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The political economy of worker cooperative development

Meitheal and sustainability

Cian McMahon

PhD

2019

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the potential of the worker cooperative model as the basis for a sustainable mode of production. We explore the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the worker coop enterprise form vis-à-vis the conventional capitalist firm; as well as the political-economic barriers to scale confronting sustainable worker coop development.

We review the international literature on worker coop development, noting that questions of social and environmental sustainability are relatively underresearched, when compared with the extensive literature on the economic sustainability of worker coops. Furthermore, the relationship between worker coop development initiatives and macro-level political-economic transformation is also relatively understudied. The gaps in the literature call for a greater consideration of the social relations established both *within* worker coops, and *between* worker coops and the wider community. A qualitative case study of the worker coop development experience in Ireland during the neoliberal era is carried out on this basis

Our methodological approach encourages a dialogue between the international literature on worker coop development and our case study results, as mediated through a Marxist political economy lens. We find evidence to support the contention that, in contradistinction to the capitalist firm, worker coops have at least *the potential* to institute sustainable development. But this ultimately requires the establishment of democratic planning mechanisms between, as well as within, individual worker coops. In terms of the worker coop movement reaching scale, while the economic policy literature emphasises the importance of “getting the (legal, technical, and financial) institutions right”, and the political economy literature emphasises the primacy of the political struggle over state power in this regard, we find that neither branch places sufficient emphasis on the political-*cultural* movement required to carry through any such transformation. This insight places grassroots worker cooperatives as counter-cultural institutions, and, hence, the primary instigators of cooperative political-economic change.

*In memory of my father, Kevin, and dedicated to workers everywhere
(especially my mother, Marian!)*

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‘Meitheal is the Irish word for a work team, gang, or party and denotes the co-operative labour system in Ireland where groups of neighbours help each other in turn with farming work . . . To the heart of the concept is community unity through cooperative work and mutually reciprocal support. Meitheal is the Irish expression of the ancient and universal appliance of cooperation to social need.’¹

‘Ar scáth a chéile is ea mairid na daoine.’²

‘There is a co-operative bakery, a co-operative factory, a co-operative mill and a co-operative electricity supply. And back along the track the smashed power of innumerable little tyrants.’

– Peadar O’Donnell³

‘Without the power of the Industrial Union behind it, Democracy can only enter the state as the victim enters the gullet of the Serpent.’

– James Connolly⁴

¹ See <http://www.maryrobinsoncentre.ie/meitheal.html>.

² ‘People live by mutual assistance’ – Irish proverb (O’Dowd 1981, p. 15).

³ Introduction to *My Story by Paddy the Cope* (cited in foreword to Lynch 1990).

⁴ Connolly ([1915] 1983b, p. 70).

1 Introduction

The opening decades of the twenty-first century confront humanity with an intersecting political-economic crisis of neoliberal capitalism (Kotz 2015b) and social-ecological crisis of the capitalist Anthropocene (Angus 2016). While the capitalist system has historically proven capable of reconciling economic and social contradictions following structural crises of successive capitalist stages (McDonough 2017), the ecological dimension of the contemporary crisis raises the spectre of a structural crisis of *capitalism* per se (Foster 2013). To deny that the expansionary dynamics of capital accumulation lie at the root of this ecological degradation is to fall prey to a *second* climate denial (Burkett 2017) – the first being that destructive anthropogenic global warming exists at all.

It is within this wider context that there has been a resurgence of interest, both academic and activist, in the worker cooperative model as a potential alternative to the conventional capitalist firm (Erdal 2011; Bernstein [1976] 2012; Ranis 2016; Webb 2016). An important strand of this literature concerns the promotion of worker coops as ‘builders of sustainable development’ (CICOPA 2014). Yet, even if the existing literature suggests that worker coops are, at least potentially, an economically sustainable alternative (Pérotin 2016), more research is needed regarding social (Piñeiro Harnecker 2009) and ecological (ICA 2013) sustainability (Brown et al. 2015). Similarly, the relationship between worker coop development and macro-level political-cultural transformation is relatively understudied (Upchurch et al. 2014). Our research set out to contribute to the emerging literature on sustainable worker coop development in this holistic sense.

Our central research question asked: What is the potential of the worker cooperative model as the basis for a sustainable mode of production? This implies a sub-question at the micro level: What is the potential of the worker cooperative model as a sustainable alternative to the conventional capitalist firm? It also implies a related sub-question at the macro level: What are the barriers to scale confronting sustainable worker coop development?

Our inquiry is motivated by a philosophical and practical commitment to republican and communist ideals, attuned to the challenges of the twenty-first century (Ó Tuathaigh 2003; Harvey 2008; Amin 2018; Arruzza et al. 2019). This *socialist* republicanism has been concisely defined from a Marxist perspective ‘as the complete democratization of society, not merely of political forms’ (Draper 1974, p.101). Or as James Connolly once put it: ‘That the agricultural and industrial system of a free people, like their political system, ought to be an accurate reflex of the democratic principle by the people for the people, solely in the interests of the people’ (Connolly 1896). As such, we understand the communist aspiration from the perspective of procedural, rather than merely distributive, justice (Anderson 1999; Varoufakis 2002). Implicit in this is a fundamental rejection of the capitalist labour process – its *alienation* of workers from *production*, from *one another*, and from *non-human nature* (Ellerman 2015; Foster and Burkett 2017; Anderson 2017).

In Chapter 2, we set out our macro-level theoretical framework, the social structure of accumulation (SSA) theory (McDonough 2017), which derives from the stage-theoretic tradition in Marxist political economy. The SSA theory helps us to analyse the contemporary crisis of neoliberal capitalism, at both the global and local (Irish) levels. We argue that the social-ecological contradictions of the neoliberal era represent a structural crisis of the capitalist epoch in the historical materialist sense (Foster 2013). While the present conditions are favourable towards a revival of working class struggle (Silver 2013), a new phase of regulated capitalism is almost certainly incompatible with social-ecological imperatives (Klitgaard and Krall 2012). As such, (radical) social democratic reforms should be conceived rather as initial steps towards a revolutionary ecosocialist transformation (Rahnema 2017). Ecosocialism ultimately requires the cooperative regulation of production and distribution via democratic planning (Devine 2017; Magdoff and Williams 2017).

Any potential response to the structural crisis of capitalism raises the question of employment: its form, content, and prevalence (Pollin 2012). Chapter 3 confronts capitalist unemployment from a heterodox economics perspective

(Mitchell and Muysken 2008). On this basis, we propose a suite of sustainable employment policies with the potential to prefigure an ecosocialist transition (Blauwhof 2012). Our programme centres on worker cooperative development (Bateman 2013). In formulating a working theory of worker coop development, we introduce labour process theory (LPT) as a micropolitical component of the SSA theory (Vidal and Hauptmeier 2014). The radical political economy literature suggests that, while worker coops represent self-help organisations of the working class (Ranis 2016), worker coop development is nevertheless subordinate to the political struggle over state power (Sharzer 2017). Furthermore, it is only through state-level coordination that the inherent *potentials* of the worker cooperative form can be realised to institute sustainable development (Piñeiro Harnecker 2009).

Regarding our empirical investigation into the worker coop development experience in Ireland, we discuss our methodological approach and research instruments in Chapter 4. We draw on the extended case methodology of Vidal and Hauptmeier (2014), which encourages a dialogue between our theoretical presuppositions and the lived experiences of our case study participants. In looking how best to address our research questions, we settle on the qualitative semi-structured interview as our primary research instrument (Ritchie et al. 2014). This allows us to investigate the social relations *within* worker coops, and *between* worker coops and the wider community, as mediated by the Irish, European, and global regulatory regimes.

The results of our case study interviews are presented descriptively in Chapter 5, along with section summaries relating back to our theoretical framework. We spoke with cooperative developers – workers, managers, trade unionists, and agency officials – from across the island of Ireland. The worker coop initiatives that we encountered spanned the decades of neoliberal transformation. We focused on the micropolitics of worker coop sustainability when we interacted with workers and managers; and we switched our focus to the macropolitical barriers to worker coop scale when we engaged with trade union and agency officials.

Our case study results are analysed with reference to prior theoretical formulations in Chapter 6. The findings are interpreted as broadly in keeping with our working theory of worker coop development. There is, however, a greater emphasis in our case study on cultural factors, and the central importance of grassroots cooperative education and activism in facilitating a cooperativist political-cultural transformation (Carnoy 1981; Baldacchino 1990; Marszalek 2017). In this regard, social partnership (McDonough and Dundon 2010) and the peace process (McCabe 2013b) are understood as the key institutional processes underpinning the rise and fall of worker coop development in Ireland throughout the neoliberal period. We distil from this analysis a hierarchy of sustainable worker coop development needs.

Chapter 7 concludes that the *inherent* potentials of the worker coop model, as the basis for sustainable development, are undermined where workplace democracy remains confined to the *internal* operations of the firm (Piñeiro Harnecker 2009). The needs of the wider social ecology must be incorporated into the planning process through mechanisms of democratic participation (Devine 2017). Moreover, the economic reforms required to promote sustainable worker coop development will be neither effectively implemented nor leveraged without a grassroots cooperative political-cultural movement leading the charge. The most pressing immediate task for the Irish, European, and global labour movements is to promote cooperative education and raise awareness amongst trade union members and the general public about the potential benefits of the worker cooperative model. As the working class regains strength, class consciousness, and confidence in response to the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, a greater awareness, knowledge, and experience of cooperativism – not least through democratised trade union and political activity (Carnoy 1981; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2019) – should translate into bold grassroots worker coop initiatives. In turn, such worker-led cooperation should ultimately encourage an ambitious sustainable worker coop development strategy within the broader labour movement.

2 The crisis of neoliberal capitalism

2.1 Introduction

The ongoing crisis of contemporary capitalist political economy underscores the failures of orthodox political-economic theory and practice (Keen 2011, 2017). This chapter proposes an alternative, radical political economy framework, rooted in the Marxist stage theoretic tradition (McDonough 2007): namely, the social structure of accumulation (SSA) theory (McDonough 2017).⁵ Section 2.2 presents an overview of the SSA theory in its modern formulation (Wolfson and Kotz 2010). This approach frames our analysis of the crisis in Section 2.3. The SSA theory understands the current crisis as a structural crisis of the latest, neoliberal phase of capitalist development (Kotz and McDonough 2010). We describe the key institutions of the global neoliberal SSA, and how these shape and interact with the Irish political economy (McDonough and Dundon 2010). A clearer picture of the Irish neoliberal SSA serves as a historical, macro political-economic frame of reference for our case study on worker cooperative development in Ireland during this period (see Chapters 5 and 6). In particular, we focus on the regulatory roles of social partnership in the South and the peace process in the North, as somewhat deviant local manifestations of more general global neoliberal institutional processes. Section 2.4 advocates a sustainable longer-term response to the crisis in the form of twenty-first century socialism (Harnecker 2015). This requires, in the first instance, an ecosocialist vision; but, also, an ecorevolutionary strategy (Devine 2017; Magdoff and Williams 2017; Rahnema 2017). Section 2.5 concludes.

2.2 Social structure of accumulation theory

The multifaceted nature of the crisis of contemporary capitalism has driven home the need for a more holistic political economy approach – both in terms of understanding and responding to the crisis (Goldstein and Hillard 2009;

⁵ The SSA theory was pioneered by David M. Gordon. See Bowles and Weisskopf (1998) for a useful overview of Gordon's contribution and commitment to radical political economy.

Lavoie 2014, Chapter 1; Martins 2014; Stilwell 2016). As Goldstein argued at the outset of the crisis:

The world economy is in the grips of a financial crisis that has the potential to rival the Great Depression. Yet, the readily visible aspects of the crisis are merely the superficial expression of a deeper crisis that revolves around the nexus of under-consumption, over-investment and financial crises. An integrated⁶ heterodox approach is uniquely suited to understand these interconnected crisis components due to its focus on the interrelations between social classes, the distribution of income, effective demand, Marxian competition, crisis theory, Keynesian uncertainty, financial innovation and fragility, endogenous expectations, and structural and institutional change.

(Goldstein 2009, p. 263)

Riccardo Bellofiore makes a similar argument, while emphasising the institutionalist, long wave dimension:

An understanding of, and intervention into, the present capitalist reality requires that we put together the insights of Karl Marx on labor, as well as those of Hyman Minsky on finance. The best way to do this is within a longer-term perspective, looking at the different stages through which capitalism evolves. In other words, what is needed is a Schumpeterian-like, nonmechanical view about long waves, where Minsky's financial Keynesianism is integrated with Marx's focus on capitalist relations of production. Both are essential elements in understanding neoliberalism's ascent and collapse.

(Bellofiore 2014, p. 1)

Social structure of accumulation theory offers an integrated heterodox framework within which to analyse capitalist long waves⁷ of relatively stable

⁶ James R. Crotty was a prominent early advocate of integrating the modern heterodox traditions in economics, focusing in particular on the complementarities between the Marxian and post-Keynesian schools: 'Whereas the Marxian tradition has an underdeveloped theory of money and finance but a rich literature devoted to the sphere of production, the Keynesians have produced interesting and important work on monetary and financial aspects of capitalist instability while almost totally neglecting production relations, the labor process, and class structure. The writings of Hyman Minsky are especially important in this regard' (Crotty, 1985, p. 36).

⁷ The term 'long waves' is used here loosely, in reference to alternating historical periods of relatively stable and unstable and/or stagnant capital accumulation, punctuated by structural crises. While the SSA theory initially emphasised long waves of relatively rapid economic growth, structural crisis, and relative economic stagnation (Gordon et al. 1982, Chapter 2), the recent literature has proposed severing the link between long waves of economic growth and the constitution of an SSA (Wolfson and Kotz 2010). This is in recognition of empirical

accumulation, structural crisis, and relative stagnation and/or instability (Kotz et al. 1994; McDonough et al. 2010; McDonough et al. 2014; McDonough 2017). Each succeeding ‘stage’ of capitalism is characterised by a particular institutional form – a new SSA – comprising a mutually-reinforcing ensemble of economic, political, and cultural institutions. At first, the SSA stabilises long-run expectations of profitability, and hence promotes steady investment, capital accumulation, and economic growth. Over time, however, this stability becomes destabilising: the process of expansion begins to undermine itself, as the underlying contradictions of capitalist accumulation (Harvey 2014) – most notably, the capital-labour class relation – reassert themselves in the form of an institutional blockage, thus leading to a crisis in the SSA. The economy enters into an extended period of decline and subsequent stagnation and/or instability; until, that is, arising out of the indeterminate process of class struggle, a new capitalist SSA emerges or the capitalist mode of production is superseded outright (McDonough et al. 2010, p. 1–4; McDonough 2017, p. 370).

The SSA theory is firmly rooted in a Marxist understanding of the longer-term, transhistorical dynamics of capitalist development, which emphasises the system’s tendency towards periodic structural crises arising out of class conflict (Mandel [1980] 1995; Gouverneur 1983; Vidal et al. 2015; Kotz 2017b; Umney 2018; McDonough and McMahon 2018). An institutionalist influence allows for the possibility of capitalist recovery, as the system evolves through stages that are intermediate in length between particular historical conjunctures and overall capitalist history (McDonough 2007). While these Marxist and institutionalist insights provide strategic direction to the working class, in line with structural and conjunctural conditions, the

anomalies arising over the *longue durée* of historical capitalism. Wolfson and Kotz (2010) note, for example, that significant alternation in the pace of economic growth breaks down between the crisis phase of the postwar SSA and expansionary phase of the global neoliberal SSA. Using a slightly different methodology, Basu (2016a) finds that, while there is convincing evidence for the existence of long waves of economic growth throughout capitalist history, the alternation in the pace of economic growth breaks down during the postwar era, before being re-established in the neoliberal era. Therefore, Wolfson and Kotz argue that, ‘Capitalists’ objective in creating the institutions of an SSA is to promote profit-making; the institutions thus created may or may not promote rapid growth’ (2010, p. 89). Indeed, Li et al. (2007) suggest that long waves of profitability may be a more suitable indicator of SSA upswings and downswings.

post-Keynesian influence incorporates a complementary consideration of the role of money, credit, and aggregate (effective) demand in reproducing a monetary production economy (Kotz 1991; Trigg 2006; McDonough et al. 2010, p. 2). In addition, SSA theory is compatible with the wider social-ecological and feminist concerns of the heterodox social surplus approach (Lee and Jo 2011; Klitgaard and Krall 2012; Martins 2014).

Wolfson and Kotz (2010, p. 82–3) argue that, by virtue of its monopoly over the means of coercion, the capitalist state plays a key role in the construction of new SSAs. While the fundamental institutions of capitalist society – those concerning private property – rig the game in capital’s favour, the working class, in struggle through its economic, political, and cultural organs, has periodically succeeded in exerting a considerable degree of influence over the capitalist state (Jessop 2002). Consequently, capitalist history exhibits a tendency for SSAs to emerge in two broad varieties: ‘liberal’ SSAs, in which capital largely dominates over labour, and ‘regulated’ SSAs, wherein labour forces a class compromise with capital (Wolfson and Kotz 2010, p. 85).⁸ Rising inequality is characteristic of a liberal SSA: with labour’s bargaining power weakened, income and wealth inequalities tend to grow, resulting in deficient aggregate demand and a tendency towards financial crises. Regulated SSAs, on the other hand, tend to reduce inequality: a strengthened labour movement is likely to push wage growth above productivity growth, thus creating a ‘profit squeeze’ crisis tendency. In either case, an SSA’s crisis

⁸ ‘There seems to be a historical tendency for liberal SSAs to alternate with regulated SSAs’ (Wolfson and Kotz 2010, p. 85) – at least since the rise of ‘monopoly capitalism’ (Foster and Magdoff 2009; Foster and McChesney 2012). But, because regulated SSAs are defined on the basis of a ‘capital-labor compromise’ (Wolfson and Kotz 2010, p. 81), the possible emergence of a capitalist-dominated regulated SSA, in response to the crisis of a liberal SSA (itself capitalist-dominated), is clouded. Kotz appears to recognise this possibility in his conception of a ‘business-regulated capitalism’ (Kotz 2015b, p. 200–5). The most coherent historical reference point for the emergence of a business-regulated form of capitalism, however, would appear to be political fascism. This is certainly undesirable from a sustainability perspective (Kotz 2015b, p. 204; Foster 2017a, 2017b). Kotz (2015b, Chapters 6 and 7; 2017b) argues that ‘both theory and history suggest that one of three alternative directions of restructuring is likely to emerge in coming years: a right-wing nationalist and statist form of capitalism, a social-democratic form of capitalism, or a transition to socialism. Such an analysis can provide the forces that favor a transition to socialism with arguments in favor of that direction of change’ (Kotz 2015a, p. 548). See Rey Araujo (2018) for a friendly post-Marxist critique of Wolfson and Kotz (2010), in particular, and the SSA theory more generally.

tendencies reveal themselves in both short-run recessions and longer-term structural crises (p. 86–7).

The economic and financial crisis of 2008 has its historical precedent in the Great Depression of the 1930s. Both events can be understood as structural crises of capitalist-dominated, liberal SSAs. Just as a liberal programme was unlikely to resolve the Great Depression, so it is unlikely to adequately address the contemporary crisis of global neoliberalism (Kotz and McDonough 2010). Indeed, the Great Depression was only eventually resolved in the postwar period, after a protracted struggle on the part of organised labour, with the inauguration of a new, regulated SSA based on the active integration of the working class in the regulatory regime. This postwar SSA itself entered a structural crisis in the 1970s, which was unlikely to be resolved within the institutional structures of a regulated SSA; this time it was resolved with the inauguration of a (neo)liberal SSA. In any structural crisis of capitalism, however, the eventual outcome is ultimately indeterminate and depends on a protracted period of class struggle. This may indeed produce tendential long swings between liberal and regulated capitalist SSAs,⁹ or, depending on the length and depth of the crisis – itself indeterminate – even a transition away from capitalism to an alternative political-economic system

⁹ The theoretical reasoning behind the posited tendency for liberal and regulated SSAs to alternate is that ‘each kind of structure addresses the contradictions inherent in the other’ (McDonough 2010, p. 37). Karl Polanyi’s (1944) conception of a ‘double movement’ anticipated the transition from a liberal to a regulated SSA following the Great Depression, whereby the social dislocation created by marketisation simultaneously produced support for non-market intervention. Similarly, Michał Kalecki (1943) anticipated a counter-movement where a regime of state-led full employment would embolden workers, eventually provoking a reaction on the part of capital. However, ‘While the transition from liberal to regulated institutional structures and vice versa may be suggestive in particular periods, it is not established that this dichotomy is universally sustainable or an exhaustive typology’ (McDonough 2010, p. 38). In particular, the transition from the competitive SSA to the monopoly SSA in the late nineteenth century was a transition between two liberal SSAs, each with a fundamentally different market structure (McDonough et al. 2010, p. 3–4). More recently, Beverly Silver combines Marxian and Polanyian insights to theorise a ‘pendulum swing’ between period of ‘greater inequality’, resulting in ‘crises of legitimacy’, and periods of ‘greater equality’, resulting in ‘crises of profitability’: ‘Thus, one type of crisis (profitability/legitimacy) can only be resolved by measures that eventually bring about the other type of crisis. The result has been an oscillation between historical phases characterised by the establishment of new social compacts that partially de-commodify labour and produce growing inter-class equality (e.g., the 1930s–80s) and historical phases characterised by the breakdown of established social compacts, the re-commodification of labour and growing inter-class inequality (e.g., the 1980s to the present). Put differently, the result has been a pendulum swing between world-systemic crises of profitability (1870s, 1970s) and world-systemic crises of legitimacy (1930s and today)’ (Silver 2013, p. 58–9).

(Kotz and McDonough 2010, p. 116–18; Wolfson and Kotz 2010, p. 86–7). Thus, at any particular historical juncture, the SSA theory provides strategic direction to the labour movement (Kotz 2015a, p. 548).

2.3 A structural crisis

The crisis of contemporary capitalism is best understood as a structural crisis (Guttmann 2015) – a crisis of global capitalism’s particular institutional form, or social structure of accumulation. The SSA theory views the neoliberal impasse as but the latest in a series of structural crises that punctuate capitalist history. Such crises necessitate radical institutional change to restore profitability and stable capital accumulation over a sustained period. The construction and disintegration of successive SSAs, however, is a historically contingent process, subject to the vagaries of human agency and class struggle (McDonough 1994, p. 78–9; Kotz 2015b, p. 2–6).

2.3.1 A global crisis

The crisis of the global neoliberal SSA is rooted in the structural contradictions of that particular stage of capitalist development (Kotz and McDonough 2010). Over a sustained period – from roughly 1980 onwards – neoliberal capitalism succeeded in resolving the structural crisis of the postwar SSA (Kotz 2015b, p. 2). A shift in the balance of power from labour to capital was facilitated by neoliberal or ‘free market’ ideas, policies, and institutions, which came to play an increasingly prominent role in the regulation of global capitalism (Kotz 2015b, p. 8) – albeit at the expense of the various non-market institutions, such as states, trade unions, and corporate bureaucracies, which typified the postwar regulatory regime (Kotz 2015b, p. 2). The SSA theory suggests that a resolution to the crisis of neoliberal capitalism will likely require, at least initially, an institutional restructuring along the lines of a new form of regulated capitalism.¹⁰ If such an undertaking were to be initiated by the workers’ movement, it could open up the

¹⁰ By ‘regulated capitalism’ we mean here a form of capitalism that is conducive to substantive non-market institutional intervention, such as that which prevailed during the postwar SSA. More broadly, the SSA theory acknowledges that all forms of capitalism are, to a greater or lesser degree, ‘regulated’ by a set of market and non-market institutions (Wolfson and Kotz 2010, p. 82).

possibility of a more radical and sustainable social fix in the form of a revolutionary transition to socialism (Kotz 2017b, p. 540–1). Indeed, such possibilities accompanied the structural crises of the early twentieth century liberal SSA and postwar regulated SSA (Wolfson and Kotz 2010, p. 87).

Neoliberal capitalism, understood as a coherent institutional structure, promotes several distinctive, if interrelated, political-economic institutional processes – namely: neoliberalism, financialisation, and globalisation. These constituent institutions work in tandem to reproduce an underlying shift in the balance of class forces – or the capital-labour relation – from workers to the owners and buffers of capital (McDonough et al. 2010, p. 9; Stockhammer 2013, p. 6–10; Kotz 2015b, p. 43–4).

Neoliberalism institutes a policy triad of liberalisation, privatisation, and stabilisation: the deregulation of business and markets characterises liberalisation, while privatisation transfers state functions to the private sector, and stabilisation prioritises inflation control over the postwar, ‘Fordist’ regime of full employment and welfare Keynesianism (Kotz and McDonough 2010, p. 94–5; McDonough et al. 2010, p. 9; Kotz 2015b, p. 14–15). Such policies derive from neoliberal ideology, which, at least publicly (Mirowski 2014), presents ‘the state as inherently an enemy of individual freedom and economic efficiency’ (Kotz and McDonough 2010, p. 94). The purported moral concern here is for the freedom of individual choice, private property, and market allocation from the constraints imposed by a supposedly intrusive and bureaucratic state apparatus. This neoliberal ideology is reinforced by ‘free market’ economic theory – whether in its neoclassical or Austrian guise – in promoting an atomistic social ontology: there is ‘no such thing as society, only individual men and women’, and maybe their families (Harvey 2007, p. 23; Kotz 2015b, p. 10–12).

There is a curious tension at play, however, between neoliberal theory and practice; particularly where the latter comes into conflict with the entrenched power of economic elites (Harvey 2007, p. 19). On one hand, the neoliberal state attacks social programmes that benefit working class communities; on the other, it extends state supports to capital, while shifting the burden of

taxation onto labour (Kotz and McDonough 2010, p. 95; McDonough et al. 2010, p. 5; Kotz 2015b, p. 37–43). Philip Mirowski suggests that the public pronouncements of neoliberals are a smokescreen for their privately held political views: ‘From the 1940s onwards, the distinguishing characteristic of neoliberal doctrines and practice is that they embrace this prospect of retasking the strong state to impose their vision of a society properly open to the dominance of the market, again, as they conceive it’ (Mirowski 2014, p. 10). Yet, even if it is recognised that the market is ultimately a creature of the state, such a strategy is compromised in practice by the class interests of monopoly-finance capital (Foster and McChesney 2012). In short, Mirowski argues that neoliberalism as ‘a political movement that dare not speak its own name has intellectual contradictions that it dare not air openly’ (2014, p. 6). This paradox can only be resolved through the lens of class analysis (Harvey 2007, p. 19).

Global capitalism has become increasingly financialised throughout the neoliberal era (Tabb 2010, 2012; Lapavistas 2014), with ‘the increasing importance of financial markets, financial motives, financial institutions, and financial elites in the operations of the economy and its governing institutions, both at the national and international levels’ (Epstein 2001, p. 2). Finance capital has, to a large degree, decoupled from nonfinancial capital, with profit-making increasingly pursued through speculative financial activity at the expense of productive investment. Even many supposedly *nonfinancial* corporations have become increasingly engaged in this casino-like behaviour (Kotz and McDonough 2010, p. 103–4; McDonough et al. 2010, p. 10; Kotz 2015b, p. 32–4).

Neoliberal globalisation removes spatial barriers to the international flow of goods, services, capital, and money (Tabb 2004; Robinson 2014). Production is relocated from the capitalist core to the periphery, where the process is spread vertically across borders and subsequently reintegrated via trade for final assembly. The consequent transnationalisation of class relations, massive rise in international financial activities, and extension of U.S. hegemony represent particularly important and destabilising developments in

this regard (Kotz and McDonough 2010, p. 98–103; McDonough et al. 2010, p. 9–10; Kotz 2015b, p. 35–7).

If the core institutions of neoliberal capitalism work together to strengthen capital's hand vis-à-vis labour; during the postwar SSA, by contrast, the workers' movement forced a class compromise with industrial and financial capitalists. These divergent trends in the capital-labour relation manifest in divergent crisis tendencies, ultimately constituting barriers to stable capital accumulation. These crisis tendencies produce both short-run business cycle recessions and longer-term structural crises.¹¹ Generally speaking, liberal SSAs, in promoting capital's domination over labour, tend to restrain real wage growth relative to productivity growth. The widening income and wealth inequalities create inadequate aggregate demand and an associated reliance on private debt accumulation to maintain spending levels and living standards. The resulting instability eventually erupts in a sudden financial crisis followed by stagnant economic activity – a classical crisis of overproduction. Regulated SSAs, in promoting a capital-labour compromise, produce a countervailing dynamic: low unemployment and a rising wage share tends to squeeze corporate profitability over time. While the slowdown is more gradual, the end result is the same: overproduction and a protracted period of stagnation and/or instability (Wolfson and Kotz 2010; Harvey 2011, p. 65–6).¹² Harvey frames the crisis of the contemporary global neoliberal SSA succinctly:

¹¹ Basu (2016a) finds that short-run business cycle downturns tend to be 'reproductive', in the sense that they restore profitability expectations, during the upswing phase of a long wave; and 'non-reproductive', in the sense that they don't do this, during the downswing phase.

¹² Deepankar Basu suggests that the SSA theory can contribute towards the articulation of a more comprehensive Marxist crisis theory: 'Marx presented a general theory of capitalist crisis as an overproduction crisis. While Marx did offer some comments on specific mechanisms that could lead to an overproduction crisis, for example the tendency of the rate of profit to fall or the restricted purchasing power of the workers or profit squeeze, they were at best fragmentary and incomplete. Later theorists have often taken up one or the other of these and constructed all-encompassing theories of crisis out of them. A better strategy, in my opinion, is to regard each of these as possible crisis tendencies and to allow for the possibility that one or the other can come to the fore depending on the specific historical and institutional setting, that is, the "regime of accumulation" or the "social structure of accumulation"' (Basu 2016b, p. 217). Kotz (2015a) advances a similar argument in favour of an integrated Marxist crisis theory. See also Basu (2017) for an extended development of this position.

The capital-labour relation always plays a central role in the dynamics of capitalism and may lie at the root of crises. But these days the main problem lies in the fact that capital is too powerful and labour too weak, rather than the other way around.

(Harvey 2011, p. 66)

2.3.2 *A local (Irish) crisis*

SSAs operate to varying degrees, depending on their specific character, at both the global and embedded national levels. Under regulated capitalism, national SSAs showed relatively little institutional variation when compared to the global SSA. National development proceeds more unevenly during the neoliberal era, however, with greater local variation nested within a dominant transnational global SSA (Kotz and McDonough 2010, p. 113–16; Nardone and McDonough 2010). In this regard, the contemporary Irish SSA reflects the general trajectory of global neoliberal capitalism:¹³ neoliberalisation, financialisation, globalisation, and, as a collective consequence, a weakened labour movement. With admirable foresight, Patrick Lynch captured the dynamic contradictions of Ireland’s neoliberal SSA in real time:

Privatisation is a vogue word today. Too many economists are enthusing about the race towards an unfettered, unrestrained free market economy. This is worship of an unthinking consumerism, animated not by considerations of social responsibility but a desire for the fast buck and let tomorrow look after itself.

(Lynch 1994, p. 168)

But it is also important to take account of the uniquely Irish characteristics of our national neoliberal SSA, and how this local manifestation interacts with the global neoliberal SSA. In particular, the Irish neoliberal SSA stands apart from the global norm in its institution of a peculiar model of ‘social partnership’, which, at least prior to the crash, involved Irish trade unions in national economic and social policy formation (McDonough and Dundon

¹³ Ireland is also a member of the eurozone: ‘To the extent that the continental European model has been distinct from American and British liberal models, the advent of the common currency and its associated institutions marked the neoliberalization of the European social structure. Indeed, the eurozone SSA can be regarded as hyper-neoliberal when compared institution by institution to its American counterpart’ (McDonough 2018, p. 17). See Mitchell (2015) for a detailed critique of the eurozone project from this perspective. See also Lapavitsas (2019).

2010). Paradoxically, however, while Irish social partnership ‘shielded workers from the worst excesses of global neoliberalism’, and even ‘democratised Irish society insofar as unionised workers had a voice at the tripartite bargaining table’ (p. 13), it also coincided with declining trade union density and rising economic inequality (McDonough and Loughrey 2009; O’Connor and Staunton 2015; Hearne and McMahon 2016; Wickham 2017; Sweeney and Wilson 2019). Arguably, this was at least partly a consequence of the demobilisation of grassroots trade unionism, where industrial peace and wage moderation were negotiated at the national level in return for reductions in the taxation of workers’ earnings (McDonough and Dundon 2010, p. 14, 17). The emergence of a low-tax regime more generally meant that, while partnership ensured that social welfare payments remained relatively high, there was also a notable deficiency in many aspects of the Irish public service. The resulting neoliberal SSA sat politically somewhere between ‘Boston and Berlin’, if closer to the former (Kitchin et al. 2012, p. 1307):

The Irish neoliberal model ostensibly takes elements of American neoliberalism (minimal state, privatisation of public services, public-private partnerships, developer/speculator led planning, low corporate and individual taxation, light to no regulation, clientelism) and blends them with aspects of European social welfarism (developmental state, social partnership, welfare safety net, high indirect tax, EU directives and obligations)

(Kitchin et al. 2012, p. 1306)

This peculiarity may be explained, at least in part, by a desire on behalf of Irish trade unions to avoid the kind of full-on confrontation and neoliberal backlash associated with Thatcher’s Britain (McDonough and Dundon 2010, p. 15, 20). But social partnership was also embedded in a system of voluntarist industrial relations, with few of the legislative regulations that characterise corporatist regimes elsewhere in Europe. A related policy issue concerned the consistent failure to diffuse partnership to the workplace level, where national agreements can be adjusted to local circumstances (p. 14–19). ‘In many ways, the framework of social partnership created an appearance of industrial harmony which did not have deeper roots in parallel economic and social structures’ (p. 16).

It doesn't come as a great surprise then that partnership was a rapid institutional casualty of the crisis of the Irish neoliberal SSA. The inability of Ireland's social partners to agree a coordinated response to the crisis delivered a breakdown in the relationship and, consequently, cuts to public sector pay, social welfare, and public services (McDonough and Dundon 2010, p. 17; Kitchin et al. 2012, p. 1307). While subsequent efforts led to a partial restoration of social partnership through a series of public sector pay agreements; this is likely best interpreted as a defensive, rather than offensive, strategy on the part of Irish labour (McDonough and Dundon 2010, p. 17, 21–2).

It is an irony that the first consequence of the crisis has been the rapid disintegration of precisely that element of the Irish social structure which served to distinguish Ireland from the overall pattern of global neo-liberalism. In the face of the crisis, the institutions of Irish industrial relations have through the abrupt abandonment of social partnership been forcibly realigned, at least temporarily, with the market fundamentalism of the global neo-liberal era. While a full frontal Thatcherite-type ideological attack on labour is not evident, the State has prevented unions from effectively defending pay and working conditions in the face of the economic crisis. The Government's morbid strategy of reflating the banks and deflating the rest of the economy is unlikely to work.¹⁴ Crises are seldom resolved through the restoration of the old order. It remains to be seen whether a kind of Thatcherism in Ireland has been denied by social partnership, or merely delayed.

¹⁴ From an SSA perspective, a *stable* recovery requires an institutional reconfiguration of Irish capitalism. McDonough (2018) attributes the extent of the recovery to date in the Irish economy to 'the substantial overestimation of the growth figures' due to multinational tax avoidance (p. 10), and 'the decline of the value of the euro against other currencies, most prominently, the dollar and sterling', which is itself 'dependent on the continuation of the euro crisis' (p. 11). The embeddedness of the Irish neoliberal SSA within the eurozone and global neoliberal SSAs suggests that 'there is plenty of room for another recessionary downturn before full recovery is achieved' (p.12). A stable recovery may ultimately require an Irish exit from the eurozone – an unlikely prospect outside of another downturn, given the high level of Irish public support for the European project (p. 26–7). 'It appears that, through Europe, Ireland will participate in a deepening globalization, continuing neoliberalism, and a financialization too big to fail. Such a strategy of ongoing globalization, neoliberalism, and financialization is unlikely to create a context for the resurgence of labour's power' (p. 27). The short- to medium-term prospect is that Ireland will return to 'a state of continuing economic stagnation and crisis. Even if Ireland were to temporarily recover on its own, it would remain exposed to ongoing global crisis, which is deepest in Europe but is threatening to intensify in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)' (p. 27). The neoliberal recovery 'strategy may serve to strengthen capital and even temporarily raise profits, but it cannot provide a resolution to a crisis based in a capitalism that is radically underregulated' (p.27).

(McDonough and Dundon 2010, p. 21–2)

McCabe (2013b) paints a similar picture regarding the neoliberalisation, financialisation, and globalisation of the Northern Irish political economy, with the peace process in the North substituting for the palliative role played by social partnership in the South – and with the fate of the former ultimately mirroring that of the latter (Stewart et al. 2018). As McCabe writes:

What we are witnessing in Northern Ireland today is class power in transition. Some aspects of that dynamic were *held back* by the Troubles, while other aspects were unaffected. The class interests associated with this re-configuration in the North towards paper not production appear to be looking to the Republic for inspiration. . . .

The financialisation profit-model has been put forward as a solution – in fact it is often hailed as the only solution – to the deep social and cultural conflicts at the heart of Northern Irish society. In fact, financialisation is *antagonistic* to the type of social and *communal* relationships necessary to develop and sustain Northern Ireland today.

(McCabe 2013b, p. 2, emphasis added)

He elaborates further that the neoliberal reorientation of the North, beginning in the 1980s, was

a truncated process . . . as the nature of the Troubles had *stalled* somewhat the the dismantlement of industry and the *privatisation of the social economy*. By the time the Belfast Agreement was signed in 1998, all the legal and legislative structures were in place for Northern Ireland to open itself up to the profit-seeking strategies of the neoliberal turn and the financialisation of everyday life.

(McCabe 2013b, p. 6, emphasis added)

If the neoliberal era in Ireland can potentially be described as ‘Thatcherism delayed’ (McDonough and Dundon 2010), it is equally apparent that the Irish labour movement never really managed to institute a traditional class compromise in the postwar era of regulated capitalism (McCabe 2013a, 2013b). Perhaps the Irish postwar SSA can even be described as an instance of ‘Thatcherism foretold’:

Ireland's interlacing with neoliberal ideology has been mediated largely by institutions operating at the level of the nation-state and within a particular political culture and system inflected by the long history of Anglo-Irish relations and the country's emergence as an independent postcolonial state.

(Kitchin et al. 2012, p. 1305)

The unbroken dominance of Ireland's comprador-middleman class, or 'lumpenbourgeoisie' (McCabe 2013a, 2013b, 2015, 2018), reinforces Mirowski's conception of neoliberalism as 'a political movement that dare not speak its own name' (2014, p. 6):

Ideology thus remains largely hidden in the apparatus of Irish politics. Its presence is barely articulated and often invisible. And yet Ireland was characterised over the Celtic Tiger period by a range of practices which bear important similarities discursively and materially with key processes of neoliberalisation.

(Kitchin et al. 2012, p. 1306)

While the Irish postwar SSA attempted to swim against the global tide of regulated capitalism; likewise, and paradoxically, the Irish neoliberal SSA attempted to swim against the global tide of neoliberal capitalism (Andreosso-O'Callaghan et al. 2016). The class struggle in Ireland materialised as a truncated form of social democracy, succeeded by a truncated form of neoliberalism. This peculiar Irish experience helps to clarify how the SSA theory and broader regulation approach (Jessop 2006) relate to neocolonial capitalist regimes more generally:

The relentless focus on the paradigmatic case of neoliberalism's assault on and dismantling of Fordist Keynesian, and cultural, political, and historical infrastructures . . . has arguably effaced the recognition that in some cases neoliberalism actually finds itself in harmony with, rather than in opposition to, prior institutional histories. . . . Although often seen as a burden, weight, and source of friction, in fact in some cases pasts can serve as catalysts, lubricants, and wellsprings for neoliberal reforms.¹⁵

(Kitchin et al. 2012, p. 1308)

¹⁵ The insight that 'pasts can serve as catalysts' for reform applies, of course, not only to transitions from regulated to liberal SSAs, but also in the opposite direction, from liberal to regulated SSAs.

2.4 The movement towards socialism

As discussed earlier, David Harvey argues that neoliberalism is not simply a utopian project to refashion the global political economy in the image of ‘free market’ economic theory. In the final analysis, it is rather ‘a *political* project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites’ (Harvey 2007, p. 19) – that is, a *class* project to restore the power of capital vis-à-vis labour. It is clear then that, at least thus far, the response to the crisis of neoliberal capitalism, both globally and within Ireland, has been basically *more* neoliberalism (McDonough and Dundon 2010, p. 21–2; Kitchin et al. 2012, p. 1322; Coulter and Nagle 2015; Kotz 2015b, p. 198–9).

2.4.1 *Neoliberal crisis, neoliberal response*

Bringing class into the analysis helps to explain the apparent contradiction of a highly interventionist initial response to the crisis, followed swiftly by a restoration of business as usual. The attempted revival of an unbalanced, neoliberal accumulation regime is manifest in the continued upward trend in economic inequality (Alvaredo et al. 2018); circumvention of (inadequate) post-crisis regulations by the financial sector (Wray 2018);¹⁶ and depressed capital accumulation, despite the recovery of profit rates from the depths of the crisis (Foster and McChesney 2012). ‘If the neoliberal social structure of accumulation remains in place, it promises a future of stagnation and instability’ (Kotz 2015b, p. 198–9). The Irish response to the crisis is indicative of the neoliberal policy consensus:

[T]he present government’s solution to the crisis has been another round of short-termist neoliberalism in the form of the public collectivisation of private debt through detoxification, re-capitalisation, and nationalisation of the banks and protection of the interests of developers and speculators at the potential expense of the taxpayer. . . . [C]apital has reversed the gains to labour which were ushered in with the Fordist Keynesian state and restored inequalities in wealth to Victorian levels. In Ireland’s

¹⁶ ‘While reforms adopted since the financial crisis have placed stiff rules around the regulated financial sector, we’ve seen essentially none for the non-regulated or shadow financial sector. That means that many, if not all, of the practices that led to the last financial crisis can be practiced almost without restraint in the shadow system’ (Ludwig 2016, cited in Wray 2018, p. 2).

case, capital is being saved from its later folly not only by the privatisation of social assets but also by the socialisation of private loss.

(Kitchin et al. 2012, p. 1322)

The balance of class power, then, remains a barrier to sustainable recovery:

Thus far, the Irish response to the crisis – like that of many other nations has been to react rather than to act, thus exhibiting a fundamental conservatism which seeks to recover, rather than to reform.

(Kitchin et al. 2012, p. 1323)

As per the SSA theory, however, only a major institutional restructuring has proven capable of resolving all past structural crises of historical capitalism (Kotz 2015b, p. 197). ‘The two possible sequels are a new SSA within capitalism or the supersession of capitalism and the building of an alternative system’ (Kotz and McDonough 2010, p. 116). While the construction of a new SSA is not a predetermined outcome – indeed, stagnation and/or instability may continue indefinitely – Kotz and Basu (2019, p. 20–1) conclude that there is a powerful tendency for a new SSA to eventually emerge. In the current conjuncture, this is most likely to resemble a new regulated SSA. But the construction of a new regulated SSA is likely to take a much longer period of time – perhaps decades – when compared to the construction of a liberal SSA:¹⁷

Constructing a regulated SSA requires working out new state roles in the economy, and the state is a very powerful entity that can either promote or harm the interests of key groups in society. The various major groups in society, such as big business, big financial institutions, small business, and organized labor, will seek to achieve a new structure that promotes their interests and avoids possible future harm to their interests. Differences within the broadly defined groups complicates the process of political conflict and compromise that can give rise to a new regulated SSA. Such a process is bound to take a long time, as it did in the construction of the postwar regulated SSA.

(Kotz and Basu 2019, p. 21)

¹⁷ Though, again, the construction of a fascist-oriented, capitalist-dominated regulated SSA represents a potentially rapid resolution to the crisis of a liberal SSA (Foster 2017b).

In the case of a liberal SSA, by contrast, the transition is less demanding: a defeated labour movement is unable to effectively resist capitalist domination, while a unified business class pursues the relatively straightforward task of deconstructing the institutions of the prior regulated SSA and enshrining ‘free market’ principles in the new institutions (Kotz and Basu 2019, p. 21). This abstraction draws on the history of twentieth and twenty-first century capitalism, with long swings from a liberal SSA prior to the Great Depression, to a regulated SSA prior to the Great Stagflation, and, once again, a liberal SSA prior to the contemporary crisis of neoliberal capitalism (p. 20–1).

There are important strategic implications that derive from this analysis. To be sure, neoliberal ideologues understood well the opportunities that the structural crisis of the 1970s presented to organised capital (not to mention organised labour):

Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable.

(Friedman [1962] 2002, p. xiv)

Within this, Milton Friedman and his associates in the Mont Pèlerin Society – a ‘neoliberal thought collective’ formed in 1947 – grasped the necessity of global capital undertaking a counter-offensive on the economic, political, and cultural institutions that constituted the postwar SSA (Mirowski and Plehwe 2009). By the 1980s, the agents of neoliberal capitalism were to emerge victorious in the struggles surrounding the structural crisis of the postwar SSA (Wolfson and Kotz 2010, p. 86-7; Kotz 2015b, Chapter 3).

There are lessons here for the labour movement in formulating a response to the structural crisis of neoliberal capitalism. Just as the neoliberal coalition reconfigured the institutions of the postwar SSA, a broad alliance of progressive and radical left forces can undertake a counter-offensive on the institutional structures of the contemporary global neoliberal SSA. It is important however to recognise that the crisis of a liberal SSA represents a

low point in the power of organised labour; whereas, under capitalism at least, the crisis of a regulated SSA represents a high point of worker power. The liberal project of reinstating the primacy of the market and the power of capital begins as soon as a capital-labour compromise is consolidated; while the potentially socialist-oriented project of constructing a regulated SSA only begins after the crisis of a liberal SSA, when capital loses its legitimacy. Plainly, the prospect of socialist revolution appears distant at the present time, particularly in the capitalist core, and the immediate struggle is to regain lost ground. Even in a situation where popular forces may be able to move beyond capitalism, initial efforts are likely to resemble the rebuilding of the institutional structures of a regulated SSA; in the process, the working class strengthens its hand and may open up more radical avenues (Wolfson and Kotz 2010, p. 87; Gindin 2015; Rahnama 2017).

It is important at this point to distinguish between the theoretical generality of liberal and regulated SSAs, and the concrete historical specificity of the contemporary global neoliberal SSA, its particular structural crisis, and what might follow. Any attempt to reconstruct a regulated SSA in response to the crisis of neoliberal capitalism is confronted with the widening social-ecological crisis characterising contemporary capitalism (McDonough and Kotz 2010, p. 117; Foster 2013, 2015b, 2017a; Burkett 2017). While environmental constraints weren't as obvious a barrier during the postwar era, another round of social democratic capitalism would likely be conducive to a prolonged period of unsustainable, if relatively rapid, capital accumulation and economic growth (Kotz 2015b, p. 208). To the extent that this new regulated capitalist SSA could be 'greened', 'the social structure of accumulation theory argues that no form of capitalism can last more than a few decades before giving rise to a structural crisis and another round of restructuring' (Kotz 2015b, p. 208) – most likely a new liberal SSA and environmental deregulation in the absence of socialist transformation. On current trends, it is likely that, by then, the future of human civilisation would be under severe threat (Kotz 2015b, p. 209).

Following this line of thought, Minqi Li proposes that ‘the global capitalist system is entering into a structural crisis that can no longer be resolved within its own institutional framework. The age of transition has arrived’ (Li 2016, p. 171). He argues that the structural crisis of *neoliberal* capitalism also represents the structural crisis of *historical* capitalism outright:

In the past, global capitalism has managed to recover from major crises by undertaking restructuring without changing the basic institutional framework of capitalism. However, in the twenty-first century, global capitalism will have to confront not only the traditional economic and social contradictions, but also the rapidly escalating ecological contradictions.

(Li 2016, p. 13)

This perspective recognises that any political-economic system, or mode of production, is also, in essence, a social-ecological system, simultaneously reshaping and reproducing (or destroying) both itself and the natural environment (Harvey 2014, p. 247).¹⁸ Sam Gindin argues however that, ‘Because we are not anywhere near building the social base required to comprehensively deal with the environment . . . It therefore seems more useful to frame the environmental crisis as part of the broader struggle against neoliberalism’ – if only at first (Gindin 2015, p.113). In the medium term, we are faced with the challenges of socialist transition in the twenty-first century; learning from the past failures, as well as many achievements, of experiments in twentieth century socialism (Kotz 2008b; Harnecker 2015; Kotz 2015b, Chapter 7; Li 2016, Chapter 8; Kotz 2017a; Devine 2017; Magdoff and Williams 2017; Rahnema 2017; Westra 2018).

2.4.2 *An epochal crisis*

In line with Minqi Li, John Bellamy Foster characterises the contemporary convergence of political-economic and social-ecological contradictions as an ‘epochal crisis’, reminiscent of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, where ‘the material conditions of society as a whole are undermined, posing the question of a historical transition to a new mode of production. This can

¹⁸ Malm (2018) incorporates social-ecological relations into Ernest Mandel’s long wave theory, a precursor to the SSA theory (see McDonough 2007). See also Klitgaard and Krall (2012).

be distinguished from the ordinary developmental crises that punctuate the history of capitalism’ (Foster 2013, p. 1). Such ‘a crisis of an entire historical epoch’ – a structural crisis of capitalism per se – is ‘equally ecological, economic, and social in its manifestations’ (p. 1).

At the root of this epochal crisis is the continuous accumulation of capital at a compound rate, which characterises the capitalist system over the long run (Magdoff and Foster 2011, Chapters 3 and 4; Foster 2013; Harvey 2014, Chapters 15 and 16). From a Marxist perspective, the drive towards endless capital accumulation and material economic growth is a structural feature of capitalism (Andreucci and McDonough 2015).¹⁹ The ‘coercive laws of competition’ compel individual capitalists to reinvest in expansion to protect and expand their market share (Harvey 2011, p. 43).²⁰ ‘Beyond the strictly economic’, however, ‘expansion is also served by the cultural and political deployment of profit’ (Andreucci and McDonough 2015, p. 60–1).²¹ During the latest, neoliberal phase of capitalist development, this capitalist growth imperative has increasingly run up against, if not outright transgressed, a number of ecological or ‘planetary boundaries’ (Magdoff and Foster 2011, Chapter 1; Rockström 2015), thereby ‘undermining the biophysical bases of society and life itself’ (Andreucci and McDonough 2015, p. 61).

The most serious of these sustainability boundaries to have been crossed relates to climate change – or, more specifically, anthropogenic global warming (Magdoff and Foster 2011, p. 13):

¹⁹ Jason Hickel and Giorgos Kallis ‘find that: (1) there is no empirical evidence that absolute decoupling from resource use can be achieved on a global scale against a background of continued economic growth, and (2) absolute decoupling from carbon emissions is highly unlikely to be achieved at a rate rapid enough to prevent global warming over 1.5°C or 2°C, even under optimistic policy conditions’ (Hickel and Kallis 2019, p. 1). They conclude that ‘green growth is likely to be a misguided objective, and that policymakers need to look toward alternative strategies’ (p. 1).

²⁰ The monopolisation and financialisation of capitalism reduce this competitive impulse, without eliminated it entirely (see Foster and Magdoff 2009; Foster and McChesney 2012). Harvey (2014) argues that ‘*monopoly power is foundational rather than aberrational to the functioning of capital and that it exists in contradictory unity with competition*’ (p. 134, original emphasis).

²¹ On the ‘Ideological obstacles to effective climate policy’, see Gunderson et al. (2018).

Science today tells us that we have a generation at most in which to carry out a radical transformation in our economic relations, and our relations with the earth, if we want to avoid a major tipping point or “point of no return,” after which vast changes in the earth’s climate will likely be beyond our ability to prevent and will be irreversible.

(Foster and Clark 2012, p. 1)

The climate change tipping point is generally understood to be a 2°C increase in global average temperature above the pre-industrial norm. Beyond this point, global warming becomes self-reinforcing, as positive feedbacks amplify the pace and direction of climate change, precipitating more frequent and destructive extreme weather events (Foster and Clark 2012, p. 1–2; Rockström 2015, p. 6–7; Foster 2017a; Steffen et al. 2018).

Ecological economists and Earth system scientists therefore argue that it is necessary to transition to a ‘steady state economy’, characterised by a constant rate of energy and material throughput and a stable human population (Dietz and O’Neill 2013, p. 45–7; Farley 2015; Rockström 2015, p. 2). ‘For any given set of technologies, a steady state economy will imply a constant stock of human made artefacts maintained by a constant flow of throughput’ (Farley 2015, p. 49), while also allowing that ‘the economy can develop qualitatively without growing quantitatively’ (Dietz and O’Neill 2013, p. 46), and so continue to advance human welfare and development (Farley 2015, p. 51).

Ecological Marxists, however, argue that the idea of a steady state economy is fundamentally incompatible with the structural growth imperative of capitalist political economy – a steady state *capitalism*, as such, is a contradiction in terms, manifest in economic and social crises (Klitgaard and Krall 2012; Blauwhof 2012; Foster 2015b; Spash 2015). The incessant drive to maximise capital accumulation and economic growth likewise maximises the throughput of matter and energy (Foster 2015b, p. 7). The dynamics of money, credit, and finance in the realisation of surplus value and accumulation of capital reinforce this growth imperative (Kotz 1991; Trigg

2006; Mellor 2010).²² What is needed according to this view is not so much the construction of a new capitalist social structure of *accumulation*, but the transition to a socialist social structure of *deaccumulation*, which can potentially accommodate the planned transition to a steady state economy (Klitgaard and Krall 2012, p. 251–2; Blauwhof 2012, p. 261; Foster 2015b, p. 8; Spash 2015, p. 376–8). This will likely require an initial phase of ‘degrowth’ (D’Alisa et al. 2015) to ensure that the steady state economy operates within the boundaries of sustainability (Klitgaard and Krall 2012, p. 251–2; Dietz and O’Neill 2013, p. 53; Li 2016, p. 174–5). ‘Ecological economists define degrowth as an equitable downscaling of production and consumption that will reduce societies’ throughput of energy and raw materials’ (D’Alisa et al. 2015, p. 3–4).

Foster (2015b, 2017a), drawing on Magdoff and Foster (2011, Chapter 6), proposes ‘a two-stage strategy for ecological and social revolution’ (Foster 2015b, p. 9):

The first [stage] would involve the formation of a broad alliance, modeled after the Popular Front against fascism in the 1930s and ’40s. Today’s Popular Front would need to be aimed principally at confronting the fossil-fuel-financial complex and its avid right-wing supporters. In this first stage of the struggle, manifold demands could be made and broadly agreed on within the existing system – ways of eliminating carbon emissions and economic waste while also promoting social and environmental needs – which, although inimical to the logic of capital, and particularly to the fossil-fuel industry, would not call into immediate question the existence of the capitalist system itself.

(Foster 2017a, p. 15)

This first stage would be compatible with initial attempts to construct a new regulated SSA in response to the crisis of neoliberal capitalism. In the longer term, however, the second stage of social-ecological revolution – the ‘eco-socialist’ phase – necessitates confronting the larger questions of systemic transformation and socialist revolution (Foster 2015b, p. 10):

In the long run, the struggle is therefore synonymous with the movement towards socialism. The more revolutionary the struggle, the more it is likely to emanate from those whose needs are

²² Even if financialisation, in and of itself, acts as a countervailing force.

greatest, and thus from the global South. It is in the periphery of the system, rather than in the center, that humanity is most likely to mutiny against the existing order. Hope today therefore lies first and foremost in the revolt of “the wretched of the earth,” opening up fissures at the center of the system itself.

(Foster 2017a, p. 15)

A two-stage strategy then factors in the present-day weakness of the global labour movement, advocating radical reform in the short to medium term, while simultaneously creating the conditions and balance of forces necessary to advance the movement towards socialism. In other words:

We cannot replace the whole system overnight. The battle must start in the present and extend into the future, accelerating in the mid-term and ending with a new social metabolism geared to sustainable human development.

(Foster 2015b, p. 10)

2.4.3 *Twenty-first century socialism*

Li argues clearly that the basic laws of capitalist political economy render the capitalist mode of production incompatible with sustainable human development:

Under capitalism, market relations become the dominant economic relations. Under the pressure of market competition, every capitalist and every state is under constant and intense pressure to use a large portion of its surplus product to pursue capital accumulation. Those who fail in the competition will be eliminated as an effective player in the capitalist market. Because of this basic law of motion, there is an inherent tendency for the capitalist economy to pursue material production and consumption on an increasingly larger scale. No economic or social reform can change this tendency without changing the basic institutional framework of capitalism.

(Li 2016, p. 190)

Further, he argues that, to institute a steady state economy, ‘the socially necessary condition is that society as a whole has control over the surplus product so that society can democratically decide how to use the surplus product and to limit the pace of capital accumulation to a level that is consistent with ecological sustainability’ (Li 2016, p. 190). Under social ownership and control, ‘society can collectively decide to use most of the

surplus product for public consumption and environmental cleaning and to use only a small portion of the surplus product for capital accumulation, or not to use any surplus product for capital accumulation at all' (p. 190).

Li's vision corresponds to the classical Marxist conception of a socialist economic system (Harnecker 2015, Chapter 6), as an 'economic system based on social ownership of the means of production and society-wide economic planning that would allocate social resources rationally to meet social needs' (Li 2016, p. 185). Yet, the 'actually existing socialism' of the twentieth century,²³ developing as it did in an incredibly hostile environment, deviated in significant respects from the ideal. This is perhaps clearest with respect to the rational regulation of the metabolic relation between humanity and non-human nature (Kotz 2008b, p. 2; Harnecker 2015, p. 65–6). At the same time, late Soviet ecology, starting in the 1960s and flourishing throughout the 1980s, pointed towards the potential for political-economic and social-ecological planning to repair the rift in the human-nature metabolism (Foster 2015a). Indeed, while the Soviet experience demonstrated that a socialist system can bring rapid economic growth (Kotz and Weir 2007), David Kotz argues that 'economic growth is not built into the basic institutions of a socialist system' (2015b, p. 216):

A democratic socialist system could aim for rapid growth, slow growth, a constant level of output, or a declining level of output, depending on the priorities that emerge from the political process. That means a socialist economy could operate in an environmentally sustainable manner. Given the threat of global climate change, the citizens of a socialist economy in a developed country could opt for gradual decrease in the production of goods, along with declining work hours.

(Kotz 2015b, p. 216)

Kotz argues further that the economic problems of twentieth century socialism were 'structural problems of the particular form of planning' and primarily 'due to a key feature of that form of socialism: an absence of popular participation in decision-making in the economy and the state' (Kotz 2008b, p. 7). Any economic system will serve the needs of those who have

²³ It must be acknowledged that, to date, the only 'actually existing' models of socialism in the twenty-first century have evolved from the experiences of twentieth century socialism.

power and influence within that system; and, in Soviet-type planned economies, these were the military leaders and certain industrial ministers, as opposed to ordinary households (p. 7). The managers of strategic enterprises were rewarded and punished by officials who held power, and this operated as an effective incentive in the specific industrial sectors. The same dynamic did not exist, however, in sectors serving ordinary households, who ‘had almost no power in the Soviet planning system’ (p. 8).

Recent decades have seen attempts, primarily in Latin America, and in response to the political-economic and social-ecological instability associated with global neoliberalism, to articulate and build towards a new socialist model (Kotz and McDonough 2010, p. 117; Harnecker 2015; Kotz 2015b, p. 211; Devine 2017). ‘Twenty-first century socialism’ or ‘democratic participatory planned socialism’ is a form of socialism that is based upon the key institutions of ‘a democratic state and a participatory form of economic planning’ (Harnecker 2015, Chapter 7; Kotz 2015b, p. 213; Devine 2017, p. 45). The supply problems of twentieth century socialism, regarding both the quantity and quality of goods and services, resulted from a highly centralised form of economic planning. Such issues could be resolved through a more ‘participatory form of planning in which workers, consumers, and community members would be represented in the economic decision-making process’ (Kotz 2015b, p. 214; Devine 2017, p. 46).²⁴ Participation could be operationalised via representation on decision-making bodies – for example, enterprise boards and regional- and national-level planning bodies – by those most affected by the relevant decisions, and with ‘a decision-making process based on negotiation and compromise, to handle the inevitable existence of opposing interests among different groups’ (Kotz 2008b, p. 8; Devine 2017, p. 46–7). Hence, the model of participatory planning outlined here has previously been termed ‘negotiated coordination’ (Devine 2002). The level of participation by different social groups would depend on their level of

²⁴ Kotz notes that ‘the recent advances in information-processing and communication technologies would make a form of economic planning involving wide participation by millions of workers, consumers, and community members, which might have been unworkable in the past, now a potentially feasible way to make resource allocation decisions’ (Kotz 2015b, p. 214). See Cockshott and Cottrell (1993) and Jeong (2017) for a more detailed discussion.

‘social ownership’ – that is, the degree to which different social groups are affected by an operational decision (Harnecker 2015, p. 96–7; Devine 2017, p. 46–7). Pat Devine elaborates on the concept of social ownership as follows:

Social ownership is best defined as ownership by those affected by decisions over the use of the assets involved, in proportion to the extent to which they are affected. It has much in common with the green concept of stakeholding. Following the principle of subsidiarity which underpins, at least in theory, the multi-layered governance structure of the European Community, the social owners will differ according to the degree of generality, the reach, of the decisions to be made. Decisions made at higher levels of generality will involve more assets and affect a wider range of people and interests than those made at lower levels. At each level, the social owners need to negotiate with one another to agree on the use of the assets that will further their collective social interest, as defined by them. This multi-layered process of negotiated coordination is what is meant by participatory planning.

(Devine 2009, quoted in Harnecker 2015, p. 213)

Twenty-first century socialism also emphasises the importance of maintaining democratic political institutions, alongside innovations in economic democracy (Kotz 2015b, p. 213). ‘Democratic institutions, which in a capitalist system are always limited by the enormous political power of the rich, would work far better in a socialist system that has no class of wealthy property owners’ (Kotz 2008b, p. 8–9). It is also argued that economic and political institutions should combine elements of both direct (participative) and delegated (representative) democracy (Harnecker 2015, p. 73–83). Martha Harnecker (2015, p. 81–2) is in agreement with Kotz (2008b, p.9) and Harvey (2012, p. 151–3; 2015) when she argues that ‘it is necessary to decentralize all that can be decentralized, keeping as functions of the central state only those tasks that cannot be carried out at the local level’ (Harnecker 2015, p. 81). At the same time, regional autonomy should be *relative* rather than absolute (Devine 2017, p. 46–7):

Of course, we are not talking about an anarchic decentralization. There must be a national strategic plan that coordinates local plans. Each of the decentralized spaces should be part of the national whole and be willing to contribute its own resources to strengthen the development of those spaces with the greatest shortages. This kind of decentralization must be imbued with a spirit of solidarity. One of the most important roles the central

state can play is just that – implementing a process of redistributing national resources to protect the weak and help them develop.

(Harnecker 2015, p. 82–3)

While a system of democratic participatory planned socialism has not existed previously on a large scale, it is possible to identify some smaller-scale entities that institute the key principles of this form of socialism; Kotz cites ‘*the internal organization of cooperatives*’ and ‘some public bodies such as elected local school boards that allocate resources based on the aim of providing a needed service’ (Kotz 2015b, p. 218, emphasis added).

From a strategic standpoint, advocates of twenty-first century socialism prefer, where possible, to travel the ‘democratic road to socialism’ – a Gramscian ‘war of position’, or protracted process of popular capture and transformation of the institutions of the state and civil society (Poulantzas 1978; Townshend 2007; Harnecker 2015; Rahnema 2017, p. 28–31). This approach seeks to extend and deepen political freedoms and the institutions of representative democracy, ‘which were also a conquest of the popular masses’ (Poulantzas 1978, p. 79). ‘Authoritarian statism can be avoided only by combining the transformation of representative democracy with the development of forms of direct, rank-and-file democracy or the movement for self-management’ (p. 83). The state is understood here in a Poulantzian sense ‘as the articulation of class forces’ – a condensation of the class struggle (Poulantzas 1978, p. 81; Jessop 2002) – ‘rather than simply an instrument of the capitalist class that needs to be fought against’ (Larrabure 2013, p. 180). ‘Dual power’ – that is, ‘the counter-power of popular organisation existing in parallel with the capitalist state’ (p. 180) – can be built *through*, as well as *against* and *apart from*, the state apparatus. Concretely, this means advancing state support for popular economy initiatives, while at the same time recognising that a contradictory antagonism still exists between the state and popular economy participants (p. 197–8). This dialectical conflict might even be welcomed:

[S]truggles between popular-economy participants and the state cannot be avoided. Indeed, they will need to be fostered, although perhaps in new forms, if the project of “twenty-first century socialism” is to continue.

(Larrabure 2013, p. 198)

The exact model of socialism, and path of socialist transition, is best tailored to the historical conditions prevailing in a given country at a given time (Harnecker 2015, p. 60–1, 106–8). Indeed, the strategic challenge is one ‘of building a democratic socialist society rooted in popular national traditions’ (p. 59). Tom Healy (2015, 2019) and Michael Taft (2015) are privy to this challenge in an Irish context:

In the current conjuncture labour and its progressive allies are on the defensive – economically and politically. Capital has used the crisis to widen its freedom and position itself to even greater advantage. . . . [C]apital was in a strong position prior to the crash; it is even stronger today. To engage in blueprint socialism, or “cookshop recipes” as Marx put it, is a retreat from the daily grind of progressive politics. We must devise our strategies in the current context. This does not mean falling into the insipid, third-way formulation that there is no such thing as a socialist or capitalist economy, only a good one or a bad one. But it does mean that socialisation strategies must be good.

(Taft 2015, p. 285)

In particular, the Irish political economy confronts the urgent challenge of developing a strong indigenous enterprise base, to counter the historical overreliance on foreign direct investment (FDI)²⁵ and, in particular, boom-bust cycles of speculative construction-related financial activity for employment growth (Taft 2015, p. 269–73; Healy 2015, p. 4–6, 2019; McCabe 2013a, 2013b; 2015; 2018). Taft makes the argument for a transitional industrial strategy:

At the end of the day it may not be socialism; but a progressive enterprise base is not intended to be so. It is a staging post towards

²⁵ Notwithstanding its importance, there is a tendency to overestimate employment generation from FDI in Ireland. In reality, there is generally less than 10 percent of the Southern Irish labour force directly employed in foreign multinational corporations (MNCs), which are relatively detached from the domestic economy in terms of sourcing inputs and, hence, generating indirect employment (McCabe 2013a, p. 97–9; Taft 2015, p. 267–9; Healy 2019, p. 20). In a Northern Irish context, there is also ‘a relatively high dependence on public service employment and direct financial contributions from the UK Government’ (Healy 2015, p. 4, 2019, p. 20).

a more advanced economic development in which socialism can become a viable option.

(Taft 2015, p. 275)

Minqi Li (2016) and Steve Keen (2017) maintain that the structural crisis of global neoliberalism will reassert itself by the 2020s, resulting in a prolonged global stagnation. Both argue that the trigger will be a major crisis in the Chinese economy (Li 2016, p. 13, Chapter 5; Keen 2017, p. 98–103). Li's forecast is based on calculated trends in China's economy-wide profit rate – a long wave approach which helped him to predict the initial crisis of the global neoliberal SSA²⁶ (Li et al. 2007, p. 47–8) – while Keen's focus is on the private debt dynamics of neoliberal political economy – a related perspective which likewise helped him to predict the crash (Keen 2007, p. 45). Randall Wray (2018), on the other hand, argues that the United States is more likely to beat China to the next 'Minsky moment'. Either way, he foresees the shadow banking system as the main culprit, noting that 'the combination of overvalued stocks, overleveraged banks, an undersupervised financial system, high indebtedness across sectors, and growing inequality together should remind one of the conditions of 1929 and 2007' (Wray 2018, p. 9).²⁷

As noted previously, the Irish political economy remains exposed to fragilities in the global neoliberal SSA (McDonough 2018). A deepening of the crisis of neoliberal capitalism may create the conditions whereby a socialist response becomes a serious prospect (Kotz 2017b, p. 540). Initial efforts to build a new regulated capitalist SSA, following the democratic road of twenty-first century socialism (Harnecker 2015), and in keeping with the first stage of Foster's (2015b, 2017a) ecological revolution, can help to create the conditions for socialist revolution in the capitalist core – even if history

²⁶ Working explicitly within the SSA theory, Kotz (2008a) argued that a structural crisis of neoliberal capitalism was approaching. A full draft of the paper making this argument was completed in December 2005, and subsequently presented to the Union for Radical Political Economics (URPE) at the Allied Social Science Association (ASSA) convention in January 2006 (David Kotz, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

²⁷ Pressman and Scott (2018) similarly highlight the neoliberal contradictions 'still lurking below the surface of the United States economy' (p. 2), arguing that 'the US economy has not escaped from the problems that created the Great Recession' (p. 16). See also Stockhammer and Kohler (2019).

attests that the capitalist periphery and semi-periphery are more likely to lead the way (Harnecker 2015, p. 98–102).

The institutions of a new regulated capitalist SSA would, over time, squeeze profits and lower profit rates. Li proposes that the resulting threat of investment strikes and capital flight could be countered by a socialist administration willing to implement capital controls, increased public investment, and strategic nationalisation (Li 2016, p. 190–1).²⁸ Further, twenty-first century socialist economies could pursue a strategy of ‘delinking’ from the global capitalist economy, by ‘imposing strong protectionist policies and drastically reducing the size of foreign trade’ (p. 191). In the world-historical context of the structural crisis of capitalism, ‘the strategy of “delinking” pursued by individual socialist countries will help to accelerate the breakup of the global capitalist system’ (p. 191).

2.5 Conclusions

The global capitalist environment remains fragile at the time of writing. A renewed crisis and slowdown appear likely under the business-as-usual scenario (*more* global neoliberalism). The continuation of relative economic stagnation is likely to strengthen calls for a new regulated form of capitalism. In a twenty-first century context, such reform of the capitalist system, however radical, can only serve as a staging post in the necessary ecosocialist transition. Ecosocialism represents the only sustainable resolution to the structural crisis facing capitalism and humanity. David Kotz’s pregnant observation that cooperatives, at the micro level, institute key principles of twenty-first century socialism has implications for the design of a transformative employment strategy in the coming period. We will tease out the implications of this analysis for worker cooperative development more generally in the following chapter.

²⁸ See Mitchell and Fazi (2017) for a more detailed programme along these lines.

3 Capitalist unemployment and the cooperative alternative

3.1 Introduction

If the crisis of neoliberal capitalism is at one and the same a structural crisis of the latest stage of capitalist development, as well as a structural crisis of historical capitalism; a sustainable policy response would set out to simultaneously address the crisis in all its manifestations: economic, social, *and* ecological (Foster 2013). This inevitably raises fundamental questions about the organisation of work, production, and employment (Pollin 2012, Chapter 1). Section 3.2 outlines a radical political economy understanding of capitalist unemployment, drawing on the leading heterodox traditions in economics (Mitchell and Muysken 2008). An understanding of the root causes of mass unemployment informs a set of ‘sustainable employment policies’ in Section 3.3. These policies derive from the traditional economic demands of the labour movement: higher wages; full employment; shorter work hours; and cooperative production. Though the policies outlined are ‘market socialist’ in orientation, they also contain seeds of a more fundamentally cooperative, socialist political-economic order. Section 3.4 narrows our focus to the challenges of worker cooperative development. We introduce labour process theory (LPT) as a micropolitical component of the SSA theory. The LPT frames our analysis of capitalist and (worker) cooperative production regimes. We consider that ‘real’ (that is, genuine) cooperatives institute workplace democracy; yet, their vibrancy and sustainability ultimately depend not only on the social relations established *within* worker coops, but also on those established *between* worker coops and the wider community. The existing empirical evidence in this regard helps to inform a ‘general theory’ of worker coop development. Section 3.5 concludes.

3.2 The political economy of unemployment

The economic and social consequences of global neoliberalism and its crisis can be most readily observed in the persistence of high unemployment and

underemployment.²⁹ Such conditions have resulted in elevated levels of poverty and deprivation, growing economic inequality and insecurity, and relatively stagnant economic performance (ILO 2018). We propose a radical political economy approach to understanding the roots of mass involuntary unemployment, drawing on the Marxist, post-Keynesian/neo-Kaleckian, and institutionalist traditions (Pollin 1999, 2012; Cornwall and Cornwall 2001; Mitchell and Muysken 2008; Stockhammer 2011). We argue that this approach is compatible with the long swing analysis of modern SSA theory (McDonough et al. 2010; Setterfield 2011; Hein et al. 2015).

A radical political economy analysis stresses that mass involuntary unemployment is the product of ‘a systemic failure of the economy to provide enough jobs for all those willing to work at existing money wages’ (Mitchell and Muysken 2008, p. 34) – a failure of aggregate effective demand (Mitchell and Muysken 2008, p. 34–7), underpinned by shifting power relations between capital and labour (Cornwall and Cornwall 2001, Chapters 4 and 5). From this perspective, the so-called ‘natural rate of unemployment’, or ‘non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment’ (NAIRU)³⁰ in its modern formulation, varies markedly over time in response to institutional policy shifts (Pollin 1999, Mitchell and Muysken 2008, Chapter 4; Stockhammer 2011; Storm and Naastepad 2012; Vera 2017). While this insight is inconsistent with the adoption of a Walrasian general equilibrium framework, even Milton Friedman acknowledged that, in reality, ‘the natural rate of unemployment is structurally embedded in society’ (Mitchell and Muysken 2008, p. 60), which makes it variable:

To avoid misunderstanding, let me emphasize that by using the term “natural” rate of unemployment, I do not mean to suggest that it is immutable and unchangeable. On the contrary, many of

²⁹ Regarding the fall in the official Irish unemployment rate from its post-crisis peak, McDonough notes that ‘many actually unemployed people are excluded from the labor force statistics and hence are not recorded as unemployed. Large numbers of part-time workers are unsuccessfully seeking full-time work. Adding these people to the unemployed ranks would easily more than double the official figure. Factoring in those who have emigrated and not returned would increase the unemployment figure by 3–4 percent’ (McDonough 2018, p. 11–12).

³⁰ That is, a supposedly stable attractor, ‘threshold unemployment rate below which the inflation rate begins to rise’ (Pollin 1999, p. 104).

the market characteristics that determine its level are man-made and policy-made.

(Friedman 1968, p. 9)

Economic history suggests that a regulated SSA can sustain (real) full employment along with low and stable inflation – a low unemployment, low inflation NAIRU – at least for a period, through collective bargaining and coordinated fiscal, monetary, and incomes policies (Stockhammer 2011, p. 157; Hein et al. 2015, p. 26). The stability of this relationship depends on the negotiation and perpetuation of a capital-labour compromise (Cornwall and Cornwall 2001, Chapter 9). Over time, however, the endogenous evolution of a regulated SSA is likely to produce a squeeze on profitability and/or rising inflation, as the constituent institutions prove incapable of permanently resolving distributional conflict in a capitalist setting (Devine 1974). This ‘profit squeeze’ inflation dynamic ultimately precipitated the stagflationary crisis of the postwar era, following an endogenous erosion of the capital-labour compromise (Cornwall and Cornwall 2001, p. 227; Setterfield 2011, para. 53; Hein et al. 2015, p. 27):

The new economic arrangements of the postwar period initially worked smoothly. Internally, the welfare state, the power of organized workers to raise wages, and demand management combined to maintain high capacity utilization and stable profits. But as the episode lengthened, rising expectations and aspirations outpaced the economy’s capacity to meet them.

(Vera 2017, p. 271)

A squeeze on profitability and/or inflationary pressure naturally provokes a response on the part of capital: in the workplace, with increased automation, offshoring, and outsourcing; but also in the political and ideological spheres, with renewed support for tighter monetary policy to slow the economy and discipline the working class through higher unemployment (Pollin 1999, p. 111; Cornwall and Cornwall 2001, p. 65; Harvey 2011, p. 12–16, 59–61, 130–1). With the rise of neoliberalism, and parallel decline of traditional social democracy, the Great Stagflation ushered the transition from a regulated to a liberal form of capitalism (Harvey 2007, p. 9–19; Kotz 2015b, Chapter 3; Vera 2017, p. 271–2). Capitalist unemployment operates here in the tra-

ditional Marxist sense: to discipline the class struggle between capital and labour (Pollin 1999).³¹

Since the level of the NAIRU depends ultimately on the balance of class forces (Pollin 1999), the transition from the postwar SSA to the global neoliberal SSA was marked by an initial rise in the NAIRU, as the increased power of labour produced inflationary pressures at full employment. The resulting unemployment crisis, both real and manufactured, tamed the wage aspirations of labour, and so helped to moderate price inflation – succeeding, as it did, if only on capital’s terms (Pollin 1999, p. 107; Vera 2017, p. 271–2). Conversely, the progressive weakening of labour throughout the neoliberal era resulted in a falling NAIRU (Pollin 1999, p. 110); albeit one that was still higher than had existed under the regulated capitalism of the postwar era. Moreover, official unemployment figures masked the growth of hidden unemployment under neoliberalism (Cornwall and Cornwall 2001, p. 30–3, 233–5). The policy goal of full employment, in the sense of providing a job opportunity for everyone ready, willing, and able to work, was thus abandoned in the shift from the postwar full *employment* paradigm to the neoliberal full *employability* paradigm. This paradigm shift replaced a focus on the systemic nature of mass unemployment with a policy frame that emphasised the supposed individual deficiencies of the unemployed (Mitchell and Muysken 2008).

Yet capitalism’s tendency toward periodic structural crises, resulting in prolonged periods of mass unemployment and economic stagnation and/or instability, calls into serious question the longer-term sustainability of a renewed social democratic, Keynesian full employment policy paradigm – even before contemporary environmental constraints are factored in (Kotz 2015b, p. 208–9). The political-economic limits to ‘full employment capitalism’ were clear to Michał Kalecki, who tempered his Keynesi-

³¹ This also applies to the transition from a liberal to a regulated SSA, where the persistence of high unemployment and stagnant economic performance during a structural crisis encourages an oppositional movement, which can force a capital-labour compromise and the institution of stimulative aggregate demand management (Wolfson and Kotz 2010, p. 85).

an/Kaleckian aggregate demand analysis with Marxian class analysis, in advance of the postwar era:

“Full employment capitalism” will have, of course, to develop new social and political institutions which will reflect the increased power of the working class. If capitalism can adjust itself to full employment a fundamental reform will have been incorporated in it. If not, it will show itself an outmoded system which must be scrapped.

(Kalecki 1943, p. 331)

Kalecki’s insight also brings to mind Joan Robinson’s observation that ‘unemployment did not occur in planned economies’ (Robinson 1972, p. 5). Indeed, Kotz and Weir point out that ‘[t]here was virtually no aggregate unemployment in the Soviet Union after the early 1930s’ (Kotz and Weir 2007, p. 26) and ‘almost no inflation’ (Kotz 2017a, p. 291).

3.3 Toward sustainable employment

The ‘jobs versus environment’ dilemma of contemporary capitalism is posed succinctly by Klitgaard and Krall: ‘We grow too fast and too slow: too slowly to ensure adequate employment and too rapidly to avoid overshoot of the planet’s biophysical limits’ (Klitgaard and Krall 2012, p. 249). Kaboub (2008) proposes a strategy of ‘employment-led development’ as part of ‘a radical counter-movement to neoliberalism’, applying the principles of functional finance (Lerner 1943) to promote full employment, price stability, and sustainable development. Our analysis of the structural crisis of contemporary and historical capitalism in Chapter 2 suggests that such state-led employment policy must ultimately set about bridging the gap between regulated capitalism and ecosocialism.

3.3.1 A sustainable employment policy framework

Trade unions, as organisations of working people, are fundamentally economic organisations, advancing workers’ struggles over ‘bread and butter’ issues in the workplace, such as wages and working conditions. But the labour *movement*, of necessity, also contests the political and cultural arenas with a *transformative* vision and strategy to complement workplace struggles

(Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010; D'Art et al. 2013, p. 5–8). With regard to employment, the labour movement has historically pursued three overarching and mutually reinforcing *transitional* demands: full employment (Apple 1980), shorter work hours (Roediger and Foner 1989), and cooperative production (Curl 2012; Azzellini 2011, 2015). Taken together, this set of demands is strategically oriented towards the labour movement's broader vision of a 'Cooperative Commonwealth' – a socialist political-economic order (Curl 2012, p. 4).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the employment policy proposals of radical political economists, in response to the crisis of global neoliberalism, directly relate to the historical demands of the international labour movement. 'Bread and butter' trade union demands find a modern formulation in the wage-led development policies of post-Keynesian/neo-Kaleckian economists (Lavoie and Stockhammer 2012; Onaran and Stockhammer 2016). The Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) branch of post-Keynesianism has proposed a contemporary full employment programme in the form of a job guarantee (JG) (Wray 1998, Chapter 6; Kaboub 2007; Mitchell and Muysken 2008, Chapter 9; Murray and Forstater 2013, 2017; Mitchell et al. 2019, Chapter 19). Left political economists of a broadly Keynesian and institutionalist persuasion have renewed the demand for shorter work hours with recent work sharing proposals to reduce unemployment (Coote et al. 2010; Baker 2011; Coote and Franklin 2013; Messenger and Ghosheh 2013a). Lastly, those of a more Marxist-feminist persuasion have advocated worker cooperative development as the basis for an alternative, 'solidarity economy' (Gibson-Graham 2003; Sanchez Bajo and Roelants 2011; Erdal 2011; Wolff 2012; Bateman 2013; Novković and Webb 2014; Ranis 2016; Webb 2016).

Interestingly, while the contemporary employment policies proposed by post-Keynesians, institutionalists, Marxists, and feminists are generally geared towards social-ecological sustainability, ecological economists have converged on a corresponding programme (Blauwhof 2012, p. 259) supportive of: wage-led development (Dietz and O'Neill 2013, p. 93; Bayon 2015); the JG (Dietz and O'Neill 2013, p. 134–6; Unti 2015); work sharing (Dietz and O'Neill 2013, p. 131–4; Schor 2015); and cooperative development (Dietz

and O'Neill 2013, p. 148–50; Johanisova et al. 2015). It is also important to recognise that ecological economists see this coherent set of employment policies as compatible with the vision of a sustainable, steady state economy (Lewis and Conaty 2012; Dietz and O'Neill 2013; D'Alisa et al. 2015). Thus, Kallis et al. (2015, p. 13) highlight the potential for developing this policy set into a more cohesive programme, with the JG financing cooperative development.³² McCoy builds on this line of thinking:

Utilizing a JG to support development of cooperatives (co-ops) would contribute to . . . aiding restoration of community and reducing hierarchy. . . . Moreover, a JG can empower co-ops to provide public works and services that benefit the locality. The organizational structure of co-ops promotes a bottom-up inclusive process in both work and community, directly contradicting the top-down structure of the price system which marginalizes those who do not fit. Indubitably, this bottom-up process remains better suited to provide for the needs of people.

(McCoy 2018, p. 245)

3.3.1.1 Wage-led development

The wage-led development proposals of post-Keynesians and neo-Kaleckians draw on empirical evidence regarding the relative importance of wages as a cost of production and source of demand (Lavoie and Stockhammer 2012; Onaran and Stockhammer 2016). Where a fall in the wage share results in lower employment and output; this is known as a wage-led demand regime. In such cases, the negative effects of reduced wages on aggregate demand outweigh the positive effects of reduced production costs. The available empirical evidence suggests that the demand regime in most countries, and, indeed, at the regional and global levels, is currently wage-led rather than profit-led³³ (Lavoie and Stockhammer 2012, p. 24; Onaran and Stockhammer 2016, p. 3).

While a wage-led demand regime is certainly conceivable at the present time, given the crisis of global neoliberalism (Kotz and McDonough 2010); it is

³² Wage-led development and work sharing policies are implicit in any such arrangement.

³³ Cost effects outweigh demand effects in profit-led demand regimes, so that a fall in the wage share increases employment and output.

plausible that the institutional conditions underpinning wage-led demand represent a *regime shift* away from the dominance of profit-led demand throughout the neoliberal era (Onaran 2016, p. 8–10). In emphasising such institutional transitions, capitalist stage theory (McDonough 2007, 2017) reconciles post-Keynesian and Marxian debates over wage- and profit-led growth (Lavoie 2016; McColloch 2016; Onaran 2016, p. 8-10).

From an SSA perspective, the Great Depression ushered a regime shift from profit-led demand to wage-led demand, in the transition from a liberal to a regulated SSA. Likewise, the Great Stagflation produced the opposite shift, from a wage-led to a profit-led demand regime, as the former was exhausted under the transition from a regulated to a liberal SSA. The profit-led demand regime of the contemporary global neoliberal SSA was itself exhausted in the recent global financial crisis, creating the conditions for a revival of wage-led development policies. Just as the wage increases of the postwar era ultimately proved unsustainable, so too the suppressed wages of the neoliberal era have been revealed as untenable, culminating in the demise of the ‘finance-dominated accumulation regime’ (Stockhammer 2010; Hein et al. 2015; McColloch 2016, p. 4; Onaran and Stockhammer 2016, p. 4, 9). Therefore, regime shifts between wage- and profit-led demand are conceivably underpinned by long swings between regulated and liberal SSAs (Wolfson and Kotz 2010; McColloch 2016, p. 13–15).

This literature argues that a sustainable recovery from the contemporary crisis demands a wage-led policy response: stronger collective bargaining structures, increased minimum wages, and enforced pay ratios (Onaran and Stockhammer 2016, p. 10–12). Even in small open economies like Ireland – possibly profit led due to high net export price elasticity – a global wage-led recovery would allow a commensurate increase in the wage share without harming (price) competitiveness (Lavoie and Stockhammer 2012, p. 12–15; Onaran and Stockhammer 2016, p. 4–8). A longer-term industrial strategy could involve shifting the composition of exports towards products that are less sensitive to price competition (Lavoie and Stockhammer 2012, p. 25), along with the implementation of well-designed sectoral and firm-level bargaining mechanisms (Onaran and Stockhammer 2016, p. 10–11).

3.3.1.2 *The Job Guarantee (JG)*

Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) (Wray 1998; Mitchell and Muysken 2008; Mitchell et al. 2019) proposes a Job Guarantee (JG) programme, whereby ‘the government *guarantees* a real job opportunity for anyone ready, willing, and able to work at a fixed socially-established basic wage (plus benefits), thus exogenously setting the price of labor’ (Kaboub 2007, p. 11). The fixed JG wage establishes a price anchor and, hence, greater price stability. The pool of JG workers functions as a buffer stock, fluctuating in a countercyclical manner: expanding to absorb workers displaced from the private sector during recessions, and contracting as JG workers find employment in the conventional private and public sectors during upswings (Kaboub 2007, p. 11). Should inflationary pressures arise in the economy more generally, fiscal and monetary policy can be tightened to transfer workers from the inflating (non-JG) sector to the fixed-price JG sector (Mitchell and Muysken 2008, p. 232).

In terms of inflation control, JG workers, who retain active employment and upskilling, arguably provide a more credible threat to workers in the conventional private and public sectors than do unemployed workers (Mitchell and Muysken 2008, p. 235). That is to say, the JG pool, or reserve army of the *employed*, might well discipline the wage bargaining process more effectively than the traditional reserve army of the *unemployed* (Kaboub 2007, p. 12). Whether the JG strengthens labour or capital to a greater extent, then, appears to depend on circumstance. The initiation of a JG programme in the present context – the structural crisis of a liberal SSA – would likely strengthen labour’s hand, especially if the JG wage were set at a level targeted to bid up wages more generally. However, the MMT/JG response to the structural crisis of a regulated SSA, where inflationary pressures tend to arise, is unlikely to be acceptable from a trade union perspective.

At best, it seems, the JG can be construed as a transitional institution within regulated capitalism, prefiguring a more comprehensive socialisation of the economy (Tcherneva 2012a; McCoy 2018). In any event, MMT argues that a sovereign currency-issuing ‘government can always meet the financial demands involved in implementing the JG’ (Mitchell and Muysken 2008, p.

243). For countries that don't issue their own currencies – for example, Ireland and other eurozone members – a *universal* JG is unlikely to be on the agenda in the near future. A *partial* JG targeting the most disadvantaged segments of the unemployed, however, is at least viable; though it may require deploying creative finance (Wray 2012; Ali 2013). Finally, the JG is particularly suited to environmental and community initiatives (Forstater 2006; Mitchell and Muysken 2008, p. 246–50; Murray and Forstater 2018), which 'are likely to be underproduced by the private sector due to their heavy public good component' (Mitchell and Muysken 2008, p. 249–50). Indeed, while the JG is a federally funded programme, it can still be administered by local community organisations – including cooperatives – thereby enhancing participatory democracy (Tcherneva 2012b, 2014; McCoy 2018).

3.3.1.3 Work sharing

Left political economists at the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) (Baker 2011; Rosnick 2013), New Economics Foundation (NEF) (Coote et al. 2010; Coote and Franklin 2013), and International Labour Organization (ILO) (Messenger and Ghosheh 2013a) have advanced work sharing employment policies to tackle the economic, social, and ecological crisis of the twenty-first century (Coote et al. 2010, p. 3, 16–25; Coote 2013, p. xx). Work sharing policies are proposed in two distinct forms (Messenger and Ghosheh 2013b, p. 5–9): 'crisis work-sharing measures' (Baker 2011), 'intended to spread a reduced volume of work over the same (or a similar) number of workers in order to avoid layoffs' (Messenger and Ghosheh 2013b, p. 3); and 'permanent' work sharing (Coote et al. 2010; Coote and Franklin 2013), defined as 'a government policy that is designed to induce *permanent* downward adjustments in average working hours for the purpose of encouraging additional hiring and thus increasing the level of employment' (Messenger and Ghosheh 2013b, p. 4).

The logic of crisis work sharing is that firms can benefit from state support if, instead of laying off workers, they 'share' the lower volume of work by reducing the working hours of all their employees (or all members of a specific work unit) (Messenger and Ghosheh 2013b, p. 3). This potentially

represents a ‘win-win-win’ solution: workers retain their jobs and livelihood; firms retain a skilled workforce; and governments minimise the economic and social costs of unemployment (Messenger and Ghosheh 2013b, p. 3–4). Permanent work sharing measures, such as ‘legally mandated reductions in the normal or standard workweek in a country’ (Messenger and Ghosheh 2013b, p. 4), have the potential to increase both employment and wellbeing.

Work sharing, as a general principle, also chimes with the vision of a cooperative, full employment, steady state economy, where productivity gains can be passed along to workers via shorter work hours, rather than increased consumption and environmental degradation (Messenger and Ghosheh 2013c, p. 285; Rosnick 2013).

3.3.1.4 Worker cooperative development

Milford Bateman outlines the case for worker cooperative development as the basis for an alternative, ‘solidarity economy’ model (Bateman 2013). He argues that ‘the key practical task involved in promoting cooperative enterprises involves “getting the local institutions right”’ (p. 1). More concretely, he advocates a ‘local developmental state (LDS)’ approach (Bateman 2017), contra ‘the market-driven neoliberal paradigm of local institutional support’ (Bateman 2013, p. 5). ‘The LDS model specifically holds that local governments and associated local institutions have played a decisive strategic planning and promotional role in many of the most successful episodes of local economic development, and in enterprise development in particular’ (p. 5).³⁴ The International Organisation of Industrial and Service Cooperatives (CICOPA) also advances an institutionalist perspective: ‘Governments should provide a supportive policy and legal framework consistent with the nature and function of cooperatives and guided by the cooperative values and principles’ (CICOPA 2014, p. 26). These include policies to assist worker buyouts of conventional capitalist

³⁴ Regarding successful *cooperative* enterprise development specifically, Bateman notes the role of local government institutions in the case of Emilia-Romagna, and non-government institutions in the case of Mondragón and the Basque region (Bateman 2017, p. 22–4).

firms – often with the active involvement and support of trade unions (Perrin-Massebiaux and Nolan 2013; FEPS 2016, p. 23–7; Gowan 2019).

Similarly, the Worker Cooperative Network (WCN) argues for the state-led development of a vibrant worker cooperative sector in Ireland: ‘It would appear that neglect, at Government level, is a major contributory factor in the underdevelopment of worker cooperatives in Ireland. Some might argue that the neglect is a consequence of the State’s overreliance on the FDI [foreign direct investment] model’ (WCN 2012, p. 26).³⁵ Calling into question the longer-term sustainability of FDI employment (p. 33), they conclude: ‘Prudent economic planning suggests that we introduce an alternative economic development model which can coexist with FDI. To unleash the sustainable job creation potential of worker cooperatives, as demonstrated in other EU countries, we clearly have to fast track their development’ (p. 36).

In acknowledging the social-ecological crisis, the cooperative movement is keen to emphasise the potential environmental sustainability of cooperative enterprises:

Sustainable development depends on the capacity to ensure full interconnection between the economic, social and environmental dimensions. Cooperatives are, in this sense, the most suitable organizational model to develop strategies for the production of innovative and sustainable goods and services with a triple bottom-line, because they base their strength and innovative capacity on the close relationship between communities and local areas. Indeed, environmental sustainability is ensured by democratic governance and the mutual interconnection between the economic activity of the enterprise, its community and environment. The state and local authorities, as a strategic partner with cooperative enterprises, can be a key actor in enabling environmental sustainability to which cooperatives increasingly aspire.

(CICOPA 2014, p. 19)

³⁵ This mirrors the findings of an earlier study: ‘In spite of relatively poor performance of worker co-ops to date in Ireland the conclusion drawn from the study is that with proper institutional support worker co-ops have an important role to play in local employment creation’ (Lynch 1990, p. 24).

3.3.2 *Limits to market socialism*

The transitional employment programme outlined in the previous subsection could be interpreted as ‘market socialist’ in orientation (Booth 1995; Schweickart [2002] 2011; Jossa 2014); even if proposed initially within the confines of the existing capitalist market economy. However, while it is envisioned that full employment, shorter work hours, and cooperative production will form key pillars of an alternative, ecosocialist political-economic order, there is good reason to question the role of markets and, indeed, money in any such configuration (Exner 2014; Lafferty 2018).³⁶

According to Exner (2014, p. 15–17), the capitalist growth imperative is rooted in market and money relations. The market socialist model can even be seen as a prior theoretical elaboration on the practical experiences of recent solidarity economy initiatives (p. 20). This model generally ‘assume[s] an economy based on cooperatives linked by markets’ (p. 21). However, ‘the principle of exchange [is] an obstacle to cooperation beyond the confines of the enterprise’ (p. 21). Echoing our overview of the model of twenty-first century socialism in Chapter 2, Exner concludes that: ‘Only reciprocity allows democratic governance and participatory planning. To make it effective, markets have to give way to cooperation’ (p. 23).

We will explore this contradiction further in relation to worker cooperative development in the following section. Suffice to say for now that the JG (itself necessary for meaningful wage-led development), work sharing, and worker coop development potentially constitute a coherent set of transitional

³⁶ ‘At a minimum, would socialism not require the provision of health, education, housing, and social welfare as citizenship rights – that is, decommodification of basic services and the democratic subordination of markets?’ (Lafferty 2018, p. 5). Moreover, regarding commercial activities, Pat Devine distinguishes ‘between market exchange, based on the use of existing productive capacity, and the operation of market forces, bringing about changes in capacity. The enterprise sells the output produced with its existing capacity by engaging in market exchange with its customers, in competition with other enterprises in the same industry, which generates information about how well the enterprise is using its assets to satisfy its users’ needs’ (Devine 2017, p. 46). He continues: ‘Social planning retains market exchange but not market forces. Decisions over changes in an enterprise’s capacity, through investment or disinvestment, affect a wider set of groups than decisions over the use of an enterprise’s existing capacity, so it is this wider set that constitutes the social owners at the level of the industry. At this level, enterprises do not compete with one another; the social owners make the decisions on investment and disinvestment together in the industry council (p. 47).

institutions, prefiguring a more comprehensive socialisation of the economy and planned downscaling of material production and consumption (Blauwhof 2012, p. 259–61). In terms of socialist strategy, it appears then that worker cooperative development is subordinate to the political struggle over state power (Blauwhof 2012, p. 261; Sharzer 2017; Marszalek 2017).

3.4 Worker cooperative development: towards a general theory

Political economy, in the classical tradition, is focused on the role of the state in mediating class conflict over the social product (Tabb 1999; Foster and Magdoff 2009, p. 134–7; Martins 2014; Piketty 2014, p. 574; Shaikh 2016). Contemporary Marxist political economy, combining SSA theory at the macro level and LPT at the micro level, frames our analysis of worker cooperative development in what follows. We ask: what are the social relations established within worker coops, and between worker coops and the wider community? Further, how do these social relations change over time, as the regulatory regime evolves through successive stages? Lastly, whose class interests are served by cooperativism, and what are the strategic political implications?

3.4.1 Labour process theory

The Marxist theory of the labour process (McIntyre 2017a, 2017b; Vidal 2019b) can be interpreted as a micropolitical component of the social structure of accumulation theory.³⁷ At its most basic, labour process theory analyses social relations at the point of production – the social organisation of work – from a class perspective (Vidal and Hauptmeier 2014, p. 1–2, 10–12). The capitalist labour process, for example, is founded upon an inherently antagonistic capital-labour relation, where managers and owners are compelled to engage in class struggle with workers over the performance and extraction of surplus labour (p. 10, 12). Depending on how the class struggle plays out at the macro level, a variety of ‘production regimes’ (Burawoy 1985)

³⁷ The SSA theory was originally elaborated to frame a historical study of the transformation of the labour process in the United States (Gordon et al. 1982). See Zweig (2015) for a discussion of this theoretical lineage.

can be institutionally embedded within the SSA. Such production regimes regulate the capitalist labour process on the basis of coercion and/or consent. The capitalist labour process is contrasted with the (worker) cooperative labour process in the following subsection.

3.4.2 *What is a cooperative?*

At its most basic, a cooperative is ‘an autonomous association of [natural and/or legal] persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise’ (ILO Recommendation 193/2002, quoted in Sanchez Bajo and Roelants 2011, p. 251). Cooperatives, though, come in many different forms: consumer cooperatives, whose members are the consumers of various commodities; small business (producer) cooperatives, whose members are small and medium businesses; community cooperatives, whose members are community representatives; worker cooperatives, whose members are those who work within the enterprise; and solidarity (multistakeholder) cooperatives, whose members are a combination of the various classes already mentioned (Webb and Novković 2014, p. 3).

Without denying the potential benefits of cooperativism more generally, we are primarily concerned here with worker and solidarity coops. The model of democratic participatory planned socialism (Devine 2002) holds that the ownership and control of a productive enterprise should reside with those who are most immediately affected by its operations: in the first instance, the workers who produce the surplus; and, depending on the geography of the firm’s operations, possibly also wider community interests, whether at the local, regional, national, or international levels. To this end, the autonomy of cooperatives from the state, as with any class of enterprise, is only ever a *relative* autonomy (Cruz Reyes and Piñeiro Harnecker 2013, p. 36). In addition, the legal ownership of cooperatives is of less importance than the *control* ownership (p. 6, 27–8, 40): ‘the fact that the members have these resources at their disposition and are able to manage them democratically with a common goal’ (p. 27). So, throughout our study, we tend to utilise terms like ‘cooperative’, ‘worker cooperative’, and ‘solidarity cooperative’ loosely

and inter-changeably (unless otherwise specified) in reference to the radical practice of *workplace democracy* – the cooperative *production* model.³⁸ This is also to recognise that the wider community interest consists largely of the working class. Worker cooperatives, in this understanding, can take on (collective) private or public legal ownership forms, with greater or lesser degrees of autonomy from the state.

The (worker) cooperative labour process, in theory, actualises the seven operational principles which, to a greater or lesser degree, condition the functioning of all forms of cooperative. These are: (1) open and voluntary membership; (2) democratic management by the members; (3) economic participation of members; (4) (relative) autonomy and independence; (5) education, training, and information; (6) cooperation among cooperatives; (7) commitment to the community (Sanchez Bajo and Roelants 2011, p. 119–26; Cruz Reyes and Piñeiro Harnecker 2013, p. 33–9). There are also significant efforts within the international cooperative movement to add an eighth principle: commitment to environmental sustainability (Cruz Reyes and Piñeiro Harnecker 2013, p. 39). These regulatory principles are informed by a broader set of cooperative values: ‘self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity; as well as ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others’ (ILO Recommendation 193/2002, quoted in Sanchez Bajo and Roelants 2011, p. 126). The extent to which these cooperative principles and values materialise in practice is, of course, an empirical matter – and one to which we will return.

In contrast to the capitalist labour process, *real* cooperatives – those that actually implement cooperative ideals – are constituted on the basis of collective worker control over decision making. The workers decide what, how, and where to produce; and how to allocate the surplus. After all, the

³⁸ Worker coops are often defined quite loosely in the literature; even for the purposes of representative quantitative analysis. Take Pérotin’s meta-study, for example: ‘For the purposes of this paper, a worker co-operative is defined as a firm that has the following characteristics: all or most of the capital is owned by employees (members) whether individually and/or collectively (capital ownership arrangements vary); all categories of employees can become members; most employees are members; in accordance with international co-operative principles, members each have one vote, regardless of the amount of capital they have invested in the business; and members vote on strategic issues in annual general meetings and elect the chief executive officer’ (Pérotin 2016, p. 4).

principal objective of cooperative labour is to meet social needs – in particular, the need for sustainable jobs – rather than maximise profits. The surplus (or ‘profit’ in capitalist terms) is the means to an end, not an end in itself (Cruz Reyes and Piñeiro Harnecker 2013, p. 40–2). Again, Cruz Reyes and Piñeiro Harnecker stress that the fundamental difference between a capitalist enterprise and a *production* cooperative relates not to legal ownership, but to *control* (p. 40):

Cooperatives should differ substantially from capitalist – that is, nondemocratic enterprises. If an enterprise that is considered to be a “cooperative” actually implements cooperative principles, it will follow a management model that is substantially – not just superficially – different from that of an enterprise controlled by one person or a group of persons (stockholders, the owners of the enterprise’s capital) who hire the labour power of one or more workers – that is, a capitalist enterprise.

(Cruz Reyes and Piñeiro Harnecker 2013, p. 40)

From a Marxist political economy perspective, Ruccio (2011) argues that, while traditional worker cooperatives generally only democratise the *production* of the social surplus, communism – that is, the ‘Cooperative Commonwealth’ – requires a concurrent democratisation of the *distribution* of the social surplus. Workplace democracy must extend beyond the factory gates. We will explore this theme further in the following subsections.

3.4.3 *Cooperatives and sustainability*

Across the world, cooperatives (in the broadest sense) are the most widespread enterprise alternative to conventional capitalist and state enterprises (Cruz Reyes and Piñeiro Harnecker 2013, p. 26–7). Yet, while the impact of cooperatives *of all types* is substantial – over 1.2 billion members, employing just shy of 280 million people (nearly 10 percent of the world’s employed population), and benefiting some three billion people (about half the world’s population) (Cruz Reyes and Piñeiro Harnecker 2013, p. 25–6; CICOPA 2017, p. 12) – the scope of worker cooperatives is comparatively small, albeit more significant than is usually thought (Pérotin 2016, p. 5).

CICOPA estimates that there are 11.1 million cooperative worker-members worldwide (CICOPA 2017, p. 12). And although worker coops account for a

very small proportion of all firms in most countries, they tend to be concentrated in particular countries – and even particular regions within those countries – that have instituted a supportive cooperative development ecosystem (Bateman 2013, 2017, p. 22–4; Pérotin 2016, p. 5). For example, there are at least 25,000 worker coops in Italy, with over 1 million worker-members; around 17,000 in Spain, employing 230,000 worker-members; 2,600 or so in France, with just over 27,000 worker-members; and 500 to 600 in the UK, providing employment to just over 94,000 worker-members (Pérotin 2016, p. 5; CICOPA 2017, ANNEX 1). Further afield, there are over 6.8 million cooperative worker-members in India; 650,000 in China; nearly 525,000 in Malaysia; around 290,000 in both Venezuela and Brazil; just short of 270,000 in Bangladesh; and a little under 180,000 in Argentina (CICOPA 2017, ANNEX 1).

In contrast, Ireland’s worker cooperative sector is next to non-existent, reflecting the lack of institutional support (Lynch 1990; WCN 2012; Gavin et al. 2014). Gavin et al. finds that there are around 20 traditional worker cooperatives currently in operation in Ireland, employing 135 workers.³⁹ This shows a decline in recent decades: the now-defunct Cooperative Development Unit (CDU) identified 82 worker coops in 1998, employing 591 workers (Gavin et al. 2014, p. 23–6).⁴⁰

³⁹ This doesn’t include figures for the North, where there are an additional 5-10 traditional worker coops currently in operation (query to Trademark Belfast). ‘Workers’ co-operatives are less common in Ireland than elsewhere, but this business model is attracting increasing interest as a useful means of job creation and small business development’ (McCarthy et al. 2010, p. 323). More broadly, ‘Ireland has about 1,500 registered co-operatives [of all types], including credit unions. For a variety of reasons, some organisations choose to register as companies, but include co-operative principles in their memorandum and articles of association and in their *modus operandi*. . . . [W]ell over half of the Irish population are members of a co-operative, many of whom may not realise they are members and part-owners of the business which serves them. Agricultural co-operatives dominate most Irish minds when they think about co-operatives, despite the fact that the credit union movement is far more widespread. Fishing co-operatives, housing co-operatives, water co-operatives and community co-operatives are also at the forefront of the co-operative movement in Ireland’ (McCarthy et al. 2010, p. 324–5).

⁴⁰ The worker cooperative sector in Ireland is historically very weak, if rooted in a long tradition of workers’ control experiments: from the Irish ‘soviets’ (Lee 2003; Mulholland and McCabe 2012) and rural cooperatives (Doyle 2019) of the revolutionary period; back through the Ralahine Commune and cooperative ideas and advocacy of William Thompson in the first half of the nineteenth century (Connolly [1910] 1983a). In 1980, there were only four traditional worker coops operating in the South (O’Connor and Kelly 1980, p. 157) and one in the North (p. 148–9). ‘The first worker cooperative in Ireland was formed in Dublin in

Contrary to the (a priori) assumptions of mainstream models of the ‘labour managed firm’, the existing empirical evidence suggests that, in reality, worker cooperatives constitute a potentially economically sustainable alternative to the conventional capitalist firm (Sanchez Bajo and Roelants 2011; Erdal 2011; Pencavel 2012; Olsen 2013; Pérotin 2016; Dow 2018).⁴¹ Notably, Pérotin (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of studies comparing worker cooperatives and capitalist firms across Europe, the US, and Latin America. She concluded that, on average, worker cooperatives were larger than capitalist enterprises, and not necessarily less capital intensive; that they survived at least as long and had more stable employment; that they were more productive, owing to greater organisational efficiency; that they retained a larger share of their profits; and that they displayed much narrower pay differentials (Pérotin 2016, p. 3, 20–1). There is also evidence to suggest that worker cooperatives are more resilient than capitalist firms in the face of economic crises (CECOP 2012).⁴²

Yet, there is relatively little research on the external institutional conditions (Upchurch et al. 2014) and internal governance structures (Novković 2013; ICA 2015; Lambert 2017) necessary to promote such economically sustainable worker coop development. In particular, ‘the role of managers has been largely overlooked in the theoretical and empirical literature on worker cooperatives’ (Alves et al. 2019, p. 3). At the level of economic theory, Gordon (1976) suggests that the productive efficiency of capitalist firms may be hampered by the control imperative – the need for capitalist managements to ‘maintain worker discipline and reproduce their control over the means of

1956 but the sector did not further expand until the 1970s when a number of “phoenix” or “crisis” cooperatives were set up in the face of threatened factory closures’ (WCN 2012, p. 9). The 1980s witnessed a further expansion of the sector, reflecting the renewed self-help culture of economic democracy during a period of high unemployment and intense social struggle. The CDU was established through the former state Training and Employment Authority, Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS), in 1988 and helped to facilitate relatively strong growth in the sector throughout the 1990s. The CDU was closed in 2002, following ‘a change in government policy’ (p. 9).

⁴¹ Some prominent radical economists have also questioned the sustainability of worker coops on the basis of such models. See Dow (2018).

⁴² It should be noted that most of these studies have been carried out in countries and regions where the worker coop model is relatively common, reflecting supportive institutional environments that condition such economic sustainability.

production’ (p. 24). In this scenario, technically possible advances in the production process are forgone so as to maintain capitalist class relations. Worker cooperatives, however, are unrestrained by any such class antagonism; hence, there may be the potential to increase productive efficiency through cooperative organisational innovation (ICA 2015). Vidal (2019a, 2019b) even argues that, while productive efficiency was generally consistent with maintaining capitalist control in the early stages of capitalist development, the technological frontier in the contemporary, postfordist era thrives on greater worker empowerment and devolved responsibility.⁴³ He concludes:

In the era of post-Fordism, when the basis of efficiency is economics of scope and flexibility, there is a real efficiency advantage to empowering workers, via multiskilling and employee involvement. In this context, the contradiction between coordination (increasing efficiency) and discipline (securing sufficient output) becomes acute. To the extent that capitalist managements fail to empower their workers to engage in decision making and problem solving – which is the dominant trend in the empirical literature – they are fettering the growth of the forces of production.

(Vidal 2019b)

But, even if the worker coop model can potentially resolve this contradiction (ICA 2015), threats to the power of capitalist managements are not the only barrier to workplace democracy. Vidal (2019a) points to the alienation and individualism promoted by capitalist ideology and praxis, meaning that, alongside ‘a more general human tendency to adhere to existing routines’, workers are often resistant or reticent to their own empowerment, preferring instead the security of established work practices. Cooperative governance structures are no more immune to these challenges, particularly when located within a broader capitalist social structure. This underscores the importance of building a cooperativist political-cultural counterhegemony to confront worker alienation and anxiety (Carnoy 1981; Nolan 2012). Even so, faced

⁴³ Pérotin notes that, ‘It is also possible that employee control is better suited to industries in which skills are most important to firm performance (yet at the same time, many people seem to think few co-operatives will be found in high-tech industries, where skills are often essential’ (2016, p. 10).

with these challenges, and under competitive market pressures, Vidal concludes that

managers may settle for control strategies that secure sufficient physical effort from workers but do not fully tap worker creativity and discretionary effort, because securing the latter requires changes that are exceedingly difficult to implement and sustain. Even where managers attempt to pursue empowerment they are likely to be confronted with the difficulties of getting alienated workers to contribute discretionary effort and intellectual labour.

Such managerial satisficing is generally less about managers protecting their power or control as such and more about settling for good enough when facing the difficulties of empowering labour.

(Vidal 2019a)

Lambert (2017) attempts to plug some of the ‘gaps in the literature’ (p. 80) concerning worker cooperative governance. His survey of US worker coops finds that they

do uphold or believe in the values of job retention of all employees (whether [worker-owners] or [non-worker-owners]) even if it means the sacrifice of productivity enhancing investment (at the cost of labour) or greater profits, even in tough economic times.⁴⁴ Managerial levels are higher on average the larger the co-op and the greater the number of [non-worker-owners], yet this may be because of the need for greater coordination among employees and not so much a characteristic of larger co-ops becoming more like capital managed firms.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Similar international research findings are discussed in Pérotin (2016, p. 19). Regarding the longer-term economic sustainability of such decisions, Lambert suggests that, ‘With some type of greater government support, such as in European nations, US co-ops perhaps could possibly retain their emphasis of valuing labor over capital and avoid degeneration and at the same time achieve greater growth through more investment, even investment in labor saving and productivity enhancing technology. Redundant labor could be retrained by the co-op for other assignments, which is often done in worker co-ops. Greater profitability could be attainable as well (2017, p. 91). Further, he notes that ‘many firm investments are job creating’ (p. 91) rather than job replacing.

⁴⁵ Alves et al. (2019) produce experimental evidence regarding the relative economic preferences of worker cooperative and conventional capitalist managers. Their ‘preliminary analysis supports two main conclusions. First, the fraction of risk loving subjects is lower among co-op managers compared to conventional managers. Second, co-op managers appear to be more altruistic than their conventional counterparts. We do not observe significant differences between the two groups across other preference domains, such as impatience, trust, and reciprocity’ (Alves et al. 2019, p. 23). Campbell (2011) and De Normanville et al. (2015) discuss the combination of horizontal and vertical governance structures that actualise broad-based worker participation in Mondragón Cooperative Corporation and the John Lewis

(Lambert 2017, p. 90)

He also found that a majority of the US worker coops that responded to the survey ‘indicated that competition from non-coops was a concern’ (p. 86). This suggests that the capitalist marketplace may at times impose a trade-off between the imperatives of economic sustainability and the realisation of cooperative principles and values more generally.

While the *social* sustainability of worker coops is likewise comparatively under-researched (Brown et al. 2015), Piñeiro Harnecker (2009), Larrabure (2013, 2017), and Ozarow and Croucher (2014) make an important contribution to the literature. Their research indicates that, relative to capitalist firms, *economically sustainable cooperatives practicing workplace democracy*⁴⁶ significantly improve worker job satisfaction, equality, and human development. In saying that however, Piñeiro Harnecker observes that ‘workplace democracy is not sufficient for workers to adopt the needs of other communities. Democratic planning or coordination between enterprises and communities is necessary for enterprises to be able to effectively and efficiently satisfy social needs’ (Piñeiro Harnecker 2009, p. 309). That is, worker collectives don’t necessarily recognise their embeddedness within, and moral obligation towards, wider society (p. 314). But if workplace democracy is *not sufficient* to address social needs, it still appears to be *necessary*:

Nevertheless, although workplace democracy is not sufficient, it might be necessary for workers’ adoption of social interests. If we see the development of workers’ social consciousness as a further step in the development of their collective consciousness, we can recognize the importance of workplace democracy in facilitating it. Certainly, workers’ internalization of the interests of others distant from their workplaces seems very unlikely if they are not capable of adopting at least the interests of their co-workers. Moreover, since democratic skills and attitudes can be transferred

Partnership, two of the world’s largest and most successful worker-owned firms. See also ICA (2015).

⁴⁶ Campbell points out that, ‘Co-ops in themselves do not guarantee participation of any type, and certainly not . . . participation in management. . . . Co-ops do, however, make it possible for participation in management in a way that is essentially impossible in a normal capitalist corporation, which legally has fiduciary responsibility to only its shareholders (2011, p. 8).

from one space to another, their consolidation within workplaces will make workers' participation in institutions for democratic planning more effective once they are established.

(Piñeiro Harnecker 2009, p. 323)

Similar findings regarding job satisfaction, equality, and human development are reported in Faughnan (1991), which documents the widespread practice of workplace democracy within the Southern Irish state-owned enterprise (SOE), Bord na Móna.⁴⁷ Nolan et al. (2013) also draws on these themes in relation to more recent worker cooperative development initiatives in Northern Ireland.

In addition to economic and social sustainability, the cooperative movement is increasingly promoting cooperatives as an *environmentally* sustainable alternative to conventional capitalist firms, with an emphasis on local rootedness and democratic governance (ICA 2013; CICOPA 2014). Yet the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) admits that further research is needed to establish whether cooperatives 'actualize what they communicate' (ICA 2013, p. 24). This could help to establish whether Piñeiro Harnecker's (2009) observations regarding social consciousness extend to questions of ecological consciousness. Further empirical inquiry is warranted on both counts.

The available empirical evidence regarding cooperatives and sustainability suggests that, while worker coops, in and of themselves, do not guarantee sustainable development; they are, unlike capitalist firms, *potentially* compatible with sustainability (Gradin 2015). The realisation of this potential requires mechanisms for effective cooperative governance (ICA 2015) and, where necessary, establishing democratic planning and negotiated co-ordination between cooperatives and communities (Piñeiro Harnecker 2009; Devine 2017). Through such channels, workers can democratise the distribution of the social surplus, as well as its production (Ruccio 2011): 'When the profit motive is exchanged for organizational aims that are more

⁴⁷ 'For the majority of participants, and particularly the core members, the experimental work groups in Bord na Móna created the conditions for high work motivation, performance and satisfaction' (Faughnan 1991, p. 30).

collective and long-term, companies no longer have the incentive to violate human rights or the environment’ (Gradin 2015, p. 155).

3.4.4 Reaching scale and sustainable development

The socialist literature on worker cooperative development suggests that achieving both scale and sustainability necessitates a political project to challenge and ultimately transcend the logic and praxis of capitalist political economy (Upchurch et al. 2014; Sharzer 2017; Marszalek 2017). Indeed, Lenin understood socialism as ‘the regime of *cultured* cooperativists’ (Piñeiro Harnecker 2013, p.7, emphasis added), arguing that ‘the whole of society must become a single workers’ co-operative’ (Lenin [1918] 1972, quoted in Miranda Lorenzo 2013, p. 84). But he nevertheless castigated those who disregarded the primacy of class struggle and instead, as Sharzer puts it, ‘built illusions in the possibility of evolutionary, market socialism’ (Sharzer 2017, p. 470):

Why were the plans of the old cooperators, from Robert Owen onwards, fantastic? Because they dreamed of peacefully remodeling contemporary society into socialism without taking account of such fundamental questions as the class struggle, the capture of political power by the working-class, the overthrow of the rule of the exploiting class. That is why we are right in regarding as entirely fantastic this “cooperative” socialism, and as romantic, and even banal, the dream of transforming class enemies into class collaborators and class war into class peace (so-called class truce) by merely organizing the population in cooperative societies.

(Lenin [1923] 1965)

The recent economic policy literature on worker coop development tends to emphasise the importance of getting the (legal, financial, and technical) institutions right (Bateman 2013; CICOPA 2014); while the radical political economy literature tends to emphasise the primacy of the political struggle over state power, before any such policy programme can be realistically and comprehensively implemented (Sharzer 2017). There is less emphasis in either tendency, however, on the necessity of a parallel cultural struggle. Interestingly, the vibrant literature on worker coop development accompanying the crisis of the postwar SSA culminated in a similar recognition

(Carnoy 1981; Cornforth and Thomas 1990; Baldacchino 1990). As Cornforth and Thomas argue: ‘Perhaps the biggest challenge facing those who wish to promote cooperative development is to find ways of helping to create a culture, or sub-cultures, which are sympathetic to cooperative ideals and forms of enterprise’ (Cornforth and Thomas 1990, p. 455).

The literature emphasising political culture all but disappeared with the consolidation of the global neoliberal SSA. With the benefit of hindsight, the ongoing revival of the worker coop development literature accompanying the crisis of contemporary capitalism appears to be going over old ground. Indeed, capitalist history suggests that interest in, and advocacy for, workplace democracy tends to ebb and flow relative to the strength of the labour movement (Ramsay 1977; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2019). In the language of modern SSA theory (Wolfson and Kotz 2010), liberal SSAs are hostile to worker coop development, in that they strengthen the hand of capital over labour; while regulated SSAs potentially advance the position of workers and, in doing so, provide more fertile ground (Christensen 2019). Liberal SSAs promote the ideology and praxis of individual alienation and competition; while regulated SSAs potentially promote a more participatory ethos of group integration and cooperation. Just as the consolidation of capitalist social relations in the workplace requires a social structure of accumulation to regulate class tensions and conflicts, we propose that the consolidation of workplace democracy requires a social structure of *cooperation* (SSC) – or a coherent set of economic, political, *and* cultural institutions that negotiate and coordinate social-productive relations of mutual respect and understanding.

The origins and history of the cooperative movement suggest that political-cultural leadership will come from the labour movement – the economic, political, and cultural organs of the working class (Curl 2012; Azzellini 2011, 2015). This implies cooperation and coordination between radicalised trade unions, cooperative federations, and state institutions (Bateman 2013; ILO 2013). In spite of historical tensions between these actors (Bateman 2013, p. 9; ILO 2013, p. 175–6), the labour movement did manage to build a greater degree of unity during the postwar era of regulated capitalism, when cooperative development was promoted through the integration of the working

class in the institutions of the state (Thornley 1981; Medhurst 2014). The postwar SSA instituted a stakeholder model of corporate governance, even within capitalist firms, however limited; in contrast to the shareholder model of neoliberal capitalism (Boyer 2010; Sanchez Bajo and Roelants 2011, Chapter 3). Cooperatives, as fundamentally democratic organisations, represent a particularly advanced form of stakeholder participation (Sanchez Bajo and Roelants 2011, p.118). With this in mind, the postwar strategy of democratising the ‘production regime’ (Burawoy 1985) appears worth revisiting in the movement towards twenty-first century socialism.⁴⁸

Cooperative development within capitalism, at best, represents a *transitional* institution – a radical or ‘non-reformist’ reform – that increases class consciousness while addressing concrete needs in the here and now (Wright 2013, p. 33–6):

Even within the logic of [capitalist] market economies, the positive externalities of worker cooperatives provide a justification for public subsidies and insurance schemes to increase their viability. Such policies could, over time, expand the weight of a cooperative market economy within the broader capitalist economic hybrid.

(Wright 2013, p. 36)

Within socialism, however, cooperatives represent a *constitutional*, rather than simply transitional, institution:

If what defines socialism is the predominance of social property in the form of freely associated labor guided by a plan that responds to social interests, and not just redistribution of material wealth, then cooperatives – and to the extent that the conditions for them to carry out their social commitment are created – are not a transitional but a constitutional enterprise form for any

⁴⁸ Burawoy distinguishes between four main types of production regime. Firstly, ‘market despotism’ is where ‘the state is separate from and does not directly shape the form of the factory regime’ regulating the capitalist labour process. Secondly, the ‘hegemonic regime’ is where ‘the state and factory apparatuses are also institutionally separated but the state shapes the factory apparatuses’ regulating the capitalist labour process. Thirdly, ‘bureaucratic despotism’ is where the production regime is ‘constituted by the administrative hierarchy of the state’, though coercion prevails over consent. And lastly, ‘collective self-management’ is where ‘factory apparatuses are managed by workers themselves. However, the state, or at least some central administrative organ, stipulates the conditions under which factories become self-regulating . . . Moreover, this central planning agency is subject to influence from below through institutionalized mechanisms of participation by factory councils’ (Burawoy 1985, p. 12–13).

socialist project. If, all in all, the point is to achieve people's needs for overall development, then cooperatives are a prefiguration of the future in the present.

(Piñeiro Harnecker 2013, p. 20)

Cruz Reyes and Piñeiro Harnecker (2013, p. 44) conclude that the traditional cooperative management model, with a relatively high degree of autonomy, is best suited to small and medium enterprises within a socialist political economy.⁴⁹ However, larger strategic SOEs can also be significantly co-operativised (Cumbers 2012, Chapter 7):

For strategic activities, other forms of management can be used that truly materialize the participation of workers in decision making while also allowing – given they are not counterposed objectives – more direct state intervention that will guarantee they respond to the social interests established in strategies and plans, such as forms of comanagement, workers' councils, or at least autonomous working groups. Thus, a state enterprise – that is, one that is administered by representatives of government ministers or regional (provincial or municipal) governments – will be more effective to the extent that it operates internally like a cooperative and that it strengthens its links to productive sectors and to the communities it serves.

(Piñeiro Harnecker 2013, p. 17)

We might also usefully apply these insights to a transitional cooperative sector within a capitalist political economy.

3.5 Conclusions

The existing literature on worker cooperative development indicates that genuine cooperatives – those that institute workplace democracy – represent a potentially sustainable alternative to the conventional capitalist firm. Assessing the extent to which cooperatives can advance economic and, in particular, social and environmental sustainability, however, calls for further research. While more empirical evidence is needed, research does suggest that the economic sustainability of worker coops relies on a supportive external institutional environment and effective internal cooperative governance struc-

⁴⁹ See also Novković and Veltmeyer (2018).

tures. As regards the social and environmental sustainability of worker coops, the available research suggests that the collective consciousness of workers tends to remain confined to “their” cooperative unless democratic planning mechanisms are established with the surrounding community.

The existing literature also indicates that scaling sustainable worker coop development requires the creation of a social structure of cooperation. The SSC would embed the dominance of (worker) cooperative social-productive relations through an ensemble of supportive economic, political, and cultural institutions. Establishing the necessary (legal, technical, and financial) economic reforms then requires political capture of the state by the working class. Moreover, effecting and then effectively leveraging any such political-economic transformation implies the nurturing of a vibrant cooperativist political-cultural hegemony.

From a strategic perspective, cooperatives appear as one weapon – albeit an important one – in the labour movement’s broader political-economic armoury. The material, pedagogical, and cultural value of worker coops cannot substitute for the political struggle; but does arguably strengthen that struggle. Cooperatives have been much neglected by the international labour movement in recent years. In one sense, this is altogether understandable, as the rise of neoliberalism has forced labour onto the backfoot. Yet the crisis of neoliberal capitalism presents opportunities for a revival of the cooperative ideal, and the articulation of a roadmap for its achievement.⁵⁰

As the macropolitics of capitalist society shift, so shift the micropolitics of capitalist production. The tendential long swings between liberal and regulated capitalist SSAs are accompanied by parallel long swing between conflictual and potentially more cooperativist production regimes. The latter can be fashioned to serve as a stepping stone in the struggle for a Cooperative Commonwealth. We engage our working theory of worker cooperative development in dialogue with our case study participants in the coming chapters.

⁵⁰ See Sinn Féin (2017, 2019), British Labour Party (2017), NEF (2018, report commissioned by the Co-operative Party), and ICTU (2019) for recent policy documents in this spirit.

4 Extended case methodology

4.1 Introduction

We set out our methodological approach and research instruments in this chapter. Our broader research strategy, the extended case method, is outlined in Section 4.2. This approach encourages us to extend out from the micro processes of our case study to the macro structures within which they are embedded. As such, the extended case method allows us to straddle the boundaries between worker cooperative development in Ireland and the neoliberal social structure of accumulation. Section 4.3 discusses our primary research instrument: the qualitative semi-structured interview. We describe how a topic guide was constructed by elaborating on our working theory of worker coop development, as outlined in the previous chapter. This helped to structure our dialogue with interview participants, who have been involved in worker coop development in Ireland throughout the neoliberal period. Section 4.4 concludes.

4.2 Extending the extended case method

Vidal and Hauptmeier propose a research strategy ‘at the intersection of labour process theory and comparative political economy’ (Vidal and Hauptmeier 2014, p. 22), expanding on what Burawoy (1998) termed the ‘extended case method’. This interpretation advocates ‘extending out from micro processes to macro structures’ (Vidal and Hauptmeier 2014, p. 22–3). Since a detailed and focused study of a particular firm or micro initiative risks missing the bigger picture, it is important to take into consideration the ‘macro drivers of changes and dynamics at the micro level’ – that is, ‘the capitalist and institutional forces shaping employment relations and workplace dynamics’ (p. 23). By adopting this approach, our theoretical framework guides our dialogue with case study participants, whose lived experiences feed back upon and reconstruct our theory, in what Burawoy calls a ‘*reflexive* model of science’ (Burawoy 1998, p.5, original emphasis):

We begin with our favorite theory but seek not confirmations but refutations that inspire us to deepen that theory. Instead of discovering grounded theory we elaborate existing theory. We do not worry about the uniqueness of our case since we are not as interested in its “representativeness” as its contribution to “reconstructing” theory.

(Burawoy 1998, p. 16)

Although Burawoy (1998) conceived of the extended case method as it applied to participant observation specifically, Vidal and Hauptmeier (2014) suggest that this approach can be extended to qualitative research more generally. Indeed, this extension of the extended case method appears to be consistent with the general approach to qualitative research advocated by NatCen Social Research (Ritchie et al. 2014, p. 20–3):

Our approach broadly falls within the school of thought generally known as “critical realism”⁵¹. . . This means that ontologically, we see reality as something that exists independently of those who observe it but is only accessible through the perceptions and interpretations of individuals. We recognise the critical importance of participants’ own interpretations of the issues researched and believe that their varying vantage points will yield different types of understanding. Our position is that external reality is itself diverse and multifaceted and it is the aim of research to capture that reality in all its complexity and depth.

Our location within a broadly interpretivist frame is reflected in practices which emphasise the importance of understanding people’s perspectives in the context of the conditions and circumstances of their lives. This has implications both for the balance between inductive and deductive approaches across the research process, and for the ways in which we analyse and develop interpretations of the data. At the start of a research project, we typically use existing theory and research to help plan and design the study, develop a sampling approach and create fieldwork tools. In the field and in early analysis, however, our focus is on understanding and exploring participants’ views and experiences from their points of view. The goal during this phase is therefore to seek to obtain as much detailed information as possible about people’s lives. Then, towards the end of the analysis, the findings of the research are often put back into the context of other theories or existing knowledge.

(Ritchie et al. 2014, p. 21–2)

⁵¹ See Lawson (2009).

4.3 In-depth interviews

Ritchie et al. (2014, p. 22) argue that research methods should be chosen in accordance with specific research questions. The central research question framing our study reads as follows: What is the potential of the worker cooperative model as the basis for a sustainable mode of production? The micro aspect of this question concerns the relative sustainability of the worker coop and capitalist enterprise forms, as regards economic, social, and environmental outcomes. The macro aspect concerns the political-economic barriers to scale confronting sustainable worker coop development. Based on our review of the international literature on worker cooperative development in the previous chapter, we concluded that the targeted, in-depth, qualitative semi-structured interview was the most appropriate instrument with which to address our central research question.

An important strand of this literature concerns the promotion of worker coops as ‘builders of sustainable development’ (CICOPA 2014). Yet even if the existing empirical evidence suggests that worker coops are, at least potentially, an economically sustainable alternative (Pérotin 2016), there is comparatively little research assessing the model’s social (Piñeiro Harnecker 2009) and ecological (ICA 2013) sustainability (Brown et al. 2015). Similarly, the relationship between worker coop development initiatives and transformations in the macro-level regulatory regime is also relatively understudied (Upchurch et al. 2014). Our research set out to contribute to the emerging literature on sustainable worker coop development in this holistic sense. This demanded an empirical investigation and theoretical analysis of the social relations established both within worker coops, and between worker coops and the surrounding community – a journey into the hidden abode of co-operative production (Novković 2013; ICA 2015). It also called for a consideration of the macro-institutional embeddedness of worker coop development initiatives (Bateman 2013; Vidal and Hauptmeier 2014).

We carried out 19 (individual and group) interviews, involving 28 participants in total. Fieldwork was carried out between November 2015 and August 2018.

We spoke with worker cooperative developers in workplaces and agencies, past and present, across the island of Ireland. Participants were identified primarily through contacts in the Irish trade union movement. In Belfast, we studied the recent experiences of Belfast Cleaning Society and Union Taxis. In the midlands, we studied the experiences of Bord na Móna and Tullamore Meats Co-op. We interviewed worker-members at the recently closed Atty-mon Peat Co-op in Galway, and the vibrant Quay Co-op in Cork. We also interviewed representatives of the all-island Worker Cooperative Network (WCN); of Trademark Belfast, the anti-sectarian unit of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU); and of the ICTU-aligned Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre (BURC). Finally, we spoke with former representatives of the now defunct Cooperative Development Unit (CDU); of the Dublin-based Irish Trade Union Trust (ITUT); and of the Derry-based Northern Ireland Cooperative Development Agency (NICDA).

We interviewed a mix of workers, managers, and trade union and agency officials for a variety of perspectives. A topic guide (see Appendix 1) was constructed, on the basis of our working theory, to explore the themes of worker coop *sustainability* and worker coop *scale* in depth. Interviews, usually lasting an hour or so, were recorded in person and, where possible, on site. The purpose of the research was communicated to participants in writing and in person, and consent was obtained on this basis. The audio recordings were subsequently transcribed and coded by the author, using standard audio and word processing software. Where participants requested anonymity, this was provided for in the reporting of results. Certain experiences provided greater or lesser quantities of relevant data than others, depending on time restraints and/or the nature of particular worker cooperative initiatives and worker coop development agencies. We turned to Richie et al. (2014) for guidance at all stages of this qualitative research process.

The purposive sampling method employed cautions that our findings are not necessarily generalisable. However, as Burawoy (1998, p. 16) noted, our purpose is not so much to generate new grounded theory, as to build upon and reconstruct existing theory – itself partly an abstraction from the pre-existing empirical evidence (Ritchie et al. 2014, p. 51–2).

4.4 Conclusions

In this chapter we have set out our research methods and instruments, drawing on the complementarities between Burawoy (1998), Vidal and Hauptmeier (2014), and Ritchie et al. (2014). We interpret the extended case methodology proposed here as in keeping with the Marxist dialectical scientific method (Kosík 1976; Burawoy 1990; Foster 2018). This extended case method frames our investigation and analysis of Irish worker cooperative development in the following chapters.

5 Worker coop development in Ireland: the case of Meitheal

5.1 Introduction

The present chapter reports the findings of our case study on worker cooperative development in Ireland. The structure of the chapter follows the outline of our interview topic guide (see Appendix 1). We provide a summary at the end of each section, in attempting to draw out the implications for our thesis. Section 5.2 sets out the background to the worker coop development initiatives that we studied from across the island: Workers' Unity Trust (WUT) / Irish Trade Union Trust (ITUT); Cooperative Development Unit (CDU); Northern Ireland Cooperative Development Agency (NICDA) / Social Economy Agency (SEA); Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre (BURC); Quay Co-op; Tullamore Meats Co-op; Bord na Móna and Attymon Peat Co-op; Trademark Belfast, Belfast Cleaning Society, and Union Taxis; and Meitheal Mid West (MMW) and Urban Co-op. We explore questions of worker coop sustainability, from an economic, social, and environmental perspective, in Section 5.3. This is followed by a consideration of the institutional and organisational barriers to scale facing sustainable worker coop development in Section 5.4. Lastly, we grapple with the potential role of worker cooperatives in confronting the crisis of twenty-first century capitalism in Section 5.5.

5.2 Background

5.2.1 Workers' Unity Trust / Irish Trade Union Trust

During the mid-1980s, at a time of mass unemployment in the Irish economy, the leadership of the Federated Workers' Union of Ireland (FWUI) – ‘what we used to call “Larkin’s Union”’ – decided that ‘the Union needed to do something actively about [the situation], as opposed to passing resolutions’. Eddie Glackin was an FWUI official at the time.⁵² The Union voted to implement a levy of 10p per member per week, over three years, to provide

⁵² Kevin McMahon noted that Eddie Glackin previously worked as ‘a bin man . . . on the line in local authorities’. Eddie is a longstanding member of the Communist Party of Ireland (CPI). See <http://www.communistpartyofireland.ie/>.

supports to unemployed members;⁵³ and a subcommittee of FWUI activists, shop stewards, and officials was established ‘to put some shape on it’. A separate organisation, Workers’ Unity Trust, was eventually set up around ‘about 1985’; both because job creation was not the main focus of the Union, and because the FWUI would need legal protection from ‘any liability, for example, if a business failed’. The board of directors of the Trust, however, ‘were all nominated by the Executive of the Union’.

Eddie was approached in 1986 by the FWUI General Secretary, Billy Attley, to head up the unit: ‘I was seconded from my job as an industrial official in the Union [initially for] six months; I think I ended up there [for] 24 years’. When the FWUI amalgamated with the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU) in 1990 to form the Services, Industrial, Professional and Technical Union (SIPTU),⁵⁴ the Workers’ Unity Trust was dissolved into the Irish Trade Union Trust – ‘a new name for the same operation, really’. ITUT was then funded by an annual grant from the Executive of SIPTU. The Trust ended up with ‘maybe seven [or] eight full-time people’, some of whom were employed via Social Employment Schemes (SES) – ‘a small number of employees, but [with] a good base of experience’.

At the beginning, nobody had any great sense of what the WUT was going to do concretely. But the unit eventually settled on ‘a twin-track approach’: (1) support for employment initiatives – ‘that’s where the worker coop thing came in’ – and (2) assisting the unemployed ‘to acquire their own voice’. To facilitate these activities, the WUT ‘developed a major resource centre [in] the old Irish Women Workers’ Union (IWWU) building’, which operated as ‘a drop-in centre for unemployed people, where they could get advice on their entitlements’ and avail of vocational training. The WUT provided office space to what became the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INOUE),⁵⁵ as well as annual grant aid of ‘maybe £1,000’ to both the INOUE

⁵³ Lynch (1990, p. 23) noted that the levy was voluntary. ‘The fund averaged over £600,000 is administered by Workers’ Unity Trust and is used to create links with the unemployed members and help them to create jobs through worker co-ops’ (Lynch 1990, p. 23).

⁵⁴ See <https://www.siptu.ie/>.

⁵⁵ See <https://www.inoue.ie/>.

and Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) ⁵⁶ -affiliated ‘unemployed advisory centres’. This wasn’t an insignificant contribution, ‘especially when there were 13 or 14 of these centres . . . around the country’.

While acknowledging the WUT’s broader remit, Eddie described how what ‘became the main focus . . . of our work was we got involved in supporting the creation and development of worker cooperatives . . . [which] was very much in line with the ethos of the trade union movement . . . [in terms of] working people combining and working together’.

Eddie recalled that the WUT/ITUT got involved in ‘dozens’ of worker coop initiatives, ‘some successful, many unsuccessful’; though he noted the high failure rate for business start-ups more generally. Some of the larger-scale initiatives involved conversions from traditional capitalist firms to worker coops, as opposed to start-ups per se. These were usually ‘rescue operations [or] what they called “phoenix cooperatives” – as in “rising from the ashes”’:

We would typically get a call – and it became quite regular – the union official would ring us, if there [were] jobs going to go in the place or the place was shutting down, to come down and . . . have a look at the business and see if there’s anything [that] could be done in terms of salvaging jobs. Was it possibly viable, if the [operation] was restructured – [i.e.] was a worker-owned business on the cards? More often than not, it wasn’t . . . because, I mean, most businesses that close down, close down for “genuine reasons” – the business is bollixed like, you know [laughs].

One conversion of particular note occurred in ‘Winstanley’s’⁵⁷ . . . here in Dublin [which] would’ve been a very, very well-known footwear company . . . that had died a death’. Eddie reckoned that there was in the region of 60-80 employees at the company; though only around 20-30 of those got involved in the cooperative, given the necessary financial participation: ‘We would encourage workers to buy shares, for example, maybe from their redundancy money; and we would . . . help to structure the business’.

⁵⁶ See <https://www.ictu.ie/>.

⁵⁷ See Casey (1985).

The WUT/ITUT also became involved in two prominent worker coop conversions at the Irish state-owned enterprise (SOE), Bord na Móna.⁵⁸ Eddie recounted how ‘Bord na Móna [was] going through – they had a lovely euphemism – “rationalisation” at the time: they were shutting down smaller operations around the place’. Two such operations – one in Glenties,⁵⁹ Donegal and the other in Attymon, Galway – were transitioned to worker cooperatives with the facilitation and cooperation of unions, management, and the local community: ‘We provided financial [and] professional support, in terms of helping with feasibility studies [and] staff training . . . in cooperative skills [etc.]’ Regarding follow-up support, Eddie recalled: ‘We were available to help deal with any problems or hiccups that arose [along] the way; we didn’t just . . . go in, give a grant or something and then walk away from it’.

5.2.2 *Cooperative Development Unit*

In 1988, the CDU was established within the state agency Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS) to promote the development of Ireland’s worker coop sector.⁶⁰ ‘What did I know about that at the time? Very little’. Denis Rowan, who was working with FÁS, was assigned to head up the Unit. The CDU provided similar supports to worker coops as the WUT/ITUT. He recollected that the CDU ‘came out from one of the [tripartite social partnership] deals’⁶¹ and ‘it was the trade union request to set up a unit that support[ed] coops’. Denis was ‘assigned as manager of a small group of people – probably about three or four of us’. The board of FÁS also set up an advisory council, which included a FÁS chair, as well as representation from the Irish League of Credit Unions

⁵⁸ See <https://www.bordnamona.ie/>.

⁵⁹ The operation at Glenties survived from 1989 until 2003, whereafter the bog was completely exhausted. See Clarke (2010, p. 250) for an account of the Glenties takeover.

⁶⁰ See WCN (2012, p. 9, 24). FÁS was the Irish National Training and Employment Authority.

⁶¹ See Government of Ireland (1987, p. 26).

(ILCU)⁶² and Irish Cooperative Organisation Society (ICOS),⁶³ amongst others.

So now you had a coop unit inside a semi-state that was only newly formed itself . . . You had a unit [in] which people knew what their job was, but had no background in it, really . . . I suppose, from your point of view, the question [is]: Was it set up in the right place . . . [FÁS] being in a semi-state body within the public sector? The alternative was [to] set up a cooperative unit outside [of a] semi-state body: [to] have another independent, either community-based or agency-based [organisation] . . . rather than [it] be[ing] a state- . . . organised [and] controlled [entity]. . . . And that's a question someone else will have to answer.⁶⁴

Denis agreed that the trade union side had 'very much' been arguing for an independent coop development unit:

They probably would've felt that . . . a semi-state body like ourselves just wouldn't have the understanding, or the credibility, or the personal drive, or the commitment to it . . . And there was a certain amount of truth to that . . . You've got to understand what a cooperative is, and the history of it, both from an agricultural point of view and from a worker point of view . . . [So there] was a feeling that it shouldn't have gone into FÁS.⁶⁵

Denis left the CDU 'probably . . . four or five years later'. He indicated that his successor's view of the world 'would not have been my view of the world'. In that regard, it is worth noting that Denis retained his SIPTU

⁶² See <https://www.creditunion.ie/>.

⁶³ See <http://icos.ie/>.

⁶⁴ The late Tom Redmond (a longstanding member of the CPI), as Secretary of the Network of Workers Cooperatives, referred at the time to the ideal organisation of any such unit, as outlined in policy documents from the ICTU and Network of Worker Cooperatives in 1988 (Redmond 1990, p. 2). The ICTU document was formally endorsed by the Network, ICOS, ILCU, and National Association of Building Cooperatives (NABCO): 'What they sought was an independent agency governed by the worker co-ops, ICTU, representatives of the wider movement and with a state presence. In spite of the unions writing support for such an agency into the Programme for National Recovery, what was established eventually, by the Minister of Labour, was a unit inside FÁS. An advisory council with representation from the wider movement was a concession' (Redmond 1990, p. 3).

⁶⁵ Tom Redmond reflected this sentiment: 'After evaluating its work and progress it is now the Network's view that there is no future for a central support organisation lodged within a state agency. Much time, effort, and resources [have] been wasted going in that direction. As control, support and expertise are essential for the co-op sector to grow, then an independent central support agency, as envisioned by the wider co-op movement and the ICTU, must be created' (Redmond 1990, p. 3).

membership, even as a manager, within FÁS. He also became involved in anti-sectarian work and conflict resolution.

5.2.3 *Northern Ireland Cooperative Development Agency / Social Economy Agency*

In October 1984, Molins Machine Company, a British engineering multinational and prominent cross-community employer in the city of Derry, ceased its operations. As the newly-elected senior shop steward at the factory, Conal McFeely attended a communication meeting at a local hotel with two company executives who had flown in from London. ‘Their first words were, “The discontinuance of the Londonderry [sic] operation . . .”, and it took them six minutes to close a factory, placing 437 workers on the dole’. The executives didn’t plan on visiting the factory themselves: ‘I remember saying, “You can’t treat workers like this”, you know, and I got up and walked out . . . So I had the task of telling 437 workers that the factory was shut – and it was chaos’. But the workers weren’t prepared to sit idly by: ‘So a small group of us decided to occupy the factory’. Conal then encouraged them to form a cooperative:

My background would be [that] I come from . . . a working class family: five brothers [and] five sisters. But, my father was . . . one of the founding members of the credit union movement. And, I knew that [a credit union] was a cooperative, but I knew very little, you know, about the ethos of coops and so forth. But I remember standing up at the factory meeting, on the following Saturday, and basically saying . . . “If people can set up their own financial cooperative”, i.e. Derry Credit Union,⁶⁶ “we can set up our own engineering cooperative” . . . I hadn’t a bull’s notion what I was talking about, you know, to be honest.

He alluded to the wider political context surrounding the occupation, and recounted the struggle to establish workers’ control:

We’re talking about Derry in the 1980s: the conflict was at its height, right. It was the major employer in the city [and] there was a new British Secretary of State coming in; on his first day, this factory closed. . . . It was a different story coming out of the Troubles – a group of workers occupying a factory. . . . We began a whole process and we convinced the company that we could put together an alternative plan. And, out of that, we did set up a

⁶⁶ See <https://www.derrycu.com/>.

company called Maydown Precision Engineering (MPE). Now, we didn't save *all* the jobs; we had managed to save, at that stage, 120-125 jobs – but, still, [a] substantial [number] . . . And I convinced the workers at that stage that they should put in their redundancy money and they should become shareholders in the company. . . . We also convinced the company that the plant and equipment . . . should be handed over to the local community . . . or handed over to the workers . . . also.

MPE survived as a coop up until 2015, after which it transitioned back to the conventional private sector.⁶⁷

For Conal, cooperatives were a natural extension of Derry's 'very strong history of self help . . . [and] the civil rights movement':

So the city had no university; it lost its main sort of employer, which was [the multinational firm] Birmingham Sound Recorders (BSR); and that [gave] rise to, obviously, people doing things for themselves. So there's been quite a number of sort of . . . cooperative ventures that have emerged over the years in this particular city.

Conal became a worker director at MPE 'after a couple of years'. 'But then an opportunity came up with a number of [radical] trade unionists, who were also arguing that . . . if Northern Ireland was to become a successful entity . . . it needed another economic model: and they were advancing the co-operative model'. The trade unionists in question – in particular, Paddy Devlin⁶⁸ and former ICTU President Brendan Mackin – were based 'mainly in Belfast'. 'So there was a group of radicals in there. And, they then felt that they could tap into something [that] they thought was unique in Derry . . . a self-help ethos'.

These radical trade unionists 'came to Derry with £6,000' – 'half a salary for a development worker . . . to look at cooperative development'. They made a representation on this basis to Derry City Council and secured another £6,000.

⁶⁷ See *Derry Now* (2017).

⁶⁸ Conal explained that Paddy Devlin 'was SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party] . . . but, first and foremost, he was a trade unionist'. Tom Wall also mentioned in passing that 'Paddy Devlin . . . created a taxi cooperative . . . in Belfast . . . [which] worked quite well for a long time . . . It wasn't a sectarian thing, to be fair to him . . . [He] was very proud of it'. See Devlin (1993).

Conal applied for and got the job with NICDA (later SEA), which operated as a non-governmental organisation (NGO). ‘So there was one employee for the cooperative development unit in Derry,⁶⁹ and then there was also [Brendan Mackin] based in Belfast [with BURC]’. NICDA then began cooperating with the WUT/ITUT and CDU on an all-Ireland basis:

Through Brendan Mackin [and] through others, we then got to know Eddie Glackin. So, I went down [South and] met Eddie, and Eddie came up [North] . . . Then there was a big closure down in . . . Tuam . . . the sugar beet factory;⁷⁰ I went down [South] and did a number of talks [to try and] convince the workers to take it over . . . There was a whole interest in alternative economics at that stage. . . . And then Denis Rowan came up [North after the CDU was established].

NICDA’s first cooperative development project attempted to recreate the MPE experience in a community setting, with the establishment of Creggan Enterprises, a community-owned social economy enterprise providing retail, office, and community services via the Ráth Mór Business and Community Enterprise Centre, located on the old BSR site.⁷¹ NICDA / SEA subsequently became involved in a host of notable cooperative initiatives:⁷²

Creggan Country Park . . . Glenowen Fisheries, which was a worker coop; a lot of coop partnerships . . . So, there was a whole range of [cooperative] projects established during that particular period . . . I set up Sackville Co-op Taxis . . . again, people who were ex-prisoners who couldn’t get work.

5.2.4 *Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre*

In 1984, the Northern Ireland Committee of ICTU moved to establish an unemployed centre, ‘following some of the developments that had taken place under the TUC [Trade Union Congress] in Britain’.⁷³ BURC⁷⁴ was set up

⁶⁹ This eventually grew to ‘seven or eight’ staff members.

⁷⁰ See Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) Archives (2017).

⁷¹ See <http://www.rathmor.com/>.

⁷² See Molloy et al. (1999).

⁷³ See TUC (2010).

⁷⁴ See <http://www.burc.org/>.

initially with no money or resources, before securing ‘a £10,000 grant from Belfast City Council . . . [which] gave us a kick-start’. The three staff members at the Centre, including Brendan Mackin,⁷⁵ were employed under an Action for Community Employment (ACE) programme. ‘I was chairman of [BURC] for about 20 years’.

BURC differed from WUT/ITUT in that the latter was resourced by FWUI/SIPTU, whereas the former relied on state support and income generation via social enterprise. ‘So . . . instead of [only] cooperatives, [BURC would be] . . . looking at social enterprises per se . . . and that would include coops as well as community businesses’. One notable initiative was the John Hewitt Bar,⁷⁶ a social enterprise owned by BURC. Regarding BURC’s funding structure and mission, ‘the social enterprise model is, in some respects, a more flexible model’.

5.2.5 *Quay Co-op*

Cork city’s Quay Co-op⁷⁷ was established in 1982 by ‘a group of like-minded people’ – feminist, environmental, lesbian and gay, and other social justice activists – ‘to set up a sort of an alternative . . . resource centre’. John Calnan has been a member of the Co-op since 1985. It was initially set up as a community cooperative, with around 120 members, and ‘anybody at all could apply [for membership], or could be invited, and you paid £1 and you were a member’. The Co-op went in search of a building and ‘once we had the building, then [we] worked out the details of what it would be’.

The building had four floors: the third floor was a resource centre producing badges, t-shirts, and ‘even a couple of books’; the second floor was ‘a women-only space . . . a meeting room and a library’; the first floor was a vegetarian restaurant, ‘primarily set up to make the money to pay the rent, so that the

⁷⁵ Brendan Mackin had been a trade union activist, blacklisted for his leadership of the 1982 sit-in strike at the DeLorean Motor Company in Belfast; in addition, he was an ex-political prisoner for Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA) activity. ‘So I don’t have much going for me’. See Kirkland (2007) for an account of the DeLorean strike; and Hanley and Millar (2009) for the definitive history of the OIRA.

⁷⁶ See <http://www.thejohnhewitt.com/>.

⁷⁷ See <http://www.quaycoop.com/>.

important stuff could happen’, and also ‘a meeting space’ more generally; and the ground floor housed a second-hand bookshop, ‘selling lots of kind of political books at the time’, as well as a space rented out to organic food coops.

In the initial stages, most members were ‘completely volunteering their energy’ and ‘anyone else who was paid was paid very, very poorly – complete minimum wage . . . We didn’t even have [a national] minimum wages at the time’. The business side of the cooperative then started to grow: the vegetarian restaurant, for example, ‘just became more successful’ and, alongside the bookshop, ‘we decided to start selling wholefoods’. While ‘there’s loads of competition now selling the same stuff’, no one else was selling wholefoods or left-wing literature in Cork city at that time. So ‘we became an employer, you know, for the first time . . . having to run a business and all that’.

Around ‘1985 or so’, the Co-op decided that ‘you had to work in the building to be a member; and that brought the membership [down]’. The cooperative structure transitioned from a community coop to a worker coop. The majority of the original members were now ‘just involved – they were very active supporters’ rather than members per se. But this decision was arrived at democratically by the membership, who recognised that, ‘We have to change’ in line with the Co-op’s activities. At the time, ‘you had to work at least two hours in a week to become a member; and that brought [the membership] from 120 down to . . . 40 or something’. As the business continued to grow, it was eventually decided that ‘you had to work a minimum of 20 hours [per week in the Co-op]’ to gain membership.

John relayed how the Co-op ‘went through [a] difficult kind of financial patch in the ’90s, where we asked the membership to raise money – we all went to our credit union [individually] and we just gave loans to the Co-op, to keep it afloat really – and that then had to be tied into membership as well’. As a consequence, the membership dropped ‘to about . . . 15 or 16, and it’s stayed something like that ever since’.

5.2.6 *Tullamore Meats Co-op*

When the Midland Butter and Bacon⁷⁸ company ‘went into receivership . . . [and] threw us out on the road’ in 1989, Oliver Larkin and Angela Conroy, along with another seven of their co-workers, ‘had no alternative only to set up something for ourselves’. 29 years later, Oliver, Angela, and two more of the nine original worker-members constitute Tullamore Meats Co-operative Society.⁷⁹

Back in 1989, the workers ‘invested £3,000 a piece’, essentially pooling their redundancy payments,⁸⁰ ‘and we sold outside [‘non-voting’] shares [to raise] . . . £27,000 more’, to help fund the cooperative venture. The Co-op was established in a separate premises over the ‘far end of town’, but the worker-members continued doing the ‘same type of work . . . Tullamore sausages had a good name . . . in the Midland Butter and Bacon company’.

5.2.7 *Bord na Móna and Attymon Peat Co-op*

In the late 1980s, during the ‘crisis and transformation of Bord na Móna’,⁸¹ Kevin McMahon⁸² was FWUI (soon to be SIPTU) Branch Secretary for general workers at the company; and also Secretary of the Bord na Móna Group of Unions (GoU). He had been a trade union official at the company for 10 years by that time.

Kevin explained the background to the ‘crisis negotiations’: Bord na Móna’s financial position was significantly in the red, with the company having suffered ‘two very bad years in 1985 and 1986’; in addition, the political context dictated that ‘there was a bigger emphasis, at that point in time, on

⁷⁸ Midland Butter and Bacon produced a range of pork products, including the famous Tullamore sausage (MidlandsIreland.ie 2016, p. 65).

⁷⁹ See <https://www.facebook.com/Tullamore-Meats-1037889639576411/>.

⁸⁰ Oliver Larkin remembered: ‘Well [laughs] you wouldn’t call it redundancy: I got £3,472 after 27 year . . . That’s exactly what I got’.

⁸¹ See Clarke (2010, Chapter 12).

⁸² An edited and abridged version of our interview with the late Kevin McMahon has been published previously in Millar and McMahon (2017). Kevin had been an Irish republican and communist activist, and worked as a painter and decorator, before becoming a trade union official.

the commercial side, rather than the social side, of the state sector companies’. Eddie O’Connor⁸³ was appointed as Managing Director (MD) in 1987 by the new Fianna Fáil government to exact cost reductions and ‘various other changes that would make the company competitive’. But, while the Unions accepted the need for change, ‘we wanted to ensure in this process that the best interests of the employees were protected, and indeed the best interests of Bord na Móna as well, which was a *state* company’.

Eddie O’Connor set out his vision for the company at a meeting in February 1989, where ‘essentially what he was proposing was a contractualisation of the peat production operations, and this was really like a red rag to a bull to the trade unions and to the workers they represented. Because it effectively would lead to the destruction of Bord na Móna, in terms of what it was all about in promoting . . . economic and social development and providing job creation in the midlands . . . through the harvesting of peat and processing of peat – that was very deep at the culture of Bord na Móna’. While the Unions remained open to negotiations surrounding cost reductions and work system operations, they made it clear to senior management that they would oppose the proposed direction of change. It was clear that there was a wider privatisation agenda at play, driven by elements in senior management. The Unions decided that it wasn’t enough ‘just to *oppose*’ O’Connor’s position, so they formulated a counterproposal:

The [ICTU] Industrial Officer at that particular time, Tom Wall, worked on a . . . proposal [which] amounted to autonomous enterprise working . . . [It was basically] a self-managed work system, where a lot of responsibility would be devolved down to the workers out on the bog operation. And it would be done on a more multi-skilled basis, and on a more productive basis as well. . . . That was our “cooperative”, so to speak.

⁸³ Eddie O’Connor had been ‘manager of fuel purchasing in the ESB [Electricity Supply Board] at the time of his appointment as managing director of Bord na Móna in June 1987’ (Clarke 2010, p.329).

Tom Wall⁸⁴ had developed a particular ‘interest in worker autonomy – *and* cooperatives’ from observing ‘the Volvo work around that time’. The social democratic political consensus in Sweden meant that trade unions were strong, even within private firms, and ‘the unions tended to work very closely with management in terms of boosting efficiency and raising [productivity]. At that time in Ireland, it wouldn’t have been acceptable [laughs] and nearly bizarre’, even in a unionised state enterprise.

Kevin McMahon recalled that it was ‘the first time that anyone had taken on this type of endeavour in Ireland’ within a state enterprise.⁸⁵ At an operational level, the ‘autonomous enterprise units’ (AEUs), which resulted from negotiations with management, worked much like the the Unions’ autonomous work group proposal.⁸⁶ The alternative course for both parties at that stage was ‘a conflict . . . a strike situation, and there wouldn’t have been any winners out of that’, given the company’s financial position.⁸⁷

The GoU was ‘empowered [via membership ballot] to go ahead and agree with the company for the introduction [of the autonomous work system in peat production]’. The new work system was trialled initially, alongside management’s proposal, before being extended ‘on a phased basis over five years’. Kevin emphasised that ‘no one was being frogmarched into becoming a team leader;⁸⁸ it was done voluntarily and it allowed for workers who did not want to participate, either to go out of the company on redundancy, or,

⁸⁴ Tom Wall had worked previously at the Unidare factory in Finglas, before gaining promotion into ‘work study’. ‘I went into ICTU when I was about 29 as an industrial engineer’. He later served as ICTU Assistant General Secretary.

⁸⁵ See Mistéil and Lawlor (1997). Eddie O’Connor would later state that, ‘There was never a programme of change management like that one’, while the then Energy Minister, Brian Cowen, described the change process as a ‘quiet revolution’ (both cited in Millar and McMahon 2017, p. 39). Tom Wall agreed that ‘it didn’t get a lot of publicity’.

⁸⁶ See Bord na Móna (2017).

⁸⁷ The AEU workers that we interviewed agreed with this assessment.

⁸⁸ ‘Use of the term “team leaders” derived from the centrality of the work group in the socio-technical system on which the teams were originally modelled. Each team had decision-making responsibilities for its employment needs. These included the recall and layoff of those employed on a seasonal basis, working hours, the allocation of work and the degree of operational flexibility required within the team’ (Mistéil and Lawlor 1997, p. 83–4).

alternatively, [to request] a redeployment'. But 'nothing succeeds like success', and 'good earnings' in the first two years of the system's implementation 'influenced other workers to come forward'. AEU's then 'became the main method of producing peat in Bord na Móna'. Tom Wall recounted the trial period:

[It involved] one year of testing the two systems, which was innovative in itself as a deal, without preconditions as to results. But the idea was: if the autonomous work group proved itself as at least equal to the [contractualised] enterprise group, in terms of management efficiencies [and] costs [etc.], then the [Group of] Management would look favourably [up]on it – and that's what happened. Luckily, we had a very good year weather-wise, and that helped.

When asked about the potential for autonomous work groups in other areas of Bord na Móna's operation, Tom recalled:

My proposal originally was basically [for] a phased process that introduced them on the bog first, but also [subsequently] in the workshops, in the factories, and, you know, basically, that [the company] would [transition] to a whole new model of collective, collaborative working. That didn't happen. The craft unions, inevitably, are much more cautious, and they dominated the workshops. [In] the factories . . . the company weren't that pushed there because they had Payment by Results (PbR) schemes [already].

Eddie O'Connor recruited Kevin Gavin⁸⁹ 'as his special advisor . . . to, kind of, help drive an innovation programme'. Kevin recalled how '[Eddie] had this idea of trying to . . . create a different culture, where people would be rewarded for effort . . . and not just for being there'. In 1992, Kevin became Group Head of Human Resources (HR): 'The [change] process had started off, but it was . . . left to me to try and drive a lot of it in'. He remained as Group Head of HR for '16 years then after that'.

Kevin Gavin explained that Eddie's contractualisation model was opposed by the Unions, who were however open to 'a PbR system' to encourage greater work effort. They argued that this could be incorporated into the autonomous

⁸⁹ Kevin Gavin had previously been a manager in Derrinlough Briquette Factory, having 'started out as an apprentice in Bord na Móna'.

work group model, without severing ‘links with the company’. This is what ultimately emerged through the negotiation process: ‘It was a hell [of a work system]; it did take hold’.

Kevin Gavin recalled that ‘as [the pilot operations] began to unfold, even in the first year, I think even us in management began to realise that Eddie’s step [contractualisation] was a step too far: that you were putting people out there with a lot of power to themselves, and they mightn’t use it to the best interests of the company . . . down the road’.⁹⁰ At the same time, ‘There was always a group of managers who didn’t really want [worker autonomy via AEU’s], because [they] felt, “We need to be in control”, and they felt it was too much power after going over to the employees . . . But, they were in a minority’.

He explained that there was a large reduction in the numbers employed as part of the change process.⁹¹ However, while ‘the Unions didn’t like the numbers being reduced’, all parties recognised the scale of the reorganisation necessary if the company was to be saved – along with the substantial number of jobs remaining.

Paul Riordan⁹² is the current ‘head of the peat business in Bord na Móna – [the] traditional Bord na Móna business’. In 1991, he moved to the midlands, ‘just as the autonomous enterprise systems [had] come in . . . the first worker cooperative model [within an Irish semi-state]’. He reflected on the novelty: ‘In Ireland, at the time, there wasn’t very many systems like it, and we led the way in Payment by Results [and] self-managed work team systems in Ireland . . . They were well ahead of their time’.

⁹⁰ A worker director reflected on the contractualisation proposal: ‘In relation to the day-to-day running . . . I’d say even managers found that their positions could be [under threat]’.

⁹¹ The introduction of new work practices and technologies meant that, while average numbers employed by Bord na Móna fell from 4,795 in the 1987/88 season to 2,387 in the 1991/92 season; over the same period, turnover increased from £116m to £122.8m (Clark 2010, p. 238, 244). The GoU also negotiated voluntary redundancy (Clark 2010, p. 236).

⁹² Paul Riordan joined Bord na Móna in 1979 as a civil engineer and ‘got into production management a few years later’.

Paul communicated that the trial period uncovered shortcomings in both the ‘union-sponsored’ autonomous work groups and ‘company-sponsored’ enterprise units:

One of the things that Eddie O’Connor said [was]: “Let the genius loose”. So these guys were off, and, in theory, they didn’t need to be supervised, because they were self-managed work teams, and they were paid on output. But we found the opposite: they did have to be supervised, because quality was suffering and work standards were suffering – in both systems.

In the end, ‘they needed more supervision’ and ‘what came out of those two systems was an autonomous enterprise system – the best of the autonomous, and the best of the enterprise: the employees stayed within the company; their budgets were tightened up; they were paid on output [with ‘a fall-back guarantee’]; and . . . the company took back a small bit of control, even though they were [still largely] self-managed work teams’.⁹³ AEU’s were ‘brought into all works’ and the piloted systems ‘faded out after a number of years – so you were left with purely autonomous enterprise, self-managed work teams’. Paul reckoned that, at the time, there could’ve been over 100 of these ‘self-managed work groups in peat production’. He described the composition of the AEU’s:

The number of “team leaders”, as they were called, [was] based on the size of the area. There was a minimum of four, I think. So there was one ex-supervisor, there was one or two ex-craft, and there was one or two or three ex-general operatives. So the unions all got a slice of the action. . . . The smaller areas had four team leaders, and the larger areas had, I think, up to six or even seven . . . And the numbers were prescribed. And then . . . [team leaders] took on seasonals for the summer, and there may have been permanent people in the area at the time.

A worker director remembered being approached about becoming a shop steward and accepting the role, partly because ‘Kevin [McMahon] was the union official at the time’. He later applied for ‘one of the autonomous enterprise units’, which the Unions were promoting: ‘If that model hadn’t

⁹³ A group of AEU workers from two bog areas in the midlands had been with Bord na Móna since the early 1970s/80s. They described how, prior to the change process, they were doing ‘the same type of work’, if under a more conventional style of management: ‘You had to do what you were told . . . when you were told’.

developed, probably Bord na Móna wouldn't be here today'. He felt that, even had the contractualised enterprise groups worked as Eddie O'Connor had envisioned, 'it would've decimated the company':

He had this catchphrase: [mockingly] "Release the genius". We reckoned he should've been locked up. . . . The "genius" was that these individuals were going to become . . . like coops . . . right. So . . . you would've had [a number of] individual coops: they would've done their own individual thing; none of them would [have been] responsible [for] or communicating with each other. . . . How would you have controlled that model?

Paul Riordan relayed how, during the change process, 'Bord na Móna got out of . . . sod turf production'. This decision led to the emergence of the Attymon Peat Co-op:

We had several bogs up along the west coast of Ireland: you had Glenties up in Donegal . . . and I managed in Glenties for a year – a great crowd of people [with a] great [work] ethic; but you couldn't compete with private turf producers . . . So, we got out of that, but the guys that were left behind ran it as a [worker] coop. . . . Where it has really come to the fore is in Attymon in County Galway, where Bord na Móna had a big operation there, and that's still going [nearly 30] years later. . . . So . . . they . . . manage the whole bog, they cut turf, they sell the turf, they get the revenue, and they pay us a royalty every year . . . [for the use of] machinery . . . and the resource. I mean, they're using Bord na Móna turf . . . they are contractors . . . [but] they're a workers' coop . . . There [are] five or six guys there . . . and they pay us so much a year to use our bog. . . . Glenties is gone for . . . the bog was depleted.

Paul revealed that the Attymon Peat Co-op was also soon to discontinue production:⁹⁴ 'The guys are getting too old, and they're [depleting the bog]'. He added: 'I don't think we've collected a royalty from them in five years, you know, because . . . it's not a lot of money and they're working away and, I mean . . . I'm sure they've had a couple of bad years'.

⁹⁴ The worker-members explained that 'the carbon tax . . . really hit us hard'. See *Connacht Tribune* (2017).

5.2.8 Trademark Belfast, Belfast Cleaning Society, and Union Taxis

Dr Stevie Nolan⁹⁵ works with Trademark Belfast,⁹⁶ ‘the anti-sectarian unit of the ICTU’. Trademark operates on the basis of ‘ad-hoc funding’ from sources external to ICTU. The ‘core work’ of the organisation is ‘anti-sectarian work . . . and [we’re] particularly involved with former paramilitaries . . . particularly loyalist paramilitaries’. Trademark are often involved in ‘workplace intervention: if there’s harassment and intimidation in the workplace, we get called in [and] we will literally go in and meet staff and meet shop stewards and try [to] find out what the problem is and . . . sort it out’. He emphasised that ‘even if they’re a non-union employer, we’ll go in, because the sectarian issue has potential to be so much more dangerous’.

Stevie stated that there are ‘six of us in the organisation . . . We have a cooperative structure [and] a flat pay structure . . . which is unique, I can assure you, in the trade union movement’. While Trademark does generate a revenue, this ‘goes back into the organisation . . . we have a reserve fund [etc.]’ He explained that the cooperative structure fits well with Trademark’s activities:

As an organisation, we have a democratic structure, and always have had, because it suits that kind of work. But the work can be dodgy sometimes, and we’ve all, in our time, been threatened . . . So, it suits us to have a close-bound team; and a flat pay structure helps that, because then there’s no hierarchy, there’s no mistrust and . . . that’s Trademark . . . that’s who we are.

Trademark’s worker cooperative development work grew out of their involvement with ‘community groups [on the] Falls-Shankhill interface’, who were participating on ‘all of our training [and] capacity-building programmes . . . political economy training, and history, and politics, and human rights training, equality training’. Trademark felt that ‘the next stage would be to build a permanent structure across the divide’ – a cooperative business – with

⁹⁵ Stevie previously worked on conflict resolution in the former Yugoslavia; ‘His PhD was on the theme of Republican and Loyalist political discourse’ (<http://www.trademarkbelfast.com/about>)

⁹⁶ Trademark was established in 2001 by the late Joe Law, a longstanding member of the CPI, who came from a Protestant working class background (Trademark 2017, p. 3–5). See <http://www.trademarkbelfast.com/>.

‘workers coming together across a divide and working for joint benefit . . . and kind of experiencing democracy every day, rather than sectarianism every day, or mistrust every day’. So an interface worker coop would be ‘a permanent community relations organisation [as well as] a business, [which] was creating profit, and taking people off the dole’. ‘But that was the theory, then we had to go about and do it; and that was where it became a bit more difficult [laughs]’.

The ‘Belfast Cleaning Cooperative [Society]⁹⁷ was born’ when a gig arose at short notice to contract clean at the 2011 MTV Europe Music Awards in Belfast – ‘the idea was there, but this was the opportunity’. Trademark assembled a group of women from their training programmes, who were ‘all working class [and] they’d all cleaned – that was the only job most of them had done [in] their adult lives’. The Coop ‘got the job to clean the green room at MTV, with Justin Bieber and . . . Lady Gaga’. ‘But in that moment, the first cross-community coop was kind of born; and after that, Alice [McLarnon] . . . [Trademark’s] office manager . . . held it and nurtured it’.

Stevie explained that Alice is a ‘worker-owner, [though] unpaid’ with Belfast Cleaning Society: ‘We all took the position in Trademark that if we helped set up a coop, we’d be an unpaid advisor on the board, and that’s what Alice is’. While she still works for Trademark, she also ‘advises the [cleaning] coop’. He noted that she ‘did an awful lot of unpaid work for it’, but once the Coop ‘was off and running . . . since then, they’ve gone from strength to strength’. Stevie stated that there were ‘about five or six functioning workers’ coops in the North, which have done *very well*, and are doing very well’ with Trademark’s support; for example, ‘Farmageddon [Brewing Co-op]⁹⁸ and . . . Creative Workers’ Co-op’.⁹⁹ Belfast Cleaning Society ‘was the first

⁹⁷ See <http://belfastcleaningsociety.com/>.

⁹⁸ See <http://www.farmageddonbrewing.com/>.

⁹⁹ See <https://www.creativeworkerscooperative.com/>. Alice McLarnon also mentioned Lúnasa Cáife, which is ‘registered as a company limited by guarantee, but they run [it] as a workers’ cooperative’ (see <https://www.facebook.com/Lunasa/>); Boundary Brewing Cooperative (see <https://boundarybrewing.coop/>); and Lacada Brewing Co-op, a multistakeholder cooperative with worker and community membership (see <http://www.lacadabrewery.com/>). In addition, Love Works Cooperative is an interface

[worker coop supported by Trademark], so it's been around for [over] five years'.

Alice McLarnon¹⁰⁰ is 'the only founding member [of Belfast Cleaning Society] left'. She described how the Coop started out with six members, before this fell back to just one. 'There's nine of us [worker-members and employees] now'.¹⁰¹ A group of the current worker-members relayed that, while some had worked previously as contract cleaners, others had not. Alice noted, however, that they had 'all worked . . . where there's the tier, and the boss at the top telling you basically what to do'. Moreover, she explained that 'cleaning was involved in [their previous jobs], you know, whether it's working in shops or restaurants or cafés – you still had to clean'. Alice recalled how many of the original members had previously worked in what were '*seen* as menial jobs – cleaning jobs . . . getting treated very, very badly . . . A lot of them were professional cleaners, but were working for minimum or below minimum wage'.

The cleaning cooperative availed of some initial consultation from Cooperatives UK¹⁰² and Cooperative Business Consultants,¹⁰³ before Trademark 'stepped in' to provide training on 'membership responsibilities . . . It was a democratic way to work: every person had a voice [and] every . . . person around the table was just as important as the other one'.

Union Taxis¹⁰⁴ was another Trademark-supported worker coop initiative; if one that was in the process of being dissolved. Eoin Davey, who spearheaded

worker coop involved in gardening, bike repair, and baking, composed of ex-prisoners and local residents (see <https://loveworkscoop.com/>); and the Blackwater Valley Co-operative 'are a workers' co-operative who curate a variety of nutrient dense top soils and top dressings for the lawns, homes and fields of Ireland' (see <http://www.blackwatervalleycoop.com/38-2/>).

¹⁰⁰ Alice 'completed a Masters in Education' after a history of working on 'cross community and cross border projects' (<http://www.trademarkbelfast.com/about>).

¹⁰¹ 'There is now 12 of us' (Alice McLarnon, personal communication, March 30, 2019).

¹⁰² See <https://www.uk.coop/>.

¹⁰³ See <https://www.cbc.coop/>.

¹⁰⁴ See <https://www.facebook.com/uniontaxis.coop/>.

the project, described how ‘ultimately, it was political opposition, within the [local] community, that led to, you know, it not being more successful’. He explained that, ‘It would’ve very much been a community taxi service, you know: it would’ve been local drivers; it would’ve served the local community; it would’ve benefited the local community, in terms of any revenues that it would’ve generated’.

Eoin recalled that it was in 2012, the ‘[United Nations International] Year of Cooperatives’,¹⁰⁵ when ‘I basically got to understand what the whole workers’ cooperative model was [all about]’. He came upon a local newspaper article¹⁰⁶ featuring Trademark Belfast, Belfast Cleaning Society, and local Sinn Féin Councillor Jim McVeigh,¹⁰⁷ which ‘really triggered . . . my imagination [and] got me thinking [about] and comparing how . . . a workers’ cooperative would run, as opposed to, you know, a [conventional] private enterprise, or even a [conventional] public . . . employer’.

Eoin had previously been a trade union activist as a postal worker with Royal Mail: ‘I had been an industrial representative [shop steward] . . . within the public sector’. But his involvement in a number of industrial disputes led to his eventual exit ‘in 2006 . . . after 18 years of working with the Royal Mail’. He subsequently found employment in a private taxi company:

You were almost like sub-contracted by these depot owners . . . So, it’s a very exploitative . . . working environment, right, which is completely at odds with the work environment which I had been in before that . . . There [are] no opportunities for drivers to [negotiate collectively], because it is not unionised, you know . . . It’s very difficult to organise them along union lines . . . so the drivers feel *disempowered*.

¹⁰⁵ See <http://www.un.org/en/events/coopsyear/>.

¹⁰⁶ See Ryan (2012).

¹⁰⁷ ‘Flash’ McVeigh stepped down from Belfast City Council in 2018 to focus on his trade union work: ‘The 55-year-old former prisoner and last IRA officer commanding [OC] in the Maze prison, is an industrial organiser with Siptu’ (Manley 2018).

The ‘final straw’ for Eoin concerned a colleague who ‘had worked a lifetime in taxis . . . as a legitimate, legal taxi driver. However, when he retired . . . and [discovered] that he had insufficient funds to support himself, he went back into taxiing, but . . . in an illegal fashion – he was a pirate taxi driver’. As such, he was forced to pay a higher ‘depot rent to the depot owners’. On one particular occasion after his car broke down, leaving him ‘off the road for about six weeks’, Eoin noticed that he was still being expected to pay his depot rent: ‘I was really angry about this . . . and I thought about it: “Well where would [he] be getting the money?” [He] must’ve been giving them . . . his pension’.

Eoin decided that enough was enough. He was now looking to establish a driver-owned taxi cooperative and contacted the local Sinn Féin councillor, Jim McVeigh, who pointed him towards Trademark Belfast. Eoin approached Trademark and discussed the prospect with Stevie Nolan and Alice McLarnon, who ‘were very informative and . . . said, “Get working on a plan”’.

There were changes to the legislation regulating taxiing being introduced around about this time. Taxi drivers were worried, and ‘the depot owners had no answers’. Having taken time to study the legislation, Eoin was able to win workers over to his vision:

I was basically . . . trying to organise a coup d’état, you know [laughs], whereby the workers, once I had opened the premises just up the road, would’ve exited an exploitative business, and gone into a workers’ cooperative . . . basically to organise their own working lives for . . . the benefit [of] themselves and [their] community.

5.2.9 Meitheal Mid West and Urban Co-op

Bill Kelly ‘had no cooperative background whatsoever . . . when I was working in a telecoms company . . . here in the midwest, and . . . we came in one day and our jobs were outsourced to India’. The workers were ‘given the option of relocating with the new owner – it was like a reverse takeover’. The company was the local arm of a ‘very small multinational’ and ‘had conceived, developed, designed, [and] tested a product, and put it out in the

field’. Bill had been with the company for ‘about 10 or 12 years’ and ‘just thought it was extraordinary that . . . not the just the capital, [but] the human capital, the intellectual capital . . . the whole lot could be . . . ripped up out of the place and [shipped abroad]’.

He ‘elected not to go to India’ and so found himself unemployed, along with ‘nearly two-thirds’ of the workforce. Bill ‘took some time out and started researching’ cooperatives:

[I] heard about Mondragón [Cooperative Corporation],¹⁰⁸ literally from a guy in a pub, right [laughs] . . . [and] it goes to show how naïve you can be when you start out . . . I invited [them] to Limerick [laughs] . . . So here I am: I have the chief cooperative dissemination officer from the Mondragón Corporation . . . coming to Limerick . . . So we assembled a kind of a posse, right, and I started to get to know . . . some of the players in town who might be interested in this sort of thing.

What was to become MMW¹⁰⁹ started out as ‘an informal talking shop [before] we decided we’d set up a limited company . . . just so we had . . . some sort of a structure so that we could liaise with . . . the Council or whoever, rather than being just a bunch of individuals’. MMW initially explored ‘this whole idea of eMoney . . . [and whether] you [could] democratise it’ through a cooperative bank. ‘But it quickly became apparent that in a tax haven – like the Irish economy is,¹¹⁰ for corporates and the financial services sector – that . . . the sort of thing we had in mind would be very hard fought’. Consequently, ‘we turned our attention to something more . . . practical . . . something more *achievable*, as such . . . the Urban Co-operative¹¹¹ model . . . to put it on the map, so to speak’.

¹⁰⁸ See Sanchez Bajo and Roelants (2011, Chapter 8); also, Altuna Gabilondo et al. (2013).

¹⁰⁹ ‘Meitheal Mid West was setup in May 2011 to promote worker cooperatives and multistakeholder coops as sustainable job creation engines in our region’
<https://www.meitheal-midwest.org/about-us.html>

¹¹⁰ See Tørsløv et al. (2018).

¹¹¹ The Urban Co-op was set up in 2013, becoming ‘the first co-operative grocery store in Limerick – owned, controlled and operated by its members’
<http://www.theurbanco-op.ie/about.html>

5.2.10 Section summary

The first wave of the Irish worker coop development initiatives recounted in Section 5.2 arose against a backdrop of structural crisis in the postwar SSA and nascent consolidation of the neoliberal SSA. More recent initiatives have emerged in response to the structural crisis of the latter. The earlier experiences involved larger-scale worker coop conversions, as well as smaller-scale start-up initiatives. Such ambition was facilitated by a relatively strong, organised, and politicised labour movement, characteristic of most national regulated SSAs during the postwar era. Worker coop development following the crisis of neoliberal capitalism has been less immediately ambitious, reflecting the decline of organised labour, characteristic of liberal SSAs, in the intervening period.

Social partnership in the South and the peace process in the North were particularly important Irish deviations from the global neoliberal turn, which help to explain the emergence of the first Irish worker coop wave. Local histories and cultures of self-help were also important to the genesis of the most successful Irish worker coops. Notably, radical trade unionists and social activists at the grassroots were to the fore in attempting to leverage such macro and micro institutional conditions to promote worker coop development.

While an all-island worker coop development infrastructure started to take shape during the first wave, individual worker coops were geographically dispersed. More recent initiatives have been concentrated in and around Belfast, however, with little to no supportive infrastructure remaining across the island. The worker coops studied also displayed sectoral diversity, with first wave worker coops tending to be more capital intensive than more recent initiatives.

5.3 Cooperative sustainability

5.3.1 Economic sustainability

5.3.1.1 Viability, efficiency, and innovation

Conal McFeely reckoned that Maydown Precision Engineering, ‘as a social economy [enterprise or] workers’ cooperative . . . to last from . . . 1985 [until 2015] assures you that cooperatives can be quite a sustainable [economic alternative]’. Likewise, the Attymon Peat Co-op, Quay Co-op, Tullamore Meats Co-op, and Bord na Móna’s AEU system all lasted for 25-30 years or more. That said, Eddie Glackin remembered that some workers took to the cooperative model more easily than others, in terms of managing to establish a successful business:

Some of them were brilliant. The ones that stand out for me [are] the lads down in Attymon in Galway – great. [They] took to it like a duck to water: very serious, very sensible . . . [with lots of] experience – working class people who’d worked in that industry all their lives, and who were very serious about what they were doing. Same thing in Glenties as well. I mean, lots of them: I remember [the] sausage company down in Tullamore [Tullamore Meats Co-op] . . . Edenderry Shoes – Q Shoes down there.

But often ‘there were problems [related to] education of the workforce in, you know, business realities . . . basic budgeting, and, you know, cash flow and whatnot’. This meant that ‘a lot of the work [WUT/ITUT] did was education [and] training’.

John Calnan explained how the Quay Co-op has grown fairly consistently for over 30 years, since its establishment as a worker coop in the mid-’80s: ‘We have gone from being a small, you know, little business, with . . . very strong beliefs about what we are doing, which are still there . . . but . . . alongside of that, like, we’ve [evolved into] a business employing [nearly] 60 people – and that’s hard work’.¹¹² But while ‘it’s always hard . . . we’ve kept going [so that] from [the mid-’80s] we have been a successful business – we can pay our way’. He explained how the Co-op has established several outlets around the county: ‘We have the shop here [in Cork city] and two in Carrigaline and

¹¹² Of those employed, ‘there’s about 15 who are owner-members; and that’s about to jump into about [the] low-20s’.

Ballincollig; we've a restaurant; we've a warehouse; we have a large food production kitchen'. However, 'we don't own [any of the buildings]; it's all landlords'.

Asked about the Co-op's profitability, John replied: 'I don't see us as making a profit, because . . . it's always just, you know, keeping the bills paid, and keeping the wages paid, and trying to generate as much income [as possible for the Co-op]'. Yet, 'since the '90s, we've continually expanded; so, in a way, we have [been profitable]'. Any surpluses generated are reinvested in the business, meaning that 'there's no [dividend paid out]' to the worker-members: 'I get my wages every week [the] same as everybody else, and we all get a Christmas bonus'. But 'we don't build up money in the bank' either, 'it's always just changing and adjusting [our operation] . . . "Hey, we've a profit; what can we do?"'

The Tullamore Meats Co-op turned a profit and expanded their operation 'from day one'. Worker-members relayed how they 'put [their profits] back into the company and . . . we drew a minimum wage, and paid ourselves a bonus if there was a bonus at the end of the year'. They elaborated on their investments:

We went around the country and bought second-hand machines from people in the same business . . . Some of [the machines weren't] great, but they got us started . . . And as soon as money started coming in, we started upgrading the machines . . . We never got a loan . . . buying machinery; if we couldn't afford it, we didn't get it . . . So now we've all new machinery nearly . . . and four new vans and . . . we have a good premises . . . We built on an extension then . . . LEADER¹¹³ did help us out there . . . [around] 20 year[s] ago. . . . And we were never in the red . . . [even though] we'd spent a lot of money on the place.

Kevin McMahon seconded Tom Wall's assertion that 'the autonomous [work groups] equalled *if not better*, in terms of tonnage delivered and moisture content [of peat] . . . the enterprise groups' piloted during the change period

¹¹³ 'Since its launch in 1991, LEADER [a French acronym meaning *Links between actions for the development of the rural economy*] has provided rural communities across the European Union with the resources to enable local partners to actively engage and direct the local development of their area, through community-led local development.'
<https://www.pobal.ie/programmes/leader-programme-2014-2020/>

in Bord na Móna. Tom added: ‘They changed the name then to . . . “autonomous enterprise groups” . . . but that didn’t matter; the basic concept was our one’. The autonomous enterprise system lasted from the late ’80s / early ’90s up until the recent round of negotiations in 2016 surrounding the need for Bord na Móna to transition away from peat production. AEU workers from two midlands bog areas relayed how, ‘on average’, they were able to meet their production targets – a worker director communicated that this was the case for the majority of AEU teams over the course of their lifetime. As a former bog supervisor turned AEU team leader explained:

The reason that autonomous groups were put in place is because supplies were beginning to get scarce, and . . . operation methods were beginning to become outdated. But the autonomous teams – now I’m not just saying us – but the autonomous teams overall improved the entire situation with [regard to] methods of getting peat, and that left Bord na Móna in a good independent position with stocks. . . . It worked for everybody . . . The work rate was *far* better . . . and better timed, [with] better use made of machines . . . *and* the bog.

Paul Riordan reflected this sentiment:

The faster they got [the peat], the better [the pay]. So . . . they would work through lunchbreaks or they would become efficient [so that] when a guy took a break, on his lunch, another guy would step up on the machine and drive the machine. So there was total flexibility, which we hadn’t got in Bord na Móna [previously] . . . [since] demarcation was reasonably tight. . . . [The flexibility within AEU teams] was a big benefit to the company, and a big benefit to the [workers].

On occasion, however, it transpired that the autonomous enterprise system was *too* productive. The workers described how management ‘have capped us at 100 percent [of target, or even below, when] our stocks were . . . way up’. Furthermore, Paul Riordan explained that, while ‘it was a good system [that] took away the emphasis on time and it focused on . . . quantity; what management had to watch was that quantity wasn’t [coming at the expense of] quality’.

The workers agreed that the autonomous enterprise system allowed greater flexibility around technical and organisational innovation. As they explained:

There'd be maybe some small modification that you could do on a machine that [meant] maybe it worked a bit better or it was easier to [operate] . . . you know, more efficient . . . which you wouldn't [have been] allowed to do prior to [the autonomous groups] without going through various engineers and [lines of] management [etc.] . . . Once you had it over [to] autonomous, you were free to do whatever needed to be done.

Previously, if one of the workers had an idea to improve the bog operation, 'you mostly kept it to yourself'. While management did try to incentivise innovation through what the workers jokingly referred to as 'Green Shield Stamps [laughs]', such schemes were viewed with suspicion:

If you came up with a good idea . . . you got something for it, you know . . . But lads were reluctant to get involved in it . . . because if it was a very good idea, some of the foremen or someone higher up would steal it on you. . . . They'd modify it the smallest little bit [and try to claim] that it was their idea . . . So lads went away from it again. . . . They weren't big on copyright here [laughs].

A former supervisor observed that the workers were 'close to the [labour process]' and could 'see the failings in what [they were] doing . . . That's why management could never see them: they were too far removed always from [the labour process]'. Likewise, Paul Riordan stated that 'another positive from self-managed work teams, or autonomous groups, is that [the workers] do come up with a lot more ideas on how to become more efficient, become more productive . . . and those ideas spread . . . And that has been positive, in most ways'. But he also expressed a word of caution:

In certain ways, it was negative as well, because, if you see something on a machine and it can be done better, and you weld on something . . . and it improves the output, [but then] something happens and there's an accident; we're totally exposed, because it's not a design – it's not engineered – so it's not classified as safe. . . . So, we've been caught several times over the years [in] that guys have done something that . . . has improved something, but [it has left the company exposed] . . . And then we've tried to come back and design [the idea] into it [following procedure].

Paul also conceded, however, that 'in fairness' many AEU's have followed the appropriate procedure regarding such innovations.

Efficiencies also arose from the autonomous enterprise system in unanticipated ways. As the AEU workers described:

Before autonomy came in, if you were sitting having your tea, you daren't talk about anything that went on in the job. You'd talk about dances and women and football . . . to pass the time . . . But now it's different . . . you'd be planning while you're having your tea . . . a symptom of the different way of thinking.

Yet the workers agreed that it no longer felt like work in the traditional sense under the autonomous enterprise system: 'It's a joined-up effort'.

5.3.1.2 Resilience to crisis

Eddie Glackin agreed that the profit margin was of secondary importance to worker cooperatives, as long as the worker-members were still employed and 'getting their wages out of [the operation]'.¹¹⁴ This allowed the worker-members some flexibility in responding to crisis situations. He recalled a difficult financial period at the phoenix cooperative which arose from the closure of Winstanley's footwear company: 'It was one everybody knew about, because it was . . . the 1980s, and it was the first, I suppose, significant workers' coop in [Dublin] town for many years'. Eddie was on the management committee, since the WUT 'put a lot of money . . . in terms of loans [etc.]' into the conversion, and it 'was all union members' money, so we had to be careful with it'. He explained the situation that the workers found themselves in:

I remember one time things were going very badly in the cooperative; there was a view there [that], because Winstanley's was a very, very well-known brand, that all they had to do was make the shoes and that they [would] fucking . . . run out of the factory, you know . . . And . . . we were faced with a choice . . . of either laying people off, or cutting wages, or shutting down for a week or two; because we had . . . wonderful quality shoes backing up out of the warehouse . . . [The worker-members] wanted to do what they were good at doing, which was making shoes, and they thought if they made good enough shoes, you don't need a salesman, you don't need a manager, you don't need a financial controller – all these things [would] look after themselves. [Like] a lot of production workers, they under-

¹¹⁴ Lambert (2017) finds evidence that maintaining employment was the priority, 'even in tough economic times' (p.90), for US worker coops.

estimated the work that they weren't involved in directly themselves – or absolutised their own work.

In the end, a decision was taken to adjust wages and work hours for a short period, rather than lay anyone off:

We were flexible about things like that – you had to be – you know, you'd have things like short-time work . . . because . . . the worst alternative was shutting the place down. Laying people off, closure for a few weeks . . . all of those things were considered; but . . . what they decided was, “We're not going to lay people off” – that was the bottom line. So, within that then . . . they understood necessities. And it was difficult, because they'd always been a well organised and militant unionised workforce. And they had [listened] for years [to] the company coming up [and] saying, “Ohh, we have to lay people off”, “Ohh, we have to cut wages” . . . All of a sudden they found themselves in that situation [as worker-owners] . . . It was their own business . . . That was an important, I think, education and developmental route for the workforce.

Eddie recalled that ‘these were constant problems . . . almost by definition’ for phoenix cooperatives:

They all came on the back of or grew out of businesses that had failed, for whatever reasons . . . [And] when businesses fail, it's usually for “good reasons”, like [the venture] was underfunded, undercapitalised, [or just] a bad business idea to begin with; it's not just because somebody decided to stuff their pockets and head for the plane to Benidorm, like, you know – I'm not saying that that doesn't happen; look at bloody Clearys¹¹⁵ now, it's outrageous! But, you know . . . there are these . . . the euphemism I think is “sound business reasons”.

Similarly, John Calnan recalled a difficult period for the Quay Co-op following the 2008 crash: ‘Now it's been tough; I mean, after the Celtic Tiger years like . . . [with] people just not spending their money . . . just being much, much tighter’. At the same time, ‘We were delighted with the fact that we didn't drastically cut back our business . . . like, we didn't leave anyone go’. But while ‘we didn't cut wages or hours . . . there [were] no pay rises here for a long stretch’. John confirmed that this decision was arrived at democratically by the worker-members.

¹¹⁵ See *Liberty* (2017).

5.3.2 *Social sustainability*

5.3.2.1 *Worker participation and workplace democracy*

Regarding improved working conditions, Eddie Glackin agreed that workers experienced greater job satisfaction in ‘the best of [the WUT/ITUT-supported worker coops]’. But achieving this required that they reach a certain level of maturity first:

I’m being very straight about this; I’ve always been a strong supporter and advocate of cooperativism . . . but, that was a challenge for many workers. Many of the workers we were dealing with . . . would have been relatively low skilled [and] poorly educated. They certainly would’ve had no tradition or experience . . . themselves, of taking on that kind of responsibility . . . So, a lot of it was about – to use that dreadful word – “empowering” and enabling workers to have the confidence in themselves. But you needed to make sure they had the tools to do it; they needed the actual skills.

The workers ultimately had to take control of the operation themselves if they were to reap the potential social benefits of cooperativism:

They had to do it. There’d be all sorts of supports and encouragement and aids, but we couldn’t do it for them. We couldn’t run down once a week on a Monday night [to attend] a management committee [meeting] and manage the company. They had to do that. . . . So often you felt that . . . [it] was a bridge too far for many workers. It’s an awful [lot] easier . . . and despite what some kinds of . . . ultra-lefties think: that all workers are gagging to be running their own business . . . No, they want to get up in the morning, go into work, do their work, put their hand out on a Friday, go home, and it’s somebody else’s worry or problem after that . . . [Granted] they all want a say and input into it.

Still, Eddie agreed that workers would likely feel differently had they experienced firsthand the benefits of a vibrant workplace democracy.

From Denis Rowan’s perspective, the level of participative democracy achievable within worker cooperatives was very much constrained by the existing market environment: ‘Democracy [has] a role; but there’s a commercial reality as well . . . the economic reality [of] the world in which [we live] . . . which is a capitalist society – you know, make as much money [and] rip off as many people as you can, and the best of luck to you . . . You’ve

got to survive in that'. As a consequence, CDU-backed worker cooperatives generally experienced limited improvements in the quality of their work life:

I think they were struggling every day to survive. The democracy part of it didn't actually operate that well inside [CDU-supported worker coops] – the day-to-day running of it – they were getting confused trying to survive . . . and survival was the key number one thing. . . . So there's always that conflict [around how democracy] actually operates inside [worker coops] . . . As I said earlier . . . they're competing in a commercial world, and they have to compete [on] quality . . . They've no right to survive because they're a worker coop – the market won't allow that.

Bill Kelly expressed a similar opinion in relation to the Urban Co-op, a consumer cooperative that aspires to multistakeholder status: 'There's nothing *against* [the multistakeholder model], but . . . people aren't going to be interested in it really, long term, unless you can make [the Co-op] commercially viable [first]; and thereafter, then, you take the next step, right – how can you democratise it, or see about democratising it further, in an economic [and social] sense?' The key lesson for Denis Rowan from the CDU experience was that representative democracy also had an important role to play within worker coops: 'Someone has to be in charge . . . to lead decision making'.¹¹⁶

John Calnan from the Quay Co-op explained that, of the 15 or so current worker-members, 'we have an elected committee of six; and the committee meets . . . on a weekly basis . . . just manages the place – keeps it going'. This has helped the Co-op to maintain a strong customer base in a market environment where 'every supermarket in town now does the stuff we do here'. The broader membership, which meets 'a little bit erratically at the moment . . . dictates the . . . ethos – the ongoing direction of the Co-op'. These workers are 'the owner-member-directors of the Quay Co-op'. The Attymon Peat Co-op worker-members also 'have our own "committee", [as] we call it', comprising a chairman, a secretary, and a treasurer etc. – 'a certain amount of [people on] a committee to come in if there [are] any [important] decisions

¹¹⁶ See Freeman (1972-73) on 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness', whereby participative governance structures often disguise informal leadership roles, and hence shield them from democratic scrutiny and accountability.

to be made'. The Co-op's trade union rep explained that the chairman was a local priest: 'I found him useful in that, if there was any agro or any conflict rising, he was able to rule on it, and he had so much respect . . . He was able to hold the whole lot together' and also possessed a shrewd business and financial acumen. Tullamore Meats Co-op had 'a priest at the start too . . . ex-father Sean O'Neill . . . He was a priest, but he left the priesthood after dealing with us! [laughs]'

John described the membership criteria for the Quay Co-op: 'Anyone can apply to be a member . . . and we're about to expand [our membership]: we're offering membership at the moment to seven . . . of our employees, who are full time and they've been here for at least two years'. However, the cooperative reserves the right to refuse membership to those who don't fit the bill, regardless of their length of service: 'We need people who are going to stick around [and] bring something to the Co-op'. That said, 'we decided as well that, sometimes, the Co-op is good for people . . . to bring them on board; where they're not necessarily bringing any skills or experience to the Co-op, but we see that their involvement here would be very good for them'. He continued: 'You pick up a lot in here, and if you're copped on, like, you're given more and more responsibility if you want it, and you're paid accordingly'.

The Belfast Cleaning Society also used similar confidence-building tactics in assigning roles. Alice McLarnon noted that 'people have left [the Coop] due to ill health, due to caring responsibilities [etc.]; but, also, some people did not get the ethos of a coop, and didn't show commitment' or recognise that, as well as being an owner-member, 'you need to actually *work*'. Another worker-member agreed that 'a lot of the people didn't get the ethos and didn't understand what you put in is what you get out'. She elaborated:

So you were trying to build a business, but, you hadn't got anyone to work with you, because . . . nobody understood what a [worker] coop was; you know, even when you were going to . . . Job Centres [etc.], they thought it was to do with, like, the Co-op Bank or the Co-op [Food] shop . . . So we were trying to educate everybody around us at the same time . . . as grow this as a

business, even though it was a workers' cooperative. . . . It was a big struggle, but we've got there.

Alice explained that, out of the 'nine of us in total . . . four of the girls do not want to be members; they want to be employees, because they don't want the added responsibility of running a business'. This creates a dilemma for the members, 'because, as a workers' cooperative, within our rules [it's stated that] you have to be a member'. But while the members are within their rights to look elsewhere for more commitment, their social conscience won't allow it:

In this last three years, we've taken six people off the benefit system, and . . . you can't really . . . your conscience won't let you say to someone, "Here, there's your P45, you can go back to the benefit system". Because, lives have been completely changed for some of these women, and . . . maybe they're at a stage in their life right now [where] they can't show [that level of] commitment, and you have to [work with that] . . . We've been trying our best to give the bible, but it is a struggle.

As a result, another worker-member described how the Belfast Cleaning Society also has to be conscious of its responsibilities as an employer: 'We're fully unionised . . . [to promote] workers' rights and . . . we pay above the living wage, you know, and that's something that we want to be proud of as well . . . as . . . employers'. She also told of how the worker-members encourage employee participation in the Coop's social activities:

The girls that are . . . employees would still come out with us . . . We try to get to . . . trade fairs and things . . . [as well as] May Day parades and women's rights [demos] and International [Women's] Day . . . So [we're] still trying to get that . . . solidarity there . . . but . . . we're employers as well . . . for now.

Alice agreed, while emphasising 'for now'. She explained further that, 'We would bring [in] casual staff as well [for big contracts]', but 'every single person earns exactly the same, whether you're a member, a worker, or casual staff'.

The 45 or so non-members 'who are employed by the [Quay] Co-op' are also 'not, you know, traditional . . . employees – "Just do your job", you know – everybody's kind of listened to, you know – *not formally* . . . but everybody

has an opinion . . . and everybody's opinions are taken on board' by the worker-members and elected area managers. John Calnan continued: 'There [are] a lot of people who come to work here who . . . they just want a job; but they want to work here because it's more attractive . . . it reflects their . . . outlook on life, you know, more than the place down the road'.

Worker-members at the Tullamore Meats Co-op confirmed that they jointly own and democratically run the business:

FÁS wanted us to get in a manager . . . They were paying him . . . they wouldn't give us the money . . . So, we took on a manager for . . . a couple of months, but he was sitting in here [in the office], doing nothin', and we were out there working, and he wouldn't come out and help us . . . So eventually we . . . let him go and we didn't get the money then . . . He was sitting in here and we're out there fuckin' strangled . . . And if he wanted to know anything he had to come out and ask us.

Only four of the original nine worker-members at the Co-op still remained, however: 'Two left, two retired, and one died . . . There's four [worker-] owners now, and there's . . . eight [hired employees] . . . We'd be the boss'. The worker-members hadn't considered offering membership to their employees: 'They probably wouldn't be able to afford to buy into it'. They agreed that, from their employees' perspective, working for the Co-op would be much the same as working for a conventional firm.

Alice McLarnon imparted that the Belfast Cleaning Society hold face-to-face 'meetings every fortnight . . . to sit around the table, to have a chat, to go through things, to go through finances, and to vote on anything that we need to vote on – or, as I say, we'll do the collective'. Another worker-member stressed that 'the meetings are documented, and it is a proper procedure where we're sitting down'. That said, Alice conveyed that 'we're constantly in contact with each other' via 'collective text where we vote and all online'. The women described how technological advancement made participatory democracy more feasible, given the fragmented nature of their work, since 'we don't have to be in the same room to vote'. But they were also agreed that, while 'technology [has] definitely shortened that process . . . we still like our meetings face-to-face, because we can put things on the board, we can

discuss things, we can say what way we want to do this, what way we're going to do that; and, plus, it's good for us four to get together, because it keeps our friendships going'. Some of the women also prefer 'to write things down, just so that they have it in black and white', rather than on a screen.

The implementation of the AEU system at Bord na Móna similarly presented many challenges, which required a joined-up approach to worker participation. Kevin McMahon explained:

Some teams were better than others, you know – you had better capabilities with some people than others – [meaning that] some units needed more intervention and support. But again, there was a [degree of] networking going on, so team leaders . . . in one area could learn from team leaders in another area. . . . People would be comfortable with the system that they have operated over many years, and [the] challenge of change is always difficult to embrace.

The social sustainability of the AEU's also depended on the facilitation of, and cooperation between, the Bord na Móna Group of Management and Group of Unions:

In fairness to management at Bord na Móna, once, you know, we had gone down this road, they gave every support that you could expect of them. They were very positive. You might have had a few bad apples in the system; but, broadly speaking, particularly from top management, there was 100 percent support for the autonomous enterprise unit[s]. And likewise [from] the Union . . . It didn't leave them there to kind of . . . find their own way – which they had to do as well – but we gave them as much support [and] backup as we could as well.

From Kevin Gavin's perspective, 'Management's role . . . when they understood it, was more of a leadership role; and there's a difference, you know, between management and leadership'. Paul Riordan elaborated, in that 'a supervisor would manage two or three different areas, and his function [was that] he would come into the area and check the quality of the peat'. Rather than passing down diktats, supervisors would 'advise' the AEU's, 'but [they] didn't have any authority over them': AEU workers 'directed their own teams'. The AEU's and works management 'were supposed to work in tandem'.

Tom Wall remembered that the worker directors at Bord na Móna were an important structure of representative democracy for the AEU's, since 'they had a fair amount of leeway to communicate with the workers'.¹¹⁷ Kevin Gavin and Kevin McMahon concurred. The latter put it that, 'The worker directors were the voice of the workers . . . at the board level'. Moreover, they 'constituted one-third of the board', and so had significant influence: 'So allies would've been won there as well to . . . shore up the type of position that the Unions were taking' during negotiations. It was important in this regard that the board 'supported a partnership approach going forward'. This resulted in an improved industrial relations climate, according to both Tom Wall and Kevin Gavin.¹¹⁸

In recognition of the limitations of worker representation at the board level,¹¹⁹ a localised system of worker participation in strategic decision making was also introduced. Kevin McMahon recalled:

We did actually, after, put in [place] a sub-board system . . . of representation in Bord na Móna, to mirror the representation at board level. Because we always felt that, "Look, it's important that participation is not just at the board level – that participation goes on between local works management and local employees". And that would've been part of the trade union, you know, belief as well going back a long time. . . . The idea of the sub-board was about the company – how the company operates and not IR [industrial relations] matters – so workers could then have a say

¹¹⁷ 'The institution of worker directors was not generally welcomed in state companies, but [Eddie] O'Connor saw them as a potentially valuable means of communication with the workforce. It was arranged that they visited the various works on a regular basis. They met with management every month before board meetings. At these meetings with management they reported on what they had heard during their visits, raised any issues they felt were becoming contentious, and at times vented frustration with management' (Clarke 2010, p. 260).

¹¹⁸ Though Tom Wall noted that 'strikes generally have [laughs] declined as a phenomenon' in recent decades.

¹¹⁹ Eddie Glackin reflected: 'I mean, worker directors: that's not control . . . Now, you can say it's tokenism on a bad day, and you can say it's an important extension of democratic rights on a good day . . . [It's] somewhere in between, like, mostly'. Tom Wall tended to agree: 'Overall, the worker director issue at that time was a bit of a disappointment, you know, to be honest. Where I found them, they tended to regard themselves as "super shop stewards", you know, always keen to ensure their reelection by . . . outradicalising anybody else . . . [Though] there was a more sensible group of guys [at Bord na Móna] – possibly, again, because of the economic situation in Bord na Móna. [They were] very traditional guys now, as you might expect in the midlands – older guys . . . but open, open to new ideas it seemed to me'.

about “what the company is doing in my works” or “what we can do better” and, you know, [the strategy of the company at a local level].

The sub-board forums were something Kevin Gavin felt the company ‘didn’t focus enough on’:

You had a kind of an organised structure within the company representative of every works. You had a group in each works that were looking at what was going on there, and coming up with ways of improving it or communicating it. And then there was a representative of [each of] those going to a . . . divisional one, and then coming to a central one – to where I’d be chairing, you know. So . . . [it was a] tiered [structure]. . . . the . . . sub-board forums.

While the sub-boards ‘worked briefly’, Paul Riordan felt that they ‘never really . . . got traction in Bord na Móna . . . Why? I’m not quite sure’. Kevin Gavin agreed that the sub-board structure ‘kind of dwindled’ over time: ‘In a lot of those things, they need to be rejuvenated; and if you leave them as they are, they will fade out eventually’. He suspected that ‘the Unions also didn’t like the sub-board structure as much as they might have, because [the workers] began to become [too powerful]’.

As with the worker directors, Kevin McMahon explained that sub-board reps were elected by the workforce, and this was also ‘provided under legislation [Worker Participation (State Enterprises) Act, 1988]’¹²⁰ achieved by the labour movement:

It was [the Worker Participation (State Enterprises)] Act in 1977¹²¹ that provided for . . . worker directors in state companies – [a] very progressive measure at that time, as was the sub-board participation as well [via the 1988 Act] – and it very much complemented the philosophy of trade unions about worker cooperation, cooperatives, collaboration, [and] participation. . . . That kind of participation, whether it’s financial participation, whether it’s sub-board participation in [decision making etc.] . . . you know, it’s [more] natural to a state sector enterprise company, or any public employment; because you don’t have . . . you know, a [capital-labour] conflict, as you would have in a [conventional] private enterprise company . . . If the employer was a socialist or [communist] by ideology . . . or a utopian socialist, he might, you

¹²⁰ See <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1988/act/13/enacted/en/html>.

¹²¹ See <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1977/act/6/enacted/en/html>.

know, pursue to convert his company into a [worker] coop or something. But most private employers, they want to maximise their profits – that’s their *raison d’être* . . . and to do that, they obviously, you know, have to keep the workers in check in terms of what they’re getting by way of pay and conditions of employment, and they don’t like them sticking their nose[s] into their business . . . But that [level of conflict] shouldn’t exist in a state sector company . . . even if it’s run on a commercial basis . . . it’s towards a social . . . objective.

For Kevin McMahon, the Bord na Móna experience showed that greater workplace democracy can potentially benefit companies on the whole, not just the participating workers:

If workers are involved, and invited in . . . you know, to express their views on how the company is operating, it’s amazing what management can learn from that – they can learn an awful lot – and they can avoid an awful lot of mistakes; because the people at the coalface in any company, who are carrying out the work functions and activities, they often know best and see the pitfalls quicker than people who are working out of the management office, important as they are and all, in terms of the roles that they perform – be it engineers, accountants and whatnot. The person [who]’s out there [on the shop floor] has a lot of knowledge, and tapping into that knowledge can be very beneficial for any company. Unfortunately, it far too often doesn’t happen.

In addition to the AEU’s, board-level representation, and sub-board participation, Kevin McMahon mentioned that he edited a Union newsletter to keep the workers informed:¹²² *Bord na Móna Union News* under the FWUI, and *SIPTU Bord na Móna Review* thereafter – of which 2-3000 copies were distributed biannually.

Paul Riordan recalled that ‘the work life did improve’ for AEU participants, since ‘their time was their own: they managed their team, they managed their time . . . and there was no one looking over [their] shoulders’. But Paul also felt that, while ‘they had a lot of autonomy; sometimes it was positive, sometimes it was abused, you know’. He elaborated:

What we would’ve found over the years was . . . as the teams evolved, some teams became very, very good – very efficient,

¹²² The company’s magazine, *Scéal na Móna*, was also ‘revamped and redesigned to reflect the “partnership” approach, with a greater emphasis on contributions from and interviews with individual employees and trade union officials’ (Clarke 2010, p. 239).

very well managed – and did well. Some teams weren't that well managed, weren't that efficient, and, tended to gravitate towards the weakest member of the team. If there was four or five members in a team . . . the theory was that peer pressure would bring up the lowest one; in many of the teams, we found that the team gravitated down to the lowest one, rather than bringing him up to their level. And that was . . . a failure of some of the teams. So you had a spectrum of good teams, average teams, and poorish teams. . . . What we found in the past, where there [were] four guys in charge in an area – in a lot of the areas – one guy managed, really, and the other . . . three were just . . . participants. And we were paying them [circa] €52,000 a year [at 100 percent of target, with a fall-back guarantee of circa €32,000] for participating. . . . I mean, that's human nature, you know. It worked well when it worked, but it evolved into something that it wasn't meant to [be]; and, like I say, every one of the 65 odd teams, in the end, had one leader. And it could've been any of the four – it wasn't necessarily the old supervisor – it could've been a craft, it could've been an operator [etc.]. And the . . . other three or four guys were, at that stage, mostly – not exclusively, but in many cases – were passengers. So the company were not getting any benefit from that. . . . So we were paying for four “managers”, if you like, and we were only getting one . . . or at most two.

Paul did also concede, however, that there were issues with the ongoing education and training of AEU participants by the company. For example, workers in two bog areas in the midlands relayed how some grades had to ‘upskill themselves on new machinery – new tractors and modern-day machinery – and, in fairness, there wasn't a lot of help given from management from that point of view’.

For Kevin Gavin, the bottom-up participation at Bord na Móna was about the workers having a ‘sense of ownership: people feeling a sense of [ownership in] having an ability to be able to influence something that means so much to them’. Paul Riordan agreed that, for teams where work effort increased under the AEU system, ‘you don't get that unless . . . they see that as their bog and their operation’. In other words: ‘When guys feel that they own that particular operation . . . you get a lot more participation’. Similarly, a worker director recalled that, as a team leader, ‘you had responsibility, you had ownership of where you were’.

The worker director remembered his time as a team leader in an AEU before being elected to the board. In relation to the seasonal workers, he pointed out that ‘you weren’t asking them to do anything that you weren’t going to do yourself; so we were working with them’. The participatory culture also generally gave seasonals more of a voice than they had previously: ‘Yeah, I mean . . . if we were doing something, and one of the guys came up to us and said, you know, “Could we not do this?”, [then] we’d say, “Yeah”, you know, “if it’s going to help, of course”’. More generally, he explained that co-management was an important feature of the AEU’s:

See, when you were in an autonomous unit, you were operating to a particular budget; so, you had to agree with management: the . . . team leaders . . . would go in [to] what was called a pre-production meeting, and they’d meet with management, and they’d discuss the budgets for the coming year, and they’d discuss the work programme¹²³ that they had gone through . . . during the winter, and . . . what they had achieved.

As regards management wrestling back some control ‘over time’, the worker director stated that, ‘I think that they did keep control, and I don’t blame them . . . you know, you survive’.

It was also important, in terms of the workers having a voice that, ‘The seasonal workers, or the team leaders for that matter, were still members of a union; they still had the right for representation.’ AEU workers in two midlands bog areas spoke of an improved industrial relations climate more generally: ‘There wasn’t a grain of peat lost through industrial action in 25 years – not a grain’. But the result was that, ‘Over the last 25 years, I didn’t know too many [AEU workers] . . . [who] got involved in the Union – they were members only, but they didn’t get involved in the running of it’.

Worker-members at the Attymon Peat Co-op also stayed in their trade union, though no industrial disputes ever arose. The worker-members at Tullamore Meats Co-op, on the other hand, didn’t see a reason to retain their trade union

¹²³ The team leaders explained that, ‘[Under the] autonomous [work system] you have a work programme kind of set out for you every year – even outside of production like . . . you’d have . . . other jobs, such as [fighting] fires . . . covering the stockpiles . . . ditching, piping . . . a lot of other work’.

membership: ‘We had no need for a union, because we were working for ourselves and it was up to us’. Similarly, John Calnan recalled that unionisation ‘was official policy of the Quay Co-op in the early years, but I suppose it’s drifted over the years. About a third of the workforce are now members [of the Co-op] and it’s never come up as something people felt we needed. And I’m glad to say, in the 37 years we have been operating, we have never had a serious issue that couldn’t be sorted internally’.¹²⁴

The workers noted that there was ‘a certain amount’ of collective self-monitoring within the AEU, ‘because each [worker] is dependent on the other one doing their job to bring in the money . . . So if there’s a weak link, he’s not appreciated’. They agreed that, under the old system, they might have turned a blind eye. Worker-members at the Attymon Peat Co-op expressed a similar sentiment, as regards collective self-monitoring; while Alice McLarnon of Belfast Cleaning Society relayed that ‘there was no fear [in] bringing it [to] the table’ where a worker-member was seen to be slacking, since, ‘with the democracy in place, you could vote to ask someone to leave’.

5.3.3.2 *Job satisfaction and human development*

One of the worker-members from the Belfast Cleaning Society expressed her satisfaction at working as part of a cooperative:

I just love the way it is, the way it’s being run . . . that I am *involved* in a job; whereas, if I was working for a [traditional] management, if I was working for an ordinary cleaning company, I would be just [told], “That’s your wage; you have to do this, you have to do that”. I wouldn’t have a voice. Whereas, in here, in this cooperative, I do have a voice, and my voice is listened to. And . . . when I go to work . . . it’s my work, it’s *ours*; so I will go a wee bit further and make sure everything is done right, because . . . it doesn’t reflect on my boss, it reflects on us. . . . I love it; I actually do. . . . I don’t have to take meds anymore [laughs]. . . . Last year I took annual leave, and after three days of being in the house, I phoned up and said, “I want to go back to work”.

Likewise, the Tullamore Meats Co-op worker-members remembered how, ‘a couple of weeks after [retiring], one of [the founding members] came back

¹²⁴ John Calnan, personal communication, May 8, 2019.

looking for a job . . . [for] three days a week . . . [laughs] . . . He got bored . . . [so] he worked until he was 70/75’.

Another worker-member at Belfast Cleaning Society emphasised the importance of sustainable employment from a social perspective:

I feel I’ve learned so much, and [I’m] still learning . . . I’m gonna start crying [laughs] . . . I have [a few] kids, and have been unemployed for so long, so getting back to work means an awful lot to me; and showing my kids, you know . . . I’ve a meaning in life . . . And there is a lot going on in my home, but, getting to my job *is my time* [laughs].

She recalled how she had to take time off from a part-time job during a period when she ‘wasn’t well’, but ‘I didn’t have to take time off from this job [laughs], because I was able to come in and vent and chat and talk, because we’re friends as well as colleagues – co-workers even’. Ultimately, ‘I didn’t feel the pressure here, as I did in the other job . . . because . . . it’s so open and transparent and . . . we all have a vote and we all have each other’s backs’.

However, Alice felt it was also important to emphasise the difficulties involved in running a worker coop:

The upside of it is your voice is heard: you have a vote, you own a business, you decide where your profit’s gonna go, you decide what job yous are gonna price for, you decide how many hours you want to work a week . . . There’s also a struggle side, a hard side – it’s not all fuckin’ wine and roses like – we do work very, very hard . . . but we work hard because we want to succeed.

Likewise, while worker-members at the Tullamore Meats Co-op felt that greater workplace democracy did improve their day-to-day work lives, there were also negatives:

It was a good thing . . . We had to paddle our own canoe . . . But I suppose . . . you bring home your problems with you . . . [Whereas] if we were down in the [Midland Butter and] Bacon factory, if there was a problem, you could go to [the manager/boss].

Asked whether the worker-members were paid more in the Co-op than when they worked for Midland Bacon and Butter company, they replied: ‘Ah no, I’d say we’d be paid less [laughs]’. But they agreed that, as workers

themselves, they felt more of an obligation to provide non-member workers with decent pay and conditions:

Yeah . . . they're . . . nearly getting more than us now . . . Some of the girls out there are with us 29 year[s], you know . . . There can't be anything wrong! . . . Hopefully we are [more worker-friendly than conventional bosses] . . . [but] maybe if you ask [the non-member workers] it would be a different story [laughs] . . . Ara we would of course, yeah – we'd give out now and again, but . . . [laughs] . . . They're all there now . . . 15 year[s] I'd say now is the least.

As to whether they had made any plans for the Co-op after the last of the original worker-members retire, they replied: 'We haven't [decided] – that's a hiccup at the moment [laughs]'.

Stevie Nolan warned of the potential danger of worker self-exploitation within cooperatives, noting that the Belfast Cleaning Society availed of unpaid labour at the outset:

We call it "sweat equity" . . . [When] setting up a coop, the one thing a coop allows you [to] do that a normal business couldn't get away with – because it's called exploitation [laughs] – is [to work] for nothing for [a period]. And [for] a lot of the coops [supported by Trademark], we would advise, in the early days, to use sweat equity, which is [where] you book your hours, but you don't get paid . . . [Then] six months or a year down the line, you can be back-paid all of that initial work. And it's just another one of those . . . things that we can do, that normal businesses can't do. And it helps you [to] establish yourself – to actually get over that hump . . . of actually setting up a business. . . . There's a danger too of self-exploitation – all worker coops self-exploit . . . because it's theirs and they don't want to give it up . . . But they self-exploit to the point that sweat equity's a good idea: if it's a short term . . . kind of, plan to get you over a financial hump. But that's what Ali's been doing [with Belfast Cleaning Society] for three or four years, and, I suppose, she's probably earned thousands by now.

Alice explained further that 'sweat equity is covered in many ways, from covering others who are on annual leave or off work due to sickness, [to] working on promoting the Coop or coming into the office to learn about different jobs when running the business. It is not every week this happens'.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Alice McLarnon, personal communication, March 30, 2019.

The worker-members stated that ‘we all work [different hours] . . . some work 16 hours [per week], others [work] 24 or 30 hours’. However, ‘Alice isn’t paid [by the Coop] at all; she’s just a member’. Alice explained that, ‘I work full time for Trademark, so I couldn’t justify taking a salary out of the Coop’. They also referred to unpaid time spent ‘messaging, meeting up for going to clients [etc.]’, meaning that ‘we’re available . . . 24/7’.

Since a number of ‘the women that work with us have children’, the worker-members communicated that ‘we do try to accommodate school runs [etc.] . . . so we work around people’s lives’. This contrasted with their experience of conventional employments. Alice expanded on the equality and human development dimensions of the Coop’s ethos: ‘We’re thinking of empowerment of a worker . . . we’re completely anti-sectarian and anti-racist . . . We’re a business; we’re just an ethical, democratically-owned business’. She explained that ‘part of our ethos is to actually educate all the members’ – for example, with respect to health and safety, which has been done ‘through the trade union’. The worker-members explained how all workers within the Coop, whether members or employees, received support in relation to their education and development: ‘If we’ve got the money in the bank, and it’s something to further you – to educate you, or to . . . you know, even if [it’s] for [helping] confidence-wise – we’ll back them up, not a problem’.

Eoin Davey, however, felt that Union Taxis ‘was too much of a struggle for [the worker-members] to really see the [potential] benefits’ of the worker coop model’. Eoin’s business plan accounted for scores of drivers to deliver the ‘envisaged benefits’ to worker-members, as opposed to the handful of drivers who eventually came on board:

Our depot rents would’ve been slightly lower than what would’ve been charged by our main competitors. But the difference is that, with the money that we had coming in, instead of that going away in profits for co-owners, it would’ve built a safety net for the drivers, in [that] it would’ve paid for their PSV [Public Service Vehicle test] fees; their licence fees each year; it would’ve provided for, you know, a fund, that if their own vehicle had been off the road, we would’ve bought pooled cars, so that they could’ve used another taxi to sustain their earnings.

Mirroring Tom Wall, Kevin McMahon recalled that, while the reported¹²⁶ *qualitative* improvements in work life and increased job satisfaction ‘might’ve been . . . in the back of the mind somewhere’, it was ‘not uppermost’ in the considerations of the trade union side in establishing AEU at Bord na Móna. As Kevin McMahon relayed:

We were so engrossed in the negotiations for the *quantitative* aspects of this system, in terms of the budgets, the wages – that side of it – it was really about ensuring there were sufficient rewards for the workers, that there were sufficient savings for the company, and . . . really, addressing all those kind[s] of issues . . . took up all our time. . . . But it was a pleasant surprise . . . when that report [Faughnan (1991)] came out, that indeed there were other benefits that neither the company, nor even the unions, when we . . . you know, structured . . . these alternative work models, really were . . . highlighting. So, yes, workers had . . . more *flexibility* in their work time, more satisfaction out of making decisions – or having decisions *devolved* to them from management – and there was a level of empowerment. And this would’ve been very much part of a trade union agenda [for] change in society, change in the workplace. . . . As trade unions, we always promoted worker participation . . . worker empowerment, and . . . [efforts] to reduce alienation on the part of workers in their place of employment.

But while such an outcome ‘wasn’t the *driving force* for the new systems coming in . . . it actually helped to very much *cement* the new system, from the perspective of the workers working *in* those autonomous enterprise units – both the . . . team leaders *and* the seasonals, but possibly more so the team leaders’. Tom Wall remembered that ‘it wasn’t all positive, particularly among the seasonal workers, but I remember there was one guy . . . [who] said, “It’s changed *my life* . . . I look forward to going into work now” . . . That struck me particularly’. In Tom’s view, ‘a democratisation of the workplace, or whatever you want to call it, is a quality of life issue – a quality of working life issue’. As Kevin McMahon recollected:

They found it a more satisfactory, a more fulfilling work system than the traditional work system. Because . . . I would’ve remained in Bord na Móna after the change; I stayed ‘til 1998 – Eddie O’Connor . . . preceded [my exit] by two years [laughs] . . . I would’ve been monitoring [and] representing the autono-

¹²⁶ See Faughnan (1991).

mous team leaders; so I had a lot of contact with them, and certainly from my experience of dealing with the team leaders, they were very happy . . . where they had control over their work time, and they had a say in decision-making. And . . . in many ways they could tap into skills and abilities they had, which were never called on by the company when they were working as direct employees under the traditional work system, which was very much, you know, hierarchical, and . . . it was a case of management direction – *telling* you what to do – not you having a say in how you do it. And that was, I think, one of the . . . great achievements of the autonomous work system, that has *sustained* it . . . over the years up to the current time . . . you know, it's 25 years now it's been operating.

The AEU workers reflected on the work system before autonomy was introduced:

It was much more regimental: there [were] more time constraints and things. There were policy issues on everything – [in the] workshop and on the bog. You couldn't stray away from . . . the straight and narrow. But once we went into the new system, common sense took over.

They explained how 'the new system allowed you to [make changes]', whereas the old system constrained worker participation. A former supervisor described how even seasonal workers had 'an awful lot more freedom to come up with ideas and it would be listened to [by the team leaders]' in AEU's: 'I found that involving the lads and asking their opinions, it made the job run much smoother [etc.] . . . The more involvement they have, the better, I find – and that would only make sense'.

While some workers were 'a little bit sceptical about it . . . in the beginning', as to whether 'the system [would] work out', 'overall it worked out fairly well – lads [were] happy enough with it, you know'. A former supervisor elaborated: 'Bord na Móna gave you added responsibility, but they gave you added rewards if everything worked out, and it was up to yourself . . . [apart from the] weather . . . if you wanted to put in the hours and work hard'. Another team leader added that 'the advantage to the lads working [in AEU's] was . . . [that] you were still employed by Bord na Móna, which is a permanent job, and a pensionable job; whereas, if you're contracted out – the private [sector] job – you mightn't have the same . . . security'.

While previously ‘there was demarcation’ in the tasks carried out, and different rates of pay for different grades, under the AEU there was ‘no demarcation . . . everybody drove everything’ and ‘every rate was the same, and that made things so much better’. This made the job more interesting, since ‘you do different work’ and ‘everyone . . . whatever was going on, had to be involved in it’.

Similarly, worker-members from the Belfast Cleaning Society ‘all educate each other in every role’ – from office administration to cleaning toilets and litter picking, ‘we all . . . do everything equally . . . and eventually everybody will be able to do every job within the [Coop]’. Job rotation was also practiced in the Attymon Peat Co-op. But John Calnan described how the nature of the various outlets in the Quay Co-op requires a stricter division of labour: ‘There wouldn’t be any [job] rotation . . . because I’ve got . . . the *skills* I’ve built up’. Likewise, there was no rotation between office work and production work at the Tullamore Meats Co-op. Angela Conroy explained that she and Oliver Larkin ‘come in here of a Saturday – that’s it . . . I do the docket and Ollie does the money’.

Another positive of the AEU that the workers mentioned was that ‘there was a lot more flexibility . . . for us all . . . You can work the hours that the weather gives you . . . and when you’re finished a job you can go home like, it’s grand’. Along with worker-members at the Belfast Cleaning Society, they agreed that this was flexibility for the worker, rather than for the employer or management: ‘The advantage, I thought, was the flexibility and, kind of, [being] your own . . . sort of boss’. Indeed, a former supervisor relayed that ‘some strands of management would look on [worker autonomy] with a bit of suspicion: they’d think that it was being . . . abused by [the workers] . . . But it’s not; [that’s] not the case at all’.

The workers illustrated the efficiencies that arose from worker-controlled flexibility:

Even down to the simple things like going to your tea . . . [In] the old time[s], every lad had to be rounded up [at] 10 o’clock and brought to his tea . . . and he had to be brought back again . . . If

you were caught having tea outside of the specified tea times . . . *you'd be bollocked* . . . as if that mattered a jot – it doesn't matter when you get your tea [laughs] . . . That went of course when the new system started . . . Now, you can drink tea all fuckin' day if you want, but you're not going to get paid . . . and the lads know that . . . and they'd nearly meet you going back out and have their tea got . . . left to their own devices. And that was a good example: a simple thing like getting the tea [laughs].

The workers felt that, from an organisational perspective, the old system was 'awful time consuming, but [management] couldn't see that: the amount of time that was lost just going for a cup of tea'. A seasonal worker retorted: 'But you were getting paid for it . . . that's the only thing [that was] in it [laughs]'. Jokes aside, they agreed that 'it was a useless exercise' from an efficiency point of view; but they also acknowledged the disciplinary function of such practices, given that 'there was no other advantage'. A former supervisor laid out some historical context:

Bord na Móna was initially set up on military lines – on army lines . . . A lot of the old sergeants and army officers were seconded into Bord na Móna . . . at the very [start] . . . [as] foremen and supervisors . . . And they had this thing about: "We'll do everything regimentally". And the tea was one of them: you got 10 minutes for your tea [then] "Out". It didn't matter whether the job that you were doing [was nearly completed] . . . "No, no, leave down the shovels, leave down your tools; go off and get your tea". Regimental, just . . . Autonomy done away with all that sort of thinking.

An AEU worker observed that autonomous working 'left you with . . . more freedom to do . . . a good job or . . . to do what should be done, as you thought yourself. Whereas, if you're, say, under [hierarchical] supervision and that, you could only really do what you were told'.

Worker-members at the Attymon Peat Co-op, however, didn't perceive the old system as hierarchical in their area, since supervisors were drawn from the local community and everyone got on well. The Co-op was more a continuation of, rather than a break with, their previous work life at Bord na Móna. They even kept to the traditional working hours: 'That was the [pre-AEU] system in Bord na Móna and we more or less continued that . . . It was a good system and it worked well'.

The AEU workers explained that ‘there was of course’ a steep learning curve initially: ‘You had to take responsibility for . . . the repairs, and the maintenance, and the overhaul; and you had to be able to plan, you know, what *was* to be done . . . you know, you had to see ahead . . . where you’d never had to do that before – that wasn’t your worry – a foreman or whoever – management – took care of all that’. But the workers generally adjusted to the new responsibilities ‘after a couple of years I suppose’.

AEU workers also developed skills that they could use outside of the workplace, in terms of ‘planning’, being ‘quicker to make decisions’, and being ‘a bit more confident in your attitude [since] you’d be ultimately responsible for making decisions . . . that you hadn’t been [responsible for making] before’. The added responsibility helped with ‘a lot of things you do . . . outside of the works . . . even at home . . . It’d take the fear out of you’. Additionally, ‘you’d have a bit more knowledge as well’ and ‘you’d be probably more used to looking at figures’ on the financial side.

5.3.2.3 *Social solidarity*

Asked whether cooperatives were less motivated by profit than capitalist firms, Eddie Glackin responded:

I’ve never had a problem with profit; any business should want to produce profit. It’s . . . what happens to the profit is the question, you know. I mean, those cooperatives I mentioned in Glenties and Attymon . . . they made profit . . . And very often, cooperatives like that, when they make profits, they do give grants and supports to local people.¹²⁷

Eddie suggested that this was because cooperatives were more rooted in the community:

Cooperatives are almost by definition . . . locally-rooted and locally-based: they make their money in the community; they buy their goods in the community; they sell [into the community]; and their profits and sales – their money – is spent in the community . . . And most cooperatives, in my experience, they’re seen very much as part-and-parcel of the [community]. I mean, I remember

¹²⁷ The Attymon Peat Co-op worker-members, however, noted that the Co-op broke even on average over the course of its lifetime; meaning that there was never a lot of profit to go around. Still, they did try to get involved in community activities where possible.

down in the likes of Attymon [and] Glenties, everybody would take pride in [the] Co-op[s]. They might have no direct or indirect involvement, but . . . they'd see it as their own people trying to do something . . . to help themselves and to protect their families and whatnot, you know.

As to whether the wider community should have any control rights over worker cooperatives, Eddie felt that any ownership stake for the wider community should amount to non-voting shares:

I would be very strongly [of the view that] the people who are working in the business [should] own [and control] it. There is provision for other people – supporters, friends – to get involved, including [to] get involved financially, and they should . . . get their divvy, as you would in a credit union . . . You should get a dividend if the thing is going well, and you take the hit if it doesn't go well. . . . [In] the . . . model . . . that [WUT/ITUT] developed . . . there was a facility for outside investment in it, but without control [rights]; so that it would still be controlled by the people who worked [within the coop]. . . . It's . . . more about control rather than . . . ownership [per se] . . . I think ownership can be a very passive thing; control is an active thing.

Yet, precisely because of the control rights within traditional worker cooperatives, where profits 'would come back in [and the workers] would make decisions [about profit allocation]', Brendan Mackin explained that 'the [worker] coop route wasn't the right model for [BURC], at that time, because [social enterprises] were to be set up by the unemployed centre, so that the profits [generated] would come back in [to BURC] and would assist to develop social programmes for unemployed people and disadvantaged people'.

John Calnan explained that the Quay Co-op is now a traditional worker coop, without any wider community membership. This is despite starting out as a community coop – and despite regular approaches from people interested in obtaining such membership. Asked whether they had given any thought to expanding current membership beyond those working within the Co-op, he replied, 'Not really'. But he also imparted that, 'Even though we're hugely . . . preoccupied with running a business, our core [ethos] – like, what we're about – still applies, you know. So people come in here [and] they know we're . . . a bit alternative really . . . and we have a conscience – a social conscience'.

As for surplus distribution, profits tended to be recycled into expanding the Quay Co-op's operation, rather than into supporting external community initiatives – even if the Co-op itself is still viewed as a community project. Similarly, while the worker-members at the Attymon Peat Co-op communicated that they 'weren't turning over much of [a] profit' throughout their nearly 30 years in operation, they were still providing a source of domestic fuel to the local community and 'were keeping 15/20 workers [in] a week's pay as well'. However, 'a good few of the members have died away since we set up, like, and they were never really replaced'. The Co-op also employed seasonal workers over the summer months – mostly 'young fellas . . . making a bit of money for their education'. Worker-members from Tullamore Meats Co-op also communicated that they hadn't made charitable donations, investing their profits instead in the business.

Asked about community voting rights in worker coops, Stevie Nolan referred to the multistakeholder model:

In Italy, they call it a "social cooperative", which means there [are] . . . different kinds of membership: you know, you've got worker-members, you've got owner-members [etc.] . . . And the beauty about a coop is [that] you can write your rules any way you want; so you can create the democratic structures you want, with different classes of membership.

As a more concrete example, Stevie referred to the potential for social cooperative creche facilities:

The parents and the workers owning the creche together . . . how do you democratically balance that? If there's six workers and there's 100 parents, well then, who should really control that? And so you elect a committee, and so the six workers elect two and the hundred parents select three, and those five people become the managing committee. So, you know, it's forms of representative democracy within a [broader workplace democracy]. But there's all sorts of structures you can use for coops . . . [It] depends how you write your rules, you know.

Asked whether the multistakeholder¹²⁸ model represents the ideal, Stevie replied that there was no ideal model of workplace democracy:

It depends what the function of the business is . . . If you're giving care, [e.g.] to children, [the] multistakeholder [model] works . . . everyone should have a voice – particularly the parents . . . If you're running a business that's for profit, which is what a cleaning company is, well then who are you going to give . . . membership to – it doesn't make sense . . . There are some businesses [where] there's a clear case for a [traditional] workers' cooperative to be set up; there are others where it's a clear case for a multistakeholder [cooperative]; and there are others which are grey, in-between [cases]. The danger of [the] multistakeholder [model], and care-giving particularly, whether it's old people or young people, is that [it can be] the state . . . dumping care onto cooperatives in the third sector [as part of a wider privatisation agenda] . . . a slow salami slicing of state responsibility.¹²⁹

Stevie relayed that Belfast Cleaning Society and Union Taxis gave donations to local community initiatives as 'more of a solidarity kind of thing, showing that they're part of the community'. Union Taxis, however, 'tried to take that a step further: they tried to make sure that it was written into their rules that 10 percent of all their profits went to local charities . . . like a solidarity tax or something like that'. Eoin Davey explained that, 'From each driver, £5 per week of their depot rent would've been paid into a fund, which would've been the Community Social Fund, [and] that would've generated money for the community to help the likes of boxing club, football clubs, you know, children's programmes, and . . . elderly [and disabled] folds [etc.]' But while Union Taxis did make a few such donations, 'we weren't able to do much more than that, because of . . . you know, our small numbers . . . and the fact that we couldn't build momentum, because of the political opposition [in the local community]'. Still, Eoin felt very strongly about the potential for cooperatives as promoters of worker and social solidarity:

Without a doubt . . . the workers' cooperative model is the best model, you know, to take forward . . . in terms of ensuring that

¹²⁸ 'Social economy co-operatives often use the multi-user structure. For example, a child care co-operative is often jointly owned and controlled democratically by both the parents of the children being looked after and the workers providing the care services. This form of co-operative is not evident in Ireland to date' (McCarthy et al. 2010, p. 324).

¹²⁹ See Wright (2017).

money stays within the community [and] that money is fairly and equally distributed . . . You fund [the] community, and [the] community supports you . . . it's that virtu[ous] circle.

When asked what the Belfast Cleaning Society do with their profits, one worker-member replied that, 'We have a Cuba fund [laughs] . . . No, we [generally] put it back into the Coop'. Alice McLarnon clarified: 'We agree; we vote on it . . . but it's up to what we decide'. Asked whether they directed any of their profits towards community initiatives, they responded that, 'We did loads of stuff [laughs]'. They purchased loan stock of £500 from Union Taxis; they sponsored sports and youth groups; and they made donations toward 'the Syrian refugees'. 'We've probably [given] out about £3,000 over the past three years, at least'.

In relation to taxation, Alice McLarnon was adamant that Belfast Cleaning Society 'want to pay our taxes, because we know where it's going to: it's going to help our society, and it's meant to be helping our people and our society'. And while the Coop wants to 'earn more . . . we're happy to pay more in, because we want [a] better health service and better education for our kids, [and] better services within our communities, and we want that money to go there'.

Asked about the relationship between Belfast Cleaning Society and the surrounding community, Alice noted that, 'We're all from working class backgrounds . . . we were all brought up through the Troubles, and we were all brought up in working class areas'. Given that history, she explained the appeal of the cooperative model:

When you were brought up through the Troubles, you were automatically *part* of a community. The community [members] helped each other anyway, because you had people whose houses were . . . set on fire, blew up . . . So you have that in you anyway . . . And we know struggle, and we know how hard it is . . . and we also have worked for very bad people, and we've been treated very badly [by] employers – even right down to working in shops, chippies, night shifts, cleaning – whatever it was, just to get by; and paid pittance, and having no rights, and having no voice, and if you didn't do that job you were out the door. And also we had the added discrimination of our [working class] background [and] where we came from – why, you know, you wouldn't get a job

somewhere. So, in that sense, yes, we do have [a predisposition towards the cooperative model]; but, I think, we all have the same sort of beliefs, and . . . I think we worked out that we wanted to empower each other, and we wanted to empower any new member that came in. And . . . we knew there was [the] long-term [issue] of . . . you know, capitalism is ruining the world, greed is ruining the world; and we knew there's an alternative to this that doesn't have to be like that.

Another worker-member reflected on growing up during the Troubles: 'My memory is [of] everybody being equal, and making sure everybody had a share, and it was always that kind of ethos in my house'.

Worker-members at the Attymon Peat Co-op also felt that they adapted well to the cooperative work system because of the pre-existing community spirit in rural Galway. And Kevin Gavin made a similar observation regarding the AEU system, where many team leaders were farmers with a strong 'entrepreneurial spirit'.

When Eoin Davey was asked whether Union Taxis was intended as an interface worker coop, operating across the sectarian divide like Belfast Cleaning Society, he noted the difficulties with this in the taxi industry:

Well, *eventually*, it would evolve into that, but, because of where it's situated . . . it would appeal to people who live in [the nationalist] side [of the community] . . . You know, lots of taxi services in Belfast . . . are like sort of small community services . . . You see . . . the difference with [Belfast Cleaning Society] is . . . where [they're] situated, it's just on the . . . loyalist, unionist side; and . . . they clean workplaces all over Belfast, you know – whereas, initially, we would be seeking to serve this community.

Kevin Gavin stated that 'the board and the management of the board' at Bord na Móna 'were very conscious of the role that the community played in the success of the company'. Asked whether the company's board had any local community representation, he answered, 'No . . . but obviously the board members were part of the [wider] community . . . as some of them were even politically elected'. In an SOE like Bord na Móna, there existed 'a culture of being *conscious* of . . . the community . . . [where] management were encouraged to become involved with the local communities'. He pointed out that, 'The community . . . influence in Bord na Móna was pretty well recognised,

pretty early on’, since ‘most of the employees in management even would’ve been [drawn] from the [local] communities’. There was also ‘an extra effort made to get involved in the different community groups . . . when the down-sizing was taking place’.

5.3.3 *Environmental sustainability*

From his experience with WUT/ITUT, Eddie Glackin was of the view that cooperatives were ‘absolutely’ compatible with maintaining a healthy natural environment: ‘We had one or two small coops addressing environmental issues . . . for example . . . one of the first recycling businesses in the country was a workers’ coop . . . that was set up in . . . Clondalkin’. From Eddie’s perspective, worker coops were more likely than conventional firms to be in harmony with the natural environment, ‘because they’re ethically based’. While worker coops – ‘and certainly the ones we were dealing with’ – are primarily concerned with ‘people trying to hold onto their job, or create jobs for themselves, and that’s their driving energy – and [there’s] nothing wrong with that’, cooperative values and principles also underpin a communitarian ethic:

In terms of [their] structure and the way coops see themselves, there’s an ethical . . . dimension to it, you know: it’s a *cooperative* model, [where] they see themselves as being part of a broader community and society. So, the question of . . . ecological consideration comes very naturally into that . . . [Worker coops are] part-and-parcel [of the community]; so they’re more . . . susceptible to pressure from the community, because they are rooted in the community. And I think that’s a part of the worker coop [model] that . . . even in lots of the literature it’s under-appreciated or underestimated.

Stevie Nolan of Trademark Belfast, however, was less sure of the environmental benefits of worker coops: ‘It all depends on what the business is’. At the same time, he still felt that cooperative values and principles should resonate with the sustainable development agenda: ‘In terms of the environmental impact of it, you know, I suppose a cooperative [prioritises] people and the environment before profit . . . Would a . . . cooperative enterprise cut down a fuckin’ rain forest? . . . I’m assuming they would be more sustainable’. Stevie reflected on the sustainability agenda more generally:

I do think there's an issue of sustainability, of localism, of democracy; but not that "green" idea of fucking retiring to a wigwam, and fuckin' breeding rabbits, up a mountain or something . . . You know, something seriously organised that's local, sustainable, [and] democratic.

When asked about environmental sustainability, John Calnan replied that this is a core agenda of the Quay Co-op, 'and it always has been from the word go'. He relayed, for example, that 'all the household cleaning products . . . we sell are all . . . environmentally friendly'. More fundamentally, there is an environmental ethos and motivation behind the vegetarian restaurant and wholefoods outlets – the Co-op's core business activities. But John also admitted that compromises have to be made in a commercial environment: 'We're always striving to do our best, and to be . . . as much as we can, what we're about, and what we've been about since we've existed. [But] we can't always do that, you know; like, in terms of just [competitive pressures]'. For example, he pointed to the medium-density fibreboard (MDF) shelves in the Co-op's new bookstore: 'That was just a financial decision . . . This stuff shouldn't be in here – it shouldn't be anywhere'. Still, he stressed that the Co-op always strives to do its best, given the constraints imposed by the market: 'We can't get pure trees that we're going to cut down and bring here by horse and cart . . . but we're always striving for something more, you know'.

Regarding environmental policies and practices, Alice McLarnon described how Belfast Cleaning Society 'recycle and use environmentally friendly [cleaning products] for a lot of [our] customers'; though 'sometimes they don't do the job and we also use [more harmful] chemicals depending on the job'. More generally, Alice explained that, 'We have a recycle [friendly and] environmentally friendly policy. We advise our customers to do the same'.¹³⁰

Worker-members at the Attymon Peat Co-op communicated that, while 'we'd do nothing to damage . . . the wildlife and all that . . . I won't say we done a lot to promote it'. But they certainly felt that they were more conscious of the importance of maintaining the natural environment as 'a rural group [since] that'd be all around us'. The Co-op was always in compliance with the

¹³⁰ Alice McLarnon, personal communication, May 11, 2019.

environmental standards set by Bord na Móna, such that ‘after . . . 28 years . . . [the inspector] hasn’t found any evidence of pollution or anything like that’.

During the crisis negotiations at Bord na Móna, Tom Wall remembered that the environmental agenda ‘was in the background . . . but it didn’t form, at that stage, as big an issue as it’s become lately’. In any case, questions of environmental sustainability ‘more impinged on Bord na Móna generally, rather than on the new systems of work’. However, Kevin McMahon was of the view that the AEU workers would’ve had ‘an advantage over, say . . . a “contract out” model’: ‘I believe that workers who are directly employed by the company, who have a pension [and greater security], are going to take more care . . . to avoid damaging that company’s reputation . . . by not maintaining proper standards in terms of whatever environmental obligations would be placed on Bord na Móna’. He even argued that sustainable development is ‘kind of inseparable from, you know, the ethos of a state company – a state company should be a leader in this area’.

Kevin Gavin explained how Bord na Móna was receptive to environmental concerns voiced by the surrounding community: ‘You were . . . producing peat in peat areas where people [were] living on the side of the road beside them. So complaints about dust or fires or anything like that were beginning to become a major problem as well’. Indeed, Paul Riordan confirmed that Bord na Móna were monitored more closely in this regard as a public company: ‘Yes . . . we’re expected to be fully compliant [with environmental standards], and there’s no problem being fully compliant . . . [but] there isn’t the same enforcement on our competitors’.

AEU workers in two midlands bog areas agreed with this assessment, referring to ‘some of those . . . turf cutters . . . [who] are really in it for the money . . . [Just look at] the way they leave the bog when they’re finished . . . like a moonscape – horrible looking . . . They treat it as open mining’. In contrast, ‘You’d have more security being an autonomous leader with Bord na Móna, because you’re employed by Bord na Móna in a pensionable job; whereas, being in the private [sector] [laughs] job, you mightn’t be that

secure'. But they also commented that 'nothing much changed' in terms of environmental practices on the bog since the introduction of the autonomous enterprise system: they were expected to comply with Bord na Móna standards and state regulations either way.

Even the Attymon Peat Co-op, a traditional worker coop, was subject to Bord na Móna's environmental policy, since the Co-op was contracted to the company. Paul Riordan described the relationship: 'We still have the environmental licence for that area [the Attymon works], so we're responsible if there's an oil spill or something goes wrong . . . because we still own the bog . . . Our environmental guys are there every other week'.

In relation to the environmental practices of AEUs, when compared to the traditional model of direct employment with Bord na Móna, Kevin McMahon didn't think that there was any great contrast:

If they're a state employee, whether they were direct [employees], you know, or whether they were autonomous [workers], I wouldn't see a huge difference there . . . I think either of them . . . could be imbued with a better commitment [to the environment] than a [private] contractor, who is driven by making profit . . . I think if you're fostering . . . you know, your employees as good citizens, it's all about education as well . . . I think unions should be very much . . . positive, where you're talking about the environment.

Kevin McMahon emphasised the potential of sub-board structures: 'At [the] local level, you would hope that you would inculcate in the workforce an understanding of the company's responsibilities to the environment', especially when 'some of these [rural] workers possibly have a huge interest in the environment'. Questioned as to whether this was a romantic view of the rural working class, he responded: 'Who said bog workers aren't romantic?!'

One worker from a midlands bog area conveyed a common experience in rural Ireland: 'All of [the men in] my family . . . at one time, they all worked in Bord na Móna'. He offered the bog workers' perspective on the natural environment:

It's your workplace – it's nearly like a farmer with the land – it gets into your blood after a while, and you don't like to see debris

on the bog . . . [or] oil . . . on top of water in a drain . . . People have a responsibility; they mightn't wear it on their lapel, but they have an inner responsibility to where they work, and I think it applies in Bord na Móna nearly more than anywhere. . . . And the amount of times you come in here to have tea in the summer, and . . . everyone would either talk about the beauty of the heather outside, or the bit of bog cotton you see . . . You love to see those things . . . or hares or pheasants or foxes running around. And people appreciate that; you like to protect all of that. I'll tell you this: the guys from An Taisce¹³¹ know bugger all about it, and they're so willing to knock on it and . . . close it down.

Kevin McMahon was confident that a localised system of worker participation in environmental protection initiatives could potentially filter up to influence the general strategy of the company: 'It may be that some ideas would come forward for the company to diversify into certain activities. And that has already happened in Bord na Móna, because they have actually transformed cutaway bogs into amenity areas'. A worker director pointed out that Lough Boora Discovery Park, for example, was a worker-led initiative.¹³² He also recalled the Bog Rail Tours developed within the Blackwater works,¹³³ where people could witness 'the developing bog, and the bog reverting back to, as near as we could [manage, its previous state]'. Though the latter project ultimately met with resistance from elements within management.

5.3.4 Section summary

Section 5.3 interrogated the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of the Irish worker coop development experience. As per the discussion in Section 3.4.3, we found evidence of sustainability practices and potentials within Irish worker coops; though certain internal and external conditions appeared necessary for their full development.

¹³¹ An Taisce is an Irish environmental NGO. See <http://www.antaisce.org/>.

¹³² 'In 1994 a group of employees at Boora led by Tom Egan developed a Lough Boora pre-feasibility study. This proposed an integration of the various land uses, extension of the wetlands, development of lakes and the provision of amenity areas. In 1996 the study won the overall Ford Irish Conservation Award' (Clarke 2010, p. 273).

¹³³ '[I]n 1990 a pilot tourism project, the Clonmacnoise and West Offaly Railway, was developed at Blackwater. This project arose from the training programme for foremen and supervisors' (Clarke 2010, p. 241).

In terms of economic sustainability, our case study offers instances of both worker coop success and failure. Where Irish worker coop development succeeded economically over a long period, this was usually the result of agency-assisted conversions of existing operations, in which workers had previously developed a shared experience, understanding, and identity. These groups were willing and able to make the collective sacrifices necessary to ensure cooperative survival. Worker coop start-ups, on the other hand, often ran into difficulties concerning business skills and cooperative organisation; in that the workers lacked previous experience and/or education. Some successful worker coop start-ups did emerge from pre-existing cooperativist groups, however.

In the most vibrant Irish worker coops, there was evidence of efficiency and productivity benefits, facilitated by organisational and technical innovation and flexibility. Such dynamism was otherwise precluded under conventional managerial control. Still, a level of oversight and/or regulation was required to uphold quality standards within relatively autonomous worker coops. We also observed flexible worker coop survival practices during crisis situations, whereby employment levels were prioritised over other economic concerns such as profitability, wage levels, or work hours.

Where a base level of economic sustainability had been achieved, we found evidence in support of the potential social sustainability of worker coops. Participative cooperative governance structures were generally associated with greater job satisfaction and social solidarity. This, in turn, helped worker coops to flourish economically by taking advantage of worker-controlled flexibility and community support. Yet, several barriers stood in the way of socially sustainable worker coop practice.

In addition to securing the basic commercial viability of their operations, worker-members needed to overcome the individual alienation and anxiety associated with the capitalist workplace, which reinforced a natural human tendency to slip back into the security of established routines. Worker-members needed to be encouraged and empowered through continuous education and training to accept new roles and responsibilities within their

organisations. In some cases, financial incentives were also necessary to encourage worker participation.

The improvements in the quality of work life that often derived from greater worker control were, however, compromised by competitive market pressures. Responding to a fast-paced commercial environment necessitated representative (indirect) as well as participative (direct) democratic structures; hence diluting the purity of worker control. It also required the employment of non-member workers and temp/seasonal staff, as well as strategic membership selection criteria, further compromising cooperative ideals. This left open the potential for management and trade union power struggles within the worker coops. What's more, worker-members emphasised the hard work and increased stress that came with added responsibility. Hence, workplace democracy produced not only positives, but also negatives, in the quality of coop members' work lives *and* non-work lives.

Likewise, any wider social-ecological consciousness promoted by workplace democracy and political economy education was circumscribed by market competition and restricted stakeholder participation. Though we did find evidence of social and environmental solidarity practices within Irish worker coops, this was more limited when solely worker-member-directed. Yet, while multistakeholder cooperative governance structures potentially improved social and environmental sustainability, there were different views as to the desirability of wider community participation. A lot also seemed to depend on what exactly the cooperatives were producing, quite aside from their governance structures.

Our case study results in this section hinted at a hierarchy of cooperative needs, which must be satisfied in turn to establish truly sustainable worker coop development. We attempt to formalise this hierarchy theoretically in Chapter 6.

5.4 Cooperative scale

5.4.1 Institutional infrastructure

Stevie Nolan of Trademark Belfast set out the institutional shortcomings facing worker coop development in Ireland:

We've had four or five phone calls in the last 18 months, from businesses all around Ireland saying . . . "We heard you help workers buy businesses". And we're like, "Well, we can give you advice". But, they're looking for seed money to buy the thing out, or they're looking for . . . a forensic accountant to come and study the books. And we're saying, "We don't have any of that infrastructure, we don't have any of those resources". And we don't. And no one does [in Ireland]. And, there's nowhere for them to go. . . . In order to get to that complexity of how the hierarchies work, and pay ratios and all that, which is really interesting . . . without development and infrastructure and capacity building, that won't occur – you'll have nothing to study.

5.4.1.1 Legal institutions

Eddie Glackin remembered how 'the Industrial and Provident Societies (IPS) Act [1893]¹³⁴ . . . [was] the primary legislation under which cooperatives were set up here [in Ireland]'. WUT/ITUT had difficulties with the Registrar of Friendly Societies in this regard, since 'the rules governing the establishment of cooperatives [required that] there had to be at least seven members; and very often, many of the small business ideas that came into us – groups of unemployed people – they wouldn't have seven people, they would have three or four or five people'. The only way around this was to recruit 'ghost members':

A group of women . . . came in to set up a cooperative . . . only four of them. So they got three of them to bring their husbands in with them to make up the numbers . . . When push came to shove, a problem [arose] down the road in the cooperative – and that cooperative was relatively successful – and, it had a meeting; and of the seven . . . two women with their two husbands constituted a majority, and . . . they voted to wind up the cooperative – more or less to privatise it. And the original founding members . . . had . . . a very clear ideological-philosophical position [that] they wanted a cooperative . . . And that was it, it was gone. So, that was the kind of a problem that you would encounter [with the legislation] . . . [Ghost members] were people who were members

¹³⁴ See <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1893/act/39/enacted/en/print.html>.

of the cooperative, but . . . they weren't working for the cooperative. So we felt that we needed a model that would protect the worker-members.

WUT/ITUT developed an alternative model 'under the Companies Act [where] you only needed two people to set up a company, to register a company' and be assured of limited liability:

But, the legislation under which that was set up was absolutely not geared for cooperative enterprise. The fundamental thing in it was that people had voting rights in accordance with the amount of money they had invested. So there's not a one member, one vote [governance structure] . . . Money has a vote, not the numbers of people. . . . But . . . we recognised as well that people might want to bring in outside investors, for example, to invest in their company. Very often, people's friends or their local community . . . or whatever, would be interested in throwing some money in by way of shares. So we devised a model which had . . . voting and non-voting shares (preferential shares) . . . under the Companies Act. But the only ones who could hold non-preferential shares were workers who were members . . . and employees – they were the only ones who had the voting shares . . . Other people could invest – they could come in and buy [preferential] shares – and [when the coop] would have their AGM [annual general meeting], they'd be entitled to their dividend, if any, and whatnot; but they didn't have votes within the company. So that was as near as we could get to an effective workers' control model, using in a sense . . . the flexibilities of the Companies Act, but without accepting the basic principle [of the Act], which is that . . . money votes and money counts, you know.

The WUT/ITUT model also protected against demutualisation:

In the event of an employee leaving the company, they had to surrender their shares – not give them back, but, sell them internally within the company . . . The cooperative would buy the shares back from them and allocate them then [to existing employees] or sell them to new employees coming in, to maintain the employee-owned nature of the business.

Eddie recalled how the WUT/ITUT model 'was robbed by various bleeding accountancy firms around the place', because, at that time, 'there [were] *significant* financial supports available for small business start-ups, *if* you were a cooperative':

So, I mean, wherever there is money to be made, somebody will find a way. We had accountants who wouldn't know how to spell "cooperative" – [who had] never encountered them in their lives

– [but who] were cheerfully advising groups on how to set up a cooperative, based on the memorandum and articles of association that they’d robbed off us, like, you know. But at least it was spreading the gospel, so we didn’t mind too much. But, you know, they were doing it to make money . . . Good luck to them, but . . . we were never set up to make money.

Oliver Larkin and Angela Conroy recalled that the Tullamore Meats Co-op had ‘an awful problem getting registered . . . we couldn’t be registered without a place . . . [and] we couldn’t get a place without being registered [laughs]’. But with assistance from ‘Eddie Glackin and . . . Mark Fielding’, they eventually managed to register with the Registrar for Friendly Societies.

Stevie Nolan explained that the legislation regulating cooperatives in Ireland is ‘still a major issue’ today:

Ireland’s a legislative fucking wasteland . . . it’s completely not fit for purpose in terms of modern [worker coop development] . . . If you go to Europe, you’ll see, in Italy, the Marcora laws,¹³⁵ where . . . if a business closes down, the first thing you do, legally, is offer it to the workers. In France, if your business closes down, or there’s a succession issue, the local unions [and] the local government have a fund . . . They come in, they forensically study the books to say, “This business is actually doable” . . . [and] workers get first stab at buying it out. We’re so far from that – *so far away from that* . . . [Co-operatives UK]¹³⁶ did a study [which] said [that] 30 percent of businesses that go under . . . are profitable – they go under for other reasons.¹³⁷ And, so, we said, “Look, you know, we could *save* some of those businesses”. And it’s easier to save your business than it is to create one or set one up, because it’s already there, and it already has a reputation, and it already has workers trained . . . But we’re so far away from that.

Stevie hinted at divisions within the Irish cooperative movement:

They were rewriting the IPS legislation . . . [a few] years ago, and we wanted them to change it radically to . . . kind of use particularly the models that [they’re] using in Italy and France and Britain. And, of course, they refused point blank, largely because ICOS didn’t want it changed. I mean, it suits them; it suits the [existing] cooperative sector, particularly [the] farming cooperative sector. It suits what they do; it’s suited them since partition, so, “No change, thank you”. . . . We [subsequently] got

¹³⁵ See FEPS (2016, p. 24) and Gowan (2019, p. 9–15).

¹³⁶ See <https://www.uk.coop/>.

¹³⁷ See Delivering Employee Ownership Network (2005, p. 5).

the law changed in Ireland: in the Registrar of Friendly Societies, it now has “workers’ cooperative” – two little words [laughs] – and that was inserted.¹³⁸

Bill Kelly remembered inviting Bruno Roelants, the current Director General of the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA),¹³⁹ and then Secretary General of the International Organisation of Industrial and Service Cooperatives (CICOPA),¹⁴⁰ over to give a presentation to the Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation. And on the basis of ‘just that one meeting . . . the Department officials . . . [convinced] the Registrar . . . on that one small change’.

When registering Union Taxis as a cooperative, Eoin Davey received assistance from Stevie Nolan at Trademark Belfast and Tiziana O’Hara at Cooperative Alternatives: ‘I was the secretary, Brendan McGivern was the chairman, Davey Gargan was the treasurer, and Stevie Nolan was like an associate . . . on the board of directors’. Stevie Nolan explained that there were certain legislative provisions in the North which could easily be replicated in a Southern context for the purposes of supporting worker coop development:

In the North, loan stock allows coops to borrow money from the community at zero/one/two/three percent interest – it’s a legal entity – to raise capital. Because, obviously, coops are workers looking for capital, rather than capital looking for workers; and workers don’t have capital, so you [need] to have alternative means to [raise capital] . . . And now, of course, in the modern knowledge and sharing economy, you have start-up money and you have crowdsourcing and you have all these other ways of raising money. And . . . traditionally, coops in Britain and the North did it through loan stock, which is much the same thing really – it’s basically crowdsourcing.

¹³⁸ The Independents 4 Change grouping in the Oireachtas tabled a Bill in 2018 to amend the relevant legislation. ‘The Bill is currently progressing to pre-legislative scrutiny at Committee Stage . . . The purpose of the Bill is to modernise the process of registering and managing co-operative enterprises in line with provisions that exist in other EU countries. . . . The bill so far has the support of all of the opposition parties’ (Rhona McCord on behalf of Clare Daly TD, personal communication, April 11, 2019). See <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2019-02-14/42/>.

¹³⁹ See <https://ica.coop/en>.

¹⁴⁰ See <http://www.cicopa.coop/>.

Legislation pertaining to coop loan stock was seen as a ‘clear practical thing that can be done’ in the South.

Yet, Eddie Glackin communicated that, ‘There has to be a viable business there’ before questions over the precise legal structure took on any real significance:

We would get some people coming to us [who] were very ideologically driven – mad lefties: “We want a . . . mini commie utopia [between] the three or four of us” . . . That’s what drove them, and, they didn’t have the sense of . . . first of all, there has to be something for you to administer and share – you have to have a viable business there – and that was always the bottom line. It wasn’t the be-all and end-all, the way it is with [the] IDA [Industrial Development Authority] and everything else; because we always said, like, you know, if our mothers had applied the IDA’s principles about commercial viability, they’d have strangled us all at birth, because they weren’t able to get any payback from us until we were in our 20s, you know. So, we said, “It’s not the be-all and end-all . . . but, it’s an essential ingredient”. After that, how you [legally] structure [the coop comes next].

From his experience with the CDU, Denis Rowan agreed that legislation wasn’t the main barrier facing worker coop development in Ireland. Again, the major problem for most workers was simply in ‘running the business . . . [where] you had to interact with the marketplace in a competitive commercial way – to survive, to make money’. Denis expanded:

It was the business skills of the people . . . There was a feeling that, because they were [a] cooperative, they should succeed – [that they] nearly had a right to succeed . . . I certainly would have the view [that] that’s not how the world works. [If] you set up a cooperative on a legal basis, that’s a matter for the people concerned; but when you’re producing something, or making something, or selling something – it doesn’t matter – the market’s out there [and] you [have] got to go out there and be commercial. And that was a struggle, I have to say.

After a while, the CDU decided to broaden its remit to include supporting employee share ownership plans (ESOPs), on the condition that workers were the majority shareholders in the company:

I felt that having . . . purely worker cooperatives, where everybody was equal . . . one member, one share, one vote . . . that it was too narrow and it wasn’t taking on. And the [ESOP] idea [was about] employees . . . getting a share of a company, or owning a

majority of a company . . . I felt that we should be supporting [ESOPs via] grant-aiding where the employees had the majority of the shares – not all the shares – [and] where one person, one vote, one share was too narrow, and we just weren't getting the growth [in traditional worker coops].

Majority worker ownership through an ESOP would at least give majority control of the company 'to workers'. 'So, we put a paper [into] the internal advisory committee . . . [which argued] that the remit of the Unit would include now . . . where 51 percent of the shares under an ESOP [were] owned by the workers. And they went for that'. This allowed the CDU to operate on a 'bigger scale'. One notable, if ultimately unsuccessful, attempt at such an ESOP conversion concerned TEAM (The Experts at Maintenance) Aer Lingus, 'a big, big organisation, you know, collapsing all around them . . . So, the workers came to us from TEAM Aer Lingus looking to buy it out':

So, suddenly, from being a small three-person/four-person worker coop making coffee or sandwiches somewhere, or whatever, we were now up in a different league. . . . And the Unions actually came along with it – obviously we couldn't do anything without approval – and Eddie Glackin . . . I would've sat down with Eddie and said, "Eddie, look, we need to go [into] a bigger space – we need to think bigger here – it's too small, [it's] not getting traction . . . The history of the country – the culture of our country – is not [favourable to developing pure] worker coops" . . . In fairness to him, he came along [with the ESOP idea].

The TEAM Aer Lingus experiment, in the end, 'got too big; but it was an interesting thing'. After that came Lough Swilly Bus Company, where 'the workers there were looking at buying out the company'. And while 'the owner wouldn't sell . . . about eight or nine of the workers . . . broke away and set up a bus company [of] their own . . . [And] we helped them set up the business . . . it was a worker coop; so it spun off from a [conventional private business]'. Notably, the 'Department of Transport gave them seven routes up around Donegal way'.

This all meant that 'we were starting now doing business plans where we were [looking] to take over a [conventional] business – buyouts . . . [involving] people already at work, spinning off into worker coops . . . [or] an ESOP'.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ Eddie Glackin remembered that 'we tried to structure employee share ownership plans in some major companies . . . We wanted to structure them in such a way that the employees

But while the CDU was having more success with this strategy, it was still ‘a drag: you were always pushing the boulders up the hill’.

Denis recalled a recent conversation with ‘a union guy, Stephen McCarty, who was on the [CDU] advisory committee – he was an ICTU rep . . . [who] was with me working on [the ESOP model]’. Denis paraphrased Stephen’s reflections: ‘At least we brought [the] ESOP . . . model into the country . . . If we did nothing else . . . that was enough in itself’. Denis pointed to ‘some big firms’ in Ireland, including Aer Lingus, which have 10 percent of their shares [going] to the workers’ – thanks in no small part to the CDU and the trade union movement.¹⁴² Noting again, however, that ‘control is active and ownership can be passive’, Eddie Glackin suggested that ‘a lot of [ESOPs] are frankly just nonsense’, as far as worker participation is concerned: ‘I was involved a lot in the initial stages [around] the whole concept of ESOPs . . . coming into this country, and we did an awful lot of work and developed a lot of policy positions’.

Denis Rowan remembered travelling to Rome with Stephen McCarty and Brendan Mackin to observe the Italian cooperative movement:

The trade union[s] there are very big into worker coops, as the workers are. And it’s a different ballgame. And they have some special law or something – [Marcora] Law . . . where it had to be looked at – the option of setting up as a worker coop . . . It was a right nearly – an entitlement – and should be looked at, do you know. And that gave them great cover; and the worker coop movement there was enormously big.

Regarding legal literacy, Denis recalled that, ‘Even those who were in a coop . . . I remember meeting a few of them, and they really didn’t understand the legal situation – their legal responsibilities’. This was likewise true of professional organisations, and partly ‘why an ESOP would be more attractive, because it was a legal entity [that] came out from the EU . . . and

got their shares . . . but they couldn’t just sell them on then willy-nilly. There had to be an internal market set up within the business, so that, if people were leaving – this was to ensure the employee-owned or the worker-owned character of the business – [internal market sales would] allocate them to new employees coming in’.

¹⁴² The workers at Bord na Móna have a five percent shareholding in the company through an ESOP (Clarke 2010, p. 305); though the board initially proposed a 10 percent shareholding (p. 287).

the workers owned a share of the business; whereas the rest was the “normal” . . . legal model that banks and other organisations would be used to’.

In establishing the AEU’s at Bord na Móna, Tom Wall and Kevin McMahon didn’t recall any legal complications: Tom described it as ‘purely an IR matter’, while Kevin imparted that it was ‘an operational matter within Bord na Móna’s . . . remit’ as an SOE.

5.4.1.2 Technical institutions

Conal McFeely remembered that ‘Derry, when it did [get] a campus of [Ulster] University . . . it had . . . a cooperative development [programme] – and the only other cooperative development [programme on] the island of Ireland was in Cork . . . university [University College Cork (UCC)]’.¹⁴³ NICDA attempted to foster cooperation amongst such likeminded institutions: ‘When the Agency was at its height, we were trying to link in to all those networks’, alongside the CDU. These efforts led to a pioneering intervention:

[Along] with Denis Rowan . . . we [ran] an all-Ireland . . . awareness programme for cooperatives with young people in school, right. So we had them running small cooperative businesses within their local schools, North and South, right. And . . . then we took them into the Basque region, and we took them to Mondragón. So, therefore, we [were] simply saying, you know, “Don’t think what you’re doing is Mickey Mouse”, you know, “This is part of a global movement”.

But an emphasis on cooperative education, at every level, was ‘just not there’ anymore.

Eddie Glackin described the WUT/ITUT cooperative training supports:

We used to run, for example, training sessions . . . down in Tullamore . . . [with a] sausage company [Tullamore Meats Co-op] . . . We went down every Monday night for 11 weeks, [to provide] training on legal structures for cooperatives, with . . . a group that was setting up a cooperative, so that they would know what they were talking about – [e.g.] they would know what the cooperative principles are. [For] many of them, their interest was, “I want to save me job”. They didn’t give a shite if it was a

¹⁴³ See <https://www.ucc.ie/en/ccs/>.

cooperative or a didgeridoo; it was a means for them . . . to save their job.

Oliver Larkin and Angela Conroy from the Co-op remembered how, ‘Every Tuesday night we went to a place here in town . . . training . . . in the Foresters’,¹⁴⁴ with ‘Eddie Glackin and . . . Mark Fielding . . . an accountant [from] Dublin’. But the worker-members felt that, ‘They were training us really in the wrong things . . . I can’t even remember what they were training us on’. Oliver Larkin explained:

You see, we sort of knew the business before we set it up, because that’s what we were after being at . . . I was 27 year[s] at it, before [Midland Butter and Bacon] closed . . . Angela was [nearly 10 years at it]. And, the rest of them [were] the same – [we] all had experience of doing what we wanted to do. . . . [Mark Fielding] got a grant of £1,000 . . . to do marketing for us . . . and he came back and said he couldn’t get any . . . customers for us – we’d have to look out for them ourselves. So, we had to look out for them ourselves.

Angela Conroy continued:

The Bacon factory closed in March [and] we didn’t get going until October. And all we wanted to do was get started, but they wouldn’t let us start . . . “You’re not ready” . . . The longer we were out, the more customers [that were] lost . . . And we wouldn’t’ve got started then only for one of the girls was getting married . . . and she wanted cocktails for the wedding. So, we started and that was it.

Training was also an important aspect of the CDU’s mandate, considering that Denis Rowan had come ‘from the training wing that merged into FÁS’. But it was a big challenge working with ‘unemployed people . . . who [had] decided, “We’ve nothing else to do, so why don’t we start up something on our own?”’. More often than not, they had no real business experience:

The Italians [started coops] for commercial reasons, and they had major ones – they had coops with thousands of people employed . . . We started off from people who were unemployed . . . trying to get off the ground. And that was a struggle . . . because [of] the amount of training . . . they needed to run a business – [it] doesn’t matter if you’re a cooperative or a multinational, the business skills are still the same . . . We’d meetings with them regularly, saying, “Look, you need leadership skills, you need financial

¹⁴⁴ The local branch of the Irish National Foresters’ Benefit Society, an Irish nationalist friendly society. See Flood (2017).

skills [etc.]”, and when we set [training sessions] up, at their request, the turn-up rate was quite low.

Denis noted that Eddie Glackin often played a role in arranging meetings between the CDU and worker coops around the country.

Tom Wall remembered being involved with the CDU, which he recalled was ‘a Labour initiative in an interparty . . . [Labour-]Fine Gael coalition’. He commented on the skill shortages faced by unemployed workers:

I was on the board of one cooperative . . . [in] St. Michael’s Estate [Inchicore, Dublin] and . . . [sighs] . . . all of the people who worked there were previously unemployed young people – which is great – but there was nobody [laughs] with any business experience to give direction . . . I mean I tried to mentor briefly, but you’re fighting against the wind.

More generally, Stevie Nolan alluded to the culture of deference in Irish workplaces and Irish society:

There’s an issue within workers in Ireland: if you say to someone, “Do you want to run [your own cooperative] business?”, here there’s absolutely no tradition of that. And taking on your own business is a *fucking massive* step – it’s huge – because, normally, we’re used to being employed. The idea that you’re a worker-owner is a huge shift in . . . value base, and . . . how you analyse the world you live in, and responsibility levels [etc.]

Indeed, Trademark’s cooperative training programmes faced similar challenges to those of the WUT/ITUT and CDU:

We’ve done all sorts of training with them over the years, but the biggest challenge was that . . . some of the women involved kept turning around to us and [asking], “What do we do now?” . . . “No, this is yours” . . . “Oh, well I fucking don’t want it” . . . So, there [are] huge issues of capacity and ability . . . and confidence as well. [These are] working class people: if you’re told you’re a scumbag for fuckin’ 30 years, you end up believing it.

Stevie agreed that ‘boss culture’¹⁴⁵ was a ‘perfect’ description of worker attitudes in Ireland:

That is the issue: “Who’s responsible for this?” And if there’s conflict . . . “The hierarchy . . . the boss will sort it out” . . . When you’re in a coop, you’ve got to sort it out yourselves. And the one thing people avoid like fuckin’ the plague is conflict – particularly

¹⁴⁵ See Larrabure (2013, p. 190).

interpersonal conflict . . . And, in Trademark, we've had a culture – we've been around 15 years – if there's an issue in our organisation, it's surfaced immediately, no matter how uncomfortable it is.

Denis Rowan made a similar observation regarding boss culture:

There's also the issue [that] a lot of people are happy to have a boss – [the] capitalist model. Some people just want to go to work every day and go home; [they're] not interested in being a . . . shareholder, and [going] to a meeting every Wednesday night in the boardroom . . . “That's my boss – he owns it . . . What do you want me to do?”

When asked about the importance of political economy training, Stevie Nolan communicated that many of the worker coops around Belfast had been initiated by people ‘who had a broadly left-wing understanding of coops . . . They were people who came from a left-wing background – often trade unionists, or former trade unionists¹⁴⁶ – [so] their value base makes coops a good idea; it's natural for them to think about coops’. Yet even such cultured cooperativists faced an uphill battle: ‘The problem they had – the problem everyone has in Ireland – is that there's no infrastructure’. Eoin Davey, for example, remembered ‘going on the internet [laughs]’ to get ideas on how to draft a business plan for Union Taxis. And worker-members at the Attymon Peat Coop said that they wouldn't have been ‘capable’ of dealing with the financial end of the business ‘on our own’ – that is, without the training they received via WUT/ITUT.

Bill Kelly was of the opinion that some of these issues could be tackled by instituting a ‘government programme’, whereby Irish-based worker cooperatives could ‘liaise with successful cooperatives in [the] UK or mainland Europe’. Local Enterprise Offices could vet worker coop business plans for commercial viability and ‘the Government [would] put up money then to ensure that they can liaise with the exemplars . . . wherever . . . to help them with the *cooperative* side of it’. He suggested that government representatives could sit on the boards of the worker coops as advisory members. In Bill's view, if ‘you're trying to fast track culturally into a

¹⁴⁶ Stevie noted that, ‘The taxi coop [Union Taxis] were all former CWU [Communication Workers' Union] posties who had been made redundant’.

cooperative . . . I think you're going to need something like that for as long as you're immersed in the corporate tax haven model . . . to incubate it'.

Bill referenced the local government supports available in Emilia Romagna, as explained to him by an economics lecturer from the Italian region, who joined the Urban Co-op while on sabbatical:

In Italy, if you have a business idea, and you walk into your Local Enterprise Office, they'll help you [to] stress test the idea . . . And if they're happy that it's something . . . that has a fighting chance of being brought to market, they will then outline to you the way[s] forward]. [This includes] the standard/conventional commercial way; but before you leave that office, they'll [also advise] you . . . [on] how you might bring it to market via the cooperative model. . . . And, they're in a culture of cooperatives as well, in Emilia Romagna. . . . So, [the challenge is] to take that into the Irish situation . . . and other supports that they have [via the Marcora laws], whereby folks can say [that] they'll take two years of their social welfare upfront to inject into the business.

In establishing the AEU's at Bord na Móna, Tom Wall relayed that, 'There was some attempt . . . in the initial stages' to train team leaders in cooperative work practices; 'but I remember it was only put in [place during the] first year'. The broader reality was that, '[We] were all kind of flying without wings here so . . . [laughs] it was "learning as you do"'. As far as Tom could recall, the training 'wasn't that focused on how a team should work really; it was more focused on the whole bonus system' and 'they learned very quickly'. He stated that the team leaders 'weren't managing a business' in the sense that they would need any much financial training.

Kevin McMahon agreed that 'the minimum amount of training, you know, went into it, because . . . everything went ahead under pressure . . . There was hardly time to really . . . get anything up and running by way of a structured training [programme] – but there would've been a level of training alright'. The workers in one AEU concurred: 'There was a good bit . . . [of] help there *in the beginning*; but as time went on . . . it began to . . . dwindle'. The training was mostly 'simply stuff', rather than accountancy or teamworking. A former supervisor complained that, 'There wasn't any training given on new modern machinery, which there should've been . . . in an autonomous area where you're responsible for looking after your own machines'. A former driver

responded: ‘You had to learn it [by] looking over some lad’s shoulder’. In another of the AEU’s, which was established a few years after the initial teams, the workers didn’t receive any training whatsoever: ‘No, not at all, we just started out . . . and we more or less followed the pattern then that [went] before us’. They were also dismissive of the level of training received by the units that came before them:

When they’d bring you into say . . . a canteen or somewhere and kind of lecture on this, that, and the other; it wouldn’t be much of a training, because you had to come out and start on the bog anyway . . . You’d get ideas from whoever you’d be taking to maybe, before you go out . . . but that’d be very minor.

Kevin Gavin outlined the scope of these early training programmes, which he argued helped to shift the culture of work on the bogs:

There was actually a . . . course arranged in the Bloomfield [House] Hotel [in Mullingar]. And . . . taken on that course [were] people who were likely to become some of these team leaders. [It focused] on . . . leadership skills. And . . . then they [had] a project to do . . . that they [worked] as a team on. . . . And here, unbeknownst to them, the teams were beginning to gel, do you know. It was a little bit devious in its own way.

Paul Riordan elaborated:

They went through a whole regime of *how* self-managed work teams would . . . work: how you would make . . . a collective decision; who would take the lead; how you would manage people . . . Each team had a budget – you know . . . like a little business. [They learned] how the budget [and] materials worked. All of this stuff. So there was a fairly comprehensive drill . . . We brought them away for two and three and four days at a time. It gave them a chance to meet their colleagues and interact and get ideas together. We had brainstorming sessions, because it was new territory for the company as well in many ways, and they were positive . . . And that made all the difference.

He did admit, however, that training and education was an area in which the company could, and should, have done a lot more regarding the AEU’s:

As teams got more mature, and as new members came into the teams, it’s something [that] we didn’t do well enough – [i.e.] continue that whole development and training and . . . teamwork. And some teams self-deflated: some team members weren’t talking to each other . . . And what should have happened, I suppose, in hindsight, [is] that every three or four years, [we

should have brought] the guys in again together and refresh[ed] the whole thing. And that didn't happen.

Paul also agreed that such a forum would have opened up additional lines of communication between team leaders and management.

5.4.1.3 Financial institutions

Noting that worker coops in Ireland 'couldn't get' conventional loan finance, Eddie Glackin recounted how the WUT/ITUT 'gave long-term, low-interest loans to cooperatives; and that became, I suppose, the main publicly known aspect of the work of the Trust'. WUT/ITUT provided a 'tailored set of supports for cooperatives', which included 'a grant you could get towards the cost [of a] feasibility study or a business plan [and] a marketing grant'. He argued that 'without them . . . it's very unlikely that many of the cooperatives would've got going at all'. The CDU also provided a package of financial supports for worker coop start-ups, comprising low-interest loans, 'development grants and feasibility study grants'. Denis Rowan noted that such loan finance was 'unusual within the semi-state world . . . I mean . . . people owed FÁS money'.

Eddie Glackin cautioned against the ever-present danger of 'grant junkies – people who'd do something because there's a grant available for doing it, you know – and . . . you got lots of mixed motives and motivations in terms of people setting up cooperatives. There were people who had no interest in cooperatives, but they would call it a cooperative to get a grant that wouldn't otherwise be available to that business'. Consequently, the Trust always made sure to meet with the entire group, to assess whether the workers were 'all going to be involved in running [the coop] – otherwise it's not a genuine cooperative'.

The worker-members told of how, 'When we registered as the Belfast Cleaning Cooperative in 2012, we tried to get a bank account, and the only bank that we could go to, that was local for us, was the Co-op Bank'.¹⁴⁷ They explained that if you're not 'a stand-alone sole trader, or you're not a business partnership, or you're not a [conventional] company limited by guarantee,

¹⁴⁷ See <https://www.co-operativebank.co.uk/>.

they don't want to know you: "What do you mean the workers own that? What's that all about?" Similarly, the Tullamore Meats Co-op worker-members recollected that, 'We were collecting money from the shareholders, and we'd nowhere to put it, because . . . they wouldn't let us open a bank account until we were registered. So we had to get a solicitor ['Brian Adams'] and a priest ['ex-father Sean O'Neill'] to hold it for us'.

The Belfast Cleaning Coop also met with classification issues regarding public administration: 'The Government's own website, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HRMC) . . . did not have a clue what a cooperative is'. This wasn't just an issue for the Cleaning Coop, but for 'workers' cooperatives around Belfast', more generally, who've all had similar issues with 'their insurance and everything'.

Loan finance was an issue for Eoin Davey and Union Taxis, when they went looking 'to source premises – we had no money at that point in time. So . . . I raided my credit union account, you know, and self-funded it . . . because there [were] no other funds available'. Later on, the Coop issued loan stock: 'In fairness to UNITE [the] Union,¹⁴⁸ I . . . did get a substantial, you know . . . investment from them in the loan stock . . . which we were grateful of. And then small investors . . . My father put a big investment in; and with it being dissolved now . . . there's no return on that'. Similarly, when the Quay Co-op were having financial difficulties early on, the members took out loans individually, since 'people [in financial institutions etc.] didn't know what they were dealing with – like, we were very . . . different, very unusual'. John Calnan agreed that worker coops were likely more readily received by Italian financial institutions, for example, but 'not in Ireland in the 1980s'.

Bill Kelly and his associates in Meitheal Mid West were initially interested in setting up a cooperative bank modelled on Mondragón's Caja Laboral [Workers' Credit Union]:¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ See <https://unitetheunion.org/>.

¹⁴⁹ See Sanchez Bajo and Roelants (2011, p. 182–3, 185–7); Altuna Gabilondo et al. (2013, p. 172–3); and Ellerman (1982).

At the bank stage, we were so naïve [that] we didn't even think of the practicalities . . . “Why not?”, you know . . . Then of course you look at government policy in terms of . . . the [Irish] socio-economic model, and it is very much the . . . corporate tax haven [strategy]. So, in that scenario, trying to set up a [coop] bank, even if you had a number of very experienced individuals with deep pockets and very good connections from the banking sector, you'd still have your work cut out for you, I would imagine. And I think one of the reasons why the Mondragón bank continues to be so successful is because it is owned by the cooperatives, which are themselves owned by the worker-members.

Meitheal Mid West concluded that a better strategy would be to focus on establishing a network of smaller-scale worker coops initially, which could then lay the basis for a cooperative bank:

I think [Mondragón] had seven or eight coops on the go . . . before they actually set up the Caja Laboral. But, at that stage, you had the . . . mentality, or the mindset, of . . . a number of businesses that were cooperatives; that were . . . commercially successful [to the extent that] they could wash their own faces financially; and they were living the cooperative model.

5.4.2 *Organisational support*

5.4.2.1 *Political support*

Eddie Glackin recalled how, ‘We did a lot of lobbying . . . with FÁS, to get a specific unit set up to support cooperatives’. This was facilitated as part of the social partnership dialogue:

It was one of the early national [social partnership] agreements – which I was never a bloody supporter of. But anyway, one of the things that was negotiated early on was that FÁS would set up a cooperative development council and unit. That arose from a recommendation that came in from the union side – from our union [FWUI] . . . Billy Attley, General Secretary [of the FWUI], asked me to draft up something. He [said] . . . “What does the Trust want to get out of these talks with the Government?” . . . [The CDU] came out of that.

He also remembered lobbying local TDs [Teachtaí Dála]¹⁵⁰ when ‘we were trying to salvage that Edenderry Shoes [company through a worker coop

¹⁵⁰ Members of the Dáil or lower house of the Irish Parliament (the Oireachtas).

conversion] and get some government support for it'. Fianna Fáil were in power at the time:

[We] went out to meet the then Minister for Labour, [Brian Cowen]. We met him . . . in Clara . . . [in the] front room of his house. Because, [of] the five or six people we had on the management committee, I think three of them [were] officers of the local Fianna Fáil [laughs] cumann, you know. So we didn't have a problem getting in to see [Cowen at] that time. He was very supportive, I have to say . . . very supportive. He made sure that whatever grants [that were forthcoming] . . . they went through quickly and there was no messing, like, you know. We didn't get anything we weren't entitled to . . . I should say, the members didn't . . . But there was no messing.

Local politicians were also supportive of the Glenties and Attymon peat cooperatives in Donegal and Galway respectively. In Galway, Eddie recollected that, 'A Fianna Fáil Minister of State . . . he was *very, very* supportive . . . local Fine Gael and Labour [Party] councillors, all of them'. That said, 'The Shinnars [Sinn Féin]¹⁵¹ would probably do it with a bit more actual enthusiasm or conviction, like; it's nearer to their kind of political . . . philosophy'.

Tom Wall recalled meeting with the then newly appointed Energy Minister, Brian Cowen, in relation to the transition happening at Bord na Móna: 'He was just interested from a political viewpoint . . . "Will jobs be okay?"'. Kevin McMahon also remembered the Unions 'making representations to government TDs, opposition TDs, and ministers in the midlands as well – and there [were] quite a number of them' – regarding the company's financial situation. A few years after the new work system was introduced, 'the government agreed to inject £120m into Bord na Móna, and to release it of its debt burden'. But, in terms of the Unions' workplace democracy agenda, Kevin explained that:

It was up to us to shape the agenda in Bord na Móna and we [were] in a good position to do it, because we had . . . a very strongly organised trade union system, a very good constituted Group of Unions, and a very united Group of Unions. So that gave us a lot of leverage and respect from management, you know, to work through these type of changes.

¹⁵¹ See <http://www.sinnfein.ie/>.

Stevie Nolan explained that cooperative development was somewhat peripheral to Trademark's main work:

We're not funded to do cooperative development work. We're a self-funded organisation for the large part, so . . . when we have additional resources, we do it, and when we're struggling to pay our wages, we don't. So it's been ad hoc, bitty. We spent a good year-and-a-half with Bill Kelly . . . doing a lot of lobbying, but we were aflush with money at the time, so we thought, "Fuck it, we'll do a bit of work here". And we pushed and pushed and pushed . . . I have to tell you, we did loads like . . . We spent some time lobbying, and it was good; but, again, we don't get any government funding to do it, [and] no union funding to do it.

Bill remembered that the Worker Cooperative Network¹⁵² prepared a report,¹⁵³ made a presentation on that basis to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Jobs, Enterprise & Innovation, and had Bruno Roelants over from CICOPA to speak with Department officials. Following on from Bruno's intervention, 'they put in a recommendation that workers' cooperatives be recognised as a [type of] coop . . . under the [Industrial and] Provident Societies legislation'. Bill started to see the possibilities:

Now it's just a definition, that [worker coops] are a bona fide type [of cooperative]; it doesn't put anything else – any framework – behind it. But what it does show is that . . . [the] hour that Bruno spent with those officials inside [the Department] – and ourselves – arguing the point . . . that it was successful . . . And it begs [the] question: that if you did have . . . competent, reasonably high-powered individuals . . . lobbying on behalf of the model, over a period of time, what could you do? . . . But it would have to be funded.¹⁵⁴

Bill agreed that you would likely need a party machine and/or the trade unions behind such an endeavour.

He recalled being taken aside by ostensibly well-meaning politicians after the Oireachtas committee hearing. They approached him 'when the cameras were

¹⁵² See <http://www.workercooperativenetwork.org/>.

¹⁵³ See WCN (2012).

¹⁵⁴ During a conversation at the Association for Heterodox Economics (AHE) 19th Annual Conference in Manchester (July 10-12, 2017), Kenneth Stickers recounted his experience of worker cooperative development in a US context. When asked by potential funders whether worker coops were a socialist idea, Kenneth would reply, 'No, no, this is about democratising capitalism!'. More often than not, he managed to secure the desired funding.

turned off . . . “That’s a nice idea . . . but . . . you can’t go around referring to Ireland as a corporate tax haven . . . You *can’t* be saying things like that””. As far as Bill was concerned, ‘That’s what we’re fighting against – we need to carve out something for the cooperatives’. Sinn Féin were particularly interested, conveying to Bill that, ‘We have [worker] coops in our manifesto’. However, their ‘economics spokesperson . . . Peadar Tóibín’, also cautioned against being too openly critical of ‘the Government’s corporate policy’. Again, Bill was defiant: ‘If it’s too hot to handle . . . then, you know, stop patting us on the head and telling . . . the activists on the ground like myself [that you support worker cooperatives] . . . At some stage you’ll have to – excuse my language – shit or get off the pot’.

‘At least, in fairness to [Sinn Féin], they talked the talk’, and sometimes walked the walk too. Bill remembered meeting with ‘the economics department’ at Belfast City Council, hoping to garner support for worker coop development.¹⁵⁵ While the council officials did show some interest, any follow through required cross-party support from Sinn Féin and the DUP [Democratic Unionist Party]: ‘The leader of the Sinn Féin party on . . . Belfast City Council . . . Jim McVeigh’ agreed to ‘take it to the DUP’ and try to ‘get them on board’. ‘A few weeks later . . . there was cross-party support for cooperatives’. Bill reflected:

Now, an awful lot of work had to go into that, to get it even that far, on a voluntary basis . . . But, it just struck me . . . that one incident of how individuals were prepared to work together – because they could see . . . potential economic benefit, for their communities . . . left-right [on the political-ideological spectrum], and in the North, orange-green [on the political-sectarian spectrum].

Bill commented that, ‘The right-hand side’ of the political-ideological spectrum tends to glorify ‘profit maximisation to the exclusion of all else . . . On the left then, you’ve got guys who . . . some of whom . . . don’t know how to fucking work, right; and who are happiest when they’re talking about it . . . But as regards fucking collectively fuckin’ doing something [about it, then not so much]’ Similarly, Stevie Nolan’s experience of political lobbying was

¹⁵⁵ See <https://minutes3.belfastcity.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=10711>.

that, ‘Left-wing people are all “great idea”, but will do nothing’, while ‘right-wing people are suspicious of it . . . “[This] sounds suspiciously socialist” . . . that was actually a DUP quote’. He relayed how there was even an ideological split within Co-operative Alternatives,¹⁵⁶ a cooperative development agency in Northern Ireland, founded by Stevie Nolan, Alice McLarnon and Tiziana O’Hara. The members who remained in the organisation after the split felt that Trademark were ‘too political and they didn’t like it’.

Nonetheless, Trademark had some limited success through their lobbying efforts: ‘We did get a motion passed through Belfast City Council [in 2015], supported by the DUP and Sinn Féin . . . to investigate the possibility of directly supporting the establishment of a cooperative enterprise hub in Belfast – we stuck in the word “enterprise” to keep the DUP happy’. Trademark were in negotiation with the Council to provide funding for such an initiative: ‘We can’t carry it anymore, it’s too heavy for us, you know’. Stevie felt that the Council were receptive to the idea: ‘They kind of “get it” like, you know; but the reason why they get it is that we knew that, in order to win those arguments, we had to point to a [successful worker] cooperative, which is why we put so many resources into the Belfast Cleaning Coop – but also Union Taxis and all the other coops we’ve helped’.

The wider political environment in Ireland, however, was hostile towards worker cooperative development in recent decades:

I think the Cooperative [Development] Unit [was] closed down by Fianna Fáil in 2002 or something: “We don’t need coops; we’re in the middle of the fucking Celtic Tiger”. . . . And so it’s [a] huge capacity issue: there’s no infrastructure. . . . If a business close[s] or there’s a succession issue, the first thing that local officials should do is contact someone [in a cooperative support unit] . . . “There’s a business here that I think might be able to [survive as a worker coop]” . . . But what they do is they run straight for redundancy, rather than [looking to] keep the jobs alive. . . . You need lobbying to influence politics . . . to introduce new legislation . . . At the moment, there’s a hostile legislative environment . . . I would advise anyone not to set up a coop in Ireland, nearly; because it’s so fucking hard – there’s no help anywhere. So people go, “Fuck it . . . I’ll just set up a [con-

¹⁵⁶ See <http://www.coopalternatives.coop/>.

ventional] business; I'll just become an entrepreneur on my own". . . . And I don't blame them, necessarily, because . . . the other route is blocked – the door's closed.¹⁵⁷

Stevie communicated that, 'We were the wrong people doing the lobbying, because we were small and ineffective'. To the degree that the Worker Cooperative Network made any headway and 'got into some of [those] rooms . . . that [was] largely down to Bill [Kelly]'s tenacity'. Yet, as Bill pointed out, 'You can't be trying to build a small business *and* [be] doing this lobbying thing, right, because you're going to run out of steam'. From Stevie Nolan's experience, the Irish cooperative movement had a lot to answer for:

ICOS should be doing that; the Irish housing cooperative association [Co-operative Housing Ireland],¹⁵⁸ they should be doing that; the credit union movement [ILCU] should be doing that. . . . If you mapped cooperatives, or democratic organisations, in Ireland – trade unions [are] one, credit unions [are] another . . . housing coops, and ICOS – you would ask them, "Where's your outreach? Where's your lobbying activities for *other* kinds of coops?" There isn't any; they don't do any of it.

While 'it doesn't take a massive shift to make a less hostile environment; I mean, even small steps would assist', Stevie stated that, 'If you had a progressive left government, you could ask them to rewrite cooperative legislation [and] introduce . . . models that exist all around Europe . . . to encourage trade unions to get involved, to encourage local government to get involved – just to put the option on the table'.

Eddie Glackin explained how the WUT coordinated 'an integrated response in the case of a closure', where state agencies would facilitate the formation of 'phoenix cooperatives'. He described the initiative in more detail:

[W]e arranged for all the relevant agencies to come together and . . . we designed this . . . intervention model . . . The IDA, for example, would come down and talk to anybody that might be interested in setting up their own business . . . FÁS would talk about people's entitlements . . . [WUT] would come down and talk about worker cooperatives and community businesses . . . And we got this integrated thing [going] . . . *as a response* to

¹⁵⁷ John Calnan felt likewise: 'The traditional model of a business . . . if it's just starting off, where it's one person, and they have an idea [that] they're really interested in . . . it's much easier if you can get the funding [etc.] to do that yourself . . . the tradition is there'.

¹⁵⁸ See <http://www.cooperativehousing.ie/>.

unemployment . . . Within the context of this bloody [capitalist] system, whatever could be done was done there.

The WUT intervention model ‘was afterwards taken over by the likes of FÁS’ through the CDU.

Denis Rowan explained that the CDU ‘had a business plan each year . . . clear goals [and] objectives for the year – how many new [worker coop] start-ups, how many new jobs in existing [worker coops] – so we had a vision of where we were going’. But ‘the issue was [that] worker coops had a bad . . . reputation’, meaning that the CDU ‘really struggled at the very start’. However, ‘The numbers did increase every year, a little bit’. The CDU would aim at ‘maybe . . . starting up 10 new [worker coops] a year as a target, [and] increasing employment . . . between new and . . . existing [worker coops by] maybe 100 extra people a year – that’d be the target, and we always got there or thereabouts’.

But the CDU had ‘a very small base starting off with, you know; [worker coop employment] was never going to go into the thousands’. Still, the existence of the CDU ensured that worker coops were ‘an option for people to look at: it gave some people hope; [it] gave some people jobs; they were in control of their . . . destiny, I suppose, at the end of the day’. In the end, ‘FÁS closed it down . . . and no one tried to stop it – well, [there was a] little push[back] against closing it down, but . . . nothing [substantial]’. The resistance came from ‘internal staff’ rather than the broader labour movement: ‘[The] unions didn’t [resist the closure], in my opinion – if my memory serves me right’.

Brendan Mackin recollected that Denis Rowan, ‘when he was in FÁS, was very supportive of the whole thing – community development’, owing to his trade union background: ‘[Denis] was one of the few senior managers in FÁS [who] actually still retained his trade union membership . . . He was a member [of SIPTU], but . . . when he got promoted up through the ranks, he never gave up his membership . . . which caused . . . points of conflict inside [FÁS] for him . . . especially when it came to, perhaps, industrial actions [etc.]’

In NICDA/SEA's interactions with state agencies in the North, Conal McFeely recounted that, 'There was always this constant battle between [the] cooperative economic model versus the [conventional] private sector model, and people [in state agencies] here were not at all interested in the cooperative model'. Unlike the CDU, which operated within the Southern state agency FÁS, NICDA/SEA was a community development NGO: 'It was outside the state . . . but our problem was that we needed resources; so you had to apply to the state [for funding] . . . That's where we came up against . . . [the] political bias against cooperatives'. He remembered setting up Creggan Enterprises:

So we originally set up Creggan Cooperative Society, right, and we convinced people to buy a piece of land . . . And then we couldn't get it through the system . . . At that stage, they're saying, "It's community[-owned] . . . it's open to manipulations . . . by Sinn Féin, the IRA [Irish Republican Army]" – because this community was at war with everybody [laughs].

The Agency moved to structure the organisation as a more conventional legal entity, to 'play [potential funders] at their own game', while embedding cooperative principles in its operations: 'So, we set up Creggan Enterprises, but within the constitution of Creggan Enterprises . . . we built into [it] . . . that the profits could only be used for the common good, in line with cooperative principles – it couldn't be used for personal gain'.

While NICDA/SEA 'had a Northern Ireland remit', it promoted cooperation on 'an all-Ireland basis'. In addition, though '[the Agency's] headquarters [were based] in Derry', state administration centred on Belfast: 'So they eventually strangled it to the point that the Agency couldn't survive, really, and it closed' around about 2008. Conal felt that the present-day social enterprise agenda had been watered down from NICDA/SEA's original intent:

There [are] people who are now involved in the social economy that will play their game. So there's a Social Economy Network;¹⁵⁹ but that was all originally set up with ourselves . . . Our view was [that] we wanted to promote worker coops [first and foremost]. Yes, we wanted to promote social enterprises

¹⁵⁹ See <https://www.socialeconomynetwork.org/>.

[and] the broad range of what was the third sector [more generally]. And we also tried to convince . . . our Assembly and all our people that . . . we should have a mixed and balanced economy. Yes, [the conventional] private [and] public sector[s are] out there; but we also should invest in the social economy.

To Conal, the social economy is about ‘economic activity, job creation, [and] local ownership’. It follows that the movement’s ethos is ‘very anti- . . . multinational capital . . . given the damage it’s done to the island of Ireland’. He said that social enterprise is ‘about social profits’, and he tried to revive this vision in 2012, in anticipation of ‘a devolved administration [that was] interested in . . . particular ideas about coops and the social economy’:

I was arguing [that] Derry, in particular, was . . . a very unique place, in terms of the range of social economy initiatives around cooperatives that [existed] in this city. And I [said that] what Northern Ireland needed was a social economy support unit . . . But, it wasn’t funded. What we needed [was] to set up a unit [with state involvement] . . . We didn’t get that though.

Brendan Mackin argued that, ‘Even from . . . the political point of view’, the social enterprise model provided ‘more flexibility’ in attracting potential ‘funders, which is largely the . . . public administration . . . and . . . banks’:

[With] two or three people setting up a business as a [worker] cooperative; the fucking banks . . . they were anything but helpful. . . . Whenever we were talking about [worker coops, the banks] thought it was . . . fuckin’ sandals and fuckin’ beads . . . the hippy approach, you know . . . So NICDA metamorphosed into the Social Economy Agency . . . to give us that broader remit . . . you know. And, hence . . . out of that there you had the likes of the Creggan [community] centre developing . . . [I]t wasn’t developed as a [worker] cooperative; but it helped to develop [worker] cooperatives.

He felt that the political situation in Northern Ireland created a need for broader social economy initiatives:

During the time of the Troubles, we had little or no . . . [conventional] politics . . . You had a very burgeoning and growing and, in some respects, quite a sophisticated community sector that had actually developed and [moved] into the space that politics had actually given up [on], you know – such as representing communities; such as representing . . . people; and . . . trying to articulate [strategies] for economic regeneration [and] housing regeneration [etc.]

Moreover, greater European integration and engagement with ‘the likes of Italy, and Germany . . . where social enterprises and cooperatives were actually part of the mainstream . . . opened the door’. For Brendan, worker cooperatives ‘could flourish’ as part of this ‘broader movement’.

He pointed to Emilia Romagna as an example of how the cooperative movement could, at least potentially, marshal a level of support from across the political-ideological spectrum:

[In] Emilia Romagna, you had fiscal and taxation and legal structures that were supported by both [the] right and left [wings]. . . . So, therefore, there was a political consensus around the fact that this was necessary. But the coops even in that setting . . . [weren’t] restricted [to start-ups] . . . “We can take over the enterprise . . . fuckin’ take it over” . . . And they were getting government support for it.

Similarly, Bill Kelly referred to the political consensus that was built around promoting cooperatives in the Basque:

As Mondragón [Cooperative Corporation] put it to us very well when we were over there . . . they got assistance from right and left [wings]. They [also] got assistance from the middle ground. And . . . they were happy to fucking take it . . . as long as there weren’t strings attached. Now . . . the Right looked at it and saw business . . . I’m generalising here . . . [while] the Left looked at it and saw . . . the potential democratisation of the workplace . . . [The] middle saw both . . . So . . . excuse my language again: I don’t give a fuck where [political support] would come from, as long as you get it, and you get something that would put [a supportive] framework in place [here].

The Church, as in Italy, could also potentially be won around to the cooperative movement. Brendan Mackin explained:

In a number of the countries in Europe, there [were] links between churches and trade unions . . . And the Church was actually supportive of things like that, you know, as well, because it supported [their] sort of social programme . . . As far as they were concerned, it was their parishioners [who were] doing it . . . it wasn’t “fuckin’ commies” or “fuckin’ lefties” coming in . . . [It was] the same [in Ireland], if you look at the history of a lot of the coops . . . particularly the rural coops and the agricultural coops, if you look at the role of local churches and stuff in setting them up – the parish priests . . . Father McDyer¹⁶⁰ [etc.]

¹⁶⁰ See McGinley (2010).

He did agree that the relationship between the Church and the Irish cooperative movement was more fractured, however, as evidenced by the struggles of ‘Paddy “the Cope” [Gallagher]’:¹⁶¹

You see, [with] McDyer and [co.] there was no conflict with business. [The only] business at that time around Glencolmcille was . . . small shopkeeper[s] . . . pubs . . . It’s [also] poor land – it’s smallholdings. [So] there was no big [capitalist or landlord class to confront] . . . There was little or no opposition, and the likes of McDyer getting in there [with the] cooperative . . . it was the only model that was going to work. . . . In other parts of Donegal [such as Dungloe] we had maybe wealthy landowners or fuckin’ business people who actually might have seen [coops as standing] in opposition [to their class interests]. And always remember: the one thing the Church was always happy to do was to ally itself to people with wealth, you know. [Also] . . . some of the people [promoting coops] in those small areas and towns were seen to be lefties . . . “fuckin’ communists” . . . [The] Ballyfermot [Cooperative in Dublin] . . . ran into . . . exactly the same attitudes.¹⁶²

Bill Kelly recalled how ‘even in [the] Navan factory, when they started up [Crannac Furniture Co-op] ¹⁶³ there in [1972] . . . the furniture shops refused to buy their product’. The factory workers had ‘*transitioned* it to a worker cooperative, when it went into difficulty’, and ‘the furniture retailers’ weren’t going to trade with ‘that shower of half-naked communists – or *potential* communists. No, kill that straight away; we don’t want that carry on’. Likewise, John Calnan described how, ‘at the time, [the Quay Coop] would’ve been . . . seen . . . very suspiciously . . . Like, we were actually raided once by the Special Branch¹⁶⁴ . . . and they took away a book on repairing phones [from the Coop’s bookshop] . . . because they suspected it was something to do with bomb making’. Such was the perception of a coalition of environmentalist, feminist, and lesbian and gay activists in ‘Holy Catholic Ireland in the 1980s’.

¹⁶¹ See Gallagher ([1939] 1945).

¹⁶² On the Ballyfermot Cooperative, see Fallon (2016). On the history of Irish anti-communism more generally, see O’Connor (2014).

¹⁶³ See *Meath Chronicle* (2017): ‘Crannac was the longest running worker’s co-operative in Ireland’ – 31 years – when it closed in 2003. See also RTE Archives (2016).

¹⁶⁴ Now officially known as the Special Detective Unit (SDU).

Tullamore Meats Co-op did receive some support from the local business community, through the purchase of ‘non-voting shares’ and the Co-op’s produce. But they got ‘very little support’ from local government:

This place that we’re in now . . . we went looking for that from the IDA . . . [who] owned the building . . . They said they couldn’t do anything for us because we were in the . . . food business . . . If we were making rag dolls they could help us out, but we weren’t making rag dolls we were making sausages. . . . But . . . we got this place from the IDA after . . . a lot of [campaigning] . . . We went to every parish priest . . . and TD in the constituency [laughs] . . . anyone with [any] bit of clout at all. . . . I think we rented it for three year[s] . . . before we bought it then ourselves . . . and then we spent a lot of money on it.

The worker-members remembered that, ‘We got a wage subsidy at the start alright . . . they allowed us to sign [on the dole] for a few weeks . . . while we were doing up the place’. Oliver Larkin recollected:

One of our lads was up in the signing office and met one of the lads who used to work with him. And we were training and doing up this place at the time, but Frank says to him, “Well son, how are ye getting on?” “Ah sure we’re working away”, says John [laughs] . . . [which] didn’t sound too good.

The reaction to the idea of setting up a worker coop was generally hostile, as Angela Conroy explained: ‘We were told [that] it was “a time bomb”, but [here we are 29 years later]’. Oliver Larkin recalled approaching an insurance broker for a quote: ‘He said, “I wouldn’t touch ye; ye’re sitting on a time bomb” [laughs] . . . And [now] he’s gone! [laughs] . . . [The] time bomb didn’t go off [on us]’. They eventually managed to get sorted elsewhere:

I think we were lucky at that time that Bank of Ireland was after setting up . . . a start-up scheme . . . We got an accountant then down town . . . We only met him one night and he said he’d do it . . . “I know there’s no money there, but . . . in the future, I might get something out of ye” . . . So he was with us for 29 year[s] and he got a good bit out of it since. . . . He had [some learning to do too, since] he wouldn’t have known much about us, or coops . . . [But] he was a decent man.

Brendan Mackin reflected on the Irish Labour Party’s role in establishing the CDU:

I mean, everybody thought that when the Labour Party got in as part of a coalition [that] there would’ve been something done [to

further promote worker coops]. Fuck all was done, you know, because . . . the unions were advocating different things. It certainly wasn't a primary objective that they would've been looking for, you know.

While 'money was put into the FÁS structure' to promote worker cooperative development, Bill Kelly described how the CDU was 'bastardised, effectively . . . [a] bit of tokenism really . . . It was kind of a sop there to . . . the trade union movement . . . "Everybody come into the collective bargaining [tent], and we'll take a bit of this"'. As far as Bill could see, 'They threw some money at it, but they didn't throw cultural appreciation at it, you know'.

Eoin Davey remembered how Union Taxis was met with political resistance in the local community: 'The republican movement would own a number of taxi offices within Belfast, so it's an earner for them, and that's long been the case'. From the outset, 'they basically objected to the planning approval' for the Coop's office. While Union Taxis would have represented increased competition in the local industry, Eoin suspected that there was also a conflict of political ideologies at play: 'I would actually have been seen, yes, as an [economic] infringement; but it was also the kind of business model that was being [pursued]'. The republican movement locally were saying one thing and doing another: 'So, although, on paper, [they] said that they were supportive of workers' cooperatives, they [did] nothing to support this workers' cooperative, and [did] everything to hinder this start-up business, and the potential that it had for, you know, transforming the community and the working lives of taxi drivers . . . [Union Taxis was] going to be owned by the workers – the taxi drivers – not by one or two exploitative owners'.

When Eoin confronted those opposing the Coop, it was suggested that he open 'the taxi depot over in Lanark Way; there's a number of units over there', rather than, as planned, on the Springfield Road. But, from Eoin's perspective, 'Lanark way . . . it's a hotspot, in terms of the sectarian flash-point, you know; so it's right on what was referred to as the "peace line" or the "interface" . . . So it would be in a dangerous setting'. Moreover, from an advertising point of view, 'it wouldn't be viable . . . because, in terms of a new taxi service, you'd need to be visible, you'd need . . . a [shop]front [on] the road facing [potential customers]'.

Right throughout the planning process, Union Taxis affirmed their ‘commitments to the local community’, making provisions to satisfy objections concerning noise pollution and gambling: ‘There would be no gaming machines, you know, because we were ideologically opposed to gambling’. Planning approval was eventually granted to allow the Coop to establish a taxi depot on the Springfield Road: ‘It was objected to at council level by the Sinn Féin councillors at the committee stage, but they were outvoted . . . by the other councillors’. The damage was done though: ‘It really delayed the whole plan of us opening by six months or more’.

The political situation also meant that, ‘Those drivers that had [given] a commitment to come along and join us had got cold feet. Because . . . as well as all this [delay] going on, once they got word that Sinn Féin, and the republican movement on the ground, were objecting to this – were against it . . . it proved very difficult then to get the drivers to come up’. When the office opened, Union Taxis had ‘only three drivers’, and really struggled to grow thereafter: ‘We built it at one point I think to six drivers; but we were really no more successful than that’. While he relayed that the Coop ‘did begin to make inroads in terms of community support . . . there was an insufficient number of drivers . . . to make it viable’.

Eoin recalled the Coop organising ‘an Open Day . . . down in the Trademark offices . . . [to] give people information on what Union Taxis entailed . . . to try and educate people and give them a general awareness as to . . . how, going forward, in terms of their working lives, they’d be so much better off, you know’. The Open Day ‘was attended by a number of taxi drivers . . . [and] also by a depot owner . . . Once we realised who [the depot owner] was, I actually had to put him off the premises, you know’. In addition, it transpired that, ‘The firm who I had worked for made it known to the drivers that, if they attended the meeting, that they needn’t come back to work. So there [were] threats, and there was intimidation of drivers’.

He approached ‘lots of the community organisations [for support], but because Sinn Féin has such a hold on the community organisations in West Belfast, it proved extremely difficult to get support from those organisations,

you know’. At the end of the day, ‘There [were] vested interests at stake here; and it just was not in their interests to see us succeed, in any way, shape, or form’. He elaborated:

Workers’ cooperatives are run . . . democratically, by their workers, and they are sort of . . . independent of any outside influence or . . . you know, control. So, they’re very much controlled from within . . . as opposed to from outside. And I fear that . . . politically, when [the republican movement] couldn’t exert any control or influence over our taxi service [then they went against it] . . . And if it had grown it would’ve posed a great threat to them . . . It was very much a control thing: that if they couldn’t control it, they didn’t want it, you know. So, I really do believe that that’s what it was about there.

Political opposition aside, however, Eoin was ‘still very much of a viewpoint that a successful business model *is* the workers’ cooperatives, you know’.

While the Quay Co-op didn’t receive any state funding at the outset, they later availed of Social Employment Schemes (SES), where the Government funded ‘10 or 12 places . . . getting people off the dole . . . 20 hours a week . . . in here for a year or so . . . [on] very low pay . . . probably just off the dole’. As a prerequisite, the Coop needed to ‘demonstrate that we do a lot of . . . social work in the community, you know, and [that we] were trying to do it on our own back – even though that’s primarily what we’re about’. In terms of social and political activism, John communicated that, ‘At the time we had the only lesbian and gay . . . switchboard operating . . . anywhere outside of Dublin, I’d say . . . We had CND – [the] Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament – [and] we had the anti-Apartheid group . . . meeting here’. Today, ‘All those projects have gone off on their own . . . by mutual consent . . . [or else] dissolved . . . So all the SES schemes then . . . went away with them . . . For the first time then we were a sole business . . . [from] 1990’.

Tom Wall set out the political context to the crisis negotiations at Bord na Móna:

Initially when I got involved, there was clearly a deep sense of political enmity between Eddie O’Connor and [Kevin McMahon] . . . Now, there were jibes about kind of communist influences on the one hand, and Maoist [influences on the other] – Eddie O’Connor was an old Maoist [laughs] in his student days you see . . . But they got over that, and what surprised me is that O’Con-

nor, for all his clear . . . kind of . . . ideological commitment to the idea of entrepreneurship, he was quite happy to . . . go along with the [AEU] idea, once [the trial] proved that our system worked, you know . . . And that was unusual in itself.

Tom suspected that ‘the Chairman of the board . . . Brendan Halligan, ex-General Secretary of the Labour Party . . . had some influence on that too’. He remarked that Eddie O’Connor and Brendan Halligan ‘got on very well’. But ‘Eddie then went on to hope to privatise Bord na Móna and fell out with top civil servants’. Kevin Gavin explained that ‘the Chairman and the Managing Director’s role was to keep the politicians on board . . . [because] while [the new work system] was an internal matter, you still were always reminded that you’re part of the state’. He agreed that, ‘At one phase, yes, there was a privatisation agenda . . . definitely’, though ‘it kind of backed off . . . [since] you were managing a very significant landbase . . . that you couldn’t necessarily depend on a private company to [manage properly]’. Still, ‘I would say, genuinely, if they could offload it, they would be very happy to offload it – if they were sure the other things were dealt with’.

5.4.2.2 Trade union support

Conal McFeely recalled that the labour movement was the driving force behind worker coop development initiatives across the island of Ireland:

The focus came . . . initially, from a number of radical trade unionists, who said that . . . given [the capitalist organisation of] Irish society, North and South, there [were] always going to be people left behind, right; and that [space] wasn’t going to be filled by the [conventional] public [or] private sector[s]. So, therefore, [there] should have been equal status given to cooperative development, right . . . [the] “third sector” [or] “social economy” . . . [which is founded upon] the principles of working for the common good. . . . People living in marginalised communities could identify with that.

The WUT, for example, arose from the FWUI’s radicalism, according to Eddie Glackin:

The Union would’ve been very committed generally to the [whole] concept of worker participation and worker directors. And the Union would’ve been involved . . . in many sectors where worker directors, for example, existed, like [in] the ESB . . . Bord na Móna, [and] Aer Lingus [etc.] So the Union would’ve been very supportive and – to use a word I hate – “proactive” in relation

to those things anyway . . . So . . . that ethos [was there in the FWUI].

The CDU, Denis Rowan explained, was also ‘a trade union-driven thing . . . It came out of the trade union movement; it was . . . [intended to support] unemployed workers . . . [and] we were purely [about promoting] worker coops’. Denis himself even personally identified with the trade union movement:

I was . . . a SIPTU member . . . So, even as [part of] management [in FÁS], I still maintained my membership. . . . The Irish Trade Union Trust [was] a SIPTU . . . grouping . . . and, I got friendly with the [General] President of SIPTU [Bill Attley] and . . . Eddie Glackin . . . And I tried to create an atmosphere [where they didn’t need to] worry that [the CDU] was in a semi-state body . . . “We are where we are . . . [but] there’s money available”. It hadn’t got off the ground [during] the first year all that well, okay, and I said, “Well, why don’t we start working together – the cooperative approach [to worker] cooperative [development]? . . . Don’t worry that I’m a [in a] semi-state body, or a suit” . . . And then we set off.

Yet, Denis questioned the wider commitment to worker cooperative development within the Irish trade union movement, especially when compared to that of continental Europe:

I think it was a token gesture to set up the Unit at the start. The unions wanted it as part of the [national social partnership] agreement, and the unions [proposed this] late in the night . . . “Okay, we’ll go along [with it]”. So it wasn’t done for economic reasons . . . as such.

Tom Wall agreed, in that, once the Unit was established, there was no great push from the trade unions. That said, Denis relayed that ‘Eddie Glackin [had a] personal interest in this stuff . . . so Eddie was always there . . . pushing and shoving’.

The often fractured relationship between trade unions and cooperatives was conveyed by Brendan Mackin: ‘[The] trade union movement, in many respects – and I’m speaking as somebody who [is] an ex-President of fuckin’ Congress – had a very sort of ambiguous attitude to cooperatives; and a lot depended on what was happening in local areas’. Conal McFeely even recounted being ‘accused once of running a little soviet [MPE] . . . by a right-wing trade unionist’. For Brendan Mackin, the tradition of top-down

governance in large-scale Irish manufacturing and public sector operations meant that, ‘You didn’t really have [a] big [identification with cooperativism] within the monoliths . . . the power brokers within the trade union movement’. While ‘they would’ve paid token [gestures] to it, they didn’t adopt it as a practical way [to go]’. Unions ‘would’ve supported it if people [organised locally], rather than see [an enterprise] close . . . but they never came forward with a policy . . . to say . . . here’s something that we will support, and here’s something that we could develop as an alternative to [neoliberalism]’. This contrasted with developments elsewhere in Europe:

If you look at the like of the Italian unions, and you look at the like of some of the Scandinavian unions . . . they actually had that as part of their bulwark, you know . . . And if you actually look at the structure of the trade union movements in Italy . . . you’ve the Christian democrats, you’ve the socialists, and [the] communists . . . but all of them support coops, you know.

For Stevie Nolan, the relationship between the cooperative movement and the trade union movement had, if anything, gotten worse in recent years: ‘I mean, the unions have a huge role to play in this, but they don’t see it as part of their . . . raison d’être. There’s an antipathy between unions and coops in Britain, and there’s a hangover here [in Ireland] about it as well’. But there was at least some sense of a shared purpose in a Northern context:

ICTU North was good, in the sense that the first cleaning contract the Belfast Cleaning [Coop] were on was [the] ICTU offices in Belfast – and they still have it, four years later – that was useful. And NIPSA [Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance]¹⁶⁵ also got us a major cleaning contract with their solicitors, which was a big office block. So they’ve been [helpful] . . . In the South, no, nothing – no purchase.¹⁶⁶

Bill Kelly commented that the trade unions ‘would’ve been the next obvious place’ for the WCN to lobby, had the Network not been ‘so fucking exhausted at that stage’. Trade unions would be ‘a possible funding source as well . . . but you [would] need to get more than the trade union movement [on board]’.

¹⁶⁵ See <https://nipsa.org.uk/>.

¹⁶⁶ A conference on ‘Economic Democracy and Worker Co-operatives; The Case for Ireland’, organised by the Society for Co-operative Studies in Ireland (SCSI), and supported by SIPTU, CHI, ILCU, ICOS, UCC Centre for Co-operative Studies, and Unite, was held in SIPTU’s Liberty Hall Theatre on April 9, 2019.

As the local trade union official with Bord na Móna, Kevin McMahon ‘got Eddie [Glackin] involved at that time [through] the ITUT’, which ‘provided support and advice’ to worker cooperatives. Kevin had been an FWUI official prior to the SIPTU amalgamation:

The Workers’ Union of Ireland was very much, in the ’60s and ’70s, supportive of the whole idea of cooperatives and [worker] participation . . . [It was] not only in our union, but in other unions too – unions were possibly in a far stronger position . . . You could really promote cooperatives with Government at that time, or with state agencies, in a way that, when the unions subsequently found themselves weakened in relation to their place in society, was much harder to do; because they were predominantly confined to firefighting and trying to just hang on in there, as against a situation where unions were very strong and they could advance aspects of their agenda that were kind of beyond the pure pay and conditions of employment – but equally important to workers as well.

While the AEU system ‘arose out of Bord na Móna’, Kevin McMahon and Tom Wall had hoped that this example would take hold within the broader trade union movement. As Kevin McMahon argued, ‘You can learn from somebody’s experience, and . . . we overcame a threat of contracting out by bringing in these new work systems’. In one notable instance, both Tom and Kevin were involved in ‘advising union officials’ in Coillte¹⁶⁷ about the introduction of AEU. As Kevin recollected:

Their operation would have been a production operation harvesting trees, and that would’ve been suitable to an autonomous work system. But it didn’t happen [in] Coillte; all the production operations of Coillte were contracted out, because there wasn’t enough commitment or interest either on the part of management or the unions to make that a reality. It would have meant a lot of investment of time and energy on the part of unions and management, you know, to bring that about. . . . A lot of workers too wanted to get redundancy money if they could, and then go off and work somewhere else, or come back in and work on a contract basis, and become little millionaires themselves – that would’ve been a kind of a frame of mind . . . that would’ve been embedded by some management people as well. We were capable of getting on top of that in Bord na Móna . . . I know there was some trial somewhere in Coillte, but . . . it didn’t get off the

¹⁶⁷ Coillte is an Irish forestry SOE. See <https://www.coillte.ie/>.

ground. . . . The political leadership wasn't there on either side, and that's why it didn't happen.

Tom Wall emphasised that, 'The [union] official and many of the shop stewards were not at all interested in any novel approach – so it was quite the opposite to Bord na Móna'. His recollection was that management in Coillte 'would've been willing to investigate this – they'd consider it positively *if* the union[s] had thrown their weight behind it'. In the case of Coillte then, 'The opposition was mainly from the union side'. The main difference between Coillte and Bord na Móna related to the composition of the workforce:

There were two classes of workers [in Coillte]: there [were] the labourers, as they used to be called – the forestry workers – and [there were the] foresters. And the foresters were professional staff organised by IMPACT [Irish Municipal, Public and Civil Trade Union]¹⁶⁸ . . . So it wasn't at all like the foremen or supervisors in Bord na Móna, who . . . had an empathy with the people they worked with . . . These were all college guys who felt they were professionals, and the *idea* of anybody kind of sharing their managerial role, it seemed to me, would have been anathema.

In the end, Kevin McMahon recounted, the cooperativisation of Bord na Móna simply went under the radar:

Unfortunately, the Bord na Móna [experience] . . . was just a one off, and it wasn't really replicated elsewhere in the state sector. And that, I think, was a big disappointment . . . to people like myself, or Tom Wall as well, [who] saw, you know, possibility here for . . . expanding trade union activity or the role of trade unions into remodelling work in a way . . . which would've devolved decision making down to workers . . . more enriched their lives, and empowered them in terms of how their own companies were operated.

Regarding the implementation of workplace democracy, Kevin McMahon felt that the responsibility lay, first and foremost, with local trade union organisers, rather than with Congress per se:

You can't expect Congress or the general officers of SIPTU to make these things happen on the ground. There [are] people on the ground that have to make it happen. It comes really down to, you know, local union officials at the coalface, and the shop stewards: they're the ones that really have to drive these type of changes and processes. And, at that stage, they can pull in

¹⁶⁸ IMPACT has been amalgamated into Fórsa. See <https://www.forsa.ie/>.

supports from Congress or, you know, get the support from the higher up in the union.

Tom Wall noted that Kevin McMahon ‘would have been aware internationally [of experiments with worker control], but most officials wouldn’t have had his kind of strategic interest, so it was helpful to have him there’. But also, ‘Congress, because we weren’t rushing from pillar to post in terms of putting fires out like your conventional . . . union, we could look at things in a more strategic light’. Some ideas ‘would be regarded as off-the-wall stuff; but in times like this it worked, partly because Bord na Móna was facing a gigantic crisis’. In their terms and conditions of employment, ‘most of the workers were conscious [that] they were beginning to look over a cliff, so a solution – even a radical one – was looked on in a way that [it] wouldn’t [have been] if that prerogative wasn’t there’.

Overall, the Irish labour movement failed to formulate a general strategy to promote worker control across Irish industry. Tom Wall remembered that, ‘Des Geraghty [former General Secretary of the Workers’ Party; and former SIPTU General President], who was [Vice President of SIPTU] at the time, at the early stages, was *very* positive and thought it was a great idea’. Relatedly, Kevin Gavin communicated that Des built up a good relationship with Eddie O’Connor during the Bord na Móna negotiations. When Des left the Union to represent the Democratic Left (DL)¹⁶⁹ in the European Parliament, Tom Wall recounted that, ‘There was nobody . . . at a senior level . . . with any great strategic vision’. Tom recalled further that, ‘The unions . . . pushed the worker participation thing . . . in state companies . . . high-level participation, but there was little thought, I ever found, given to lower-level participation’. Even ‘cooperatives [were] seen as an entirely separate kind of thing’ from worker participation, so ‘there was no great integration of ideas’.

¹⁶⁹ Democratic Left was formed after a split from the Workers’ Party, following the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). DL later amalgamated into the Irish Labour Party. See Hanley and Millar (2009).

5.4.2.3 Cooperative movement support

Eddie Glackin told of efforts to develop a ‘federation of worker coops’ around the time the WUT was established: the late ‘Tom Redmond¹⁷⁰ . . . a very dear friend and great comrade . . . was heavily involved in the [Network of Worker Co-ops] and would’ve been a member of the cooperative development council with FÁS, which did a lot of very good work’. Similarly, Denis Rowan remembered ‘a little network [of worker coop developers] starting to work [together]’ on an all-Ireland basis. For example, Conal McFeely described how NICDA and the CDU set up ‘an all-Ireland coop award’ for outstanding cooperative enterprises. They wanted to tap into the history of cooperatives in Ireland to promote ‘a mixed and balanced economy’: ‘So . . . yes, we know we’re living in a global economy [that is] driven by the [capitalist] private sector ethos; however, you know, there’s another sector out there, and it’s part of a global movement, which [is] the cooperative movement’. One initiative to win the award, Glenowen Fisheries, was ‘a workers’ coop’ based in Creggan. Another was based in ‘a Protestant working class area’ of Belfast. ‘So there was a *big* movement at that stage’.

Brendan Mackin was involved in setting up NICDA with Conal McFeely, who he knew as a fellow ‘trade union activist’, and ‘we then met Denis’ when setting up the all-Ireland cooperative award – ‘we all sort of met through NICDA’. Brendan noted that, ‘Denis and I have been sort of friends [ever since]’. Denis explained how the WUT/ITUT, CDU, NICDA/SEA, and Network of Worker Co-ops needed to combine for the movement to reach scale:

We were starting too few worker coops. There was a feeling . . . and [these are] the words *they* used – worker coops: “brown-sandaled, brown-riced, breast-feeding brigade” . . . [That was] . . . how people saw coops. [But for] the Italians, coops [were] a way of life: it was nearly a first choice . . . to set up as a coop, rather than as a [company] limited by shares . . . So I felt [a] critical mass [of worker coops was] required. So, [we adopted] an all-Ireland type of approach, where they had some coops [up North, and we had] some coops [down South].

¹⁷⁰ See <http://www.communistpartyofireland.ie/ob-tom.html>.

The CDU and NICDA ‘applied for funding . . . as a group together, and we got [a] substantial [amount of] money . . . for feasibility studies, for . . . conferences, for . . . a whole range of things . . . cross-border, all-Ireland training . . . where people started to network a bit together’. It was also hoped ‘that coops would trade with one another – which really happened to a certain extent’. In addition, the Irish worker coop development network ‘tried to link into the UK and Wales. We did a lot of work with the Welsh crowd . . . The head of the [Wales Cooperative Development and Training Centre] . . . Bill Burnett . . . [a] Scottish fella . . . we met up with him’. The international dimension was very important:

So we were trying to spread the networking [of worker coop] development bodies. Even though we were a semi-state body ourselves, I felt we needed [to be] linking [up] with other organisations doing the same type of work, okay. And it started to give us a bit of street credibility . . . Wales¹⁷¹ certainly worked with us; [the] Scottish¹⁷² worked with us; Northern Ireland certainly did [also] . . . And what we were trying to do was [to reach a] critical mass . . . at an EU level . . . and . . . from that [build] confidence [so that] people would see setting up as a coop [as a viable option] . . . Because a lot of people just didn’t get it . . . it’s a cultural thing.

Conal McFeely emphasised the importance of drawing on ‘the history of the cooperative movement’ in Ireland, from ‘the Plunkett Foundation’,¹⁷³ to ‘the credit unions’,¹⁷⁴ to ‘Paddy “The Cope” [Gallagher]’,¹⁷⁵ to Fr McDyer’s cooperative experiment:¹⁷⁶ ‘One of the things I used to always do anytime I employed a new member of staff . . . I took them up to Glencolmcille, and that was part of their induction’.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷¹ <https://wales.coop/>.

¹⁷² See <http://cdsblog.co.uk/> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSI2jRdYEsU>.

¹⁷³ See King and Kennedy (1994) and Doyle (2019).

¹⁷⁴ See Quinn (1995).

¹⁷⁵ See Gallagher ([1939] 1945).

¹⁷⁶ See McGinley (2010).

¹⁷⁷ Incidentally, IRA volunteers also received cooperative education in Glencolmcille after the republican movement’s shift left during the 1960s. As veteran Irish republican Jim Monaghan recalled: ‘The [Special] Branch arrived up to Fr McDyer and they said to him:

‘Trademark set up Co-operative Alternatives with [Tiziana O’Hara] . . . as a worker coop development coop’. Stevie Nolan explained that Tiziana had ‘come into Trademark . . . from the Northern Ireland Cooperative Forum, which doesn’t exist anymore . . . the Northern equivalent of ICOS’. Co-operative Alternatives moved away from its initial focus on worker cooperatives, however:

Unfortunately there was an ideological split, as usual, and Co-operative Alternatives is still in existence . . . but it does mainly . . . kind of, share-issue coops; in the sense of, like, large wind farms and . . . community benefit societies. . . . [They] weren’t interested in [worker coops to the same extent]; and that was our focus . . . We were “red” coops and they were kind of “blue” coops [laughs].

To illustrate a more general tension within the cooperative movement, Stevie recounted when Trademark met with ‘the head of the Co-op [Food]’:¹⁷⁸ ‘You’ve had 180 years to make your employees members [of the Co-op], and you haven’t . . . 180 years to bring more democracy into your union’. Stevie agreed that a similar criticism might apply to the Irish credit union movement.

Bill Kelly remembered how Meitheal Mid West and Trademark, along with some others, set up the WCN in 2012. Stevie Nolan described the Network as ‘an attempt just to put everyone in contact with each other’ across the existing Irish worker coop sector. In an attempt to quantify the sector, ‘the last piece of work was done by Michael [Gavin] . . . [who] worked in [Bridge Street Co-op]¹⁷⁹ down in Kenmare’. ‘[Michael] identified 19 worker coops in [the South of] Ireland, [though] most of them were moribund even when he did the research on them’.¹⁸⁰ The need for a network was more pressing in the South and on an all-island basis: ‘The *reality* is, in the North, we’re all in contact with each other anyway, and it’s more a kind of network; there aren’t

“You know there are carloads of IRA men coming up here every month and working”, and McDyer responded, “Do you think you could arrange a carload of Special Branch, maybe they could do a bit of work too?” So the Branch went off in a big huff . . . Everywhere else they could intimidate people, but not him’ (quoted in Sin é, a chara 2015). See also, Millar and McMahan (2017, p. 13).

¹⁷⁸ See <https://food.coop.co.uk/>.

¹⁷⁹ See <http://www.bridgestreetcoop.com/>.

¹⁸⁰ See Gavin et al. (2014).

that many [worker coops in the North]’. For now, the WCN mainly exists online: ‘[The website]¹⁸¹ still functions and we still put stuff on it; but, at the moment, we haven’t got time to develop [the Network much further] . . . which is a pity, you know’.

Asked whether Belfast Cleaning Society networked with other worker coops, Alice McLarnon replied that, ‘Principle 6 [of the coop principles] is Cooperative Support’. The worker-members communicated that, ‘We have drunk Farmageddon [Brewing Co-op] beer, and we had a cleaning contract with Creative Workers’ Cooperative, [who] designed our logos and . . . our website, and our fliers [etc.] . . . We used Union Taxis quite often . . . and we always eat out of [Lúnasa] Cáife [laughs] . . . We have all our meetings there [laughs] . . . and buy our lunch off them [etc.]’ The strategy was to grow the movement, explained Alice: ‘I mean, [imagine] if there [were] 100 coops, and they all used each other . . . and [got] a discount . . . That’s helping the cooperative economy grow, you know . . . Unfortunately there’s only a handful . . . if even, of us in Belfast [at the moment]’.

One worker-member emphasised that cooperative solidarity extended beyond ‘the groups that we know . . . If we’re in a shop and it’s made by a cooperative, we buy it, you know; we’ve got that in our heads now’. Alice offered an example: ‘I have to buy Cravendale [milk]’. Another worker-member remembered that ‘last year we went to London . . . to a cooperative over there, to help them [starting up] – a cleaning cooperative’. Alice recalled that this was the ‘Custom House Workers’ Cooperative’.¹⁸²

Down South, while a worker-member in the Attymon Peat Co-op recalled ‘a bit’ of contact from other worker coops, ‘a lot of them weren’t in the same league as we were . . . and they weren’t a big interest to us then, you know’. He agreed it was ‘probably’ more a case of other worker coops looking for advice and support, rather than anything that might be mutually beneficial. John Calnan, on the other hand, relayed that Quay Co-op had been recently

¹⁸¹ See <http://www.workercooperativenetwork.org/>.

¹⁸² See. <http://customclean.london/>.

contacted by Dublin Food Co-op¹⁸³ to ‘make connections . . . and meet up and stuff – and compare notes [etc.]’ The Urban Co-op in Limerick was also mooted, so that ‘the three of us would get together in some fashion’. He conveyed that cooperative networking was ‘very slight, but it’s there, yeah . . . We’ve done this before ourselves’.

Stevie Nolan communicated that discussions were also taking place ‘to allow the Worker Cooperative Network to become kind of the local body for CICOPA’. The former Secretary General of CICOPA, and current Director-General of the ICA, Bruno Roelants, struck Stevie as ‘a Marxist’. The WCN ‘brought him over to meet FÁS . . . because FÁS were doing a big piece of research on social enterprises . . . and they hadn’t mentioned coops anywhere in it . . . Social enterprise in Ireland and Britain means kind of charities; whereas in Europe, social enterprise means coops’. As for those who felt that coops and charities were ‘all the same’, Stevie responded:

No, we’re not all the fucking same: we’re democratic, you’re not. That’s a big difference. . . . You might do good, but you’re deciding who does the good; whereas, in a coop, we fucking decide. . . . If a coop’s anything, it is a democratic organisation – if it’s not run [on the basis of] one member, one vote, then you’re not a coop.

Alice McLarnon felt much the same about many agricultural cooperatives, where ‘farmers all clump together – all millionaires, like, a lot of them’ to pool resources; ‘but they all still go back to their own big farms and they still want to make all their profits . . . and get migrant workers in and pay them a pittance’. As far as Alice was concerned, such enterprises are cooperatives in name only: ‘You cannot stand here in front of me and tell me you’re a member of a cooperative, because you are definitely not’. Stevie was critical of the cooperative federations in Ireland, more generally, for their lack of inter-cooperation:

Anywhere else in the [European] Union, you’d have those four legs of the stool: you’d have finance; you’d have maybe agriculture or farming; you’d have goods [and you’d have services] . . . You’d have various [cooperative organisations], and they’d all be working together in a [national] cooperative

¹⁸³ See <https://www.dublinfood.coop/>.

federation. . . . But . . . *here*, the federations . . . just don't seem to work together.

Stevie noted that 'there's a €7,000 grant for worker coop start-ups [that] you can get from the credit union movement [the Workers' Cooperative Fund]¹⁸⁴ . . . [but they don't] promote this. So they're not working for the benefit of other kinds of cooperatives'.¹⁸⁵ He suspected that this 'might be down to the conservative nature of Irish society; worker coops are considered a bit . . . "left[-wing]" or whatever'. But the Irish cooperative movement, on the whole, needed to start pulling its weight:

All of this work comes down to the fact that there's no resources or infrastructure put into it, and the people who were doing [the work], like Bill [Kelly] and [ourselves are] just fucking tiny . . . We have *no* resources at all. And the people that do have the resources aren't doing [the work], so that's where the gap is . . . [The trade unions and political parties] . . . but also the cooperative federations . . . the credit union [movement], the ICOS, and the . . . housing coops [etc.]

Bill Kelly told of how he contacted the then CEO of ICOS, Seamus O'Donohoe, who was 'very upfront' in communicating that, 'Look . . . we've no history here in worker cooperatives . . . it's not our cup of tea – not that we have anything against them, but our tradition is in [agricultural cooperatives]'. Bill felt that the credit union movement might be more receptive; but they would need to see some already-existing examples of successful worker cooperatives in Ireland first. He portrayed the political-economic barriers facing the movement in general, and the Urban Co-op in particular:

If you're going to do it outside of government support and all the rest of it, and if you're going to fly in the face of the [corporate] framework that's already there, I think you'll have to . . . develop a business that is commercially viable, and that is of some size – that is more than just two, three, or four people, right; that would have . . . 20, or 40 people working full time . . . And, of course, trying to mainstream [a cooperative] grocery [such as the Urban Co-op] . . . commercially, it's a fucking nightmare – excuse my

¹⁸⁴ See Kenmare Credit Union (2016, p.6).

¹⁸⁵ Conal McFeely stated that, 'One of the things . . . which we did through the Irish League of Credit Unions . . . we also argued that they'd an obligation under the coop principles to promote education and further cooperation. So they had a fund where . . . if you were a credit union member, you could apply for [it], and you could actually use that to set up a workers' cooperative or another cooperative'.

language – when you consider that, in the Republic, [circa] 85% of the shopping [industry] is controlled by the five or six multiples . . . the rest then – the 15% – is . . . everybody else [laughs]. . . . But, now, a bit like the [worker coops] in the North, it’s something . . . The basic [structure] is [there], but can we now transition it to something more substantial. . . . Even if it’s a . . . consumer cooperative and not a worker cooperative; it might lead on to something else [resembling a multistakeholder coop].

He emphasised the importance of sharing cooperative experiences within the movement: ‘There’s a lot to be said for . . . if people want to start something in a cooperative vein, [then] get them on a cheap flight over to Mondragón, or get them on a cheap flight over to Suma¹⁸⁶ . . . [to] see it – they need to experience it’.

While there was some history of cooperation in Tullamore, this didn’t factor in the decision to set up Tullamore Meats Co-op: ‘The North Offaly Co-op . . . that was “The Co-op” in Tullamore . . . it was a farmers’ coop . . . [which eventually] moved up here [to Spollanstown Industrial Estate from the “Co-op Corner”]’. While this indicated that there was a little ‘co-op group’ starting to form, Oliver Larkin noted that, ‘We’re the only coop in Tullamore now¹⁸⁷ – they’re gone: St. Peter took them up [laughs]’. The North Offaly Co-op demutualised when it was taken over by ‘Glanbia, yeah’. Angela Conroy commented that, ‘It’s a wonder really, isn’t it [that worker coops aren’t more prevalent across the country]?’ Oliver Larkin came up with the idea to form a worker coop independently: ‘The only thing I was . . . aware of was that, with my £3,000 I could start nothing; but if I got enough [of the other workers along] with me, we could make it [work]’.

Still, he pointed to the logic of building a cooperative network across the island: ‘If the coops were organised, in my opinion . . . we could deal with them . . . They could buy from us or we could buy from [them] . . . the whole lot of [us could] work together’. The Tullamore Meats Co-op had engaged in such networking in the past: ‘We [purchased] the coats one time . . . [from] a

¹⁸⁶ Suma is a wholefoods wholesaler, and the largest worker coop in the UK. See <http://www.suma.coop/>, and Pidd (2019).

¹⁸⁷ While Tullamore Meats Co-op is the only *worker* coop in the town, there is also the local branch of the Irish National Foresters’ Benefit Society; and the Tullamore Credit Union, a financial cooperative. See <https://www.tullamorecu.ie/>.

coop . . . Diamond Designs . . . [in] Mayo [I think]’. At the very beginning, ‘There was another coop . . . down in Westport . . . [and] we went down to see how they set it up’.¹⁸⁸ ‘We should be able to buy from [other worker coops] . . . but they’re not out there’.

5.4.3 Section summary

In Section 5.4, we learned of the rise and fall of a worker cooperative development infrastructure across the island of Ireland. Referring to our discussion of worker coop scale in Section 3.4.4, we examined the changing nature of the economic institutions regulating the Irish worker coop sector. We further explored the role of key stakeholder organisations in promoting or, indeed, retarding Irish worker coop development. Our case study results reaffirmed the central role of the labour movement in the struggle to establish a Cooperative Commonwealth or social structure of cooperation.

The legal, technical, and financial supports for worker coop development in Ireland were seen as inadequate by international standards. The legislative framework regulating Irish cooperatives discriminated against the worker coop form in particular, creating registration and governance issues for start-ups, and lacking any tailored support for buyouts. Similarly, little technical support, in terms of worker coop education and training, could be accessed through the state education system. And financial services were exceedingly difficult for worker coops to obtain from conventional sources. Yet, in attempting to circumvent these barriers, independent economic supports were devised and instituted by radical Irish trade unionists, *through and against* the Irish state.

By garnering the support of sympathetic elements within the Irish trade union leadership, cooperative labour activists were able to leverage the movement’s lobbying capacities to win concessions from the Irish state. This resulted in

¹⁸⁸ ‘I’ll tell you who mentioned them to us: [an Irish Labour Party] TD by the name of . . . Michael Bell . . . He came down to a meeting here and he mentioned them, and he said he’d arrange a meeting for us’. Bell was General Secretary of the Irish Shoe and Leather Workers’ Union (ISLWU), before it amalgamated into the ITGWU; and was nicknamed “Ding-a-ling” by workers in the Dubarry factory in Ballinasloe (as conveyed by Dr Gerrard Madden, a labour historian with the Irish Centre for the Histories of Labour and Class (ICHLC) at NUI Galway, whose father, John, worked in said factory). See *Irish Independent* (2000).

the establishment of an all-island worker coop development infrastructure, bolstered at times by concrete support from local-level politicians of all stripes, back when the Irish labour movement still retained sufficient clout. Any political concessions of this nature were relatively piecemeal, by comparison, in more recent times, reflecting the relative weakness of organised labour. That said, even at its height, and apart from tokenistic gestures and pockets of local support where conditions were more favourable, Irish worker coop development generally met with political hostility from the corporate-church-state nexus. This was understood as a far cry from the political consensus achieved by strong cooperativist labour movements in other countries.

Likewise, despite the persistent efforts of a small number of radical trade unionists, and the sympathetic ear of a smaller number of strategically-minded union leaders, the broader Irish labour movement was ambivalent, when not outright hostile, towards the idea of worker cooperative development. It often took a crisis situation before the cooperativist proposals of grassroots labour activists were even countenanced, let alone sanctioned, from above. The Irish union-coop relationship had only become worse in recent decades, with the rise of neoliberalism forcing labour onto the back foot. Again, this was contrasted with the broad-based support for worker coops amongst competing trade union federations in countries where workplace democracy is more widespread.

Nor did the general cooperative federations in Ireland show any significant enthusiasm for *worker* coop development. This indifference spurred past and present attempts to network Irish worker coops independently under an all-island umbrella. At the federal level, Irish worker coop development agencies jointly coordinated their activities, building linkages at home and abroad; while, at the grassroots, worker coops began to cooperate and trade amongst themselves where practicable. Attempts were also made to tap into the movement's history, and to encourage the sharing of cooperative experiences. Still, this modest networking effort paled in comparison to that of the leading international worker coop federations. Interview participants also noted that, in countries where *worker* coops were more widespread, there was usually a

far greater degree of cooperation amongst the different types of cooperative federations.

All in all, the exchange of ideas reported in this section reiterated the importance of negotiating a cooperative alliance between the various branches of the wider Irish labour movement – political, trade union, and cooperative. Such a progressive coalition could help to scale worker coop development via (legal, technical, and financial) economic policy reforms. But the Irish experience also reaffirmed the vanguard role of the most radical and class conscious of labour activists in the endeavour to establish a more comprehensive social structure of cooperation.

5.5 Cooperatives and the crisis of neoliberal capitalism

5.5.1 Political-cultural considerations

As to whether worker coops ‘have a future, in the western world, these days’, Denis Rowan reflected: ‘I think it needs a cultural change . . . There’s an educational dimension [and] an awareness dimension of what it is all about’. Bill Kelly was of a similar view, in that, ‘There are *cultures* out there – socioeconomic cultures – whereby there are things called cooperatives, which are . . . sustainable democratic businesses that are, in a lot of ways, foreign to our [contemporary] culture here [in Ireland]’. Denis Rowan emphasised the culture within Irish banking, for example:

I think the culture of the whole banking system would have to change as well. I mean, you walk into a bank [in Ireland] as a [worker] coop . . . they won’t touch you. . . . So the whole cultural thing – banks, [the] legal [framework, education etc.] – the whole thing would have to change dramatically for coops to be[come] an economic player equal to any of the other legal models that exist.

Such a fundamental cultural shift was beyond the scope of a cooperative development unit, in and of itself: ‘You can’t change the [Irish] banking world’s view’ through an isolated state agency. For a cultural change on that scale, Denis felt that, ‘You would have to take a long view of the world’, spanning decades. Cooperativism would need to become a ‘part of life, [such] that everybody just understood [the cooperative ethos]’. There were clear

public policy implications: ‘That’s where the government needs to come in as a partner to this development and thinking’. Bill Kelly concurred:

If you’re asking me . . . “Why don’t we have more . . . worker cooperatives in this jurisdiction?” . . . Yes, the short answer is it’s a cultural thing; but, the deeper answer I think is that it’s an ongoing government policy thing. . . . In . . . [promoting] worker cooperatives, you’re coming bang up against the . . . corporate tax haven model that is the foundation of economic policy here in this state since . . . shortly after [Seán] Lemass’s time. . . . I would say [that], economically, [there has been] a right-wing government anyway in Ireland . . . since practically the foundation of the state.

From Bill’s perspective, while worker coop development is ‘definitely the way to go . . . it presupposes clout and resources and time . . . and . . . in the absence of that, you have the continuous corporate thing going on in the background’. These political and cultural barriers will remain ‘unless there’s some confluence of . . . actors and resources to . . . coagulate together to put the framework in place, right – to start the lobbying process for the framework’:

You need to get . . . even a small . . . cohort of players who would be interested. Some would have to be on the inside . . . in government circles – departmental officials who would be . . . at least not hostile to the idea . . . Even if [it’s] a case of presenting to officials: “Here’s what happens in Mondragón; here’s what happens in Emilia Romagna; here are the employment statistics over a period of time” . . . Now maybe that’s where you guys [researchers] come in . . . where it could be put together on paper who the actors might be – a description of them . . . and . . . the plan that they would work towards.

Denis Rowan agreed that the ‘launch and convert’ model – that is, launching a conventional business before converting it into a worker coop – might be one way to tackle entrenched cultural attitudes. He suggested that ‘a version of that would be [where] the owner [through] succession planning would offer [the company] to the workers [to establish a worker coop] and work [to this end] maybe two or three years before they retire’. Either option would be better than starting from scratch:

Something like that would be better, rather than starting from unemployed [workers] . . . To try and grow an economic model [from scratch], it’s very hard . . . [By contrast, take] buyouts: converting [a firm] that’s already established . . . where there is a

market, and you're just reorganising the democracy of the business – whether [you're] taking over from a person [who]'s retiring, or you're buying out part of a bigger organisation.

In all of this, Denis argued that the state has a key role to play: 'For workers to be involved in . . . ownership of their business, whatever [the] model – [a] worker coop, an ESOP [etc.] – IDA, Enterprise Ireland, the local enterprise boards have got to be pushing it as a viable option, [for] which they get grant aids and support'. It followed that a coordinated, state-led worker cooperative development programme would be needed to advance 'a different model [and] different way of thinking altogether – there's your cultural change'. Without disregarding the importance of smaller-scale worker coop development initiatives, Denis indicated that reaching scale necessitated policy intervention at the highest levels. He counterposed this with the development of interface worker coops in the North:

The issue of the Shankill-Falls Road people coming together to run a . . . cleaning [coop etc.] . . . you're not up at an IDA level. So [there are] different levels . . . it's not "one size fits all" – it's different responses. Now, the Shankill-Falls model . . . has its place . . . [regarding] the social impacts and benefits . . . But if you really want to cause cultural change – economic model change – then you [have] got to go up to the top: [the] IDA [etc.] . . . all the wings of the state.

'Concerning people projecting a [worker] cooperative as the answer to unemployment', Eddie Glackin agreed with Denis, in that 'it's part of a response, but that's all – it's not the answer to unemployment'. With that said, Stevie Nolan defended Trademark's worker coop development work as a case of 'building practical utopias' and 'building the future now':¹⁸⁹

Although I know how naïve that is – as a fuckin' communist – at the same time, particularly working in the North, it's given me a sense of hope, because it's positive. And I like the idea of doing something [positive], because my last 15 years has been anti-sectarian work, and, I can assure you, it's fucking depressing. . . . I know that it's easily attacked, but I still think [that] there's massive potential in [worker coop development], actually, you know.

¹⁸⁹ See Wright (2010).

He agreed that the state had an important role to play in helping to scale the Irish worker coop sector:

There's not going to be a massive growth in the cooperative sector in Ireland [without] something [happening] at an institutional level – a state-level change – realistically . . . Because it's just too fucking hard: it's harder to set up a coop than it is to set up a [conventional business] . . . even though a coop is more likely to survive, and provide employment, and remain sustainable¹⁹⁰ . . . The state has a role in it; you can't pretend it doesn't, you know.

At the same time, state support wouldn't count for much unless accompanied by a fundamental cultural shift within Irish society: 'Huge value and cultural shifts . . . are needed . . . even for that to work. So it has to occur at all those levels'. Such cultural change could only come about by way of determined grassroots activism, according to Eddie Glackin, who pointed to 'huge successful ventures', such as 'Mondragón [Cooperative Corporation] in the Basque Country' and the experiences of 'the agricultural cooperatives',¹⁹¹ 'credit unions',¹⁹² and 'Templecrone Co-operative Society [The Cope]',¹⁹³ in Ireland. They showed what's possible, even against all odds: 'These are all community-run and member-owned businesses'.

Conal McFeely added Creggan Enterprises, a community cooperative and 'the main employer' in 'one of the most marginalised communities in the North of Ireland', to the list of Irish coop success stories: 'You're sitting in a building – an infrastructure – that's owned and controlled by the local community; it's self-sustaining; all the profits will be used . . . *can only* be used for the common good'. In terms of scale, he noted that, 'There [are] over 300 jobs created here as a result of this particular infrastructure'.¹⁹⁴ A number of cooperatives and social enterprises were scattered around the city of Derry: 'Now the problem is [that] they're all working in silos – they're not connected

¹⁹⁰ See CECOP (2012) and Pérotin (2016).

¹⁹¹ See King and Kennedy (1994) and Doyle (2016).

¹⁹² See Quinn (1995).

¹⁹³ See Boner (2009).

¹⁹⁴ 'Now they're not all employees of Creggan Enterprises. But, we've the public sector in here; we've the private sector in here; we have the social economy in here; we have some cooperatives in here'.

– [and] the only way you can connect them is . . . if you have the infrastructure to connect them’. In this regard, ‘The scale of the sector, you know, *globally*, is phenomenal . . . if you go to . . . some of the South American countries [for example]’.

At the micro level of the cooperative enterprise, Bill Kelly had ‘come to the conclusion that even if you had very deep pockets . . . it’s still going to take a big cultural shift to get everybody singing from the same hymn sheet’. He referred to the induction process at Suma in the UK:

The HR guy in Suma, Bob Cannell – keep in mind now [that] they’re going almost 30 years, at this stage – his rule of thumb is . . . if they [are] new hires . . . and they’ve the option of becoming worker-owners in Suma . . . [it takes them] *six months* to . . . get their head around this whole worker cooperative thing . . . once they’re *working* . . . in a successful cooperative. And then [it takes] a further 18 months to be . . . *spiritually* sort of culturally imbued with the thing, right. . . . [So] it gives you some idea of the mountain to be climbed.

Assuming state supports were put in place, Bill underscored the leading role of worker cooperative developers on the ground:

You’d still need . . . a [grassroots] structure to roll it out – to make it happen – even if you’ve the [policy] framework there, right . . . You’re still going to need practitioners around the country, who are going to have to grow them, in a sense . . . a cohort of accountants and legal [professionals] are going to have to – even outside of the government agencies – get familiar with it, such that they can be the accountants and the solicitors for the coops. And . . . of course, the boys and girls who started coops: they’re going to have to grow into it . . . But I think for it to . . . happen . . . in the short to medium term, you will need government support for it to happen . . . You need a policy shift, basically, right; otherwise you’ll just have tiny little pockets.

As a grassroots cooperative development activist, Conal McFeely was disheartened by the complacency of the political establishment in Ireland:

I would be highly critical of our political establishment here [in the North] . . . There’s no mention of cooperatives at all, in terms of their new Programme [for] Government . . . There’s very little mention even of the social economy; it’s all about inward investment . . . it’s all tokenism . . . So, I would actually argue that, North and South, at the moment, I don’t think there is an effective support structure for cooperative development. I think it’s a missed opportunity. Now, clearly once the economic

collapse came, particularly in the 26 counties . . . people like myself and others felt that, you know, it was an opportunity . . . to get [coops] back on the agenda . . . Because [when] everything was going grand, you know . . . the Cooperative Development Unit was . . . let go. . . . And we're now looking at Brexit here; but we're also looking at the situation . . . in the Republic following the collapse of the banks and all that. . . . If we're [going] to build a modern Ireland . . . how would we like that modern Ireland to be, you know? [If] you go back to some of the [cooperative] theories of Peadar O'Donnell¹⁹⁵ . . . of [James] Larkin,¹⁹⁶ [and James] Connolly¹⁹⁷ . . . there [are] ways and means of actually doing that within a modern society – it's all been . . . forgotten about, you know. . . . Sinn Féin seem to have abandoned it at the moment;¹⁹⁸ everybody seems to have abandoned [it]. . . . Everybody's bought into the [conventional] private sector model, which is quite frustrating.

Even if this all meant that we were basically 'starting fresh' today, Conal maintained that there are remnants of a cooperative, self-help ethos within Irish society. This could be harnessed to revitalise the coop movement:

If you look at the island of Ireland . . . its natural instinct is to do things for itself. And a classic example of self-help would be [the establishment of] the GAA [Gaelic Athletic Association]¹⁹⁹ . . . So, therefore, there's an ethos there . . . that you can tap into . . . If we're going to create . . . the cooperative ethos, it needs to be taught in the home,²⁰⁰ it needs to be taught in the schools –

¹⁹⁵ See Ó Drisceoil (2001).

¹⁹⁶ See O'Connor (2015).

¹⁹⁷ See Collins (2012).

¹⁹⁸ Conal noted that, 'Sinn Féin initially took a view that they would be supportive of the cooperative model . . . At that stage, they didn't have the political power they have now . . . [Back] then they were very supportive of how [cooperatives] would empower local communities. . . For example, there was a project on site here . . . the North West Taxi Proprietors, which is a cooperative . . . Again, it's all taxi drivers they've brought together – all ex-prisoners'.

¹⁹⁹ See *History Ireland* (2011).

²⁰⁰ Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey describes in her memoir how, 'Our family was a very democratic assembly' (Devlin 1969, p.32) and 'we weren't a family, we were a cooperative society' (p. 44). More recently, she recalls: 'My father was a trade unionist. I have no recollection of him drilling trade unionism into us as kids. But I have the clearest memory of him planting flowers in our garden and then planting a small coin. We watched the flowers grow and he dug up the coin. He showed us that if you plant flowers, they grow. But if you plant money in the soil, it doesn't. Money only grows when you plant it on the backs of working people. My father died when I was nine but I never forgot that. . . . From my mother I got a sense of human solidarity that, oddly enough, I think came from Catholicism' (Devlin-McAliskey 2016, p. 84).

primary school [and so on] – and it has to be seen as a career opportunity for people . . . I think we do need the political will . . . but it’s about creating . . . that culture. And I think that culture . . . does exist in Ireland – particularly in rural Ireland. . . . In many ways, because of the [conventional] private sector sort of ethos . . . everything’s become . . . [about] “me, me, me” . . . the individual. But that can be reversed. . . . “We” as a community now should set up our own cooperative [university], and we should model it on [Mondragón University²⁰¹ in] the Basque region.

Worker-members from the Belfast Cleaning Society also emphasised education from a cultural perspective. As one of the women running the Coop argued:

Why, why do you not get taught about [cooperatives] in school – why do you not get educated, you know? I did Economics in A Levels at school, and I hadn’t got a clue – I knew about supply and demand [laughs], and I knew about capitalism – [but I] hadn’t got a clue [about] what a cooperative was. And I just think [that] that’s the strangest thing now – now that I’m here . . . If there was an alternative economy, and if the workers’ cooperatives were [to be] part of it, it should start with education – it should start at that level – and it should be taught through schools and taught through families, you know. . . . When I was doing Economics, it was all about “entrepreneurs”, and . . . I didn’t want to be an entrepreneur – I didn’t want to be a boss – but yet, now [I am, in the cooperative sense].

The worker-members reflected on the culture of deference within Irish society:

*It’s the way you’re brought up too . . . that you have to listen to a hierarchy, and it’s very hard to get out of that . . . mindset . . . Even right down to the Catholic Church – any church – the priest, or the vicar, was always right . . . You feel *safe* in your mindset if there’s somebody telling you what to do – then you just go and do it, and you don’t question it – it’s when you start questioning it that the mind goes, “Hold on a minute”, you know. But people are just . . . they’re afraid of change . . . and, if you’re afraid, then you don’t change.*

Eoin Davey also felt that individualism needed to be rooted out of Irish society:

I grew up in an area of the conflict here [where the] community was very strong, you know. They mightn’t have [had] a lot, but the community was like that. The community is no longer like

²⁰¹ See Sanchez Bajo and Roelants (2011, p. 198–9).

that. When I grew up, it was an “us” and a “we” mentality. And . . . at this point . . . [an] “I” and a “me” has replaced “us” and “we”. . . . And that’s Thatcherism and everything else. That is the capitalist market. And that’s the way it’s driven.

Bill Kelly pointed to Emilia Romagna as an example of what’s possible when a cooperativist culture and supportive policy regime are instituted by, and coexist alongside, an activist grassroots cooperative movement:

You’re in an environment there as well, in Emilia Romagna, where you have all those [cooperatives] . . . where you have that culture of . . . around every corner you go . . . you’ve got some sort of cooperative, whether it’s [a] workers’ [coop], or community [coop], or whatever . . . So it’s not as though you’re asking them to be the first astronaut to walk on the moon . . . And, of course, the figures would suggest that, in Emilia Romagna . . . socioeconomically, it’s more stable . . . more egalitarian etc.²⁰²

The wider capitalist environment always poses a barrier to the aspirations of the cooperative movement, however:

There’s a constant battle there between those who want to strengthen the Marcora laws, and the other frameworks and supports for cooperative development, and the [capitalist] corporates who want to weaken and dismantle them . . . And . . . we just have to accept that that is the way [it is] . . . and [ask], “How do we fight back?”

Regarding the latter, Stevie Nolan noted the lack of radicalism within the Irish labour movement:

That absence of radicalism is something that Irish society suffers from . . . in every context, not just in terms of worker coops, I think. But . . . the history of coops in Ireland is quite conservative . . . you know; whereas the history of coops in, say, Latin America is extremely radical. That’s the difference, you know: it’s part of people’s thinking . . . like [those] workers in Uruguay and Argentina there – those 200 [or so]²⁰³ factories [that] were taken

²⁰² ‘Emilia-Romagna has regularly topped European “Quality of Life” surveys thanks to the very high levels of social capital generated through the cooperative-based economic model’ (Bateman 2013, p. 2).

²⁰³ ‘The best and most up-to date figures put the number of [worker-recovered enterprises in Argentina] at 314, with a total workforce of 13,462, continuing a trend of strong growth since 2001’ (Larrabure 2017, p. 3). These firms are ‘overwhelmingly concentrated in manufacturing although a third operate in services’ (Ozarow and Croucher 2014, p. 995). Likewise, the Latin American debt crisis, which presaged the crisis of global neoliberal capitalism, ‘resulted in the recuperation of more than 20 different businesses [in Uruguay] employing approximately 1,500 workers, mainly engaged in industrial work’ (Rieiro 2015, p. 274).

over. Why wouldn't they? That's what they would've been thinking . . . "Of course you could take over the factory; what the fuck else are you going to do?"²⁰⁴ Here [in Ireland], what do we do? We just go home, with our tail between our legs, and hope to get a new job somewhere else; because that's what we're told to do – that's the system, you know.

As an example, Stevie recalled the Paris Bakery occupation in Dublin in 2014.²⁰⁵ Trademark raised the prospect of a takeover; but the workers 'just wanted their redundancy money . . . No one was interested in taking it over'.

Regarding the mindset of Irish workers, Eddie Glackin's opinion was that 'the trade union movement generally lost its way – lost the run of itself . . . [with] this whole concept of "social partnership"':

And this was in the beginning . . . the 1980s and '90s, where the trade unions increasingly were *seen* – now what they were is one thing – but they were seen [as] being part and parcel of the bloody establishment, in this triparting of government, employers, [and] trade unions. [They] all go off [for] cosy chats [and] cups of tea in Government Buildings, and then they come out and there's your deal for the next three years. . . . Now and I know this is an over-simplistic version . . . and I'm not trying to do a bloody . . . thesis on it [laughs] at this stage, [I'm] just offering opinions . . . I think the trade union movement lost its way; I think it became . . . that the action was focused at leadership level, and that the emphasis on active and conscious participation and involvement by [grassroots] members receded. . . . And I think then, when social partnership, to a large extent, bloody . . . collapsed then, over the last few years, basically because the employers didn't need it anymore – "G'way, g'way, scruffy trade union people" – the movement doesn't have the tools then to deal with it . . . We've a generation of union officials in negotiating, who never organised a bloody strike in their life – I'm not saying that's the answer to everything, but you have to have that in your toolbox too.

²⁰⁴ As to the worker-recovered enterprises in Argentina that argue for nationalisation (see Ozarow and Croucher 2014, p. 1001), Stevie responded: 'You have a combination there of Stalinism, of course . . . "This is the responsibility of the state to run this" . . . But also, you have people who are worried about running a [private] business, because [private] businesses collapse, whereas state-owned businesses don't – they continue, they're funded, they're subsidised. So . . . I can see both arguments . . . It's about security: workers need security, workers want security, and workers are occasionally vulnerable. Coops don't look secure – you're running a [private] business'.

²⁰⁵ See RTÉ News (2014).

The culture within trade unions reflected developments in Irish society more broadly:

There's a kind of a return to [a] "The poor will always be with us" auld mentality, like, you know . . . If unemployment is there, the response to all of this is various state [active labour market policy] measures,²⁰⁶ and the concept of . . . for example, cooperative self-employment initiatives, I don't think it [has] the same value [or] importance attached to it now – and, sad to say, I think including in the trade union movement. I mean . . . I was fronting that [Irish] Trade Union Trust for 20-whatever years . . . Workers' Unity Trust [originally, and] then it was [the Irish] Trade Union Trust . . . I retired then [in 2013] . . . I'm not saying [it's] because I wasn't there, but, for whatever reason, it's not there anymore; the Union is not engaged in that type of activity. Now, in fairness . . . the worker cooperative thing . . . kind of . . . flittered away: there were fairly comprehensive state supports there; a lot of people had moved into the areas that we had pioneered; and there was a view amongst some people in the Union [that], "We don't need to be doing this stuff anymore; there are other people doing it". And . . . as the Trust, we developed into [the] social solidarity arm of the union . . . not just for unemployed [workers], but retired [and] disabled people [too] – dealing with prejudice and racism and whatnot, you know. So we moved into other areas. We hadn't been involved for years in the question of cooperatives, and, bluntly, there was no great demand for . . . the type of services we were giving. I mean, we stopped giving the long-term, low-interest loans, because we didn't have that capital fund – it had been exhausted.

From a cultural perspective, Denis Rowan pointed out that 'unions change as well', and 'people change' within trade unions. As regards the shift in attitudes towards worker coops from Irish trade unions in recent decades, Denis noted that, 'Eddie Glackin had moved on at that stage too I think; Tom Redmond . . . all those people . . . SIPTU had changed at the top – people had retired and all that'. Eddie Glackin described the conventional wisdom that developed within the Irish trade union movement: 'The general perception is that . . . "That's all been tried and it doesn't work", you know. As if capitalism works, like, for jaysus sake, gimme a break . . . Socialism doesn't work and coops don't work, but this *does*?! [laughs]'

²⁰⁶ See Mitchell and Muysken (2008).

Stevie Nolan ran up against similar attitudes within the leadership of the movement:

Someone in Congress said to me, “Oh, we tried that once” . . . Coops are nearly considered old-fashioned . . . “It didn’t work”, or, “It got beaten” . . . And, in order to be “innovative” and “forward looking”, which is the neoliberal language, you have to do . . . “modern” things, like privatise everything . . . [because] unions are now “different”. So . . . they’re not really interested in [coops] . . . They’re so neoliberalised in their thinking, if not in all of their structures, that they cannot think creatively anymore about [alternatives].

While Tom Wall agreed that there seemed to be somewhat of a resurgence of interest in cooperatives and worker participation, his impression was that ‘it gets only an occasional kind of look at . . . There’s no strategic thinking [etc.]’ However, ‘To be fair now, I mean, the union[s are] struggling . . . to survive . . . it’s bound not to be the top priority’. Kevin McMahon expanded on this point:

The environment now is not friendly to that . . . because employers at the moment feel that they have . . . the upper hand and that they can just dictate the terms, and that they don’t have to . . . take account of their employees’ views on how their business [should be run]. . . . Again, it takes a huge amount of effort and work to put together even small cooperatives, and whether the unions are resourced enough now to do that is a big question. . . . I’m going back to my time . . . in the early years . . . and maybe I’m blinkered because I was dealing with [a] specific industry where circumstances may have been more favourable to this type of transition. But I know, certainly in the ’70s and early ’80s, [there was a] huge amount of emphasis on worker participation in decision making. . . . I think it just is an extension of strong trade union organisation . . . [which] leads to this need to empower workers. I know there [are] some people in trade unions [who] don’t believe in that type of philosophy; they just see trade unions as a service, they don’t see it as a social movement that has a mission to change society. [But] a lot more people did back in those circumstances in the ’70s and . . . the ’80s – [and the] ’60s before that – before neoliberalism took hold. And [neoliberalism] didn’t take over the minds only of employers, it took over the minds of union officials as well sometimes . . . which is disappointing, given . . . you know, the history of the trade union movement. . . . If it’s a goal of trade unions to empower workers in their place of employment, and . . . by empowering workers, you give workers greater confidence in their own importance and strength . . . you’re helping to change society as well. . . . Unions

are weaker, but . . . you're talking about education as well. So . . . it really depends on what, you know, strategies unions have in general in place for addressing . . . work changes at the place of employment. . . . Possibly unions are not as much at the races as they should be in this particular area. But it is a case of what resources you have, what priorities . . . If you're back is to the wall, as a trade union, and you're just trying to stay there – [to] hold onto your members – and all the time you're losing more and more ground – you're having to concede reductions in pay or the whittling down of terms [and] conditions – it . . . may be hard really to . . . think outside the box – to think in a more strategic way about a business.

5.5.2 *Whither workplace democracy?*

Tom Wall wondered where the impetus around workplace democracy within the labour movement had gone to:

I mean, unfortunately it seems a more historic discussion now . . . And you're right to raise [the question], "Where the hell has it all gone to?", because during the 1970s up to the early '80s, it was a huge debate – worker participation – mainly at the strategic level . . . in the trade union movement . . . And . . . it collapsed basically . . . I don't know the answer to it. . . . Even those [worker coops] that did thrive for a while, like Crannac [Furniture Co-op], fell away . . . Frequently it depends on one or two individuals to drive it, and when they retire or go [the coop struggles] . . . [At least] that's the impression I have. Now that's possibly true in a lot of [conventional] enterprises too, you know . . . But [in Ireland] they tended to be in low-productivity, labour-intensive type industries – furniture and printing and . . . fuel [etc.] . . . which ran into, you know, globalisation . . . They were never likely to thrive [after the 1980s], because of cheap competition.²⁰⁷

The answer, for Eddie Glackin, could be found in the temporary success of the neoliberal accumulation regime:

You had growth . . . "full employment" . . . It's not something I accept myself, that [a] 5% [unemployment rate] constitutes full employment . . . But, I mean, there wasn't a perceived need [for worker coop development]; there were plenty of jobs . . . certainly as [far as] the people who make decisions about these things were concerned . . . I think a lot of it has to do, bluntly, with bloody gung-ho capitalism . . . [and] the political culture of the time . . . "The unemployed will always be with us" [etc.] . . . The idea of

²⁰⁷ See Errasti et al. (2017).

encouraging people to band together [to] try [and] find collective solutions and responses to the crisis [has been all but lost].

In terms of making some progress, Stevie Nolan argued that, ‘You don’t need . . . a revolution like – but, at the moment, [nothing is] happening . . . outside of what we’re doing . . . There’s a history there – there’s roots there – but then there’s . . . Thatcherism and neoliberalism’.²⁰⁸ But he also indicated that the economic and social instability engendered by neoliberal capitalism provided fertile ground for a renewed cooperativism: ‘There’s always a resurgence [of] coops in times of recession, because people come together – self-help’. Brendan Mackin expanded:

I think one of the reasons why it’s coming back onto the agenda now is [that] you’re seeing a reaction, right across the spectrum, [against] the growth [of inequality] between the rich and the poor . . . [This relates to] the loss of trade union penetration in jobs and workplaces . . . So, effectively, people felt they were fuckin’ voiceless . . . That’s why . . . the whole [coops] thing has come back onto the agenda . . . People are looking for a different way of working [and] looking for more accountability of access, instead of [conventional] big companies [and] the neoliberal [privatisation and deregulation] agenda.

The challenge for Brendan was to build towards a Cooperative Commonwealth, rather than simply promoting cooperatives as a defensive ‘reaction to the [neoliberal] economy’. He understood this to mean the ‘democratisation of the economy [and] work, [as well as] the democratisation of politics and representation’.

In the current context, Stevie Nolan was nonetheless wary of ‘the dangers of the British spinoff argument that [David] Cameron [was pushing]: in order to hive off the welfare state, you don’t privatise it [outright], you just turn it into mutuals and coops, which eventually will be privatised’. Brendan Mackin explained that this was ‘causing conflict within some of the unions, [and they] are [coming out] against social enterprise [as a result]; because they see it as a mechanism to undercut their members’ pay and conditions’. For many trade unions today, ‘Instead of it being seen as a positive, it is now being seen in some respects as a negative’. Brendan referred to a trade unionist ‘who I

²⁰⁸ In Eddie Glackin’s view, ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘Thatcherism’ are just ‘new word[s] for capitalism’ – even if in ‘a particularly extreme form’.

know, [who's] a very good left winger . . . and he [said] to me, "Look, Brendan . . . I'm fuckin' suspicious of the whole fuckin' thing" – the social economy – "All of this scene is to try and humanise the face of fuckin' privatisation".

While acknowledging the threat of such cooption, Brendan Mackin and Stevie Nolan both still felt that there was great potential for cooperativising state services and SOEs. As Stevie put it, 'They should be more accountable and more transparent: there should be worker councils – [going] back to that industrial democracy argument of the early '70s'. Conal McFeely was of a similar persuasion, as regards the perceived need for 'greater . . . economic democracy . . . worker participation and work[s] councils [etc.]'²⁰⁹ in the public sector: 'To me, that's another part of community ownership – employee ownership – it's part of the ethos of cooperation . . . But, again, that hasn't really taken off'. He felt that there was also room for cooperation between the public sector and the traditional cooperative sector: 'I actually see in many ways the public sector and the cooperative movement working for the common good. So, therefore, there should be creative ways for [them] to come together . . . Maybe we could do it through joint ventures – why [does] it just always have to be the [conventional] private sector?'

Stevie Nolan explained the potential for combining different forms of workplace democracy within both private and public companies:

There's that continuum between direct democracy and industrial democracy, and everything in between. . . . And if you map the whole of Europe . . . [or] South America . . . you'll find examples that are very, very different all the way along that continuum. It's not one or the other; it could be a combination of all of those things.

Kevin McMahan felt that, in particular, 'state companies, they're kind of like socialist-type workplace[s], in a manner of speaking, because . . . the objective is not about maximising profit. So why shouldn't you in that context be able

²⁰⁹ Conal observed such practices while on 'a study visit . . . to Sweden with a group of trade unionists . . . Eddie Glackin . . . young Matt Merrigan [etc.] . . . We [visited] the Volvo plant and all that'.

to foster different kind[s] of relationships, different work systems, and tap into everybody's, you know, talents and knowledge and experiences'.

As to whether a 'Cooperative Commonwealth' would comprise of traditional worker coops competing in a market socialist setting, cooperativised state enterprises operating to a common plan, or a mixture of the two, Stevie Nolan was noncommittal:

[James] Connolly always looked forward to a "Co-operative Commonwealth",²¹⁰ and no one really knew what that meant exactly . . . [Erik] Olin Wright²¹¹ . . . and David Schweickart²¹² . . . [etc.] try to look [at] "post-capitalism" . . . Who the fuck knows what that looks like? . . . Well, if you look around [the world] today . . . those . . . "practical utopias", as . . . Wright would [say], already exist. [The question is]: How do we connect them [and] increase their . . . role within modern economies? And, in some countries, you can see that that's happening in various places.²¹³ Here [in Ireland], it's not happening . . . at all. We're so far removed from [that] . . . it's unbelievable.

Stevie's approach was to embrace of the various forms of workplace democracy:

I would rather have the challenges of that complexity, rather than what we have now, which is no diversity – it's all one model: it's a shrinking state and an increasingly large privately-owned [capitalist] sector . . . with a social enterprise sector, or charitable sector, or "third sector", kind of catching old people and kids and drug addicts and vulnerable people and homeless people. And, that's it, it's Victorian fuckin' politics again: it's a small state [sector], [a] large private [sector], and no welfare state. That's the model that's emerged in Ireland – well everywhere . . . And if you're asking me would I rather see the challenges of direct democracy [and] industrial democracy . . . fuckin' brilliant, the more diverse, the better. . . . I mean, you can call it what you want: call it a [worker] coop, call it a workers' council, call it a soviet . . . you're talking about a democratically-controlled area of production. Theoretically, it sounds easy; in practice, it becomes more complicated.

²¹⁰ See Connolly ([1915] 1983b).

²¹¹ See Wright (2010).

²¹² See Schweickart ([2002] 2011).

²¹³ See Piñeiro Harnecker (2013).

Stevie argued that such organisational diversity was ‘a more *sustainable* way of living’, rather than relying on ‘one way of doing things’, which implies greater vulnerability to crises:

Global warming . . . the collapse of the eurozone, the collapse of the European Union, the collapse of capitalism itself . . . Resilience needs to be built into communities, and . . . coops [are] a part of that: [if] things are democratic, if things are locally-owned . . . then they’ll be more resilient [because people are] more willing to make it survive. . . . Cooperatives survive during recessions, and private businesses don’t.²¹⁴ . . . Sometimes you need a sector outside the state, nearby, and outside the [conventional private] market that mediates between the two and creates that sustainability and that balance. It sounds a bit Keynesian that; but it kind of works to some degree, you know.

Conal McFeely agreed with this assessment:

There needs to be political recognition that a cooperative enterprise is as valuable and, indeed, I would argue, more valuable than the [conventional] private sector model. But all we’re actually saying is that it should be treated as an equal; because, if we’re to build . . . the economy in Ireland, North and South, then I think it has to be a mixed and balanced economy, which is about, yes, you know, [the conventional] private [and] public sector model[s], the community development model, the cooperative model . . . And we also then get into the [challenge of sustaining the natural] environment as well.

As to the charge that the values and principles of worker cooperatives are compromised in operating within a capitalist-dominated market environment, Stevie Nolan responded:

Whenever you meet ultra-leftists, that’s what they’ll throw in your face straight away; that you’re . . . competing in a capitalist marketplace. And I look at them and [ask], “Where the fuck do you work?!” . . . Of course it’s a contradiction . . . [if] you get out of bed [under capitalism], you’re living in a contradiction if you have any left-wing views at all. The idea that you’re committing some sort of . . . betrayal of your Marxist principles, because you’re in a [worker] coop, is ridiculous . . . From my experience – from what I’ve seen²¹⁵ – people in [worker] coops are happier, healthier, [and] better off at times. They’re involved [and] they’re fuckin’ active citizens – it’s good for them . . . Now it might not

²¹⁴ See CECOP (2012).

²¹⁵ See Nolan et al. (2013).

be a fuckin' perfect . . . communist utopia, but I'm not too sure that that's ever going to exist . . . certainly not in the next fuckin' . . . five years! I'm not going to wait around for it. But those contradictions are there; you just have to manage those contradictions. It does take you down that route, theoretically, into market socialism . . . "Doesn't profit twist and turn values" . . . I'd rather have those contradictions than not have them. I'd rather two [worker] coops competing in a marketplace than two capitalist enterprises exploiting [workers] . . . So, it's a step in the right direction . . . It's [like] the "communist hypothesis",²¹⁶ you know: you keep trying things out to see if they work . . . And that's what communism is: it's a hypothesis. I don't know the fuckin' answer; we still haven't worked out . . . the equation.²¹⁷

Worker-members at Belfast Cleaning Society were of the opinion that the worker cooperative model could be geared to any type of work: 'It could be suited to *anything* . . . There [are] pop groups . . . that are cooperatives . . . Beautiful South, you know they're a [worker] cooperative'.²¹⁸ Worker-members at the Attymon Peat Co-op agreed that there was the potential for worker cooperative development right across the economy, 'but it would want to be better organised now than [Attymon Peat Co-op] . . . you'd want to have a structure of management, you know'. Members of the Peat Co-op 'were all very experienced workers . . . we knew one another exactly'. Under different circumstances, however, 'No one really had the authority . . . to sack . . . or to penalise . . . [a] blaggard'. The worker-members at Tullamore Meats Co-op also felt that it 'probably' helped that they knew each other from working together previously:

[The worker coop model] would be a good way to go, but you'd have to have fierce . . . cooperation . . . It's not easy now, being honest . . . when you're working with nine people, and the nine people are equal . . . You wouldn't get a group of nine people out there, take them in, and say, "Look, do that" . . . It wouldn't work that way. We had to sit down and pick the nine [most suitable] people . . . related to the job they could do. . . . It is hard going . . . it took a lot of work: we used to start here [at] six o'clock in the morning, and we'd [still] be here at about ten [or] eleven o'clock at night . . . And, like, getting feck all for it, do you know

²¹⁶ See Badiou (2010).

²¹⁷ See Castro Espín (2015).

²¹⁸ 'The Beautiful South were structured like a co-op with all of their financial earnings split evenly amongst the band members.'
<http://www.othervoices.ie/content/paul-heaton>

. . . You wouldn't get many young people doing that nowadays . . . [But] what we were [producing] . . . people wanted it every day . . . We could get in a bit of help then [once the Co-op was up and running].

They didn't see any major reason why the worker coop model couldn't succeed more generally, 'but you'd have to have the right people' and the right product: 'We couldn't see it not working [at the time], because we did [some] market research before we started'.

An AEU worker commented: 'I think [the autonomous system] would be . . . a good system for any company . . . [The autonomy and flexibility] probably gives the workers more of an incentive . . . to do [a better] job than he would [have done] beforehand'. He continued: 'I mean, when [the autonomous system is] fit to save a company from going to the ground altogether, it can't be a bad system'. Paul Riordan tended to agree: 'I think there's an awful lot of merit in self-managed work teams . . . [Greater worker autonomy would] work in any work system'. Similarly, Kevin Gavin felt that, 'You certainly could have a version of it' in other workplaces.

Outside of Bord na Móna and the Coillte pilot, Kevin McMahon believed that autonomous work groups could also have been an option 'in the case of local authorities, where the activities were being contracted out'. The principle would have been the same:

It might have been a different design . . . but . . . you know, I've no doubt at all that workers, if they were given the opportunity, and . . . if alternatives were *explained* to them, that they could've embraced direct labour alternative work systems – not necessarily all, you know, to the same extent of autonomy, but you can have different levels of autonomy, depending on the nature of the business. . . . I think where you are faced with cost-cutting . . . you've got to be innovate in the [design] of work systems.

Regarding Irish SOEs, Kevin pointed out that many 'state companies have been [privatised] . . . A few of them have, you know, disappeared . . . and others have been . . . significantly changed. And . . . a lot of contracting has taken place. But you've got to work with what you have there'. While Tom Wall felt that there was definitely potential for greater worker autonomy in the remaining Irish SOEs, 'You'd have to look at the situation in each one'.

Kevin McMahon stressed that the potential economic, social, and environmental benefits of workplace democracy faced political and cultural barriers, however:

Sometimes you do need workers to be able to challenge management in terms of how the business is being operated. [Be]cause sometimes management don't always manage well, and I think they manage better if you have an empowered workforce. But obviously some [approaches to] management would see that – particularly in state companies – as a threat to their . . . status [or] power base as well. So these things can be resisted, and sometimes there are also members of trade unions and management that don't want to share decision making with workers, because the workers would know too much about them. . . . [But] these possibilities are there and . . . it's a case of people in the trade union movement having the politics to understand, you know, that these are . . . small steps in changing society.

Kevin Gavin agreed from a management perspective:

There [were] – and *still* [are] – some people in management who totally resent [worker autonomy]. They do see that it worked, but they actually see that their influence – or their authority – was undermined . . . And they would feel that the Unions and the employees got too much power. . . . You do meet opposition and resentment from management, who want to remain in control . . . [From their perspective] you're kind of giving away control – when you're actually not . . . because your control is [of] a different type, and you have to be more influential, you know.²¹⁹

Tom Wall recalled that, 'When we got into the [national social] partnership thing later I became responsible for attempted enterprise partnerships . . . that, you know, were trying to push a more advanced type of autonomy'. He remembered one particular instance, 'in the printing industry [where] an employer had run with this . . . [but] the difficulty . . . really came from the union side . . . The union official . . . [was] afraid they were going to discuss . . . demarcation . . . [so he] put an end to it . . . But that's what you're up against'. As regards enterprise partnerships more generally, 'The union has to be involved in it . . . but the union too has to devolve some of [the] decision making to its members, rather than being like that craft official'.²²⁰ In another

²¹⁹ One worker-member from a worker-recovered enterprise in Argentina referred to the coop's manager as 'a coordinator' (Larrabure 2017, p.7).

²²⁰ Kevin McMahon recalled that, '[There] would've been a lot of other people, you know, like me, [who] would've been kind of politically motivated . . . in terms of what, you know,

instance, Tom ‘tried to convince [Dublin Corporation] to basically design an autonomous working system [in] . . . a Corporation depot . . . [where] they basically maintain the lorries’. This would have also instituted ‘a payment system linked to their productivity, and it got some traction for a while – certainly on the union side, on that one – but the managers wouldn’t have it’.

For Kevin McMahon though, there was a strong economic case for greater worker participation, even from a management perspective:

If the workers say, “Well look, I’m only here to do or die, and not to reason why”, then in those situations, the worker will say, “I’ll just take my wage at the end of the week; I’ll tell them nothing . . . [and won’t] make them aware of problems . . . [I’ll] let it blow up in management’s face. Let [them worry about it]” . . . you know . . . just a total indifference.

Tom Wall remembered a seminar he attended with Kevin McMahon ‘in Venice, [regarding] teamworking and autonomous working . . . There was one American academic from the East Coast . . . [who] basically said [that] he’s always been amazed and impressed [by] the degree to which workers use their ingenuity to frustrate management [laughs]’. Regardless of whether autonomous working was the best option economically, it ultimately came down to politics and culture for Tom:

The difficulty is, with a subsidised company, the traditional [mindset] always is, on the union and management side, if there’s a problem, we all join together and put political pressure on the government to give us more money . . . [Granted] that’s becoming less and less of an option under EU rules. . . . That’s why I think Bord na Móna worked: it was clearly a commercial venture, or had turned into a commercial venture, rather than a social enterprise. And that’s why it could work potentially in a private company if the management [and unions] would let it.

5.5.3 *A Just Transition?*

Regarding the prospects for worker coop development in Ireland today, Bill Kelly noted that, ‘The tax haven model won’t be allowed to continue

a union official . . . relationship should be with shop stewards and the members. I’m not saying [that] you bring them all down to your house every night of the week . . . But, you know, in terms of your dealing[s] with them, they should see you as . . . a member of the Union who happens to be, you know, a paid official – but you’re still . . . a union man as well . . . You’ve [just got] a different kind of responsibility’.

indefinitely’. In terms of EU ‘tax harmonisation . . . we’ll have to go mainstream, or we’ll have to fuck off – excuse my language’. If Ireland opted instead to leave the EU, ‘then we’ll have to ask very fundamental questions’ about the Irish economy: ‘The Irish tax haven model . . . I expect, will come under . . . more and more pressure going forward . . . not just from Brussels, but I think from the [United] States as well’. He pointed out that the global warming crisis was also bound to have an impact: ‘If a right-of-centre . . . government is . . . rolling out . . . an energy plan,²²¹ which has a section in it for community development, community empowerment, [and] community ownership of energy resources . . . that in itself is interesting, and who knows where that might go . . . It’s something that wouldn’t’ve been dreamed of 20 years ago . . . in terms of economic policy planning and development’.

Conal McFeely was also of the view that the environmental question posed opportunities, as well as challenges, to the cooperative movement: ‘I just think there’s a big opportunity to look at cooperative models that deal with the environment – without a shadow of a doubt; I would put it in the top end of potential [opportunities] to grow cooperatives’. Brendan Mackin tended to agree: ‘There’s [absolutely] an opportunity in the crisis . . . I think we’re in interesting times; but, it doesn’t mean to say we shouldn’t keep . . . the voice going for . . . social enterprise, [the] social economy, and cooperatives’. On cooperatives and the environment specifically, he commented: ‘I think it’s an area that certainly . . . could be and should be explored’.

While the AEU workers generally accepted that peat production needed to be phased out over time, ‘It’s a bit of a downer because we know nothing else . . . Where are we going to turn to?’ Moreover, ‘It’s very hard to [accept] that when they’re opening probably a power station a week in China . . . or [the likes of] America as well . . . A place like this is not going to [make] a whole lot of difference in the [grand] scheme of things’. They felt that Bord na Móna was being unfairly targeted relative to other sectors of the Irish economy: ‘Would they like to do that to [a company] like Aer Lingus?’ The team leaders elaborated:

²²¹ See Department of Communications, Energy & Natural Resources (2015).

Yeah, put it in perspective, Bord na Móna's doing absolutely no damage . . . If you single it out . . . you will make a case that there's damage being done [to the environment]; but on a global . . . scale, Bord na Móna would not feature. . . . In reality, you're not really doing any great harm to the environment . . . because the bog is still there – you know, it's not like you're picking it up and bringing it away. Now you're taking a bit off the top of it, but it's still there . . . and when it's left for a while, as you can see if you go around the area . . . it's gone back . . . nearly into its original state again.

One team leader, however, was more accepting of the situation:

I mean, supposedly everybody in the country acknowledges that . . . there has to be something done about the . . . amount of pollution that's going into the atmosphere . . . It is damaging the atmosphere and it's doing a lot of harm, I suppose, over a number of years. So, I mean, most people can see that – it is a problem. And . . . in Bord na Móna's case, it is a pretty serious problem, with the amount of pollution they're actually putting into the atmosphere.

But the AEU workers were generally sceptical of the motives at play within Irish environmental agencies. One team leader turned to politics:

An Taisce are very like the crowd in America in the '50s who started to hunt down communists . . . McCartyites . . . If they get a whiff of anything at all – it doesn't matter the consequences – they will follow it to the bitter end. . . . But their word should not be taken without the upmost scrutiny: the fact that they squeal, that does not mean that everybody should sit up and listen to this little squealer. . . . This McCarthy in America . . . they said he was going to save the world from communism, and all he done was persecute decent honest people . . . Poor auld Pete Seeger [laughs].

A seasonal worker suggested that, 'They're getting paid to do that aren't they as well: that's their job'. Some team leaders were less damning though: 'I don't think the environment[al] crowd's out to do away with any[one's] job, but . . . they have a job to do themselves, you know . . . [And] usually it's a directive coming from Europe'. Whatever the motive, one team leader stated that, 'It's going to have a devastating effect on this part of the country . . . all around the midlands . . . because the ESB and Bord na Móna were the only . . . *big* employers in this part of the country'. Another team leader offered an analogy: '[The] ESB and Bord na Móna [are] married, and as a married couple they have the biggest family in [the midlands] . . . they rear everybody

in the midlands'.²²² The AEU workers were 'all amazed that Bord na Móna haven't responded to An Taisce yet . . . They will have a response, and a good one, but we're just mad to hear it'. A worker director, however, reflected on Bord na Móna's purported 'contract with nature': 'I reckoned [that] every time we did anything, we kicked nature up the arse; because we were using fossil fuel to develop a bog'.

The AEU workers agreed that the situation would be easier to accept if alternative employment opportunities were provided for. However, they weren't confident that the company's renewable energy strategy could replace the jobs lost in peat production: 'It'll be like with the windmill; [there'll] be feck all [jobs] . . . it'd be only a shadow of the current operation here with the milled peat'. They explained their rationale: 'If you [start] . . . growing willow [for biomass] and stuff like that, you're renting land from farmers at that stage – arable land can grow it . . . [and it's] harvested on the farm and delivered . . . There has to be less jobs, you know'. A worker director also commented on this: 'The only way you grow willow is on farmland, and the farmers are not engaging with [the company] on this idea'.²²³ One team leader stated that, 'I think the future of Bord na Móna is those windfarms and . . . the peat will be no longer part of Bord na Móna's company as such . . . it'll be all [those] wind turbines [and] those solar panels'. Another team leader summed up the situation as regards the autonomous system:

It's a system that has run its race in Bord na Móna, and the biggest problem is cutaway bogs, and the reduction of staff through natural wastage²²⁴ . . . And they're not needed with the amount of peat that's going to be needed going forward . . . The environment

²²² A worker director stated that, 'To develop the bogs in Bord na Móna [was] a huge lifeline to the midlands. . . Without Bord na Móna . . . there'd be nothing in the midlands. . . I think I remember people saying that, when they came to Shannonbridge, the grass used to grow in the middle of the street . . . before Bord na Móna and the ESB started [up]'.

²²³ As Paul Riordan put it: 'We [are] trying to grow willow . . . [if] reasonably unsuccessfully at the moment; it's hard to get farmers to grow [it]. . . . But we're still pushing, and we're using . . . biomass to co-fire . . . in the power stations with peat'.

²²⁴ Paul Riordan put it that, 'There will be no job losses as such; it's just, as people retire, they won't be replaced. So, our workforce will deplete at the same rate as the bog. And that's positive, that . . . anyone [who] wants [to retain] a job in Bord na Móna [and who's] prepared to work for the next 15 years will have a job. . . . And other things will come to replace that hopefully . . . When I joined the company in . . . 1979, I think there were 8,000 people working in the company[']s . . . peat business. The equivalent today would be around 1,800 or 1,900'.

is the big problem, and they're under serious pressure from Europe over that. And it's quite possible within a couple of years, if they wanted to, they could come and clamp down on all peat production.

As for the government stepping in to provide alternative employment opportunities, he wasn't overly optimistic:

It should be [the case], but . . . I can't see those jobs being replaced to be honest with you . . . You will not get the jobs, I suppose, here in the midlands where we're living . . . You will probably have to go to Dublin and different places; but you won't get them, say, locally.

Another team leader continued: 'It's hard to find suitable jobs . . . for Bord na Móna workers; they're . . . used to one type of work [over the course of] their lifetime'. The workers concluded:

The future of Bord na Móna is . . . bleak . . . It'll be a place for people with a high standard of education, in my opinion, when they move into different things . . . away from peat . . . There won't be [any] need for what we're doing now . . . [the] ordinary working man. . . . *Tourism* will be the big thing as regards the bogs . . . They're talking about now putting, say, railroads through the bog and that for tourists . . . [but] it won't be a big employer . . . There was [previously] a train in Blackwater: there was only one man . . . I think, to drive that train and bring people in . . . There wouldn't be [that many] tourists [either] . . . Once you have Lough Boora [Discovery Park], there wouldn't be much point in trying to turn [our bog area] into a tourist attraction.

Kevin Gavin was blunt in his assessment: 'You'll never replace the [jobs] . . . because you could have one man on a machine and he'll cut all the biomass you'd fuckin' want in a day – that's reality'. Still, he argued that, 'The Lough Boora Parklands is . . . a very good example of what can happen post-peat phase'. He communicated that, '60, 000 people passed through Lough Boora last year. So, therefore, with a kind of a coordinated effort in the local community, you could have a lot of stuff being sold there . . . [and hence jobs created] in a different way'. Paul Riordan explained that, 'We have [200,000] acres that can be turned into a mosaic of . . . biodiversity, woodlands, flood-lands . . . [and] fishing centres [etc.]' Paul believed that the workers were up to the challenge:

The workforce in Bord na Móna are good guys: they know their business; they know the bogs; they respect the bogs; they're hard

workers . . . they're very experienced; they're very loyal; and . . . they take pride in Bord na Móna, working with the company. . . . Nothing fazes them: we've been through fires; we've been through storms; we've been through floods; we've been through minus 15 degrees. And people will always get over the obstacles . . . The [GoU] still represents all of our workforce: we have 1,200 people in our business [and] there's probably . . . 60/70 people not in a union . . . That'd be in the management side, but all of the general workforce and the craft are in unions – [Bord na Móna is] heavily unionised. . . . There isn't a great partnership [between unions and management] there at the moment. . . . And partnership wanes when you're doing well, and partnership gets a bit stronger when your back is to the wall and you're facing difficulties. . . . We're . . . facing into difficulties at the moment, and, if we don't get back into . . . more [of a] partnership mode, we will struggle and the workforce will struggle.²²⁵

5.5.4 *The decline of enterprise partnership at Bord na Móna*

From a management perspective, Paul Riordan offered his view on social partnership:

I'm 37 years in the peat business and I've dealt with unions from day one, and different officials and different people and different unions. I mean, [Bord na Móna is] a unionised business; we'll always be a unionised business, and that's fine. But . . . [from] what I've seen over the years – I've seen weak unions and I've seen strong unions – and, if you have a union, you're as well to have a very strong union. I mean, some people will see a weak union as a positive; it's not a positive, it's the worst thing that you could ever [have] . . . from a management perspective. I mean, where you have a weak union, you can't do a deal . . . so you need a strong union.

One team leader reflected: 'I think what weakened the unions, more than anything else, was the [2008] recession'. That said, after the transformation at Bord na Móna, 'everybody kind of made their own way and weakened the Union'. He continued: '[For] all the good that [the] autonomous [work system] and all these bonus schemes [and] PbR schemes [etc.] brought, they divided the workforce to a certain degree'. What's more, he felt that social partnership at the company had weakened the GoU from an organisational perspective: 'There was little or no . . . need for, say, strikes or standoffs or

²²⁵ When asked about the role that the worker directors currently play, Paul responded: 'Don't go there [laughs] . . . well, no, the worker directors used to go around and meet their colleagues once or twice a year. That doesn't happen anymore'.

whatever you [want to] call them. There was little or no need because, if a thing is run well and run fair . . . the unions don't have to be as active, in my opinion anyway'. Because of this, he felt that the unions were less prepared for the confrontations of recent years.

Paul Riordan confirmed that Bord na Móna have 'changed the [work] systems [since 2016]: we've disbanded the autonomous enterprise system', since the company are transitioning away from peat production to comply with environmental standards. He acknowledged that '[the AEU] system stood us well', but times are changing: 'That system worked well over the years . . . [but] over the last number of years, we've been getting out of that system . . . because we have to cut costs even further – we're going into the open market'. The company can no longer avail of the 'public service obligation (PSO) [subsidy] for indigenous fuel'. He explained further: 'Government policy and European policy is to phase out high-carbon fuels, so peat will not get subsidised into the future; we'll have to survive or fail on the open market . . . We're heading into difficult times'. In Paul's view, the AEU's weren't fit for the task at hand:

We were paying three and four and five [team] leaders, or sub-leaders, in an area €52,000 a year [per person, at 100 percent of target]. We said, how can we do this more efficiently . . . "No, let's get rid of that system now, [and] move back to a managed team: put one guy in to manage the area [the 'lead operative'], pay him, whatever, €50,000, and pay production rates to the rest of them". So . . . we've introduced that [since 2016].

He agreed that the new system was 'much similar' to that which preceded the AEU's: 'Payment by Results is still there . . . but . . . they're back under direct management'. He reflected on the legacy of AEU's:

The autonomous enterprise system – the self-managed work teams – it did a job for Bord na Móna: it got us away from the old management systems of direct control – the army-type systems – it got guys motivated by output, and it got rid of the old payment for time rather than Payment by Results. And that was a huge cultural change in the company. And that worked well in some areas, it worked okay in other areas, and it worked poorly in other areas – so there [are] people [who] got carried away . . . And a lot of these things go in circles: if we're around in 10 years' time, you could see us going back to . . . even a different type of self-managed work team.

One team leader – formerly a supervisor – felt that elements of management who were hostile to the AEU system were leveraging the environmental transition to regain power: ‘As the years went on, they [started] . . . *be-grudging* the fact that . . . you were doing the job without much help from them and they withdrew further back’ from providing supports. ‘There was a more of an overall helpful attitude from management’ in the initial years. But now ‘trust is gone – almost all [trust]’. Another former supervisor corroborated this account: ‘There was help there *in the beginning*, but as time went on . . . it began to . . . dwindle and . . . we’ve got to the stage now . . . in the last, I suppose, five years, where you [don’t] get . . . the cooperation . . . from anybody’.

Team leaders had been informed that ‘the autonomous groups are being disbanded . . . We’ve been told our current rates of pay – anyone that’s currently on the job – will not change; but for new people coming in, there will be different rates’. The team leaders felt that the senior management team ‘have *no idea* the road that has been travelled from 25 years ago . . . Management has changed so often that they have lost contact completely with what went before’. This also applied to the GoU: ‘The autonomous [system] wouldn’t be a kind of a big thing on the Unions’ agenda [at this stage]’.

John Regan, then Secretary of the Bord na Móna GoU, explained that, ‘There’s a whole transformation agenda going on now’, whereby ‘ultimately, the autonomous groups and the autonomous teams are winding down . . . It’s all about hitting targets and it’s all about producing peat cheaper’. Negotiations were focused on the pay structure: ‘The principle of the new team structure is acceptable; it’s just around how they earn’. However, ‘They need savings, and if they don’t get the savings through pay cuts, then they’re going to have to get it through the model that we’re talking about, which is continuous improvement and reduced overproduction costs and all the costs associated with getting the peat out’. John described the fractured relationship between unions and management:

[The] company haven’t made their mind up yet whether they want to sit down and talk to us, or whether they just want to unilaterally impose stuff. . . . The Management want to bypass that whole

[local IR] structure; whereas, we're trying to get them to go back in and give ownership locally and get the shop stewards fixing things locally, because they know the business locally. . . . It's a very hostile fecking environment at the moment – it's not good, it's not good . . . for *everybody*.

A worker director corroborated this account. Asked whether the then Energy Minister, Alex White could intervene, John Regan replied: 'He'd have a sympathetic ear to the trade union movement . . . because he's a Labour [Party] minister; but, there's very little he can do . . . like most ministers – they don't interfere with industrial relations'.

Regarding the strength of the labour movement more generally, John imparted that the 1980s were 'different times, and you find yourself now having to fight differently than we used to have to fight . . . Partnership is gone'. It appeared that there was a management agenda against union organisation within the company:

In Bord na Móna there's what is known as a closed shop agreement [where] it was mandatory for all workers to join the appropriate trade union. . . . [Traditionally] every new employee that went in for induction training always got the [union application] form to fill out . . . through management . . . In recent years the management have stopped doing that . . . We now have to motivate and point out to shop stewards that, if we don't keep on top of this, we're gonna become very weak on the ground, and when you need to have a fight, you won't have the troops or the army there.

While union organisation remained strong within Bord na Móna, a decline in trade union membership was nonetheless apparent: 'Bord na Móna probably [has gone] from [nearly] 100 percent union [density to] 80-90 percent union density – it's slipping. But, we've a plan now . . . to get all [those workers] into [the GoU], because . . . we're fighting differently with an employer that just doesn't want to have any union to answer to'.

A worker director observed how changes were being pushed through 'under duress and . . . if you have a workforce whose morale is on the ground, then productivity is affected'. He communicated that, 'There's a . . . very aggressive style of management' and the worker directors 'are more tolerated than accepted' at present: 'We're not allowed to represent the views of employees, and there's something perverse about that . . . What is a worker director [if

not] a representative from the workforce?’ Worker directors previously played the role of a ‘carrier of information between both sides . . . and that worked extremely well . . . and everybody recognised [the] value that they played in that [regard]’. The worker directors were now seen as ‘more of a dinosaur than . . . an asset to the company’.

The team leaders understood that the work system was essentially ‘going back to what it was’ prior to the transformation – a counterproductive move in their view. Even if ‘it’ll be a PbR system of some sort . . . there’ll be no autonomy, that’s for sure . . . you’ll be under a foreman or supervisor or something again . . . They have the reins back in their own hands now’. A worker director agreed with this assessment: ‘There is the possibility that they’ll destroy the company . . . that they [will] no longer get employees to engage with them’. He accepted that the current approach was ‘very profit-driven, and that’s the way it should be . . . but it’s *how* they go about doing this’.

The team leaders emphasised the changeover in management personnel:

People . . . in the [management] job [traditionally were] promoted up along through the [ranks] and they were aware of what had happened previously. But you have . . . a new batch of people now [who are] outsiders . . . economists and businessmen . . . They’d know nothing about the [bog] . . . they’d know nothing about reality [laughs] . . . And they’ll tell you how the job should be done . . . [based on] just a bit of theory.

Kevin Gavin worried that, ‘You have . . . nearly a whole senior management team that are not of the old guard . . . and they wouldn’t necessarily be aware of the hazards that they’re facing’. The relationship between the senior managers and the worker directors was indicative: ‘I think that has kind of been severed a good bit now in recent times’. He understood that pre-board meetings were no longer accommodated: ‘I think the current man has stopped it . . . I think it was very useful; I think he’s made a mistake’. The team leaders explained that the worker directors ‘used to call more a few years ago’, but ‘at the present [time], they don’t call at all . . . They’re not allowed now; and they don’t have the time’. Likewise, ‘You’d never get a visit from a shop steward or [anything] like that . . . There’s no meetings as such’. The team

leaders would have preferred more communication from their union reps: ‘You don’t really hear enough . . . of what’s happening’.

A seasonal AEU worker described terms and conditions of employment as ‘really bad now at the moment’, with respect to management’s cost-cutting agenda. On the other hand, the relationship between the seasonals and the team leaders was ‘just as good’ as it had always been. The other AEU workers confirmed that the push was coming from ‘outside of the team leaders’. When asked about protection from the unions, the seasonal worker replied that, ‘It’s getting worse and worse, so I don’t think the unions . . . are doing enough’. Team leaders were also feeling the pressure: ‘They have been chipping [away] at the conditions for a long time’. But the workers warned that, ‘It will cause big problems on the ground though . . . It’ll cause huge resentment anyway’. The general perception was that, ‘Bord na Móna in the last few years are after making big profits . . . [by] cutting back on the workforce and cutting back on the payment to the workforce in different ways’.

The AEU workers described the breakdown in social partnership at the company:

Management are a different breed today; I think they’re solo runners. They come up with an idea [and] they want to push it through. They don’t want any input from [the] ground level at all; they just want to run it their way . . . which, maybe in certain circumstances, would be the way to do it. But, most of the time, everybody should be involved . . . like the Kerry footballers . . . [It’s better] if they can bring the workers along with them, you know . . . through negotiation and [by] giving them [the] freedom to think for themselves, rather than going in and telling them, “Well, this is what you do and this is the way you do it” . . . you know – people kind of resent that.

Kevin Gavin likewise stated that, ‘Certainly . . . union-management participation has been diluted; I think it’s unfortunate’. Paul Riordan agreed that ‘management have become more cost orientated, more bottom-line orientated’. This reflected the ‘shareholder value’ model:

We’re being run like more of an American-style business . . . And that’s a positive thing, because . . . the energy market is tight . . . and . . . we will not survive unless we become competitive and unless we continue to make profits. . . . If we don’t go through

this change process now . . . we'll [soon] be losing €12 million a year and we will close. And 1,200 people will lose their jobs.

5.5.5 *Lessons of history and future prospects*

Conal McFeely reflected on the history of his involvement with cooperative development, and the prospects for the movement's renewal in the twenty-first century:

[There were] people telling us, "Go away, go away". And we just said, "No, we're going to do this". That's the cooperative movement. . . . But the fact is that we're not getting any younger – people coming into the movement – and we need to create a whole new generation of people who understand [the meaning of] . . . the common good . . . [the] cooperative principles . . . the social economy . . . And we need to be getting [back to] that debate again. Now, I think everything comes around in cycles.

Similarly, an AEU worker reflected on the neoliberal turn during the 1980s: 'Things will turn again'. And Oliver Larkin recounted setting up the Tullamore Meats Co-op: 'There [were] a lot of people [who] said, "You can't do this" and "You can't do that", but we were a bit thick and we said, "We'll do this and do that"'.

For Eoin Davey, 'The one lesson I take away from all this here is [the importance of] the process of education [and creating] public awareness, as to . . . *what* a workers' cooperative entails, and how it would benefit people locally'. He referred to the educational ethos at Mondragón Cooperative Corporation:²²⁶ 'You can go and you can do a degree on workers' cooperatives, you know, within [Mondragón] University. They need to set such programmes up here'. He felt that worker cooperatives should be promoted as 'a viable business alternative' to multinational capital:

If we want to ensure sovereignty, if we want to ensure local control, and we want to ensure that we have sustainable business models, then it's got to be done via workers' cooperative[s] . . . [We should] promote it as a viable alternative to the [conventional] private market, you know . . . and capitalism. . . . [Then] it's [a case of] linking [worker coops] together. It's more of a structured approach to it: that involves finance; that involves

²²⁶ See Meek and Warner (1990): 'Mondragon points to the fact that training should not be an event but an ongoing process, an integral part of worker self-management' (p. 525).

public awareness; that involves education; and that involves the wider trade union movement. . . . Public awareness and education [are] really the key to this.

Alice McLarnon agreed: 'Education to me is the key'. Likewise, Kevin Gavin felt that the 'cultural [barrier] was the biggest barrier', as regards setting up the AEU's.

For John Calnan, worker cooperative development was difficult but necessary in the current environment:

Everything we did here, we had to kind of invent it . . . There was a huge passion to set [the Co-op] up . . . I think it is just easier to go down [the route of] the traditional model, you know. But . . . how could we have done what we set out to do . . . in any kind of traditional model, do you know? . . . We started very much from the bottom . . . everybody who was involved here was an owner-member, and then . . . as things changed and we evolved . . . we adapted.

Kevin McMahon was asked whether the struggle for a Cooperative Commonwealth was lost to history:

Ah no, I think . . . the potential is there . . . and . . . if you're talking about the world of work – if you want to make it more fulfilling and meaningful to people – well these are challenges that have to be taken on, or else you're just going to continue to have huge alienation. And I think if you . . . secure greater participation, empowerment, or autonomy for workers in companies . . . this does influence the agenda in terms of changing society generally. . . . And I'd see it as part of the struggle of trade unions to create . . . a move to a more equitable society.²²⁷ And you can't ignore that; you know, [be]cause you can't just bring everything in at a [national level] . . . [If you] elect a new government in[to power], and they have a socialist type vision or goal . . . you've [still] got all this practical stuff about how companies operate . . . you know: what are people's roles in these companies . . . as workers [and] management? . . . And there [are] a lot of changes going on here all the time . . . because of technological changes, you've seen a lot of reconfiguration of work . . . But . . . in that context too I think workers have to make – or should be making – gains, and unions should be leading workers in trying to make gains, in terms of . . . participative issues, so that, in their jobs . . . they have a stake. . . . I think I've . . . said enough [laughs].

²²⁷ As to whether 'bread and butter' trade union demands must necessarily be separated from such transformative demands, Kevin responded: 'I think they complement one another – they should complement one another'.

Eddie Glackin responded that worker coops ‘*absolutely*’ had an important role to play in terms of rebuilding the Irish labour movement as an institution of working class power. For Eddie, there were hopeful signs in the response of social movements to the neoliberal onslaught:

I think [that] there [are] a lot of very positive developments in the community sector at the moment . . . The anti-water charges [movement]²²⁸ brought out . . . [massive] numbers of people in communities who’ve never been involved in any political or social activity in their lives, and they’re all banding together and getting out, and they’re saying, “Enough” . . . It’s huge, and it’s great to see tens of thousands of working class people empowered and empowering themselves . . . So, yeah, I’d be hopeful . . . if [the labour movement] started pushing that out again . . . [worker] cooperatives . . . No amount of ideological conviction or philosophical persuasion will turn a bum business idea into a good business idea. So that has to be there. But then, after that, in terms of the model – of how you grow, and build, and develop – the cooperative model is every bit as viable as anything else. . . . Why not?

5.5.6 *Section summary*

We discussed in Section 3.4.4 how the worker coop development literature tends to underplay cultural factors, relative to the economic and political, in institutional analyses of barriers to scale. We also alluded to the long waves of cooperativism associated with long waves of capitalist development. Liberal SSAs tend to choke off workplace democracy, in alternation with regulated SSAs, which tend to promote workplace democracy. We argued further that the logic of this double movement under capitalist political economy can be transcended with the inauguration of a socialist social structure of cooperation. In Section 5.5, we brought these theoretical propositions into dialogue with the experiences of Irish worker coop developers. Their recollections spanned the decades following the crisis of the postwar SSA, up to and including the contemporary crisis of the global neoliberal SSA.

²²⁸ See Henderman (2014).

Our interview participants communicated a cooperativist upswing in Ireland, beginning during the crisis of the postwar SSA. Ireland was late to the party in this regard, with social partnership and the peace process facilitating a worker coop development peak into the 1990s. As the Irish neoliberal SSA more fully consolidated, Irish worker coop development fell away in a cooperativist downswing. The dominant political culture amongst Irish workers, trade unionists, and managers shifted further from cooperativism towards individualism. Reflecting on this experience in the context of the contemporary crisis, however, there was a general sense that such cooperativist upswings and downswings come around in cycles. And Irish worker coop developers were hopeful that current economic, social, and environmental contradictions would catalyse a revival of the cooperative ideal.

In terms of present challenges to a cooperativist revival, interview participants emphasised neoliberal culture and the attendant lack of public education and awareness surrounding worker coops. This was at root a question of government policy and, hence, class interests. System-level change required a longer-term political-cultural struggle, waged by a broad alliance of worker coop advocates. There were even indications of such a cooperativist political culture emerging at the grassroots in response to the ravages of neoliberal crisis management. In this respect, it was understood that successful international worker coop development combined a supportive policy regime with a vibrant grassroots political culture. Given their presence in existing workplaces, and the relatively strong potential of worker coop conversions when compared to start-ups, trade unions had a particularly important educational and promotional role to play here.

This regulationist story of Irish worker coop development challenged us to nuance and deepen our theory. Liberal SSAs appear capable, at least for a period, of facilitating a limited degree of cooperativism; even if the creep of individualism remains ever-present. Likewise, cooperativist tendencies may be suppressed for a period under a regulated SSA, as in Ireland during the postwar era; though the cooperativist push is strong. Hence, long waves of cooperation don't respond to successive capitalist stages in a mechanical

fashion, even if there appears to be a (lagged) relation. Furthermore, our case study participants placed a strong emphasis on precisely that aspect of the worker coop development puzzle that is least emphasised in the literature: namely, political *culture*. We will tease out the implications for our SSC theory in Chapter 6.

6 Irish worker coop development in context

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we analyse the results of our empirical case study (see Chapter 5) in light of our evolving theoretical framework (see Chapters 2 and 3). Through this reflexive methodological approach, we attempt to answer our motivating research questions concerning worker coop sustainability and scale (see Chapter 4). It will be helpful for the purposes of illustration to focus on the worker coop *enterprises* that we studied explicitly: Quay Co-op; Tullamore Meats Co-op; Bord na Móna AEU; Attymon Peat Co-op; Belfast Cleaning Society; and Union Taxis. These, in turn, were buttressed by the network of developmental *support organisations* that existed across the island of Ireland. Section 6.2 sets out the main characteristics of our core group of worker coop enterprises. This is followed in Section 6.3 by an assessment of their associated economic, social, and environmental sustainability outcomes. Section 6.4 interrogates the intra- and extra-organisational factors influencing said outcomes. In each of these sections, the characteristics, sustainability outcomes, and influencing factors concerning our worker coop case studies are considered in relation to the existing literature (see Sections 3.4.3 and 3.4.4). We then distil from this analysis a hierarchy of sustainable worker coop development needs in Section 6.5. Finally, Section 6.6 concludes.

6.2 Cooperative characteristics

Quay Co-op, Tullamore Meats Co-op, Bord na Móna AEU, and Attymon Peat Co-op all arose in the mid- to late 1980s, with the first wave of Irish worker coop development. Quay Co-op converted from a community coop to a worker coop in 1985 and continues to operate today, some 34 years later. Tullamore Meats Co-op was established as a worker coop start-up in 1989 and continues to operate 30 years later. The Bord na Móna AEU system and Attymon Peat Co-op were also both established in 1989, with the former ceasing operations after 27 years in 2016, and the latter ceasing operations after 29 years in 2018. Both were worker coop conversions arising from previous operations at Bord na Móna. Belfast Cleaning Society and Union Taxis, on the other hand, represent more recent worker coop start-up

initiatives. The former was established in 2011 and continues to operate eight years later; while the latter was established in 2014 and ceased operations two years later in 2016.

The longevity of some of the worker coops examined provides us with further evidence contradicting the ‘theoretical speculation’ (Pencavel 2012, p. 30; Dow 2018, p.65) and ‘armchair intuitions’ (Dow 2018, p. 68) of earlier theorists of the ‘labour-managed firm’, many of whom maintained that worker coops were inherently deficient relative to conventional capitalist firms.²²⁹ Indeed, ‘the existing evidence suggests that labour-managed firms survive at least as well as conventional firms’ (Pérotin 2016, p. 16). Moreover, ‘It is not uncommon for worker co-operatives to survive well over a century’ (p. 14).

A degree of sectoral diversity was also apparent among our case study enterprises, with first wave worker coops tending to be larger and more capital intensive; and with more recent initiatives tending to be smaller and more labour intensive. Quay Co-op administered a variety of related operations across the wholefoods, hospitality, and retail sectors. The Co-op even managed to maintain strong growth in the context of an increasingly competitive marketplace. Tullamore Meats Co-op functioned in the competitive food processing industry, and likewise proved capable of preserving strong growth over the course of its life. Bord na Móna AEU and Attymon Peat Co-op both operated in the energy industry, with the former engaged in mechanised milled peat extraction, and the latter engaged in mechanised sod peat extraction. While the Bord na Móna AEU maintained strong growth throughout their lifetime, benefiting from a state monopoly over milled peat harvesting, Attymon Peat Co-op could only realistically achieve stagnant growth in the face of strong competition from unregulated turf cutters. Belfast Cleaning Society and Union Taxis both operated in the competitive services industry. The former registered strong growth over recent years, while the latter witnessed little to no growth before discontinuing operations.

²²⁹ See Dow (2018) for a retrospective critical assessment of this literature.

Once again, our case study results offer up evidence contradicting the rationalist presuppositions of earlier theories of the labour-managed firm. Against the view ‘that worker co-operatives are only suited to particular industries (for example, industries with low capital intensity or low capital requirements)’ (Pérotin 2016, p. 10), we observed instances of Irish worker co-ops competing in relatively capital-intensive industries, as well as in relatively labour-intensive industries. This finding corroborates the available international evidence: ‘In practice, worker co-operatives can be found in most industries’ (Pérotin 2016, p. 10).

6.3 Sustainability outcomes

6.3.1 Economic impact

There was a noticeable difference in the relative size and ambition of the worker coop initiatives undertaken during the two periods. A greater number of jobs were generally at stake during the first wave, with the Quay Co-op creating a significant number of jobs; Tullamore Meats Co-op saving and creating a relatively small number of jobs; Bord na Móna AEU saving a substantial number of jobs; and Attymon Peat Co-op saving a relatively small number of jobs. By contrast, Belfast Cleaning Society created a relatively small number of jobs, and Union Taxis created a small number of jobs.

Despite ‘the most common received idea about worker co-ops’ being ‘that they must be small . . . and a small size is sometimes regarded as a condition for workplace democracy to function’ (Pérotin 2016, p. 6), the experience of the Bord na Móna AEU indicates that workplace democracy can be quite effectively implemented at a large scale, encompassing thousands of workers. Even if the Bord na Móna AEU were not traditional worker co-ops, and the other labour-managed firms we studied were relatively small by comparison, Pérotin points out that ‘most firms actually are very small’ (2016, p. 6). This is as true of conventional capitalist firms as it is of cooperatives. In either case, ‘Large firms are very rare’ (p. 6). Granted, the Irish experience does not appear to offer convincing support to the existing international evidence: ‘Where we have data for workers’ co-operatives we observe that the co-ops are actually larger than other firms’ (p. 6).

Worker coops in either period also displayed varying levels of economic performance. Strong growth and resilience in the Quay Co-op, Tullamore Meats Co-op, Bord na Móna AEU, and Belfast Cleaning Society was underpinned by relatively high levels of profitability and reinvestment. On the other hand, weak profitability and low rates of reinvestment resulted in, at best, stagnant rates of growth in Attymon Peat Co-op and Union Taxis, helping to explain why they both ultimately dissolved. There were also classic signs of degeneration over time in Tullamore Meats Co-op, Bord na Móna AEU, and Attymon Peat Co-op.

We found at least some convincing evidence of worker coop performance outcomes that contradict received notions based on rationalist theoretical modelling. A common refrain of such models is ‘that worker co-operatives that are collectively owned by their employees and depend on internal finance will underinvest because members’ property rights are truncated. When they leave the firm they do not keep a claim on future profit as they would with shares that appreciate in value and reflect the present value of future profit if capital markets are efficient’ (Pérotin 2016, p. 17). However, several of our worker coop case studies were characterised by relatively high levels of reinvestment.

This finding conforms with the available international evidence, which suggests that ‘in practice worker co-operatives plough back significantly more profit than required . . . perhaps as a form of insurance against job losses in downturns . . . This suggests that the hypothesised under-investment process itself does not apply in practice’ (Pérotin 2016, p. 18). And while the corollary of high levels of reinvestment is that worker-members can’t extract their surpluses in the form of higher incomes, the narrow pay differentials observed mirrors international research showing that ‘worker co-operatives are more egalitarian than conventional firms’ (p. 19).

Other rationalist theories argued that worker coops ‘are rare because they have inferior work incentives relative to similar [conventional capitalist firms]’ (Dow 2018, p. 68). Again, the implied idea that worker cooperators are shirkers (Pencavel 2012, p. 14–15; Dow 2018, p. 68) was not supported

by our fieldwork. In a majority of cases, the worker coops examined registered strong profitability and growth, even when faced with stiff competition. Indeed, the available international research finds that ‘the way worker co-operatives organise production is more efficient’ (Pérotin 2016, p. 18). That most of the Irish initiatives in question were born of, and resilient to, economic crises also sits well with the prevailing international research: ‘[Worker coops] are created more counter-cyclically than other firms’ (p. 16) and ‘may also preserve jobs better in downturns’ (p. 19). Moreover, even though we did observe evidence of degeneration in some worker coops, where ‘the proportion of members among the co-operative’s employees decreases until the firm is to all intents and purposes a conventional [capitalist] firm’ (p. 16), or where workers slip back into old habits (Vidal 2019a), this was not universally true.

6.3.2 *Social and environmental impact*

In terms of social impact, there was again a variety of sustainability outcomes observed across the worker coops under consideration; though higher levels of social equality were a common feature. High levels of job satisfaction were noted in the Quay Co-op, Bord na Móna AEU, and Belfast Cleaning Society. However, there was no great change to job satisfaction evident at Tullamore Meats Co-op, Attymon Peat Co-op, or Union Taxis. Such variation in job satisfaction outcomes, along with evidence of greater social equality, is consistent with existing international studies on the social sustainability of worker coops (Faughnan 1991; Piñeiro Harnecker 2009; Larrabure 2013, 2017; Ozarow and Croucher 2014).

Levels of social solidarity also varied from one worker coop to the next, and social consciousness didn’t always translate into charitable or solidaristic surplus distribution practices.²³⁰ If the worker coops investigated could all be described at some level as community oriented, only Belfast Cleaning Society and Union Taxis consciously distributed any meaningful portion of their surpluses *directly* towards social solidarity. That said, Bord na Móna AEU

²³⁰ Of course, all of the worker coops examined paid state-imposed taxation; but this is not a very useful indicator of social (or environmental) consciousness or solidarity for our purposes. We are primarily concerned with the distribution of post-tax profits in this analysis.

distributed a substantial portion, and Quay Co-op distributed a significant portion, of their surpluses *indirectly* towards social solidarity. Little to no surplus was distributed towards social solidarity from Tullamore Meats Co-op or Attymon Peat Co-op, despite their community orientation and social consciousness. The social principles of the worker coops were also compromised more generally at times.

These findings are consistent with Piñeiro Harnecker's (2009) demonstration that, while internal workplace democracy may be necessary, it is not sufficient to generate wider social solidarity practices. All too often, social consciousness and solidarity within worker coops fails to extend beyond the immediate worker-members. Still, we also observed counterexamples, where worker coops displayed higher levels of external social consciousness and practical solidarity.

In addition to social consciousness, all the worker coops examined displayed at least some level of environmental consciousness. This ethos was most pronounced in the Quay Co-op, Belfast Cleaning Society, and Union Taxis; though it was more muted in Tullamore Meats Co-op, Bord na Móna AEU, and Attymon Peat Co-op. As with social consciousness, environmental consciousness didn't necessarily translate into solidaristic surplus distribution practices. And again, environmental principles were sometimes compromised more generally. Even in the worker coops where environmental consciousness proved highest, little to no surplus was distributed *directly* towards environmental solidarity. This suggests that Piñeiro Harnecker's (2009) insights regarding social consciousness and solidarity within worker coops may be *even more relevant* when extended to questions of environmental consciousness and solidarity.

6.4 Influencing factors

Our worker coop case studies revealed a wide array of possible sustainability outcomes. We observed a variety of worker coop potentials and practices that either promoted or undermined economic, social, and environmental sustainability. But how are we to *explain* this diversity in outcomes?

6.4.1 *Skill development*

The level of skill development achieved by worker cooperators has been identified as a foundation stone of successful worker coop development (Meek and Warner 1990). While all of the worker coops that we visited were characterised by a high degree of ‘learning by doing’, the majority also benefited from at least some initial education and training via agency support; or from the application of skills acquired in their previous work lives. Only Quay Co-op stood apart from the group in this respect, relying almost entirely on self-help.

The most vibrant of our case study worker coops, Quay Co-op and Belfast Cleaning Society, which have to date avoided degeneration or dissolution, both instituted continuous education and training and provided opportunities for upskilling via new roles and responsibilities. By extension, they also encouraged non-member workers to eventually become worker-members. Regarding the worker coops that degenerated over time, Tullamore Meats Co-op, Bord na Móna AEU, and Attymon Peat Co-op, there was no focus on continuous education and training, and non-member workers were not encouraged to become worker-members. Matt Vidal highlights the importance of continuous education and training for sustainable worker coop development:

Managers cannot simply tell workers they are empowered and expect that to become institutionalised. Humans are creatures of habit and are resistant to change; workers and managers slip back into old routines. In general, it takes a high level of dedication to ensure new changes become institutionalised within any organisation. With regard to alienated workers, the challenge is even more difficult because existing routines provide a source of security and even identity.

Some workers don’t like the variety that academics fetishise.

(Vidal 2019a)

Nolan (2012) emphasises the importance of political economy education in building worker solidarity. The worker coops that displayed the highest levels of social and environmental consciousness, Quay Co-op, Belfast Cleaning Society, and Union Taxis, all benefited from such a political economy

educational orientation. This appeared to make (direct or indirect) social solidarity surplus distribution practices much more likely. Belfast Cleaning Society and Union Taxis both distributed part of their surpluses towards social solidarity through direct charitable donations. This surplus transfer was more significant in the case of the former, though the latter intended to institute a Community Social Fund. Quay Co-op, by contrast, practiced social solidarity surplus distribution in a more indirect manner, through its close relationship with the social movements.

Neither Tullamore Peat Co-op nor Attymon Peat Co-op distributed any consistent portion of their surpluses towards social solidarity. Nor did they benefit from a political economy educational ethos. And the substantial surplus distributed towards social solidarity in the case of Bord na Móna AEU related more to their embeddedness within a state-owned enterprise, rather than to any particular imbued commitment on the part of AEU workers.

In addition to social consciousness, political economy education did also seem to promote high levels of environmental consciousness. But this rarely translated into any corresponding environmental solidarity surplus distribution practices. Only the Quay Co-op was consistent in this respect; and, even then, only indirectly through its environmental *raison d'être*. None of the worker coops examined distributed any consistent portion of their surpluses directly towards wider environmental solidarity initiatives.

6.4.2 Governance structure

At the level of the enterprise, governance structure has been identified as key to sustainable worker coop development (Novković 2013; ICA 2015). Our case study enterprises reflected the international experience of cooperative governance, in that ‘co-operatives are very diverse, and a one-size-fits-all solution does not seem to be the best way forward in co-op governance practice’ (Novković 2013, p. 93). There were commonalities across the worker coops studied, with smaller worker coops tending to adopt more horizontal governance structures, and larger worker coops tending to adopt more vertical governance structures. This finding is consistent with Lambert’s (2017) observation that there tends to be more managers in larger US worker

coops. But there were also many differences across similar-sized worker coops, regarding worker-member, non-member worker, and external stakeholder participation; the division of labour; job rotation practices; the pay structure; unionisation levels; the ownership structure; and the founding ethos and mission.

All of our case study worker coops relied on at least some degree of centralised coordination and leadership, whether this materialised in a formal or informal management structure. This looked to be a precondition for economic sustainability in the worker coops examined. The larger worker coops had more formal management structures, whereas the smaller ones had a mix of formal and informal management structures. Where the coops displayed strong economic performance, this appeared to result from a suitable management structure combined with channels for meaningful worker participation. Lambert (2017) suggests that such *cooperative* management structures may help to improve *coordination* in a fast-paced market environment. Similarly, Gordon (1976) and Vidal (2019a, 2019b) argue that there are potential economic benefits to be gained from greater worker participation. Instances of degeneration and dissolution, however, could not be directly related to the different governance structures of our case study enterprises.

A link between substantive workplace democracy and high job satisfaction and social equality was clear in the cases of Quay Co-op, Bord na Móna AEU, and Belfast Cleaning Society; though such outcomes were less obvious in the examples of Tullamore Meats Co-op, Attymon Peat Co-op, and Union Taxis. Social and environmental consciousness seemed to be more related to education, as discussed in the previous subsection, than to governance structure per se. However, a lack of any serious external stakeholder participation in the governance structures of these worker coops, aside from in the case of Bord na Móna AEU, meant that social and environmental surplus distribution practices were generally directed solely by the worker-members. This could help to explain the inadequacy of social and environmental solidarity practices in some of the cases observed. Piñeiro Harnecker concludes that ‘democratic planning, much more than education,

is indispensable to offset the serious negative ideological and cultural effects of market economies' (2009, p. 337).

No discernible association could be drawn between our case study sustainability outcomes and the various combinations of the division of labour (delegated roles versus job rotation); the pay structure (flat pay arrangements versus pay according to responsibility); the level of unionisation; and the ownership structure. With one exception: flat pay structures were clearly associated with narrower pay differentials.

6.4.3 External environment

A final influencing factor on sustainable worker coop development that is identified in the literature as centrally important is the external political-economic environment (Bateman 2013; Upchurch et al. 2014). The recurrence of the deep structural crises that punctuate the history of capitalist development (McDonough 2017) lies at the root of long waves of worker coop development (Ramsay 1977; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2019). In particular, our case study is concerned with the consolidation of the global neoliberal SSA following the structural crisis of the postwar SSA (Kotz and McDonough 2010), and the local Irish variant of this global transition (McDonough and Dundon 2010; McCabe 2013b).

The first wave of Irish worker coop development initiatives was born of this neoliberal transition, in the context of social partnership in the South (McDonough and Dundon 2010) and the peace process in the North (McCabe 2013b). And more recent Irish worker coop development initiatives were born of the structural crisis of neoliberal capitalism (Kotz 2015b; McDonough 2018), suggesting the potential emergence of a second wave in the context of global political-economic restructuring (Christensen 2019). This Irish history reflects the international experience of worker coop development, which suggests that economic crisis periods necessitate worker self-help: 'Increased unemployment . . . may create a greater pool of potential [worker cooperators] out of necessity. It may also generate opportunities as redundancy payments' (Pérotin 2016, p. 15) can be directed towards funding worker coop initiatives.

Of the first wave of Irish worker coops that we studied, Tullamore Meats Co-op and Attymon Peat Co-op benefited directly from the all-island cooperative support infrastructure that arose through social partnership (WUT/ITUT and CDU) and the peace process (NICDA/SEA and BURC). Both of these initiatives were responses to business closures, where workers decided to pool their redundancies to help finance worker coop conversions. The gradual disappearance of Irish cooperative support organisations (CSOs), as social partnership and the peace process degenerated and the labour movement lost strength and influence, meant that these worker coops were subsequently left to their own devices and likewise degenerated over time. The rise and fall of enterprise partnership at Bord na Móna, itself facilitated by national social partnership, played a comparable role in the case of the Bord na Móna AEU's. More recent worker coop initiatives were supported by an emergent network of relatively underresourced CSOs, given the relative weakness of the labour and cooperative movements, centred on Belfast. In particular, Trademark Belfast was to the fore in assisting the establishment of Belfast Cleaning Society and Union Taxis.

Only Quay Co-op stood apart from the group through its independent inception. The external influence in this instance was the relative strength of the social movements. And Quay Co-op managed to navigate the subsequent decline of the social movements through its embeddedness in a local social-environmental subculture. The social movements have also regained strength in recent years. But the Co-op's resilience in the intervening period points to the importance of cooperative subcultures to successful worker coop development more generally, as articulated by Cornforth and Thomas (1990). Indeed, all of the worker coop experiences that we studied benefited from pre-existing subcultures, where groups of workers had already developed a collective sense of identity and purpose. This was achieved through working together in conventional firms previously in the cases of Tullamore Meats Co-op, Bord na Móna AEU's, Attymon Peat Co-op, and Union Taxis; through learning together in educational groups previously in the case of Belfast Cleaning Society; and through struggling together in activist groups previously in case of Quay Co-op.

This sense of collective solidarity also improved the resilience of these worker coop enterprises to economic downturns, such as the 2008 crisis (CECOP 2012). Such cooperative resilience is in keeping with the international research: ‘In response to demand shocks, [worker] co-operatives adjust pay more than employment’ (Pérotin 2016, p. 19). But the combined external pressures of the economic cycle and market competition also clearly compromised any social and environmental principles and practices of the worker coops. This suggests that market competition needs to give way to planned reciprocity for truly sustainable worker coop development to be achieved (Piñeiro Harnecker 2009; Exner 2014; Devine 2017; Lafferty 2018). ‘Such a system of conscious coordination would thus create an environment more consistent with the democratic, egalitarian and solidaristic principles of worker-managed enterprises where they will not have to choose between surviving and realizing their social potential’ (Piñeiro Harnecker 2009, p. 337).

In this respect, the Bord na Móna experience was similar in some respects to that of Mondragón, in that the latter’s

cooperatives are willing to cede total autonomy over strategic decisions and even management decisions *if* the decision making goes to democratic bodies where they can represent their interests and participate indirectly in those decisions. Income scales, the permitted percentage of wage workers, and the criteria for using profits are decided by the congress of all Mondragón co-operatives. Moreover, the executives of the second- and third-degree cooperatives participate in the governing council of the grassroots cooperatives. Without setting out to do so, Mondragón is thus contributing to clarifying the question of whether it is possible to combine enterprise autonomy and planning, so important in debates about socialism.

(Piñeiro Harnecker 2013, p. 12)

While the Bord na Móna experience represented an attempt to cooperativise a state-owned enterprise, the company acted effectively as a higher-degree cooperative federating the AEU. The AEU workers ceded a certain amount of autonomy, while still retaining a high level of self-management, to company managers with whom they negotiated directly in pre-production meetings, and with whom their elected representatives negotiated at the sub-

board and board levels. AEU workers also participated in the wider representative democratic institutions governing ministerial appointments to the company's board. As a state-owned enterprise, it was Bord na Móna's responsibility to develop a social and environmental ethos and mission for the company as a whole, in accordance with its democratic mandate, and where this may have been relatively absent at the level of individual AEU's.

Acknowledging the importance of cooperative subcultures also helps to counter the rationalist 'hypothesis that labor-managed firms are rare because they have problems with collective choice' (Dow 2018, p. 71). The supposed reason for this is that

workers have heterogenous preferences involving income, effort, job security, working conditions, and the like. By contrast, investors unanimously agree on the goal of profit or present value. As a result, [labour-managed firms] incur high transaction costs in making managerial decisions, which are manifested in voting cycles or bargaining impasses.

(Dow 2018, p. 71)

Cooperative subcultures, however, imply greater homogeneity amongst worker-members. Pencavel suggests that this is important 'because the lubricant of trust is more easily engendered among like individuals', meaning that 'consensus decisions are more easily reached and implemented' (2012, p. 28).²³¹ But this creates challenges in the process of selecting and integrating new coop members (p. 28), as experienced by Quay Co-op and Belfast Cleaning Society, where a strategic approach to member recruitment was required. Pencavel concludes that, 'Co-ops do face governance problems arising perhaps from the differences among worker-owners, but when workers remain sufficiently homogeneous they may look forward to a long life' (2012, p. 30). In any event, international research demonstrates that

there are many successful worker cooperatives in countries like Italy, Spain, and France that compete effectively against capitalist rivals. This calls into question the claim that collective choice problems explain the rarity of [labour-managed firms], and suggests that these problems can be managed through good

²³¹ That said, 'Others have suggested that heterogeneous decision-makers make better decisions when faced with complex problems' (Pencavel 2012, p. 28).

organizational design. For example, voting cycles can be avoided by using representative rather than participatory democracy, and bargaining costs can be minimized by sharing credible accounting data among workers or their representatives. To do extent that the costs of collective choice do remain important, they may be offset in some situations by [labour-managed firm] advantages [regarding higher] productivity

(Dow 2018, p. 72)

Given that cooperative subcultures do appear to matter, however, this suggests that worker coop initiatives are more likely to succeed where the workers involved have previously developed a shared sense of collective identity. This was certainly true of the longest lasting and most vibrant of the worker coops in our case study, Quay Co-op. And to the extent that the other case study worker coops succeeded in their aims, pre-existing cooperative subcultures were clearly a foundational element in that success. In particular, the Tullamore Meats Co-op, Bord na Móna AEU's, and Attymon Peat Co-op conversions, which each involved experienced groups of workers, benefited greatly from this dynamic. These experiences point to the potential of worker coop conversions more generally (Olsen 2013; Gowan 2019); and to the potential of leveraging pre-existing trade union power and grassroots organisation in this direction (Perrin-Massebiaux and Nolan 2013; Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2019). Belfast Cleaning Society also benefited from a local anti-sectarian subculture in a particular interface area (Nolan et al. 2013).

Another important external influence on our case study enterprises was the local political context. There was local political support for some of these worker coop initiatives, such as Tullamore Peat Co-op, Bord na Móna AEU's, Attymon Peat Co-op, and Belfast Cleaning Society, where they weren't perceived as an economic or ideological infringement. But where an economic or ideological threat was perceived, such as in the cases of Quay Co-op and Union Taxis, the initiatives were met with local political hostility. A local social-environmental subculture sustained Quay Co-op in the face of such political hostility, and even managed to secure the Co-op some limited state assistance; but the lack of political muscle on the part of Union Taxis

proved fatal. This latter experience in particular underlines the importance of building strong ties between worker coops and counterhegemonic political organisations (Carnoy 1981). Such a political-cultural strategy could set out initially to leverage local government institutions to create a more worker coop-friendly environment (Bateman 2013, 2017). In the longer term, it follows that this alliance would need to contest the commanding heights of the capitalist state (Sharzer 2017).

In all of the worker coop development experiences that we encountered during our case study, radical grassroots trade unionists and left-wing activists were to the fore in either initiating the projects or providing institutional support. Crucially, the CSOs that existed across Ireland were all established through the political agitation of radical trade unionists. And the grassroots activism of worker cooperators provided a necessary complement: living examples of what is possible when workers take the reins of production. This implies the primacy of grassroots activism in the hierarchy of political struggles required to establish a Cooperative Commonwealth (Ranis 2016; Marszalek 2017).

Last but not least, the overarching external influence on our case study worker coop initiatives concerned ongoing environmental degradation. This reality ultimately constrained the longer-term sustainability of all such productive operations. While the Quay Co-op was established in part to combat environmental degradation, all of the other worker coops examined involved industrial processes that, to varying degrees, exacerbated the problem. And even the Quay Co-op was compromised by market pressures. At the extremes, tighter environmental regulation and the withdrawal of the state subsidy for peat harvesting hastened the decline of Bord na Móna AEUs; while increases in the carbon tax sounded the death knell for Attymon Peat Co-op. This suggests that greater attention is needed as to *what* and *how* worker coops produce, quite aside from their democratic structures. As the Quay Co-op goes to show, the environmental crisis presents the worker coop movement with *opportunities*, and not just challenges (CICOPA 2014). Table 1 presents a summary of our case study worker coop characteristics, sustainability outcomes, and influencing factors.

Table 1 - Analysis of Irish worker coop case studies

Coop characteristics					Sustainability outcomes			Influencing factors		
Coop name	Time period	Sector	Competitive context	Growth trajectory	Economic	Social	Environmental	Skill development	Governance structure	External environment
Quay Co-op	1985-present	Wholefoods, hospitality, retail	Growing competition	Strong growth	<p>Created significant number of jobs via conversion</p> <p>Profitable and resilient</p> <p>Relatively narrow pay differentials</p> <p>High proportion of surpluses reinvested</p>	<p>High job satisfaction and social equality</p> <p>Community oriented, high social consciousness</p> <p>Social principles sometimes compromised</p> <p>Significant surplus distributed (indirectly) towards social solidarity</p>	<p>High environmental consciousness</p> <p>Environmentally friendly policies, practices, and produce</p> <p>Environmental principles sometimes compromised</p> <p>Significant surplus distributed (indirectly) towards environmental solidarity</p>	<p>Learning by doing</p> <p>Opportunities for upskilling via new roles and responsibilities</p> <p>Non-member workers encouraged to eventually join Co-op</p> <p>Focus on continuous education and training via Co-op</p> <p>Focus on political economy education</p>	<p>Formal management committee</p> <p>Worker-member and (informal) non-member worker participation; strategic membership criteria; no wider stakeholder participation</p> <p>Delegated roles, no job rotation; paid according to responsibility; nonunionised</p> <p>Rent buildings; provide social space to community</p> <p>Strong social and environmental founding ethos and mission</p>	<p>Economic recovery and depression</p> <p>Environmental degradation</p> <p>Declining and resurgent strength of social movements</p> <p>Local social-environmental subculture</p> <p>Local political hostility</p> <p>Limited state support</p>
Tullamore Meats Co-op	1989-present	Food processing	Competitive industry	Strong growth	<p>Saved and created relatively small number of jobs via start-up</p> <p>Profitable and resilient</p> <p>Narrow pay differentials</p> <p>High proportion of surpluses reinvested</p> <p>Degeneration</p>	<p>No great change in job satisfaction, though greater social equality</p> <p>Pros and cons to greater responsibility</p> <p>Lower pay than before</p> <p>Community oriented, some social consciousness</p> <p>Little to no surplus distributed towards social solidarity</p>	<p>Some environmental consciousness</p> <p>Environmentally harmful industrial process</p> <p>Little to no greening of operation</p> <p>Little to no surplus distributed towards environmental solidarity</p>	<p>Learning by doing</p> <p>Application of previous skills</p> <p>Opportunities for upskilling via new roles and responsibilities</p> <p>Limited initial education and training via agency support</p> <p>No focus on continuous education or training</p>	<p>Informal management committee</p> <p>Worker-member collective; limited opportunity for non-member workers to join; no wider stakeholder participation</p> <p>Delegated roles, no job rotation; flat pay structure for worker-members; nonunionised</p> <p>Non-member workers subordinate to worker-members, though similar pay</p> <p>Own plant, machinery, and vehicle</p> <p>No particular social or environmental founding ethos or mission</p>	<p>Economic recovery and depression</p> <p>Environmental degradation</p> <p>Declining strength of labour movement</p> <p>Rise and fall of worker coop development infrastructure</p> <p>No local competition</p> <p>Support from local business community</p> <p>Local political support</p> <p>Limited state, agency, and coop support</p>

Bord na Móna AEU system	1989-2016	Energy (milled peat)	State monopoly	Strong growth	<p>Saved substantial number of jobs via conversion</p> <p>Higher levels of efficiency and innovation on average</p> <p>Met production targets on average</p> <p>Returned company to profitability</p> <p>Relatively narrow pay differentials</p> <p>High proportion of surpluses reinvested</p> <p>Degeneration and dissolution</p>	<p>High job satisfaction and social equality</p> <p>Increased pay on average and maintained benefits</p> <p>Community oriented, some social consciousness</p> <p>Substantial surplus distributed (indirectly) towards social solidarity</p>	<p>Some environmental consciousness</p> <p>Increased exploitation of natural resources</p> <p>Met environmental standards on average</p> <p>Environmentally harmful industrial process</p> <p>Some greening of operation</p> <p>Little to no surplus distributed towards environmental solidarity</p>	<p>Learning by doing</p> <p>Application of previous skills</p> <p>Opportunities for upskilling via new roles and responsibilities</p> <p>Limited initial education and training via company</p> <p>Uneven development of teams</p> <p>No focus on continuous education or training</p>	<p>Formal company management structure</p> <p>Team leader collective; (informal) participation of seasonal workers; wider stakeholder participation via ministerial appointment to company board</p> <p>Worker representation at company board and sub-board levels</p> <p>Payment by Results; flat pay structure for team leaders, fall-back rate; lower pay and conditions for seasonal workers; job rotation; heavily unionised via GoU</p> <p>Strong social, though no particular environmental, founding ethos and mission via company; payment of state dividend from surpluses; company monitoring of quality and environmental standards</p>	<p>Economic recovery and depression</p> <p>Rise and fall of national and enterprise social partnership</p> <p>Declining strength of labour movement</p> <p>Rise of shareholder value model and development of market for external managers</p> <p>Environmental degradation</p> <p>Increasingly unpredictable weather</p> <p>Greater environmental regulation</p> <p>Removal of state subsidy</p> <p>Diversifying energy market</p>
Attymon Peat Co-op	1989-2018	Energy (sod peat)	Competitive market	Stagnant growth	<p>Saved relatively small number of jobs via conversion</p> <p>Low but stable profitability</p> <p>Relatively narrow pay differentials</p> <p>Degeneration and dissolution</p>	<p>No great change in job satisfaction, though greater social equality</p> <p>Less pay and benefits than before</p> <p>Community oriented, some social consciousness</p> <p>Little to no surplus distributed towards social solidarity</p>	<p>Some environmental consciousness</p> <p>Met environmental standards</p> <p>Environmentally harmful industrial process</p> <p>Some greening of operation</p> <p>Little to no surplus distributed towards environmental solidarity</p>	<p>Learning by doing</p> <p>Application of previous skills</p> <p>Opportunities for upskilling via new roles and responsibilities</p> <p>Some initial education and training via agency support</p> <p>No focus on continuous education or training</p>	<p>Formal management committee</p> <p>Worker-member collective; some wider stakeholder participation via chair of board from local community</p> <p>Flat pay structure and job rotation for worker-members; unionised</p> <p>Seasonal workers subordinate to worker-members and paid less</p> <p>Rent plant and machinery from Bord na Móna</p> <p>Monitoring of environmental standards by Bord na Móna</p> <p>No particular social or environmental founding ethos or mission</p>	<p>Economic recovery and depression</p> <p>Declining strength of labour movement</p> <p>Rise and fall of worker coop development infrastructure</p> <p>Significant company, trade union, and local political support</p> <p>Environmental degradation</p> <p>Increasingly unpredictable weather</p> <p>Greater environmental regulation</p> <p>Increasing carbon tax</p>

Belfast Cleaning Society	2011-present	Contract services	Competitive industry	Strong growth	<p>Created relatively small number of jobs via start-up</p> <p>Profitable and resilient</p> <p>Equal pay</p> <p>Reinvested surpluses</p>	<p>High job satisfaction and social equality</p> <p>Higher pay than industry average</p> <p>Community oriented, high social consciousness</p> <p>Social principles sometimes compromised</p> <p>Significant surplus distributed directly towards social solidarity</p>	<p>High environmental consciousness</p> <p>Environmentally helpful and harmful industrial process</p> <p>Some greening of operation</p> <p>Environmental principles sometimes compromised</p> <p>Little to no surplus distributed towards environmental solidarity</p>	<p>Learning by doing</p> <p>Significant initial education and training via agency support</p> <p>Opportunities for upskilling via new roles and responsibilities</p> <p>Non-member workers encouraged to eventually join Co-op</p> <p>Focus on continuous education and training via Co-op</p> <p>Focus on political economy education</p>	<p>Informal management committee</p> <p>Worker-member collective; non-member workers encouraged to participate and join; limited wider stakeholder participation via unpaid advisor on board</p> <p>Job rotation for worker-members</p> <p>Flat pay structure for worker-members, non-member workers, and temp workers; living wage employer; unionised</p> <p>Rent office; own vehicle and equipment</p> <p>Strong social and environmental founding ethos and mission</p>	<p>Economic depression and recovery</p> <p>Environmental degradation</p> <p>Weak labour and cooperative movements</p> <p>Evolution of peace process</p> <p>Anti-sectarian subculture</p> <p>Significant trade union and agency support</p>
Union Taxis	2014-2016	Transport services	Competitive industry	Little to no growth	<p>Created small number of jobs via start-up</p> <p>Struggled to turn a profit</p> <p>Equal pay</p> <p>Business failure and dissolution</p>	<p>Struggle to survive, though greater social equality</p> <p>Community oriented, high social consciousness</p> <p>Social principles compromised</p> <p>Some limited surplus distributed directly towards social solidarity</p>	<p>High environmental consciousness</p> <p>Environmentally harmful industrial process</p> <p>Environmental principles compromised</p> <p>Little to no greening of operation</p> <p>Little to no surplus distributed towards environmental solidarity</p>	<p>Learning by doing</p> <p>Application of previous skills</p> <p>Opportunities for upskilling via new roles and responsibilities</p> <p>Limited initial education and training via agency support</p> <p>Continuous education and training via Co-op</p> <p>Focus on political economy education</p>	<p>Formal management committee</p> <p>Worker-member collective; limited wider stakeholder participation via unpaid advisor on board</p> <p>Lower depot rent than charged by competitors; build driver safety net from surplus; unionised</p> <p>Rent office and own vehicles</p> <p>Strong social and environmental founding ethos and mission</p> <p>Build Community Social Fund from surplus</p>	<p>Economic recovery</p> <p>Environmental degradation</p> <p>Weak labour and cooperative movements</p> <p>Evolution of peace process</p> <p>Local political hostility</p> <p>Some trade union and agency support</p>

6.5 Towards a hierarchy of cooperative needs

Our case study results are suggestive of a hierarchy of sustainable worker coop development needs. At the most basic level, worker coop sustainability and scale requires a viable business idea, in the sense of having identified a marketable commodity for production. As discussed in the previous section, such ideas are increasingly expected to meet the requirements of environmental sustainability. After identifying a viable business idea, worker cooperators need to achieve a basic level of education and training in essential business skills (financial management, marketing, cooperative organisation etc.). Next up, a viable business idea and essential business skills need to be combined with a sense of collective identity amongst the worker cooperators. This helps to smooth the decision-making process within worker coops.

Particularly as worker coops continue to grow, the question of designing a suitable internal cooperative governance structure, combining elements of representative as well as participative democracy, and striking an appropriate balance between delegated roles and job rotation, comes to the fore. All the foregoing elements are needed regardless of the external institutional environment regulating worker coop development. But a more supportive external institutional environment, in terms of legal, technical, and financial assistance at a minimum, and culminating in a cooperativist political culture and (dual) state, greatly benefits sustainable worker coop development.

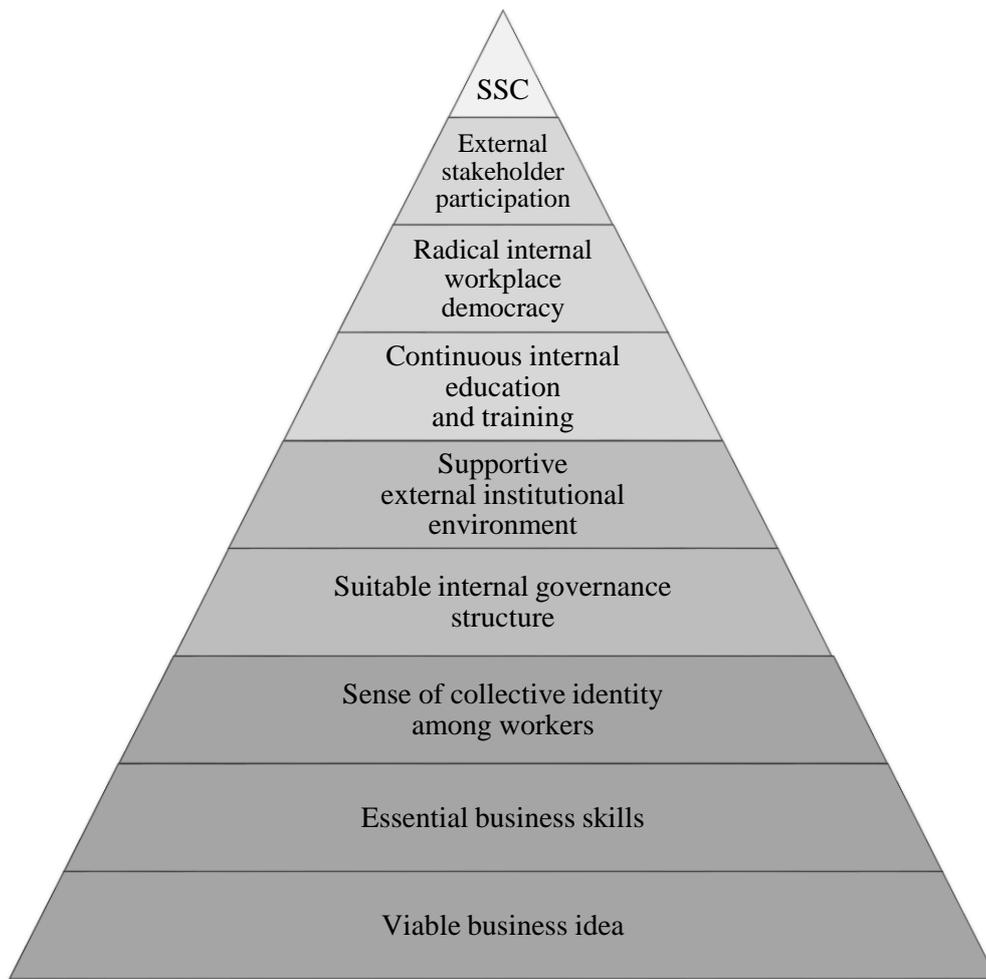
Much, if not all, of the discussion so far relates to economic sustainability, and unlocking the economic potentials inherent in the worker coop enterprise form. To further activate the social and environmental, as well as economic, potentials of worker coops necessitates, firstly, continuous internal cooperative education and training, with an emphasis on political economy education. This can lay the necessary foundation for the institution of radical internal workplace democracy and workers' control within worker coops; itself a precondition for the effective implementation of external stakeholder participation of all those affected by the operations of worker coops. The latter, in turn, is a precondition for sustainable worker coop development across the economic, social, and environmental spheres; and reaches its highest stage of development as the social structure of cooperation or

Cooperative Commonwealth. The SSC represents the highest macro-institutional culmination of all of the previous stages in our hierarchy of cooperative needs. As such, the SSC remains an aspiration even within a socialist society.²³²

We represent our proposed hierarchy of cooperative needs in Figure 1. This depiction is not intended to suggest that each stage in the hierarchy, moving from bottom to top, must be completely satisfied in every respect before successive stages can be attained in any respect. Rather, we mean to imply that a certain threshold must be met within each stage before successive stages can be more fully enacted. And the further development of higher stages, in turn, allows for the fuller development of lower stages in this dialectical hierarchy. Figure 1 can be read through the micro lens of an individual worker coop, or through the meso and macro lenses of a worker coop sector or worker coop economy, respectively.

²³² See Devine (2017) and Magdoff and Williams (2017) for a detailed sketch of the eco-socialist society to which the SSC aspires.

Figure 1 - Hierarchy of cooperative needs



6.6 Conclusions

This chapter has analysed the results of our case study on worker cooperative development in Ireland throughout the neoliberal era. Our findings are suggestive of a hierarchy of sustainable worker coop development needs. Further research on the economic, social, and environmental dynamics of worker coop development will be needed across different national contexts to further develop, or otherwise amend, our own conceptualisation and visualisation of this hierarchy of cooperative needs.

7 Conclusion

This thesis has explored the potential for worker cooperative development as a sustainable response to the structural crisis of the latest stage of capitalist development. Our study was motivated by the resurgence of interest in the worker coop model, in light of the intersecting political-economic crisis of neoliberal capitalism and social-ecological crisis of the capitalist Anthropocene. We set out to help establish whether worker coops are economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable at the micro level; and whether and how worker coop development can reach scale to establish the basis for sustainable development at the macro level.

From early on in our research, it was clear that questions of worker coop sustainability at the micro level required a consideration of social relations beyond those established exclusively *within* the firm. Together with pre-existing theory and empirical evidence, our case study results suggest that, while worker cooperatives display sustainability *potentials* at the micro level not present in the operations of conventional capitalist firms, inter-cooperative planning and macro-level regulation appear as a necessary antidote to the expansionary dynamics of market competition. In this sense, the worker coop model is *necessary* at the micro level, if *not sufficient*, to institute sustainable development at the macro level. Sustainability requires that the whole of society operates as one big worker coop via democratic participatory planned socialism.

The existing literature on worker coop development emphasises economic barriers to scale and calls for reform of the legal, financial, and technical framework regulating the sector. There is less emphasis, however, on the arguably even greater *political-cultural* barriers to reaching scale. Indeed, a political-cultural movement is necessary both to achieve the desired economic reforms in the first instance, and then to effectively leverage a more supportive institutional environment on the ground.

There is a tendency, on the one hand, for researchers to overemphasise the importance of macroeconomic policy change relative to the grassroots activism of micro worker coop development initiatives. On the other hand,

grassroots worker cooperators have tended to be suspicious of any collaboration with state-level institutions (often fearing the very real threat of state cooption), preferring instead to set a living example of worker self-management in defiance of the prevailing state policy institutions. An ambitious political-cultural worker coop development strategy calls for a greater recognition that both of these tendencies have a mutually-reinforcing role to play. It should be noted in this regard that the political-cultural importance of grassroots worker coop activism, and, indeed, its primacy in effecting and exploiting the desired structural transformation, was not always so clear to us at the outset of this research.

This is not to argue that a discussion around the political-cultural significance of worker coops is entirely absent from the existing literature. In a recent political economy analysis, for example, Peter Ranis draws on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci in arguing that:

What worker cooperatives provide is a counter-narrative to the one that assumes that only owners and managers can provide leadership and function effectively in the world of production. . . . Gramsci would see institutions like cooperatives as forming collective habits which make social behaviour automatic and give the working class, the hitherto subaltern class, the belief in itself as becoming the bearers of a new hegemony.

(Ranis 2016, p. 16)

Similarly, and on the basis of cooperative practice rather than merely academic interest, Tom Redmond long ago highlighted the political-cultural challenges facing the Irish worker coop movement:

The fortunes of the worker co-op sector in Western Europe [were] boosted in unique circumstances when the labour movement was in the ascendancy after the defeat of fascism in 1945. It survives and grows in direct relationship with the support, encouragement and positive treatment it gets from sympathetic governments and local authorities. . . .

Working in co-ops requires dramatic changes in people's attitude[s] and inherited assumptions. It is difficult to overcome our conditioned reflexes toward management, skills protection and information sharing. Education in the new working environment is as necessary to any co-op as the business training.

As this requires time, commitment, and sacrifice, the efforts of working people to create jobs [via] the co-operative model are not alone courageous, they are experiments in broadening the horizons of the cultural patterns of working class life.

(Redmond 1990, p. 3–4)

Even more explicitly, in a recent economic policy report, the New Economics Foundation (NEF) noted the experience of Emilia Romagna and the Italian cooperative movement:

[A] broad and deep socialist lifeworld that existed outside of Italian capitalism, bolstered by the active social presence of the Italian Communist Party in many of the heartlands of Italian co-operativism, was crucial to providing the institutional, cultural, and political space and momentum for the development of co-operativism. This suggests that a supportive institutional framework is best enabled and embedded by a broader political culture conducive to co-operation. If culture and institutional support are in place, the Italian experience²³³ suggests co-operatives can thrive.

(NEF 2018, p. 25)

Yet, while such arguments can be located in the literature, they are generally underdeveloped and observed in passing. Even if this might make strategic political sense in advocating for economic policy reform, a serious political economy analysis of worker cooperatives needs to emphasise political-cultural institutional change as it relates to the class struggle. We have proposed the social structure of cooperation (SSC) as a theoretical conceptualisation of the Cooperative Commonwealth. The transition from a capitalist social structure of accumulation (SSA) to a socialist SSC is inevitably a working class endeavour, and will no doubt provoke a capitalist class reaction. The construction and consolidation of an SSC then requires a mobilisation of the entire labour movement across the economic, political,

²³³ Regarding the Italian experience, Erik Olin Wright notes that the '[g]eneral defeat of the working class in [the] late 1970s [and] the fall of [the] USSR [in 1991]' led to 'profound change in [the] political system and cooperative movement', with the latter abandoning its 'ideological forward vision' (2017, p. 2). 'Since [the] 1980s [Italian c]ooperatives have adopted a more business-like approach' (p. 2). This history suggests that, 'When the labour movement is strong, cooperatives can be true to their values. Now that [the labour movement is] weak, the cooperatives can be manipulated for capitalist purposes' (p. 2).

and cultural spheres of contemporary capitalist society,²³⁴ working in tandem and aspiring towards the ultimate vision of a Cooperative Commonwealth.

In an Irish context, cooperativism is beginning to reemerge from a particularly low base. As such, the most pressing challenge for the labour movement is to educate workers and, by extension, the wider society in cooperative ideals and practices. This means democratising the internal organisation of trade unions ‘to facilitate a multi-directional, interactive relationship among leaders, local officials, activists and ordinary members’ (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2019, p. 104) as a prerequisite: ‘If it is impossible to involve and empower workers within their own trade unions, it is scarcely plausible to suggest that work itself can be democratized, and the legitimacy of unions as a voice for democratization is itself undermined’ (p. 105).²³⁵ It also means workers organising into ‘a political party which serves as the ideological means through which the movement expresses itself, influences worker takeovers at the plant level, and the spread of such movements to other plants’ (Carnoy 1981, p. 243).²³⁶ This sees ‘the decentralized political party’, in alliance with radicalised trade unions, ‘as the key educational institution in a counter-hegemonic movement’ (p. 258–9).²³⁷

A greater awareness and lived experience of cooperative organisation should encourage grassroots worker coop initiatives, and eventually feed into the

²³⁴ Mary Mellor emphasises the necessity of cooperativising household and caring labour: ‘If a red-green future will be bucolic freedom for the ex-workers/consumers, women’s burden of work will never pass from them. . . . Democratic ecological planning needs to start from human provisioning in all its elements, not just what currently comprises production’ (Mellor 2018). See also Devine (2017, p. 43).

²³⁵ In an article generally critical of experiments in workers’ self-management under capitalism, the revolutionary Marxist economist Ernest Mandel concludes: ‘The working class will prepare itself for self-management through the struggle for workers’ control and the self-organisation of its struggles. When workers begin to exercise control over the capitalist management of their factories, to take control of their unions, to take the organisation of strikes into their own hands with the greatest possible degree of workers’ democracy, they are enrolling themselves into the only real school of self-management which is open under capitalism’ (Mandel 1975).

²³⁶ See also Wolff (2019).

²³⁷ On ‘A New Political Instrument for a New Hegemony’, see also Harnecker (2015, Part 3). Formal cooperative education would itself need to be cooperativised (see Freire [1968] 2012; Bell et al. 1990).

general strategy of the Irish labour movement (Gumbrell-McCormick and Hyman 2019). In the short to medium term, a reasonable aspiration might be to grow the Irish coop sector to something resembling that of Emilia Romagna. The Italian region has a population roughly equal to that of the South of Ireland, but with ‘more than 40% of its GDP generated in the cooperative sector’ (Bateman 2013, p. 2) and one of the very highest living standards in Europe (p. 2). Our case study suggests that the areas of Ireland with the highest levels of poverty and deprivation²³⁸ – rural areas and sectarian hotspots – are also, partly as a consequence, those that are most conducive to a culture and ethos of cooperative self-help. This points to the potential success of a ‘bottom-up’ cooperative and spatial industrial strategy targeting such regions (Boylan 1996; Bateman 2017).

But this can only be achieved through a rejuvenated and radicalised Irish labour movement. This is hard to envision to the extent necessary outside of a renewed slowdown in the Irish economy. The SSA theory, however, suggests that economic instability and a tendency toward relative stagnation are here to stay, alongside the attempted revival of global neoliberalism (McDonough 2018). The Irish Left must be ready next time.

In all of this, the social-ecological window of opportunity is small and closing, with less than 20 years on current estimates²³⁹ for humanity to avoid exceeding the climate tipping point. Given the timescales generally involved in social transformation, the situation might appear all but hopeless. Yet perhaps a Gramscian optimism of the will is still warranted. Writing in the context of Cold War animosity and the threat of nuclear conflagration, Soviet philosopher Yuri Zamoshkin²⁴⁰ explained the concept of a ‘border situation’. This traditionally referred to a life or death situation facing individuals, who would respond either with passivity, accepting their fate, or, alternatively, could ‘find themselves capable of feats they never before would have thought

²³⁸ See the Pobal HP Deprivation Index (<https://maps.pobal.ie/index.html>) and Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/deprivation>).

²³⁹ See <http://trillionthtonne.org/>.

²⁴⁰ See Millar and McMahon (2017, p. 24–5).

possible' (Zamoshkin 1988, p. 211). He argued that this concept could also be applied to humanity as a whole, given the existential threats – including social-ecological threats (p. 212) – now facing us:

This situation, for the first time in history, directly, practically, and not purely speculatively, confronts human thought with the possibility of death for the entire human race. The continuity of history, which earlier had seemed to be a given, suddenly becomes highly questionable.

As with the individual, this global [border situation] may contribute to a “revelation” in human thinking and to a positive change of character previously thought impossible for our species. The global [border situation] could give rise to the critical self-reflection needed to resolve the contradictions between ideals and political reality. It could prompt rethinking the essence and importance of everything that constitutes the “human experiment”. In this unique situation, and the hope that humanity will come to comprehend it, lies the real possibility for ideal to finally be translated into practice.²⁴¹

(Zamoshkin 1988, p. 211)

²⁴¹ Jason Hickel (2018) provides evidence to support the contention that ‘it is theoretically possible to achieve a good life for all within planetary boundaries in poor nations by building on existing exemplary models and by adopting fairer distributive policies. However, the additional biophysical pressure that this entails at a global level requires that rich nations dramatically reduce their biophysical footprints by 40–50%. Extant empirical studies suggest that this degree of reduction is unlikely to be achieved solely through efforts to decouple GDP growth from environmental impact, even under highly optimistic conditions. Therefore, for rich nations to fit within the boundaries of the safe and just space will require that they abandon growth as a policy objective and shift to post-capitalist economic models’ (Hickel 2018, p. 1). See also Foster (2019).

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Appendix 1

Topic guide

- **Introduction**
 - Thanks
 - Researcher, topic, and funder
 - Aims and objectives
 - Consent and anonymity
 - Recording, storage, and disclosure
 - Questions and continue

- **Background**
 - **Work** history
 - Length of employment
 - Previous work
 - **Role** in enterprise
 - Job specification
 - Delegated responsibilities
 - History of **organisation**
 - Origin
 - Mission statement

- Worker coop *sustainability*
 - Economic
 - **Employment** (sustain viable enterprise, pay/conditions, seasonal/temp)
 - Efficiency (competitiveness, productivity, quality, **monitoring**)
 - Innovation (ideas, technology, **labour process**)
 - Resilience (crisis response, employment, **work hours**)
 - Growth (**impulse**, employment, (non)**profit**, debt)
 - Social
 - Job satisfaction
 - Employment (**pride**, security, pay/conditions, turnover/absent, recruitment)
 - **Inequality** (pay, gender, religion, ethnicity etc.)

- **Participation** (direct v. monitor/control, structures v. promotion, responsibility/risk, **job rotation**, transferable **skills**)
 - Work hours (**flexibility**, work sharing, work week)
 - Education (training, **political economy**, skills)
 - Conflict (group, interface, class, employment contract, **strikes**)
 - Culture (**mindset**, individualism, history)
 - Social consciousness
 - Private (coop) v. **community** (local/international) interests
 - Communication v. **action**
 - **Surplus** distribution (profit, tax, interest)
 - Employment creation (direct/indirect)
 - Inequality (commonwealth)
 - **Community participation** (voting rights, local/state)
- Environmental
 - **Impact** (emissions, pollution, health)
 - **Action** (equipment, materials, technology, labour process)
 - **Surplus** distribution (profits, tax)
 - State **regulation** (caps, growth, profitability)
 - **Jobs** vs. Environment
- Worker coop *scale*
 - Getting the (Irish) **institutions** right
 - Legal
 - Start-up / buyout-conversion (transfer, succession, closure)
 - Enterprise structure (indivisible reserves etc.)
 - UC and severance (capitalise)
 - Technical
 - Education and training (state, unions, coops)
 - Business
 - Participation (**'boss culture'**)
 - Political Economy (integrated heterodox)
 - Financial
 - Institutions (coop and conventional banks)
 - Instruments (loan stock / non-employee equity)

- Tax incentives
 - UC and severance (capitalise)
- Organisational **support** (Ireland)
 - State
 - **Politics** (allies, political spectrum, ‘**level playing field**’, FDI/SMEs)
 - CDU (consultancy, finance, training, education)
 - Regulation (scale, environment)
 - Anchor institutions (public contracts, finance)
 - **Ownership** v. **control** (community reps, co-management)
 - Trade unions
 - Politics (**priority**, historical relationship)
 - CDU
 - Buyout-conversion (consultancy, education/training)
 - Factory occupations
 - Unemployed members (start-ups)
 - Cooperative movement
 - Network/**federation** importance
 - **Lobbying** (laws, regulations, finance)
 - Input-output
 - Credit union fund / Coop bank
 - Political strategy (**institution building**)
- ‘**Coop commonwealth**’ (Ireland)
 - Crisis/**opportunity** (labour movement, **socialist transition**, ’80s v. ’00s)
 - Replicability (sectors, public/private)
 - **Barriers/limits** (neoliberal **culture**, deindustrialisation, **failure**)
- **Conclusion**
 - Final thoughts
 - Thanks and follow-up