

A CENTURY OF THE CO-OPERATIVE PARTY AND LABOUR IN SHEFFIELD

The year 2026 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the Co-operative Party and the Labour Party's rise to political victory in Sheffield, which paved the way for a century of success.

In post-war Sheffield, the political climate was dominated by a Liberal and Conservative alliance known as the Citizens' Party. The party benefited from Britain's electoral laws, which gave voting rights to only a limited section of the public — middle- and upper-class men who owned land. In 1918, Parliament passed the Representation of the People Act, which gave the vote to all men over 21, and to women over 30 who met a property qualification, allowing the Labour Party to focus more directly on working-class voters.

This change in Labour's approach went hand in hand with its alliance in Sheffield with the Co-operative Party. Although the first Co-operative MP, Alfred Waterson, was elected in 1918, it was the election of A. V. Alexander as MP for Hillsborough that demonstrated the ability of the Co-operative movement to build a political force.

This achievement also demonstrated the integration between Labour's political inner workings and the Co-operative movement, with their shared belief in municipal socialism. This contrasted with the Citizens' Party's defence of vested interests. The integration became so essential to Labour's functioning that, in 1925, an official agreement gave the Co-operative Party a free run in three wards, allowing Co-operative Party candidates to stand for council with no opposition from Labour.

In 1926, mine owners' proposals for wage cuts and longer working hours brought about the General Strike, which was particularly strong in a heavily unionised Sheffield. The



A.V. ALEXANDER, ASSISTED BY A CAT, ADDRESSES A STREET MEETING

strike increased Labour's support and reinforced solidarity between the trade unions, Labour, and the Co-operative movement.

Co-operative organisations viewed the strike as a moral stand against the proposed wage cuts. It had a significant impact on the political landscape, with the *Sheffield Co-operator* framing the upcoming election as a battle between "reactionary Tory Citizens" and "progressive Labour-Co-operative reformers".

This framing came naturally, as Co-operative ideals were echoed in Labour's Progressive Charter for Sheffield Ratepayers, with proposals

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UNITING COMMUNITIES: FOOD CO-OPERATIVES

LEADING THE FIGHT AGAINST FAR-RIGHT POPULISM

In Burngreave, one of Sheffield's most deprived and diverse neighbourhoods, a group of around twenty people have gathered in the Verdon Street Recreation Centre. They are neighbours, many from different cultures and holding different faiths. But the thing uniting them is the food co-op that they all contribute to and maintain together. They are here for something more than the fruit and vegetables laid out across the tables, and what is occurring in this room is something far more politically significant than the food itself.

Today, the nation is deeply affected by the rise of far-right nationalist populism. Populists seek to divide and polarise communities, targeting migrants in particular and laying the blame on anyone but the political elites who have created these conditions. Under the guise of being "for the people", figures such as Nigel Farage and Tommy Robinson have created a destructive current in British society — one that is no longer confined to the fringes and is increasingly posing a serious threat to the nation's political, social, and civic life. They prey on deprived and underfunded communities, deepening existing divisions and encouraging further polarisation.

It is in this climate that co-operatives can help fill the void created by neoliberal individualism and the ever-increasing decline in civic engagement. Through the seven co-operative principles, communities can defend themselves against the dangers of populism by building structures that encourage people to work and learn together. Nowhere is this more evident than in the work of Cooperation Town Sheffield, which has nurtured what is taking

place at Verdon Street Recreation Centre.

Cooperation Town Sheffield is an organisation that sets up food co-ops across the city, particularly in underfunded communities. Mikee Whitson and his team provide the essential tools of administration, logistics, communication, and distribution to help get them off the ground. Unlike food banks and charity models, which, though valuable, can create dependency and fail to establish lasting structures, the co-operative approach builds something more sustainable. When Mikee leaves places such as Burngreave, the co-op can continue to be run by the members it serves. People are not only fed, but also develop the skills to run a co-op, creating a community in which people help and look out for one another rather than only for themselves.

In the context of growing right-wing populist sentiment, the sense of community and cohesion that organisations like Cooperation Town create is vital in resisting a politics that thrives on division and preys on underfunded communities. Through co-operation, members find belonging, connections between neighbours are formed, boundaries are broken down, and misconceptions and stereotypes can be challenged. On this subject, Mikee himself says that "exposure to people who are different to you is the best way of fighting the populist narrative".

Once communities connect and work together, people can begin to recognise that they share more similarities than differences. The far right offers a sense of community built on exclusion; co-operatives build communities that are open and inclusive. By following the tradition of co-operation, communities can create long-term, sustainable change, rather than the short-term reactionary culture encouraged by the Farages of the world.

By using food as a vehicle for social cohesion, community, and cultural exchange, and by adopting a co-operative model that offers agency and challenges hierarchies, the sentiments pushed by right-wing figures and media can begin to be resisted and challenged. The co-operative tradition is older than Farage, older than the anxieties he exploits, and older than the divisions he profits from. It does not begin with manifestos or movements, but with people simply choosing to work with one another. In Burngreave, around a table full of food, that is exactly what they are doing.

— **ARTHUR KEY**



CENTENARY - CONT. FROM PAGE 1

for shared education services, public works for the unemployed, reduced tram fares, expanded municipal enterprise, and support for vulnerable groups — all intended to make Sheffield and its policies more accommodating to the working class.

Labour went on to win a majority on Sheffield City Council, the first Labour majority on a city council in Britain. The Co-operative Party was credited with helping Labour present itself as a community-focused alternative to the Citizens' Party through its organisational discipline and moral authority. With unemployment in Sheffield at an all-time high, the people of the city

were relying on Labour for relief and social policy.

During their six years in office, the Labour and Co-operative partnership delivered substantial and lasting change in Sheffield. One of their most significant achievements was the creation of the National Conciliation Board for the Co-operative Service, which formalised negotiations between Co-operative employers and trade unions and embodied the movement's commitment to fair and dignified labour relations.

Shared leadership from figures such as Ernest George Rowlinson and A. V. Alexander reinforced the partnership's

integrity, ensuring that political action and Co-operative principles moved forward together.

By the end of their term in 1932, the relationship between the two parties had evolved into a confident and durable political alliance. Co-operative councillors and MPs worked seamlessly within Labour's broader movement, offering a unified voice for Sheffield's working-class communities.

The partnership demonstrated how political democracy and economic democracy can strengthen one another — a lesson that continues to shape Sheffield's civic identity a century later.

— **SPENCER KIRK**

NEW COMMUNITY HUB FOR UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

A new student support initiative at the University of Sheffield has helped more than 720 students in its first month, underlining both the financial pressures facing many students and the value of practical community support.

The Community Hub, launched by Sheffield Students' Union in February, brings together free food, clothing reuse, and repair facilities in one welcoming shared space. Its aim is simple: to help students manage rising living costs while also cutting waste.

Funded by a £19,800 donation from an anonymous supporter, the Hub has already distributed more than 3,000 food items, with demand reaching as many as 130 students in a single day.

The speed at which students have made use of the service suggests a significant level of need. With food, rent, and household bills continuing to rise, many students are finding it harder to make ends meet.

The project has been led by Anna James, Sheffield Students' Union's Sustainability and Development Officer, who said the experience of building the Hub had shown how important this kind of support can be. "Building the Community Hub has been such a privilege," she said. "I've had the incredible experience of speaking to many of these students and understanding the importance of this service."

James has also highlighted the wider aims behind the project. "Accessing sustainable food, clothing and repairs not only reduces our impact on the planet and our wallets, but it can really bring us together," she said.

At the heart of the Hub is the Community Pantry, which offers free groceries through partnerships including FareShare, the charity that redistributes surplus food. Fresh fruit and vegetables are available alongside essentials such as pasta, pulses, and beans, helping students access nutritious food that might otherwise go to waste.

The Hub also includes a Community Closet, where students can access donated clothing free of charge, and a Repair Café, where they can learn basic clothing repair skills using shared tools and materials.

Together, these services reflect a growing interest in community-led approaches that combine immediate practical help with longer-term sustainability.



Importantly, the Hub is open to all students rather than being limited to those formally identified as being in hardship. That open, stigma-free approach may be one reason why so many students have already made use of it.

There are already plans to expand the project further, including partnerships with other organisations, student-led workshops, recipe resources, and food-growing initiatives. As universities continue to face the realities of student hardship, Sheffield's Community Hub offers a practical example of how support, sustainability, and community action can work together.

The *Sheffield Co-operator* looks forward to seeing this initiative develop in the coming months. There is clear potential for the Community Hub to connect with similar projects across the city, strengthening networks of mutu-

al aid, sustainability, and community support. It may also provide a useful starting point for wider conversations about whether students could go further by creating their own co-operative ventures, whether within the Students' Union, in halls of residence, or alongside the wider Sheffield community.

Universities bring together people, ideas, and energy in a way few other institutions can, making student life a natural setting for experimenting with new collective solutions. From initiatives such as this, it is easy to imagine co-operative models taking root and flourishing.

— **CHRISTOPHER OLEWICZ**

The Community Hub is based on Level 3 of the Students' Union building and is open on weekdays from 10:30am to 3:30pm.

FOOD CO-OPERATIVES BRING HOPE TO SHEFFIELD AMID COST OF LIVING CRISIS

With the success of local food co-operatives Regather and Cooperation Town we look back on the history of food co-ops in the co-operative movement and how they can help our communities in the cost of living crisis.



Cooperation Town, a member-led food co-op network, has been growing in Sheffield and spreading awareness of the value of co-operatives within the community.

Food co-ops have a long history within the co-operative movement. In 1927, Alice Honora Enfield, then Secretary of the International Co-operative Women's Guild, wrote about the importance of consumer-based co-operatives in her book *Co-operation: Its Problems and Possibilities*.

Enfield argued that consumer co-operation could serve a greater purpose than simply the practical concern of sourcing cheaper food. She believed that by eliminating profit-seeking from the supply of consumer goods, collectivist principles could challenge the status quo of self-interested individualism. In this way, the expansion of co-operation could help bring an end to consumer exploitation — an idea that remains relevant today during the prolonged cost of living crisis.

Working within community food co-ops can help to empower communities by encouraging independence and reducing reliance on large retailers and supermarkets. These are also the aims of newer Sheffield co-ops such as Regather and Cooperation Town.

Originally founded in London, Cooperation Town now has several food groups established in Sheffield.

Although Cooperation Town helps with the initial founding of each group, once a food co-op is established its members are able to order independently while working within a democratic leadership structure. Cooperation Town aims to tackle community dependence on food banks, which can force those in need to rely on charity and donations. Instead, through wholesale purchasing and bulk buying, food co-ops are able to provide food from the community, for the community. By encouraging collaboration, Cooperation Town helps to further the long-standing aims of the co-operative movement: community independence and mutual support.

Regather runs a local farm co-op in Moss Valley, providing locally sourced organic produce. Its veg box scheme offers options to cut out plastic or include only Sheffield-grown produce. When supplying out-of-season produce, it has committed to avoiding air freight in order to reduce pollution.

Regather has also collaborated with the University of Sheffield through the Institute for Sustainable Food. It has worked as part of the Healthy Soil, Healthy Food, Healthy

People programme with universities across England, as well as with the University of Sheffield on the Developing Urban Growing Spaces project. The organisation has also recently purchased its building, reducing costs and enabling it to engage

in more community events. Overall, Sheffield's food co-op scene has expanded significantly in response to the cost of living crisis. Co-operatives are stepping in to provide essential, high-quality food to the community. —EVAN BARTHOLOMEW



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DID YOU KNOW THERE'S A CO-OPERATIVE ON CROOKESMOOR ROAD?

“No, that’s a Sainsbury’s!” “Or do you mean Ozmen’s?” I hear you say — alas, you are the one who is mistaken. The co-op in question is not the “prominent British supermarket chain... operating roughly 2,400 stores across the UK” which has become a byword for the means to procure groceries conveniently. Instead, the co-operative I am referring to is Beanies. Holding prime position on the corner of Crookesmoor Road and Barber Road, Beanies is a registered Workers Co-operative.

In their own words, “this means that we are owned and run by our members. We are all responsible for the business and we all have an equal voice.” As a perennial Crookesmoor resident during my time at university, this was news to me. The fact I wasn’t aware made this all the more surprising as I would consider myself to be the typical socially conscious left-wing student, my copy of Che Guevara’s *The Motorcycle Diaries* poking out of my rucksack as I write this. In all honesty, my knowledge of Beanies as “a business” encompassed the fact they sell exceptionally good focaccia which occasionally would lure me into reneging on a self-imposed state of student austerity and entering into the middle-class hinterland from which I wrongly assumed Beanies was born.

Since beginning this project with Principle 5, the Sheffield-based co-operative resource centre, I have discovered that a lack of awareness of my local co-operative is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of my wider lack of knowledge surrounding the co-operative movement. As the intended audience of this piece is people like myself, I think it would be helpful to provide answers to some fundamental questions alongside some key facts at this stage in the article, to help further comprehension. What is a co-operative? — Co-operatives are associations of people freely joining together to achieve their mutually agreed aims. Quick co-op facts:

In the UK co-ops contribute over £40 billion to the economy.

There are 3 million co-ops around the world with 1.2 billion members.

Co-ops employ 10% of the world’s employed population (280 million people).

Despite their ubiquity, however, awareness of what a co-op is, how it functions, and how important they are in global society — particularly among younger generations — is profoundly lacking. Yet it seems to me, currently inhabiting this quasi-role of both writer and intended reader of this piece, that there also exists huge scope for positive engagement between the co-operative movement in Sheffield and a largely sympathetic student population.

Across the city, there is a vibrant multitude of co-operatives working across a variety of areas encompassing food, housing, energy, arts and even hospitality — The Gardeners Rest has been a community-owned pub since 2017, when it was purchased by a group of regulars



who had formed the Gardeners Rest Community Society (GRCS) the previous year. Since then the GRCS has blossomed into a group constituting “over 400 shareholders”, many of whom, according to board member Dr Tim Stillman, “have been with us from the start”, as they look forward to celebrating the remarkable milestone of 10 years since buying and establishing the pub as a community benefit society. In this model, all shareholders have a say in how the pub develops as a community enterprise, with decisions being made to “benefit its customers and the wider community”, rather than being driven exclusively by financial profit. This includes providing opportunities for young adults otherwise excluded from the workplace, as well as a welcoming space for the arts and local creatives. Therefore if you, the reader, gain nothing else from this article, then you have now been provided with the perfect way to boost your performative credibility whilst enjoying the age-old student pastime of getting inebriated.

SHEFFIELD RENEWABLES

Another Sheffield-based co-operative organisation, Sheffield Renewables, was formed in 2007 by a group of volunteers which included David Berry and his partner Jean Tinsley, who kindly agreed to speak to me about all things Sheffield Renewables and co-operatives in Sheffield. He outlined how their co-operative model works: “we are a community benefit society run by volunteers on democratic lines with decisions being made by our members at our AGM.” I also wanted to understand what being part of a co-operative meant, and why they had decided to become founding members of Sheffield Renewables. David outlined a desire to operate “outside of profit-driven motives” and instead adopt a “more holistic view of the world.” How did he perceive the future of the co-operative movement in Sheffield and as a whole? After clarifying that I did not expect the production of a crystal ball, David offered a positive outlook, acknowledging that “across Sheffield in different sectors co-operatives are operating despite the current political and economic headwinds.” Like Sheffield Renewables, Regather is another co-operative and community benefit society, whose objectives are to “foster community development and understand

ing around the importance of the local food system in Sheffield and how it works, in order to enable everyone to work together to democratically change their food system for the better.”

I spoke to one of its founding members, Gareth Roberts, who outlined that Regather’s formation constituted a response to “the precarity of contemporary life”. Like David, he also offered a positive appraisal of the current fortunes and future prognosis of the co-operative movement, in Sheffield especially. “In localities, co-ops are thriving despite the efforts of institutions to kill them off.”

This led to a discussion of the importance of resilience in Regather’s success, and whether it could be replicated. “Regather is not an outlier — we have had to weather various challenges and opportunities but we have proven to be resilient. Developing resilience is important, but to be a co-op you have to be resilient in the first place, making it a chicken-and-egg situation.”

THE SHEFFIELD SCENE

It should now have become clear that within Sheffield, there exists a burgeoning co-operative scene — a reality that raises the question of why the level of student awareness and engagement is so low. As a longstanding member of the Sheffield student community myself, this perplexes me further; the buzzwords of community, independent and ethical should theoretically combine with the profoundly left-wing notion of people before profit to produce an intoxicating cocktail of activism and

participation that your average socially-aware student would find more appealing than two VKs for a fiver. Therefore, in the current climate in which the proverbial millstone of student debt grows ever heavier around our necks (I prefer not to look), and the cost of living shows little sign of decreasing, could forming a co-operative be the answer? In our initial project meeting at the start of the week, Steve Thompson, an obvious titan of the co-operative movement in Sheffield and guardian of Principle 5’s archives, shared a quote that has profoundly stayed with me throughout the ensuing days of this project: “competition is death, co-operation is life”.

To me, this encapsulates the essence of the co-operative movement perfectly and how it provides a welcome rebuke to the reality of our consumerist lifestyle. Next time you are lured in by a multi-national corporation throwing a free slice of pizza your way outside the SU, or when you scan a supermarket loyalty card just to get £1.60 off your weekly shop, think about the incomprehensible turnovers and salaries intrinsic to the operation of these behemoths.

Arguably students face the aforementioned precarity of modern life to a greater extent than most. Whilst you are forced to debase the quality of your life through batch cooking meals or missing out on nights out to pay household bills, landlords and institutions are profiting off your existence. If only there was another way...? Did you know there’s a co-op on Crookesmoor Road? — You do now! So pay a visit — tell them Pete told you about the focaccia, you won’t be disappointed.

— **PETER GARLEY**



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FEEDING SHEFFIELD: CAN CO-OPERATIVES SCALE UP SUSTAINABLY?

As the cost of living continues to rise and food insecurity becomes an increasingly urgent issue across the UK, communities are beginning to look beyond traditional supermarket models for solutions. In Sheffield, initiatives such as Cooperation Town are exploring how locally run, community-owned food networks might offer a more affordable, resilient alternative. This raises the question of whether co-operatives can work, and whether they can scale up to meet the needs of entire cities.

Co-operatives are fundamentally owned and run by their members, whether they are workers, consumers, or local residents. This structure allows them to prioritise people over profit, while remaining economically viable. Across the UK and beyond, co-operatives have already demonstrated their ability to succeed at a local level, particularly in food distribution and community retail. Their strength lies in their responsiveness, because they are embedded in the communities that they serve. As a result, they can adapt quickly to local needs and build trust in ways large corporations often struggle to match.

The question of scale, however, is often framed too narrowly. Growth does not have to mean becoming a single, centralised organisation. For co-operatives, scaling can take a different form, based on networks, collaboration, and shared infrastructure. By linking together smaller,

locally rooted co-ops, it becomes possible to achieve the benefits of size — such as purchasing power and efficiency — without losing control. In this sense, co-operatives are uniquely positioned to grow in a way that is both economically effective and socially grounded.

CO-OPS TO THE RESCUE?

There is strong historical evidence to support this more gradual, networked approach. As documented in *Co-ops to the Rescue!* (edited by Alan Thomas, Jenny Thornley and Chris Cornforth, 1989), many worker co-operatives in Britain emerged during periods of economic crisis, often as workers attempted to save jobs from closure. One example is the [TO VERIFY: Unicorn Shirt Co-operative, formed in Taunton in 1981] when employees took over a failing factory. While not all such ventures succeeded, the research highlights a clear pattern: co-operatives were most effective when they built on existing relationships and developed steadily with ongoing support. Rather than undermining the model, these findings point to how co-operatives can succeed through careful growth, strong organisation, and long-term commitment. Sheffield itself has a long history of co-operative ambition. In the interwar period, the *Sheffield Co-operator* newspaper promoted the idea of a “co-operative commonwealth”, arguing that economic life could be organised around democratic ownership, mutual aid, and community benefit rather than private profit. Far from being a marginal experiment, co-operation was seen as a practical way to address poverty, stabilise local economies, and give ordinary people greater control over their lives. This historical vision reinforces the idea that co-operatives are not just small-scale solutions, but part of a broader, scalable alternative economic model. For Sheffield, this offers a compelling blueprint. The goal should not be to replicate the scale or structure of large supermarket chains, but to build a system that works differently and prioritises resilience, accessibility, and community control.

By expanding networks of food co-operatives across neighbourhoods, sharing resources, and strengthening local supply chains, Sheffield has the potential to create a food system that is both scalable and sustainable. Importantly, co-operatives are not just about economics but about empowerment. They give people a direct stake in the systems that shape their daily lives, whether that is the food they eat or the prices they pay. In doing so, they can rebuild a sense of agency and collective responsibility that is often absent in more traditional modes of business. Ultimately, the question is not whether co-operatives can scale, but how we choose to support them in doing so. With the right infrastructure, investment, and community engagement, co-operatives have the potential to expand far beyond small local projects and become a central part of Sheffield's economic future. In a time of growing inequality and uncertainty, it is not just an ideal worth pursuing — it is a practical and necessary one.

— HARRISON HALL



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WHAT DOES THE AVERAGE SHEFFIELDER KNOW ABOUT CO-OPERATIVES?

As of 2025 there were 16.6 million co-operative members across the UK, but how many people know how a co-operative works and how it can benefit their community?

Most people when asked about co-operatives pointed to the chain Coop, but co-operatives extend far beyond the supermarket you pass on the high street. A co-op is a business or organisation that is democratically owned and controlled by its members who have a say in how the co-op operates and what it focuses on, which is usually the group's shared needs. It can take on many forms such as cooperatives for housing, healthcare, and community services.

Diane Dale, 60, from Sheffield, was just one person who initially thought of the Co-op shop. She said: "When I think of cooperatives I think of the Co-op because it has always been really handy and good value. But, they've also come out in support of Palestine which I think is excellent."

Due to being member-owned, co-operatives can have a direct say in political decisions that affect their own communities and society as a whole. In 2025 the Coop announced it would no longer buy goods from countries which have "human rights abuses and violations of international law" in which they included Israel.

Peter Day, 88, originally from Sheffield, said: "I think most people who think about co-operatives would think about the shop. But it is about community and that can be anything from your local neighbour up the road, to a village or town." Judy Day, 85, said: "A Co-operative is about working together for the benefit of the whole group. People on their own can get very lonely and might need help and if there is a community they can help each other."

Sheffield has a long history of co-ops, the first co-operative society in the UK was established in Sheffield in 1865 and today in Sheffield new cooperatives are popping up around the city. Tomas Mc Dowell, 35, said:

"When I think of co-operatives I think of fairness, quality, and accessibility to the community. My dad was a huge believer in the cooperative growing up. You put into it what you get out and it's accessible to everyone, everyone has fair stakes in it."

There was an understanding of co-operatives amongst the small number of people The *Sheffield Co-operator* approached and it was clear that the idea of community and co-operatives were still valued across Sheffield. Tomas proposed how co-operatives could tackle current issues in Sheffield. He said: "Housing and finance is challenging and everyone's facing that, with large deposits on houses people need help getting started. But also some people just need help with food, that's huge right now because prices seem to keep getting higher and higher and higher."

The *Sheffield Co-operator* also sought the opinion of students, hoping to gain an understanding of young people's perceptions of cooperative societies. Most students did not have a concrete understanding of co-ops at first, but once provided with an explanation they could also see how cooperatives could address ongoing problems.

Mabel Smith, 22, a student at The University of Sheffield said: "Being part of a cooperative seems like a lot more economic and liberating way of living."

Students currently face a multitude of challenges, with the rising cost of groceries and bills. A 2022 study by the Office for National Statistics showed that half of students

felt they dealt with financial difficulties, with 77% reporting concern that the cost of living may impact their studies.

Mabel said: "I think a co-operative could help with transport, especially in student communities, like car shares. I suppose it's the same with food sharing and food waste, I think you can tackle a lot of inherent structural inequalities through just sharing food."

The University of Sheffield Students' Union does work on food-based initiatives, with The Big Stew taking place on the 22nd of April this year. This event partners with FareShare in hosting a free community meal made from surplus food, aiming to feed 500 students. These types of initiatives ensure that students can eat well, for free, amongst their peers.

Other students on campus echoed similar ideas. Ella, Shibali and Nina, a group of three students, told us what community means to them. They said: "People. People not being alone, actually having someone to go to". The three seemed enthusiastic about joining a cooperative. They said: "If it was something that relates to me, if it's valuable," and explained how they appreciated the community fridge at the edge in their first year as many students struggle with not having enough money.

The Community Fridge, based on University of Sheffield campus, provides free food (that would otherwise be thrown away) and is welcome to anyone.

Most people spoke about how cooperatives can be vital in aiding people struggling with the price of food but they also offered new ideas for how a co-op could support their community: from travel and finances, to loneliness. Whilst some people can understand the impact of co-operatives after learning what they do, perhaps currently across Sheffield not enough people know about them or how to get involved in order to implement them into their daily lives.

- AMY STOWE AND CHARLIE PALMER-TULLEY

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THE CO-OPERATIVE WHOLESALE SOCIETY AND CO-OPERATIVES

How could small, local co-operative shops compete with large private businesses? The answer lay in their connection to the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS), a shared organisation that united them through collective buying power, production, and mutual support. This relationship combined local autonomy with collective strength, allowing small co-operatives to benefit from large-scale production and distribution.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CWS AND CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETIES

The CWS originated through the efforts of a group of pioneers, including figures such as William Cooper, Charles Howarth, and James Smithies. The initial idea emerged from a social gathering in 1860, where existing co-operative societies came together to discuss the need for a co-operative wholesale organisation. Within three years, following numerous meetings in cities and towns including Manchester, Oldham, and Rochdale, the North of England Co-operative Wholesale Society officially registered on 11 August 1863, with trading beginning in March 1864. The CWS acted as a secondary co-operative, serving primary retail societies.

This system, and the newly established relationship it created, proved extremely successful, particularly before the mid-twentieth century, contributing significantly to the wider co-operative movement. The CWS operated through a model of vertical integration, which became one of its greatest strengths by giving the movement ownership across the supply chain. This meant that the CWS owned and controlled the farms and factories producing goods for retail co-operative societies. It oversaw much of what happened behind the scenes, from manufacturing and production to banking and insurance, ensuring that the quality of products remained under co-operative control.

A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER?

Despite its success, by the mid-1960s this system had been largely abandoned. Rather than producing and supplying goods directly to co-operatives, the CWS increasingly shifted towards purchasing on behalf of societies instead. This change was driven by a combination of factors, including declining membership loyalty and the growing dominance of the private retail sector. As private retailers expanded, the CWS found itself competing to remain the principal wholesaler for co-operative societies. Its model had to adapt to changing consumer habits, even if this meant surrendering some control over the co-operative supply chain.

However, tensions between the CWS and local societies had already begun to emerge. The Co-operative Commission of 1958 concluded that the number of societies

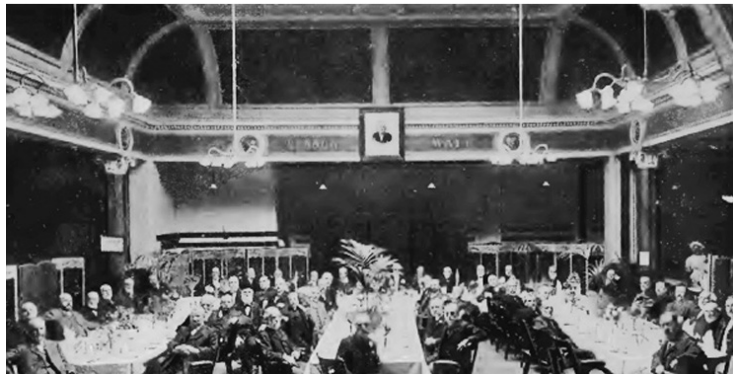
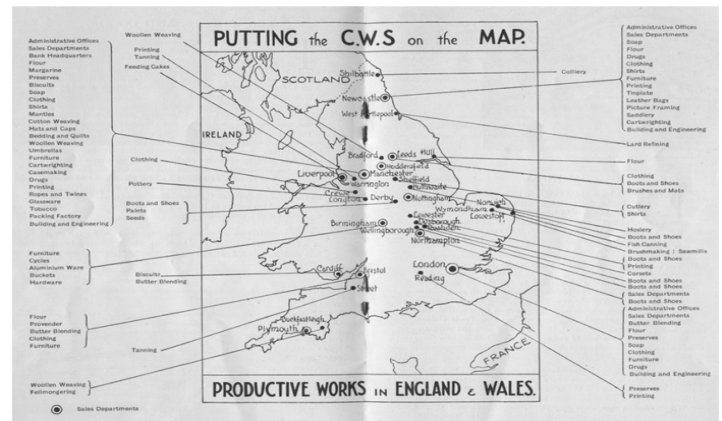


Image taken at a reunion of the Past and Present Directors, Auditors and Scrutineers in the Balloon Street Old Dining Room, August 23rd, 1905

should be reduced through mergers, and also argued that the CWS should exercise greater control over the movement. This was met with resistance from societies that valued their independence.

At the same time, wider social and economic changes weakened the position of co-operatives. The decline of manufacturing and mining contributed to the erosion of traditional working-class communities, while the expansion of the private sector made competition increasingly difficult. As a result, many societies were no longer able to offer dividends to members, weakening customer loyalty and diminishing one of the co-operative model's key attractions.

THE CWS AS A DYSFUNCTIONAL STRUCTURE

Although the CWS played a major role in supporting co-operative societies, some argued that aspects of the model had become dysfunctional.

While it was intended to act as a central supplier and coordinating body, many retail societies valued their independence and resisted central authority. This created a lack of unity within the movement, making it difficult to act cohesively or implement large-scale reforms.

The CWS also struggled with inefficiencies created by its size and structure. It attempted to manage a wide range of activities, from manufacturing to distribution, while being collectively owned by numerous societies with dif

fering priorities. This often slowed decision-making and created conflicts over direction, reducing its effectiveness in a rapidly changing economy.

It can also be argued that the CWS failed to respond quickly enough to economic and social change. As private retailers expanded and traditional working-class communities declined, the co-operative movement needed to modernise. However, the CWS was often seen as too conservative and slow to adapt, contributing to declining competitiveness and relevance.

Its push for greater central control, highlighted by the Co-operative Commission, arguably exposed these tensions further. While centralisation was intended to improve efficiency, it deepened divisions within the movement, as many societies resisted losing their autonomy. This limited the CWS's ability to lead effectively.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the relationship between the Co-operative Wholesale Society and local co-operative societies was central to the early success of the co-operative movement, combining collective strength with local independence. The CWS's vertically integrated model allowed small societies to compete effectively with private businesses, demonstrating the power of co-operation on a national scale.

However, as economic and social conditions changed in the mid-twentieth century, this model became increasingly difficult to sustain. Tensions over control, organisational inefficiencies, and a failure to adapt quickly to a changing retail environment weakened the effectiveness of the CWS.

Ultimately, while the CWS played a vital role in supporting and expanding the co-operative movement, its limitations highlight the enduring challenge of balancing centralisation with local autonomy in a rapidly evolving economy.

— AMIRAH HASSAN

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“IT MADE ME GET ON WITH LIFE”: VOICES FROM BROOMHALL’S COMMUNITY MEAL

We visited the FoodCycle event in Broomhall, which provides a free community meal for anyone in the neighbourhood. It runs at Broomhall Centre, every Wednesday at half twelve in the afternoon. In visiting, we wanted to understand the motivations of the volunteers who worked there, and what the guests gained from the event.

Our first sense upon arriving was the social buzz amongst guests. While waiting to be let inside, they were chatting and laughing together in small groups, despite the cold winds and droplets of rain that were beginning to fall. The doors opened just as we began to complain about the chill and upon entering the room, we noticed the layout - six, large tables with chairs tucked around them, and knives and forks placed at the ready.

Attendees started filling the seats quickly and not long after, the quiet hum of chatter was joined by the delicious smell of a warm meal being cooked in the kitchen. The menu was written in neat handwriting on a large whiteboard at the front of the room with doodles and drawings decorating the edges. Course one was a homely leek and potato soup with bread, which not soon after our arrival, started to be served by volunteers to all the guests. We sat down with one guest, and asked what he thought of the food. “I can’t complain! I’m not saying the food is the best in the world, but I’m happy enough.” He said with a smile.

The food being served here isn’t just feeding the community, but is saving perfectly good food from going to waste. Meals are cooked from surplus, usable food that lacks commercial value as FoodCycle works with supermarkets, small independent shops and markets to source their food. After the small lull of the first course, the bustle returned as the kitchen volunteers served up the main course. We watched as the volunteers seamlessly piled up countless plates of food. This main consisted of Quorn meatballs in tomato sauce, with potato wedges and mixed vegetables. The room smelled incredible, and the plates of food looked delicious - a colourful, nutritious and well-balanced meal.

We talked to Amy Forbes, a newer volunteer and she told us that she had been to this event herself as a guest in the past. She said: “I think community is important because we need each other, and when sitting down for a meal you can actually take an interest in others, because you have time to chat.” As echoed by many of the people we spoke to, the social benefits of this event are as important as the food.

One guest told us about why she comes to this event weekly. She said: “It’s pretty much the only outlet I have for regular, face to face human interaction. It’s nice to have something to look forward to.”

Some guests didn’t talk much, while others were having loud, rambunctious conversations across tables. “When I come here, I don’t judge. We are all different.” One guest said, telling us about his experiences with the event.

Dressed in a green FoodCycle apron, volunteer Ian White told us that like Amy, he also used to attend FoodCycle events. He said: “It’s made me get on with life. I was all ready for giving up. I wasn’t eating properly, but then I got told about this place.” Now, Ian often brings his daughter and grandchildren to the event. “My grandson eats the food but he’s not stuck on the soups because of the vegetables.” He joked.

We watched as the volunteers called those who wanted seconds, and the room filled with hearty cheers and hands raised as guests excitedly brought their plates back up to the kitchen. As our conversation with Ian concluded, one happy guest came up and patted Ian on the shoulder. “That was the best today, that.”

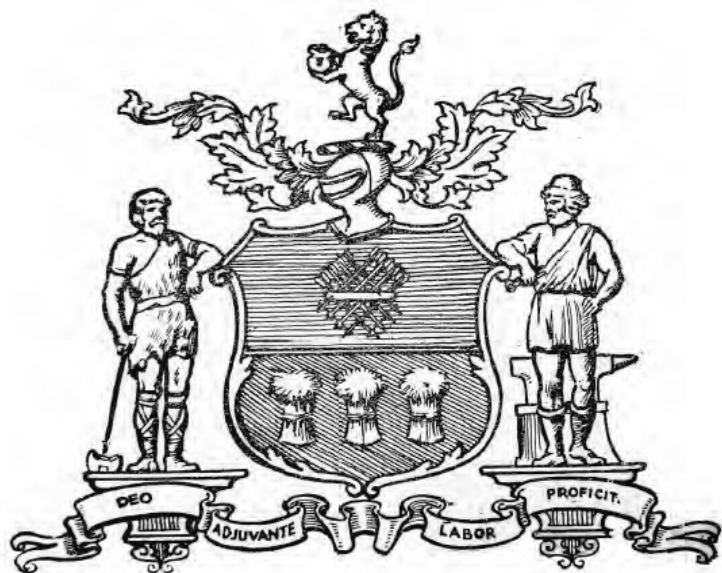
The guest said as he joined the long line for seconds. Kate Connery, another volunteer and project lead, spoke to us about her motivations for volunteering: “I am retired. I love to cook. I’m really interested in using surplus food, and I like this feeling of being part of something.” The sense of community here extends beyond the guests, with all the volunteers expressing a desire to give back to the people through their work. Kate also spoke about the importance of events like FoodCycle in contrast to foodbanks. “I think it’s really important that they sit down and they’re served. It’s very different to picking up a meal and taking it home.

It’s about reducing that isolation. “This centre is fantastic because it stays open after we finish serving and some people stay and play pool and talk.” We left to let the guests enjoy their chocolate mousse, but we were particularly struck by something Kate had told us: “We refer to them as guests.”

Perhaps simple, but this seemed to reflect a more general ethos amongst the volunteers and how they saw their work. They were committed to providing meals with warmth and dignity and saw the guests as an integral part of the community, rather than just mouths to feed.

- AMY STOWE AND CHARLIE PALMER-TULLEY





"GOD WILLING, LABOUR ACHIEVES"

NOTES FROM THE COUNCIL

Councillor Fran Belbin (Labour and Co-operative, Firth Park) was elected unopposed as the new leader of Sheffield City Council at its annual meeting on 21 May. She takes over from Tom Hunt, who lost his Walkley seat to the Greens in the May elections. Her deputy is Cllr Zahira Naz (Labour, Darnall), the first Muslim woman to hold the post. The Labour-Green administration follows the Liberal Democrats' move into opposition over proposed green belt housing in the draft Sheffield Local Plan.

In her inaugural speech, Cllr Belbin pledged to "get the basics right" on waste, fly-tipping, and parking, alongside extending regeneration into neighbourhoods and delivering Labour's promised free bus fares for under-18s.

Labour and Co-operative councillors now make up almost half of Labour's twenty-five-strong group, with Cllrs Dawn Dale, Elle Dodd, and Mark Rusling chairing the Education, Finance, and Environmental Services policy committees respectively. Cllr Belbin's appointment comes a century after the 1926 Labour and Co-operative breakthrough on Sheffield City Council.

THE CO-OPERATOR RESPONDS

The Sheffield Co-operator welcomes Cllr Belbin's election and the strength of Co-operative Party representation on the new council. But appointment is only the beginning. With the Labour Government committed to doubling the size of Britain's co-operative and mutual sector, Sheffield's twelve Labour and Co-operative councillors are well placed to make the city a national leader in that effort.

The council's clearest priority over the next four years should be to put real institutional and financial weight behind the development of new co-operatives across the city — in housing, food, retail, care, and the worker-owned conversion of established businesses approaching succession. The council's procurement, asset, and economic development powers should be used to favour co-operative enterprise wherever possible.

A century ago, the partnership between Labour and the Co-operative Movement transformed Sheffield by combining political democracy with economic democracy. A century on, that same combination is what the city needs again..

The SHEFFIELD CO-OPERATOR

The *Sheffield Co-operator* is published by Principle 5 Yorkshire Co-operative Resource Centre.

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For enquiries, letters, and correspondence, please contact Steve Thompson: steve@principle5.coop

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THE BASQUE BLUEPRINT AND THE STEEL CITY

Co-operatives in Sheffield have a rich history rooted in industrial working-class self-help, promoting education and mutual support between communities. The first co-operative society on record in Sheffield was founded in 1865 on Devonshire Street: the Sheffield Improved Industrial and Provident Society.

In 1981, a group of Sheffield City councillors visited the Mondragón area in Spain to study the structures of the Mondragón experiment and consider how its principles might be adapted to British society. David Blunkett, then leader of Sheffield City Council, wrote a three-page report detailing the characteristics of the Basque model and how these might translate to Sheffield and Britain's wider economy.

Sheffield City Council sent councillors, officers, financial experts, and representatives from local educational institutions. What is important to note is the reason for an in-person visit, rather than relying solely on research. The Council wanted to understand the people behind the experiment — their motivations, values, and rationale — not simply the statistics.

THE BASQUE BLUEPRINT

The Mondragón experiment is an example of regional economic development through employee empowerment. It proved remarkably resilient during Spain's unemployment crises, with Mondragón helping to keep unemployment in the Basque region at less than half the national average. The 2017 Labour Party Alternative Models of Ownership report noted that Mondragón co-operatives maintained a higher investment rate than Spain as a whole between 1971 and 1989.

What began in the Basque region in 1956 as a small group of workers manufacturing heaters and stoves de-

veloped into a network of more than 250 co-operatives across manufacturing, retail, finance, agriculture, and civil engineering. By 2012, the network supported 83,800 jobs and annual sales in excess of US\$20 billion.

As equal co-owners of their workplaces, workers have a direct stake in their employment, with the highest salaries capped at no more than six and a half times the lowest. The Mondragón Corporation is structured across three broad areas — finance, industry, and distribution — each operating autonomously within a shared strategic framework.

A key component of the Mondragón Corporation was Caja Laboral, now Laboral Kutxa. Founded in 1959, it was designed to encourage popular savings and channel those resources into co-operative development, supporting the growth of the wider Mondragón system. In 2012, Caja Laboral merged with Ipar Kutxa to form the modern credit union Laboral Kutxa, which in 2026 was recognised by Forbes as one of Spain's top five banks.

Blunkett's 1981 report highlighted both the achievements of the Mondragón experiment and the reasons behind its success, while asking whether similar institutions could be adapted to British economic structures. He acknowledged the differences between the two countries, but argued that these differences did not make a British co-operative path impossible.

What inspired the people of Mondragón, Blunkett argued, was necessity, deprivation, and the aftermath of the Franco dictatorship. Creating democratic workplace structures within a fascist political framework required considerable political awareness, community organisation, and compromise. The Mondragón experiment had to adapt to fit within the capitalist system while remaining loyal to its founding principles. Blunkett emphasised that workers' sense of responsibility and ownership — feeling that their work mattered and understanding why they were

doing it — lay at the heart of the model's success.

On finance, Blunkett criticised what he described as the “idiocy” of the British system, arguing that it was designed for those manipulating the money markets rather than those whose money was being used. By contrast, Mondragón's financial institutions were intended to be powerful but not dominant — secure vehicles for reinvestment in communities and productive enterprise. It was not simply about investment, but about people having a stake in their own futures.

CO-OPERATIVES IN A CAPITALIST SOCIETY

Despite Mondragón's success, Blunkett did not dismiss the difficulties of operating co-operatives within a capitalist market that does not naturally recognise or reward them.

In an effort to avoid isolation, the Mondragón Corporation appointed political representatives capable of navigating existing systems. Critics argued that the co-operative movement distracted from the wider struggle of the working class to overturn capitalism altogether. Questions over whether co-operatives are political remain contested, though Mondragón's response, as Blunkett noted, was simple: “life is political”.

Blunkett believed Mondragón's success depended in part on a politically conscious society. He contrasted this with Britain, which he described as having some of the “least aware and politically educated people in the industrialised world”. This was not simply a criticism of British workers, but an observation about political culture and economic structures. Mondragón emerged from communities where economic survival demanded collective organisation and democratic participation. Britain, by contrast, had often developed systems in which workers were more distant from ownership, finance, and decision-making.

THE BASQUE BLUEPRINT IN THE STEEL CITY

Both regions share strong industrial heritages rooted in steel and manufacturing, but their responses to economic decline were markedly different. When traditional industries came under pressure in the late twentieth century, Mondragón's interconnected co-operatives were able to support one another through shared institutions and collective resilience. Sheffield, by contrast, experienced de-industrialisation in a far more fragmented economic environment, where communities were often left exposed to unemployment, disinvestment, and the erosion of local economic control.

Yet Sheffield has continued to develop co-operative initiatives of its own. The South Yorkshire Ownership Hub, launched in 2021, aims to build a more resilient local economy by increasing worker and employee ownership. Businesses receiving support range from food shops to tattoo parlours.

As reported by The Ownership Hub, South Yorkshire Mayor Oliver Coppard has said that “employee ownership and worker co-operatives have the potential to transform South Yorkshire's economy, a central pillar of our move to a co-operative model where more wealth is created here, and more wealth stays here.”

The Ownership Hub contributes to the five-year Reclaiming Our Regional Economies (RORE) programme in South Yorkshire, which seeks to develop new approaches to regional economic renewal through decentralisation, sustainability, and community ownership.

While these initiatives operate in a very different environment to Mondragón, they reflect similar principles: keeping wealth local, widening ownership, and giving workers greater influence over economic life.

The Sheffield version does not need to be a direct copy of the Basque model in order to succeed. Rather, Mondragón offers a framework of ideas that can be adapted to South Yorkshire's own economic realities. Despite the challenges, experiences in Sheffield and across Britain suggest that where co-operative models have been introduced, workers have often proven eager to participate, improving both efficiency and wellbeing. Blunkett accepted that Mondragón did not offer a ready-made blueprint for Britain, but argued that this did not mean similar structures could not flourish here.

The Mondragón experiment demonstrates that co-operative enterprise can survive and thrive even within difficult economic conditions, provided the right supporting institutions exist. Sheffield faces a different set of challenges, but not ones fundamentally incompatible with co-operative solutions. The question is not whether Mondragón can be replicated exactly, but whether its principles of democratic ownership, mutual support, and community investment can be translated into forms that meet the needs of South Yorkshire today.

— MABEL PERRY





BOOK REVIEW

Co-operatives: Linking Practice and Theory by Ian Adderley is a comprehensive introduction to co-operative principles.

The foreword includes a recommendation of the book by the UK Society for Co-operative Studies, and for good reason. The history of the co-operative movement is rich and expansive, with hundreds of texts surveying various points in the movement's history.

As Adderley found when he decided to write this book, there has not been a good, singular introductory text for quite some time. Now he has provided one. For a person who has newly discovered co-operatives, the first section of this book provides a fantastic summary including a brief explanation of the history, principles and operations of various co-operatives.

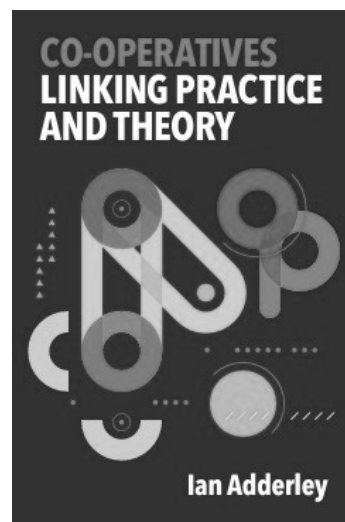
His summary of the contemporary co-operative movement is extensive, and serves to show the influence and reach of the movement.

In a way, it may have been advisable to publish this first section of the book as a separate pamphlet. At 100 pages long, it remains an accessible introduction to co-operative ideals, without the weight of the technical understanding which comes later on. The second section of the book provides an overview of the technical context of co-operatives.

With Adderley's background as a lawyer, his technical summaries and explanations are very well articulated. Despite the complexity of the legal structures and systems he explores, his prose remains thoroughly digestible, even for a reader who has no background in

either co-operatives or law. The third and final section of the book deals with the ideology of the co-operative movement, from the core principles espoused by the Rochdale Pioneers to the current goals and aims of the international movement.

Here, Adderley addresses the complex question of political neutrality within the co-operative movement. Admirably, he presents a wide variety of the viewpoints expressed in the movement, without taking a particular stance. This is especially important due to this work's position as an introductory text, and Adderley enables the reader to make up their own mind, or research further with his comprehensive list of references. Overall, this book represents an incredible achievement in successfully bringing together the expansive and



scattered explorations of the co-operative movement.

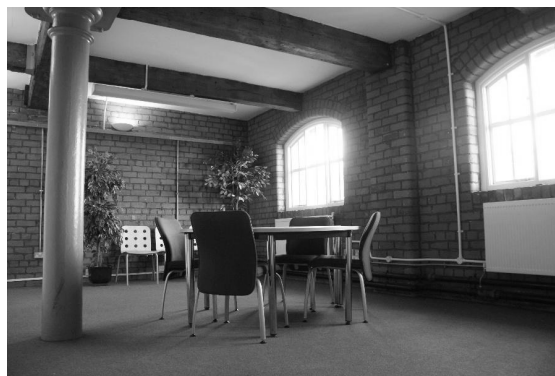
In one book, Adderley builds on the rich tradition of the co-operative movement with a fantastic introduction to the movement's history, activities and ideology.

Co-operatives: Linking Practice and Theory by Ian Adderley is published by Co-operative Press Limited and the UK Society for Co-operative Studies, and is available online.



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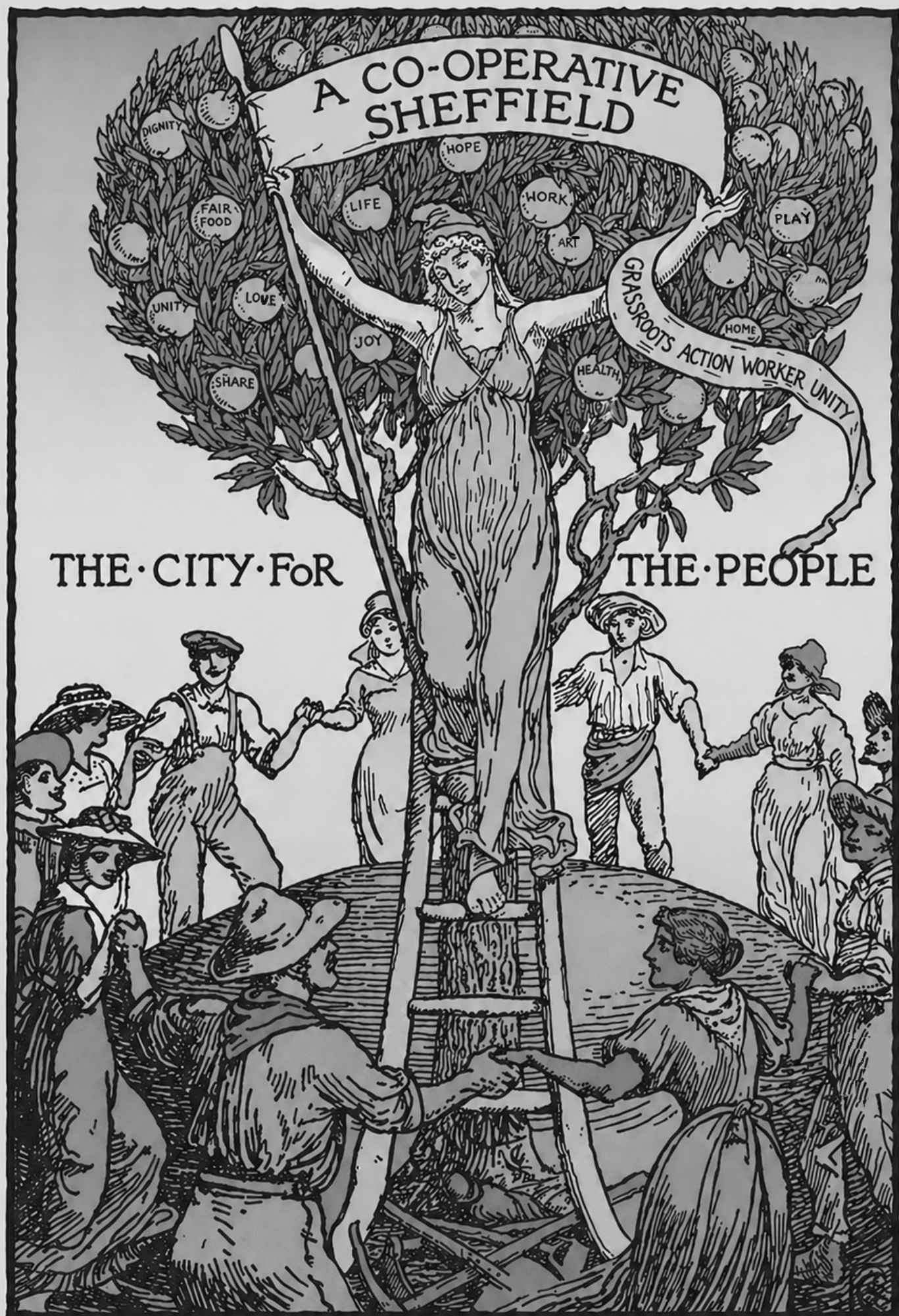
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