



Re-Imagining Localism and Food Justice: Co-Op Cincy and the Union Cooperative Movement

Heather M. Zoller*

University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, OH, United States

Co-op Cincy is an incubator of worker- and community-owned cooperatives, including the farm and food hub Our Harvest. The incubator is part of the innovative 1worker1vote.org network of unionized worker cooperatives stemming from a partnership between the Spanish Mondragon Cooperatives and the United States Steelworkers. This Community Case Study examines Co-Op Cincy's food sector organizing as an example of resistance to the industrial, corporate food system. Their hybrid and experimental approach creatively re-imagines both cooperative ownership and localist food systems. Whereas some local efforts fail to address questions of social justice or drift from social justice missions, this essay describes how Co-Op Cincy and Our Harvest 1) define their social justice goals in pursuit of locally rooted ownership, 2) raise consciousness about the connections among food systems and racial and class disparities as well as the need for sustainability, solidarity, and democratic ownership, and 3) embody these commitments in everyday organizing. Their experimentation lends insights into potential paths to create a more equitable food system and a more just economy.

Keywords: food justice, worker-owned cooperatives, food cooperatives, communication and social change, generative economy

OPEN ACCESS

Edited by:

Kathleen P Hunt,
SUNY New Paltz, United States

Reviewed by:

Rahul Rastogi,
SUNY Oneonta, United States
Joe Quick,
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee,
United States

*Correspondence:

Heather M. Zoller
heather.zoller@uc.edu

Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Science and Environmental
Communication,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Communication

Received: 26 March 2021

Accepted: 04 June 2021

Published: 22 June 2021

Citation:

Zoller HM (2021) Re-Imagining
Localism and Food Justice: Co-Op
Cincy and the Union
Cooperative Movement.
Front. Commun. 6:686400.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2021.686400

COMMUNITY CASE STUDY

The call for this Frontiers Topic enumerated crises associated with the neoliberal organization of food, including hunger, environmental degradation, consumer and worker illness, economic devastation, and colonial dispossession of land, asking, “How are dominant and marginalized food system participants engaging, navigating, and/or resisting these conditions?” This “community case study” examines Co-Op Cincy's food sector organizing as an example of grassroots resistance to the industrial, corporate food system through the development of alternative models. Co-op Cincy incubates worker- and community-owned cooperatives, including the farm and food hub Our Harvest and a cooperative grocery initiative. The incubator is part of the innovative 1worker1vote.org network of *unionized* worker cooperatives initiated by an agreement between the Spanish Mondragon Cooperatives and the United States Steelworkers. This hybrid and experimental model represents a creative re-imagining of both cooperative ownership and localist food systems that centers social justice.

The health, economic, and environmental consequences of the industrial food system have sparked a significant rise in food activism by local communities, non-profits, unions, government entities, and social movements (Alkon and Guthman, 2017). Critics point out that many of these efforts fall short of promoting food *justice* (Hall, 2016; de Souza, 2019), although there is significant debate about what constitutes justice and how best to achieve it. This qualitative case study examines

how Co-op Cincy centers social justice as it articulates its mission, promotes its vision for change through consciousness raising, and enacts these ideals in concrete practice. First, I provide a background on the organization and then overview literature addressing social change and local food businesses, cooperatives, and solidarity economies.

Background

Cooperative businesses are owned by their workers or members and reinvest profits in the organization or to owners through dividends (Battilani and Schröter, 2012). Many cooperatives emphasize democratic control and decision-making by owners, focusing on the development of stable, high quality work (some seek business efficiencies instead) (Lima, 2007). The cooperative movement increasingly prioritizes community benefits such as sustainability and food access (Webb and Cheney, 2014). Co-op Cincy (originally named the Cincinnati Union Cooperative Institute) was incorporated as a non-profit in 2011 with the goal of incubating union cooperatives in the Greater Cincinnati area. Co-op Cincy has launched numerous businesses including Sustainergy, which retrofits houses for energy efficiency, Care Share childcare cooperative, and Renting Partnerships, which helps build equity for apartment dwellers. Co-op Cincy helps to start cooperatives through training, education and funding, and then provides ongoing education and support. Incubated businesses work together with Co-op Cincy, sharing resources such as accounting and public relations. A percentage of any profits go back into Co-op Cincy to help launch additional businesses. This case study is based on qualitative research and participation primarily related to Our Harvest farm and food hub, and Apple Street Market, a worker and community-owned grocery cooperative initiative.

Co-op Cincy was a founding member of the 1worker1vote.org network, which results from an agreement between the Mondragon Internacional and the United States Steelworkers union to mutually promote the development of Mondragon-style worker-owned cooperatives. Mondragon is a high-profile federation of mutually supportive worker-owned cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain. The Mondragon system includes a cooperative bank and Mondragon University, which trains workers in business skills as well as cooperative principles and values, which are embodied in the Mondragon Cooperative principles (Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014). The agreement with the Steelworkers created the opportunity for expanding intercooperation (mutually supportive cooperatives) to include global trade. Mondragon leaders explained that they partnered with the United States union movement in part to promote the culture of solidarity that is common in the communal Basque region but less dominant in the individualistic United States. The union movement provides support for the network, and worker-owners in individual cooperative businesses affiliate with local unions.

Food Activism and Social Change

Food activism ranges from filling gaps such as raising money for the hungry (Ivancic, 2017; de Souza, 2019) to improving food labor wages and working conditions (Rosile et al., 2021), to

attempting to transform the food system (Holt-Gimenez and Wang, 2011; Counihan and Siniscalchi, 2014). *Transformative* efforts promote alternate visions of food organizing, addressing social justice and ecological relationships. The food justice frame highlights both who is served by the food system and who controls it, connecting low income food workers, producers, and consumers (Loh and Agyeman, 2017). Food justice activists address racism and intersectional oppression related to class, gender, nationality, and other differences embedded in the food chain and beyond it (Gordon and Hunt, 2018). Activists in the global south conceptualized food sovereignty in terms of “people’s self-government of the food system” (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2009, p. 86), promoting indigenous land rights, improved ecosystem relations, and resisting imperialism and patriarchy (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2009; Pal, 2016).

This case study focuses on localist, alternative food businesses. Critics observe that many localist efforts primarily serve the needs of white, middle-class people and reinforce neoliberalism (Busa and Garder, 2015; Butterfield and Ramírez, 2021). However, as more localist efforts adopt social justice discourses (Clendenning et al., 2016; Alkon and Guthman, 2017), we need to investigate how these groups communicate and enact their visions of change.

One rationale for localist food systems is strengthening environmental sustainability through reduced food miles and improved growing practices. “Grow local” policies and small farms may reduce the use of fossil fuels and agricultural chemicals by making better use of local natural resources (e.g., water reclamation and crop diversification) and replace mechanization with human labor (Holt-Giménez and Patel, 2009; Levitte, 2010). These sustainable practices require shifting farm knowledge networks from hierarchical corporate systems to interpersonal and horizontal networks (Levitte, 2010).

Unfortunately, sustainability discourses have historically privileged environmental impact over things like food access (Allen, 2004), coming slowly to embrace food sovereignty and justice concerns (Blay-Palmer, 2010; Gordon and Hunt, 2018). Blay Palmer (2010) argued that food evidences the linkages among environmental, economic and sociocultural sustainability; for example, farmers must be socially and economically enabled to make environmentally sustainable choices and offer fair wages to farm laborers. Larger organic farms tend to provide better wages and offer benefits to workers, but small organic efforts often cannot afford to hire many workers or struggle to pay them more (Shreck et al., 2006). In one study, sustainable growers (not certified organic) desired to improve labor conditions but believed they could not afford it (Strochlic et al., 2008).

Local food initiatives connect food producers and consumers. As Gordon and Hunt (2018) described, “Agricultural practice can localize food system relationships, cultivating intimacy with ecosystems and communities” (p. 11). Spaces like community gardens foster intergenerational learning among people normally removed from agricultural production. At the same time, efforts such as farmers markets may circulate a “white farm imaginary” (Slocum, 2007; Gordon and Hunt, 2018) that celebrates white farmers and white histories (McCullen, 2011), erasing Latino and

other farm workers of color in consumers' minds (Carter and Alexander, 2020). Farmers markets and local groceries also may serve white and middle class consumers (Webber et al., 2010; Conley and Eckstein, 2012). Even efforts that start with the goal of addressing systemic inequities can drift from their social justice missions towards gentrified, aesthetic, and/or fetishized practices (Conley and Eckstein, 2012; Hall, 2016).

Critics also argue that local food businesses reinforce neoliberalism by participating in private, market-based efforts. However, focusing on the binary question of whether local food businesses resist or reinforce neoliberalism prevents us from recognizing an array of imaginative and pragmatic efforts at social change. For example, despite the complexities presented in chapters of their edited volume on food activism, Alkon and Guthman's (2017) introduction sets up a dualistic tone by inviting contributors to assess whether activist efforts are neoliberal. Dualistic framing fails to address complex interconnections of economic, environmental, and social challenges; see for example Hinrich's (2010) critique of local/global and conventional/alternative binaries (Hinrichs, 2010). Ivancic (2017) study of rural philanthropy challenged binary categorizations of who gives and receives food aid.

Alkon and Guthman (2017) embraced capitalist reproduction discourses, which establish a dualism between neoliberal capitalism and noncapitalism, and ignore existing, heterogeneous economic relationships or place them in a subservient, reinforcing position to capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2006). For example, the authors suggested that alternative efforts "by women and communities of color to highlight economic success stories from their communities, and to create additional ones, can be seen as neoliberal in that they uphold individual wealth as an indicator, if not a method, of social change" (p. 11). Despite acknowledging Gibson-Graham's (2006) argument that capitalist reproduction discourses impede alternative imaginaries, Alkon and Guthman (2017) dismissed alternative economy efforts as marginal to the capitalist project: "while potentially generative, exist at the margins of the neoliberal political economy" (p. 17). Furthermore, Alkon and Guthman (2017) privileged governmental policy change to resist neoliberalism, positing that alternative food efforts "convince a generation of activists that is impossible to confront the state or corporations in the interest of human and environmental health" (p. 17).

This case study strongly supports a pluralist approach, which "eschews rigid blueprints and the belief in a single, correct path [and] builds on concrete practices, many of which are quite old, rather than seeking to create utopia out of theory and thin air" (Kawano, 2013, p. n.p.). Focusing on interstitial spaces of social change "invites us to depart from a polar divide between autonomous oppositional movements on one side, and a cooptation by powerful corporations and states on the other" (Friedmann and McNair, 2008, p. 430). Efforts that partially embrace market logics may also resist elements of neoliberalism. For example, initiatives in Mexico reviving regional food cultures exploited market niches to promote environmental justice and democratic governance (Blay-Palmer, 2010). Loh and Agyeman (2017) positioned urban agriculture as both neoliberal and

radical. Figueroa and Alkon (2017) described how regional food hubs in Black neighborhoods temper neoliberal tendencies through collectivist practices.

Rather than assume that local efforts prevent more widespread change, we need to *investigate* whether incremental changes impede or facilitate more systemic change over time. Gordon and Hunt (2018), for example, acknowledged that "reform initiatives can work synergistically with other efforts toward longer-lasting change" (p. 14), particularly when they redress structural barriers such as racism. Alternative economy efforts may foster rather than supplant policy change. For example, environmental justice activists (a model for food justice organizing), simultaneously promoted local resistance to racist and classism pollution siting decisions and advocated for broader policy changes (e.g., toxic waste siting policies). Moreover, privileging policy change ignores limitations to transformational politics in elite-dominated governmental systems, where even reformist policy changes take immense effort on the part of marginalized groups and are subject to being reversed by well-connected industry groups, particularly under conservative administrations (Conrad and Abbott, 2007). The slow pace of policy change must be balanced with meeting urgent needs (Levins and Lopez, 1999). To what degree can localist efforts catalyze cultural changes needed to cultivate and sustain policy change by raising consciousness and demonstrating the utility of alternatives?

We also need to recognize existing noncapitalist economic forms, including widespread "alternative" economy efforts operating interstitially under a variety of names including solidarity economy, "new economy, local living economy, generative economy, and sharing economy" (Loh and Agyeman, 2017, p. 261). For example, Loh and Agyeman (2017) described how low-income residents in Roxbury and Dorchester organized for-profit, non-profit and cooperative businesses (farms, kitchen incubators, community gardens, etc.) together form the Boston Food Solidarity Economy, representing a solidarity economy ethos countering the dominant food system. Efforts focused on creating democratic, just, and sustainable models of exchange focused on human and ecological needs are documented throughout the United States, in the social economies of Europe and South America as well as the international cooperative movement (Hoyt and Menzani, 2012; Kelly, 2012; Peter, 2015; Calvário and Kallis, 2017).

Cooperatives are alternative spaces that reimagine capitalism in terms of worker voice and ownership (Cheney et al., 2014). Cooperatives complicate debates about neoliberalism in the food system because they defy the dichotomies of market/non-market (Battilani and Schröter, 2012). They differ from corporations in that owners are either workers or consumers but also differ from non-profit or governmental efforts because they seek profit (albeit one that is shared with members). In the U.S., agrarian purchasing cooperatives have a long history (Harter, 2004; Battilani and Schröter, 2012), and member owned cooperatives include grocery stores, consumer supported agriculture, farms, and food hubs. Historically, cooperatives represented a working-class response to industrial capitalism and many cooperatives were organized by immigrant groups and African Americans as a

path towards reducing the wealth gap (Nembhard, 2014; Peredo and McLean, 2020). In addition to developing stable incomes and quality jobs, worker-owned and community-owned cooperatives increasingly embrace sustainability and community contributions (Cheney et al., 2014). In practice, cooperatives may embrace liberal market logics or more radical approaches (Lima, 2007), as demonstrated by Zitcer's (2017) comparison of the divergent paths of Mariposa and Weaver's Way grocery cooperatives in Philadelphia. As I will discuss, Co-Op Cincy and the 1worker1vote.org network adopt a transformative ethos and further defy dichotomies through innovative hybrid models of member/worker ownership and unionization.

Case Methods

This case study is based on public documents produced by 1worker1vote.org, Co-op Cincy and the Our Harvest farm and food hub it incubated. Material includes websites, social media posts, and Co-Op Cincy's Cooperative Handbook (2019). In addition, I draw from field notes of observations at Co-Op Cincy events over the last eight years. I attended and took field notes during two biannual worker cooperative symposiums, multiple presentations, and annual celebrations. My analysis is also indirectly informed by insights from a focus group interview with five Our Harvest farm workers in 2018, which took place in the hoop house during the off-season. Although not a direct part of the case study, my board membership with Apple Street Market also informs my analysis. I become a board member as a way to contribute to Co-op Cincy, attending weekly and/or monthly meetings and other organizational activities. In this role, I represented Apple Street Market at an additional worker-cooperative symposium and multiple Co-op Cincy community presentations and annual celebrations. For this case study, I analyzed the organization's articulation of social justice, including how it educates the public and enacts social justice.

RE-IMAGINING FOOD SYSTEMS: SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH LOCALLY ROOTED OWNERSHIP

This case study describes how CC and its food cooperatives envision a creative alternative to the industrial food system. I describe how these organizations incorporate social justice into their missions, raise consciousness about the interconnections of food, economy, sustainability, and equity, and enact their innovative mission through everyday organizing.

Communicating a Social Justice Mission

Co-Op Cincy leaders explicitly incorporate justice issues into mission statements and other organizational descriptions. Like many contemporary cooperatives, the incubator's vision goes beyond the traditional cooperative focus on quality jobs to address community needs. Co-op Cincy leaders envision a cooperative economy that redresses marginalization and promotes community equity, in contrast to extractive forms of

capitalism that prioritize benefits to distant corporate managers and shareholders (Deetz, 1992; Cray, 2010).

The incubator's mission statement explicitly centers issues of power and justice: "Co-op Cincy creates an economy that works for all—that supports family-sustaining jobs, provides business ownership opportunities for underserved and historically marginalized people, and is accountable to the communities that drive it" (<https://coopcincy.org/>). The statement prioritizes equity by developing business ownership among those who previously have been excluded from the benefits of the market system. Invoking community accountability re-envision corporate governance, which has come to prioritize accountability to distant stockholders (Ritz, 2007).

Co-op Cincy's social justice mission informs the development of their food cooperatives. During Our Harvest's incubation, Co-op Cincy leaders employed localist discourses highlighting economic benefits of shifting dollars from distant corporations to local spending. In contrast to localist discourses that contribute to gentrification, Our Harvest addresses inequalities in accessing the benefits of local spending. The organization seeks to create food access, environmental sustainability, and quality jobs:

Co-op Cincy's first cooperative and the first Mondragon-style union co-op in the country! Our Harvest creates access to healthy, local food in a way that honors land and labor. By creating farm jobs that pay family-sustaining wages, and employing responsible growing practices, we are working to strengthen the local food system in Cincinnati. Through strategic partnerships and advocacy, we seek to make access to fresh, local food a possibility for all in Greater Cincinnati. <https://coopcincy.org/our-harvest>.

The theme of "honoring land and labor" paints a vision that integrates environmental sustainability with food access and quality work. The incubator's 2016 Annual Report reinforced the dual goals of sustainability and food access: "... to make sustainably-grown food available to all of the Greater Cincinnati community" (n.p.). Our Harvest leases two urban farms in the Greater Cincinnati area. Despite lacking resources to undergo organic certification, the organization uses natural growing methods and eschews industrial equipment: "Our food is just that: food. We never use synthetic pesticides or fertilizers. We grow our food the way nature intends" (<https://www.ourharvest.coop/>).

Our Harvest's mission also includes restoring farming skills among urbanites that has been lost in the transition to industrial farming. "Our Harvest is committed to creating family-sustaining jobs, strengthening the local food system, increasing access to healthy food, and sustaining these efforts by training new farmers" (Our Harvest Annual Report, 2016, n.p.). Worker-owners in the focus group described significant challenges in learning to farm and use natural growing methods, but also greatly appreciated acquiring this skillset.

Co-op Cincy's mission emphasizes local action, but simultaneously envisions a broader, transformative influence

on the larger food system and economy. Co-founder Ellen Vera explained, “We have such an issue around jobs and inequality in our country right now. My hope is that Our Harvest Cooperative and the Mondragon USW union co-op template can serve as a model for communities across the country as a way in which we can truly improve our food system, employ our neighbors, and create the type of society we all want to live in” (Our Harvest Annual Report, 2016, n.p). Co-founder Kristen Barker told prospective cooperators that Co-op Cincy is building a network of worker-owned cooperatives in order to create a Cincinnati “thriving in every neighborhood,” adding, “we have a goal of operating across the world but we’re going to start here.”

The incubator also links localism to broader social transformation through participation in the union movement. In different national and local settings, cooperatives may be viewed as an ally or antagonist to the union movement (Lima, 2007; Sbicca, 2017). Affiliating cooperatives with unions represents a proactive growth strategy for United States unions, which face declining membership. Representatives from at least nine different unions, including the Steelworkers, UFCW, Machinists and the United Electrical, attended the 2017 Union Co-op Symposium. At a session on the union-cooperative relationship, participants emphasized the idea that worker-owned cooperatives are a way to achieve worker ownership of the means of production.

The model combines Mondragon’s cooperative principles with collective bargaining, “in a way that not only makes the workplace more participatory and more accountable to the workers, but also further protects the interests of the workers...” (Worker Co-op Handbook, p. 9). Union representation helps to prevent degeneration (mission drift) by adding another layer of worker protection if cooperative managers begin to emphasize short-term business goals over the Mondragon principle of the “sovereignty of labor.”

Unions are an important bulwark against class inequalities, and the *IworkerIvote.org* network further seeks to diversify the union movement. Union leaders acknowledged that although the union movement has been an important factor in creating equality for underrepresented groups, it has not always been inclusive. At the 2017 Union Cooperative Symposium, *IworkerIvote* Director Michael Peck described the organization’s outreach in “healing communities where unions didn’t serve their interests when it was needed.” Small group working sessions included frank discussion of past United States union failures to represent marginalized groups. Participants shared methods for facilitating greater inclusion of immigrant workers within existing laws and advocating for more just immigration laws.

Social Justice Through Consciousness Raising

In order to make this innovative vision of a just food system a reality, Co-op Cincy and its food cooperatives engage in extensive efforts to raise consciousness about the need for food access, environmental sustainability, and democratic ownership through a solidarity economy.

Given that the United States public is not highly familiar with worker-owned cooperatives, Co-Op Cincy raises awareness about the model and the wide scope of cooperative efforts in order to recruit potential cooperators and supporters. Leaders highlight the percentage of GDP that comes from cooperatives, and the high success rate of cooperative businesses.

Leaders work to achieve their social justice mission of building ownership among the marginalized through consciousness raising efforts aimed to recruiting women, minority, and immigrant-led businesses. At one outreach event at New Prospect Baptist Church in a predominately Black neighborhood, speakers described how worker-owned cooperatives can aid low-income and minority neighborhoods, and attendees brainstormed potential cooperative businesses. Speaker Sarah Gellar from *Yes! Magazine* highlighted communities enacting intersectional justice through regenerative economies from her book “The Revolution Where you Live” that featured Our Harvest’s efforts. Rev. Damon Lynch described the impact of white flight and redlining on wealth in black communities, suggesting that “We have to build and control our own community.” He explained, “We have to re-imagine. Rosa Parks didn’t just resist the busses, they desegregated by creating their own network of rides: we [the black community] created Uber. But when that was over, they went back to using the bus. They needed to create their own networks... We need black business, press, church, and schools.”

Co-op Cincy created Co-op U for people interested in opening a cooperative business. The program pairs business training with consciousness raising about solidarity and cooperative culture including the Mondragon principles. In order to promote ownership among marginalized communities that may lack access to adequate education and opportunities to gain management-level business experience, the program provides training in business strategy, accounting, and marketing.

Ongoing on-the-job education sessions, “serve to demystify financial statements, tap into people’s collective intelligence about how to problem solve and build the business, develop communication skills, and integrate co-op values” (2016–2017 Cincinnati Union Cooperative Institute Annual Report, n.p.). During the focus group interview, Our Harvest farm workers expressed their appreciation for learning about business strategy and workplace communication, along with farming skills.

Prospective farm workers, particularly urban young people, often lack knowledge about farming and natural methods due to the shift to industrial farming. Farm Manager Stephen Deinger wrote in their 2016–2017 Annual Report, “I have come a long way as a farmer and as a manager, and I could only have done it with the support of the coop [Co-op Cincy]. I went from working by myself on a half acre, to now managing five farmers on over 12 acres. I could barely operate a tractor... I can now run all four of our tractors with just about every implement...” (n.p).

In addition to worker training, Our Harvest raises consciousness by connecting food consumers and producers. For example, the organization hosted a dinner celebrating one of its farms’ (Bahr Farm) 100-years anniversary. Tables were set up among the crops, and supporters got the chance to speak with farmers about growing methods and business challenges. The

Farm Manager shares a weekly farm report through newsletters and social media, connecting their buyers to the growing process. Leaders are frank about the challenges of small-scale farming. Their 2016–2017 Annual Report described, “The seasonal nature of produce, the intensive capitalization required, the low cost of conventional produce, and the unpredictability of the weather reduces the margin of error we have to work with-in.”

Recognizing that consumers need to understand natural food practices to support the CSA, the farm reports educate consumers about seasonal eating and sustainable farming. Consumers also learn about the benefits of supporting the union cooperative model in particular. Our Harvest’s hybrid model gives workers more voting rights than the public in order to protect worker democracy, but consumer owners need to support the cooperative ethos as well.

These consciousness-raising efforts challenge the “white imaginaries” of farming histories. For example, a November 5th, 2020 Facebook post profiled Dr. Booker T. Whatley, “the man who brought us the CSA” by developing clientele membership clubs to aid in the survival of black farms. The post observed, “BIPOC farmers have played a central role in agriculture. Yet they are overlooked and uncredited in our retelling of history. In a world where the majority of the ones who feed the world are people of color.” The post further shared: “We want to tell the true story of food. We highlight farmers from around the world and celebrate their ingenuity. We understand that erasure is a form of violence and commit to giving credit where credit is due” and asked, “Why is it so hard for white people to recognize that people of color have the solutions?”

CC’s commitment to education extends beyond Cincinnati by hosting a biennial symposium with cooperative leaders (established and start-ups), experts from Mondragon, union leaders, and 1worker1vote.org advocates. Many attendees have been eager to learn about Our Harvest and Apple Street Market and to share insights from their own food system initiatives, including food hubs, community gardens, grocery stores, and catering companies. In 2017, participants discussed efforts to counter gentrification through affordable housing and food businesses. Brooklyn Sprout organizers (a community urban garden supplying hospitals and health centers through Vital Brooklyn), described teaching young people about farming and creating a “self-sustaining space for people of color to control their wealth.” Creating these spaces for mutual learning facilitates shared strategizing in the face of resource challenges, and also aids in managing tensions between the mission to create locally rooted businesses and to transform global economies.

Embodying Social Justice Through Everyday Organizing

This essay primarily focuses on Co-Op Cincy’s creative re-imagining of food embodied in its mission and consciousness-raising efforts. However, it is also important to consider how these communicative practices translate into their everyday organizing, given the risks of mission drift (degeneration) and/or gentrification.

Our Harvest maintains its commitment to localism by growing and aggregating food within 150 miles of Cincinnati, primarily within the city core. It connects localist farming to food access by distributing at farmers markets, low-income community locations, and through mobile delivery. Given business costs (e.g., wages, sustainable growing) and low profit margins, Our Harvest engages numerous philanthropic and governmental programs to promote affordability. Harvest Day “brings fresh, local product directly into your community at prices affordable to all” (<https://coopcincy.org/our-harvest>). By partnering with Produce Perks Midwest, “SNAP benefit customers can purchase \$20 of produce each week for just \$10” (<https://www.ourharvest.coop/affordable-produce-program>).

Harvest Day hosts (community organizations and churches) in underserved neighborhoods facilitate orders and act as distribution sites (along with mobile outlets), receiving a portion of the profits. In addition, “We donate our extra produce to communities in need through partnerships with Freestore Foodbank and CAIN Food Pantry” (<https://www.ourharvest.coop/mission>). These efforts require extensive time and relationship building, but they are key to achieving the twin goals of food access and family-sustaining jobs.

In 2017, Our Harvest was able to pay managers \$15/hour and workers \$10/hour, with a system of raises and bonuses to increase their income. Workers also received a \$450 monthly stipend to purchase health insurance through the UFCW union. At that time, three of nine workers had achieved cooperative ownership status, paying \$3,000 in installments.

To achieve its agricultural educational mission, Our Harvest builds farm knowledge through its apprentice program. “Cultivate! Ohio Valley’s farm apprentice training program educates farm staff by combining on-farm training with classes in the Sustainable Agriculture Management Certificate program at Cincinnati State Community and Technical College” (<https://www.ourharvest.coop/education>).

Co-op Cincy also lives out its social justice goals by going beyond the Mondragon cooperative principle of “open membership” (nondiscrimination) to embrace Mondragon’s principles of solidarity and transformative social change. Leaders actively redress barriers to ownership by marginalized groups, including participation in Co-op U by underserved communities. In 2019, they partnered with nonprofits and city government programs to create the *Building Resilience in the Refugee Community of Cincinnati through Agriculture and Entrepreneurship* initiative, which pays for participation and provides childcare for low-income immigrants and women attending training. In 2020, fifteen Bhutanese refugees worked with Our Harvest to prepare for a business growing vegetables to supply Bhutanese grocery stores. A group of graduates is developing an affordable grocery delivery to apartment complexes in a neighborhood where many Bhutanese immigrants live (<https://coopcincy.org/updates/2020/7/13/refugee-owned-grocery-delivery-in-a-food-desert>). Co-op Cincy is hiring bilingual facilitators to work with a group of Congolese refugees attending Co-op U, and a racial justice educator for the Power in Number program, which will incubate black-owned businesses, by providing seed capital to overcome racial wealth

inequalities. These efforts pair consciousness-raising with material resources to address barriers to participation.

Our Harvest also continually investigates ways to increase sustainability. Their Facebook Farm Report on January 11, 2020 described improving soil at White Oak farm, which was “put through many years of monocropping creating harsh environment for life to flourish.” Now under Our Harvest, “After years of careful crop rotation and soil building cover crops we noticed white hairs clinging to the roots of our turnips and rutabaga this winter. Mycorrhizae!” They explained, “This is great news for the future of White Oak and its production of nutritious food for not only its caretaker humans but for life under the soil.” These posts share their ongoing commitment to sustainable growing methods on urban farms.

Speaking to the ways that local organizing can contribute to larger policy and cultural change, Our Harvest supports several local food policy initiatives, including the Greater Cincinnati Food Policy Council, Green Umbrella, and the Creating Healthy Communities Coalition. Moreover, Co-op Cincy participates in several national and international loan funds including Seed Commons, “a national network of locally-rooted, non-extractive loan funds that brings the power of big finance under community control” (<https://seedcommons.org/>). Co-op Cincy supporters also have advocated for city development funds to be distributed for food support in low-income rather than gentrified areas. These efforts demonstrate the potential for union cooperative networks to promote social justice and policy change.

CONCLUSION

This case study adds to research demonstrating how activists engaged in alternative, solidarity economy businesses are re-imagining the food system, defying the corporate colonization of the status quo in public consciousness. These groups communicate ambitious visions for social change, raising consciousness about food justice and enacting these visions in their everyday organizing. These efforts also concretize transformative visions, demonstrating that other economic systems, with different values and assumptions, are not only possible but currently available.

Rather than center possible residues of neoliberalism, this project highlights Co-op Cincy’s and Our Harvest’s unique approach to achieving social justice goals, with a goal of catalyzing future efforts. Our Harvest integrates social justice, addressing inequities in food production and consumption, with environmental sustainability.

We can recognize the embodied constraints that alternative groups face organizing from within a capitalist framework with an eye towards understanding how these groups counter corporate dominance by co-opting resources and structures designed to

reinforce capitalist interests. Co-op Cincy creatively and flexibly redeploys resources from market mechanisms, non-profits, government programs, community organizing, unions, and the larger cooperative movement to promote an independent and democratic model of community wealth and ownership.

It is also crucial to understand how self-identified alternative economy efforts with social justice missions maintain those commitments in the face of lower access to capital and lack of public knowledge about more collectivist models, including cooperatives. Co-Op Cincy and Our Harvest pair innovative approaches to funding with enduring commitments to education that promote cooperative culture. Their educational efforts spread awareness of the need for equality in the economy and food system. Their efforts further enact social justice by providing material resources that redress intersectional structural barriers to participation in education and worker ownership.

Taking a generative approach highlights the transformational capacities of alternative economy food businesses, asking how we can further catalyze these models rather than dismiss them as incidental to the capitalist project. Theoretically, scholars need to investigate in practice the degree to which localist, interstitial, alternative food initiatives are inhibiting or catalyzing larger social justice coalitions and policies. Co-op Cincy offers one model for building and expanding power among the marginalized. By connecting locally rooted businesses in a national/international network of Mondragon-style, hybrid community- and worker-owned union cooperatives, the organization promotes ownership among women, minority, and immigrant workers, creates food access for low-income publics, and advocates for policies that support marginalized groups. Other articles in this Topic highlight additional paths.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Written informed consent was obtained from the individuals for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

REFERENCES

- Alkon, A. H., and Guthman, J. (2017). "Introduction," in *The New Food Activism: Opposition, Cooperation, and Collective Action*. Editors A. H. Alkon and J. Guthman (Oakland, CA: University of California Press), 1–30.
- Battilani, P., and Schröter, H. G. (2012). "Introduction: Principal Problems and General Development of Cooperative enterprise," in *The Cooperative Business Movement, 1950 to the Present*. Editors P. Battilani and H. G. Schröter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1–19.
- Blay-Palmer, A. (2010). "Imagining Sustainable Food Systems," in *Imagining Sustainable Food Systems*. Editor A. Blay-Palmer (New York: Routledge), 3–16.
- Busa, J. H., and Garder, R. (2015). Champions of the Movement or Fair-Weather Heroes? Individualization and the (A) politics of Local Food. *Antipode* 47 (2), 323–341. doi:10.1111/anti.12108
- Butterfield, K. L., and Ramirez, A. S. (2021). Framing Food Access: Do Community Gardens Inadvertently Reproduce Inequality?. *Health Educ. Behav.* 48 (2), 160–168. doi:10.1177/1090198120950617
- Calvário, R., and Kallis, G. (2017). Alternative Food Economies and Transformative Politics in Times of Crisis: Insights from the Basque Country and Greece. *Antipode* 49 (3), 597–616. doi:10.1111/anti.12298
- Carter, A. L., and Alexander, A. (2020). Soul Food: [Re]framing the African-American Farming Crisis Using the Culture-Centered Approach. *Front. Commun.* 5 (5). doi:10.3389/fcomm.2020.00005
- Cheney, G., Santa Cruz, I., Peredo, A. M., and Nazareno, E. (2014). Worker Cooperatives as an Organizational Alternative: Challenges, Achievements and Promise in Business Governance and Ownership. *Organization* 21 (5), 591–603. doi:10.1177/1350508414539784
- Clendenning, J., Dressler, W. H., and Richards, C. (2016). Food justice or Food Sovereignty? Understanding the Rise of Urban Food Movements in the USA. *Agric. Hum. Values* 33 (1), 165–177. doi:10.1007/s10460-015-9625-8
- Conley, D., and Eckstein, J. (2012). "Spatial Affects and Rhetorical Relations: At the Cherry Creek Farmers' Market," in *The Rhetoric of Food: Discourse, Materiality, and Power*. Editor M. B. Joshua Frye (New York: Routledge), 171–189.
- Conrad, C., and Abbott, J. (2007). "Corporate Social Responsibility and Public Policy Making," in *The Debate over Corporate Social Responsibility*. Editors S. May, G. Cheney, and J. Roper (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 417–437.
- Counihan, C., and Siniscalchi, V. (2014). *Food Activism: agency, Democracy and Economy*. Bloomsbury.
- Cray, C. (2010). "Using Charters to Redesign Corporations in the Public Interest," in *The Bottom Line or Public Health*. Editor W. H. Wiist (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 299–320.
- de Souza, R. (2019). *Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries*. MIT Press. doi:10.7551/mitpress/11701.001.0001
- Deetz, S. (1992). *Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonization: Developments in Communication and the Politics of Everyday Life*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Figuerola, M., and Alkon, A. H. (2017). "Cooperative Social Practices, Self-Determination, and the Struggle for Food Justice in Oakland and Chicago," in *The New Food Activism: Opposition, Cooperation, and Collective Action*. Editors A. H. Alkon and J. Guthman (Oakland, CA: University of California Press), 206–231.
- Friedmann, H., and McNair, A. (2008). Whose Rules Rule? Contested Projects to Certify Local Production for Distant Consumers. *J. Agrarian Change* 8 (2–3), 408–434. doi:10.1111/j.1471-0366.2008.00175.x
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. (2006). *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew it)*. Minneapolis: First University of Minnesota Press.
- Gordon, C., and Hunt, K. (2018). Reform, justice, and Sovereignty: A Food Systems Agenda for Environmental Communication. *Environ. Commun.* 13, 9–22. doi:10.1080/17524032.2018.1435559
- Hall, B. (2016). Organizing the New Food Labor Movement: From Neoliberal Alternatives to Worker-Based Justice. *Jafscd* 5, 1–. doi:10.5304/jafscd.2015.054.012
- Harter, L. M. (2004). Masculinity(s), the Agrarian Frontier Myth, and Cooperative Ways of Organizing: Contradictions and Tensions in the Experience and Enactment of Democracy. *J. Appl. Commun. Res.* 32 (2), 89–118. doi:10.1080/0090988042000210016
- Heras-Saizarbitoria, I. (2014). The Ties that Bind? Exploring the Basic Principles of Worker-Owned Organizations in Practice. *Organization* 21 (5), 645–665. doi:10.1177/1350508414537623
- Holt-Giménez, E., and Patel, R. (2009). *Food Rebellions: Crisis and the Hunger for Justice*. Cape Town: Pambazuka Press.
- Holt-Gimenez, E., and Wang, Y. (2011). Reform or Transformation? the Pivotal Role of Food justice in the U.S. Food Movement. *Race/Ethnicity* 5 (1), 83–102. doi:10.2979/racethmulglocon.5.1.83
- Hoyt, A., and Menzani, T. (2012). "The International Cooperative Movement: A Quiet Giant," in *The Cooperative Business Movement, 1950 to the Present: Comparative Perspectives in Business History*. Editors P. Battilani and H. G. Schroter (Cambridge University Press), 23–62.
- Ivancic, S. R. (2017). Gluttony for a Cause or Feeding the Food Insecure? Contradictions in Combating Food Insecurity through Private Philanthropy. *Health Commun.* 32 (11), 1441–1444. doi:10.1080/10410236.2016.1222562
- Kawano, E. (2013). *Social Solidarity Economy: Toward Convergence across continental Divides*. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. Available at: <http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BE6B5/search/F1E9214CF8EA21A8C1257B1E003B4F65?OpenDocument>.
- Kelly, M. (2012). *Owning Our Future: The Emerging Ownership Revolution*. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, Inc.
- Levins, R., and Lopez, C. (1999). Toward an Ecosocial View of Health. *Int. J. Health Serv.* 29 (2), 261–293. doi:10.2190/wlvk-d0rr-kvkv-a1dh
- Levitte, Y. (2010). "Thinking about Labour in Alternative Food Systems," in *Imagining Sustainable Food Systems*. Editor A. Blay-Palmer (New York: Routledge), 71–86.
- Lima, J. C. (2007). Workers' Cooperatives in Brazil: Autonomy vs Precariousness. *Econ. Ind. Democracy* 28 (4), 589–621. doi:10.1177/0143831X07082200
- Loh, P., and Agyeman, J. (2017). "Boston's Emerging Food Solidarity Economy," in *The New Food Activism: Opposition, Cooperation, and Collective Action*. Editors A. H. Alkon and J. Guthman (University of California Press), 257–283.
- McCullen, C. (2011). "The white Farm Imaginary: How One Farmers Market Refetishizes the Production of Food and Limits Food Politics," in *Food as Communication, Communication as Food*. Editors J. Cramer, C. Greene, and L. Walters (Peter Lang), 217–234.
- Nembhard, J. G. (2014). Community-based Asset Building and Community Wealth. *The Rev. Black Polit. Economy* 41 (2), 101–117. doi:10.1007/s12114-014-9184-z
- Pal, M. (2016). Organization at the Margins: Subaltern Resistance of Singur. *Hum. Relations* 69 (2), 419–438. doi:10.1177/0018726715589797
- Peredo, A. M., and McLean, M. (2020). Decommmodification in Action: Common Property as Countermovement. *Organization* 27 (6), 817–839. doi:10.1177/1350508419867202
- Peter (2015). *Social and Solidarity Economy: Beyond the Fringe?* (London: Zed Books).
- Ritz, D. (2007). "Can Corporate Personhood Be Socially Responsible?," in *The Debate over Corporate Social Responsibility*. Editors S. May, G. Cheney, and J. Roper (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 190–204.
- Rosile, G. A., Boje, D. M., Herder, R. A., and Sanchez, M. (2021). The Coalition of Immokalee Workers Uses Ensemble Storytelling Processes to Overcome Enslavement in Corporate Supply Chains. *Business Soc.*, 60 (2), 376–414. doi:10.1177/0007650320930416
- Sbicca, J. (2017). "Resetting the "Good Food" Table: Labor and Food Justice Alliances in Los Angeles," in *The New Food Activism: Opposition, Cooperation, and Collective Action*. Editors A. H. Alkon and J. Guthman (University of California Press). doi:10.1525/california/9780520292130.003.0005
- Shreck, A., Getz, C., and Feenstra, G. (2006). Social Sustainability, Farm Labor, and Organic Agriculture: Findings from an Exploratory Analysis. *Agric. Hum. Values* 23 (4), 439–449. doi:10.1007/s10460-006-9016-2
- Slocum, R. (2007). Whiteness, Space and Alternative Food Practice. *Geoforum* 38 (3), 520–533. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2006.10.006

- Strochlic, R., Wirth, C., Fernandez Besada, A., and Getz, C. (2008). *Farm Labor Conditions on Organic Farms in California*. California Institute for Rural Studies. <file:///C:/Users/Owner/AppData/Local/Temp/Pub0608.1.pdf>.
- Webb, T., and Cheney, G. (2014). "Worker-owned-and-governed Co-operatives and the Wider Co-operative Movement: Challenges and Opportunities within and beyond the Global Economic Crisis," in *The Routledge Companion to Alternative Organization*. Editors M. Parker, G. Cheney, V. Fournier, and C. Land (New York: Routledge), 64–88.
- Webber, C. B., Sobal, J., and Dollahite, J. S. (2010). Shopping for Fruits and Vegetables. Food and Retail Qualities of Importance to Low-Income Households at the Grocery Store. *Appetite*, 54(2), 297–303. doi:10.1016/j.appet.2009.11.015
- Zitcer, A. (2017). "Collective purchase: Food Cooperatives and Their Pursuit of justice," in *The New Food Activism: Opposition, Cooperation, and Collective Action*. Editors A. H. Alkon and J. Guthman (University of California Press). doi:10.1525/california/9780520292130.003.0008
- Conflict of Interest:** The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.
- Copyright © 2021 Zoller. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.*