason is competition between the channels. For example, when an important private national TV channel *(Rede Record)* transformed its broadcasting policy so that it became friendlier towards social movements, the *Rede Globo*, which is the main nation-wide private channel, also began to give more and friendlier coverage to the movement. Indeed, this channel covered, for an entire day, the events surrounding FLM and its supporters vacating a building which they had occupied, and their subsequent camping in front of São Paulo's government buildings. Such an about-turn in terms of focusing on this movement can also be attributed to the huge amount of work that alternative social media has been doing. The main private channels follow these alternative media sources as a means of updating their information.

Due to this mass media coverage, some middle class people have become interested in the homeless people's struggle and they have started making donations and helping to organize some solidarity activities.

## Challenges and Final Remarks

According to Osmar, Brazil's judicial system is the biggest challenge facing FLM, as it always favors the owner of property, regardless of his/her debts. Another challenge facing FLM is the general state of inertia of some social movements, as well as the speculative nature of the Brazilian housing market.

In terms of national housing policy, there is also a lack of initiative on the part of the political elite. Despite the existence of some positive legislations, there has been no concerted move to transform these legislations into reality.

Osmar explains that another problem of the Brazilian economy is the huge disparity between the minimum wage and the minimum rental fee in São Paulo; the first is roughly US$300, while the second is roughly US$220 in the outskirts of São Paulo. Obviously, it is not difficult to see the problems that such a calculation entails. "What we want is our right to have our own house and we do not want to have it without paying for it, but we need a chance and appropriate public policies so that we can afford to pay for it", says Antonia.[10]

The prospects in terms of the continuity of FLM's struggle is a long term one. Osmar emphasizes that the housing problem in São Paulo is growing continuously, and this implies that the movement must continue its organizational activities, combining direct actions with occupations.

In conclusion, FLM is a movement that does not either reject the role of dialogue or underestimate the problems coming out of capitalist political system. FLM follows a strategy which is based on creating legitimate channels, and to do so it uses the judicial system, dialogue, public coercion and persistent struggles through direct actions. While legal avenues are important, FLM strives to extend the limits of the legal system in favor of low-income families. As it is expressed in their motto, without struggle, there is no chance of a better life within the existing system.

## Notes

[1]  In fact, we do not know exactly why these building are abandoned. In this regard, each building has a different story.  All we know is that they have been abandoned for such a long time that at the moment, the total amount of tax which is required to be paid before the buildings can be 'reused', are usually much more than their market prices. See: http:// www.edificiosabandonados.com.br.

[2]  See: www.ibge.gov.br (accessed July 2011).

[3]  Why does the FLM take the minimum wage as a reference in its arguments? We would say this is because of IBGE and thus Brazilian politics: (1) IBGE annually generates some social indicators. And distribution of population according to their income which is adjusted according to the minimum wage is one of them. Unlike the Gini coefficient as a distribution of income according to population, this indicator is the distribution of population according to income. There are basically six income categories in the calculations of the IBGE: F: families earning up to half of the current MW; E: families earning between half of the MW and one minimum wage; D: families earning between one MW and two minimum wages; C: families earning between two MW and three minimum wages; B: families earning between three MW and five minimum wages; A: families earning more than five minimum wages. (2) So, as it is generated regularly it is one of sources to evaluate the family economy. It has been frequently used by politicians and political actors. Consequently, the FLM thinks that it is an organization (of) for families in categories of C,D,E,F and families without income.

[4]  Interview with Osmar Borges, (April, June and August 2011).

[5]  For this case study, several interviews were conducted with two coordinators of FLM (Osmar Borges and Antonia) and two occupants in occupied buildings located at Avenida São João, 601 and 613 in July and August of 2011.

[6]  Interview conducted in São Paulo, 14 July 2011.

[7]  Interview with Antonia, op cit.

8  Interview with Osmar, op cit.
9 See: http://www.portalflm.com.br/.
10 Interview with Antonia, op cit.

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### *Interviews*

Osmar Borges, General Coordinator of the FLM, April, June and August 2011.

Antonia, Coordinator of the FLM, April, June and August 2011.

Two occupants of vacated buildings, 14 July 2011.

# Denuding the Viscera of State-Oil Capitalism and Patriarchy: Post-Capitalist Alternatives and Women's Resistance in the Niger Delta

# 10

*Babatunde Ayelabola*

## Introduction

The past half century of Nigeria's formal independence has witnessed a wide array of forms of resistance to the capitalist order, at local and national levels. The underdeveloped nature of capitalism in the country results in an articulation of pre-capitalist spaces of oppression within the broader gamut of the domination of working people by capital. Resistance and radical struggles for reforms have consequently been welded in many cases with anti-capitalist organizing and alternatives.

The past decade has witnessed an upsurge of new forms of movements and forms of organizing and framing of the tasks of old movements in ways and manners that challenge the canons of capitalist and particularly neoliberal social-economic, political, and cultural hegemony. These have included: economic demands for improved livelihood and living conditions; challenging the political powers of the state and multinational corporations; and resistance to entrenched patriarchal cultural practices.

The case study presented here is that of 'the 2002 women's wars'[1] which, like a wave, engulfed several communities in the Delta of the Niger River, challenging traditions of patriarchy and the might of the state and multinational oil corporations (MNOCs), while also reconfiguring old forms of struggles and introducing new elements of gender, economic and political solidarity amongst working people, in that region of the country, in terms of their demands for socio-economic rights and environmental justice.

This case represents a people and community-initiated construct of another mode of life beyond that foisted on working people by the state and MNOCs, resting on an indigenous-inspired vision of ecologically sound relations of political

economy, which further challenges institutionalized patriarchal realities in the Niger Delta region, bearing seeds of alternative models for relations between humans and between humankind and nature. It could be typified as Brownhill and Turner (2006) put it, as 'gendered ethnicized class struggle', taking the forms of sustained sit-ins, shutdowns of Big Oil's facilities, and protest marches.

## Sector and Organizations

The case study spans two broad sectors. These are the political-economy of oil exploration, on the one hand, and anti-patriarchal traditions, on the other. The nexus is one of resistance, *specifically by women*, to economic exploitation, socio-political oppression, and environmental degradation.

The organisations studied are women movements in communities within the Niger Delta region. These include a wide array of women organisations in the Ijaw, Itsekiri (and Ilaje),[2] as well as alliance/coalition-building efforts between them which took place in 2002.

## General Background and Context

The Niger Delta question is a defining contradiction in Nigeria. The region generates over 90% of the country's resources through crude oil earnings. The revenue from oil exports grew from US$300m in 1970 to over US$55b in 2007.[3] However, the region's 30 million populace, encompassing 40 minority nationalities (spread across 6000 communities), within the country, are pauperized and harangued, while their lands and rivers are despoiled, ravaged, and rendered largely useless for their traditional means of sustenance such as farming and fishing. The debilitating situation of life for poor working people in the region became worse as the wealth from its oil reserves expanded.[4] The region consequently became a centre of resistance, from the pre-Independence era and was the first site of a bid for secession after Independence, in 1966.[5] There is an ongoing, low-intensity guerrilla war in its creeks and swamps, with attempts by the state at instituting disarmament, de-mobilization and reintegration (DDR) through a general amnesty programme. This commenced in the wake of the state-backed Niger crushing and subsequent incorporation of more mass-based struggles such as those of the women of the Niger Delta.

In the 1990s, the movements in the Niger Delta, which at that time were non-violent, developed new strategies and approaches for organizing resistance, inspiring hope that the oil firms that had seemed omnipotent could be defeated. At the fore of these were new movements, including those of women. In Ogoniland,

these movements have stopped Shell from operating since 1993, forcing its license to be revoked in 2006 as the state was forced to invoke the clause of forfeiture of any license belonging to MNOCs that cannot operate in a location for 10 years due to social-based agitations. Similarly, during the same year, the mobilization of these movements included the occupation of Shell headquarters in Europe, and the use of both legal and extra-legal, but legitimate means; all of which succeeded in winning a court ruling for MNOCs to stop their 24-hour gas flaring activities in Nigeria.

The 'judicial murder'[6] of leading playwright and President of the Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP) on November 10, 1995, marked a sharp turn in the repertoire of approaches and narratives of struggle in the region. The first steps which placed armed struggle at the fore of practice and demands for 'resource control' as the kernel of perspectives for self-determination, were taken in the late 1990s, climaxing with the formation of the Ijaw Youth Council and the proclamation of its *Kaima Declaration* on 11 December, 1998.

Women in the Niger Delta have played key roles in different ways in these struggles, through their different twists and turns, demonstrating what Brownhill and Turner (2006) describe as 'revolutionary eco-feminism'. They have been part of the broader Niger Delta people's struggle for self-determination, since its onset. The deepening of oil exploration and oppression in general went along with a "feminization of oil exploitation" (Emem Okon, 2006: 10).[7]

By 1984, starting at Ogharefe, women entered the fray *as a distinct political category*. A situation that led Ikelegbe and Ikelegbeto to observe that: "women groupings have not only become an active part of civil challenges and popular struggles, but have begun to appropriate traditional forms of resistance" (2004: 242). The women's demands were for potable water, electricity transmission, and compensation for the despoliation of the lands of the community. The year 1986 witnessed a plethora of women's resistance, covering four communities in two states of the federation.[8] During this same year, women's collaboration with the male chiefs and elders suffered a big blow. The women were taught a bitter lesson about trust when these chiefs and elders edged women out of the negotiations that the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC) had initiated in the wake of the women's protest at Ekpan.

Subsequently, there was a lull in women's resistance on the Delta for roughly a decade. The fires of revival that would erupt in the 2002 'women's wars' were ignited in 1998 when women of the Egi nationality marched on the Elf headquarters several times, between September and November, demanding the provision of potable water, electricity and a halt to the despoliation of their environment. 1998 also marked a turning point in the struggles on the Niger's Delta in general as pointed out above. This fed into, as much as it was invigorated by, the new risings of the groups of women in the Niger Delta. The first all-women demonstration took

place on 11 January, 1999 on the streets of Port Harcourt, under the aegis of the Niger Delta Women for Justice (NDWJ) coalition, against Shell Nigeria Petroleum Development Corporation and the Nigerian state. It was a protest specifically by women, but it was also part of the *Operation Climate Change* that had been agreed upon at Kaima exactly a month before, and which had the objectives of making the Niger Delta ungovernable for the state and MNOCs with effect from 1 January, 1999.

The 2002 women's wars emerged from this context of oppression and resistance that had been established. The female uprising began almost simultaneously in June by Kokodiagbene and Okerenkoko women of the Ijaw Gbaramatu clan and Itsekiri women in Ughorodo, both in the Delta state; the main adversary in both cases was Chevron Nigeria Limited (CNL).[9]

The Gbaramatu women had earlier won the concession for the provision of boats by CNL to ferry them to Warri (two hours away by speedboat) every market day. The MNOC in May unilaterally withdrew one of these boats, insisting that the women first go to *Escravos*[10] (Ugborodo). On June 15, "frustrated by this decision, an estimated six hundred women angrily mobilized and blocked the waterways, hindering Chevron-Texaco workers passage to Escravos from the Abiteye flow station, as a way of showing their displeasure and bringing about a reversal of the decision" (Oluwaniyi, 2011: 155). The response of the firm was to bring in the Navy with gunboats who attacked the women, sinking five boats and leading to the drowning of a girl. The resistance was temporarily suppressed but not cowed and would reemerge stronger by July 15, with the uprising of Ugborodo women.

The immediate trigger for the Ugborodo women's sit-in, as Okon (Ibid: 17) notes, stemmed from a letter presented to CNL by the women in June which asserted that the MNOCs activities in their area had only furthered underdevelopment and as such, they demanded redress from the company. CNL refused to respond to the letter, as it was assured that it had the backing of the state. The women's attempts to meet with the firm's management were equally rebuffed. The 10-day shutdown of the CNL oil tank farm facility by 200 Ugborodo women, which ended only after winning concessions on 18 July, inspired similar actions by women across the Niger Delta.

## Motivations, Goals and Objectives

The women seem to have been motivated to take *independent* action by the following:

- anger at the continued despoliation of their lands and the prevalent state of poverty which they and their families lived in, despite the massive wealth generated from crude oil production in their localities;
- resentment of the arrogance of Chevron and its collaboration with the state in violently repressing popular resistance in the Delta;
- distrust of the sincerity of the male chiefs, elders and youths who had more often than not turned negotiations with the MNOCs, supposedly on behalf of the communities, into means of feathering their own nests;
- the demonstration of the re-invigoration of the Niger Delta peoples' struggles for self-determination and resource control in the wake of the *Kaima Declaration*, which women under the aegis of NDWJ had played a key role in rousing;
- a strong belief that by working together, women could win concessions from the oil firms that would translate into better lives for them; and
- the quest for *respect* from the state, the MNOCs and the male members of the communities.

The goals and objectives of the women were, in themselves, quite limited and set within the logic of capital. Similar elements in the demands of women from the different communities that arose during the women's wars reflect the broad objectives of the uprising and include the following:

- enhanced employment opportunities for their children;
- the provision of basic infrastructure, particularly electricity, potable water and improved (waterways) transportation (e.g. building bridges);
- the construction of secondary and vocational schools and the provision of scholarships for their children in (secondary and) tertiary schools; and
- the opportunity for locals to attain contracts that they are capable of complying with, as a means of ameliorating the depths of poverty in the land.

## Actors Involved and Extent of Inclusiveness

The 'wars' were solely actions of women and even when just 200 women were in the heat of the action proper, as was the case with the Ugborodo women's sit-in and shutdown, the planning, mobilization and action, which included behind-the-scenes support services that ensured the success of the sit-in, included virtually all

the women in the different communities. Consequently, the actors in the 'popular sector' were essentially all the women in the communities of our case study.

The structures and processes for entrenching this all-embracing participation are largely rooted in the culture and traditions of these communities as is presented substantively in the next section. Nevertheless, there were other non-women actors involved in these uprisings. These included the men, particularly the chiefs, who tried to dampen the fervor of the fires they were fanning, without much success. The MNOCs, particularly Chevron in these specific cases were also actors, specifically the target group, along with the state, which met the earlier outbursts of resistance with brute force.

## Structures of Democratic Participation

In the Niger Delta, women have had a long and deeply-ingrained tradition of organization,[11] which served as a form of pressure grouping to ameliorate the worst patriarchal structures, as well as helping to form being a community of solidarity grounded on shared gender experiences. Women from each community meet regularly; this is often on a weekly, bi-weekly, or on a monthly basis. These meetings bind all the women in the community, irrespective of their different social status, and they are used to provide mutual aid and credit, encourage thrift, regulate trade, and at times help women solve or at least provide advice on marital and domestic problems (Oluwaniyi, 2011: 154-55).

In each of the communities where the women's wars were waged, the women utilized these structural repertoires of organization. They completely shielded the planning processes from the men, who assumed that the meetings going on were the usual routine women meetings, even though they seemed to have become much more intense. Speaking to Emem Okon on the Ugborodo women's action, Dorothy who became a leading activist of the NDWJ after the 2002 actions states:

> It took us a few weeks to plan (the) action. A few weeks because of the pain in everybody's heart and it didn't take time for us to conclude. When we started, we got to Chevron tank farm quite well. There was no obstruction because the plan was not circulated. It was only we the women that knew about it. So nobody could stop it.[12]

In the course of implementing their sit-in and shutdown actions, the structures of the 'traditional' women's collectives were equally used, thus engendering inclusive participation of women across the length and breadth of the communities concerned.

## Processes of Democratic Participation

In the course of the planning of those actions, virtually all women in the communities took part in the discussions, contributing freely and with vigor to the discourse. Implementation of the actions did, however, require taking a number of critical issues into cognizance. In general, there were sit-in shifts on the facility concerned, during which some women could go back home to refresh and come back the following day. Particular attention was given to the aged, pregnant, or nursing mothers, who were allowed to stay back from the sites of struggle. Nonetheless, many at their own discretion, decided to enter the fray all the same.

Oluwaniyi (2011: 156) once again provides some details, as she notes: "At the beginning of the crisis, six women took over the security post while others went into the Chevron-Texaco offices and instructed all the staff to vacate, except for the security personnel and cooks, who were cooking for the women. Chevron's planes and helicopters were barred from landing or taking off".

Throughout the sit-ins in all cases, the women held meetings every day and the opinions of those who had been excused from active participation were always sought. It was on the basis of consensus reached at these meetings including the related consultations that decisions were reached in terms of what would be the way forward, on a constant basis[13].

Lines of communication were kept open with the male elders and youths but the women refused to budge without any concrete response to their demands. For example, some of the Ugborodo women informed Okon (2006: 15) during a focus group discussion that: "At first they sent men to talk to us. But we said yes, although you are our chiefs, we don't want to talk to them. We wanted the Chevron management from Houston". Such positions which they made clear to the men were reached at inclusive meetings they held to review the situation, subsequent to the intervention of the men folk.

Discussions and consultations did not take place only between women within each community. In the wake of the developments in July, discussions between the leaderships of the different communities of women in the areas of uprisings in the Niger Delta led to a massive *unified action* of Ijaw, Itsekiri and Ilaje women in August. This is of great significance as the oil companies had played each of these nationalities' traditional *male* leaderships of chiefs and elders as well as male youths against each other, with crumbs worth millions of naira, which ended up more often than not in individual *male* pockets. The result had been fratricidal wars between Ijaws and Itsekiris and between Ilajes and Ijaws,[14] prior to the women's actions. Due to these calculating, 'divide-and-rule' company actions, thousands of people had been killed on all three sides, women raped, and whole villages razed down; indeed, the need to confront the MNOCs had been averted and in its place, villagers from distinct nationalities murdered one another.[15]

## Outcomes and Current Situation

The outcomes of this new form of radical protest by the Niger Delta women in Delta state, in particular, are mixed, although taken together they influenced the present situation of low-intensity war in the creeks, from which the state is still trying to flee. It has also taken quite a while for *tangible* positive responses of MNOCs to the women's demands to be felt. As Oluwaniyi (2011: 161) observed recently: "Though the protests occurred in 2002, it is only recently that some of the benefits have started trickling down to indigenes".  The 'negative' outcomes can be traced to the crushing of the peaceful form of protest championed by the women and subsequent use of youths in the region by politicians as armed thugs for the 2003 general elections, both of which led to the ascendancy of armed conflicts in which the people, both genuine armed self-determination groups as well as criminal 'cults' representing a  rhetorical claim of resource control , have become harried and disempowered spectators, at the very least.

At the height of the protests, the women were nourished with promises. These included, for the Ugborodo women:

- the upgrading of 15 members of the communities who are contract staff to permanent staff status;
- the employment of one person from each of the five Ugborodo villages every year;
- the construction of a house for each the elders of the Oloja Ore and the Eghare-Aja in the communities;
- the provision of vital infrastructure;
- a monthly allowance of N50,000 (US$313) at least for the elderly aged 60 years and above; and
- the establishment of income generating schemes.[16]

Similarly for the Gbaramatu women, 'promises' made included:

- the establishment of a nursery school in Kenyagbene;
- the establishment of a health center;
- the setting up of skills acquisition centers for women and youths;
- the employment of one person from each of the ten communities as a permanent staff every year, effective from August, 2002;
- the employment of three people from each of the ten communities in Gbaramatu every year as contract staff, effective August, 2002;
- an increase in the bursary award for scholars in tertiary institutions from N50,000 to N75,000 (US$313 to US$460) effective form the 2002/2003 academic session, while that of secondary schools will be raised to N20,000 (US$125) from N10,000 (US$62.50);

- N20 million (US$125.000) credit scheme for each of the ten communities to aid business development;
- the provision of electricity and pipe-borne water in each of the communities (Kenyagbene is already enjoying these facilities); and
- the provision of two speedboats for each of the ten communities.[17]

Most of these promises were not kept at the time, but the women won respect and they have been duly consulted on issues bearing on community development by the male elders and the oil firms ever since.

In 2006, though, Chevron declared it would commence a micro-credit scheme for the women. This has, at the time of writing, not actually commenced[18]. But bursaries for tertiary schools students from the communities have been institutionalized, as demanded by the women,[19] to the tune of N60.000 (US$375) per annum. The two big MNOCs have also stepped up efforts at building infrastructure as well as the communities' capacity for physical self-development, while at the same time furthering underdevelopment through the socio-economic and environmental consequences of their oil exploration and production (Adekoye, 2006).

The thrust towards signing Global Memorandums of Understanding (GMoU) which became a norm of sorts from 2006, albeit with most of the pro-people provisions observed more in the breach, could also at least partly, be traced to those events of 2002. There is however a flip side to these. They represent attempts, on one hand, to "pathologize Deltan unarmed protest not only externally and internationally, but also in the minds of those most subject to the ravages of oil extraction" being in the main women, and on the other hand, to establish "a new set of community 'foundations'….including the World Bank" as a reaction of cooptation (Zallick, 2011: 185, 190).

The present situation in the Niger Delta in general is one of social morbidity arising from the inability of the still existing and strong state-oil *ancien regime* to maintain consent and the weaknesses of the forces representing a new historic bloc to entrench decisive counter-hegemony, especially as its manifestation bears with it elements of criminal strands that mouth its rhetoric. With the women's movement, the situation is indeed even more abysmal. It has been driven as a force for canons beyond the logic of capital to the margins by three intertwined realities.

First, the ascendancy of violence-as-response to the state-oil complex's domination and oppression disempowers the women's movement for those of youths and indeed they become victims particularly during backlashes when the armed Joint Task Force of soldiers, sailors, and policemen rape and plunder women's properties while hunting down armed 'militants'. Second, the incursion of *NGOism* into the popular struggles of women on the Delta came with 'mixed blessings'. While it helped to externalize their struggles and deepen the capacity and vision of their leaders, it also created fissures and brought in a sense of donor-driven activism. Third, the combination of *NGOism* in the region, both generally

and within the women's movement in particular, and the new 'foundations' which the MNOCs through GMoUs and other means are fostering, have resulted in the flourishing of a number of pro-*status quo* 'community based associations', NGOs and similar bodies that have greatly contributed to the withering away of radical groupings of women; ideologically, politically and organizationally.

## Factors Critical to Success

There are both external and internal factors that were critical to the successes of the women's wars (and also which contributed to the setback of the women's movement) on the Delta and the ingenious approach they brought to bear on struggles in the Niger Delta. A number of these have been highlighted in earlier sections of this report. They will be looked at more closely here and other elements will be introduced.

### Internal factors critical to success

*The traditional structure of regular all-women meetings:* It would have been almost impossible to have organised the actions the women embarked upon, *involving virtually all the women*, without the males in the community and the MNOC management becoming aware during the planning stages, if women did not have such a standing structure. It was also through these that the women had known much earlier of the different capacities of different women and the distilling out of 'natural leaders' for the actions, as well as being able to equally built trust and a base of solidarity. This was a case of pre-capitalist structures as means for activating and deepening anti-capitalist activities with possibilities for post-capitalist ends.

*Inspiring leadership and traditional 'networking':* The leaders of the women were bold and inspired the other women to audacious acts. Networks that had been established over time between women in the different communities such as through common markets at which they traded and other social relations which subsisted despite the frictions between their contending ethnic nationalities made it possible for the July singular 'wars' to evolve into the August united upsurge.

*The frustration of the women with their situation:* The women were frustrated by the situation of despoliation of their lands and the abject poverty of their collective lives, despite the extent of wealth generated from oil exploration in their communities. They believed that they had nothing to lose but their chains and everything to gain by rising up to fight.

*The fears of Niger Delta women:* The women's frustration stemmed mostly from their fears. Ememe Okon (2006: 35), via focus group discussions with women

in several of the communities under review, identifies these to be three-fold: reduced bargaining power for a better life in the possible situation of 'end of oil' as a central element in Nigeria's political economy; eradication of their means of livelihood with the possible end of oil, combined with a lack of qualitative development at this juncture which would represent double jeopardy; and, "the fear of extinction due to health hazards and imminent earthquake due to oil and gas exploitation".

## External factors critical to success

*The groundswell of resistance in the Niger Delta:* The 'women wars' can not be wholly separated from the broader 'oil wars' and popular resistance on the Delta of the Niger River, which have intensified with the sharpening of exploitation and oppressive practices by the state-oil complex in the neoliberal era. The contours of the history of women's resistance in general have been largely shaped by the tides and ebbs of this broader groundswell, as explained earlier.

*Extant popular declarations of peoples of the Niger Delta:* Related to the grounds well of resistance in the Niger Delta was the subsisting plethora of declarations that served as hinges for some of the demands of the women in their specific struggles. Starting from the Ogoni Bill of Rights in the 1980s, a number of the nationalities in the Niger Delta had, during the upsurge of popular self-determination struggles in the 1990s, issued declarations that set the vision of economic and political self-determination of peoples in the Niger Delta into radical programmes. The leading declarations in this light, which were popularized within the ranks of the women's movement during this period, were: the *Aklaka Declaration,* the *Ibibio Bill of Rights,* the *Oron Bill of Rights,* and particularly for the Ijaw women (of the Gbaramatu clan), the *Kaima Declaration*.

*The intervention of (women-based) NGOs:* NGOs, particularly those concerned with feminist issues of which the NDWJ was at the fore, linked up with the women at the vanguard of the "wars" in Delta state as soon as news of these hit the air waves. They helped to publicize the viewpoint of the women in both the national and international media. They also subsequently helped in building the women's capacity for organizing and mobilizing through training, as well as sharpening their understanding of the linkages of their situation to the global onslaught of neoliberalism and the consequent alter-global resistance.

## Constraining Factors and Obstacles

Constraining factors, which served as obstacles to the fullest fruition of the post-capitalist alternative vision inherent in the women's wars, could be considered as encompassing the political, organizational, and ideological.

### *Political constraints*

The political constraints have to do with *material power relations*. These exist between the communities as a whole and the state-oil complex and *within* the communities, between the women, on one hand, and male elders (and youths), on the other.

*State-Big Oil Complex and coercion:* The major political constraint is that of the dominant control of the means of coercion by the state which time and again was invoked on the initiative of the state or at the behest of Big Oil. The protests of the women were, as much as possible, suppressed with the armed might of soldiers, gunboats and the police. The drowning of a Kenyagbene girl was noted earlier. The August united action of the women as well faced the brutish deployment of armed force against the women. No less than 800 of the women who stormed the premises of both Shell and Chevron, in coordinated *unarmed protest marches*, sustained injuries, while 15 were declared missing.[20]  Such acts of state-directed violence could not but emasculate the unarmed protest movement of women, with time, especially as they were often met with rape and the plundering of the homes of activists even after action on the immediate sites of their struggles.

*Co-optation by the state-big oil complex:* It is not only through coercion that the state and big oil serve as political obstacles to the radical women's movement on the Delta of the Niger River. A more corrosive means has been co-optation. Women in the Egi community, informed the researcher of what they considered as 'betrayal' by some of their finest leaders at a point in time after they became favoured contractors of the MNOC, Elf[21]. In many instances, to facilitate the process of co-opting elements of the resistance, 'new' or 'splinter' women groups are created within the community.[22] It might however be pertinent to point out that such efforts at co-optation did not happen during the women's war. Indeed with the prevalent mood then, co-opted persons would have been considered as traitors and could have faced violent reprisals as was the case with the Ogoni 'vultures'.[23] Co-optation as a means of weakening the women folk came later as a reaction to their resistance.

*The rise of 'ethnic militias':* The rise of ethnic militias is the unfortunate flip side of rising state-led violence in the region. The popular struggle of people in the Niger Delta had been re-ignited in the 1980s by MOSOP in the form of non-violent

civil disobedience. It became thus generalized by the Pan Niger Delta Resistance Congress *(Chikoko Movement)* in the mid-1990s, during the 12 June democratic revolution in the country. These peaceful efforts were met with brute force by the state in collaboration with Big Oil, leading many youth on the Delta to conclude that armed struggle was the way forward. This sentiment became generalized in the aftermath of the *Kaima Declaration* and the experiences of the 'women wars', with the brutalization of women. More arms also became available as politicians mobilized different groups of youths for electoral brawn, first during the 1999 transition elections, and in the subsequent 2003 consolidation elections. Women were caught between the violence of the state and that of ethnic militias of different hues and sizes. The consequence was predictably disempowering for the women's movement.

## *Organizational constraints*

The women's organizing was no doubt impressive. Serious flaws and limitations of organization, however, did impede the extent to which their impassioned organizing efforts could enthrone their desired vision and even the limited aims they set themselves based on this.

*The limitations of traditionally ascribed associative societies:* In the dynamics of struggle for social change, what is at a point a source of organizational strength could at the same time and particularly subsequently become a constraint on organization and organising *beyond the logic of capital.* The women were organised based on all-women collectives that had always existed. While the women could *and did* use these traditionally ascribed umbrella platforms, they were limited as well in that, resting on 'culture', these groups sooner or later had to respect traditions, except there were fundamental ruptures in social relations beyond their actions. Respecting 'tradition' in the final sense approximates to respecting the dominance of the elders and chiefs, as well as norms of 'respect' and gerontocracy.

*Lack of a 'united front' of women from below:* The phase of unifying the women's wars in August petered out largely because of a lack of organization. The women cutting across the three ethnic nationalities that united-in-action had indeed related as *individuals* for decades, but there was a palpable lack of even the basic traditionally ascribed women collectives that united women in each of the communities on an inter-ethnic basis i.e. a form of united front. While the NDWJ did try to fill in this gap, especially as it recruited and thus bound leading activist women from some of these ethnic nationalities, it would appear more as an NGO from above, and more particularly as verified from concrete analysis, it eventually could not achieve such a feat of unity.

*Absence of a Left/social transformative network or coalition:* The comatose state of the revolutionary Left at the time of the women's wars was both an organizational and ideological constraint for deepening the vision and capacities for struggle beyond the capitalist canon, in the mental and practical constructs of the women. The formation of the Campaign for Democracy(CD), a radical initiative of the revolutionary Left in 1991, had helped to deepen the vision and intensify the transformative contents of the Ogoni people, organised around MOSOP for example, in the early 1990s. Not only did its politics *positively* influence the alternative politics of the group, MOSOP was an affiliate of CD, and its leader, Kenule Saro-Wiwa was on the executive board of the united front that CD was.

The CD represented *the* united front in the first moment of the 12 June revolution (1993-1995). By 1997, it was a shadow of itself. Today, CD is a ghost of what was thought to be the seedbed of a revolutionary Left, afflicted by the cancer of opportunism in its benign beginnings.

## Ideological constraints

Ideology, in the sense of *how* political actors *perceive* reality, is critical to the visions they construct, the goals they set themselves, and the politics of their struggles. Ideology for working people captures the *'contradictory consciousness'* which emerges from the spontaneous and intentional (on the part of the elite) reinforcement of the dominant world view in society through everyday life on one hand, and the aspiration for transcendence of the oppressive nature of their subjugated lives marked by outright exploitation and deprivation, on the other. The specific ideological constraints for the women's wars are thus:

*The morass of 'NGOism':* Probably the most debilitating ideological constraint on the further development of the women's ways along a post-capitalist trajectory of vision and construct is the entrenchment of 'NGOism' as the dominant form of what otherwise stands out as alternative politics. It is not as if NGOs or its activists are necessarily bad or *reactionary*,[24] but the proposal-driven nature of their activism denudes the transformative nature of their politics. With the dearth of revolutionary Left organising, NGOs were the first and major contacts the militant women had with broader alternative political structures, values and traditions. A concomitant development was the subsequent flourishing of NGO-like politics by the women in a number of these communities.

*The living ghosts of 'tradition and culture':* The women rose against patriarchy as much as against the MNOCs, which were seen as the harbingers of their appalling living conditions. Thus their struggle was against tradition in a sense, as any struggle with elements of post-capitalist alternatives, particularly in an underdeveloped society, must become. Nevertheless, the living ghosts of

'tradition' marched every inch of the way with them. It takes both the struggles of several generations and the alignment of these with much more revolutionary politics than those which are NGOist, to severe the thralldom of traditions in the spirits of struggles in rural regions of underdeveloped societies. In no time thus, the male elders (and to a lesser extent, in ideological terms, that is, male youths) stole the fire from the women's Prometheus.

*The ideology of 'negotiations' and (G)MoUs:* Big Oil was caught off guard by the initial wave of resistance but its surprise did not last  for long. It acceded to negotiations in the spirit of 'give and take', even though what it would initially give were empty promises, while taking the depth of the revolutionary fires from the women's resistance. Its further tilt towards signing Global Memorandums of Agreements with the communities amounted to part of the arsenal of its 'consent mechanisms' to 'pathologize' subsequent unarmed protests, including shutdowns, such as those conducted by the women in 2002 (Zallick, 2011).

*The international 'war on terror':* Closely related to the pathologizing of Niger Delta women's resistance *by Big Oil* is the outright categorization of this as a form of 'terrorism' in the wake of the post-9/11 'war on terror' *by the state*. As Brownhill and Turner (2006: 8) note, "in 2005, the Nigerian women's groups, including the NDWJ that had contributed to a moratorium on gas flaring were labeled terrorist by the government which was being drawn ever more deeply into the US global war on terror".


## Indicators of Emerging Critical Consciousness and Capacities

It is of great importance to identify indicators with which we can infer the emergence of critical consciousness and capacities. Critical consciousness comprises two intertwined strands. On one hand, it entails oppressed people, *from their lived experiences*, grasping the *reality* behind the state of their subjugation, within the power relations that they are part of, thus identifying the representative personages, structures, mechanisms and processes that affect their domination. On the other, it equally involves their awakening to the need to seize their fate in their hands towards transforming their lives and with them, society itself. Transformative capacities relate to their ability for praxis in relation to critical consciousness.

The *threads* of critical consciousness and transformative capacities are part and parcel of the fabric of these two phenomena's generalization. This is clearly manifested as well in revolutions such as those we have witnessed in recent times in the Middle East and the North African region.

In a nutshell, the following elements of the emergence of critical consciousness could be noticed from Okon's (2006) documentation and subsequent discussions with a number of the women in the affected communities:

- identifying the linkages between the pauperization of the community and the endangerment of their health, with the despoliation of the environment;
- identifying intertwined relations between the violation of nature and the exploration activities of Big Oil;
- realizing that MNOCs' investments in their community have not translated into enhanced employment or better livelihood for the local populations;
- realizing the need for struggle to turn things around;
- noting the importance for unity of struggle considering the commonality of their fates, irrespective of ethnic differences;
- realizing the might of their power through the earlier successes of their resistance; and
- commitment to die if necessary, in defiance of the suppression of their earlier upsurge.

Transformative capacities that emerged in the course of the resistance include the following:

- transformation from a marginal and rather politically marginal, traditionally ascribed women's associative collective to a power for affecting change;
- dismantling the traditionally ascribed second fiddle role of women in their societies;
- organising to shut down sophisticated facilities despite lack of technical expertise;
- networking across ethnic barriers that had been manipulated for decades by the state-oil complex and the male elders (and youths);
- acquiring technical skills from networking with progressive NGOs;
- affecting the granting of some concessions from the state-oil complex; and
- winning respect and entrenching self-confidence.

## Problems and Prospects of the Women's Resistance in the Niger Delta

The women's wars in the Niger Delta are now, at least for the time being, (recent) history and not an ongoing case of post-capitalist alternative-possibilities. There are, however, key lessons to be learnt as well as problems and prospects for women's anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal resistance in the Niger Delta, which remains

the most striking illustration of alternative processes of anti-capitalist visions and actions.

Probably the most important lesson to be learnt is that, while a distinct and very important element of the popular struggles in the Niger Delta, the transformative resistance of women, which took the forms of mass sit-ins and shutdowns of oil facilities at its acme, is a strand within the broader complex of self-determination struggles of the peoples in the region. The dimensions of these struggles, with their socio-economic, political and cultural dimensions that challenge the capitalist canons, have had great impact on the prospects for the flourishing of this critical piece of the jigsaw puzzle. To the extent that this struggle's dominant form takes the shape of guns and bazookas, with insurgency replacing insurrection as the main form of countering the might of the state-oil complex, transformative women's resistance and indeed mass-based revolution from below in the region would be anti-capitalist marginal possibilities.[25]

Challenging the spaces closed to mass action by the clash of arms is essential for a renaissance in the Niger Delta that could take the popular struggle of its peoples decisively beyond the hegemonizing logic of capital and its canons of 'development'.

The lesson of creative organization is equally one that is central to post-capitalist alternatives on the Delta of the Niger River. The use of *traditionally ascribed collectives* was critical to the successes of the women's wars. Nevertheless, it also limited it. NGO-like organizations, which have flourished, have also proved useful, particularly with the lull in this terrain of struggle. However, they come with different extents of proposal-driven activism as baggage. There is a palpable need for organization(s) that forge a synergetic relationship between the spaces of traditional and modern forms and methods of organising on the basis of a radical programme, within communities and on an inter-ethnic nationalities basis. NGOs closely aligned with grassroots politics in the Niger Delta, such as the NDWJ and Social Action (SA) could play pivotal roles in creating such platform(s). There is a wealth of experience, popular yearnings, and (women) cadres for initiating this.

Conscientization is critical, from the experiences of the women's wars, to take action against the existing oppressive system with the aim of transforming such lived situations, *with the oppressed transforming themselves in the process*. People do make history, as the Niger Delta women's resistances, like many gallant anti-capitalist struggles of working people and the poor all over the world, make clear. In the process of learning from lived experience, ideological constraints could and do emerge, setting perceived limits of the possible as reforms. Therefore, there is a need to: "maintain the continuity of the theoretical, programmatical, political, and organizational acquisitions of the previous phase of high class activity, and of high working class consciousness" (Ernest Mandel, 1983: 5.); centralize experiences, knowledge and lessons learnt from previous peaks of popular struggles; and relate

the victories of reforms won with the circumscription of reformism. Organization would be required for building capacity to fulfil this need. In doing this, the use of such channels as radical newspapers and other periodicals (in native languages as much, if not more than in English), community radio, posters, and graffiti, cannot be overemphasized.

There are great potentials for the popular struggles, particularly of women in the Niger Delta. There are however, as well, great problems to be overcome. It is believed that drawing from the lessons of the women's war, the political, organizational and ideological challenges these represent, as demonstrated here, could be overcome, generally speaking.

The specific problem of patriarchy, though, is a major obstacle to the fruition of women's struggles, within the nationalities' movements. While some level of respect hitherto better imagined than believed as possible has been grudgingly acceded to the women, they still remain marginalised even within the structures and processes of the self-determination movement. Martha Agbani, the Programme Director of Lokiaka Community Development Council and a MOSOP activist, notes that women are still considered more as cheerleaders than as activists by their male co-activists in most self-determination movements in the region, despite their proven ability to equally fight and lead.[26] Talking more specifically on MOSOP, she also informs that despite some three decades of the organization as the model for popular pro-emancipation groups in the region, it was not until last year that a woman was elected onto its national executive.

She rightly sees political education of (male) cadres as being of the utmost importance for transcending this problem. It can only be added as well that re-building the women's movement as a powerful space of resistance, while not surrendering the terrain of the organisations that encompass men and women, would as well be very fundamental for winning respect for the women from the male activists, as well as deepen the anti-capitalist struggles and post-capitalist possibilities of both the women's movement and the popular self-determination struggle as a whole.

## In Lieu of a Conclusion

This case study has attempted to put in perspective the anti-capitalist and anti-patriarchal struggles of women in the Niger Delta with the 2002 women's wars as its exemplar. In doing this, the spaces of alternatives to the socio-economic, political and cultural condition of their lives within the oppressive logic of capitalism, which their actions claimed through resistance, served as our lodestone.

The factors which engendered the developments reviewed as well as those which inhibited their further evolution were identified. The transformation of the

women as actors through the emergence of critical consciousness and capacities was distilled from these, just as much as the morbid rolling back of these in the passing period could not but emerge as the passing curtains of what was a gallant period of 'gendered ethnicized class struggle'.

"Now and then the workers are victorious for a time. The fruit of their battles lies not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers" (Marx and Engels, 1969). One could substitute 'working women in the Niger Delta' with 'workers', to realise the dilemma and yet the kernel of post-capitalist possibilities which spaces of resistance and anti-capitalist struggles such as that presented here bear in them.

## Notes

[1] Oluwatoy in Oluwaniyi, 2011: 159.

[2] At the beginning of the field research for this project the author decided, after a thorough literature review, to focus on the women of the Egi and Ogoni nationalities. However, upon visiting these two communities in Rivers state, the author was advised by women activists there to focus on the Ijaw and Itsekiri communities in Delta state as they were deemed to be more pertinent to the study's objectives.

[3] See: Okonjo-Iwealaet al., 2003: 1.

[4] The first documented expression of concerns by the peoples in the Niger Delta in regards to the negative effects of oil exploration was before Independence, leading to the establishment of the Wilkins Commission which submitted its report in 1957. One year later oil was struck in commercial quantities and two years after that Nigeria secured its Independence from the British colonial masters.

[5] See: Adaka Boro 1982: The Twelve Day Revolution.

[6] This was how John Major, then the British Prime Minister described the hanging which took place during a Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting.

[7] I must add here that the study is greatly indebted to Emem Okon, whom I have did not meet in person. During my field trips, she was not in the country, but everywhere I went, the women activists directed me to her! This reflects the depths of her knowledge on the issues of women in the region and the impassioned commitment she has brought to bear over the years, both of which were reflected in the series of telephone interviews I subsequently had with her.

[8] These were in Bonny Egbema (both in Rivers state), Ughelli and Ekpan (both in Delta state).

[9] Shell which operates more in Rivers state which has been dubbed the 'treasure base of the nation' was equally a Big Oil player here, but not as much as Chevron was.

[10] Escravos, or slaveport, the name the Portuguese had given Ugborodo during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, is the name CNL prefers to use for the place, maddening the natives.

[11] This is common in most rural (and not so rural) parts of the country, and during the pre-Independence era, they had similarly been invoked for women's wars in the Igbo (Eastern) & Yoruba (Western) regions of the country.

[12] Okon, 2006: 16.

[13] Information provided during an extensive follow-up interview with Emem Okon on 21 March, 2011.

[14] The Ilajesvs (Arogbo) Ijaws conflicts were much more in the neighboring Ondo state, as the Ilajes are rather few in numbers within Delta state. The centrality of Ijaws to most inter-ethnic nationality conflicts in the region is due largely to their size as the dominant ethnic minority group in the country, being the fourth largest ethnic nationality after the dominant Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba and Igbo. Its spread is such that it is the only ethnic group in all the six states within the Niger Delta, though as a (large) minority in five and having only one (Bayelsa state) as its exclusive preserve.

[15] Comrade "Che" Ebegwura, septuagenarian revolutionary and former trade unionist who relocated to the Egi community to struggle for self-determination in the Niger Delta told me during an interview in his home within the community on 17 March, 2011 that in the course of no less than four detentions he had gone through with several security agencies, he would repeatedly be told that "we have no problem with you people killing yourselves, but now that you are killing government people and disrupting oil services in the region, you should all expect trouble".

[16] Emem Okon, 2006: 19.

[17] Ibid: 23.

[18] Oluwaniyi, 2011: 161.

[19] In some of the communities such scholarship programmes had existed but with much smaller amounts.

[20] See Okon, 2006: 31.

[21] This occurred during a focus group discussion with women at Egi.

[22] Josephine Ned, the ONELGA Women leader and Secretary-general of the Egi Women's Congress buttressed this position, in an interview with her on 16 March, 2011 noting that scramble for the spoils of co-optation played a role in the splintering of the movement in the community to the extent that from being a united platform, there are now four groups laying claims to the representation of Egi women (i.e. Egi General Women's Association; Egi Women's Organization; Egi Women's Movement and Egi Women's Congress). The best funded and largest (through the disbursement of patronage), she further asserted, are those closest to the state-oil complex.

[23] The pretext for killing Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni leaders was that they had led or at least inspired spontaneous mass attacks that had left some six state-oil complex collaborators in the community dead in 1993.

[24] Similarly, an individual capitalist might be a 'good', 'bad,' or 'colorless' individual, but personifies a particular logic and represents the dictates of a particular canon i.e. capital.

[25] This of course is not to lose sight of the fact that armed struggle started as defensive violence. The author similarly does not lose sight of the fact that neo-patrimonial DDRs-generated "peace" cannot only not be lasting, but plays the role of strengthening elite hegemonizing designs in the region.

[26] This was during an interview with her on Saturday 19 March, 2011 at Port Harcourt.

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# Alternative Anti-Poverty Organizing: A Case Study of OCAP in Canada

# 11

*Rob Butz*
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## Introduction

Canada is not often perceived as a country with strong anti-capitalist tendencies. However, there are a small number of anti-capitalist movements and organizations that do exist which reflect the state of anti-capitalist organizing in Canada. One of the most enduring examples is the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, commonly known by its acronym, OCAP. OCAP is an anti-poverty organization based in Toronto, Ontario that has survived and involved itself with mobilizing poor communities for over 20 years despite the difficulties of organizing impoverished persons, one of the politically weakest sections of the working class (Greene 2005: 5-6). The organization is known for standing up to austerity programming of neoliberalizing municipal and provincial governments and private entities that contribute to the expansion of poverty. They are continuously organizing campaigns against regressive government policies and institutions that are not only hostile to poor and working class people's economic interests, but at times, their existence.

While OCAP's participants are motivated affectively by the suffering of their constituency, their actions are suffused with a 'critical consciousness' of poverty that seeks to link poverty systemically to class warfare, urban neoliberalism and colonialism (and capitalism, generally), as a means of ensuring that poverty— and themselves— is not turned into a mere 'issue.' In this way, OCAP participants not only act on an implicit understanding that poverty is essential to capital rather than an unfortunate aberration within it; but they also seek to deprive capital of this 'vital ingredient' (Caroll and Ratner, 2001: 622).

At the same time, from the viewpoints of participants, this critical consciousness is kept alive and useful not only by exposing connections but by building individual and collective capacity to resist. Thus OCAP has been

famous for its willingness to organize and engage in collective 'direct action' and confrontational protest to alleviate oppressive conditions and to have basic needs met immediately. Simultaneously, OCAP has been very interested in engaging and joining others' struggles to broaden collective capacity among other segments of the poor and working class, and the 'coalition' is again slowly building beyond its Toronto base after serious setbacks in the 1990s which diminished province-wide organizing. Growth at this scale has been crucial for OCAP's survival and capacity to resist; for the capacities of Canadian poor peoples' movements have often been diminished by localism (Greene, 2005: 5-6).

Here, it is important to understand how OCAP has responded to setbacks, victories, and limitations to maintain a resilient, bottom-up movement that empowers segments of the poor and working class, and contributes to the long-term project of a broad anti-capitalist movement in Canada. While OCAP and its allies have rarely forced a wholesale change in state policy, they have certainly mitigated the outcome of state actions and affected state agencies at points where they exercise power. As OCAP has done so, we argue, it has undertaken innovative forms of protest which have succeeded in not only making the role of poverty visible within the state and capital and through this, achieving concessions, but articulating systemic connections between issues, which has been crucial in linking geographically and affectively dispersed elements of the working class. At the same time, OCAP's struggle has broadened to combine with newcomers of colour and of First Nations (indigenous) peoples against racist and colonial oppressions. It has increased participants' understanding of the relation of 'neoliberal' processes to colonial ones. This dialectic of change – plus much tenacious and patient work – is how OCAP is slowly (re)building an anti-capitalist movement across Toronto and Ontario.

## Early History

The conditions for the emergence and expansion of an anti-poverty organization that relies on 'direct action' – or collective action by the poor themselves to alleviate oppressive conditions and have basic needs met – involved increasing inequality in Ontario throughout the 1980s as well as other negative developments. Though 'poverty intensity' was slightly less severe in Ontario than other provinces in Canada during the 1980s (Osberg and Xu, 1999: 186), the experience of poverty in cities such as Toronto increased markedly during this decade. National anti-poverty organizations that sought to influence Canadian policy on poverty had been reduced to defending their few gains almost since their inception, and especially since the election of the federal Progressive Conservative government in 1984 (Greene, 2008: 111).

A specific event credited with leading to OCAP's initial formation was the spectacular, week-long March against Poverty in 1989, originating from several cities and converging at Ontario's legislature building in Queen's Park, Toronto. Its objective was to draw attention to the worsening conditions of local poverty. The participation in this march was drawn from "existing activist infrastructure" and also had its roots in welfare reform struggles of the 1980s, where poor and unemployed workers had attempted to form "unions of the unemployed" (Newberry, 2008: 50-53).

Shortly after the march, the Liberal government led by David Petersen raised welfare rates by 9%. While march participants had asked for a 40% increase in rates, this partial success encouraged many participants to continue to fight and build a stronger and more permanent movement, mobilizing people around issues of poverty. Thus, where traditional attempts by organizations that sought to negotiate with decision-makers had met with little progress, spectacular direct action obtained success. Nevertheless, poverty continued to eat away at the city's social fabric; by 1999, there were between 5000 and 6000 people sleeping on the streets of Toronto (Livesay, 1999).

OCAP had initially set out to continue and build upon the provincial coalition that had developed the march against Poverty, yet this victory occurred at the cusp of mounting élite pressures on Ontario's governments to 'neoliberalize' economic policy and governance. Some of these factors had led to the destabilization of the Petersen government and the historic victory of the social-democratic NDP (New Democratic Party) in one of Canada's wealthiest provinces. But the NDP coming to power created strategic disarray among OCAP's coalition partners (Greene, 2005: 7), some of whom felt obliged to defend the NDP from élite attacks, even as the NDP government responded to a recession by embracing austerity, shedding anti-poverty as a concern, and caving to pressure from the business class to embrace "fiscal conservatism... under threat of a declining provincial credit rating and under massive pressure from both well-organized business lobbies and ad-hoc private business interest groups" (Newberry, 2008: 35). In a short time, the governing 'left party' in Ontario, as a means of shoring up its support with middle-class voters, began to decisively abandon its traditional commitments to poverty reduction (34). Simultaneously, however, 'demoralization' caused by the NDP's 'neoliberal turn' frayed coalition relationships and commitments until effectively, OCAP's activity became largely based and centered in Toronto's poor communities (Greene, 2005: 8).

At its founding conference in 1990, OCAP explicitly rejected traditional forms of 'advocacy for the poor' that relied on consultation and negotiation (OCAP, 2010), and affirmed an approach relying on "direct action, spectacular political theatre, and often-confrontational mobilization, as their main sources of political power" (Newberry, 2008: 50). At this inauguration, OCAP explicitly committed

itself to anti-capitalist and 'class-based' politics. John Clarke, an unemployed autoworker who was hired as OCAP's first organizer at this meeting, put calls for 'realism' in their place: "If decent paying jobs, living income, adequate housing, health care and education are 'impossible' under this system, then we have to look beyond capitalism... This is the most simple but also the most important reason why OCAP is an anti-capitalist organization" (Clarke, 2001).

However, OCAP's anti-capitalism, while making references to the broader working class, was articulated from a perspective of the role of impoverished persons and the strategic field available to them. Drawing heavily from Piven and Cloward's empirical and theoretical studies on poor people's movements[1], OCAP's interventions would lean heavily on disruptive methods of protest to gain concessions from governments and the flow of capital, bringing attacks on the poor to a halt by raising the political costs that this form of state or capital action would imply (Greene, 2005: 8).

Piven and Cloward's strategy emphasized disruption because the structural conditions of poverty ensured that 'mass organizations' or 'identity-based groups' in themselves would be less able to effect change (Schram, 2003: 715). However, OCAP organizer John Clarke explained that OCAP's strategy was more complex and ambitious. While the premise that "the main way the poor can have influence is through their ability to create crisis by disrupting institutions... seems fundamentally true," (Livesay, 1999) OCAP's activity is clearly aimed at a coalition politics that emphasizes less spontaneity than Piven and Cloward, and in which, although mass organization is still a goal, it cannot be separated from the possibilities of direct action available to the poor. As Clarke explains: "It's debatable whether [consultation and negotiation] ever achieved anything... And certainly the period we are in now, this method is totally irrelevant to the poor. We are not opposed to negotiating.... But if you are going to come to the table to negotiate you need something backing you" (ibid).

Furthermore, OCAP's disruptions emphasize "the poor [ceasing] to be the sanitized supplicants that [mass media] can endorse. Instead, they [become] people who got into other people's faces and resisted and demanded things" (Livesay, 1999). This suggests, 'the poor' reconstituting themselves in struggle is a large part of OCAP's politics. This also addresses criticisms of Piven and Cloward that argue that self-acceptance of 'the poor' as a category of persons allows a movement to be co-opted more easily by identity-based appeals (Shantz, 2003: 717). In short, OCAP rejuvenates Piven and Cloward's advocacy for the poor through an anti-capitalist lens that has become newly relevant as neoliberal governance intensifies "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2010: 37). How that is played out is the subject of the rest of our discussion.

## Theorizing OCAP's Approach

By not only taking an anti-capitalist stance but asserting confrontational forms of protest in their range of activities, OCAP goes against the grain of traditional postwar anti-poverty advocacy in a way that involves trade-offs. Rejecting a 'consultation and negotiation' process, eschewing positive media coverage and calls for a superficially respectable anti-poverty movement means that even small wins are not easily within reach for OCAP. But what does OCAP gain from this? It became clear in our study of OCAP that the organization did not undertake direct action merely to circumvent a hamstrung and ineffective postwar tradition of institutional negotiation on behalf of the poor, or even to 'empower' the poor, but to effect 'recomposition,' which is normally used in conjunction with certain autonomist Marxist theories of working class organization and radical labour organizing.

Defined very simply in this context, recomposition involves augmenting "the individual and collective ability to organize" (Hamilton and Holdren, 2007). But recomposition is more specific than capacity-building or empowerment. In autonomist marxism's notion of the dynamics of class and class struggle, 'the working class' is seen as a network of alliances that is fractured, de-composed and re-composed in different formations against the backdrop and recurring crises of capital. As capital strives to overcome crises and limits, it struggles not merely for control of the production of wealth and resources, but for the control of social production of workers. The internal dynamics of 'recomposition' can be described as follows:

> Struggle changes us, makes us different, recomposes us. When we organise on the job something is ruptured. This happens to individuals and to organisations, whether informal, like a group of friends and co-workers, or more formal, like a union. If struggles are widespread or circulate enough, they begin to effect what can be called a recomposition of the working class. The most important effect of this is to increase 'compositional power' – the individual and collective ability to organise. Compositional power is increased or made more effective by its use, like a muscle: solidarity unionism is one way of doing this. (Hamilton and Holdren, 2007)

Observing OCAP's forms of campaigning and action through the lens of compositional power yields insights into what OCAP 'gains' through direct action methods, over and above 'empowerment' of the poor. OCAP's activities seem tailor-made to specifically resist the way capital adapts to crisis through the re-organization of geographical space and the bodies in those spaces, breaking solidarities and identifications by separating and re-categorizing people within them. As David Harvey has suggested, these crises are driven by 'blockages' in

flows of capital, such as lack of access to technology or an undersupply of labour, which threaten capital because it is characterized by a necessity to reinvest (Harvey, 2010: 65). Overcoming these barriers often ushers in new forms of capital (ibid: 50) and 'compositions' of the working class. An understanding of capital as 'flows' is often applied to understanding the movements of capital at a global scale, but flows and their blockages occur at more site-specific places as well: for example, downtown real-estate that is deemed financially valuable can be taken out of the trajectory of investment flows, via civic regulations, competing business interests, or public ownership.

Another way that these localized flows can be blocked, however, is through people's active resistance. Thus, at the local level, capital often preemptively engages in "exacerbating and re-organizing internal divisions in the working class, ripping apart sources of working class and oppressed people's power, fragmenting groups and struggles" (Kinsman, 2006: 47). Thus OCAP's activities, which often involves the poor temporarily occupying space in ways deemed 'inappropriate' by the police or media, are directly aimed at resisting capitalist recomposition and the 'neoliberal' rationality through which this works. Through direct action, OCAP intends to build new solidarities between oppressed categories of people.

Now that we have given a general overview of OCAP's brief history and placed it within the literature on recomposition, we now turn to discuss its democratic processes and internal structures.

## Democratic Processes and Structures

As of 2005, approximately 200-300 persons make up the 'base' membership of OCAP – generally poor or homeless persons and allies who are active in planning OCAP's actions and campaigns. 'Membership' in OCAP is informal, with the strength of one's membership determined by participation (Greene, 2005: 8). In terms of numbers and membership, the interviewees for this research project, informed us that the numbers fluctuate, depending on the level of state repression. Though the number of active members fluctuates, and that it often depends on the actions being undertaken at any particular moment: "Right after an action it's 50, 60 or more. Especially if we just did a really good action that really catches people's imaginations or pulls something off. We probably have a phone list of about 1000 and during the larger campaigns our lists had thousands"[2].

In terms of OCAP's democratic practice, Jeff Shantz, an anarchist participant, offers an overview of internal decision-making processes:

Decisions are made at biweekly meetings which are open to all members. Despite many anarchists' preference for consensus decision making, OCAP shows that majoritarian votes can be taken in a participatory, democratic and

effective manner. Time is always made for lengthy and vigorous debate and all sides are heard regardless of perspective or ideological bent. Debate is regularly carried over several meetings where further discussion is required. Ideological fetishes are left at the door and meetings generally maintain a focus on developing effective, winning strategies and tactics. (Shantz, 2010: 65)

During OCAP's annual general meeting, the membership discusses strategy and elects staff members (generally five people): three organizers, one administrator and one caseworker. Mac Scott, a former board member and long-time activist with OCAP, explains OCAP's bottom-up approach in spite of its traditional-sounding organizational structure:

Contrary to how it traditionally works, the executive is not the top of the organization, nor is the staff. All major policy and strategy decisions are set by the general membership. The executive is responsible to basically set up important discussions for the general membership meetings. So, if we're having problems with our *Special Diet* campaign[3], the executive may figure out a way to frame the questions around it for the general membership. But the decision will be made by a vote of hands at the general membership. The executive also handles any decisions that may come up between any general membership meetings. And the executive is usually made up of more experienced people. So, they are required to provide a bit of leadership — helping the debates that need to happen occur, help trainings, and mentoring needs to happen. The staff is responsible to do the day to day work set by the direction that the general membership agrees upon. I'd be wrong to say it always works perfectly but in theory our supreme decision making body is the general membership.[4]

This bottom-up model of organization, as Mac explained, was somewhat inspired by democratic trade unions and their approach to organizing. While OCAP is built on this bottom-up model, in practice such progressive democracy occurs imperfectly. Over the years, however, steps have been taken to mitigate or eliminate 'informal' imbalances in the leadership of the organization.

Mitigating these issues in OCAP's later years are the expansion of OCAP's organizers into a small group of paid staff. However, questions of OCAP's internal democracy, differential privilege, and leadership development, remain important.[5] One early example of these steps toward a more bottom-up organization is in dealing with the perceived leadership of John Clarke, who for many years acted as the main spokesperson and 'media face' of OCAP, as well as its main historian and theorizer. While Clarke does not earn a huge salary, his position of relative privilege vis-á-vis the very low income earning, unemployed and homeless constituency of OCAP has prompted debates about internal democracy among otherwise sympathetic

observers. Clarke's prominent role has also raised questions of racial and gender privilege in discussions of OCAP's decision-making, particularly when risking confrontational direct action that involves often repressive responses from police (Newberry, 2008: 75-83). As Mac Scott explains, it became clear that John Clarke as the singular public face of OCAP complicated the organization's ability to align itself with its grassroots' members and the bottom-up philosophy this implied. Mac summarizes the response to such fears:

> There's been a very conscious effort and to be fair it's been partially led by John. Encountering [the focus on John] as an organization was really hard on the organization, and it was hard on John. John during the Queen's Park Riot was targeted by the police because he was seen as the face of OCAP. It often meant that John was having to be run ragged at demonstrations. It meant also that we didn't get a variety of views out. So there was a conscious effort of both the membership and John himself (who realized that this was a problem), so now I think you see a variety of voices that are featured in terms of OCAP towards the media.[6]

Similarly, there has been some criticism of OCAP in terms of whether the organization substitutes rowdy direct action for workable anti-capitalist strategy, and thus only appears to empower participants, with some going so far as to pronounce OCAP as encouraging a 'culture of defeat' that will be limited by a 'ceiling' on the numbers of people in the community that will be inclined to become involved (Newberry, 2008: 63-67). These critiques are further visited in greater detail in a later section of this paper, when we discuss the critical consciousness of OCAP members.

## OCAP's Direct Action Casework

Working from the basis of Piven and Cloward's theory of poor people's political power, that argues that poor people's ability to disrupt as an often untapped means of obtaining concessions,[7] OCAP, during the years of the NDP government, formulated a set of practices it called 'direct action casework,' which have become a staple of its day-to-day work: seeking relief for the unemployed, welfare recipients, tenants, and immigrants, and workers being denied entitlements or pay by governments or employers. Adapting methods from the Great Depression (where unemployed worker delegations often stormed social agency offices), the intent of casework is to allow denied persons to circumvent "official channels of appeal that... are often lengthy, costly and ineffective" as well as designed to discourage complaints (Groves, 2005).

Typically, casework begins when a person or family being denied entitlements contacts OCAP and informs its staff of a situation that cannot be satisfactorily and speedily resolved through another channel in the social system. OCAP begins its work by sending a letter to the offending social agency or employer threatening 'public action.' If a resolution is not forthcoming, OCAP participants set up a 'delegation' which then travels to the entity in question, accompanied by the wronged person. The delegation aims to secure a meeting with a decision maker to come to an immediate resolution regarding the withheld entitlements. This is done by affecting the normal running of the entity in question, via work disruption, refusal to leave the premises, and turning the site into a place of protest (Groves, 2005):

> If people are facing an eviction, OCAP goes directly to their home to make the eviction impossible for the landlord and sheriff. If someone is being denied back pay, OCAP takes a picket right to the boss and disrupts business until the money is forthcoming. If an acceptable settlement is not forthcoming, they raise the costs of offending agencies to the point where it is no longer worthwhile for them to act in an oppressive way (Shantz, 2010: 72)

Using such methods, OCAP has attained success in hundreds of cases. Direct action casework has been facilitated by maintaining an office in communities where poor and homeless people, who access services more frequently, live. In these areas, OPAC members seek to becoming a "visible and welcoming presence, providing a safe and comfortable space, and being able to lend a helping hand when required" (Greene, 2005: 10). By consistently following up on promises to disrupt, and judicially escalating them as necessary when demands are not met, the notoriety of these actions are such that frequently, agencies immediately relent to the complainant's demands when seeing them printed on an OCAP letterhead. "It is clear how OCAP's well-established readiness to use direct action methods to confront such injustices has by now created a situation where the mere threat of a response often brings results" (OCAP, 2002). The positive results of OCAP's direct casework are in large part due to its strong membership base and organizing tactics. Turning again to our informant Mac, he explained how OCAP is able to rally a lot of people for such direct actions:

> If we have a general action, if we're building it over several months, we can get 500 to 600.  If it is a smaller action that we put out there for a couple of weeks, we can get maybe 100. We have smaller actions or ones that are done word of mouth for obvious reasons where we might have 20 or 30. It's hard to know what our numbers are. They often go up and down based on [the length of] our campaigns and actions.[8]

In addition, Mac spoke of the significance of direct action casework and its positive results, citing an example surrounding a particular Toronto Community Housing (TCH) building: "10, 20, 30 tenants would come and go into the manager's or superintendent's or supervisor's office and raise crap until the building's superintendent agreed to do some repairs". In this particular case, it was not the work of OCAP alone responsible for this action's success, but a foreshadowing of OCAP's turn toward linking with existing community organizing, which in this particular case was led by a couple from the Eritrean community. Mac explains how this couple was quite radical before getting involved with OCAP, but that through OCAP they have gained an appropriate outlet to do what they were already doing but in a way that felt "more productive and more collective". This example shows the importance of OCAP's grassroots community organizing work, and how they are working with individuals who are not afraid to stand up for their rights and who are conscious that by working together collectively the fight to guarantee their basic rights can be won.

Likewise, OCAP engages in important educational work concerning how to confront and stand up to the local police. This is a particularly important theme for many migrant communities. Amina Ali, an OCAP organizer from Etobicoke (a suburb of Toronto), offered an overview of this pedagogical initiative:

> We are organizing around the rights of people and how they survive in Canada, with respect to welfare, housing, especially policing. Many people were afraid to demonstrate because of intimidation by police. With police in Etobicoke (Division 23) opening next to social housing, harassing kids and writing their names down, or arresting them, it was very stressful because mothers didn't know they don't have to talk to police.[9]

Often the direct nature of the action casework leads to stress and anxiety as many people fear getting arrested. Amina helped convey the problems that such fears bring to OCAP organizing campaigns:

> Still the biggest worry is about police putting [participants] in prison. Once or twice, OCAP people at demos, have been arrested and this has [greatly] worried people— many run away when they see this happening, they are worried that they are next. This is a problem because then they communicate it back to the community that people were arrested at demos. So, [now] I tell people to come along and say, when we go, if you see someone getting arrested, you can just leave. Or if someone does get arrested, we will all go to the jail and support that person and not leave until we get that person out.[10]

Amina explains how the grassroots organizing efforts of OCAP have helped to motivate people, in particular migrant communities, to stand up for themselves,

fight for their rights and foster a community of collective solidarity. She further explains how empowering this process has been for those in her communities but also in other migrant communities: "We used to be ignored. But since we organized as delegations with OCAP, we, along with Pakistani and Afghani people are now being seen properly".

Direct action casework comprise a set of tactics that have been described as 'non-branded,' or tactics that "tend to spread in a viral way, with no one taking ownership or attempting to exercise control over how they are implemented" because they can be reproduced successfully by other organizations (Day, 2005: 19). For instance, casework has been instrumental in establishing Kingston and Peterborough 'chapters' of OCAP, and has become a major strategy in the work of Vancouver's Anti-Poverty Committee and London's (England) Coalition Against Poverty, as well as several other dozen smaller networks in North America and Europe which focus on one aspect such as deportation cases or evictions.

A question that frequently arises for the form of direct action casework OCAP has taken up, is whether it has pushed OCAP towards acting as an ersatz non-governmental association that takes the place of social services downgraded by neoliberalism's attack of social services— limiting its action to a slightly more radical form of social work, possibly with a 'servicing' model that makes a poor person or family dependent on OCAP's support. Aware of these dangers, participants explain that whether casework builds and complements larger anti-systemic movements depends on the way casework is carried out. First, direct action casework is accomplished collectively, that is, the organized delegations go with the aggrieved party when possible, "rather than representatives, vanguards, or experts" to do things for them to solve problems that one cannot solve on their own (Shantz, 2010: 72). Secondly, casework does not happen in isolation from the complementary activity of the mass movement; as a London counterpart explains about this work, the work of change cannot simply be done "taking on individual problems one by one" without "collective organising and mobilising for broader change." (D'Cruz, 2009). Thus casework is thus associated and identified with movement demands and "broader political practices" (Shantz, 2010: 72). Furthermore, concessions are not merely limited to enforcing the law, but often in excess of the law, to alter the behaviour and social norms that informally keep precarious and poor persons marginalized. A famous example is OCAP's picketing of a film set whose developers had cleared sex workers out of the area. By picketing and disrupting the filming they were able to get sex workers paid for the loss of business (ibid: 76). Similarly, casework attempts to break out of the trap of the individual client-service provider relationship. Hence, a grievance involving one or two tenants in a building can expand to most of the tenants becoming involved, or likewise most workers on a job site.

OCAP's form of direct action complements its anti-capitalist position, since it is identified as a poor people's movement and within its actions and activities it develops participants' critical consciousness. Its most useful organizing feature is that it is often successful in its actions.

> Direct actions are also about education, especially self-education. When we do an action we learn that despite this system's best efforts to beat us down, we can actually enjoy some victories. We also learn that the authorities are not all-powerful or beyond our grasp, and we are not as alone as we might sometimes feel. Actions teach us how bureaucracies work, that decisions are often arbitrary and based on nothing more than expediency or the hope that we'll accept no for an answer. Institutions that appear mysterious or impenetrable often come undone when confronted by a delegation of 10-20 people who are sure of their purpose. Direct action lets us see the fear in the eyes of bosses, cops, bureaucrats and landlords when they have to face our unleashed collective anger borne by the strength of our solidarity. It teaches us that we can shake those in power and build a movement that fundamentally challenges the existing arrangement. (Shantz, 2003: 465)

Finally, direct action casework itself builds the movement through cycles of ongoing personal victories for collectively assisted persons, with many new OCAP members drawn from the ranks of people who had called upon OCAP for assistance. Unlike other radical activity which is capable of being pigeonholed, casework "allow[s] us to engage with people on the basis of direct action and solidarity in a way which would be difficult when their confidence is low, and they are preoccupied with day to day concerns" (London Coalition Against Poverty, n.d.).

## Ontario Days of Action

Complementing OCAP's casework is a long history of mass actions, most of which have been carried out under the rubric of a longstanding campaign, while others are more short-term and spontaneous, such as actions that resemble political theatre. Because of space limitations, we deal here with 'landmarks' in OCAP's history that became widely known across Toronto (and even across Canada) and led to changes in the forms, emphases or distribution of OCAP's organizing. The history of these actions marks a series of serious setbacks for the broader left in Canada which, among other things, led to OCAP's separation from most of organized labour in the city.

Among the most notable is OCAP's role in the Ontario *Days of Action* between 1995 and 1998, a political strike by labour and community organizations

in cities across Ontario that was one of the largest organized resistances to austerity in recent Canadian history. The Ontario Conservatives (Tories), led by Mike Harris, were swept to power in the provincial election of 1995, after the NDP government had alienated most of their voting base by implementing austerity measures to cope with a serious recession. The Tories began aggressively pushing neoliberal 'clawback' policies, announcing very shortly after election "an immediate cut of 21.6% from social assistance," cancelling funding for 17,000 units of affordable housing, and eliminating rent controls in Ontario (Shantz, 2002). Here, OCAP, along with other community organizations, played a major role in persuading organized labour to mount a mass resistance to Harris in a labour-community formation. In spite of their different organizational cultures, communities and labour began developing a 'common front' to halt or reverse the neoliberal assault of the Tory government.

As well as organizing large demonstrations at Queen's Park, OCAP participants organized a march from Regent Park (one of Toronto's poorest communities) into Rosedale (one of its wealthiest), and organized extensively throughout neighbouring cities of Kingston, London and Waterloo. Thousands mobilized in rolling strikes across cities in Ontario; in Toronto, thousands-strong mobilizations helped to periodically shut down Toronto's finance capital centered on Bay Street. OCAP, in addition to being given speaking space at all Days of Action events, played a key role in populating the major (and most confrontational) pickets.[11] Despite this successful disruption and glimpses of what may have been possible, labour leaders seem to lose their nerve and fear public and political backlash, as had befallen other political strikes in Canada. As OCAP's John Clarke relates, "[M]ost leaders in the Labour Movement were not ready for the implications of such a confrontation and the Days of Action were called off in spite of the massive potential they demonstrated" (Clarke, 2010a).

As organized labour wound down the Days of Action and nothing was able to stop the neoliberal assault of the Harris government, "the struggles of OCAP took on the sharp character that we have come to see as defining our work" (OCAP, 2010). Unable to mobilize hoped-for resistance across Ontario, OCAP redoubled its efforts to disrupt the 'governance' of institutions that were being transformed through aggressive neoliberal austerity. These changes did not simply involve withdrawing entitlements, but intensified state intervention and disruption of poor persons' livelihoods and survival strategies.[12] As in other jurisdictions, an aggressive 'criminalization of the poor' was enacted both provincially by the Harris government and by the municipal regime headed by Mayor Mel Lastman. Institutionally, for example, the Ontario Works program sought to remove the unemployed from welfare rolls by penalizing the poor for infractions, reduce their benefits by hiding opportunities to receive them, and channel them into the worst jobs through 'workfare' programs. On the street, 'social cleansing' measures were

undertaken as aggressive enforcement of anti-vagrancy and anti-panhandling bylaws, as well as the relocation of poor and homeless persons. Both levels of government stepped up discursive attacks upon the poor and persons receiving entitlements; these attacks took the form of 'poor-bashing,' or scapegoating the poor as anti-social and parasitic. Overall, these years saw the intensification of OCAP's direct action casework. In addition to casework, OCAP participants

> ...picketed agencies and employers who were introducing workfare and made the program harder for them to put into effect. We took over empty buildings to win shelter for the homeless. We took to the streets to fight the social cleansing of poor and homeless people. We stood against attacks on squeegeers and panhandlers. We resisted the closing of rooming house stock in poor neighbourhoods. We were a thorn in the flesh of reactionary 'residents' associations that worked to redevelop the urban landscape in a way that served the interests of developers and yuppie colonists. (OCAP, 2010)

These years also saw innovations in OCAP's disruptive tactics, that sought to expose the links between poverty, homelessness, and the 'securitization' of the presence of poor people in Toronto, where even an apparently symbolic action could lead to violent arrests.


## OCAP's Strategies

### Indigenous and anti-colonial struggles

One interesting point about the evolution of OCAP and the people involved in it, concerns its gradual shift in terms of representation.

> When OCAP first started it was predominantly an 'all white male' organization, composed of middle-aged men on welfare and homeless white guys. However, since the late 1990s and early 2000s, it has branched out to help defend migrants' rights as well as being active in First Nations' solidarity campaigns, in particular, the issues facing Tyendinaga Mohawks. As a result OCAP has gained respect from the radical First Nations sovereignty movements and respectively, migrant justice organizations.[13]

Beginning in the new millennium, OCAP became more prominently involved in 'support work' for indigenous and anti-colonial struggles, particularly ones that involve occupation and direct action as a dimension of protest (Withers, et al., 2007: 160). This was not so much a new direction for OCAP. Rather, it was a broadening and outgrowth of its concerns, and extending and building upon solidarity with

the larger communities whose membership base overlaps with OCAP's. In an everyday sense, according to OCAP organizer AJ Withers: "the obvious connection to OCAP's anti-poverty work is that a lot of Native people are poor, especially in the cities. Systemic racism leads to fewer opportunities, lower pay and lower standards of living for many Native people" (ibid, 2007: 160).

As organizers recount, linking poverty with colonialism was led and articulated by specific OCAP members. Shawn Brant, a Mohawk from Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory in Southern Ontario, who would later be targeted by the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) for his leadership in direct action, had been hired as an OCAP organizer in 2001. As Josh Zucker, an OCAP organizer, explains,

> I got involved with indigenous struggles through working with OCAP. When I joined OCAP in 2001 there were 5 paid organizers, one of whom was Shawn Brant… Most members of OCAP, I would say, started learning more about native issues and sovereignty through the links Shawn brought to OCAP, which went back to before 2001. (Cited in Wither et al., 2007: 156)

Moreover,

> a number of actions over the years that built this connection, the most notable of which was the attempt to open up the bridge that runs from the U.S. through the Mohawk territory of Akwasasne into Canada. This action was planned when demonstrators came from the U.S. to attend the anti-FTAA demonstrations in Quebec, and it was done in conjunction with Mohawk people… [as a result] our consciousness about the issues grew greatly. (ibid)

It was during the 2006 crisis in Caledonia, Ontario, where members of Six Nations Iroquois undertook a reclamation of Douglas Creek Estates that OCAP's solidarity work moved to the centre of its everyday activities, and where OCAP organizers began to articulate their activity in terms of an anti-colonial movement. For some 200 years, corporate development activity had steadily whittled away lands granted to Six Nations Iroquois, despite their own understanding of themselves as an independent nation. In 2006, several dozen members of the Mohawk nation initiated a reclamation process as a means of calling attention to this encroachment by setting up a camp at the entrance to the Douglas Creek Estates (Keefer et al., 2006: 136-7). The Ontario Provincial Police once again raided the camp, and in the ensuing resistance, blockades were set up on roads that are unceded territory, leading to tensions between Six Nations and propertied white settlers.

Unresolved tensions over these encroachments and dispossession eventually expanded into blockades on Canada's CN national rail line (ibid: 137). During these actions, it became clearer that victimization by colonial practices and poverty

interlock at the level of OCAP's membership. Zucker recounts a conversation with John, an indigenous and formerly homeless resident of Toronto.

> He told me point blank that we should be fighting to get the welfare rates raised in Toronto and so we talked a bit about the OCAP 'Raise the Rates' campaign. The connection is obvious. Native people live in extreme poverty unknown in many other communities across the country. (Withers, et al., 2007: 156)

In the period of this crisis, according to OCAP organizer AJ Withers, OCAP organizers travelled to Caledonia to undertake the support work of being 'witnesses' to deter police and settler violence, do concrete support tasks such as cooking to relieve the Mohawks for organizing tasks, and of course, to build a "meaningful, lasting solidarity relationship" rather than just a moment of convergence of interests (ibid: 157).

Part of the limitations of organizing in crisis is that the 'event' itself overwhelmed OCAP's capacity to harness people's interests and move them into participatory roles, and to both witness the Iroquois struggle and effectively resist neo-colonial forces. Self-critically, OCAP organizer AJ Withers argues that she and fellow organizers:

> should have put more energy into attacking the government from Toronto and confronting the racism of the Caledonian citizens, through the media and through actions and events in Toronto, in order to give voice to the other supportive opinions which non-natives have of the reclamation. (ibid: 153)

Regardless, OCAP's affinity with the Mohawks' battle and expansion into this arena of struggle can be seen as a natural progression for several reasons. The first is that 'neoliberalizing Ontario' is not a process isolated from Canada's colonial processes, but one that clearly builds from colonialism's longstanding, effective, and geographically-based strategies of dispossession, in which racism plays a key role, breaking potential solidarities between affected groups of people. Arguably, the most lasting symbol of the Harris regime, for example, was the shooting of unarmed protester and Ojibway band member Dudley George in a 1995 demonstration that took place in Ipperwash Provincial Park. Ipperwash had been expropriated during WWII via Canada's War Measures Act from the Stoney Point band and never returned. Harris himself was involved at the highest levels in the Ipperwash action, and, 'behind closed doors,' made intensely racist remarks about the demonstrators that were understood to have militarized the response to the protest (Linden, 2007: 677), and in themselves are revealing of the symbolic importance of evacuating people by any means necessary to assert 'ownership'

by capital. Both the impoverished and the colonized, even as they are forced to negotiate in courts, do so while this development continues apace (Podur, 2007).

Because of this parallelism at the level of repression, it is perhaps unsurprising that the course of direct action taken by OCAP resembles 'reclamation' undertaken by natives, and that when 'negotiation and consultation' with the colonial process leads to a seeming dead end, reclamations seek to work through negative inducement. For example, OCAP's attempts to 'raise the costs' for the capital and the state in its processes of dispossession very much mirrors the thought of Miqma'q warrior Sikaj's (cited by OCAP member Josh Zucker), in which he argues:

> I don't see us having a strong enough military power to conquer Canada, but I do see us having the strength to create a condition of deterrence where colonial domination becomes very difficult for Canada to continue. This will create the physical and political space for us to pursue our own definition of our rights and our ways of life. (Alfred, 2005; cited in Withers, et al., 2007: 157)

## Development of Critical Consciousness

In terms of building critical consciousness, in relation to organizing as a class, there are numerous examples where people in the greater OCAP community have come together to exercise solidarity with each other. These actions contribute to the consciousness of their collective struggle, as they build bridges with other groups of people who have been deeply impacted by the state's austerity measures, and the overall capitalist system. A striking example of this form of collective solidarity was made in our interview with Mac, in which he recounts the time when OCAP began getting involved with migrant groups and their work around migrants' rights campaigns. He explains how a sense of solidarity between migrants and the homeless was created; since both groups recognized that they were in this struggle together, being left out of the system:

> Seeing a family being deported and a bunch of homeless guys whose lives are just the shits, out at the immigration office to support this family and sitting down to eat together afterwards… it's just fantastic. We did a campout two-three years ago, and had No One Is Illegal[14] activists showing up to bring food to the campout, which was all homeless people, in the middle of the night. Those are the moments [that keep me inspired].[15]

In the same interview with Mac, he reflects on the level of critical consciousness among OCAP's members, and confirms that for the most part people have a strong sense of critical consciousness, especially among migrant communities involved

with OCAP: "People often come from a history of struggle; they've done organizing in their own countries of origin." This level of consciousness and awareness among many migrant groups helps to build the movement, as they already know who they are fighting against and how to do it. In this regard, OCAP doesn't need to raise awareness or motivate its members. Mac reflects on OCAP's role in the general context of members' critical consciousness:

> My contention is that – not all the time, but most of the time – people know who is screwing them over. The horrible thing that capitalism has taught them is that they can't win. So it becomes more about all of us coming together in a way where we can win, than it is about us radicalizing people or teaching people that capitalism is the problem. It's about creating a space where we can talk about what we already know is the problem rather than teaching people analysis.[16]

In terms of the OCAP's relationship to the trade union movement, there has been a history of grassroots solidarity and collective organizing. For instance, there are numerous occasions in which the trade union movement has stood in solidarity with OCAP, again an example of critical consciousness and organizing as a class – the working class. In an interview with Euan Gibb, a trade unionist and former auto worker, we learned about how his union, the Canadian Autoworkers Union (CAW), was very active in its active support of OCAP's activities for many years. The CAW also gave significant financial donations to OCAP. Euan recalls when he first got involved with OCAP, during the time of the Queen's Park riot:

> I had seen posters advertising the march [Queen's Park Riot] in the plant but wasn't already connected to OCAP so didn't go. I met a bunch of the workers from the plant that had gone and they talked to me about how the media coverage was completely false. Given the extreme treatment of the event in the media, and my trust for the experienced activists in the CAW that had gone, I decided to check out the next demo to learn what OCAP was about.[17]

Further on in the interview, Euan expresses that what really caught his attention and motivated him to be involved with OCAP, as he learned about a different form of organizing methods, was that OCAP were using these tactics effectively to ensure that their demands were met. He explains how it was this level of consciousness, in regards to OCAP's direct action approach, that motivated him to continue to stay involved in solidarity work with OCAP:

> I was motivated to join some OCAP actions because it sounded from experienced activists that they were doing it differently. Sure, OCAP organized some pretty serious demos, but they also did 'direct action

casework.' Many of us got involved with this work. It was a highly effective method of fighting back against impersonal bureaucratic decisions that directly impacted people's lives. It was concrete solidarity. Something relatively easy to do that got results. I mean people got their welfare benefits reinstated or got to stay in Canada to have their case to gain refugee status based on humanitarian grounds. These are serious results.[18]

In this sense, we can see how their work is building critical consciousness among other groups, such as more mainstream labour organizations. The Queen's Park riot initially opened Euan's eyes to the work of OCAP, but he was not alone. The level of curiosity and interest from other activists also increased during this time. OCAP members see that moment as a point of critical consciousness because despite the injuries and arrests, this event marked a turning point where OPAC attained more support and could organize on a larger scale.

Unlike movements of more privileged activists, the most intense barriers to participation are created externally, by the conditions of poverty itself. Thus Newberry, in line with Bordieu, observes that a "key victory of poor people's movements is their very existence," particularly "in the face of neoliberalism's challenge to their formation" (Newberry, 2008: 99). These obstacles include, in the political arena, redefining political concern as being the well-being of the 'middle class,' as well as pronounced discursive attacks on political sympathy for the poor. Moreover, in cities like Toronto, the 'neoliberal' mode of urban development works to encourage 'cracking down' on the presence of poor and homeless as a means of marketing the city as 'world class', a process that involves redefining spaces as 'middle-class' or vibrant business districts (Greene, 2005: 9-10). The development of a 'critical consciousness' among OCAP members is thus based less on becoming 'aware' of the problems they experience, and more on developing an individual willingness and collective capacity to act on them.

## Capacity Building of OCAP Members

In terms of capacity building among the membership of OCAP, through the various interviews conducted, it becomes apparent that OCAP has played a role in developing leadership and organizing capacities with its members, which have made them better equipped to fight for their rights and demands and in many cases mobilize their communities. Mac recounts an example of such capacity building:

> We did an immigration case with an Afghani woman 12 years ago, she's now president of the Afghani Refugee Rights Organization, fighting to bring more and more Afghani refugees in the country. Again, you're talking with people who are already politically astute, who are already doing political

work, but I think OCAP became the outlet for people to really get into their work and in a collective way.[19]

In terms of leadership abilities, OCAP has contributed tremendously in terms of strengthening its members' organizing skills. As the above example illustrates, people are now collectively organizing by themselves. They have also fostered a sense of collective solidarity among members, helping each person understand that he or she is not alone in the struggle. This ensures that members feel more confident to fight and push forward. In Mac's words, again:

> There are guys in the homeless community we've worked with, who are natural leaders, brilliant people, the kind of people that would be ignored except for some agency grabbing them to put in front of a camera to be a token homeless person but now these guys walk into shelters and people on the street respect them, and they bring hundreds of people to rallies and have been doing it for five, 10 years[20].

Another area of building the capacities of OCAP's members relates to OCAP organizers' ability to build relationships. This is, without doubt, a key component to successful community mobilizing and has led to very successful results. Mac recalls the importance of this aspect of capacity building in relation to collective struggle:

> So what people can do is talk with Amina and her group one night, and talk in Lawrence Heights' TCH project the next night, and bring those two communities together so that it expands the concept of collective struggle... So we provide a collective enough of a situation where we can be out there and openly be anti-capitalist. I don't think we radicalize people, I think all of us radicalize each other. The key is that we're all together or on the street together and this provides a feeling of power that lets people see what they already know.[21]

## Conclusions

This short study on OCAP briefly chronicles one network, while also illuminating the forces which shape the forms and strategic choices of anti-capitalist movements in Canada. It is clear through the case study of OCAP that certain political developments and consequent economic situations motivated and led the activities of OCAP in its ongoing mobilizations and organization.

'Neoliberalizing Ontario' is sometimes spoken of and written about as if it is merely advancing an ideology of austerity. Yet one should rather understand 'neoliberalizing Ontario' as a political 'geography,' in which segments of the poor

and working class are forced out of areas of Toronto and Ontario as part of the workings of capitalism; a process designed to 'make' the poor. Neoliberalism's 'interventionist' character disciplines subjects, especially poor and dispossessed subjects, by means of more direct contact with the market and the state, obviating rights and entitlements, even those rights guaranteed by law. OCAP's support work in solidarity with indigenous people's struggles demonstrates how Canadian neoliberalism has learned from racialized, geographic techniques of colonial oppression. Moreover, OCAP's recognition of the connections between these phenomena of dispossession, and the way its members reach out to others affected by them, have expanded their possibilities of, and capacities for, anti-colonial and anti-oppression politics as well as anti-capitalist ones. While OCAP has been characterized as moving from being an anti-poverty organization to becoming a 'social justice' organization, we would describe this as an underscoring of anti-colonial thought that is latent within anti-poverty struggles, precisely because 'poverty' is hidden by being racialized. While the white poor may be sympathetic figures, poverty's association with 'nativeness' makes it impossible to assimilate, legitimizing marginalization as its solution.

This study has helped re-confirm that the unique aspect of OCAP's work is its class-based approach, which separates it from many other social movements. This is further complemented by OPAC's anti-capitalist philosophy. This sentiment is reinforced by one of OCAP's key organizers, John Clarke: "Only a reawakened movement, based on the needs and demands of poor and working people and that refuses to accept the austerity that capitalism requires, can offer a way forward" (Clarke, 2010a: 113).

## Notes

[1] Piven and Cloward's studies of poor people's movements were referred to often in our interviews with OCAP participants, and have been frequently cited in other case studies of OCAP. The key readings are Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare (1971) and Poor People's Movements: Why they Succeed, How they Fail (1978).

[2] Mac Scott, interview, 2011.

[3] OCAP's Special Diet campaign was arguably one of OCAP's most successful campaigns, returning hundreds of dollars to thousands of assistance recipients that had been erased through reductions in the base assistance amount, by organizing an en-masse application for a special dietary assistance supplement (and a campaign among doctors to campaign that the dietary assistance supplement was a necessity for everyone). For more information, see "OCAP Special Diet Campaign Gathers Strength," Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, http://www.ocap.ca/node/383.

[4] Interview conducted with Mac Scott on 26 September, 2011.

[5] Comment taken from the interview with Mac Scott, op cit.

[6] Interview with Mac Scott, op cit.

[7] Interview, John Clarke, 30 August, 2011.

[8] Interview with Mac Scott, op cit.

[9] Interview with Amina Ali, 7 September 2011.

[10]  Interview with Amina Ali, op cit.
[11]  Interview with John Clarke, op cit.
[12]  Interview with John Clarke, op cit.
[13]  Interview with Mac Scott, op cit.
[14]  No One is Illegal is a grassroots migrant rights organization that fights for the rights for all migrants, regardless of citizenship status. It currently has offices in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa and Vancouver. See: http://www.nooneisillegal.org/.
[15]  Interview with Mac Scott, op cit.
[16]  Interview with Mac Scott, op cit.
[17]  Interview with Euan Gibb, 30 September 2011.
[18]  Interview with Euan Gibb, op cit.
[19]  Interview with Mac Scott, op cit.
[20]  Interview with Mac Scott, op cit.
[21]  Interview with Mac Scott, op cit.

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# The Greater Toronto Workers' Assembly

# 12

*Euan Gibb*

## Background

For more than forty years now workers have been told to defer their ambitions to improve their lives. The pervasive ideological iterations of neoliberalism have been actively used to convince workers that if they just waited long enough and elected governments that would allow 'the market' to function freely, prosperity for all would inevitably result. It wasn't just prosperity that was promised. Ideological proponents of neoliberal policy also argued that capitalist markets thrive best when there is little to no market intervention; the introduction of markets to public services would increase efficiency; flexible labour markets and de-unionized workplaces would improve job security and finally, that development of capitalist markets would lead to commensurate growth of democracy, freedom and equality.

The popularity of these arguments is evidenced by the international narrowing of policy options to what Thomas Friedman described as essentially a choice between 'Pepsi or Coke' (Friedman, 2000). State responses to economic and political responses look more and more similar. Friedman was describing the manner in which these policy responses may have slightly nuanced local peculiarities but that they must not deviate from the core 'golden rules' of neoliberalism.

The rise of right wing governments across the world proudly demonstrated that they had accepted the hegemony of the ideology of neoliberalism and also the consequent golden rules. Workers' organizations would be directly targeted. Independent trade unions came to be seen as monopoly actors in labour markets, forever distorting the 'free market' in labour. Unions were also understood to be a key source of inflation. Thus, from a policy perspective the organized interventions and activities of workers and unions must be structurally constrained. The local

version of the frontal assault on trade unions has been well-documented (Panitch and Swartz, 1993). One of the implications of that never-ending assault has been a shifting of the relative bargaining power of workers. Internalization of the consequences of this shift has stretched deeply into the culture of workers organizations and manifested as a systematic lowering of expectations.

Union density – or the proportion of workers in unions - has steadily decreased over this same period of time. While Canadian unions have not lost as much of their membership and been impaired to the extent of those in the US or other places, trade unions here have been severely weakened (Camfield, 2011). Unions that were once seen to be the strongest and most independent (from management and the logic of management) have increasingly accepted the logic of competition and workers have shouldered the consequences. Trade unions have been conceding important terrain in areas of wages, workplace rules and retirement security.[1] As the concessionary bargaining trend began more than twenty years ago, one exasperated auto worker famously argued that workers "don't need a union to walk backwards; we can give things up just as easily on our own ..." (Cited in Gindin, 1995). In other words, if we are going to make concessions, why put our time, energy and money into trade unions. While there are still plenty of good reasons to do so,[2] the logic of the argument is intuitively appealing. Clearly something isn't working.

It took the great recession of 2008-2009 to put some of this into sharper context locally. As the banking crisis of late 2008 transformed into a real economic crisis with the evaporation of liquidity in the economy it became increasingly obvious that something deeply structural in the economy was not working for workers. Simple explanations about a couple of greedy bankers taking things too far or taking too many risks lost their early traction as the recession spread outside of the banking sector and began to directly affect workers' jobs. Workers started to ask some questions that didn't have such simple answers. Specifically, how could a small group of actors have such an immediate and large impact on the economy and workers' lives?

When the great recession was added to the previous forty years of waiting for things to improve, many began to seriously question the ability of capitalism itself to deliver the goods – a stable economy that provided an increasing standard of living for each subsequent generation. This generation of Canadian workers now believes that it will be worse off than the previous one. Workers immediately felt what economists would later describe as the pro-cyclic implications of deregulated labour markets. In other words, workers in deregulated contexts lost their jobs quicker when the economy turned downwards. The impact of deregulated labour markets worsened the crisis.

In fact, the unofficial newspaper of record for the business class – the Financial Times, actually ran a series of articles, editorials and analysis on 'The Future of Capitalism' at the height of the recession. After forty years of promoting

financial liberalization and neoliberalism, the validity of the 'golden rules' was being questioned in elite circles as well.[3] Capitalism – and more specifically – the neoliberal iteration of capitalism seemed to be undergoing a crisis of ideological legitimacy. Not since the great depression of the 1930s had this kind of opening to question the legitimacy of the current model of capitalism bubbled to the surface of a crisis in this manner. The militant working class organizing that occurred during and after the crisis of legitimacy of the 1930s led to the broad class compromise of the post-war period. The structures ceded by capital and governments to workers during that period are those that have been under assault since the 1970s. Despite that assault, the structures that workers won after the depression and war continue to shape the legal contours of current trade union activities. Workers made serious structural and substantive gains when they were able to engage with militant independent action during that deep ebb in the legitimacy of capitalism.

This contrasts starkly with erosion of legitimacy of neoliberalism following the great recession of 2009. Many workers and unions intuitively understood what the crisis would mean for them. Many picked up the placards claiming 'We Won't Pay for Your Crisis!' The rhetoric was perfectly well suited to the moment. In contrast, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has claimed that ten years of cuts are ahead – to make workers pay for the crisis (Cited in, Albo, Gindin & Panitch, 2010: 22). Instead of workers making gains when there was an erosion of the broad public faith in capitalism's capacity to deliver stability and economic security, the demands for austerity have intensified.

Not only have the demands for workers to pay for the crisis amplified, it increasingly appears that governments are ensuring this is precisely what will happen. The right wing has been emboldened. The frontal attack on basic trade union rights first in Wisconsin, then immediately in another half-dozen states offers a severe example. The continuing demands on Greek workers to accept austerity measures also fit in with the political moment. In Ontario and Toronto, provincial and city governments have imposed 'wage-freezes' for public sector workers and expanded the privatization of public services. Despite creative, sustained and occasionally militant organizing on the left, the adherents of neoliberal doctrine on the right continue to make gains.

Some dedicated Toronto activists and trade unionists saw exactly what was occurring. They were disappointed with the weakness of the response of the left and trade unions. Rather than criticize and decry the lack of militant action and frank talk about capitalism that they saw as essential to make gains in the political moment, a small group made a decision to contribute to building something for the longer term in order that such clear opportunities to make gains for workers are never missed again. There was a clear desire to build something broader than simply the next campaign: a need to "create a layer of politics beyond coalition politics"[4] and something deeper and more inclusive than anything that currently

exists. The Greater Toronto Workers Assembly (GTWA) is the result of that initiative.

## Motives, Goals and Objectives

The GTWA is a non-sectarian, anti-capitalist workers organization explicitly organized with the goal of increasing working class capacities to fight back. It includes workers that are union members and unorganized, workers with status and without, workers that are retired and active and those unable to work, i.e. the working class broadly conceived. The GTWA offers an example of a sincere attempt to build an explicitly anti-capitalist workers organization that takes seriously the many failings of previous attempts to organize in this manner. The goal of the GTWA is to "establish a network of activists that is anti-capitalist, democratic, non-sectarian, and dedicated to building, through coordinated campaign work and political education, a broad multi-racial working class movement that is militant and effective" (Garver, 2010). Many of the members of the GTWA are political veterans. Others are younger, including organizers and activists with immigrant rights and anti-poverty community organizations.

Some of the underlying ideas for a structure like the GTWA are attributed to US political activist Bill Fletcher, Jr. and his co-author of the book, *Solidarity Divided*, Fernando Gapasin.[5] They described city labour councils developing deeper interlinkages with social movements at the city level aimed at building working class power. Many of the ideas of these authors have been adapted by Toronto's Sam Gindin, a socialist political economist and former research director of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). The proposal for the creation of the Workers Assembly (WA) came from the Labour Committee of the Socialist Project. The Labour Committee was one group of many (largely) Toronto based trade union and community activist groups working to develop anti-capitalist analysis and action on the Toronto left.

A few 'felt-needs' on the left contributed to the impetus to put energy into a WA in the city. A clear need to broaden the scope of worker activism beyond organized union members was underlying the initiative. Workers are divided in too many ways. This is one of the legacies – if not one of the reasons – of neoliberal economic and social policies (Rosenfeld, 2011). Additionally, the gap between what workers have historically achieved during periods of capitalist crisis and what they failed to gain during this crisis demanded a response. The weak or even conservative response to the crisis of many trade unions exacerbated this problem – again demanding a response. Also, the WA could create a substantial organizational space on the anti-capitalist left for trade unionists and social movement activists to engage with each other in a sustained manner.

In a broader and more ideological sense, the assembly could provide some crucial political space for workers to directly challenge the core tenet of neoliberalism that the market is the answer to everything. This is one of the basic principles of neoliberalism and it often remains unchallenged in union education, bargaining and political work. Finally, the WA could allow an increased focus on the local sphere instead of focusing on far-off meetings[6] - one of the basic weaknesses of the anti (counter) globalization movement that arose in dramatic fashion throughout the 1990s.

Consequently, the Labour Committee of the Socialist Project extended an invitation to a *consulta* in order to stimulate a broad conversation about why we were unable to take advantage of the crisis in a manner so many thought may have been possible. The invite went out broadly to trade unionists and community/ social movement activists throughout Toronto and beyond in order to start that conversation about the possibilities of moving the idea of a Workers' Assembly forward in Toronto in 2009.

## Actors Involved and Beneficiaries

Three consultas were organized over the next few months. They brought together activists from different spheres. This allowed focused conversations about the differences between organizing workers using different strategies depending on where they were located; the relationship between the assembly and a progressive city labour council in Toronto; and finally, the relationship of class and other forms of identity under capitalist social relations (Rosenfeld, 2011).

It did not take long for support for the idea of the assembly to build. Volunteers quickly got together to organize the first large meeting of the nascent WA. At this stage, volunteers put together three committees. First, a campaigns committee to work on examining the criteria, forms and models, capacity assessments and project proposals for various possible campaigns that may form the basis of the initial actions coming out of the Assembly. The experienced organizers volunteering to give a lead on the assembly process wanted to be sure to catalyze discussion. That was effectively accomplished by offering some concrete proposals for action without being overly prescriptive. Second, a structure committee volunteered to examine aspects of democratic structure that may lay the basis for a working fight-back organization, including political or geographic scope, dues structures, decision-making models, etc. Finally, a logistics committee would handle the logistics of organizing the Assembly itself, as well as (temporarily) 'everything else'.

About a hundred and fifty people chose to come to the first assembly under the banner of 'Solidarity. Resistance. Change. Organizing Working

Class Communities'. The outcome of this first assembly was a nearly universal endorsement for the premise that attendees urgently needed to work together in a more organized manner in order to move the broader working class movement forward. At the Assembly itself participants broke into workshops that debated and discussed movement strengths, limitations and challenges in the current climate. Workshop discussions were reported back and shared with the assembly as a whole. These reports fuelled the concrete strategic discussions on how to move forward and work together. The afternoon was spent presenting then discussing and debating the implications of the reports that the three volunteer committees had offered.

The goals of this assembly were publicly stated as:

- To bring together activists within the broad working class movement, to explore the experiences and approaches to struggle that both unite and divide us as a starting point for overcoming divisions and building greater collaboration, exchange, strategic discussion and action amongst us;
- To share our understanding of the problems created by capitalism and the current economic crisis and the need to develop alternative visions that challenge the logic and power of private corporations, and the states that back them, over our lives; and
- To identify and develop concrete strategies and organizational forms of struggle which defend working-class people's immediate needs and lay the groundwork for an equitable and democratic alternative to our present economic and political system.[7]

The good-faith, mature, non-sectarian approach of participants was remarkable. Despite well-founded concerns that, "some of the political differences between left groups would become too fractious",[8] activists from typically sectarian organizations that could barely stay in the same room were volunteering to work together on committees. A veteran of left politics in Toronto remarked that, "considering the sectarian history and pettiness of the far left in Toronto this is quite heartening. Of course there are hard debates, but it seems that people are learning how to conduct political debates in a way that moves us all forward. Instead of preaching it seems like people are willing to take the time to try and figure things out together".[9]

Additionally, many activists met for the first time at this initial assembly. There was a clear and well-articulated sense of what Garver described as a "frustration with the political impotence and fragmentation of the Canadian left in the face of the neo-liberal offensive in Canada," and that "union and community activists in the Greater Toronto area are looking for collaborative projects that might appeal to the broadly defined working class" (Garver, 2010).

Some simple principles upon which the assembly would be constructed were agreed after the intensive workshops. "The assembly agreed on the principle of

individual membership, set up a voluntary, interim coordinating committee and set about the process of establishing criteria for collective campaigns, a proposed vision statement, and the next assembly" (Rosenfeld, 2010). These basic structures allowed a much larger group of volunteers to commit to the assembly. Previously sectarian actors were confronted with the choice of maintaining their former divisive political practices or stay involved in perhaps the most significant organizing effort going on in the region. They unanimously chose the latter.

The committees got to work immediately between the assemblies. In short order they managed to organize a second assembly of over 200 activists from Toronto and beyond. At this assembly, process and structure took substantive steps forward. Serious and rigorous debates were engaged around campaigns, membership (including dues structures) and the vision statement. These discussions were certainly divisive at specific moments. However, while it was possible to observe historic (sectarian) bad habits creep forward during the large group debates, it was remarkable to watch them recede almost as quickly. Again, a sincere good-faith approach of participants was plainly apparent.

A diverse list of committees was struck beyond the Interim Coordinating Committee agreed to at the first assembly. These include:

- Coordinating Committee
- Membership/Finance/Outreach Committee
- Political Development and Education Committee
- International Solidarity Committee
- Cultural Committee (artists from all disciplines encouraged to join)
- Labour Caucus (both union and non-union members encouraged to join)
- Labour Caucus Flying Squad
- Free and Accessible Transit Campaign
- G20 Solidarity Committee/ Civil Liberties

The goals and actual work of these committees would be decided upon and prioritized by the active members of the committees themselves. Anyone was welcome to volunteer on any of the committees. The Coordinating Committee (CC) replaced its interim version that had been built at the first assembly. The basic founding premise of the assembly has been that no single individuals have a monopoly recipe for a democratic participative model that involves and engages membership and the broader community. Therefore, the ICC and eventually the CC developed proposals that were circulated ahead of time in the broadest possible manner.[10] The tone of the outgoing ICC was indicative of the hope and investment that the process had generated to date.[11]

Campaigns for free and accessible mass transit and in defense of threatened public sector programs and employment gained the most support and volunteers at this assembly. Significantly, the vision statement of the WA was also adopted at

this assembly. Again, this was not without serious debate. There were significant and important differences articulated by different assembly members. However, a broad consensus was achieved. The following is the third and fifth paragraphs of the vision statement:

> The Assembly calls on activists to join together in a democratic process to create a new politics. It is both a space for dialogue and learning within the popular left movement and an organ of common action. Seeking to move beyond coalition and network politics the Assembly is an organization that individuals belong to without giving up their membership and allegiances to community organizations, unions and left groups. We are committed to developing our understanding of what we're up against, who our potential allies are, and to organize and act in new ways that will take us from a politics of resistance to emancipatory alternatives...
>
> While capitalism itself has created ongoing suffering and oppression in its "normal" phases, the crisis has made things worse. But crises do not just come and go; they bring both great dangers and significant opportunities. Historically, they have represented new openings for either the consolidation of, or shifts in, social power. The question is whether we can take advantage of the new openings and threats to build a new kind of politics. The Assembly represents one answer to that challenge.[12]

## Structures of Democratic Participation

In addition to the expansive and clear vision statement, basic democratic practices were endorsed by the assembly. These included democratic procedures for election to the coordinating committee, policies in discrimination and harassment, participation, voting and disruption policies and finally, a statement of principles adopted by the broad assembly aimed at guiding the work of the coordinating committee. Simple majority rules voting procedures were deemed dangerous and therefore eliminated. These are found to be too alienating and divisive. Genuine attempts to deal with political differences were brought in. Any time a vote is close, it is considered to be suspended, not adopted and to be revisited. One participant that has been involved in organizing events and volunteering time to get the assembly off the ground noted that, "in creating democratic structures together people are willing to trust those structures. There is always a small minority who rejects forms of structure under the mask of 'anarchism'. However, the majority of people are willing to trust the structures they themselves have created and ultimately control".[13] The openness and transparency of process and the wide variety of participants has allowed a significant degree of trust to be built.

Also, clear policies on disruption were articulated at this point. This was viewed as a necessary addition due to the appeal of disruption to historic sectarian actors committed to sabotage of a meeting or even an organization. Thus, policies adopted were an attempt to confront and prevent previous mistakes and organizational weaknesses. The disruption policy has been used on a couple of occasions. It has proven to be highly effective. By initiation of an open process that attempts to deal with the reasons underlying disruption, nobody is simply 'kicked out'. Therefore, good faith is preserved and meetings can quickly resume and progress continues.

## Outcomes, Current Situation and Capacities Developed

To date, GTWA's major outcomes have been:

- The Assembly continues to build capacity;
- Various concurrent activities organized and executed by the membership of the Assembly;
- More organized approach to demonstrations/picket lines;
- Interventions at official public consultations organized by government;
- Work through political differences in a large, diverse group;
- Deepening community activists/trade union activists interlinkages; and
- Deepening activist capacity for neighbourhood organizing

Two efforts bear further analysis. First, the campaign for free and accessible transit and second, a conference organized by the labour committee.

From its beginning at the WA, the campaign for free and accessible transit was an attempt to do politics differently. Rather than a defensive attempt to organize support for the protection of service levels or (unionized) jobs, the transit campaign went on offence with a proactive, hopeful message. At the core of the campaign was a call for the outright abolishment of fares. This is particularly relevant for Toronto given that, "recent fare-hikes, strikes, provincial funding cuts, cancelled or delayed construction projects, insufficient service, piecemeal and inadequate accessibility infrastructure, and public relations debacles have made our transit system the target of considerable public anger, much of which has been channeled into generalized anti-union resentment and calls for privatization" (Schein, 2010). Schein further points out that the 'fare box recovery ratio' in Toronto is one of the highest in North America. That means the transit systems is one of the least 'public' systems going.

Unlike European cities, working class wage earners disproportionately rely on public transportation systems in North America. A class bias is culturally built into the use of public transit. This is less the case in larger metropolitan cities,

but it remains an important dimension of the politics of public transit in the city of Toronto. This establishes public transit as a key site of struggle in a different manner. It means that many wealthy people are not invested in a public transit system and will not mobilize to defend it. Conservative populist arguments making the case for privatization due to poor services are aimed almost exclusively at working class riders. This is one of the reasons the intervention of the free transit campaign volunteers is so critical. They offer a much-needed alternative diagnosis, analysis and prescription.

The transit campaign committee met regularly and developed some exceptionally good quality campaign materials. They put together solid research with forward looking strategic and clearly articulated demands. The main slogan of the campaign was 'No Fare is Fair'. Volunteers took these materials to political meetings all over the city and talked the campaign up. They leafleted at major subway stations; giving them out on buses and anywhere else that lots of workers were lining up for transit. The campaign also offered the opportunity to link transit providers with transit users. The power of service providers allying with service users against politicians wanting to cut services offers an extremely potent recipe. Organizers also hosted a 'free transit' party in a major public park. They invited the public to come by, listen to some live music and talk about the politics of free and accessible transit in the city of Toronto.

The free transit committee moved with some urgency to get the campaign off the ground. This was due to the fact that municipal elections were underway. City politicians can have a dramatic impact on how precious transit money from the Provincial Government gets allocated. They select the projects that will be funded and which bus / subway / streetcar lines will be expanded or reduced. The transit campaign volunteers recognized the political moment as an opportunity. Many in the city were already talking about transit due to the election and the committee could influence that debate and widen its scope. Finally, and perhaps just as important as the campaigning work itself, those undertaking the transit campaign set the enviable precedent of establishing the Assembly as what Wayne Dealy has described a "space for both deliberation *and* action" (Dealy, 2010: 27). The free and accessible transit campaign injected a positive and forward looking perspective into an otherwise miserable municipal campaign – when it came to transit debates.

A right wing populist mayoral campaign brought Rob Ford to power in Toronto. Ford immediately began championing the usual neoliberal recipe. Among other ingredients, Ford's agenda included cancelling some 'underused' bus lines and reneging on previous public transit expansion. Public meetings were initiated by city bureaucrats to 'consult' about service reductions. The veterans of the WA free transit committee were in a position to organize and systematically intervene in these consultations due to previous organizing and networking accomplishments.

Some of the bus lines that working class citizens needed to get to work were preserved as a consequence.

Recent organizing by the transit committee has focused on demanding that transit be free on official 'smog days' when a threshold is reached on a commonly respected, pre-existing independent scale. Activists managed to have this proposal officially debated. The proposal was rejected but the fact that transit activists managed to move this issue onto the official agenda indicates some capacity to intervene in official forums. Transit committee activists have recently decided to partner with a couple of other public transit advocacy groups in the city.

The second effort coming out of the assembly that drew a substantial volunteer effort was a conference organized by the labour committee. The initial call-out for the WA had attracted dozens of trade union activists. Those trade unionists and others that chose to define themselves as 'labour activists' broadly conceived met separately to establish the labour caucus of the WA. The aim was to coordinate and facilitate cross-workplace union and worker interlinkages. The shape, scope and mandate of the labour caucus remained undefined – to be determined by the caucus members themselves.

The most significant accomplishment of the labour caucus was a highly successful conference organized at the end of January 2011.[14] Active labour caucus members put together a Saturday evening event and a full-day conference on the Sunday. The conference was well attended. It served to deepen connections between labour activists, introduce many activists (who had not considered themselves to be trade unionists or labour activists) to some specific trade union strategy approaches and energize activists in attendance.

The conference was titled 'Solidarity, Resistance, Change: Building the Working Class Movement.' In part, the conference had been organized in order to build the labour committee and to contribute to developing an agenda for action that activists could commit to fulfilling. Many of the participants on the organizing committee had met a few years earlier at the bi-annual Labour Notes conference in Detroit. At that meeting, an informal 'Canadian Caucus' met and asked the key question: Why are we coming to Detroit to meet and talk to each other? And then crucially – Why isn't there this kind of labour conference in Canada? An undefined commitment to organize an inter-union labour activist conference at that time in Detroit finally took concrete shape and expression in this labour committee conference in Toronto a few years later.

An exceptionally good list of concurrent workshops was developed and executed by volunteer facilitators. These workshops made space for the discussion and debate of some key issues that do not often receive sufficient attention at union conventions and educational events.[15] The list of workshops include:

- Workers and social movements - building bridges;
- Who are precarious workers? How does free trade and neoliberal globalization attack both workers of the north and workers of the south?;
- How has precariousness become a central part of unionized as well as non-unionized workplaces and how are working classes organizing themselves?;
- What is the role of the labour movement in this working class struggle?;
- How do we activate our own members?;
- Stepping outside the collective agreement 'box';
- Building reform and other caucuses (building an opposition); and
- Building international working class solidarity.[16]

There are no easy answers or prescriptions for the issues problematized in these workshops. As discussions and debates continued throughout the day, conference organizers and participants quickly recognized the depth and scope of our local resources in the labour movement and on the left in Toronto. As with every other significant meeting of the WA, reports were offered to those unable to attend.

The WA also created an internal education committee at that second assembly. Volunteers with this committee have produced several internal 'discussion bulletins'. These are openly available to anyone interested. Members or interested members are encouraged to both read and contribute. These semi-regular bulletins provide a space for sharing written ideas. There are often articles explaining particular positions, rethinking previous positions and preparing the ground for upcoming discussions. They allow an invaluable space that if seized by members – can make an important contribution to the quality of debate and decision making when people are in the same room together for meetings and larger assemblies. Additionally, some activists prefer to write their ideas down rather than go to a microphone at a large meeting. The bulletin provides a method of diversifying the sources of the ideas that inform decision making.

The political development and education committee has organized an ongoing series of 'coffee house discussions'. These are smaller, informal-group gatherings where members and non-members of the assembly can spend some time together hearing from and discussing campaigns in the city or just discuss ongoing issues. These are semi-structured events. Often a couple of people will offer a presentation to get the discussion started followed by an inclusive discussion. Topics for these coffee house discussions are determined by the committee of volunteers. Some of the discussions have been:

- Anti-capitalism, disability and injured workers: Class struggle and the body;
- Publications, movement building and radical transformation;

- Anti-capitalist organizations: experiences and debates;
- "Reflections on the reclamation: Haudenosaunee land rights struggles and non-native alliance building five years after the 'Douglas Creek Estates' reclamation";
- Egypt today, South Africa yesterday. The case for international solidarity; and
- The recent [Toronto] municipal election.

Invitations to these discussions are always extended to activists beyond the WA. They provide a comfortable and informal space to talk politics and build the WA networks both internally and externally.

The WA has also created a 'Flying Squad'[17] that organizes and provides direct action support for demonstrations and picket lines. The notion of a 'flying squad' is as old as trade unions themselves. The basic idea is that groups of workers physically go and support other workers that are under attack. A substantive resurgence of both the notion and practice of flying squads in Southern Ontario dates back to the early 1990s. A particularly vicious conservative government in Ontario provoked strikes with several groups of public sector workers. Workers responded by developing the kinds of activist networks that could mobilize picket line support quickly. Many anti (counter) globalization activists were introduced to trade union activism through flying squad networks. The decentralized network style of organizing and mobilizing fit well with their own experiences.

Many WA members were already doing this kind of basic political and direct action, solidarity-based work. This committee has volunteered to coordinate efforts and ensure that requests for solidarity and support do not go unheeded. This provides an example of a working class defensive direct action strategy. The flying squad has quickly developed logistical capacity to get people to picket lines and introduce themselves and the GTWA to workers in active struggle.

## Factors Critical to Success

One major factor critical to the success of GTWA is the ongoing, sustained political commitment of diverse activists to maintain and grow the assembly. The assembly must be seen/understood to be making the kinds of contributions and building the kinds of working class capacities it originally set out to build.

All of these committees function in an open and inclusive manner. Every member is welcome to attend any or all meetings of any committee. Updates on the work of any of the committees are available at any time. Members are invited to be as involved as they wish to be in the work of every committee. As everyone recognizes – there is no shortage of work to be done.

The assembly was explicitly organized not to be simply another coalition or network. Instead, "people join and participate as individuals, committed to a vision statement and building a democratic, activist organization. Engaging in common campaigns, building common approaches, planning together, debating and discussing activities, political discussion and debate and summarizing experiences will lead to a higher level of unity and can contribute to the growth of a more unified and sophisticated socialist left movement" (Rosenfeld, 2010).This is the aim of the assembly – to be an organization. While one activist that has been involved in the assembly since inception reports that, "we have also attracted a number of members who are either active in their unions or left groups or have been active a long time on the left but wish for something new, to build a political home, to build an organization that is more than a network, folks who realize that we need to overcome the fragmentation of the left to have any kind of power".[18] In practice, this has proved to be more difficult to build than expected. There is a substantive risk that WA members continue to understand themselves and their organizations as completely separate from the assembly rather than bringing projects through the assembly.[19] At demonstrations or broader union/activist meetings many assembly members retreat back to their 'home' unions or organizations, making the crowd under the WA banner look thin. This is not a problem in and of itself and it is extremely early but it does end up *appearing* as though the WA had very little presence at demonstrations or meetings. It makes the WA look weaker or less supported than is actually the case. This may change with time but it remains unclear.

The inter-organizational relationship/s between the WA and other organizations has not been formalized in any sense. This is an issue that will need to be developed and worked on as the WA grows. There are many unions/locals and community organizations, in addition to the Toronto city labour council, that are all doing great work across the city. Lessons and good practices from linking up with joint projects and learning from each other as we work together will need to be internalized and shared. The recipe to make sure this happens has not yet been written.

## Constraining Factors and Obstacles

There is a desire for action on the part of the assembly but the assembly itself was set up in order to build capacity to move beyond 'lowest common denominator' politics that arise from tactical/logistical decisions around demonstrations. Reconciling these two pressures is an ongoing constraint because the assembly could move quickly to agree/facilitate agreement of these basic questions but then not build in the bigger picture. There is a frustration with the slow pace of

figuring out how to build effective working class power through the assembly. The low participation of trade union activists to date has constrained the growth of the assembly. Limited group of volunteers fulfilling the majority of the mandate determined at the larger meetings is an ongoing obstacle.

There is a pervasive tension throughout the WA between giving a lead and waiting for a lead to come from the floor or from the membership. Members have often articulated an expectation that the Coordinating Committee or some other committee go ahead and do some work then report back. But the volunteers on those committees have been waiting for a clearer direction and deeper, richer input from the larger group of members before making decisions. The open structures put in place ensure that there is little risk of any committee making decisions that are not reflective of the larger group but the tension remains. One participant articulated surprise that, "there is a call for more direction and leadership to be shown by those voted onto leading bodies by the membership".[20] This is partly about the lack of time that many WA members have to volunteer but it also offers clear evidence of trust in process and trust in those that have stepped up to give a lead. Ongoing practice and engagement will dissolve some of this tension as trust accumulates and expectations solidify.

Roughly two years into the WA process, some of the early participants in the assemblies did not see the ambitions of the WA matching the substance. Consequently, some activists pulled back and determined that they did not want to attend and invest resources into more WA meetings. This may have occurred because members did not feel that the assembly was delivering or that it was sufficiently representative of the broad working class. Also, some activists saw the assembly as simply recruitment grounds for their own groups and when it became clear that this was not the case, they chose to stop attending.

In response to this, WA volunteers organized themselves to call through the phone list of every WA member and follow a scripted, open ended survey in order to ask what had been working and what could be improved. Also, surveyors asked what kinds of things the assembly should be focusing on or doing differently. This was a genuine attempt to provoke and shape a self-critical organizational introspection. The surveys had been completed at the time of writing but the responses have not yet been shared. They will be reported back to the large group at the next assembly. As one experienced activist has noted, "members have been patient, which has been key".[21]

An additional and ongoing tension is the large amount of committee work that is being undertaken by a small group of volunteers. Either more volunteers will need to come forward to sustain this workload or the expectations of WA members will need to change. One participant has offered the insight that:

> Many people are searching for a space for left politics but not necessarily
> to join the 'hyper left' organizing models that the left, mainly student left,

has designed over the years. This makes me think that we could possibly attract more people if we were to develop more along the lines of a political party, where folks could join, have a space to talk about the important key events of the day, develop collective political analysis of alternatives, and then do a few concrete campaign actions to win other folks over. I would not have said this when we first started the assembly and I understand the concerns about building a party, but I just feel that we need to build the kind of space that people who are newly politicized can join and learn more and where left radicals can organize, and eventually build the kind of mass left organization or organization of the mass left that can put alternatives on the map during election time, where the broader public can engage in the politics of the assembly.[22]

One of the missing dimensions is a physical space. Dealy has made the case that, "one of the main limitations of the Workers' Assembly is that at present it serves only as a metaphorical space. As such, it is subject to the same physical limitations and pressures that have undermined our efforts and contributed to our past isolation from each other" (Dealy, 2010). He argues that bricks and mortar are important; not only symbolically important but also important as an antidote to isolation. Physical spaces can inspire. It is not clear if any kind of commitment to a physical space is in the future of the WA. That debate is yet to be introduced.

The future direction of the assembly remains an open question. However, this insight clearly articulates the degree of openness to the possibilities. This is not a prescriptive process. The WA assembly is slowly beginning to take shape and re-shape. Substantial steps towards establishing a broad and enduring space for the development of anti-capitalist working class organizing and capacity building have been taken. Both defensive and offensive initiatives have been launched.

## Indicators of (Emerging) Counter Consciousness and Transformative Capacities

One key indicator of emerging counter consciousness and transformative capacity is the ongoing joint political/organizing work of groups and individuals that would not previously work together. Another important indicator is the increasing recognition of workers in struggle (on strike/locked out) that the GTWA exists and can be relied upon to intervene at the grassroots level in neighbourhoods, on picket lines/ demonstrations and in available political forums. Similarly, there have been many successful 'coffeehouse' (informal) political discussions.

The reality of time constrains remains an ongoing issue. As noted above, much of the necessary committee work between mass membership meetings is performed by a diverse, but small group of volunteers. Motions, priorities and

programs are determined at the larger meetings but the actual work must be executed in between those meetings.  This has forced many WA activists to reflect on historic strategies of engagement and mobilization with the result that, "many have realized that moralism is politically bankrupt and is a short cut that does not work. Having to deal with peoples' limited time has forced us to be creative".[23]  This WA member has noted that the strategy of 'moralism' may have been effective in student politics but that workers, "time is limited and they are juggling many job, family, care-giver commitments. Asking people to put time into a project, no matter how much they are committed to it, is difficult considering how much pressure they already face."  He goes further and offers the insight that, "in a way this is good because it has forced us to root ourselves in reality."  This forces a grounding of WA strategy and tactics out of theory and into practice.

A couple of years into the WA project new activists continue to be attracted despite these clear and unbending time constraints.  "I am always very happy to say that I can walk into a GTWA event and not recognize many people there".[24]  The fact that it is not the same small group of people showing up over and over offers hope for the future of the assembly and also indicates that the projects and events organized by the assembly continue to be of interest to activists in the region.

## Conclusion

Evidence for GTWA contributions to the development of counter consciousness in the broader working class remains weak.  However, the balance between the actions and the space for debate/decision making at GTWA meetings is critical.  There is a strong desire to build something more durable than organizing committees for the next demonstration so this tension between short-term decisive action and longer-term movement building is ongoing and activist are consistently applying their energy to reconciliation of the tension.

The lack of capacity of the left to take any advantage of this model of capitalism's most severe crisis of legitimacy since the great depression was clearly evident during and after the great recession.  It is clear that existing structures in their present form are not up to the task of challenging the logic and imposition of neoliberalism.  Something new is required.  Perhaps the assembly is the one good thing that followed that recession.[25]  The immediate response of previously distinct (or even alienated) groups and individuals – many of whom did not know that the others were active – to the call-out to get together to discuss and shape the assembly proposal clearly indicates the pre-existing appetite for a new formation like the WA.  Volunteers did not need persuading or convincing.

After more than two years of organizing events and internal discussions, people keep showing up to assemblies – many of whom are showing up at WA

events for the first time. People continue to volunteer their time and energy. Some of those people are those that could not stand to be in the same room as each other a little over two years ago. But the WA is more than public group therapy for parochial sectarian politics. The fact that the participation of these historically divisive groups has been sustained despite differences is an indicator that many on the left recognize the need to work together and build something greater than any of the groups can do individually.

This kind of tangible effort at the creation of a non-sectarian, anti-capitalist over-arching organization that was not led from the top is extremely rare. While it remains fragile,[26] the WA clearly offers an example of a genuine and substantial effort at building a new politics: an open and democratic politics driven by the felt needs of the community; a politics of doing what's needed and not waiting around for others.

## Notes

[1] Of note, workers that are members of USWA have made significant recent concessions in moving from defined benefit to defined contribution pensions – essentially allowing management to abdicate any responsibility for security of retirement income for workers. These concessions were gained after lengthy lock-outs or strikes.

[2] Workers would almost invariably prefer to have a structural capacity to negotiate over the shape, scope and depth of any concessions rather than ceding jurisdiction over these kinds of decisions to a unilateral management.

[3] Of course, it was back to business as usual at the Financial Times as soon as the massive government stimulus money began to offer liquidity and then show up on the balance sheets of private companies.

[4] Interview with Sam Gindin, Toronto, July 2011.

[5] See Fletcher Jr., Bill. and Gapasin, Fernando 2008: Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path Toward Social Justice. University of California Press.

[6] See Gindin, Sam "Working People's Assemblies". http://www.socialistproject.ca/relay/relay30_gindin.pdf.

[7] From the original call-out to the first assembly in 2009, see: http://www.workersassembly.ca/node/1.

[8] Interview with Sarah Declerck, Toronto, July 2011.

[9] Interview with Shiraz Valley, Toronto, July 2011.

[10] Interim Coordinating Committee Proposals, 2010: http://www.workersassembly.ca/node/7?page=1

[11] Message from Outgoing Interim Coordinating Committee to the Toronto Workers Assembly, 2010: http://workersassembly.ca/node/5.

[12] For the complete WA vision statement, see: www.workersassembly.ca/vision.

[13] Interview with Shiraz Valley, op cit.

[14] For the original call-out to this conference see: www.workersassembly.ca/callout2011/more.php.

[15] Interview with Sam Gindin, op cit.

[16] Labour Committee Conference, 2011: http://www.workersassembly.ca/callout2011/more.php

[17] A flying squad is a group of activists in labour or community organizations that is an organized quick-reaction force that can be called into action to support breaking labour and community struggles such as strikes, lockouts, casework actions, demonstrations, and any other site of conflict between the working and capitalist classes. See http://www.workersassembly.ca/node/130?page=3.

[18] Interview with Sarah Declerck, op cit.

[19] Interview with Sam Gindin, op cit.

[20] Interview with Shiraz Valley, op cit.
[21] Interview with Sarah Declerck, op cit.
[22] Interview with Sarah Declerck, op cit.
[23] Interview with Shiraz Valley, op cit.
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## Interviews

Sarah Declerck, July 2011, in Toronto.

Sam Gindin, July 2011, in Toronto.

Shiraz Valley, July 2011, in Toronto.

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# The Pursuit of Alternatives

Stories of peoples' struggles across the globe are testaments to their determination to resist exploitation and injustice, and to imagine and construct their own narratives of economic and political difference. These stories of emancipatory moments demonstrate that something radically different in terms of dominant socio-economic relations and mental conceptions of the world may arise out of and beyond capitalism.

*The Pursuit of Alternatives: Stories of Peoples' Economic and Political Struggles Around the World* presents a fresh and new perspective on how the 'process of becoming' alternatives might take place based on peoples' lived experiences. The chapters here, by labour activists and academics, explore how various forms of peoples' economic and political initiatives and struggles in six countries – Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Nigeria, the Philippines, and South Korea – might become 'actually existing' spaces and moments for the development of critical consciousness and transformative capacities which are both central in challenging the dominant social, economic and political relations. The stories in this book bring to light today's language of peoples' struggles; what inspires people to create their own emancipatory moments and spaces for transformative self-change.

While this book does not aim to propose an alternative to capitalism per se, it makes a stimulating contribution to the continuing debate on what alternatives to capitalist relations and arrangements might look like by grounding these alternatives in the everyday lives and struggles of workers, women, aboriginal peoples, the unemployed, and the poor.

Key words:  alternatives, emancipatory moments, critical consciousness, transformative capacities, peoples' struggles, language of struggle, worker-run factory, workers' cooperative, solidarity economy, building occupation, democratic participation, women's resistance, anti-poverty organizing, local community, respect for nature, right to the city, working class politics