



# Reviews *By Jonathan Hill*

## PICTURES OF CO-OPERATION

In the dead centre of Wolverhampton, where I grew up under the shadows cast by the Molineux floodlights, Myrrh and Marigold Cleansing Cream, can be purchased from the shelves of Roots Two Wholefoods Ltd. In Whitmore Reans, a mile down the road, where my father was born, Lanzee Afrikan Arts have found a home. A traditional African dance, music and drama collective, they perform in "theatres, community centres, hospitals, schools, prisons and shopping centres". In the Black Country itself, over in Wednesbury, Heath Die and Tool Ltd produce drop forge die sinkers in brass and steel.

### West Midlands — "The Directory of Worker Co-operatives"

What have these services in common? They all appear in *The Directory of Worker Co-operatives*, published by West Midlands County Council as a contribution to the West Midlands Jobs Campaign. There are forty Co-operatives represented in the pages which are handsomely illustrated by excellent photographs. No price tag discourages the prospective owner of this Directory, and unless it has already become a collector's item, it may yet be possible to obtain one free of charge.

My initial selection of three examples by no means spans the range of services on offer. Catering and taxi cabs, boatbuilding and bookselling feature in the contents which could hardly be more varied. Walsall Locks (established 1873) appears opposite Vital Enterprises Ltd, specialist purveyors of West Indian Herbs, spices and provisions. Whatever success the Directory has in trade promotion, (and it is to be hoped that this is achieved), it also serves an education purpose. The message is that for some people who are willing to test their enthusiasm, Co-operation provides new opportunities for self-expression as well as for self-reliance.

### G.L.E.B. — "A Strategy for Co-operation"

More pictures of Co-operatives appear in the Greater London Enterprise Board publication, *A Strategy for Co-operation*, (price £1.00, 44 pages).

This booklet merits a nomination for the best introduction to worker Co-operatives. It is readable without condescension to the reader. The proposals are realistic but far-reaching. Moreover the piece on "European comparisons" does not seem out of place with the local and immediately useful information.

Early in the booklet we are warned that it is more expensive to set up a Co-operative than to set up a limited company, buy one off the shelf, or go into partnership. Towards the end, a succinct one-page statement explains how to apply for financial support from the Greater London Enterprise Board (GLEB) or the London Co-op Enterprise Board (LCEB). Snapshots of Italian motorways, Mondragon-made bicycles and a balloon-festooned mini Co-op zone in Hackney enliven the text. Points are made about the importance of marketing, training, obtaining finance and premises, and of links between the Trade Union and Co-operative Movements.

For each element of the "Strategy for Co-operation" there are indications that GLEB has plans to support, promote, fund, advise and encourage new and "converted" Co-operative businesses, but does not intend to dominate, or to lead from the front. Even retail Co-operatives are acknowledged and a little space is found for a wry historical note, or two. If the strategy is to succeed, however, it will need to be long-term, and sustained into the future for many years. The odds, at present, still seem stacked against this possibility.

### **"A Co-operative Approach to Local Economic Development"**

There are no pictures in *"A Co-operative Approach to Local Economic Development"* by Chris Cornforth and Martin Stott (CRU Monograph No.5, from the Open University price £2.50). This is, perhaps, a disadvantage in an attempt to portray five different Co-operative Development Agencies. Some images of the staff, the premises and the clients of each of the CDA's would have communicated their style in a more appealing way — to a wider readership. The relative effectiveness of different CDA's is too serious a topic to be tackled entirely in sober print.

On page 58a (almost an afterthought?), Table 2 summarises the achievements of the sample of CDA's against a range of performance criteria, such as the number of new Co-operatives formed, and the number of new jobs created. One of the tentative conclusions, in a very preliminary study, is that the number of Co-operatives formed per "person year" of development work varies between 1.2 and 3.4 and the number of jobs created varies between 8.1 and 21.0. The cost of each job created is estimated to vary between £700 and £2,500 per job. The report is, essentially, of a pilot study in which an initial attempt at evaluating CDA performance is made. There will be further such efforts in future, both critical and sympathetic, but in the meantime Cornforth and Stott is the most detailed (though not conclusive) study on offer.

## **"The Co-operative Way"**

Finally, the prospective reader's attention is drawn to a new ICOM publication *"The Co-operative Way: Worker Co-ops in France, Spain and Eastern Europe"*, (price £2.95, 76 pages, with a foreword by Jenny Thornley). The contents are composed of three extended descriptions, one by Antoine Antoni explaining how to start, organise and succeed in running a "producer" Co-op – French style, and two by Alastair Campbell on "Mondragon 1980" and on "Producer Co-operatives in Eastern Europe". Once again, some illustrations would have made the account much more accessible to the newcomer to Co-operative literature.

There is plenty of good advice in Antoni's account of the French ways of worker Co-operation. It is conceptually clear, and there are many practical hints. but the translation sometimes sticks too closely, one suspects, to the original. For example: "Sentimentality is one of the attractive features of producer co-op members. It can make them commit mistakes, one of the more serious of which is a tendency towards technical conservatism". Whether in pictures or words, there must be a more direct way to pass this thought to the reader!

## **Note of the Author**

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An industrial psychologist by profession, he spent 10 years in Zambia working in the Mining Industry, and in the Ministry of Labour, on the replacement of the expatriate workforce with Zambians. More recently he was employed in the CLEAR Unit at the Co-operative College, helping to establish a research and consultancy service, and worked on a Co-operative training and marketing project in Thailand. His interests are in the behavioural and developmental aspects of Co-operation, management learning, adult education and banjo playing.