

Interview: Belfast Co-operatives.

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Belfast has seen something of a surge of co-operatively run businesses in recent years as more people are faced with the choice between precarious work and unemployment with meagre dole payments. Belfast is now home to a taxi co-op, Union Taxis, a cleaning co-op, Belfast Cleaning Society, a co-operatively run café, Lúnasa, and a digital media co-op, The Creative Workers' Co-Op – to name but a few. We sat down with Clem and Colin, two of the three members of the Creative Workers' Co-Op, and Elena from Lúnasa to get their thoughts on co-ops in Belfast.

Common Threads (CT): Why did you want to start a co-op?

Elena: I had been working for other people for a long time, since I was very young. I've been a union member from the beginning of my working years too. For me, working in a co-op was and is the only moral and ideologically sane alternative.

Clem: I was working in various jobs in the media industry and it was a very unstable and precarious market. The newspaper I was working for closed down. We were working in precarious, zero-hour contract jobs.

Gerard and I were working in jobs that paid very little with very little prospects, he was a photographer I was a graphic designer we put our heads together and said "right will we just open a co-operative?" I was involved with a trade union, the Independent Workers Union, that was very supportive of the idea. We talked about it for quite a bit, we thrashed out the idea. There were a couple of other people who were interested but didn't follow through when it became a project.

CT: How did you start off?

Clem: It was myself and Gerard who initially started off, we sort of grew a wee bit and gained two other members who then, for different reasons went on to different jobs, but we very slowly started to build up a base of clients we worked with which were NGOs, Trade Unions, Unity groups, some private companies, but essentially we were just building up a base.

Colin: I worked freelance for two years when I was studying; it was low paid with very few prospects. I came in here one day and asked the guys to do a newsletter when I quickly realised it was a job interview, we went for lunch and they said "Right is this the new member then?" From there we just started getting stuff together to register, to get the bank account set up all that there stuff, all the stuff that we weren't used to doing. We got some advice from the Co-Operative Development Hub and got up and running.

CT: Do you find that the co-op model is becoming more well received as the economic situation continues to worsen?

Clem: Not really, it's a very very small movement across Ireland. One example is the credit union movement, they are essentially co-operatives. They survived the bulwark of the crisis because they weren't speculating on people's money and they're quite autonomous and ingrained in Irish society.

It's a functioning model of co-operation within communities and people don't even think of them as a radical idea but they are very radical in terms of what they do, in terms of gathering a community's money together and loaning it out to those within that community who need it.

There's probably very few people who haven't had experience with them and it's mostly a positive experience — but outside of that, in your workplace or how you live your life, there isn't much in terms of co-operation.

So you have a credit union movement which is the largest density of co-ops in Ireland but outside of that there was very large agricultural co-ops that were set up in different phases but outside of the financial credit union type things there's a tiny amount of worker co-operatives and most people having lived through a capitalist, individualistic system for so long haven't seized on them mostly because they're very difficult to set up.

A lot of places that do have successful co-operative movements have universities dedicated to teaching people how to co-operate. It may seem counter intuitive but it's a very difficult thing to do, based on a lot of compromises between workers and how they operate and dealing with work on a day to day basis, especially if you have a flat structure.

It's completely different to the management structures of a normal business: in a co-op you're the boss as well, you have the responsibilities that go along with that, it isn't like going to a normal waged job.

Colin: People are used to a certain way of working. People know to talk and communicate with each other to get the job done, but in other jobs you do your bit and then other people do theirs, but in a co-op you need agreement on every step of the way, every part of the job and that means compromise.

In terms of setting it up, there are a few different options but the biggest thing that other people have found is difficulty in getting funding. We've never taken funding which is why we've never had difficulty in it.

But in terms of the state, the government doesn't have a definition of co-ops and doesn't have a structure for it, so you have to decide if you're going to be a company limited by guarantee, a partnership or if you're going to go down the Industrial and Provident Society route and that's as close as you'll possibly get to what a co-op is.

Elena: I definitely think so, but only for those who were already organised activists or had some previous education in these matters.

CT: Among these difficulties what other factors do you have contributing to the difficulty in setting up?

Colin: There used to be recognition for co-ops, the Rochdale Principles were set up years ago, there had been a certain amount of recognition within government — that was removed. In its place we essentially have social enterprises. A social enterprise operates as a business but with some social values, a co-op starts with social and then builds a business on top of that.

Clem: Social enterprises now are kind of like a buzzword, some of them could be doing particularly positive things but still exploiting their workers, it's not one member one vote.

What was previously quite a large co-operative movement in England has sort of shifted towards social enterprise models. Quite a lot of what people would have naturally tended towards, like co-operation, has now been changed under the guise of social enterprises, which are really just businesses.

A lot is made of them but when you go in and look behind the curtain you see that they don't actually produce that much social value and they generally don't have a democratic workplace. Do they distribute wealth in an equitable manner? Probably and mostly not. Not to knock them, some of them do a lot of good within communities, it's just a shame they don't go further.

Elena: The human factor aka slave mentality. We are not used to running our work life, we are not used to directing ourselves. I think that is a massively important factor in terms of obstacles.

CT: What role do you think co-ops have to play in creating an alternative society?

Elena: Right now, we are fun, weird anecdotes. We should be the norm. It's only through self organising that we are going to gain anything, starting by some dignity.

Clem: Co-operatives are not a solution to capitalism at this stage. They need a wider array of political activism.

Co-ops are generally, the history of them, a small bubble within wider capitalism, and they can sort of be a band aid to that but they're never a complete solution to it. Co-operatives are in a big and wide arena in a sense, but they're not in themselves a solution to it.

They could foreshadow what a society could look like in an alternative economic model but at this stage it needs a wider reach, I don't think it's gonna be co-ops replacing capitalism.

That said, they are useful, and while they are still a capitalist enterprise they do give you quite an insight into how Capitalism operates and into how to run and operate an economy, your own small economy. It does make you realise however that you are not free from the constraints of capitalism in any capacity.

Colin: A lot of stuff that we're now doing in our work is stuff that we usually would have volunteered to do and doing it through our day job kind of helps with preventing burn out.

Our workplace is based on a co-op model as well as our own principles which means that we can try to make a positive change through a full-time job.

CT: After working in a co-op for some time now what are your opinions on bosses and workers' control?

Elena: My opinion is the same as before. Although this experience is turning out to be even tougher than I expected, my opinion on employers, bosses and management hasn't changed. I still see most of them as conscienceless vultures. I really don't think this behaviour is inherent in the managerial class, I think it is an option; a decision on how to run a group of people and a business that ignores the welfare of workers and puts profit first every single time.

Clem: We don't need them! We don't need bosses, we need workers control

CT: What do you enjoy most about working in a co-op?

Colin: There's a purpose to everything we have to do. It's not about doing the next mundane thing just because the boss said to. Every decision, whether you agree with it or not, is made together and is rooted in the collective desire to succeed, not an individual's desire to control.

Elena: The pride and self respect.

CT: What advice would you give to anyone looking to set up a co-op?

Colin: Hurry up!

Clem: Stick at it! Go and talk to as many people who have been through that process before, it could help you resolve or avoid a lot of common mistakes that other people have been through before, there's a small network of co-ops in existence

Elena: I would say, get twice the money you think you are going to need. Make sure you know who are you getting in bed with. Be resilient. Take some time off from work. Accept help from others and get professional help if needed (from accounting to electric installation).

Colin: Get in touch with us, give us a shout, one of the principles is co-operation among co-ops!

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