

# Worker Cooperatives & Economic Cooperation as a Response to Crisis

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## **I. Introduction: “Bayanihan Forever”**

### ***Rural Philippines, circa 1960s***

The lingering scent of a harsh rainfall inflicts the humid air in the Filipino island of Leyte. Anticipating a heavy flood, a group of about thirty men gather around a small hut. Together, they kneel and lift the hut, carrying it away from the flood-prone area. This concept—known as Bayanihan (pronounced buy-uh-nee-hun)—illustrates a sense of cooperation, especially during an urgent situation.<sup>1</sup> “Bayanihan” is a Tagalog word, which translates to “being in community,” and signifies the collective pursuit of work toward a specific goal. The word itself refers to the literal act of lifting the hut, but the underlying sentiments of the act contribute to the term’s greater meaning. Although the incoming natural disaster will inevitably wreak havoc upon the land, the group is able to come together and lift a hut that no one person would be able to carry on their own. It is this sense of solidarity that empowers the neighbors and families to protect each other, and therefore uplift their communities during a time of crisis.

### ***And elsewhere...***

Community cooperation is a natural human phenomenon. With employment and entrepreneurship being the main venues that people can pursue in order to maintain their livelihoods in a capitalist system, cooperation often manifests itself in the form of worker-owned cooperatives. Throughout history, both globally and within the United States, various communities have utilized worker cooperatives as a response to social and economic crises. In the context of this paper, a “worker cooperative” refers to an organization that workers own and democratically manage through a one-person, one-vote system. The term “crisis” may refer to a variety of situations, ranging from the sudden impacts of an economic depression, to the historical and ongoing exclusion of Black and brown people from participating in the mainstream US economy. From Spain’s Mondragon Corporation, to the reclaimed factories movement in Argentina, the rich history of cooperatives among Black Americans, and the 20th century cooperative movements in Buffalo, NY, cooperatives have continuously reemerged as a strategy for marginalized communities to empower themselves and build upon their collective strength.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: one, to examine the historical role of worker cooperatives and other similar organizations as a response to crises, and two, to emphasize the often untold history of cooperative movements among communities of color, including this history as it pertains to Buffalo, NY. In pursuing both goals, I will also highlight how a cooperative's internal democratic structure enables worker-owners to play a significant role in decision-making, thus allowing for both greater business flexibility and more stable livelihoods for the cooperative's workers. For example, rather than simply closing a struggling business, worker-owners may decide to provide a new product or service in order to keep their jobs. Democratic structures also enable cooperatives to serve the best interests of their worker-owners and surrounding communities, which can effectively create wealth for marginalized groups. Moreover, I will challenge the notion that cooperatives are an inherently ineffective means of empowerment, and instead examine what factors—both internal and external—have led to their shortcomings and successes.

## **II. Cooperatives on a Global Scale**

In Europe and South America, cooperatives have taken on an increasingly important role as prominent local businesses, social service providers, or even multinational corporations. Currently, Argentina is home to several worker-owned businesses and factories that were occupied and recovered by workers who were laid off during the 1998-2002 Argentine Great Depression.<sup>2</sup> The movement to reclaim the businesses encompassed nearly 190 facilities and 10 thousand workers, indicating how widespread the movement for cooperative ownership became.<sup>3</sup> Italy has a number of “social cooperatives”—that is, social service organizations owned in part by employees, consumers, volunteers, and other stakeholders—which have thus far provided economic benefit to certain regions, and ensured the provision of services that were not met by the nation's government.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most well-known examples of currently existing worker cooperatives is the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation in the Basque region of Spain, which emerged in 1956 as a response to economic crisis and neglect.<sup>5</sup> While imperfect, Mondragon has been a frequent subject of study, and the corporation often serves as a blueprint for cooperatives in the US to follow.<sup>6</sup> The corporation has 256 independent cooperative companies and employs over 100 thousand people, making it a prime

example of how cooperatives can survive in a capitalist system and succeed on a relatively large scale.<sup>7</sup> Overall, the success of cooperatives across the world illustrates how they can serve as an empowering tool against economic crises. When the traditional government and market systems fail to adequately provide for those who are struggling, cooperatives grant people the chance to provide for their communities and build prosperity for themselves.

### **III. Cooperatives in the US**

While cooperatives have become somewhat commonplace in many countries, they are still not very prevalent in the US. Employment is dominated by large, non-democratically structured corporations, who primarily seek to serve the interests of their shareholders. Yet, despite globalization, an increased trend in wealth and income inequality, and the common narrative of American individualism, cooperatives have a rich history in the US.

The Knights of Labor (KoL), well known for their prominence during the late 1800s labor movement, championed worker cooperatives as a key goal in establishing democratic and economic power for workers. Their efforts were soon overshadowed by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), which sought to pursue unionization as the primary strategy and goal for worker empowerment.<sup>8</sup> However, contrary to common historical narratives, the cooperative movement did not disappear after the AFL's rise to power—rather, it became increasingly concentrated among Black Americans, who had been continuously excluded from the mainstream labor movement and general economy.

#### ***Economic Cooperation in Black Communities***

As described by Jessica Gordon Nembhard's *Collective Courage*, the circumstances of slavery compelled some of the first recorded instances of Black economic cooperation in the US. Mutual aid societies and intentional communities were the most prevalent approaches to cooperation. The former refers to groups of people that facilitate the sharing of clothing, food, shelter, and other resources that members can materially benefit from. The latter refers to groups of people who live in a shared neighborhood or plot of land, and partake in sustaining themselves and the land through an agreed-upon plan.

Mutual aid societies grew prominent across the North and in some southern cities, with members who were freed slaves seeking not only to support each other, but also to gather their financial savings in an effort to free their friends and families.<sup>9</sup> Societies often formed out of existing connections among religious communities, with religious meetings sometimes coinciding with mutual aid meetings.<sup>10</sup> Intentional communities were more varied in purpose. Some—such as the Northampton Association of Education and Industry—were mainly white-led, and aimed to enable their Black members to ascend to the middle class, while others—such as the Combahee River Colony—were Black-led, and focused more on creating a collectively-oriented living space outside of the industrial, employment-based economy.<sup>11</sup> Overall, both intentional communities and mutual aid societies served as common strategies for support and survival among both free and enslaved Black communities.

Even after the abolition of slavery—with the exception of forced, unpaid prison labor, which is still legal under the 13th amendment today—economic cooperation remained a vital tool for Black Americans. The early US labor and populist movements sometimes encompassed interracial solidarity, with the Knights of Labor recruiting thousands of both Black and white workers.<sup>12</sup> However, Black sharecroppers and farmers were excluded from joining major populist agrarian organizations of the late 1800s, leading them to develop the Colored Farmers' Alliance and Co-operative Union (CFNACU) in 1886.<sup>13</sup>

The CFNACU was a direct parallel to the National Farmers' Alliance, as well as a clear successor of the smaller mutual aid societies of the early to mid-1800s. Expanding upon the more localized versions of mutual aid, the CFNACU delivered a two-pronged strategy for empowerment—one, to facilitate the sharing of funds, material resources, and knowledge between its members, and two, to protect its members through policy advocacy.<sup>14</sup> Fundamentally, the CFNACU was a key example of how Black economic cooperation rose to an institutional level within the US, specifically in light of the damaging post-Civil War economic conditions and exclusionary movements in the mainstream political sphere.

### ***Shifting to Worker Cooperatives***

Black worker cooperatives began to emerge during the late 19th and early 20th century, with mutual aid societies serving as their main precursor.

As mutual aid societies became increasingly prevalent in the form of religious communities, fraternal organizations, farmers' alliances, and other groups, mutual insurance companies—in which a group of people jointly own an insurance fund—arose as well. Mutual insurance companies laid the economic groundwork for how a worker cooperative may function. Gordon Nembhard explains that in a mutual insurance company, a group of people would contribute their resources to a fund that aimed to benefit all of the company's members. Likewise, early worker cooperatives sometimes incorporated a joint-stock ownership model, in which workers would purchase a share in order to support the company's development, and later receive payments from the cooperative's profits. While these cooperatives did not necessarily entail a specific structure for democratic governance, they were a key model for the worker-owned organizations that followed.

W.E.B. Du Bois utilizes this model to help define the Chesapeake Marine Railway and Dry Dock Company as an early worker cooperative.<sup>15</sup> He argues that the shipbuilding company was "collectively owned" in the vein that it operated from funds that all workers contributed through purchasing a stock share, and the workers later retrieved those funds and more when they were paid.<sup>16</sup> Little is known about its level of democratic governance, if there was any. While the company consisted of both Black and white workers, its founding was rooted directly in an effort to counter racial injustice.<sup>17</sup> After experiencing frequent antagonism from white workers at another company in the shipbuilding industry—who repeatedly boycotted for all the Black workers to be fired—a group of Black workers formed the company in an effort to safely maintain their jobs.<sup>18</sup> Lasting from 1865 to 1883, the company's success was a testament to the ability of Black workers to utilize economic cooperation to their advantage in response to racist exclusion, specifically in the context of challenging the typical employer-employee relationship.

More formalized worker cooperatives surfaced frequently during the Great Depression and the Civil Rights Movement, with Black women leading key initiatives—including the Northeast Self-Help Cooperative and the Freedom Quilting Bee.<sup>19</sup> The former, which emerged in Washington, D.C. during the Great Depression, was founded by Nannie Helen Burroughs as a means to provide vocational employment

and education for young Black adults.<sup>20</sup> Upon immediate success, the cooperative shortly grew into an amalgamation of cooperatives, which also incorporated consumer memberships.<sup>21</sup> As a whole, the Northeast Self-Help Cooperative's success enabled Black women to find employment, provide for their families during an uncertain time, and improve accessibility to food and other consumer goods within their communities.

The Freedom Quilting Bee was also successful, albeit in a slightly different context. Located in rural Alabama, the cooperative was founded in 1967 by a group of Black women who planned to sew and sell quilts together.<sup>22</sup> The women were also involved in the Civil Rights Movement and had faced evictions from their homes as a result, leading them to create a cooperative both as a means to provide for themselves and to purchase and sell affordable land to others who had lost their homes under similar circumstances.<sup>23</sup> Just within a year, the Freedom Quilting Bee was able to purchase 23 acres of land for redistribution.<sup>24</sup> Their story illustrates how economic cooperation served as a valuable tool during a time of both sociopolitical and personal tumult, along with a testament to their effective and altruistic leadership.

### ***A Historical Outline of Economic Cooperation Among Indigenous, Latinx, and AAPI Groups in the US***

Cooperation has always been a noted economic strategy for BIPOC in the US. The ramifications of what cooperation may look like depends very much upon the given community and the historical context of the time. Prior to European colonization, Indigenous groups also pursued economic cooperation. For the Ohlone, Miwok, and Wintun tribes of present-day Northern California, cooperation was the most practical means of livelihood and social organization—families would live in a village of about 250 people, and neighborhood members would hunt and gather food that would later be divided among all in the community.<sup>25</sup> Such practices indicate the pragmatism of cooperation—even when a crisis of systemic oppression or sudden disaster is not readily apparent, cooperation still serves as the most effective tool in ensuring an equitable distribution of resources and power.

Additionally, economic cooperation—particularly in the form of worker cooperatives—has been a key strategy for immigrant communities all throughout the past three centuries. During the late 1800s, a number of Chinese immigrants—who had initially arrived in California as contract workers—began their own laundromats as

worker cooperatives.<sup>26</sup> More recently, cooperatives have become increasingly present among Latinx immigrant communities in Philadelphia, with the development of Masa Cooperativa (an agricultural worker cooperative) and the PWA Handymen Cooperative (a construction cooperative).<sup>27</sup> Immigrant-owned worker cooperatives have also played a key role in the rise of cooperatives in New York City—where as of 2019, there were already over 50 cooperatives in 20 different industries.<sup>28a</sup> Among some of these cooperatives, there are a few different beauty salons owned by trans Latina women, some of whom are undocumented.<sup>28b</sup> After being exploited or discriminated against in previous jobs, they began their own cooperatives as a means of entrepreneurship and securing a more stable livelihood.<sup>29a, 29b</sup>

Perhaps one of the most famous modern worker cooperatives in the US is Cooperative Home Care Associates (CHCA) in the Bronx, a 2,000-person organization of home health aides.<sup>30</sup> CHCA is particularly notable in its effort to expand cooperative ownership into the broad sphere of domestic work—a form of labor that predominantly employs Black and brown women, and has been historically undervalued due to its connotations with femininity.<sup>31</sup> Overall, exclusion from the mainstream economy plays a major role in spurring the development of worker cooperatives among immigrant communities, with language barriers, limited access to unionization, and other systemic factors motivating a group's inclination for cooperation.

### ***Defining Crisis & Understand Economic Cooperation***

Nearly all of the examples discussed above pertain to groups who face an ongoing crisis of exclusion from the mainstream economy. While the term “crisis” typically refers to a sudden momentary disaster, it can also be a lingering and unremitting reality for many. And unlike some seemingly temporary crises—like a storm or a fatal accident—the ongoing crisis of economic exclusion for Black and brown people in the US is intentional. This crisis is informed by historical and political dynamics, in which those in power secure their interests through a system of severe economic inequity, white supremacy, and other constructs.

Also, the general crisis of exclusion often unleashes several more related crises. In Buffalo, the marginalization of Black communities has led to food insecurity, unemployment, among other major concerns that inhibit people's wellbeing. As such, economic cooperation has been a necessary strategy among those who experience the



ongoing crisis of exclusion, since cooperation is one of the few ways in which communities can pool resources for survival. Moreover, cooperation enables people to challenge the notion that the only way to escape poverty and become upwardly mobile is to exploit others. Instead, cooperation calls for a democratic system, in which all members of a group are able to benefit equitably from the group's success, and have input on the group's direction. However, these values are not always easy to practice, and the influences of both internal and external power dynamics often influence the success of economic cooperation. In the following section, I will explore how certain crises have given rise to cooperative enterprises among Buffalo's Black communities, and analyze what factors have impacted each efforts' outcomes.

#### **IV. Cooperatives in Buffalo**

##### ***Citizens Cooperative Society of Buffalo***

Founded in 1928, the Citizens Cooperative Society of Buffalo ("Citizens Co-op") was one of the first documented efforts of economic cooperation within the city's Black community. The society launched its debut project—the Citizens Cooperative Grocery Market—in 1931, but after failing to adequately compete with other stores, the market closed down a year later.<sup>32</sup> The society dismantled itself shortly after. Dr. Ezekiel E. Nelson, a Black physician and one of Citizen Co-op's key leaders, reflects upon his experiences with the society in a later interview. According to Dr. Nelson, the key impetus for creating the society was the ongoing economic and social crisis for Black Americans, particularly those who were living in Buffalo. While describing how he felt when he had first moved to Buffalo in 1917, he recounts the following:

"I found Buffalo had nothing for Negroes. Nothing that Negroes could be proud of. No jobs, no work in Buffalo...and there weren't many Negroes here...the conditions were in such bad shape until we began [sic] to notice them. We had to notice them!"<sup>33</sup>

When Dr. Nelson moved to Buffalo, the city's main issue was not just a lack of economic opportunity—it was a lack of community. Although more Black families began to settle in Buffalo during the 1920s, there were still minimal formalized connections between them.<sup>34</sup> Citizens Co-op was one of the first attempts to build a more formalized network between families, and thus raise the notion that their

disadvantageous material conditions were not permanent—rather, there was potential for them to create wealth through collaborating with each other.

Also, the historical context of the 1920s-30s provided further motive for Citizens Co-op's creation. Dr. Monroe Fordham, a professor of History at Buffalo State College, explains that Buffalo's Black residents experienced relatively high rates of poverty and unemployment during the 1920's.<sup>35</sup> His assessment indicates that despite the common assumption that the US (and Buffalo) seemed prosperous at the time, an acute economic crisis was already present within the Black community. The Great Depression only accentuated existing inequities, thus prompting a community-led effort for change. Although the society was unable to continue throughout the Depression, it reemerged soon after under a new name: the Buffalo Consumers' Economic Society, and later, the Buffalo Cooperative Economic Society.

### ***Buffalo Cooperative Economic Society***

The Buffalo Cooperative Economic Society (BCES) was founded in 1935—only two years after the end of Citizen Co-op. Originally known as the Buffalo Consumers' Economic Society, BCES changed its name in 1939. The organization's members agreed that although consumer cooperation was their original focus, they were also interested in possibly creating worker and producer co-ops.<sup>36</sup>

Dr. Nelson believed that one of Citizen Co-op's main flaws was that the group lacked community support. Community members were not necessarily opposed to the idea of cooperatives, but they were disinterested. In order to garner support, Dr. Nelson and other leaders created an educational curriculum on cooperative economics, which included the following topics: "'Economic Status of the American Negro,' 'Importance of Self-Help and Cooperative Economics to the Negro,' [and] 'Techniques of Operating a Cooperative Business,'" among others.<sup>37</sup> They hosted classes on a weekly basis, aiming to help community members understand how cooperative economics could help them. The topics were also taught with frequent references to religion. By asserting that cooperation was a "Christian duty"—rather than an economic strategy alone—leaders were able to help people understand the moral imperative behind cooperative economics, and limit the extent to which the public could label the society's members as socialists (which was a derogatory term at the time, according to Dr. Fordham).<sup>38</sup>

Overall, the educational campaign was extremely effective at bolstering community engagement, and the increased community engagement led to relatively successful projects. Nearly 200 families joined the society during the first three years of the campaign, and over half of them became active members.<sup>39</sup> After the campaign ended in 1939, BCES launched two major initiatives: a credit union and a grocery store. The credit union had nearly \$37 thousand in capital, and the grocery store had a sales volume of about \$387 thousand (both in 2020 dollars).<sup>40</sup> As the projects grew and thrived, BCES became increasingly well-established. The organization continued to gain membership within the Buffalo community, and it also became an affiliate of the Eastern Cooperative League.<sup>41</sup>

The exact organizational structure of BCES, its credit union, and its grocery store are relatively ambiguous and unknown, but overall, the group's success was a testament to the viability of cooperative economics at the time. In an interview, Dr. Nelson implies that the store was a consumer cooperative, but he does not specify whether it was also a worker cooperative.<sup>42</sup> The store only had three full time employees, and the BCES board of directors decided to hire additional part-time employees.<sup>43</sup> In both Dr. Nelson's interview and Dr. Fordham's records, there is no implication that the full time employees were involved in any organizational decision-making. Therefore, there is not enough evidence to suggest that the grocery store was a worker cooperative. However, while consumer cooperatives and worker cooperatives are distinct concepts, they still both espouse the ideals and strategy of cooperation.

The grocery store's success lasted until 1947, when sales began to fall and BCES's membership plateaued.<sup>44</sup> The store and credit union finally closed when society officially disbanded in 1961. An internal memo titled "Causes of failure" lists six reasons for BCES's outcome.<sup>45</sup> Some causes were external, such as confusing business regulation policies, families being forced to move out of the Ellicott District, the 1950's recessions, and increased rents for meeting and storage spaces.<sup>46</sup> Some were internal, such as the difficulty in retaining members. Some may have been both internal and external, such as the inability to compete with other grocery stores entering the area.<sup>47</sup>

What does the story of BCES mean for the capacity of cooperatives to maintain themselves through crises? In order to fully understand BCES's situation, and relate the organization's story to the concept of workplace democracy, one needs to learn

about the extent to which democracy existed within the organization. Aside from the clear ways in which cooperatives aim to redistribute and share financial and material wealth, they also exist to ensure that power is distributed fairly and democratically within a group of people. Who had power within BCES, and which voices were heard the most? What was the balance of power within the grocery store, and within the classrooms? How did internal democracy enable the organization to become more or less adaptable to crisis, if at all? Unfortunately, BCES's documents and Dr. Nelson's interview both leave these questions largely unanswered. However, the assumption that BCES lacked resiliency while also dismisses the organization's clear success and ignores the fact that the existing alternative economic system was likely worse. Overall, the society's ability to emerge at all under the conditions of racism and economic oppression demonstrates clear resiliency, albeit impermanent.

### ***East Side Community Cooperative (ECCO)***

In September 1968—nearly seven years after BCES officially ended—East Side Community Cooperative (ECCO) was formed. ECCO began as a buying club, and was converted into a cooperative grocery store in August 1971.<sup>48</sup> The grocery store's creation was funded through the Buffalo Model Cities program, which was part of a federal anti-poverty initiative.<sup>49</sup> Model Cities programs were introduced throughout predominantly Black communities in the US, aiming to incorporate local decision-making and community leadership in economic development.

After operating for seven years, ECCO closed in 1975. In a 2006 documentary on the Buffalo Model Cities Program, founder William E. West reflects upon ECCO and its relative success. According to West, while the organization's members were initially very active, only about 5 percent of its membership showed up to monthly meetings within a few years.<sup>50</sup> He also explains that ECCO closed due to the aftermath of a robbery, claiming:

“[The incident] made...our staff rather nervous...[and] since this was not their livelihood, they were not particular about carrying on the operation, and I felt that because it was not my livelihood, I couldn't ask someone to volunteer their time...on something that was not a matter of life and death to them.”<sup>51</sup>

West's explanation suggests that since the workers' livelihood did not depend on the store, perhaps their labor was unpaid, or a form of side employment. West himself was a foreman with the US Postal Service, and thus, ECCO was separate from his work life.<sup>52</sup> The fact that ECCO's most involved members' livelihoods did not financially depend on the store turned out to be a net positive, since the store's closure did not substantially harm them. However, it is possible that their limited relationship with the store led to an overall lack of commitment, which ultimately contributed to the store's end.

ECCO's story somewhat resembles that of BCES. There were clear similarities between the two—mainly, the effort to fight poverty by opening a grocery store. Both were more consumer-oriented—their advertising emphasized food accessibility, rather than employment opportunities. Moreover, even if paths for leadership and democratic participation within employment were present at ECCO, it is unclear whether this would have enabled the organization to succeed after the robbery.

In a cooperative, members and worker-owners should hold both stake and power in the organization. In this context, stake may refer to one's livelihood. On a more general level, stake is the extent to which the organization's outcomes influence one's personal outcomes. Power refers to one's ability to control the organization's decision making, and thus influence the organization's outcomes. There is little indication of how much power ECCO's workers and members had, but as evidenced by the Model Cities documentary, it seems that they had little stake in the organization's fate. As a result, ECCO found itself unable to continue.

### ***Our Market***

Nearly two decades after the end of ECCO, another campaign to develop a cooperative grocery store in Buffalo's East Side emerged. The store—Our Market—never fully came into fruition, but the campaign received much grassroots support. From door-to-door canvassing and open weekly meetings, the Our Market campaign received over three thousand signatures of approval.<sup>52</sup> Local officials were also enthusiastic about the campaign—Mayor Anthony Masiello was a vocal supporter, and City Hall agreed to help finance the project.<sup>53</sup>

What was the crisis that gave rise to Our Market? The simple answer: a food desert, coupled with the ongoing effects of systemic oppression. In 1995, the area surrounding the corner of Fillmore Avenue and East Utica Street in Buffalo's East Side

had not had a grocery store for over a decade.<sup>54</sup> This was a reality faced by many other low-income communities of color across the nation. Alluding to this issue, Mayor Masiello asserted that Our Market would fill “a tremendous void” in the East Side, and that the store would create much needed jobs for the community.<sup>55</sup>

Although the campaign was largely framed around the idea that consumer cooperation would make groceries more affordable, there is a case that worker cooperation would also be an effective solution to food deserts. Community members operating and working in their own grocery store would be best fit to serve their community’s needs, since their experiences and interests would be inherently similar to that of their neighbors. Major grocery chains have historically attempted to maximize profit by launching large, one-story stores, which could only be built in low-density, suburban areas.<sup>56</sup> If a grocery store were run by its workers, there is a higher likelihood that workers would prioritize their community’s needs and find a way to situate the store in an accessible location.

So why was Our Market unsuccessful? Dr. Curtis Haynes, a professor of Economics at Buffalo State and a key leader in the campaign, claims that the project failed due to limited institutional support and a lack of organizational structure. In a 2001 reflection, Dr. Haynes argues that a local city council member’s vocal opposition to Our Market damaged the campaign’s reputation. The council member did not want to risk his career by supporting an initiative that could potentially fail, and so he publicly spread the idea that a grocery store could not be collectively owned and operated.<sup>57</sup> As a result, venture capitalists and banks were hesitant to support the effort as well.<sup>58</sup> Although news articles at the time indicated that the city government did support Our Market, it is possible that the news articles only mentioned positive support by name, and broad arguments against the campaign were not attributed to the names of any person or organization.

As for organizational structure, Dr. Haynes indicated that there was no clear leadership or system of representation. Also, much of the campaign labor was voluntary and unpaid, meaning that they may not have held much material stake in the campaign. He argues that an unclear leadership structure led to incoherent goals and minimal accountability for all involved, thus leading to the organization’s failure. Also, often a few people would dominate the conversation, leaving little room for a meaningful discussion. Perhaps if leadership had been more formalized—while still

incorporating democratic decision-making—the campaign and organization would have had a clearer path to success.

In June 2020, I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Haynes about his experience with Our Market and his views on cooperative economics as a whole. One of my first questions was whether he felt Our Market fit the “cooperation as a response to crisis” framework, to which he replied that yes, the campaign was fueled by a powerful catalyst—that is, the food desert and ongoing economic distress.<sup>59</sup> Reiterating points from his 2001 reflection, he quickly recognized that the institutional support and internal structures were simply not strong enough to succeed.<sup>60</sup> Dr. Haynes also expressed that Our Market led him to reconfigure his thoughts on cooperation, and expressed the following: “Initially, I thought that cooperatives were the answer. Then...I realized that cooperation is a tool. Our real goal is human betterment.”<sup>61</sup>

Throughout our interview, I learned that Dr. Haynes’s conception of “human betterment” is best defined as a process in which individuals willingly build upon their strengths, and are motivated to do so by their love for themselves, their craft, and for others.<sup>62</sup> He explained that the process of human betterment requires a general shift away from economic frameworks of scarcity—which focus on managing a limited amount of resources—and instead, move toward a framework of abundance—which focuses on developing people’s skills in order to build a more equitable, utilitarian society.<sup>63</sup>

Worker cooperatives relate directly to the framework of abundance because they allow for a decision-making process in which all people can contribute their thoughts, rather than just those in power. Dr. Haynes’s particular framework of abundance—which he calls Black political economy—focuses on how to best facilitate the process of human betterment for Black Americans, and how cooperation serves as a tool in that process.<sup>64</sup> Essentially, the theoretical framework of Black political economy fits intrinsically with the strategy of creating and operating cooperatives.

However, as Dr. Haynes expressed in a 2012 speech: “Practice is a lot thornier than theory.”<sup>65</sup> The actual process of reaching consensus and efficiently utilizing democracy was extremely difficult for the Our Market campaign. In his 2001 reflection, Dr. Haynes writes that the cooperative movement would benefit from an educational campaign that explained theoretical cooperative principles, and demonstrated how such principles may manifest in practice.<sup>66</sup> As of 2020, he has delivered on his past

suggestion. During our interview, he informed me that he had done recent work with Say Yes to Education Buffalo—namely, by teaching teenagers and young adults about the economic framework of abundance and its relationship to cooperative economic principles.<sup>67</sup>

Overall, Dr. Haynes's main finding from Our Market—that is, the idea that cooperatives are a tool for human betterment—fits with the ongoing theme that education is an essential strategy for bolstering community support of cooperatives. People are naturally motivated to learn about what they can use to improve their own spirit, material conditions, and communities. Their initiative to learn can enable a bridge between practice and theory, thus allowing them to more effectively use cooperation in pursuit of human betterment.

The story of Our Market also illustrates how power dynamics, political issues, and a lack of internal organization can thwart a community's efforts for change. Had there been an internal system that ensured both accountability and an open, egalitarian dialogue between members, perhaps the organization would have been able to continue. Likewise, the influence of the city council, banks, and venture capitalists further hindered the campaign, making it difficult for Our Market to gather resources and effectively develop its organization. The interests of a few powerful individuals and institutions—both within and outside the organization—overrode the mobilization of passionate community members, thus limiting the extent to which Our Market could be a truly democratic project. If the conflicts of politics and power dynamics had not been as influential, then the organization may have been more successful.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the many stories of cooperatives throughout the history of Buffalo, the US, and the world illustrate their capabilities in empowerment and resiliency. Worker cooperatives across the globe have proven how cooperatives can be a successful organizational model on a large scale, as well as how cooperation emerges as an effective response to various economic crises. Instances of economic cooperation in the US—mainly in the form of mutual aid societies and cooperatively owned businesses—have also exhibited how cooperation serves as a tool for people to use in response to ongoing exclusion from the mainstream economy. Buffalo's history in particular highlights how although the city's cooperatives may have not necessarily



been as long-lasting as some of their international counterparts, they are still a testament to the significance of cooperation among marginalized communities.

When discussing the history of cooperatives, there is one particularly important question: why are these stories—particularly, the stories that pertain to communities of color—so often untold? Perhaps the answer is that these stories are not discussed because they challenge the powerful people and institutions that benefit from the presence of undemocratic and economically inequitable structures. Yet, there is still much to learn from past examples of economic cooperation. Buffalo's examples illustrate how a given set of disadvantageous social and economic conditions necessitate cooperation, as well as how cooperation can sometimes be confounded with internal and external conflicts of power. It is this type of examination that can improve upon current strategies, and thus inform the future of economic cooperation.

## Endnotes

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