



The Co-operative as Employer

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In the Moscow department store, behind the wooden counter, with its sparse array and poorly laid out merchandise, the assistant gazed nonchalantly at the customers. Her characteristic response to queries was an apathetic “Het”, and an expressive shrug of the shoulders.

“Reminds me of Mrs. ... in the Co-op” quipped one of the English group.

Such comments on the indifferent service provided by co-operative assistants, along with those on the unattractive layout of the stores are to be met with fairly often and more often than one would wish. To verify the accuracy of such statements would require extensive knowledge of the co-operative stores, but a cursory look round the stores would seem to indicate a predominance of older, more settled (possibly apathetic) employees than exists in other chain establishments.

After a Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW) branch meeting a not too serious discussion arose on what made people choose to work in a co-operative store rather than elsewhere. The remarks ranged from “Nobody else would take them” to others based on the idea that they were attracted through a background of co-operative loyalty and a belief in its principles. This idealistic approach was somewhat marred by the cynical USDAW member who preferred the term “Co-op connections” to explain the presence of certain employees. Yet in some respects the co-operatives may well be getting the type of staff they deserve, and there is much that a trade unionist can find to criticise in their approach to labour relations. In a conversation with a now full-time trade union officer he explained his gradual disillusionment with the co-operative setup. As a young boy he had entered co-operative service. Being bright, alert, and no doubt anxious to get on he took full advantage of the co-operative educational facilities. At such courses he was inundated with the co-operative principles of common ownership, community of interests, non-profit-making organisation and democratic structure, whilst at work he felt at the mercy of what appeared to be the autocratic decision-making of the Board of Directors. It is difficult not to agree with his opinion that the status of co-operative workers should be markedly different from those in “capitalist” stores. It was after all one of the oft expressed objectives of the Rochdale Pioneers and their followers to break the capitalist framework by the gradual development of a democratic Co-operative Commonwealth. Such sentiments however should not be overvalued. As Cole and Postgate point out in *The Common People*:

Necessarily and naturally, men who were chiefly occupied in the practical details of successful commercial trading came to the top, and the belief that the Movement would peacefully put an end to the competitive system, while never formally abandoned, became more and more a pious hope which clearly had no relation to everyday affairs.

Nor is it hard to understand why bright, enthusiastic workers may be less than eager to remain any time within the organisation. All those involved in the co-operative movement are aware of the difficulty of attracting and keeping suitably qualified personnel.

Relations with the Unions

At Labour Party and trade union conferences the co-operative fraternal delegates often reiterate the plea that all those in the Labour movement also be co-operators, but this is less likely to be the case than formerly. In the early twentieth century the co-operative movement and the trade unions were at times depicted as twin sisters on the road to socialism. In a pamphlet published by the Co-operative Union in 1904 entitled *Should Trade Unionists be Co-operators?* one of the reasons for an affirmative answer was:

The men and women who join the co-operative stores, and make their purchases there, and allow their dividend to accrue will find that their little savings in the co-operative bank will increase more and more until the time comes when they will need it most in the long lockout or the continued strike.

Such were the harsh realities of industrial relations some seventy years ago. Nor should it be forgotten that the co-operative movement was fundamental to the strength of USDAW. Until the introduction of the Industrial Relations Act, those accepting work in a co-operative society were bound to join their appropriate trade union; failure to do so within a reasonable time could have led to dismissal. Where the movement failed was in the failure to pioneer and implement a new status for workers in the retail industry generally.

Anyone who approaches the co-operative in the expectation of finding the “model employer” is bound to meet with derisive comments from employees and trade union officials alike. USDAW has the same fight “to maintain and improve the conditions of their members’ working lives” as they have in other retail establishments. As a discreet observer put it “Relations have at times been less than harmonious”. This dates back to the early years, as for example in the period 1891-1914 when the shop assistants’ union laid down a national minimum for co-operative workers and then had to struggle to get the co-operative societies to pay it. In more recent times the idea of “employee representation” has never had wide- spread support. Many societies are content to make do with the one or two token representatives from the shop floor, and this at a time when workers are demanding, and in some instances obtaining more control over their working conditions.

To return to the image of the dowdy, unaware co-operative shop assistants — so long as their apathy exists, so long indeed as these workers are not in the vanguard for real improvement of their lot, so too will the co-operative movement be failing to live up to its ideals, and condemnation from trade unionists will be justified.

The Author

Esther Quinn was a graduate of both the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde. She specialised in industrial relations and the role of trade unions in society and their pressure-group activities and was a member of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW). She retired from her post as Scotland’s training officer for USDAW in 2010, after 30 years’ service.

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Reference

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