

## Worker Co-op History Themes

As we continue our timeline of cooperative history in the US, I wanted to share a couple of themes that emerged in our study session on the 31st:

**Movement resilience.** It is amazing to me, reading about the laundry union & co-op in 1864, that when manufacturers refused to supply them with collars, they said - well, we'll just start a factory. This essentially happened twice. And, it comes up again and again in this history - when faced with what looks to many of us today like an insurmountable obstacle, these folks just worked it out. How do we get the skills and capacity to keep on when we come up against this sort of thing in our movements today, especially when it seems to take so much capital to do things like starting a factory or a power company?

**Co-ops exist alongside struggle, support struggle, and come out of struggle.** Throughout this history, we see co-ops providing bread to strikers, being organized by unions, etc. - they can't be separated out.

**Democracy and city takeovers.** The Seattle general strike, the Pittsburgh Commune - these huge, powerful examples of people power that I know I had never learned about.

-Noah

## A Few Events in U.S. Cooperative History, 1800s-1910s



*Logo of Generations Community Credit Union. Generations formed in 2002 as a merger of the remaining Black credit unions in NC.*

1864

### Collar Laundry Union

Kate Mullaney leads 300 laundry workers in Troy, New York to form the Collar Laundry Union, the first women's union in the U.S. In 1869, the Troy collar manufacturers, in an offensive to destroy the union, refused to send collars and cuffs to any laundry employing union ironers, and recruited nonunion replacements. In response, the CLU members opened their own cooperative laundry, but it foundered when the local manufacturers were able to cut off their supply of new collars from out-of-town collar makers. Undaunted, and with the help of Sylvie's Iron Molders' Union, the women started their own collar factory, the Union Line Collar and Cuff Cooperative Manufactory. Just as they were getting off the ground, however, the manufacturers pulled the rug out from under them by introducing new paper collars, which transformed the industry.

1930s

### Black credit unions in NC

North Carolina Council founded by Black schools in Tyrell County, established farmer's cooperatives, credit unions, buying clubs, health insurance and a state-wide Black cooperative federation. In 1936 there were 3 Black credit unions in NC, by 1948 there were 98 credit unions and 48 additional co-op enterprises!

1927

### Colored Merchants Association

Colored Merchants Association - Founded 1927, an association of independent Black grocers organized into a buying and advertising cooperative. Winston-Salem, NC played an important role in the development of the CMA and established CMA stores in 1932. By 1930, 253 stores were part of the network.

### 1889-1906 labor exchanges in CA

Between 1889 and 1906, a labor exchange movement rose and faded. Begun in Sedalia, Missouri, by G.B. de Bernardi, it operated mostly in small towns. At its peak in 1896, it had 6,000 members and over 135 local branches in 32 states, extending into California and Washington, with 22 exchanges reported in Southern California alone. They exchanged both services and products. Members received "labor-checks" for the estimated wholesale value of the products they contributed, and could use those checks to trade for other products. Most of the branches also sold at discount for cash.

### January 21, 1919 Seattle General Strike

35,000 AFL shipyard workers in Seattle struck to raise wages for lower-paid unskilled workers. Cooperatives provided much help during the strike. For a week, workers ran the city through the Central Labor Council's General Strike Committee. The Seattle Consumers' Cooperative Association gave away 10,000 free loaves of bread in one day. Twenty one eating places were set up around town and thirty thousand meals a day served to whoever needed one. Garbage collection, hospitals, even barbers opened under worker control.



*Serving food during the 1919 Seattle General Strike.*



*Shipyards strikers in Seattle, 1919.*

Six Jewish cooperative bakeries donated 170,000 loaves of bread in the Massachusetts textile strike of 1922. Cooperative bakeries contributed heavily to strikers in the 1924 silk strike in Paterson, New Jersey, and the railroad strike in Los Angeles.

*Source for timeline: Events/text are from the book "For All The People" by John Curl and by a presentation from Dr. Jess Gordon Nembhard on Black Co-ops. Images from the internet.*