

Workers' Co-operatives 1970s-1990s



What is a workers' co-operative?

Workers' co-operatives are businesses owned and controlled by the members who work in them. Most are flat structures where each member has a say in how the business is run.

These societies often included in their rules open membership, democratic control, and a distributed dividend to the members.

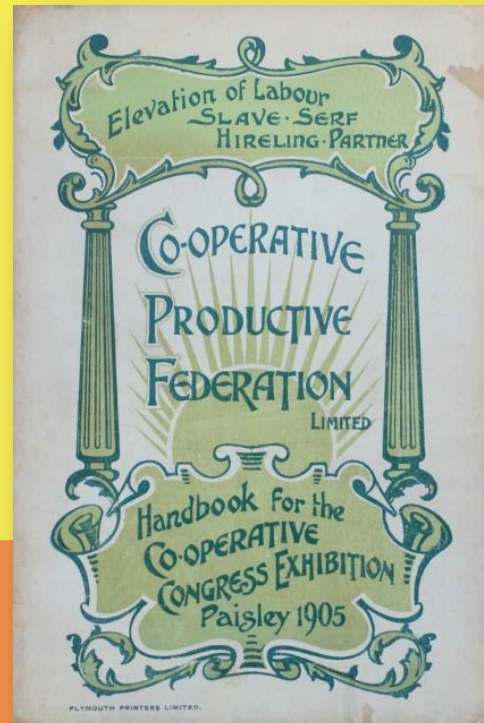
By the turn of the 20th century there were 200 societies, however by the mid-20th century many of these had fallen into decline.

The workers' co-operative movement pre-1970

Co-operative productive societies

The first steps within the British co-operative movement towards workers' control were the **co-operative productive societies**. Largely set up in the late 19th century, these were often based in industries where a high element of craft was required, such as printing or footwear.

Many of these societies belonged to the **Co-operative Productive Federation Limited**.



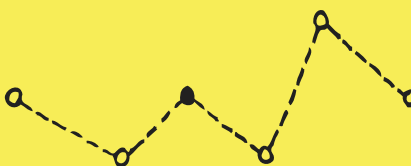
Although preceded by the co-operative productive societies of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the 1970s-1990s saw a new wave of workers' co-operatives developing due to a number of factors.

Economic Conditions

Oppressive economic conditions and high unemployment during this period meant that many saw workers' co-operatives as allowing greater job security and control.

New Attitudes

Although prompted by poor economic conditions the new wave of workers' co-operatives also developed as part of a wider change in societal attitudes. A new generation of activists were looking for a more peaceful, equal and fair society.



Evolving Industries

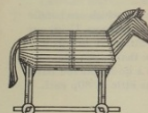
Many workers' co-operatives were set up in evolving industries that complemented the ideals of the movement. These included sale and distribution of whole foods, radical bookshops, and printers.

TROJAN PRINTING SERVICES

A Workers' Co-operative

Trojan Printing Services is a workers co-operative recently established in Hackney. We offer a unique blend of practical printing services, help, friendly advice and easy access to all community groups and progressive organisations. The co-operative was set up in December 1979 and grew quickly as it acquired new equipment and expanded the range of services it could offer. In April 1986 it moved to new premises in Dalston Lane, which also became the base for Hackney Peoples Press, the local community newspaper.

Trojan, like other co-ops in the area, is trying to create a practical alternative to private enterprise. Our aims are twofold: firstly to grow and therefore provide new jobs in an area of acute economic decline and secondly to be of service to the community. At present there are three full-time workers, plus a number of partners, but these figures will grow as the co-op expands. There is a 100% trade union membership amongst the workforce. The day-to-day management of the co-op is in the hands of the workers, and people from various community groups are co-op members contributing help and advice on how Trojan should develop.



See inside for
a full list of
our services

Trojan Printing Services, 85 Dalston Lane, London E8.

"It was the time of late 60s' alternative counter-culture and we decided we'd like to do something completely different to promote more collaboration, rather than competition."

Jenny Slaughter,
Member, On the 8th
Day, Manchester



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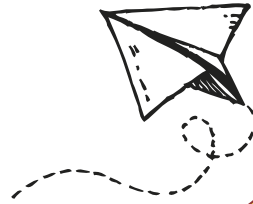
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How workers' co-operatives operated



Although spanning different industries, workers' co-operatives of the 1970s-1990s often shared common elements in how they operated.



Voting

Decisions were often reached through a vote. Many co-operatives accepted majority votes. However some co-operatives required consensus to be reached before a decision was passed.

Democratic decision making

Organisational decisions were made fairly with all members' voices heard. This was often at regular weekly or monthly meetings attended by all members of the co-operative.

In some larger workers' co-operatives, management committees were democratically elected to make decisions on behalf of different areas of the workers co-operative. These were often not permanent positions again ensuring democratic decision making.



“We were pretty good at collective management”

**Jane Watts,
member of York
Community
Books**

“Job rotation...was a fantastic learning experience for me”

Martin Meteyard, member of Greencity Whole foods, Glasgow



Job Rotation

Many workers co-operatives practiced job rotation to ensure members were involved in all aspects of the business. This helped develop democratic decision making.

It also helped create a more feminist work environment, with women and men sharing roles that in other businesses would often have been gendered.



Fair pay

Workers' co-operatives offered fair pay. This usually meant all members were paid the same wage. This was made easier by the practice of job rotation.

In some co-operatives equal pay was not a possibility. This was often the case in co-operatives that required specialist technical skills.

However within these wages still remained fair, and pay differentials were minimal.



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Workers' co-operative networks

As more workers' co-operatives succeeded, the popularity of the movement grew. In **1984** there were around **700 workers' co-operatives** in the UK. Key to this development were networks created to share ideas and learning.



Local networks:

Often informal, local networks of workers' co-operatives were set up. A common practice within these was to swap members for short periods of time in order to develop ideas and skills from other co-operatives.



National networks:

Alongside these, wider national networks were set up between workers' co-operatives. Trade links often provided the ties for these networks, with workers' co-operatives from industries such as bookselling and whole foods, banding together to share suppliers and advice.



Alongside these networks there were also a number of wider, formal networks set up to support workers' co-operatives across all industries.



Co-operative Development Agencies

A **National Co-operative Development Agency** was set up in 1978. Alongside this around 100 **regional Co-operative Development Agencies** were set up during this period, mostly by local authorities.

These supported the creation and development of new co-operatives.

ICOM

Supported by the **Industrial Common Ownership Act, 1976**, representation and advice was offered through the **Industrial Common Ownership Movement**.

ICOF

The Industrial Common Ownership Act also provided £250 000 to establish a loan fund for the **Industrial Common Ownership Finance**. Loans were then provided through this body to workers' co-operatives in need.

"In the 1970s, employee ownership, common ownership, worker co-ops... was, becoming a little bit more known, but was still very much on the fringe and, we felt, we needed to support each other, so we needed an organisation...so we started ICOM"

Roger Sawtell, one of ICOM's founders

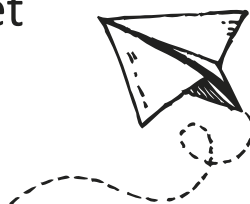


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Commitment to Social Change

A commitment to wider social change was promoted by many of the workers' co-operatives set up in the 1970s-1990s.



Promoting change locally

Workers' co-operatives promoted positive social change locally through tackling labour market problems for those who might face discrimination in other businesses, such as those with disabilities.

Many workers' co-operatives also became involved in their local communities. This was often through providing support to local businesses and groups, with this support frequently being returned.

**You can help Trojan -
-We can help you.**

Trojan receives no grants and can only continue to exist, let alone grow, if our services are used. That is why we want YOU to make sure that your community group, trade union, tenants' association, political party or Youth Club uses Trojan for its printing work. We can be a great asset to Hackney and East London, but only with your support.



“We did put money aside for community projects and wanted to put so much money in to community projects every year.”

Richard Waring,
Member of
Down to Earth,
Sheffield



“

[The bookshop was] “a very natural point of contact...for the whole resurgence of CND, which by then was in full flood.”

Martin Spence, Member of Days of Hope Bookshop, Newcastle.

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Promoting wider change

Often workers' co-operatives were involved in wider movements for social change. This included refusing to trade with unethical companies, and campaigning for movements such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).

The involvement of workers' co-operatives in these movements occasionally invited attention from extremist right wing groups and national security bodies.



“There was a way of checking if your phones were tapped...I thought ‘how boring!’ for anyone listening to this...placing an order for some crafts and gifts.”

Peter Turnbull, recounting an investigation of Sunpower, a book and food co-operative in London.



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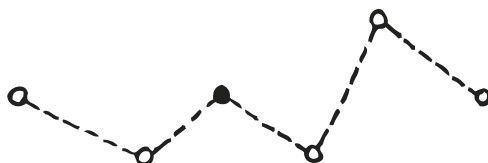
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Workers co-operatives post 1990s

In the late 1990s and early 2000's there was a decline in the number of workers' co-operatives in the UK.



Reasons for this include:

Funding cuts:

The mid-1980s saw cuts to local authorities who had previously provided support to workers' co-operatives through local Co-operative Development Agencies.

Recession

The Recession in the early 1990s hit small workers' co-operatives hard. This was worsened by increased competition from large firms.

Change in attitudes:

From the 1980s there was an increasing focus on the individual, with self-interest replacing ideas about fairness and community

NEWS FROM NOWHERE

EVICITION THREAT

In our 20th Birthday year, our landlords are trying to evict us, purely so the building can be sold with vacant possession (so they can make more profit).

We are a thriving small business which has made significant contributions to the cultural, retail and community life of both Bold St. and Liverpool as a whole.

**DON'T LET PROPERTY DEVELOPERS
PLAY MONOPOLY WITH BOLD ST.**

Come to the public meeting in **The Irish Centre on Wednesday June 1st at 7.30pm prompt.**

Help us protect both our future and the vibrant, unique atmosphere of Bold St.

DON'T DELAY, ACT TODAY!

“it was becoming more difficult again, '83,'84 had been our best time and then it was falling off, it was falling off in terms of trade.”

**Martin Spence,
Days of Hope
Bookshop,
Newcastle**



Workers' co-operatives today

Despite this, many workers' co-operatives were able to adapt and survive, and continue to be thriving businesses today.

With an increasing number of people moving from secure employment into precarious work, there is a growing interest in the workers' co-operative model again.

Workers' co-operatives are increasingly set up in the digital and creative sectors, with focus on bringing together self-employed and 'gig economy' workers into collectives to share resources and experience.

Co-operative support organisations such as Co-operatives UK continue to offer support to new and existing workers' co-operatives.

"The dynamics of how we adapt our structures in response to changing pressures...is an eternally fascinating process"

**Edmund Potter,
founder of Delta-T,
Cambridge shire**



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