

Work and the Economy: The Decline Of Unions And The Role Of Worker Cooperatives

Key Words: labour law; unionized context; worker cooperatives; amateur economy; secure employment.

Presentation themes and ideas:

The research approaches the issue of capitalization and corporatization from the perspective of the elimination of unsuitable employment practices, and the promotion of employment security for those working in the amateur economy and local context. In particular it focuses on the worker cooperative and the possibility of providing greater promotion of worker cooperatives by strengthening the position of workers. The focus is on the importance of workers cooperatives as a transformative capacity in the degrowth movement.

The field of knowledge in the area of union and labour law provides a substantial understanding of many of the principles which guide cooperative employment models. These include ensuring security of employment and putting the employee first. Of particular relevance for the cooperative is the strength of the legal regulation framework, and the possible supportive role played by arbitration and complaint procedure mechanisms contained in current employment legislative framework which may be able to contribute to surety of employment for the worker in a cooperative.

This research paper approaches local mobilisation and focus, from the perspective of long term and sustainable support for individuals acting within the degrowth movement, by ensuring employment security. The research will address questions such as:

- How can we ensure security for the individual wishing to become involved in long term sustainability and the local movement?
- How can we utilise structural legal knowledge to support individuals in workers cooperatives?
- Can we identify structural faults with the legal support for workers cooperatives?
- If so, how can we lobby for legal change?

These research questions are particularly relevant to the conference thematic themes of building a social and ecological economy, “work, labour and socially meaningful activities beyond growth,” and Organizing Society, “conditions for degrowth.”

Paper and Presentation Outline:

In this paper the authors consider workers co-operatives in relation to the current state of worker representation in the unionized context. The similarities in the founding principles of union and workers co-operatives, such as equality, equity and solidarity, provide us with the opportunity to consider governance and structural challenges common to both contexts. Traditionally the union model has provided the opportunity for workers of fair representation, and to consider issues of salary equity and security, among others. Despite the on-going importance of these issues unionization rates have been dropping in the context of a rapidly changing work-place and the phenomenon of the "new" economy of non-traditional work relationships.

With the decreasing membership in the unionization model, and increasing difficulties in union regulation across provincial and international state borders, this paper considers whether worker cooperatives can operate as alternative or a supplement to the traditional union model. We look at whether there are characteristics of cooperatives that make them more resilient or better able to meet the challenges of the “new economy”. We begin by considering what is meant by “worker cooperatives”, in light of the statutory framework in which they operate in Canada. Next, we consider what protections worker cooperatives can offer workers and how these compare to protections available in the union model. Finally, we consider some of the challenges faced by unions and query whether worker cooperatives may be an alternative or a supplementary way of addressing decreased union membership, and corresponding weakening in employment security.