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Dave Kerin on Workers' Cooperatives and the Climate Emergency

Anarchist Affinity

November 11, 2014

Dave Kerin is a co-founder of the Earthworker Cooperative in Morwell, Victoria, which is building a network of democratically owned and managed cooperatives throughout Australia to manufacture clean energy technology. Sam spoke with him at Trades Hall.

What is the Earthworker Cooperative?

The Earthworker Cooperative facilitates and enables the establishment of other workers' cooperatives in Australia, with a focus on manufacturing new green technologies for supply locally. Eureka's Future is one of the enterprises within that, manufacturing solar products. It started with manufacturing the BOLT-ON solar heat pump, which renters can bolt-on and bolt-off when they leave. It used to be made in China but we won the rights to make it here, along with stainless steel tanks, which are entirely made here by us. There are other products, an evacuator tube solar system, solar ventilators and so on, which we also won the rights to make here.

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The point of Eureka's Future is to control the spaces where we work and where we live. All workers make decisions democratically and own the enterprise collectively. The Australian service sector is now eighty percent of the economy. In Greece it was at sixty percent before its collapse. We've allowed capitalism to build our lives on exploitation and on sand. It will wash away at the first sign of real crisis. We have to put those jobs back in place. Capitalism is saying we can't do it, the state is not going to do it, so that leaves us with one class: that's us, the working class. Earthworker is one aspect of that. Regardless of a person's worldview, how they define themselves, they can join Earthworker if they support the outcomes we're trying to achieve.

How do the workers who are involved react to being in control of their workplace and democratically managing their own work?

Well, at Eureka's Future we're just getting started, so it's a scary time. October-November is when we mutualise Everlast, which was the private company. And the workforce are only just coming over to the cooperative structure. At this point, we begin a process of them not only becoming worker-owners, but also a process of education, that Borderlands Cooperative is assisting us with. Where we as a group of workers learn what it is to run our workplace. We learn about group dynamics and group decision-making, conflict resolution at work, how do we deal with power. Other things: how do we deal with hazards, toxicity, and so on. The Earthworker Cooperative has been a success, but also a lot of hard work.

What have been the major challenges in building the cooperative and what challenges might new worker cooperatives face more generally?

I guess the biggest challenge has been the cultural shift in the organised labour movement and the green movement over the past two decades. Workers are encouraged to be individualised, to reject trade unions and anything to do with cooperation. Meanwhile, due to a variety of factors, the labour movement has been separated

they've got us. The world does not revolve around parliaments, it revolves around economies, how we meet our needs. We need to get in there.

The Earthworker Cooperative requires skills and support. To become involved, visit earthworkercooperative.com.au for more information

around ninety percent of the world's wealth. That's a greater intensity than under the kings, queens and aristocrats of feudal Europe. And what's more, combine that with the military-industrial complex and you have the basis for the growth of a real fascism. If we want to get out of this mess, we've got to start relying on each other, trusting each other, and putting the forms in place that allow us to do that economically, and trade unions are important to that.

There is a tendency on the far left to view cooperatives as a limited strategy in that they are forced to operate within capitalism, they are subject to market forces and so on. One example is the Mondragon cooperative, which grew to multi-national proportions and employs wage labour. Is there any merit to those criticisms?

Sure. There's truth in that critique. Look at the impact of the Global Financial Crisis. Mondragon was hit really hard and pretty much went under. But look at what happened: workers continued to be paid at the same rate for two years. They were retrained. And yes, one result is that large numbers of people are now employed by Mondragon, not as worker-owners. Cooperatives exist now in so many forms, and not all of them offer prospects for the future. Here in Australia you have large agribusiness cooperatives where workers are not allowed to be members. That's just calling something a cooperative when it is behaving like a corporation

But sure, the critiques are real. The point is this: no one is saying that the development of workers' cooperatives will eradicate the problems that exist under capitalism. It is simply saying that we will finally own those problems, and therefore be able to do something about them. The growth of workers' cooperatives is a process, not a final act. But the real work starts with the cooperative

Everyone agrees we need to change the world, whether you vote Tory or Liberal or you don't vote, whatever. Are politicians capable of making these changes? No, look at the world! Look how far

from the environmental movement. We're trying to reverse that shift by talking about jobs and the environment, not jobs versus the environment. The latter strategy has been tried and it failed miserably. Not only workers, but it has failed the planet. So we're taking a class approach to the climate.

We emphasise that capitalism is causing the climate emergency. To march in the streets asking capitalism to get a heart transplant and get out of the Big Four — fossil fuel, petrochemical, plastics and the military — is impossible, when capitalism is totally and utterly dependent on those industries. I mean, the military is the largest industry in the world, by half, and the largest producer of greenhouse gas emissions. Capitalism is bound to it.

If you look at the Middle East, it is about controlling oil and resources as they decline, but it's also about directly serving the military-industrial complex. That's how much of a systemic crisis we're facing. So unless we want to get good at yoga and learn how to bend over and kiss our asses goodbye, we'd better get these cooperatives and other forms that allow workers to make decisions in place, to meet our needs together.

How then do worker cooperatives differ from capitalist enterprise in their relationship to the environment?

Well, the first and obvious difference is worker ownership. No one paints the house they rent, you've got to own it, then you might protect it from the weather. Same with the economy. We're allowing all manner of awful things to happen to the planet within our economies because we don't own them. The second difference is popular control. We can't deal with climate unless we have engaged communities, and that can't just be in an abstract political sense, it has to be in an economic sense. Power is in the economy. If we don't control the places where we work and where we live, we don't control anything. Marching and demonstrating against war and climate change aren't forms of control.

It can't just be about ownership. I mean, we as working people now provide the capital base for private investment via our super-

annuation. Seventy-five percent of capital investment in Australia is our own superannuation. If you own seventy-five percent of your house, you own it already! So in many ways we've passed capitalism. Since the Second World War it has devolved into this monster. I mean the military, a giant monolith of destruction, is the largest industry now. Constant production, constant profit, and all it takes is a few dead bodies.

Workers' cooperatives demonstrate the power of positive example. They show that workers can run industry, they can make decisions about the economy, and that that's a good thing. If you have a strong social sector in the economy, people will participate regardless of how they vote, their religious background or anything else. It's about us as a class democratically controlling where we live and where we work.

During the 2001 economic crisis in Argentina and in other examples workers have taken over formerly capitalist enterprises as a means of economic recovery and transformation. Do you see that as a possibility in Australia?

I think it has to be a possibility. As I say, capitalism is in systemic crisis. The climate is acting as a new imperative. The climate emergency is unfolding at a rate that even the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is unable to fully comprehend, as they say. The effect is going to be enormous. So more and more we are going to be thrown back onto our own resources. The choice is to evolve or devolve. There might always be a private sector, fine, but we need a strong, democratic social sector, because without popular engagement we're not going to deal with all the minutiae and complexities of building a new and sustainable economics.

People ask why the Big Four banks can't simply shift their investments over into renewables. They can't! Why would they shift out of industries so enormously profitable into industries that are not? That's capitalism. A dollar is only useful to a capitalist. Even under government-ownership things were different. When the coal was publicly owned by the Electricity Commission, they already

had solar power on the grid, because under state ownership renewables and fossil fuels did not compete, they were just different ways of producing power. But the minute you introduce private ownership then anything outside that modality is a competitor, so you kill it. We don't have time anymore to work within ownership models that are outdated, and I think in future there will be more immediate and spontaneous responses from workers.

Eureka's Future is aiming to secure markets for solar technology by having trade unions include them in their collective agreements. You are also a former member of the Builders' Laborers Federation, which actively intervened in environmental issues through its famous Green Bans campaigns. What role do you see for trade unions in their relationship to cooperatives?

I think it is about developing a new economic space, where groups of people determine what their needs are and organise to meet those needs. At the heart of it is democratic ownership. Trade unions are a form of workers' power that exists currently, and they will be important to growing the power of people and workers in the future.

Our experience is that the vast majority of people want to see changes in this direction, but we can't satisfy our needs through individuals going to a shop and individually purchasing something, so trade unions offer a collective basis for that to happen.

Trade unions have enormous potential. That's why the Fraser Government criminalised secondary boycotts (black bans) in 1977, to stop unions striking in solidarity with each other. And why they introduced casualisation, which came in under Labor in the 1980s I might add. Federal and state politicians promised trade unions that it would only be used for relief staff in the public sector. Now we have 44 percent of young people on casual contracts. Jobs with no rights, and union density at an all-time low. And look at the world! Capitalism has a more unequal concentration of wealth than you had under feudalism. Eight thousand individuals own