

NEWSLETTER

The third national conference for housing Co-operatives was held at the Third Annual Co-ops. Gathering at Beechwood, Leeds, 17-18 July 1982. After three years of hard work, the bones of a constitution for a federal structure were ironed out. A national organisation is needed to influence government, to present to people outside the movement a real alternative to landlords and mortgage repayments, and to make possible the exchange of information and ideas between housing Co-operatives. (NFHC News No. 1, Dec 1981/Jan 1982)

Towards a National Federation of Housing Co-operatives

The constitution will soon be ready for examination by the Registrar of Friendly Societies. The housing Co-operatives foresee considerable discussion between the Registrar and themselves over their proposals. The new organisation will represent eight regions, including Scotland, and will provide a service to any of the 440 or so existing housing Co-operatives.

The regional representatives now on the national committee of the NFHC are Tim Goodwin and Philip Jones (S London/Home Counties S); Rome Godwin and James Carrera (N London/Home Counties N); Steve Kimberley (West and Wales); Sandra Hadley and Eric Sadler (Midlands); D.W. McEwan and Jack Parker (Merseyside); Adrian Gough and Alan Tate (Lancashire/Yorkshire/Greater Manchester); Tom Williamson and Mike Catchpole (NE/Cumbria); and a representative from Scotland. The chairperson is David Bristow,

an ex-member of the Co-operative Housing Agency and a co-opted member of the management committee of the Solon Housing Co-operative, London.

Workers' Co-operatives - New Moves towards a Federation

Important discussions on a federal structure for workers' Co-operatives also took place at the Beechwood Gathering. And 11th September this year could be a further very important date for the worker's Co-operative movement in Britain. That is when ICOM holds its AGM at Aston University in Birmingham. Constitutional amendments have been submitted which could transform ICOM into the proper federal body for workers' Co-operatives which Britain has lacked to date.

ICOM was set up as a campaigning body, and its work was successful in triggering off the major expansion of workers' Co-operatives in Britain which has taken place over the last ten years. However, it has failed to grow into a federal body which represents the Co-operatives which have been set up, and increasingly activity has taken place outside ICOM's framework.

That is how the proposals to change ICOM's constitution arose. The growth of local C.D.A.'s outside ICOM, had begun to create problems of organisational jealousy, and of confusion both within and outside the movement about exactly who was who.

The local C.D.A.'s network took the initiative a year ago by starting a long and careful dialogue with ICOM about how the movement might be brought under one umbrella. These discussions have now borne fruit in the form of a set of proposals which have the support of a wide

consensus within the movement.

The basic proposals are:

- to replace majority control of ICOM by individuals within Co-operatives, (a system which worked badly) with majority control by the Co-operatives themselves.
- to reduce the role of individual members of ICOM, and to give promotional bodies like local C.D.A.'s a formal role.
- devolving power within ICOM to committees to a greater extent, so that networks which have grown up outside ICOM feel able to come in and operate as part of ICOM.
- to emphasise the democratic and federal nature of ICOM by ensuring that the Chairperson is always from a Co-operative, and by ensuring that the officers are elected by, and are accountable to, the Council.

These changes would amend ICOM's structure so that it could fit the decentralised style of movement which has developed. It would remove those barriers in the membership structure and in the highly centralised power structure which have limited ICOM's ability to represent the movement it did so much to create.

A New Image for the CDA

For those who did not see the recent articles in the Co-operative News and the CDA News it is worth reporting on developments at the national Co-operative Development Agency. Set up in 1978, the Agency survived a review by the Government after its first three years, and since then has

seen some major changes in personnel and activities. At the start of its second three year term in September 1981 the Agency's budget was effectively halved and about half the staff had left or were made redundant. The following month the entire board was replaced by Ralph Woolf (chairman), Managing Director of Scott Bader; Lewis Lee, Chief General Manager and a Director of the Co-op Bank; George Wright, General Secretary of the Wales TUC and Regional Secretary of the TGWU; Tom Garnier, Group Managing Director of Kalamazoo; and William Farrow, Chief Officer of the North Midlands Co-operative Society and Director of the CWS. These appointments showed the Government's clear intention to strengthen the businesslike approach of the Agency. This was reaffirmed in March 1982 with the secondment of George Jones from Unilever as the Agency's Director. He replaced Dennis Lawrence who retired, and subsequently took up a place on the board.

The Agency was quick to rethink how best it could assist workers' Co-operatives (including neighbourhood, community and marketing Co-operatives) - still the sector in most need of help. The network of some 30 local CDAs, it was felt, could clearly give effective advice to newly forming Co-operatives. But with their small staffs, specialist business skills were sometimes lacking to advise existing Co-operatives. If the total of some 500 co-operatives was to double by 1984 as the Agency hoped, the sector could not afford to let too many ventures collapse.

It was decided that the Agency's board members and staff had to spend more time in the field. Board meetings were held in Manchester and

Cardiff to enable members to discuss policy issues with Co-operative and labour movement organisations in those areas. Also, George Jones and his staff stepped up the Agency's visits to Co-operatives and local CDAs around the country. Rod Barr became the liaison officer with local CDAs, working mainly in the South of England, giving general advice and locating the need for more specialist advice. Ian Brierley, seconded from the Co-operative Bank does similar work in the North. In addition to this work, the Agency is updating its valuable Directory of Co-operatives, with publication expected in the Autumn.

The Agency is currently negotiating three more secondments in specialist business skills, this time from 'blue-chip' companies. Paying only a small proportion of the seconded staff salaries, it will effectively almost double the resources at its disposal. In an attempt to reduce further its dependence on government funding, the Agency is hoping to raise money from the EEC Social Fund. This would be used to train local CDA workers in a wider range of skills. So far the 'grassroots' have responded favourably to the revamped CDA.

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Note of the Author: JENNY THORNLEY is a research fellow in the Co-operatives Research Unit at the Open University, currently examining the role of trade unions in Italian workers' co-operatives.

Her previous research into workers' Co-operatives in Britain, France and Italy was carried out at the Centre for Environmental Studies which was closed in 1980. Her book on this research, Workers' Co-operatives: Jobs and Dreams, was published by Heinemann Educational Books in 1981. A second edition with revisions was published in June 1982.