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# Radical democratic citizenship at work in an adverse economic environment: the case of workers' co-operatives in Scotland

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## ABSTRACT

Worker co-operatives generally embrace democracy in their ownership and decision-making structure. However, the commitment to a flat organisational hierarchy, implementation of equal wage policy, and the pursuit of a strong ethical policy position these co-operatives on the highly principled side of the co-operative landscape in the UK. This paper draws on an ethnographic study of five such principled workers' co-operatives operating in a most adverse economic context, the UK capitalist market economy. The study explores collective decision-making and the personal investment as two important political aspects. Workplace democracy and the personal are interlinked paradigms for political praxis – as practiced democracy, immanent critique of the hegemonic corporate way of organising work, as well as prefiguring a viable alternative. Taking the perspective of radical worker co-operatives, this article caters to an urgently needed conceptualisation of radical democratic citizenship at work.

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## Introduction

Especially in times of crisis – currently exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic – when the economic, political and social flaws of the capitalist system are acutely felt by the majority of people, particularly those from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, the need for radical democratic grass-roots change is more pressing than ever. For this we need to look into democratic grass-roots alternatives that provide economic security, resilience, a dignified working life but also actively nurture and practice direct democracy. In a similar vein, Vieta (2020) makes a compelling case for workers' self-management in the case of Argentina since the economic crises at the turn of the millennium. Underlying this article is the conviction that in

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order to capture, understand, but also promote such democratic change a new form of citizenship is needed that is rooted in democratic political practice on the grass-roots level rather than entitlement: radical democratic citizenship. To this end, this article makes a case for radical workers' co-operatives as a site for such citizenship.

Radical democratic grass-roots politics is practiced in various social and geographical spheres. Vivid examples include the Anti-Globalisation movements (Maeckelbergh 2012), the Zapatista movement (Harvey 1998) and feminist community development (Emejulu 2011). Radical democratic citizenship is not rooted in the nation-state, is not an entitlement. It thrives in what Isin and Nielsen term 'acts of citizenship' (Isin and Greg 2008). A direct democracy that is grounded in the active, in doing, in making; for example making claims to justice and equality. It gives space to conflicts and a democratic way of addressing them. To be sure radical democracy 'seeks to put forward a way of life' as a sustained commitment to lived democracy where the political is a 'constant challenge to the limits of politics' (Claire and Brown 2002, 2). Such concerns are rarely addressed in the sphere of work, yet we surely also encounter radical democracy there, and literally at work in radical workers' co-operatives. Here it finds application in alternative ways of organising work and making the objective of work a political project – posited against, yet operating within the adverse, hegemonic economic system of market capitalism. A closer look at the collective decision-making of worker-members of radical workers' co-operatives, as I show in this article, reveals real spaces of compelling radical politics in practice; a realm of politics that is based in daily practice and is not primarily about entitlement, but about making changes on the grass-roots level. Of course, entitlement to legally work and as well as legal requirements on the workplace are regulated by the state. However, below that state-regulated layer, the grass-roots of the world of work is a fertile soil for radical politics. Radical workers' co-operatives nurture this sphere of radical grass-roots politics. And these features of radical grass-roots democracy in workers' co-operatives are what forms a part of the fundamental 'doing' – the praxis – in the radical democratic form of citizenship.

Workers' co-operatives constitute a particular space of politics – not only in their democratic ownership but also in governance. Numerous case studies, theoretical investigations and critical analyses have fruitfully explored workers' co-operatives, workplace democracy and workers' self-management (Sobering 2019; Langmead 2017; Bernstein 2012; Coates and Topham 2005; Crouch and Frank 1983; Jossa 2014; Shukaitis 2010; Mellor, Hannah, and Stirling 1988; Ness and Azzellini 2011; Rothschild and Allen Whitt 1986; Wajcman 1983). Rothschild (2000) shows how workers' co-operatives have pursued a flattening of workplace hierarchy, normally a crucial aspect of organisational inequality, in order to enable and

stimulate participation in decision-making. Yet formal consolidation of power, pressure on consensus-based decision-making often leading to reducing time and space dedicated for it, a seeming degeneration of workplace democracy, often tends to emerge when it comes to problems of economic efficiency, usually imposed by the market imperative to stay economically competitive (Catherine and Evelyn 2009). However, other studies challenge the degeneration thesis (Cornforth 1995) by showing how that the practice of consensus-based workplace democracy in workers' co-operatives can provide a creative space to practice equality, nurture a 'solidaristic ethic' and stimulate skill-sharing and alignment of the individual with the collective (Langmead 2017, 87). In addition, informal communication amongst worker-members which, on the one hand might fuel concerns over efficiency with regards to decision-making, on the other hand informs the debates taking place at general assemblies or virtual platforms for debates, and thereby increases the influence of the worker-members as well as contributing to accountability within the co-operative (Sobering 2019).

Prominent research points out that from a political perspective workers' co-operatives represent a 'prefigurative' and 'immanent' form of praxis (Winn 2015; Shukaitis 2010; Sandoval 2016). Prefigurative, because their democratic ownership and governance present an embodied practice and experience of a democratic alternative for organising work. As such, radical workers' co-operatives harness a sustained practice critical of the capitalist mode of production, of wage labour. They can aptly be considered as a 'laboratory for the creation of forms of social cooperation and subjectivities that arguably would form the basis of a post-capitalist world' (Shukaitis 2010, 63). On the flip side in the radical workers' co-operatives we encounter the immanent critique of the capitalist configuration of wage labour and the mode of production through the 'particular co-operative constitution of labour' which points us to 'what is, and therefore what *is not* (but *could be*)' (Winn 2015; Postone 1993). Through this political practice, radical workers' co-operatives may nurture what Holloway (2010) calls 'cracks' in the capitalist system. A metaphor for the interstices of vulnerabilities and small scale resistances that may after all fissure a seemingly solid rock through cumulatively producing 'the crumbling of seemingly impenetrable edifices of power' (Cornish et al. 2016, 116). This political practice of prefiguration and immanent critique combined with the transformative every-day experience of lived democracy and pursuit of non-abstract labour mean that radical workers' co-operatives are organisations where radical democratic citizenship is practiced.

This article explores collective and democratic decision-making in radical workers' co-operatives. Bringing the worker-members' lived experience with collective decision-making as well as the way they go about collective decision-making into focus, my ethnographic study reveals the particular appreciation and space that is given to the worker-members as human beings in these processes as opposed to their capacity as workers only. Radical democratic politics in radical workers' co-operatives embraces the worker-member as a whole human being which means they reject the liberal ideology that the political is separate from the private and economic. It also illustrates important personal aspects of the social complexity of self-governance and workplace democracy in radical workers' co-operatives. In addition, this article sheds light on the external pressures from the market environment that challenge and impinge on the practice of workplace democracy.

My findings add to existing knowledge on workplace democracy in hope of a better understanding of the personal investment of running a workplace democratically. Furthermore, this article demonstrates that worker-members engage in radical democratic politics not only by practicing workplace democracy as a prefigurative and immanent critique (Winn 2015; Shukaitis 2010; Sandoval 2016) but shows how by doing so they practice a certain form of resistance to the adverse market imperative and abstract work (Holloway 2010). This is the prerequisite for the broader aim of this article: to outline how we could fruitfully constitute the workplace democracy that worker-members of radical workers' co-operatives live and practice on a daily basis as a form of radical democratic citizenship.

I will start with an introduction to the five workers' co-operatives I studied and then outline how I studied them. I understand democratic governance as political – and part and parcel of the political as praxis. By drawing from both observations during fieldwork as well as semi-structured interviews with workers of the co-operatives, I reveal the experiential and social complexity that characterise the practices involved in democratic decision-making.

## **Studying radical workers' co-operatives**

### ***The context: a sketch***

Although workers' co-operatives are a nationwide recognised form, the type of co-operatives I studied is rather rare. In the UK the umbrella organisation for co-operatives, including workers' co-operatives, is Co-operatives UK (Co-operatives 2020). There also exist other co-operative entities in the UK that actively promote workers' co-operatives, such as the Radical Routes Network and Co-operative Technologists (CoTech). The identity of the co-operative movement is outlined by values and principles (ICA 2020). The values are self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equity, solidarity, and equality (ibid.).

By 2020, Scotland was home to 31 co-operatives classified as owned by workers, 132 by consumers, and 26 by tenants.<sup>1</sup> This does not include co-operatives owned by self-employed workers or via employee's trusts. In addition to the Co-operative Party, to support and further the development of the co-operative economy on a political level, the Scottish Parliament in collaboration with Co-ops UK runs a cross-party group on co-operatives. When attending their meetings I observed that some members of co-operatives or people involved with co-operatives in some other capacity attend these. From my attendances as well as looking up the minutes from other meetings I gained the impression that community and employee buyouts as well as housing co-operatives attracted the group's main interest. Although in the most recent meeting on 01.03.2021 includes a call for 'an entrepreneurs' scheme aimed at establishing new worker co-ops' (Co-Operatives 2021). In addition to that, Co-operative Development Scotland (CDS), a subsidiary of Scottish Enterprise a public entity of the Scottish Government, is tasked with supporting the growth in implementation of co-operative models. However, it promotes employee ownership models – which are fundamentally different than workers' co-operatives – and consortium- and community- co-operatives. Thus workers' co-operatives are not actively promoted by CDS, but they provide support for them where possible. In the industries of the radical workers' co-operatives I studied the Scottish Organic Producers Association (SOPA) as well as CoTech play an important supportive role in Scotland's co-operative landscape.

While there are existing networks and associations for co-operatives, workers' co-operatives remain a very small proportion of companies. The number of workers' co-operatives adopting equal pay and deeply democratic decision-making is even smaller. This means that in the capitalist market economy these radical workers' co-operatives have to compete with an overwhelming number of firms run on exploitative lines.

### ***The five radical workers' co-operatives***

For this article I draw from my doctoral research on radical workers' co-operatives in Scotland. The objective was to explore the political characteristics of these co-ops, of which I focus here on collective ownership and decision-making. For this research project I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 2017–2018. The ethnographic approach enabled me to explore the social, economic and organisational complexities that worker members are immersed in. Only by this I was able to explore, identify and grasp the political characteristics of the complex workplace in these radical workers' co-operatives: for example, how they organise and run general meetings, how they make decisions, communication, what working in a co-operative means to them, and challenges within the co-

operative as well as external constraints which are fundamental for a substantive understanding of the politics at work, how they pursue a political agenda within and with their work, with their business. An important part of this is played out over time through informal interactions – as relational processes – and meaning-making, and therefore makes an ethnography a particularly suitable approach (Sobering 2019; Desmond 2014; Morrill and Fine 1997).

During this period I joined four workers' co-operatives and visited a fifth, all based in Scotland. I selected them according to their adoption of an equal wage policy and no formal hierarchies.<sup>2</sup> The first, Amazing Aliment Co-operative is a food shop which provides the community with delicious vegan and vegetarian wholefoods. Founded early 2010s, the co-operative currently has six worker-members, two of whom are founders. They have a strong commitment to support small suppliers, where possible source food locally and from organic producers, actively support land right movements such as the Zapatistas – whilst at the same time keeping their staples as affordable as possible.

Second, Radiant Resolution Co-operative was founded in the late 1980s. It started with print and graphic design – inspired by the political activism of some of the founder members. Later on, work expanded into web development and hosting but stayed true to a strong ethical policy. No corporate projects would be taken on and incoming projects need to be assessed as ethically sound. At the time of fieldwork Radiant Resolution Co-operative had four worker-members, including one of the founders.

Third, Fab Films Co-operative is an ethical media and film-making co-operative with six worker-members, amongst them two of the founders. The co-operative was launched in the early 2000 and covers a wide range of media services, from media production to broadcast TV, animation, social media management and media training. They closely work with the public sector, do not accept corporate projects and have a keen interest in productions that are socially and politically important and topical, such as on domestic violence and community initiatives for example. The co-operative actively promotes participatory film-making, runs workshops to further nurture empowerment of the people they work with.

Fourth, in the early 1990s a group of activists launched Pristine Publishing Co-operative. Committed to education through literature encompassing areas such as Feminism, Racism, Anarchism and Marxism, they have printed and distributed zines and books and joined anarchist book fairs in the UK and Europe. Still today two members keep up the important dissemination of knowledge through literature, carefully curate the catalogue and attend anarchist book fairs.

Fifth, Fantastic Foods Co-operative is a wholefoods wholesaler founded in the late 1970s to supply ethically and locally produced wholefoods, they are currently one of the longest operating workers' co-operatives in Scotland. Currently there are 52 worker-members. Food politics lies at the heart of this workers' co-operative.

I joined each as intern-researcher, a twofold role that allowed me to participate in the operational business and experience tasks and the workplace as a co-worker. Oftentimes I learned interesting aspects about the workers' co-operative, for example about their political agenda, from worker-members when they trained me up in tasks or when I was helping them with their work – or simply when going on lunch or coffee breaks with them. During my stay with them I switched between the roles of 'participant observer and "observant participant"' (Sobering 2019, 419; Moeran 2009). When working with different members I had the chance to engage them in small-talk, for example about their work, about their co-operative, about their lives, politics. Where possible I would take notes during work or after work. I spent six weeks with Amazing Aliment Co-operative, then 6 weeks with Fab Films Co-operative, and then Radiant Resolution Co-operative for 8 weeks. After that I took on a part-time paid position with Radiant Resolution Co-operative for 3 months.

At the end of my intern-researcher sojourn I conducted 20 semi-structured interviews, lasting on one hour on average, mostly with worker-members because they are the ones who make the decisions. Most interviews took place outside of the workplace. A dedicated time and space allowed the interviewee to think about the questions, give an answer as well as gave both of us the chance to elaborate on and further explore aspects the conversation came across. Such would have been impossible during work. In the case of Pristine Publishing Co-operative I only conducted semi-structured interviews with the two worker-members – due to size and resource constraints. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Subsequently I analysed the transcripts in NVivo, a software available for the purpose of qualitative data analysis. Together with the information from the field notes I captured and developed themes related to the politics of work and life in these co-operatives. I have changed the names of the workers' co-operatives as well as the interviewees to ensure best possible anonymity.

Upon finishing my work for Radiant Resolution Co-operative, the opportunity to visit Fantastic Foods Co-operative for a week as researcher came up. There I helped a bit in the warehouse but was mainly observing, having chats and studying internal organisational documents such as minutes from general assemblies. A few months later I was offered a part-time job, first deliveries, then in the warehouse and occasionally helping out in manufacturing, which I did for 1 year.

All workers' co-operatives I studied in this research project allowed me to join their general assemblies, in the capacity of participant observer. Fantastic Foods Co-operative also invited me to join their Strategy Day in 2020. I took notes on all attendances.

### **Why 'radical'?**

What makes the workers' co-operatives I studied 'radical'? Well it would certainly be a misconception to imagine every worker running around in anarchist gear, face masks and a molotov cocktail in hand, ready to have a violent go at neoliberal, conservative, authoritarian governments and their stooges, the police. The five cooperatives in my research are radical because, in the context of an adverse economic system, which favours the capitalist organisation of work, they harness a particularly egalitarian workplace by employing an equal wage policy and no formal hierarchy. They also pursue a particularly strong ethical agenda, for example through actively supporting fair and local production, political projects such as the Zapatistas or women coffee producers or Palestinian farmers, working on projects that tackle socially meaningful issues, or deliberate rejection of projects for corporations. In addition, Amazing Aliment Coop, Radiant Resolution Coop and Pristine Publishing Coop operate on a consensus-based decision-making model. Fab Films Coop usually makes decisions based on consensus but is not formally bound to it and there have been instances of using majority vote in the past. Fantastic Foods Coop currently operates on a majority vote system, however worker-members use general assemblies for substantive debates and deliberation – and they have begun to explore sociocracy as a form of governance system with a structure of interconnected circles rooted in consent-based decision-making which the worker-members are considering to deploy in future (Sociocracy for All 2021).

### **Making collective decisions**

In these radical workers' co-operatives, each member has an equal share in the business and this is tied to a democratic workplace governance model of direct democracy (Rothschild and Allen Whitt 1986). In addition to that, the non-hierarchical organisational setup and equal wage policy in place boost and in a way enable democratic decision-making (Cannell 2016). Collective ownership and workplace democracy imply that every members' voice matters, is considered of equal value, and all members are encouraged to engage because they have an equal share in the business. But beyond that the equal wage policy means that their labour is equally valued. That means they are in both capacities, fundamental in a workers' co-operative, valued as equal: as workers and as directors, or

in other words in their economic and political capacity. The flat formal hierarchy has a similar effect. The worker members are not only on the same plane when it comes to political authority but also organisationally. They truly have no formal boss or line of command; a structure that undergirds direct democracy at work.

Thinking of decision-making as a singular event limits understanding of what is involved in making decisions. The following arguments grant a more substantive insight into the complex world of making decisions in radical workers' co-operatives and how by doing so they create and nourish a way of organising work that posits itself against the capitalist practice of prioritising the maximisation of profit, hierarchical management, shutting down space of debate and fruitful engagement with conflict (Kokkinidis 2015).

In the smaller co-operatives, decision-making tends to happen in a very informal context and very flexible structure (Langmead 2017). Decisions may be made in scheduled general assemblies but some also spontaneously and informally. For example, as I learned from Alison: 'It [decision-making] is pretty informal and ad-hoc. We occasionally have made a decision to have a meeting at a specific time every week and then that will last for a few weeks and then dissolves into just like "oh we chat about things when they come up". I think it depends what is going on'. (Alison, Pristine Publishing Co-operative). But also in the bigger co-operative, making decisions is not a straightforward procedure. Aspects related to time, such as different working hours of shifts, as well as related to space, such as worker-members working in different locations (e.g. deliveries or film shoots) and of course economic pressures that originate from a market economy (Catherine and Evelyn 2009), tend to elicit a more organised way of making decision also for smaller workers' co-operatives. For this worker-members revert to the use of communication platforms, devices and applications in addition to physical meetings. Use of digital platforms, devices and applications to make decisions are used in bigger workers' co-operatives too. Although they aim at facilitating decision-making, they may also be source of inequalities when it comes to usability. I talked to worker-members who do not have the proclivity or means to engage in such technological platforms. Likely, everyone in the co-operative has access to a computer somewhere, but not everyone uses a smartphone. Apart from that engaging in debates on digital platforms is less likely for warehouse workers or lorry drivers whose job involves spending little time of their working day on computers or digital devices, compared to office workers. Arguably, technological platforms can reproduce or exacerbate asymmetries in participation in decision-making.

Before a matter comes to be subject to collective decision-making it goes through a process of qualification. Organisational structures and formulated guidelines can provide a helpful, yet not exhaustive, framework. This framework is organic in that it evolves as the workers' co-operative develops. For

example as Politics not only takes place during the general meetings but begins in the interstices of the daily business operations, like informal debates (Sobering 2019). It dwells in the structures that the worker members create, negotiate and develop within the co-operative. It acknowledges external dependencies, seeks collaboration, provides support, acts as resistance or careful adaptation to ensure democracy at the deeply democratic level. The act of creating and amending structures to facilitate direct democracy, taking place on the grassroots-level that is lying in the hands of the body politic (here of the radical workers' co-operative), is another fundamental characteristic of radical democratic citizenship.

Let us now look at the point of collectively making decisions in the radical workers' co-operatives. Here we finally find the issues that have been qualified – either informally or by dint of the guiding framework – to be raised with all worker members of the co-operative. Collective decision-making is powerful because for a certain period in time all member workers, everyone who makes the co-operative operate, gathers at the same space for the purpose of debating and deciding upon matters that affect their workplace, their working future (Rothschild and Allen Whitt 1986). The only comparable experience I had encountered was a stockholder annual general meeting in a company where I worked in the service area years ago. However, for the co-ops a 'shareholders' meeting is profoundly different. The primary object is not about profitability but taking the worker members as human beings – not only as workers – and what they want to do with their workplace in terms of development and tackling challenges (Kokkinidis 2015). As Marcus explains

... the fact that, I think, in a traditional shop job is making money is the bottom line. [...] that's quite a simple set of criteria to work to. You can just do a cost-benefit analysis and that's you done. [...] Whereas in [Amazing Aliment] it's a bit more subtle so that there can be things that could make the shop more money but we don't do it because of ethical reasons. It's always a balancing act. (Marcus, Amazing Aliment Co-operative)

From general meetings, informal conversations and forum discussions I learned that subjects of debates concerned, for example, customers and suppliers they were considering working with – or considering to discontinue collaboration because of ethical controversies, (re-)organising internal jobs, tackling organisational and staff issues, as well as collectively setting (non-economic) targets for the future development of their co-operative. The purpose of the collective coming together goes beyond mere economic considerations. Democratic decision-making takes time and engagement. As Toby explains in view of a new book-keeping software: '[...]we had we had several meetings, looking at different systems and evaluating them and quite a lot of discussion about the pros and cons. So [it] took a while to make that decision'. (Toby, Radiant Resolution Co-operative) And in all five co-operatives I studied, this time, so

valuable for workplace democracy, is primarily under pressure from economic necessities originating in the competitiveness of the market environment. Worker members negotiate this time between democratically running their enterprise on the one hand and maintaining a sustainable economic performance of the business on the other (Catherine and Evelyn 2009).

Mainly the general meetings, or general assemblies, are designated for collective debate and decision-making in person. Amazing Aliment Co-operative and Fantastic Food Co-operative use digital space, e.g. the forum, as supplementary platform for collective decision-making. In Radiant Resolution Co-operative and Pristine Publishing Co-operative the office space serves as platform for ad-hoc debates and decision-making as a collective. The most significant matters for the co-operatives are normally debated and decided on during gatherings designated for that purpose, the general meetings. This is the case particularly for Fantastic Food Co-operative, Amazing Aliment Co-operative, Radiant Resolution Co-operative and Fab Films Co-operative.

How are the general meetings set up? For every general meeting an agenda is compiled and distributed in advance by a worker member. The agenda informs the worker members which issues are going to be discussed in the general meeting. Points include, for example, proposals submitted by individual members or by the management committee in the case of Fantastic Foods Co-operative, reports by the finance department and HR matters. Although the agenda points do not set a deadline for when a final decision has to be made, it possesses a rudimentarily disciplinary function in that it seeks to compel to some degree the participants to keep an eye on time and results when dealing with each agenda point. In fact, after extensive debate member workers may agree that regarding a specific matter further research and amendments are required and consequently postpone the decision to the next general meeting. The agenda sets a roadmap for the general meeting. This is particularly helpful for the facilitator who guides the assembly through the agenda and the discussions ensuring that members who would like to provide input are respectfully heard. Facilitators are worker members. In the general meetings of Amazing Aliment Co-operative and Fab Films Co-operative the facilitator sits at the table with the others. There is no distinction in view of seating arrangements. In Fantastic Food Co-operative two worker members, usually Martin and Tracy (pseudonyms), are seated at a table in front of the assembly, like a panel, facilitate the discussions and guide the meeting through the agenda. The worker members are seated in theatre style arrangement, reflecting the number of workers members. About 50 members partook at the general assembly I visited in December 2018.

Working with two co-operatives in food and three in the cultural sector begs the question if industry affects the way radical democracy in the form of decision-making is practiced at work. In view of Fantastic Foods Co-operative

the comparably bigger the size in terms of members (over 50) supports findings that increased pressure on efficiency – to remain viable against the pressure of the market – result in a more regimented decision-making structure and implementation of coordinating management committees (Cheney 1999; Catherine and Evelyn 2009). However, I also observed that particularly relevant for how the radical workers' co-operatives I studied go about decision-making is the organisation of space and work as well as the strong ethic against the pressure of market competition – which usually lead to a very thin margin of economic viability. And in this regard the industry does play a role to some extent. For instance, the spatial setting for a graphic design and web development co-operative such as Radiant Resolution Co-operative, or print distribution such as Pristine Publishing Co-operative, means most of the time at work is in a shared office. In the case of Amazing Aliment Co-operative the work space was split over the shopfloor (for restocking shelves, taking inventory and attending to customers), the basement (for processing incoming goods), the office (for accounts, procurement, HR, etc.), and the pack-down area. Arguably, given that the shop was small all those areas were adjacent, but unlike the Radiant Resolution and Pristine Publishing they had a rota of shifts. Hence usually not all worker-members were in the shop at the same time. In the case of Fab Films, in addition to the main office and neighbouring editing suite, work also involved being out of office for shootings and workshops. The spatial conditions of having the workplace spread across a warehouse, offices (for sales, IT, procurement, HR, etc) and the lorries on the roads (for deliveries) as well as varying working times – the drivers start around 5.30am – and days (not all warehouse workers are in every day) evidently posit distinct organisational parameters on decision-making for Fantastic Foods Co-operative. Spatially sharing a workspace with overlapping working hours means also a quicker and more substantive flow of communication which informs decision-making.

### **The personal is political**

During my research-internship at Amazing Aliment, I was invited to two general meetings. Taking place on weekdays, these started with the worker members arriving, sharing food and drinks from the shop, and making tea and coffee for everyone. Lively informal chats accompanied the settling in. The call to commence the meeting followed and everyone gathered around the big table. Thomas agreed to facilitate the meeting. The first point on the agenda was what the members call 'check-in'. Here, each member shares what is currently or has been significant in their lives, occupying their minds most and regarding their well-being. That may concern their private life but also work-related issues. Although it is up to each member what they wish to share with the group, I was not prepared for the highly

personal level that characterised that part of the general meeting. Doubtlessly, they value each member's well-being greatly and find it important to provide space for that in the context of their work. Ella aptly illustrates this:

I guess one of the things I really value is that we try as much as possible to like, really hear what's going on for people. And you know if somebody says or it'll be fine, it'll be fine ... and Cathleen is the one who mostly does this which is amazing but it being like wait, is it really? It doesn't sound like it's gonna be fine. And to try and do that like, check in, and yeah, I guess that I really value. (Ella, Amazing Aliment Co-operative)

And subsequently elaborates

... if people are willing to be really honest and open about what they think and what they feel. I guess this is being really quite influenced with counselling now and other readings and nonviolent communication and the things I've done over the last year, but just how much better any decision or conversation is gonna go if people are able to get in touch with what they feel and what they really want and feel we're able to express it and don't feel guilt or blame or all of that. Yeah. I guess. So there's a lot on that level and not just boom, boom, boom, boom. (Ella, Amazing Aliment Co-operative)

Ella's account shows that what very much matters in the democratic decision-making they practice is the human being and an appreciation of each individual character – and not primarily in their capacity as labourers, reduced to a human resource.

When collectively making decisions, granting space to the worker members as human beings does not only occur in the form of a dedicated time to share personal affairs. At the occasions of democratic decision-making, worker members acknowledge the diversity of the personality of each worker member. Some have a more vocal and extrovert personality, others are more reserved and contemplative – though not less engaged. Often confidence to engage in debates depends on experience in the sense of being well-acquainted with the issue at stake, perhaps already having potential propositions at hand, but also being familiar with the workplace – its rules and processes for example – and the fellow worker. This is a very local and specific experience, derived from being immersed in the idiosyncrasies of the particular workers' co-operative and its worker members. Then there is also past experience in roles – whether they be in professional careers or civic engagement, for instance – that require the person to be very confident and vocal, for example when pitching proposals or when having management responsibilities or when being in a representative function. Of course, diversities in personality matter also in debates during collective decision-making, this is arguably one of the most complex matters and challenges that

process. Stress also has an immense effect on engagement in collective decision-making. To minimise conflict based on stress level, the members of Amazing Aliment Co-operative are visibly mindful and respectful towards participants who have been going through a lot of stress at work and with personal affairs.

Also contemplating points raised in a discussion takes time. And a debate which expects participants to feed in and reply rather swiftly can become very stressful for participants. The case of giving enough space is exacerbated when members are already under pressure because work in these workers' co-operatives tends to be fairly stressful due to the toll it takes to operate in a market environment whilst maintaining a highly egalitarian and democratic organisational structure as well as pursuing a profoundly ethical agenda.

Navigating a discussion when stress is visibly affecting engagement can be quite challenging. But the worker members of Amazing Aliment Co-operative demonstrate a very refined awareness and consideration for that. Mutual respect, openness and understanding characterise the debate – also in periods of high stress levels. And whenever tensions, especially in such circumstances, occur, worker members tend to address them thoughtfully. This includes as well differences in views, opinions, and how strongly they feel about a particular issue:

I think there is a bit of, some people care more about some things than others. And there's a bit of like ... [...]I tend to find that some things I just don't really mind about and I'm happy for other people to make decisions on. And I think vice versa. But then we always have the conversation about it yeah. (Rebecca, Amazing Aliment Co-operative)

The importance of communication in collective decision-making and governance of these workers' co-operatives could not have been expressed in a better way.

A common challenge of collective debates and democratic decision-making – also in social movements – materialises when the very self-confident, vocal and extrovert participants end up constantly dominating and driving the debate, taking up space to elaborate and discuss their views. Activists and researchers have devised valuable strategies to tackle such power asymmetries in group discussions and seek to maintain an engaging discussion for everyone (Hoffmann 2012; Maeckelbergh 2012). One example is to have someone facilitating the debate and thereby trying to ensure that one or a few people do not end up dominating it. As previously noted, the general meetings of Amazing Aliment Co-operative, Fab Films Co-operative and Fantastic Foods are all facilitated.

Back to the general meetings at Amazing Aliment Co-operative, the check-in is followed by 'shout outs' whereby the participants are invited to flag up important matters regarding the co-operative. After that the members go

through the reports from the administrative areas such as finance. Subsequently they deal with agenda points about current affairs which involved first an update by the responsible member(s), second specifically formulating where a decision is required, third by a collective discussion of the matter at stake and options, and fourth the making of a decision based on consensus. Amazing Aliment Co-operative has adopted consensus-based decision because it made most sense to them. This might be due to the activist background of the founders where consensus-based decision-making is the commonly chosen model because it is the most democratic in that it does not formally exclude minority voices and allows for truly collective decisions. The debate was lively with members being very engaged and respectful. It seemed that the debate received as much time as members felt it would deserve. There did not seem to be a rigid time schedule. In fact, the general meeting lasted for roughly 3 hours. And that was no exception I was told.

Viewing members not solely as workers but whole human beings, accepting that all members have a valuable contribution and not only those who are extroverted or fit the capitalocentric view of what makes good leaders, as well as the creation of time and space to listen become forms of resistance to the adverse market imperative and abstract work.

Acknowledging personal circumstances of the member workers strengthens not only the possibility for support but also the feeling of being valued and heard as a member in the co-operative and a stake-holder in making decisions collectively (Hoffmann 2012). A lack of this tends to result in suppressing, failing to address or internalising conflicts. This as well as a feeling of political impotence we could understand as 'my voice does in effect not really matter' may risk that members of the body politic of workers' co-operatives become less engaged in the collective governance of the co-operative. And if not addressed, such apathy might consolidate in the long-run and impinge on the practice of workplace democracy. One factor leading to this is the constant market imperative of competitiveness and economic performance in the form of efficiency and productivity confronting the worker-members under the cloak of time. Labour time invested in democratic decision-making and debates leading up to that is not productive in the sense of capitalist labour. Quite the contrary, in the logic of capitalist-economic labour, this form of labour is quite unproductive and inefficient – because it evades this logic and rejects it (Holloway 2010; Winn 2015; Shukaitis 2010). However, the market imperative is strongly felt in the radical workers' co-operatives. In all of those I studied I learned about instances of collectively agreed proposals that were then put on hold or made a low priority; or issues raised that were insufficiently discussed or on which debates were postponed multiple times over an extended period. And in most cases the reason was the lack of time whilst facing a pressing mountain

of work. In the bigger Fantastic Food Co-operative I observed conflicts in opinion voiced at the general assembly, which received space to be debated. However, the pressure to be productive in the capitalist-economic sense, thus economically viable, eventually led the members to agree on a tiered majority vote system in order to speed up decisions and reduce the time needed for debate until a consensus decision is reached. Interestingly, in the general assemblies I observed that most decisions were settled with wide consent, although at times there were some abstentions, whereas votes on the online platform tended to facilitate less debate and more rejections – however still sufficient to pass. In order to address the negative side-effects of the current voting system, worker members have started to explore sociocracy as a decision-making tool for larger workers' co-operatives.

The democracy employed in these worker's co-operatives enables a distinct form of democratic grass-roots politics. Thereby radical democracy is not a generic system; it does not look the same in every workers' co-operative. It changes shape in its realisation. Members tailor democratic structures and processes to the needs of the co-operative and members as well as the spatial reality of the workplace. And all those are affected by external aspects, and most prominently stymied by economic imperatives coming from the capitalist market system: changes in the decision-making system as well as organisational structure tied to decision-making were usually adopted, as is usually the case in general, to change the procedural effectiveness in view of speeding up decisions. In view of this negotiation of working time, some worker members have framed their concerns in terms of efficiency and specialisation. In these instances they are usually tied to economic considerations such as the viability of their business in the market environment and paying decent wages.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

Radical workers' co-operatives are not only a means to make a living for the worker-members, but essentially also a radical democratic political project. This goes beyond active citizenship (Crick and Lockyer 2010) towards performative citizenship (Isin 2017), though its rootedness and empowerment of the direct democratic grass-roots level and inclusion of spaces that are not necessarily in the public sphere where most political conceptions are located. This is because these workers' co-operatives strive to make a difference through the work they do, but also because they commit to practicing democracy and an egalitarian environment in the workplace. As such they prefigure an alternative way of deeply democratically organising work from the grass-roots level – and in the broader sense, to practice a change towards

a solidarity economy. This change is political in its nature, practiced on a daily basis. In the workers' co-operatives I studied, democracy is taken onto a different, more comprehensive level. A fruitful conception of democratically practiced citizenship such as radical democratic citizenship needs to take account of these aspects. Where the practices of collective decision-making take into consideration the personal they become a form of resistance to the adverse market imperative and abstract work, and are therefore an example for radical democratic citizenship.

Radical workers' co-operatives 'reconfigure social relationships' through an immanent critique of the dominant structure and organisation of work as well as a prefiguration through sustained practice of an alternative (Cornish et al. 2016, 116; Winn 2015; Shukaitis 2010). It is important to understand the social and experiential intricacies involved in 'prefiguring the democratic and egalitarian relations desired of a future, more just society, without waiting for large-scale structural changes' (ibid., 116; Maeckelbergh 2012; Breines 1982). In the contemporary times the transformative potential, immanent critique and prefigurative capability of radical workers' co-operatives is needed more than ever. With the capitalist economies having gone into recession pre-COVID-19 outbreak, subsequently enormously exacerbated over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of people may be facing the sack by the companies' luxuriously paid senior management – regardless of the public money pumped into those companies and gratefully sucked up by the fat cats and elite. This scenario is unimaginable in workers' co-operatives with an equal wage policy and democratic decision-making. Furthermore, the policy-making of the increasingly authoritarian, verging-on-fascist, governments constituted and steered by the elite caters towards an ever-expanding existential threat for millions of people. Neither corporate economy nor governments proffer much reason for hope of large-scale structural changes towards a more just society. This moment makes radical workers' co-operatives all the more vital as sources of alternatives.

## Notes

1. This data is based on the open data set 'Organisation data', a .csv available on CoopsUK (<https://www.uk.coop/resources/open-data>). Sadly, the statistics do not capture if (workers') co-operatives have equal wage policy, which form of decision-making they use or if they have a formal hierarchy.
2. With the exception of Fantastic Foods Coop as mentioned above, which turned out to be an unexpected opportunity that I welcomed because of its outspoken political profile and as it turned out later internally it appears to be generally understood as without formal hierarchy when it comes to deciding on overall-business related issues.

3. From paying a living wage and reduction of unpaid labour in newer workers' co-operatives to allowing for annual pay rises to balance out inflation.

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