

Member Participation in Retail Societies

Report of the 1981 Conference

THEME AND THREE VARIATIONS

by

DR. A. WILSON

The article which follows is intended to be a reasonably accurate account of the three talks given on the theme of member participation at the annual conference of the Society for Co-operative Studies in September. It is intended for the benefit of those members who were unable to be present and enjoy these well-presented and thought-provoking presentations. If there is anything original in what follows, it must arise from misunderstanding what the speakers really meant - in which case I beg their forgiveness.

While Dr. Mary Mellor and Professor Joe Banks were primarily concerned with the findings of research projects which they had conducted in recent years on what produced lay leaders in Co-operative societies and with what made them tick, Mr. Nelson Smith was concerned with the rather more familiar topic of what the lay leaders and officials could do to keep alive participation amongst the wider membership and attract potential members. He spoke on the efforts made by the Norwest Society over the past twenty years to get

Note on the Author: DR. A. WILSON: Deputy Director of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of Manchester; long interested in Co-operation - in pioneering courses for Co-operative management, in Co-operative research, as a main begetter of the Society and its first Chairman and currently as its Secretary.

grassroots people involved in their local society, in national Co-operation and internationally. It had been and still remained a very difficult task to sell a philosophy. There were no tailor-made answers, and there was a continual need for experimentation, in order to maintain enthusiasm and keep alive the flame.

In the Norwest Society

The decision had been taken to look both inwards and outwards, and in place of the Guilds there were now the Co-operative Friendship Groups. Through the Youth Clubs, the Painting Clubs, the Gymnastic Clubs and the Bands as well as through the Woodcraft and other sponsored groups, the community received the Co-operative message. The need nowadays is to offer what people are positively interested in, such as painting for pleasure, and to introduce a Co-operative element into their activities. Lay leaders courses were run to prepare people for committee and other responsibilities. Opportunities were given to potential committee candidates to meet committee members and society officials, and to learn special skills, such as understanding a balance sheet with the help of the accountant. All the last seven new directors of the Society had served on the Member Relations Committee, with three or four of them having served about ten years.

The Norwest Society sees the boundaries of the Co-op. as co-extensive with those of the community, and tries to get a greater commitment to Co-operation within that community. The need to educate goes outside the Co-op. and is as wide as the community. So events are arranged at which the benefit of participation is not confined to members. At the Music Festivals, there is an

approach to schools and teachers; likewise at Employee Sports Days. At the Brass Band Contest with 10 bands competing, some 1,200 people received both a cultural experience and a Co-operative message. At public lectures, such as the Jack Jones lecture on 'The Future of Labour', the approach was to the trade unions and the Labour Party as well as to Co-operative Guilds and Clubs.

Some of the benefit of this approach was to be seen at Members' Meetings, where attendance and participation have so long been regarded as the main yardsticks of success. Whereas attendance had declined to 300 at the half-yearly and other meetings, it now came to about 500, and occasionally reached 650. District Councils were held to keep up local feeling, with major events bringing all groups together. At these there was deliberate restriction on business reports, and the business parts of meetings were always followed by refreshments and some social intercourse. This was greatly appreciated by the older people, some of whom were, however, deterred from attending as frequently as they would like by the danger of muggings.

Research by Banks and Mears

Professor Joe Banks prefaced his report on the 3-year project sponsored by the Social Science Research Council, which he and Robert Mears had conducted, by explaining that there had been some misunderstanding about the confidentiality of his discussions and findings. This had been intended to apply only to his discussions with individuals, and not to the total picture. In addition it should be noted that the findings applied only to retail Co-operative societies. Workers' Co-operatives have a very different problem with

regard to member participation from those of retail societies. The sheer fact of numbers is important, and studies of workers' Co-operatives indicate a need to keep below 80 in size, for effective participation. Despite the fact that workers' Co-operatives have recently become glamorous, while no one seems to love retail Co-ops, the relative success or failure of democratic participation in the Co-operative movement has to lie basically with the retail societies.

Robert Mears had made a study of all the surveys and reports about member participation since the Independent Co-operative Commission report. This had been followed up by their consideration of the major issues involved. Should people be 'active'? Are the 'activists' odd? What makes them tick? How did they come to be active? Was it really the case that there was a sharp division between the managers and the politically-minded people - with the former interested almost entirely in business, surplus and viability, while the latter believed that the business existed primarily to provide funds for the other activities of their societies?

- And its Findings

The research findings had pointed to four kinds of activists:

1. The Politically Committed: They tend to be members of the Labour Party; they believe in Socialism and the Co-operative Commonwealth; their support for Co-operation goes hand in hand with their support for other parts of the Labour Movement. They joined because Co-operative Societies were seen as a form of active socialism; or because they had a job with the Union or CWS, or had joined the Co-operative Party.

2. The Co-operatively Committed: They shared similar beliefs, and also referred to the Labour Party and trade unions, but they had typically entered the movement through the guilds - the Mothers' Guild, the Children's Circle, or the Women's Guild. They tended to have accepted Co-operation as a way of life, and they laid stress on the importance of their early introduction. They continued to believe in the importance of the auxiliaries, and in help for poor people.
3. The Family Connection: Their parents had shopped at the Co-op and had stressed the value of Co-op shopping as part of good housekeeping. Often they had started being members by getting a £1 share from their parents. They tended not to refer to politics - nor consider it relevant.
4. The Employee Entrants: They had joined quite simply as a consequence of employment. Their membership opened up opportunities for participation in decisions affecting their working lives. For them the Co-op. Board became a form of employee democracy, with a disproportionate number of shop managers. The managers found a vested interest in Co-operative democracy.

The importance of the Guilds and the Youth movement had declined as a major source of recruitment to the Board. The guilds and the youth groups no longer provided the same opportunities to enthuse future activists, so Type 2 activists were declining, as were also Type 3 activists, who had come into the movement when the dividend meant a lot. With the decline in importance of the dividend, the family link had been weakening. Meanwhile the whole nature of political involvement was changing with its effects on Type 1 activists.

People did not mean the same now as in the 1930s on what is 'Socialism'. Generally left-wing inclined people do not often see the retail Co-operatives as part of the workers' struggle. For Type 1 people it was an advantage to have Congress with a political slant as well as its business aspects. In their view this helps to keep alive the activities which are set off from the business side of their societies.

Meanwhile conflicts on the Board are more likely to be drawn from the personalities of Board members, rather than caused by their background. The problems of nitty gritty tend to be more relevant than long-term policy making. Board Room issues are really mostly day to day issues. Involvement, however, means a great deal of commitment. Not merely are there the board meetings to be attended, but there is the preparation for them, as well as attendance at functions. All this takes strong hold of the participants, for whom it has to be a hobby.

Similar project by Dr. Mellor

Dr. Mary Mellor had conducted a research project similar to the Banks-Mears investigation, though perhaps somewhat deeper and wider in scope. This had been focussed on the involvement and attitudes of the leaders of the North Eastern Co-operative Society at the time of its inception, and the research had been carried out over a fairly lengthy period since then. All the board members of some thirty merging societies had had their positions collapsed into 117 elected seats in the NECS. Of these, 106 places had been filled, and Dr. Mellor had aimed at interviewing all of these, including the 9 elected members of the Central Board. Those former board members who either failed to obtain, or did not seek, re-election were not included in the survey, but in

all 93 activists were interviewed. Since the initial elections, most elections in the Society were not contested, and seldom did more than 100 members ever vote in elections. Membership had dropped from 800,000 to 473,000, with much of this drop being due to death, dual membership of formerly neighbouring societies, and to the cleaning up of the register. There had been a gain of about 1,000 members in the last two years, but despite her eagerness to make a study of recent members, the Board had been reluctant to release to her the names and addresses of the new members.

The Profile of Activists

She had, however, obtained a great deal of interesting material from the 93 activists who had co-operated in the project, and many of her findings supported those of Professor Banks and Robert Mears. The profile of the 93 was that they tended to be male/ over 50 years of age/ unlikely to have a manual occupation, but if so, skilled/ and tended to have given long service to the movement. They were likely to work in the Co-operative Movement/ or in the Trade Union movement/ or in the Public Sector. After school, most had been involved in further study such as correspondence courses/ Co-operative College/ adult education or private study. They turned out to be all-round activists - with some 30 councillors, plus members of Hospital Boards, plus trade union lay officials, plus Labour Party committee men. About half had been employed with the Co-op. at some time in their working lives, and about half of these had been working all their lives in the Co-operative movement. On the NECS Central Board only one person has not been a Co-op.

employee. This is possible despite the NECS rule of only 2 Co-op employees per committee, as the rule does not apply to former employees.

Why do people come into the movement? This could be from either attachment or commitment, or some mixture of the two. Attachment might not mean anything more than trading, while commitment might not mean active involvement. With the disappearance of dividend, there is no compelling reason to be a non-committed member, so perhaps those members who remain will provide a higher proportion than formerly of activists. As far as the 93 activists were concerned, Dr. Mellor would classify 46 as having family reasons for attachment
24 as having employment reasons for attachment
3 as having Co-op Guild reasons for attachment;
while for commitment 6 had family reasons,
6 had employment reasons,
18 had Guilds/Trade Union/ or
Labour Party reasons,
25 had come in from own desire
to participate.

New Members and Activists?

Self-recruitment has been falling away in recent years, and the key to bringing in new members seems to be the morale of the existing membership. There appears to be a grave danger of the activists spreading themselves over too many committees in the community. Politically committed people are much less clear nowadays about the Co-operative idea and principles than they are about trade union or Labour Party ideas. Co-operation is widely equated to fair trading. It involves the concepts of mutual aid, community ownership and democratic control, with a multi-

million organisation being available to the ordinary man and woman for virtually nothing. Co-ops. have stopped getting over the message of common ownership and democracy, and have tended to concentrate on trade, trade, and trade, and to some extent this is reflected in the aims and ideals of the 93. The aim is mainly seen as serving the consumer (with the member forgotten about):

33 were for a fair deal for the consumer;
14 were for mutuality; and
1 was for social democratic control.

The ideals of Co-operation were seen as:

mutuality, 55;
consumer, 22; and
democracy, 10.

Morale was highest at the level of the Central Board, but there was frustration at the Divisional Committee level. Perhaps a large Central Council might help, but frustration might then move higher up.

Conclusions by Dr. Mellor:-

- a) Half a million members are represented by 9 Board Members.
(Not by 3 CWS appointed Board Members, nor by Divisional Committee members. So what sort of responsibilities can the latter be given to avert complete boredom and frustration?)
- b) Democracy in NECS rests on the employees and the political activists.
- c) Most activists hanker after the old-fashioned dividend and mutuality. Interest in the consumer does not play a major part in the activists' minds.

- d) Stamps have removed any difference between consumers and members - without having had much attraction.
- e) Shoppers will not be affected by shop notices etc. Shopper relations efforts will not provide the activists. New activists have to be drawn into the Co-operative movement from those active in other branches of the Labour movement.
- f) The Co-operative movement in the UK is not really a consumer movement. It is not really a people's movement, nor a members' organisation. It needs strong activists now in a national organisation of Co-operators who are committed activists in related parts of the Labour movement.

Discussion of the Reports

In the ensuing discussion, the most telling point was made by Mr. Will Watkins in a characteristically impressive contribution. This was on the disastrous effects on the possibility of keeping Co-operation before the broader public until they can become committed members, arising from the loss of the Co-operative press, compared with the situation 50 or 60 years ago. There had recently been some sign of greater interest in the newer forms of Co-operation shown by young people, but this interest might be shortlived without a widely circulating members' journal, such as 'WIR', the Austrian Co-operative Members' magazine. Some of the success of Co-op. Austria in attracting, out of a total membership of 800,000, attendances totalling 100,000 at local annual meetings seemed to be closely linked with the magazine.