

CO-OPTING PRECARIOUSNESS: CAN WORKER COOPERATIVES BE ALTERNATIVES TO PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT FOR MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS? A CASE STUDY OF IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE WORKER COOPERATIVES IN CANADA

*Amanda Wilson*¹
Ph.D. Student,
Department of Sociology,
Carleton University,
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to analyze whether, or to what degree, worker cooperatives are providing immigrant and refugee populations in Canada with a viable alternative to precarious employment, and if so, in what ways. Much of the existing research on precarious employment is limited in that it fails to address the root causes of precarious employments and fails to offer solutions or alternatives that can be organized by workers themselves, today. While several challenges remain to organizing and sustaining worker cooperatives, the cooperatives studied were successful in creating an alternative space of employment that provided control and flexibility over their work and lives and a sense of community and empowerment. More research is needed to better support and facilitate the development of cooperatives to truly harness the potential for the model.

INTRODUCTION

Talking about worker cooperatives as a solution to precarious employment may seem like an unrealistic and utopian response to a very pressing problem. In the current context of “economic crisis” it can be easy to dismiss such radical ideas in favour of what may seem more practical and realistic. However, I remain convinced that it is precisely in these times that such radical alternatives are most needed.

Much has been written on the topic of precarious employment but there is a need for discussions that go beyond reforms to legislation and new organizing models. We must examine different models of work such as worker

cooperatives, which provide people, particularly those most often trapped in precarious employment, with decent and fair employment opportunities. Given the limited and often hostile labour market conditions facing immigrants and refugees in Canada, it becomes particularly important to assess the ability of these models to provide alternatives to precarious employment to those segments of society who face these heightened risks and challenges. It doing so I am employing a 'politics of the act' (Day 2004), as opposed to a politics of 'demand', meaning that it is a course of action that allows its participants to build a solution themselves, rather than demand it from an institution or individual who holds power. Worker cooperatives were chosen as the model of study because of their member-owned and controlled structure. This ownership and democratic decision-making have the potential to give workers greater control and autonomy in their work, and to create a preferred type of working environment.

Two cases are highlighted where cooperatives were envisioned and organized as a mechanism to provide employment for members of immigrant and refugee communities. They were started after its members had spent years struggling through a variety of jobs, much of which can be described as precarious employment. The research was meant to provide a space for members of worker-coops to share their struggles and experiences in creating an alternative model. These experiences are explored to highlight their successes and challenges so that they can be shared with other worker cooperatives and communities who are struggling to find ways of obtaining decent and fair employment. These case studies suggest that, while far from a perfect solution, the worker cooperative model has the potential to create alternative forms of employment, and perhaps it is a model that should be taken up more seriously by those concerned with the rising tide of precarious employment relations.

This article is based on research conducted as part of my Master's Thesis. It included literature reviews on worker cooperatives, employment barriers to immigrants and refugees and precarious employment relationships. Two case studies were selected based on an Internet scan of existing immigrant worker cooperatives. Interviews were conducted with three members of the first cooperative and two members of the second. In most cases members presented a shared perspective on their experience, I have tried to illustrate the diversity of opinions where they exist.

PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT AND THE LABOUR MARKET MARGINALIZATION OF IMMIGRANTS

Much has been written on defining the nature of precarious employment relationships. Vosko (2006) describes it as "atypical employment contracts, limited social benefits and statutory entitlements, job insecurity, low wages, and

high risks of ill health.” Immigrants and refugees face particular barriers related to their status and experience as “newcomers” which often leads to a life of precarious employment. There is an abundance of research documenting the lack of decent employment opportunities for immigrants and refugees, and the discrimination and marginalization they face in the job market (See Brouwer 1999, Jackson 2002, or Das Gupta, 2006). For racialized workers, precarious employment is an extension of their precarious citizenship status and situation in society at large. They are constructed as the “other” against the white male citizen; they are seen as non-citizens, non-workers, and dependants by the rest of society.

Despite the mounting evidence of systemic barriers facing immigrant workers, the focus of government and employer strategies continues to be on the individual skills of immigrants, not on the structures of racism or precariousness in the labour market (Galabuzi 2004). Employment solutions for immigrants and refugees emphasize the need to “retrain”, to learn English, and attend basic workshops on resume writing and job search skills. This approach is inconsistent with the realities of immigrant workers and largely ignores the deficit of decent jobs.

Given this over-representation in precarious employment relations and the lack of solutions that address the fundamental, and more structural causes of precarious employment, worker coops organized by immigrant and refugee communities, as well as other marginalized groups, are in many senses at the forefront of the struggle against precarious employment.

CONCEPTUALIZING WORKER COOPERATIVES AS A RESPONSE TO PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT

One question that remains unanswered in much of the current literature is if we are against precarious employment relations, what type of employment relations are we for, and how do we get there? Precarious employment relations are often contrasted with standard employment relations, consisting of full-time employment with permanent status, social benefits and security, often in a unionized environment (Vosko 2006); however it is not clear if a return to this model is what is being sought. Attempting to rebuild the standard employment relationship may be tempting but given the shifts in the global economy brought on by neoliberalism, such a return, in its previous form, is doubtful.

Most discussion on how to combat or limit precarious employment relations fails to address fundamental and underlying constraints of the current organization of work. Much of the existing literature focuses on strategies such as extending union representation to these groups through new organizing tactics and strategies (social and community unionism)² and reforming labour relations and collective bargaining legislation to make them reflective of the

realities of precarious work and to give workers the space and opportunity to organize.³ While these reforms are desperately needed, and would certainly be of benefit to those in precarious employment relationships, we also need to try and address the fundamental causes of precariousness. We need to be looking for a different model of work which provides people, particularly those most often trapped in precarious employment, with decent and fair employment opportunities.

Discussions of precarious employment often focus on its symptoms, rather than the underlying causes. Many of the symptoms of precarious employment relations can be attributed to the lack of control workers have over their work and workplace, and the lack of flexibility or consideration of social and personal needs. The organization of work under cooperatives can provide workers with a sense of security and control over their work. They are structured in a way that perceives workers as human beings, as opposed to cogs in a machine.

Worker cooperatives have the potential to present an alternative model of work that addresses these roots causes of precarious employment. Worker coops are founded upon the principles of worker ownership and control (Carter 1996). Cooperative production is based on a critique of both liberal individualism and centralized socialism. It embodies the principles of “autonomy, participatory democracy, equality, equity and solidarity” (De Sousa Santos and Rodrigues-Garavito 2006). McGillivray and Ish (1992) describe the cooperative form as “a fusion of ethical, at times Utopian, service-oriented collectivist goals and practical, market-oriented individualist goals.”

Worker cooperatives have made, and continue to make, unique contributions to the social and economic welfare of communities in Canada and throughout the world. Cooperatives have a higher survival rate than investor-owned companies, almost twice as long, yet they are stereotyped as highly difficult to organize and sustain (Quebec Ministry of Industry and Commerce 1999; Cooperative Secretariat 2004). In addition, cooperatives have shown a higher employment growth rate than the Canadian economy in general. From 1991-2001, employment within cooperatives rose 25%, versus the overall economy of only 13% (Cooperative Secretariat 2004).

Table 1:
Organization of work under precarious employment relations

Symptoms of precarious employment	Sources of precarious employment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Insecurity ▪ No benefits ▪ Instability ▪ Poverty wages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A lack of control, autonomy over one’s job and work ▪ No support in the workplace ▪ No consideration of social needs of workers

INSECURITY DUE TO A LACK OF CONTROL

Insecurity can be a symptom of a lack of control in the workplace and over one's job. Reinhart identifies the growing rise of contingent labour and precarious employment relations as an extension of both the scope and degree of working people's alienation (Reinhart 2001). The increase in part-time, temporary and self-employment has led to a decrease in people's power and control in their work (Reinhart, 165). According to Benach and Munatner (2007), evidence suggests that non-permanent work leads to less job autonomy and control over one's schedule.

Because of their democratic, one-member-one-vote structure, workers are able to control the direction of their place of work, giving a sense of autonomy and ownership. Many worker cooperatives operate under a flat structure, without management or hierarchical powers. This gives the worker-owners control and autonomy over their work, with no one telling them exactly how or when to do their work.

Lewchuk et al. (2006) suggest a more holistic understanding of control is needed, encompassing considerations of social power. Control can be understood both in relation to one's job and work, but also as control over the balance between work and outside life. The cooperative model may allow us to move forward into what Halpern and Murphy (2005) call the work-life interaction, as opposed to searching for a work-life balance. They argue that we should approach them not as two separate categories that must be balanced against one another, but as two spheres that interact with one another and shape each other. The coop model presents opportunities for a more positive work-family interaction, because workers can control and mediate that interaction.

The democratic structure of cooperatives has the potential to give workers control over their jobs. It can provide a sense of security, meaning that decisions on the future of the business, the future of their enterprise, will be made by themselves, not in a closed-meeting of managers without their participation. Even if things are not going well, members will at least have the ability to decide their fate.

SUPPORT AND FLEXIBILITY

Lewchuck et al. (2006) concluded that "social support appears to be a significant buffer between less permanent employment and health." A core element of employment strain is a lack of control over skill use and job assignment and a lack of control over scheduling and hours (Lewchuk et al. 2003). Working in a workplace that is flexible to the needs of its workers can play an important role in relieving stress and stress-related illnesses.

Coops are better able to be sensitive to the diverse cultural and personal

needs of their members (Canadian CED Network). In Little's (2005) study of the Regina Women's Construction Cooperative, members felt that the cooperative was able to be flexible to their personal and family needs in a way that the traditional construction industry would not have tolerated. Moreover, the authors of "Cooperatives and the Social Economy" conclude that the greatest strength of cooperatives may be their ability to adapt to the specific needs of people through their membership structure: "the coop model is not a static entity, nor a thing of the part, but a flexible tool that continues to evolve in response to the needs of people and communities (Cooperative Secretariat 2004).

A commonly stated benefit of cooperatives is that they build social capital. A study conducted with immigrant women in the Toronto area found that the women interviewed gave high importance to the need for social capital, above the need to have financial capital or employable skills (Canadian CED Network). A publication on cooperatives and the social economy argues that cooperatives build social capital by promoting citizenship engagement, social cohesion and trust, and democratic process leading to inclusion and empowerment (Cooperative Secretariat 2004). In addition, the cooperative model can help to reduce feelings and real experiences of isolation and exclusion (Canadian CED Network).

FROM A 'POLITICS OF DEMAND' TO A 'POLITICS OF THE ACT'

In conceptualizing worker cooperatives as a response to precarious employment, I am implicitly calling for a shift from what Day (2004) calls a 'politics of demand', to a 'politics of the act.' Day describes the politics of demand as "actions oriented to ameliorating the practices of states, corporations and everyday life, through either influencing or using state power to achieve irradiation effects." A politics of demand seeks to improve existing institutions and everyday experiences by "appealing to the benevolence of hegemonic forces and/or by altering the relations between these forces" (Day 2005). Day recognizes the practical appeal of a politics of demand but insists that it is necessarily limited in scope, writing that "it can change the content of structures of domination and exploitation, but it cannot change their form" (Day 2005).

By focusing on extending unionization and changes to legislation, much of the existing discourse on precarious employment remains trapped in a politics of demand.

They are "resistance strategies", aimed at limiting precariousness through demands on the state and employers for improved legislation and regulation. Within these struggles little emphasis is placed on building new alternative spaces of employment that are decent and fair.⁴ Vosko has argued that workers are "resisting" precarious employment, and demanding better from their employers and the state, but what is not said is how workers are, themselves,

building new spaces of employment that challenge precarious employment by creating an alternative (Vosko 2003).

By contrast, a politics of the act is about breaking the cycle of demand and desire by “inventing a response that precludes the necessity of the demand” (Day 2004). It is about creating an alternative here and now, taking direct action instead of demanding action of others. It is a shift from the “fantasy” to the “authentic”, exposing the fantasy upon which the politics of demand is based; that hegemonic structures will recognize and validate the demands being made and respond in an appropriate way (Day 2005). In making demands of employers and the state to improve the conditions of precarious workers, it is questionable whether they have any interest or desire to hear and act on these demands, yet they are made nonetheless.

The politics of the act seeks to simultaneously work against capitalism while being for the construction and building of alternatives (Day 2004). Establishing worker cooperatives as an alternative to precarious employment employs a politics of the act, it seeks to create alternative spaces of work, rather than making demands on the state or employers. It is aimed at building alternatives alongside those that are oppressive, simultaneously working against precarious employment.

It is not strictly a question of either/or, but a question of emphasizing one over the other. Clearly there are situations in which a politics of demand are necessary, workers need to resist precarious employment and we need to establish ways to assist that struggle. However, in order to change the organization of work under precarious employment, which creates these dismal and oppressive employment conditions, we must invoke a politics of the act that seeks to create spaces of non-precarious forms of employment, in the ‘here and now.’ If we are seeking practical responses to current challenges, that not only address the immediate but also built towards a further goal, it is not sufficient to merely call on states to improve legislation, or to call for new organizing forms and strategies to unionize precarious workers. Worker cooperatives have the potential to provide not only a practical response for workers in these forms of employment, but they build alternative spaces of post-capital production based on worker freedom, autonomy and control.

THE ENVIRO-SAFE WORKER COOPERATIVE

Learn English and resume writing and job search, doesn't really help. Job search, and when you go to the website, you find a job [that needs] ten years of experience, Canadian experience... So what they [immigrants] do is they learn English and then they become taxi driver or security guard.

If I look at what I was getting when I was working in factory, or as a security guard I said I cannot do this by myself, that's when we said let us put our effort together and let us create

something that would belong to us... Something that will allow everybody to be a part of it, everybody to be a part of decision making... Something that will allow us to discuss peacefully, decide on our destiny.

- Enviro-Safe Cooperative members

The Enviro-Safe Cooperative was started in 2006 in Winnipeg, Manitoba by a group of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo who were frustrated by the lack of decent employment opportunities that fit their skills and experiences. Each of the members interviewed had lived in Canada for more than five years, one as long as fifteen, yet they were still trapped in marginal, precarious employment relations. After having saved portions of their paycheques for years, the five founding members established the Enviro-Safe Worker cooperative, a cleaning business that uses organic products to clean small factories and office buildings. The coop members receive a wage of 11\$/hr, most are receiving part-time work although two are working full-time through financial assistance from the Cooperative Development Initiative of the Cooperative Secretariat of the Government of Canada. They try to ensure an equal balance of work between members, so that they all share the work of their contracts.

CONTROL AND FLEXIBILITY OVER THEIR WORK AND THEIR LIVES

Coop members interviewed emphasized the difference in control and flexibility that the coop model provided in contrast to non-cooperative employment. The coop model has allowed for consideration of the personal and social needs of members and has allowed members to achieve a desirable work-life balance. One member had previously worked as a cleaner in a school, and as a result was not able to pick their children up from school. Working with the cooperative, this member is now able to incorporate picking up their children because they have control over their work schedule.

A member noted that in a traditional business, there is no flexibility given to the workers, regardless of their situation. The cooperative model allows for consideration of other interests. For examples, working at the coop has given several members the flexibility to take English classes.

SECURITY

When you are a member of a coop, you are a member of a business, you are a worker and at the same time you are an owner of the business. That is something that provides security.

- Enviro-Safe Cooperative members

Members of the Enviro-Safe Coop felt that having ownership of their business in and of itself provided security and stability that was absent in other jobs. Members compared this feeling of security (drawn from ownership) to feelings of insecurity in traditional jobs, where there is fear that you could be fired should you make a mistake or do something wrong.

BENEFITS

At the time of the interviews, the cooperative was exploring the possibility of extending some form of health coverage to the cooperative members; however, given their size, such insurance would be very costly. Outside of the formal scope of benefits, members highlighted many important things that the cooperative brought them.

Members emphasized a continual process of learning and empowerment, to building a space where immigrants and refugees can take control of their lives, build meaningful relationships and develop new skills and interests. To that end, the coop participates in workshops on participatory management, meeting facilitation and business math. Workers participate in different elements of the business, and as a result learn new skills, from promotions to contract bidding, to the actual cleaning work.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND EMPOWERMENT

Members felt that their coop had facilitated the building of social capital, and saw it as a vehicle for the empowerment of newcomers to Canada. One member talked about the coop model being a mechanism for people to come together to share their skills and knowledge. They highlighted that this was particularly important for immigrants, who often come to Canada not knowing English, having a place where people can help you and support you was very important.

They also felt that the coop had helped them overcome the isolation immigrants often experience. One member recounted how the coop has helped to expand their social network within Winnipeg, to meet new people and interact with new communities. More than one member described the coop as a family, a network of people who cared about each other.

THE TACO PICA WORKER COOPERATIVE

It's a dream. First, like, a dream to come to Canada. You have, like, a big dream, and you say, oh I will do this, but when you get here you will have barriers. People don't have the language; you don't have the money, and everything's against you [...] when we build up Taco Pica, not for only ourselves, we build up for Saint John, we build up for Canada, to

share our language, our culture, our food. That's kind of the way, how we see it.

- Taco Pica Restaurant Cooperative members

The Taco Pica Worker Cooperative was formed by a group of Guatemalan refugees in 1991 in Saint John, New Brunswick. Unable to find work relevant to their education or experience they decided to create their own source of employment. Viewing their cultural and language as their only assets, they formed a Latin American restaurant. Over fifteen years later, the cooperative has five members, and several additional employees. Of the members, three are full-time and two are part-time. Members and employees earn minimum wage, \$7.75/h.

CONTROL AND FLEXIBILITY OVER YOUR WORK AND OVER YOUR LIFE

One member commented how within the cooperative model, you have more control over when you work. Again the notion of having a more desirable work-life balance was articulated. One member said that working full-time at the cooperative they had more time to spend with their children compared to other jobs they had in the past.

One of the members talked of a "double standard" they experienced working at both the coop and in a non-cooperative model in terms of what power and control workers had in the workplace: "I don't like the double standard, like anything I say just stays there, or probably goes into the file X box, the big R Blue Bin, but in here anything I say, it counts."

Another member emphasized the idea of having the opportunity to express oneself, as opposed to a notion of control or freedom. According to this member, the coop gave the opportunity for members to express themselves in a unique way.

SECURITY

The issue of security was a bit more complex with Taco Pica, in part due to their longer history. One member's experience of security appeared initially to be contradictory. Despite the fact that they felt the need to get a second job, when asked if they felt secure in their employment with the coop, they answered "Absolutely, oh yes." They had a strong faith in the coop, stating that "I know this business can provide for me, and it will provide for twelve more people who want to apply." This member seemed to tie the idea of security to the fact that as coop member-owners, they made their own decisions about what affected them. So both Enviro-Safe and Taco Pica members situated their feelings of security within the context of ownership.

However, that faith seemed to be constrained by a sense of uncertainty. The member believed that the cooperative could grow to have more members and even open a second restaurant, yet there was something holding them back from doing so. The other coop member felt that their sense of security was constrained by the fact that they operated a small restaurant, referring to themselves as “small fish.”

BENEFITS

Taco Pica does not provide any formal benefits in terms of health and dental for its employees or member-owners but it brings several interesting informal benefits. Members eat at the coop for free when they are working. In addition, the restaurant bulk orders milk and eggs to divide amongst the coop members to take home.

It was clear from the interviews that the cooperative has been a space for members to learn new skills and develop existing ones. As members of a cooperative they fulfill many different roles within the restaurant, in a traditional business model they would be limited to one particular role. They felt that in a traditional business, you are not given the chance to develop or utilize “your talents”; it was almost as if they felt that traditional employment was boring and monotonous while the coop was exciting and challenging. The coop appeared to bring its members diversification instead of specialization.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

One member felt that coop had helped to build a sense of community and empower the coop members. Through the coop members had been very involved in the Latin American community in Saint John, providing space for benefit dances, donating gift certificates for fundraisers both in and outside Latin American community. They saw it as an opportunity to give back to a community that had helped them to get started and to strengthen ties and cross-cultural understanding. They saw their coop restaurant as a way to share their culture with the community. One member saw the cooperative model and its networks of cooperatives as a way to overcome the barriers they faced in finding employment: *“to be under the umbrella of coop, it’s a way we will get through the system.”*

MOVING FORWARD: SUPPORT FOR COOPERATIVES

While these two cooperates are different in many important ways, including the sector in which they operate, their years in operation and regional climate, their shared experiences offer some insights into the possibilities of using the

cooperative model as a counterbalance to precarious employment relations. One of the most important distinctions between the two case studies is that they appear to be on opposite ends of their life span. While the Enviro-Safe Coop is barely two years old and eager to grow and build, Taco Pica is over 15 years old, and its members appear almost ready to retire and pass the cooperative on a new generation. The experiences and opinions of the cooperative members must be seen in the context of the different stages of their cooperative's development, and helps to explain the somewhat more resigned perspective of the Taco Pica workers. A crucial insight that was drawn from both case studies is the importance of external support. Taco Pica was an illustration of the struggles experienced by a cooperative with little outside support and networks, while Enviro-Safe attributed its success to the strong support from community organizations.

Members of the Enviro-Safe coop were quite clear that the outside support was crucial in their ability to get started and their continued sustainability. Organizations such as SEED Winnipeg (Supporting Employment and Economic Development) provided, and continue to provide, invaluable support—both financial and logistical. Members of Enviro-Safe felt quite strongly that there should be increased support and training for immigrants and refugees coming to Canada about the coop model, how it works and to help them organize one for themselves. While Taco Pica initially received some support from external organizations there was a general feeling of disconnect from the cooperative movement or other support networks. The strongest area of support came from the local community itself and the churches. While still important, community support cannot replace support from organizations and networks with specialized knowledge and expertise. For Taco Pica, the lack of outside support seemed to contribute to a decreased sense of security and a feeling of isolation. Both the existing literature and data from interviews conducted with worker coop members illustrates the need for organizations that explicitly support the development of worker cooperatives within “marginalized” communities such as immigrant and refugee, First Nations people, disabled or low income individuals etc. This should not necessarily be seen as a bad thing, or as a weakness of the cooperative model. Many businesses, of all kinds, require a large amount of support to get started. In the traditional business sector this often occurs within the private sphere, family members giving loans, donating their time etc. or through government assistance. In the case of immigrants and refugees, those private networks are not always able to provide that, so there is a need to make sure that this support is available in the public sphere.

Both cooperatives highlighted main challenges to their success and sustainability as access to finances and a lack of knowledge about worker cooperatives, and the process to establish them in Canada. These are two key areas where a network of support organizations could be of great value. While

the cooperative model has been able to address elements of precarity in the two case studies, others such as access to formal benefits and a living wage have not yet been achieved. These remain crucial considerations to the development of an alternative to precarious employment that must be addressed in the future.

CONCLUSION

It appears that on some level, the worker cooperative model is providing an alternative from elements of precarious employment. One research participant felt that the cooperative had “for sure” provided an alternative to forms of precarious employment, stating that she “saw the benefits from the beginning.” Having control and flexibility over their work but also over their lives, which allowed for a work-life balance and the ability to pursue education or other interests, were crucial factors articulated by research participants. Collective ownership was a source of security, and also an opportunity for capacity building, where workers learned new skills and developed existing ones. Finally, the worker cooperative model provides more than just a job; it builds social capital and a sense of community, both within the coop and the community at large. This research represents data from only two immigrant worker cooperatives, however the stories of their members are echoed throughout immigrant communities in Canada, with countless other workers facing the same challenges and obstacles to decent and meaningful employment. The findings of this research indicate the need to further analyze alternative models of employment relationships.

While cooperatives are often small, take time to build up, in the end, they can create alternative spaces of employment that have the potential to be empowering, satisfying and sustainable alternatives to precarious employment. Cooperatives are a long-term solution, not an immediate stop-gap measure. Nor are they a mass, broad-based approach that can immediately be used by workers to change their lives. Small-scale actions that work can be just as important and meaningful as forever searching for “the” solution that can change everything at once. Replicability is perhaps more significant than the scale of the model. Much can be learned from these examples, and built upon, to make it easier for others to follow in their footsteps. Worker cooperatives represent a decentralized, bottom-up approach to tackling precariousness, one that can be taken by workers and adapted to their situations and individual needs.

The cooperative model is an imperfect solution. There are still some remaining issues, primarily in terms of providing full-time work and “hard” benefits. For worker cooperatives to fully succeed in providing alternatives to precarious employment, these two key issues will need to be addressed. In addition, they remained constrained within oppressive, racist, and sexist

systems, and remained trapped in a capitalist economy.

It could be argued that these cooperatives have failed to sufficiently challenge precarious employment relations because of the lack of formal benefits, and higher wages. However, in conducting this research my interest was in examining how we might challenge the roots of precariousness within the employment relationship itself, rather than the end material conditions. I believe that worker cooperatives have shown the potential for providing an alternative model for structuring employment relationships beyond precariousness.

In order to tackle the issue of precarious employment relations, we must move beyond merely critiquing its existence and move toward a positive understanding of what kinds of work and employment relations are just and non-oppressive, not just “non-precarious.” As Gindin (1998) argues, capitalism has challenged our ability to imagine; to see a world other than our own. We are so entrenched in a world plagued by precarious employment that it is difficult to articulate a vision of a world without precarious employment. However, the two worker cooperatives and its members analyzed in this paper show that despite capitalism’s ability to obscure the “real conditions of life” (Gindin 1998) and to leave us feeling hopeless, there are still spaces of hope, which can stimulate our imagination to build a different vision of work and to develop a new relationship between work and the rest of our lives.

NOTES

- ¹ Please note, at the time of this research the author was an MA candidate in Labour Studies at McMaster University. She has since graduated and is now pursuing a PhD at Carleton in the department of Sociology.
- ² See Cranford et al. (2006) for an examination of the lack of union representation and the community unionism approach taken to address this.
- ³ See Cranford et al. (2006) and Warskett (2007) for a discussion for collective bargaining legislation; see Fudge (2003) for an explanation on the ways self-employment or “independent contractor” has become a site of precariousness due to a lack of regulation and protection.
- ⁴ Community unionisms could be understood as a politics of the act, in that they are building new forms of unionism outside formal labour legislation and traditional trade unions. However, in the case of organizations such as the Workers Action Center and others, the emphasis remains on making demands, rather than building alternative forms of employment.

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