INCARCERATED WORKERS' CO-OPS: NEW FRONTIER FOR THE US COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT?

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US CRIMINAL INJUSTICE SYSTEM

- Early Connection between Incarceration and Race: illegal for enslaved African Americans to congregate, can’t testify against a white person, disparate sentencing for violence and murder.

- After Emancipation: 13th Amendment to the Constitution; Convict Lease system

- 1980s to present: Blacks disproportionately arrested and imprisoned; incarceration rates in US higher and higher; women largest growing prison population.

- No jobs for returning citizens.

- US 5% of world population, 25% of world’s incarcerated.
PRISON-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

FACTORY

PLANTATION

SWEAT SHOPS

DEPT. OF CORRECTIONS

SLAVE LABOR

CORPORATION

- .19 CENTS AN HOUR
- NO BENEFITS
- NO MEDICAL
- NO VACATIONS
- PENALTY FOR REFUSAL TO WORK
- SOLITARY CONFINEMENT
- LOSS OF PAROLE
- LOSS OF PROGRAMS
SOURCES

• Previous graphic from:
  http://www.prisonabolition.org/what-is-the-prison-industrial-complex/

• Vicious cycle/ multiple systems map:

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SOLUTIONS?

• Are there community-based approaches to justice that address the PIC?

• Co-ops of incarcerated people and returning citizens with lived experience - are they viable - why or how?
CO-OPS AS A GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY ECON DEV TOOL

• Co-ops address market failure, are both anti-poverty and community building strategies.
• Cooperative ownership helps address underdevelopment, economic isolation and marginality.
• Co-ops anchor the local economy - keep the returns to capital & benefits of production recirculating among those who produce them, service them, and need them.
OTHER CO-OP BENEFITS

• Reduce poverty and costs
• Save or create decent jobs in communities
• Increase income & provide asset ownership
• Earn better prices for locally-made products and/or better wages for labor
• Leadership and Social Capital development
• Use and Values based.

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10 Reasons CO-OPS ROCK

1. Cooperatives are DEMOCRATIC businesses & organizations. There are worker co-ops, consumer co-ops, producer co-ops, financial co-ops, housing co-ops, and more. In a cooperative, ONE member has ONE vote.

2. Cooperatives aren't a far off theory. Cooperatives offer achievable and practical solutions to many ECONOMIC, ENVIRONMENTAL, & SOCIAL PROBLEMS that can be implemented RIGHT NOW.

3. Money & jobs in their communities. Because cooperatives are democratically owned by community members, co-ops keep wealth & power in their communities.

4. Cooperatives aren't charity; they're an empowering means for self-help & solidarity.

5. Members equally share THE BURDEN in hard times & THE BENEFITS in good times.

6. Cooperatives are more resilient IN ECONOMIC DOWNTURNS & IN IMPOVERISHED COMMUNITIES. When other businesses may shut down or lay off workers, co-op members pull together TO WORK OUT SOLUTIONS.

7. Cooperatives are an INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT. There are thousands upon thousands of cooperatives around the world that are making major differences GLOBALLY & LOCALLY.

8. Cooperatives strive to make people's LIVES, COMMUNITIES, & ECONOMIES more JUST, EQUITABLE, & DEMOCRATIC.

9. There's no one right way to do a co-op. They can be flexible to fit DIFFERENT COMMUNITY & INDIVIDUAL NEEDS. There are big co-ops with thousands of members, and there are small co-ops with only three members.

10. Cooperatives are Viable & Just ALTERNATIVES for meeting our social and economic needs in contrast to CORPORATIONS THAT EXPLOIT the people and the planet.
AFRICAN AMERICAN COOPERATIVE PRACTICE

• African Americans have a long and strong history of cooperative ownership, especially in reaction to market failures and economic racial discrimination.

• It has often been a hidden history and one complicated by economic marginalization, and thwarted by racial discrimination and white supremacist violence.

• Less well known aspect integral to the Long Civil Rights movement.
RESEARCH ON AFRICAN AMERICAN COOPERATIVES

• Survival
• Resistance
• Prosperity

• psupress.org

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CO-OPS ADDRESS ISSUES FOR INCARCERATED OR FORMERLY INCARCERATED?

- Exploited populations – within and without PIC
- Used as slave labor in prison
- Employers outside won’t hire – must legally identify themselves
- Need new or different skills
- Newcomers to market in some way
- Bad previous experience(s).
COOPERATIVA DE SERVICIOS ARIGOS

- Began with art therapy in Guyama Penitentiary, Puerto Rico
- Need business model to sell their art
- Learned about co-op model and demanded co-op education
- Meeting with Governor; State Assembly changed PR co-op law; incorporated co-op
- Rephrased the 7 principles; internal rules
- MOU with Corrections Department – 15% (office space, electricity, etc); have to pay for extra security
- Surplus - 10% retained; 75% to owners
IMPORTANT SUPPORTS

• Puerto Rican League of Co-operatives and the Co-op Movement in Puerto Rico provides important support:
• Volunteer Co-op Educator in the prisons
• State-level worker co-op model and legislation support – years of experience
• Marketing and clients – invite to sell products at Annual General Meetings, newsletter coverage, etc.
GROWING THE MODEL IN PUERTO RICO

• 4 More Co-ops developing in prisons
• Men’s: technology, solar
• Women’s: Tanos Co-op: bakery now sewing; Much slower development

• Challenges of what to do with returning citizens — not as far along.
BENEFITS

• More control over one’s life and work
• Decent humanized work with living wages and ownership equity
• Develop trust and solidarity relationships
• Increase skills and capacities, new kinds of leadership
• Change behavior in prison/prison experience
• Rehabilitation, resocialization, reintegration
• Reduce recidivism - Only 2 recidivists of 50 + who got out over 10 years.
FAMILY SUPPORT

• Cooperativa Arigos internal rule: members must pay child support and contribute to family expenses outside.

• Former member stated that this model is the only option they had for jobs to support their families.

• Weaver (2015) similar: importance of control over work, sense of family, ability to support family.
“I never imagined that working in a cooperative I would find the ideal model to rehabilitate myself.”

“I will say anywhere that the program with the co-op model changes lives” - We are not the same after engaging in the co-op.
REFORM?

• Make prison life acceptable instead of leading toward transformation/abolition?

• Programs and co-ops may be co-opted as model programs to show how to make prisons “better” rather than lead to meaningful change and transformation of people and places.

• “Creams” and divides prison populations, used as rewards for favored prisoners.
BARRIERS TO DEVELOPING & SUPPORTING INCARCERATED WORKERS’ CO-OPS

• State/Federal laws; Prison bureaucracies
• Corrections administrations/prison directors keep changing and not always interested
• Lack of information about cooperatives
• Social inequalities and potential for elitism
• Society’s view of prisoners as non-deserving of human rights
• Commodification of prisoners and prison slave labor – will corporations free labor?

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RETURNING CITIZEN WORKER CO-OPS

• **SHIFTING GEARS CO-OP**, community bicycle shop in Wisconsin – bicycle repairs and bicycle advocacy; returning citizen members +; plan to offer a day release program

• **COLLECTIVE REMAKE** social enterprise in Los Angeles County, designed to support the creation of worker-owned businesses & other cooperatives with returning citizens +.

• **BLACK PRISONER’S CAUCUS**, Washington state
GENERAL CHALLENGES:

• Co-op model not well known or understood.
• Few uniform co-op laws in US – state-level laws differ from federal; state and federal prison rules differ – and by state.
• How to create effective co-op eco-system for incarcerated and returning citizens?
• Thank you!

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