



I reaffirmed my conviction that any sustained real change must come from the ground up. Any hope of top down reform seemed less and less possible.

However, the difficulty with bottom up change is that, capitalist values of competition and self-interest increasingly permeate the community. Capitalism has become more and more entrenched not just politically but culturally as well, as everyone becomes more consumerized and less self-sufficient. Its tentacles extend further and further, as its values increasingly become part of the thinking of all, including the working class and the poor. Superannuation provides a clear example. Workers now can see themselves as shareholders. They become more and more concerned about the share price and the ongoing growth in the economy and their super fund balance, and less and less about the wages and safety of their fellow workers and challenging big business profits. Its tentacles even reach in to family life as the values of competition and self-interest start to take over the traditional values of cooperation and caring.

Having been reminded that we could not rely on the Labor Party I began to think more about alternative ways to transform the capitalist monolith. We needed an approach which could survive inside capitalism, but operate in a different way. It needed to provide a model for work based on very different values to Capitalism. It needed to be about co-operation, sharing, community, a concern for others, and a concern for the environment, rather than competition, profits, and self-interest. We needed a lifeboat that could row against the capitalist current. My previous experience with cooperatives at Thomas St got me thinking about a modified co-op model.

My time with the Red hill Paddington worker cooperatives was fun and enjoyable but they never really generated the sort of income to make it seem like it could be a long term lifestyle for anyone particularly people with children. Part of the reason for the lack of income was our openness to anyone being part of the co-ops and to sharing whatever income had been made. The Good Foods co-op was a consumer co-op, and while successful for many years creating several jobs, it suffered from being run by the customers. The customer's interest in cheap prices do not allow for good profitability. Also being a community organization with monthly meetings they were obviously not going to be as quick to adapt as a one owner business. At Traveston we were part of a big farmer's co-op, which meant it was owned by the farmers and the profits were returned to farmers. It however still operated like a big business in other respects. There is no guarantee a big





producer co-op will treat its workers any better than another big business. In the past, many big co-operatives and Mutuels have sold out to big companies for the benefit of the co-ops shareholders, not the customer's or the co-operative movement.

I began to think about a modified co-op which would be community owned but worker run. A co-op where profits were shared with workers, customers, and to help new co-ops start up. Rather than getting bigger and bigger, the idea was to keep the co-op always under the control of the workers, and so splitting in 2 when it became too hard for all to participate in the decision making. So success would lead to more small co-ops starting up. It would self-replicate.

Over time these co-ops might multiply and so providing a challenge to how things are now done in the capitalist system. It would create a very non-threatening alternative inside the system. For other regular businesses the co-op would be just another competitor. It would have all the advantages of a small flexible business, while having the values of sharing, concern for others, equality, consensus decision making and environmental sustainability. These new co-ops could then act to support each other, leading to a co-op of co-ops if you like.

So after about a week of feeling depressed post the election, I started to get excited about the potential for this idea. The co-op movement had waxed and waned over the decades. I hoped this different form of a worker co-op might provide a new stimulus. It was an obvious idea to experiment with our weekly buying group and to transform it in to this model. The first step was to test the idea out with some of our existing customers. I asked a few to form a little group to help us get the co-op up and running on a legal footing. I then began looking for people who I thought could be interested in





working in this co-op and after a few discussions with some young friends from Balaangala and a couple of friends from the community garden, we formed The Gap Local Organic Co-op. , The Gap LOCO in 2012.

The Gap LOCO

Michelle and I began sharing our knowledge about what we had been doing, and training people to do the boxing and other tasks involved. It was going to be a potential problem for our neighbours if we had too much activity happening in a suburban street so we decided to focus on finding more home delivery customers.

Becoming an official co-op was a fairly involved process but we had good support from the Office of Fair Trading which was responsible for registering co-ops. There were not many new co-ops coming on the scene so we were a welcome possibility. We were also interesting to them as we ended up with what was a unique set of rules. A sort of hybrid between the two standard types, a non-trading and a trading co-op. We wanted to make a profit (to share) and so had the rules of a trading co-op but we also wanted to not have shares that could grow in value like in a regular business. We adopted other rules more like a ‘non-trading’, which meant if we ever close down, all our assets must go to another similar group and cannot be divided between the shareholders. This effectively means we are a community owned organization. Workers can come and go but the assets remain part of the community. If we could be successful it would not be for individual profit but rather for the benefit of the whole customer community.

We developed rules to specify our profit sharing ambition, where one quarter of profit would be returned to the customers (as we wanted them to feel part of the co-op and to get some reward for any success), one quarter to help improve the co-op, one quarter to help a new co-op set up and one quarter to return to the workers as an incentive to encourage their effort. This was balanced against another rule to limit and tie the wages of workers to the minimum wage. This was an explicit attempt to embrace egalitarianism as a goal. Our focus was not on getting richer but on sharing wealth. All workers would receive the same hourly rate. We mandated our replication policy, by dividing rather than getting too big for full worker participation. We also adopted an explicit consensus decision





making model, ensuring that all workers had the same power, and to stop the majority ruling over a minority. Everyone would have to work on a solution that suited everyone. All workers would all be directors.

We achieved our formal incorporation in October 2013, about a year after beginning on an informal basis. We were now one of only 3 registered worker co-operatives in Queensland. The other two, Reverse Garbage and the Bicycle Revolution, both being created by the Friends of the Earth. While being novel, was a badge of honour, we soon discovered the difficulty we had in being different, when dealing with other big institutions. It was difficult to open a bank account and to get other registrations as we did not fit the normal business model. Being registered with the State Government rather than federally created all sorts of problems. I can remember the endless phone calls and headaches trying to get things like our ABN organized.



We continued to work under our house for the first year. Michelle and I were enjoying the boxing work much more now, having a wider group to socialize with. Instead of just being a service to the customers, we now had a more explicit agenda and social purpose. This helped to ride over any frustrations that emerged in getting started. There were all the hiccups that you would expect with new people learning unfamiliar skills, but we slowly expanding our customer base and started making close to our wages goal of \$20/hr.



Through our connections with Balaangala and Yoorala St Community Garden, I heard SOWN was having doubts about keeping the shed because of the costs involved. I tentatively suggested to Geraldine Knapp that LOCO could move in to help pay the rent for the BCC lease. I did not really expect this was possible,





but Geraldine was again supportive, and in no time, she had given us permission to move in and set up shop. A small L liberal she worked her way around the rules and wanted to reward our initiative. Without Geraldine we would have never been able to set up at Yoorala St. We spent money lining and insulating a section of the shed creating some new doors and redoing the electricity and then moving the cold room from our house to the shed. We opened Mondays and Fridays for walk in customers while still boxing for deliveries on Mondays.

Not long after a Farmers Market started at The Gap and we decided it would be best for us to have a presence there to avoid someone else filling the gap, so we effectively had 3 trading days. We were now growing and needing new people to join the co-op to manage all the work. The co-op included Camille, Deb, Kate, Monique and Michelle and I



Running a shop was a big jump up for all of us compared to doing home deliveries. We had to learn to use a till and an Eftpos machine. Everyone had to get more knowledgeable to answer customer questions about fruit and vegies and all the other grocery items we started stocking. We all had to learn about promotion and social media to find ways to grow the customer base to pay for the increased wages required to staff the store.

It would have been good to have had the luxury to think about how to grow and expand the co-op philosophy in other areas but I found we were all working hard, just to stay afloat, and to make our little co-op viable. While creating more hours of work we were not really generating profit. We had started to develop different ways to share profit with the customers, but we never had to follow through as there were no profits. The early years relied on a sizable loan from Michelle and I to finance the renovations to the SOWN building and to increase our stock. It was hard to promote the model to others as a way forward if we were still





‘scraping along the bottom’. Without a profit we could not follow through on financially helping a new co-op get started.

So while up and going, we were hardly a threat to the capitalist system. I found this financial difficulty particularly concerning, as we were in my view a very talented group with lots of skills and resources. How would a group with less financial backing get off the ground? LOCO was a good idea, but could it really work. We needed to make a profit to make it a model others could follow.

While the money was always tight, there was a lot of comradery and new friendships forged. The workers enjoyed being able to be their own boss and they began to feel more personal ownership of the business and its direction. While all (in varying degrees) were on board with the philosophy of the LOCO at an intellectual level this does not mean it’s easy to put this all in to practice. In practice our actions often still reflected traditional values. Sometimes, workers behaved more like just employees, not wanting responsibility for thinking about the business as a whole. If it was their own personal business, they would have had to stay back and fix various issues or customer problems, but it was easy as part of a group to flick that responsibility to someone else, if they had another appointment. At other times they would want to enjoy the full freedom to decide about, when and how long they would work, or when they would take holidays without consultation or thinking about the needs of the co-op. This is to be expected as few had had any previous experience in running their own business.

Given Michelle and my experience with growing and selling vegies it was easy for others to keep deferring to us, and treating us more like the boss. We were also to blame, for not letting workers make their own mistakes and jumping in, too often to keep things on track. Other practical things reinforced this. We had a ute, so it as easier for me to do the ordering and pickups from the market. We provided the bulk of the finance to set up. The other co-op workers had other work or family responsibilities, whereas, I had more flexible time. This meant I could be there early for the setup, late for the packup, there at the end of every day to deal with the cash, and to do the accounts and banking. While the others did most of the in shop work with customers, I did most of the back of shop work.

Being there at the beginning and end of the day, and there every day, gave me a better perspective on how things were going and what changes or modifications were required. Consequently, I was in effect acting like a shop manager. Given





sensitive than conventional produce customers. Consequently, given this and all the competition, margins have to be very tight. So we have a co-op in a field where it is very unlikely at our scale we will ever be very profitable.

Organics was a good area for me to be in, because of my ideological commitments to be working with essential, environmentally sustainable products. From a financial perspective it would have been a lot easier to set up a successful profit sharing LOCO in some other area say like medicine, dentistry or a legal firm. So a key part of the LOCO model looks like it will be hard to implement. Maybe a better starting point would be if an existing profitable business adopted the model and co-operatizing its work force. Currently our group certainly does not have the capital or the willingness to borrow, to purchase an existing profitable business. This idea will rely on some successful business person having an epiphany and then joining LOCO; or me winning gold lotto; or some other very lucky event.

We are very weak at publicity and promotion of our ideas in comparison to our competitors. We mainly rely on word of mouth. We lack a ‘Bernie Maloney’, an extraverted person in the group who will tell everyone they meet about LOCO. It has not been easy to build an enthusiasm for this within the group, partly as it requires resources we don’t have but also because it feels like we are just like everyone else, competing for attention when part of our philosophy is anti-competition. Is there a more ethical way to promote ourselves?

My own personal efforts here are also limited by LOCO being only one of several projects I have been working on over the last 8 years, including YSCG, Balaangala, LOCO, Claypave and my painting. Maybe Da Vinci was not a good role model and I should have focused on one area. The other co-op workers are also all involved in other activities some to support themselves financially, or to support other community activities. None of us have a lot of spare time to do unpaid promotion and we are mostly flat out, keeping up with the existing LOCO demands.

Within these constraints, we continued to look for ways to become more viable. Maybe things just take time. We are outlasting our competitors and slowly finding new customers and more people who like the co-op ideals. Our efforts here were hit sideways by an unexpected external threat to our survival in 2016.





A big setback

As we pondered how we could take the LOCO up a level, disaster struck in the form of the Ashgrove Men's Shed. It is a bit of a long involved story as how they came to take over the shed from SOWN, but it is worth mentioning some aspects because it highlights some of the problems we were about to encounter.

The Men's Shed were asked to leave the Respite centre that had initiated the group. Geraldine I think under pressure from Campbell Newman was desperate to find them a new home. Greening Australia nursery at The Gap closed suddenly and Geraldine thought the Men's shed could take it over. SOWN had an adjoining nursery and they worked very cooperatively with Greening Australia sharing access to the house (and toilets) on the Greening Australia site. When the Men's Shed met with SOWN and BCC to discuss the possibility of the men taking over the Greening Australia site, the Men said access to the toilets would no longer be possible as there were women involved in SOWN. An almighty fight ensued played out on ABC radio. Some of the leaders from SOWN said to me that they had never met a group of people who were so aggressive and hard to get along with. At a big public meeting of very angry SOWN members (where Geraldine was being very strongly criticized by all her friends in SOWN) someone suggested why the Men could not have the Yoorala St shed. My heart sank. I had already thought this could be a likely option but I hoped it would not come up. Geraldine, again tried to protect us telling the meeting 'Colin and Michelle were there and it would not be suitable', but I knew this would become the ultimate solution. The Men had obvious political support, or otherwise the BCC would not have been so eager to help this very poorly behaved and aggressive group.

A short while later, SOWN agreed to give up the Yoorala St shed. The SOWN leadership warned the people in the community garden and Balaangala and LOCO about what the Men Shed group was like, and expressed their guilt about dumping them on us. They were actually encouraging us to resist, but SOWN and Geraldine had been so good to us it was hard to be angry at them or to try to stop this happening. We were indebted to them, they had been so co-operative and generous to us in establishing ourselves there. I felt Geraldine would still do her best too look after us. I knew that any resistance was not going to be successful and would sour our relationship with The Men from the outset. I guess





our naïve strategy was that perhaps we could win them over and find a way to get along with them.

A meeting between SOWN, Balaangala, YSCG, BCC officers, the Men's Shed and LOCO occurred where Geraldine laid down the plan about what would happen and everyone agreed to get along and keep things as they currently were. The Men's spokesperson said we would all be 'one big happy family'. This was a slight relief. We would need to make some adjustments to minimize our use of the meeting room end of the building, but LOCO could continue. Unfortunately no one took minutes of this meeting.

The other disaster for us, was that Geraldine retired 12 months prior to the election, a clear strategy to help her replacement Steve Toomey win the election. Geraldine was not a stickler for the rules and just wanted to see good things happen. The bureaucrats had to adjust around her. We soon found the new guy was did not have her clout and was more constrained by the rules and the bureaucrats. We tried to build a supportive relationship with him but we found it very hard to work out what his agenda was.

Despite their agreement the Men wasted no time in trying to get rid of The LOCO. The first bad sign was how many of their members would wander in to the back area of the shop without asking or introducing themselves. It looked like they were 'measuring up' in their minds. Several were also surprised to find us there, the leadership had not even told their members of our existing tenure. Their first strategy was trying to find fault and something illegal in what we were doing. They regularly came in complaining and hassled the staff for things like mess, or washing up, or lights left on, or whatever they could think of. They blamed us for a rat in the building and called in The BCC rat patrol. We all felt intimidated but the women in LOCO also felt a physical intimidation. They were loud and angry in their interactions.

Unlike other Men's Sheds, this one had a lot of ex-businessman and professionals. They actually had very few people interested in woodwork and building things. It was really more of a retired businessman's men's club. So they were used to wheeling and dealing and knew how to exercise power and to get their way. At meetings with BCC designed to encourage everyone to get along, the men would regularly say to the BCC officers, "you put in writing that 'they' are allowed to be here". The bureaucrats could not do this. With





Geraldine's support and tacit approval of the bureaucrats we had set up without any formal paperwork and had been operating under the radar. The Men knew this and they now had a new BCC counsellor to push around. He was soon telling us we would need to find a new place.

At the same time the Men were making themselves very unpopular with other local residents again via their aggressive, intimidating, 'born to rule' attitude. They scared several local women who went to complain about noise. Steve Toomey told us they were the most complained about group in Brisbane, and there was some doubt in his view whether they would survive their probation period. He even suggested Balaangala could take over the LOCO end of the shed to solve the problem. By the time we gained Balaangala's interest in this option, he acted as if this idea was never suggested. I assume a higher force crushed this idea. So while we were looking at other options we were hoping the Men's Shed would implode or get kicked out by BCC.

The Men told us at one point that they were about to start work on the building and that we would have a few weeks to vacate. We began a call out to our customers to sign a petition. When I rang to complain to Steve Toomey about the short notice, we discovered they did not have permission from BCC to kick us out, they certainly did not have permission to start building. They could not do anything until they had their lease and were off probation. We did not have to leave. Our petition was submitted to BCC and we were given formally 12 months grace. We continued still hoping the men would be kicked out rather than us.

A strategy used by the Men, to win favour with BCC was to get 'grant' money to spend on building improvements, which would be an investment in a BCC facility. It is very interesting that they have been able to get grants, as you normally have to have a lease secured and the Men were still on probation. They somehow got several grants to help renovate the shed despite still being on probation and not very popular at all with anyone they had to work with. Spending \$70,000 on the shed starts to twist arms. We discovered many of the group's members are keen supporters and members of the Liberal National Party . Surprise, surprise!

During this period it was very hard for the LOCO workers, as the Men would continue to visit and intimidate. Workers were eventually wanting to move, to escape this harassment. We looked seriously at the Newmarket bowls club at





Steve Toomey's instigation. It was not in The Gap, but we did not seem to have a lot of choice, and it seemed BCC would assist in our move there. It was suggested we could set up and operate from the Tin shed at The back of the Bowls club and from here we could open as often as we wanted. It was exciting to think we could have a space of our own.

Like other Bowls clubs, they were closing down because of low numbers. The Bowls committee wanted to gift the club back to the community as the land was originally gifted by a farmer for the community. Communify (formerly The Red Hill Paddington Community Centre) had some legal issues to work out before we could go any further, as Bowls Queensland tried to take over the site to sell to developers to help fund their operations. After a bitter battle BCC eventually took over the site and we were ready to take the next step, but then a different part of BCC said nothing could happen there because of flooding. After a few months Communify was able to resolve the flooding issue.

BCC required Communify and us to do Development Applications to get permission for the new activities that were going to take place there. Communify wanted to sort out their DA before we submitted ours. While Communify was trying to speed up this process, they relied on another arm of BCC to give permission for them to submit their DA. For some unknown reason, despite constant questioning, this process took several months. Meanwhile Steve Toomey was getting tetchy about why we had not yet moved. He was not very understanding or helpful particularly given BCC itself was the main stumbling block.

We engaged a building certifier to start the preliminary work for our DA while waiting for Communify to submit theirs. We discovered we would need to fire proof the tin shed we were going to operate in because of the proximity to neighbouring houses. We had to engage fire engineers to see what was required, which cost us \$3000 for their report. From this we found that it was going to cost at a minimum \$70,000 to get the site, up to what was required. While we had been encourage to move in to by Steve Toomey, the BCC was not prepared to help financially in any way to the improvement of what would remain one of their buildings and which we would only have at best a 3 year lease on, as BCC was only offering Communify a 3 year lease.





I was tempted to do a personal loan to keep going with this as I had spent so much time on this proposal, and desperately wanted to find a new home for LOCO, but fortunately Michelle and the other workers dissuaded me from going down this path. It was a very risky thing to do with no guarantee of a successful DA or a long term lease from BCC. So sadly this was off the agenda. The Newmarket LOCO would have been a great name.



The Newmarket Local
Organic Cooperative

We then returned to an earlier idea we had which was ruled out by Toomey. This was the Riaweena St Scout hut in The Gap. This looked like it would be a terrific site for us and in our conversations with the local scout leaders they were very encouraging and supportive of sharing the building. The building had not been actively used for several years, and we could basically have our own lock up area and access to the rest of the space during the day and then they could operate their 'cubs' groups at night time. All that was required was for the Scouts to sort out with BCC their own lease on the building first as it was up for renewal. Their own volunteers built and paid for this shed 40 years ago, but as it is on BCC land, it is owned by BCC. We were very hopeful this we be sorted out quickly and we could move from Yoorala St to Riaweena St and keep the shop sales going continuously. Unfortunately this did not happen and we had to close the shop operation, dismantle our fitout in Yoorala st and put all our stuff into storage. This was June 2018.

Back to where we started

The end result was we have had to move back under our house. We are still waiting over 2 and half years later for BCC and Scouts to sort out the lease arrangements and it seems they are now in a stalemate. It's a real catch 22 situation. BCC leasing section is saying to Scouts 'you need to have people using the building and to spend money on the building'. LOCO twice with scouts support asked BCC formally to enable LOCO to spend money on the building. The BCC refuses saying Scouts do not have a longer enough lease to undertake the work. It seems BCC without any self-awareness is saying to the Scouts "You can have a longer lease if you spend money on the building". At the same time they are saying "You can't spend money on the building as you do not have a long enough lease"





Requests to Steve Toomey and the Lord Mayor to help speed up the process have done nothing. We don't know if our local representative is just ineffective or unsupportive or maybe even working against us. It probably has not helped that my nephews Shane and Daniel Bevis have run against him in the last 2 Local Government elections. We are suspicious the site is going to be taken off scouts for some other group. The Local Scouts are still supportive which is encouraging, but even with this, we still have to do a DA and the neighbours could object to a change of use of the shed to allow us to set up a shop. Our building certifier has seen the building and sees no problems this time, but there is still a long way to go and much uncertainty. Scouts have recently offered us an alternate sites outside The Gap where there are no BCC lease issues as Scouts own the land themselves. We have now decided to take up this offer and hopefully will be doing home deliveries from an Oakleigh Scouts shed in 2021.

So for the last 2 and a half years we have been boxing up orders and doing deliveries from underneath our house at 25 Bellata St. We have slowly reduced the amount of time we spend in discussion abusing the Men's Shed, but we are still angry with the costs they have imposed on our group. It has cost us about \$10,000 in having to move, with stock losses and moving expenses. This does not count our lost revenue as our turnover has more than halved without a shop front. Many of our former big spending customers like to look at the produce and home delivery does not suit them.

Despite all the frustration the workers are still keen and it has actually been more relaxed and fun as we are working together as a group rather than doing different shifts in the shop. The group now is Cielle, Lesley, Kerry, Di, Sophie, James, Michelle and me. Just recently we have begun to consider the possibility of some new co-ops and some other ways to promote worker co-operatives.

Hopefully we will be able to expand our home delivery business at the Scouts shed. We can open several days there and it is very suitable for customers to come and collect there order (and buy extra stuff). With enough customers we may have enough confidence to take a lease out on a commercial property. So with a bit of luck LOCO will rise again.





Hierarchy and Competition

From The LOCO experience I would like to consider these two things in a more global general way.

Heirarchy -

Under Geraldine's guidance we avoided having to deal with the BCC hierarchy when we started, operating without formal approvals but with BCC's tacit support. In SOWN we had a very supportive (non-controlling) landlord to deal with. This all changed with the arrival of the Men's Shed. We soon discovered we were at the bottom of the hierarchy, with very little power in the situation, as we had no formal paperwork giving us permission to be at Yoorala St from BCC. Initially after Geraldine had retired, her replacement did try to continue the support, but he was also walking both sides of the fence, wanting to be supportive to the Men's Shed as well. Slowly we slipped out of favour and the Men shifted more in favour, with the grant money they had on offer and their right wing connections. Our only power was the support we had from our customers.

We were very lucky and spoilt to have had a few years of tacit support from BCC at Yoorala St. What is now the case should not really have be a surprise. While we hoped at the very beginning the Men's Shed might grow to like us, It is not actually surprising that a conservative, group of ex- businessmen with a history of aggressive controlling behaviours did not for a moment consider the value of our new "idealistic" community owned business model. It was also not surprising that once challenged the BCC was forced to invoke their own rules. The new Councillor once the Newmarket option failed has shown no interest in supporting the LOCO. Having initially developed a supportive relationship with him we did hope for more here, but he has demonstrated little understanding of our model over time, telling customers who have advocated on our behalf that we are just another commercial enterprise rather than a social enterprise.

It is to be expected that when trying to set up a model which challenges the existing competitive controlling and hierarchical nature of business, that it would be actively resisted by those who support the existing capitalist structures. After a lucky start, the experience with BCC and The Men's Shed has certainly given us a taste of the resistance that we should have expected from the outset. It has provided an experience for the group of the worst aspects of hierarchy, and reinforced my commitment to flat structures. Being forced out of the Shed by the





Men has cost us a great deal financially and emotionally. The slowness and lack of action by BCC to work things out with the scouts has also cost us a great deal in lost revenue.

We now clearly sit at the bottom of the hierarchy looking up at a controlling and unsupportive system. Our partnership with Scouts Qld offered some initial promise but it seems we have unfortunately connected to a group also not in favour with BCC, and so weakening our position even further. We now need to think about building ourselves up from this position up at the bottom. More correctly, to start expanding across the bottom. We need to find new ways to promote ourselves in the community to build support and to new ways to deal with the hierarchy above us. Maybe The Partnership with Scouts will give us a solid base from which to prosper.

Micro hierarchies – Before talking about promotion, I want to just mention a slightly tangential experience of hierarchy for the LOCO from the opposite direction. One interesting and unexpected feature of hierarchy is how it also effects the customers. This was particularly evident when we had a shop space.

We were keen to go beyond what would normally be expected in a shop. We wanted to build relationships with customers beyond the normal expected ‘market exchange’, seeing them as potential supporters of the co-ops ideals. We saw them more as colleagues in a movement for social change. We also sought to build community by encouraging connection between customers in the shop introducing them to one another, emphasising we were there to build community not just to make profit. While we all agreed to work fast when we were boxing orders, we consciously changed gears when a customer was there, to spend time with them, asking questions and sharing information about the LOCO, carrying their boxes to the car and checking on how they were doing in other areas of their life. They in turn would seek to reciprocate this interest and friendships formed. For many this was a nice novel experience which they enjoyed, and new customers would turn in to regular supporters and friends.





Most customers treated us like friends, but some customers when in the shop assumed the position of ‘princess’ where the staff were treated like servants. There was a definite air of superiority, and an expectation that we were there to fulfil their every whim. It seemed they enjoyed directing and being in charge for that period of time. You were made to feel like their temporary servant and they saw no need to be thankful.



The ‘princess’ customers seemed to miss this more mutual relationship invitation and made us feel like a slave. Some were simply bringing to the shop the controlling behaviour that was normal for them in their other relationships, like in their work places. These were just generally ‘controlling’ people. However many were actually completely different in other situations, in fact they could be seen to be at the bottom of the hierarchy in other areas of their life. It was like the shop offer a little taste of what it was like to be in charge, in control. It perhaps offered them a sense on control lacking in the rest of their life. Maybe this is part of the reason so many people like shopping, even when they don’t need things. I think these customers would be aghast if they were seen as the ‘master’ in a master/slave relationship but unconsciously, they enjoy their temporary position of privilege and power when shopping. For the staff however, these experiences highlighted just how much we were on the very bottom of the hierarchy, as we were getting bossed around by people who were at the bottom of the hierarchy.

These controlling customers were not popular with the LOCO staff as they made us feel demeaned. While the task of being a shop keeper probably looks similar to an outsider for both the controlling and supportive customers, the emotional experience is very different. We probably helped both the supporter and the princess customers in very similar ways, it is just that their attitude was very different and so changed the meaning of the whole experience. While hierarchy is seen as a normal and necessary part of our current world, when you can see its emotional consequences it raises questions as to why people persist with this structure which is demeaning for so many, and not just at the bottom. The master slave relationship exists at all levels in the hierarchy and we see bullying accusations often levelled by senior executives against their superiors.

We like to think slavery is a thing of the past. Some are not even aware of the slavery inflicted on first nations people whose wages were controlled by the state





and stolen from them. Many also do not know the history of South Sea Islander people who were brought here as slaves to work in the cane fields. These practices may have stopped but without compensation the impact of slavery lingers on it infects our current relationships. The daughters of the slave and the master may be friends but without compensation something of the master slave relationship is passed on to the next generation.

I want also to highlight another way in which some elements of slavery continues in micro ways. This is very different and in no way comparable to the terrible slavery of the past in Australia, and yet I think it can offer a small window for people to understand elements of the slavery experience. I also want to highlight this as many bad aspects of human actions do not simply disappear through History more often they are just transformed into something else that the people from a particular period of time are just as blind to its injustices as people were to slavery in the 1800s.

While slavery may have stopped to be a category that describes someone's whole life. I think slavery has become broken up and now people are slaves too many others and at the same time could be the master of many slaves. Instead of two types of people, masters and slaves, we have created a hierarchical structure within the capitalist system where we are in some situations the master and in others the slave. Both attitudes and experience become enfolded within us and we can change personalities depending on the situation. Instead of having a number of slaves that live in, we now call on a vast array of different trades and service people to do the work for us. When the exchanges are relatively equal there is no slavery but when the exchanges are not equal aspects of "slavery" reappear. The more unequal the greater the slavery experience. A rich person may not have live in slaves any more, instead they pay people to come and sweep their floor, clean their pool, mow their lawn paying them a small fraction of the hourly rate that they themselves earn. A person who earns \$200/hr and then pays someone to clean for \$20/hr seems in our society non-controversial, but is this not just a reformulated slavery? When I did odd-jobs in the Red Hill workers co-op, I was certainly made to feel like a slave by some rich people. This was reflected in their attitudes and expectations. You felt like you would be in trouble if you did not do everything as expected and in quick time. The experience was very different when the rich person would be more friendly and welcoming but if the monetary transaction was the same, does it still not have elements of slavery. Some slave owners were friendly and looked after their slaves, but they were still





on only selling certified produce, where farmers produce is regularly tested for chemical residue, so we can ensure no dodgy practices are occurring. It costs farmer to be certified and so it is important to support these farmers who are trying to do the right thing and who are willing to be tested every year.

Our final local competition comes from an informal organic group who buy from the wholesaler and divides up the stock between themselves. Normally these sort of groups don't last too long as the easy rider problem occurs or people forget to turn up. However the lady running one in The Gap has done so over many years and has put in a lot of energy to keep it all going. I know some of our customers buy from this co-op as well as things are cheaper, but their commitment can wane to this group as they have to put in work and time to get the cheaper prices.

The evil competitive part of me would like all our competitors to fail so we could do better. More ideally if they all adopted our co-op model we could all work together to support each other. For LOCO to become more successful, on one hand we will need to find more local organic customers and to build their commitment to becoming more organic and on the other hand we need to also build the customers commitment to our model and philosophy. We want customers to become supporters and promoters of the LOCO philosophy.

Promotion

Our co-op wants to encourage co-operation rather than competition but we are nevertheless in competition with all these non-co-ops for our survival. All these operations promote themselves in different ways, often making use of old forms like TV or print media but also increasingly social media. LOCO has been relatively low key, relying mainly on word of mouth, and occasional letterbox drops, but we also have a web page and social media pages. We have been more active on these when younger people like Sophie and Monique were workers, but less so with the older workers. Social media has led to some new customers but I am very conflicted about this approach. Social media has become so popular it is the only way to reach some people. However I don't like the way these multinational have become so ingrained in every business and make huge amounts of money while avoiding tax.

Facebook and twitter are mentioned like they are just a feature of life, including on the ABC which is not meant to be advertising businesses. These new digital platforms are antithetical to the whole LOCO philosophy of small, local,





community based and environmentally enhancing enterprises. Their power scares me. They are able to use the huge amounts of data obtained via social media and search engines to tailor and promote themselves in much more sophisticated ways than possible with standard advertising. I have been amazed how quickly everyone was talking about catching an Uber rather than a taxi. It seemed like you were definitely old fashioned and out of the loop if you mentioned Taxi's and yet here is a company that does not like to pay tax which forced its way in to the market without having to pay for Taxi Licences, sending many taxi owners broke. Despite all this they are seen as "good" by users and just part of the unavoidable new digital age. Uber is now transforming the home delivery of food. What was perhaps a good thing for local small businesses initially, is now a big threat as Uber with all its data is able to set up its own food outlets cutting out the small local businesses and further extending their reach and control. The workers driving their own cars as Ubers or to deliver food are on poorly paid contracts with no proper job security and insurances. Despite all this they remain popular with young people as they have this new powerful global promotional ability. Many young delivery drivers for various multinational delivery services are forced to work as sub-contractors which allows the companies to avoid paying proper awards and work place health and safety requirements. Many of these young workers have been killed on their push bikes while doing deliveries. Where is the outcry? It is scary thinking about where this could all end up. Its capitalism on digital steroids.

Of course there is nothing wholesome about traditional advertising either. Competitors are all looking for some angle to attract new customers. For some it is about price or quality. For others it is about association with celebrity or other desirable connections. For LOCO our hook is about ethical environmentally sustainable purchasing, and local worker controlled businesses. Other groups also appeal to people's virtues, and there is a lot of 'green' washing or 'ethical' washing going on, where there can be big difference between what is espoused and what takes place in practice.

The question is, can we find a way to promote ourselves that avoids all the bad aspects of traditional promotion? Can we find an ethical approach to promotion? To date word of mouth is what feels the best. The LOCO workers could be more like "Bernie Maloney" in promoting the LOCO to all and sundry. Maybe workers need some training in how to be a bit more evangelical about the LOCO in their interactions with others. Currently we simply are not extraverted enough, and





this is in part because the co-op workers don't want to be pushy and self-interested. Similarly, if we ask our customers too much to help us find new customers it starts to feel like multi-level marketing. To really achieve our goals we need to find a different approach.

I am in the beginning stages of developing an idea which I think might work. It will not be a quick fix, but it could help build a more loyal band of long term committed customers where both workers and customers feel more able to promote and discuss what we are doing with their own friends, family and wider network. The idea is to establish a buying group whose objective will be to assist and support local, ethical, and environmentally sustainable and worker controlled social enterprises. It could also have a role in encouraging and assisting new co-ops to set up.

This new community organization which has become incorporated and is called COOEEE (Community Owned and Operated, Ethical, Environmental Enterprises). The customers will pay an annual membership to fund the group. The group will also seeks discounts from the ethical groups being promoted to encourage more members. If a fairly big membership can be established it will make it worthwhile for the social enterprises to offer a discount as they would benefit from the extra sales and the promotion by the buying group. It would be a supportive mutual relationship between customers and enterprises. LOCO of course would be a beneficiary of this, but it would provide a clearer role for customers in promoting the whole agenda.

The COOEEE idea has helped to expand my thinking. I have been trying for several years now to see if LOCO can be viable. It is very hard to encourage others to set up a LOCO in their own area when it is so difficult to make it viable. But COOEEE has got me thinking about other potential new co-ops in other areas and ethical market to help particularly emerging co-ops. Having other co-ops happening helps to create a sense that something new is developing. Diversity is obviously a good idea in any struggle for survival, and there is the potential for each new co-op to be able to support each other.

LOCO wants people to change their consumption behaviour to promote a more environmentally sustainable and enhancing approach to agriculture. Each purchase can be seen as an act of social action. Hopefully COOEEE can help people change their consumption and spending patterns on a broader level in





other areas like clothing and furniture. The sort of commitment we are talking about is not something that can be achieved overnight. It requires the slow development and integration of these ideas within a person whole thinking. Moreover when this commitment is manifested in actual monetary purchases they also need to have support from the others in their household. It will help if people have the encouragement of other supporters as they try to become more ethical consumers

I think COOEEE is a good idea but I have been through this enough to know that my efforts will be limited by a lack of extraversion. Success will require more networking with other social enterprises, learning from them and sharing our approach. Hopefully as a community group we can help each other with this promotional task.

Conclusion

I feel my involvement in LOCO has been a positive contribution. It has not taken off as I hoped but we are still at least in our small group experimenting with this new co-operative way of working and maybe conditions will shift in our favour at some point. It is hardly surprising that the local politician has not been supportive when we are challenging the capitalist model that his political party is advocating for. It's hardly surprising in a middle class, upwardly mobile suburb like The Gap that finding supporters is difficult.

I am advocating for a new flatter community based society. I am rallying in my small way against hierarchy. A hierarchy which can be seen to have transformed slavery in to a multiplicity of controlling relationships. LOCO is both a challenge and an experiment in what a future economic system might look like. I wish I was a better businessman to enable the LOCO to be more viable. Perhaps the LOCO would have been more successful had I studied business rather than social work. I want however for anyone to be able to take up the model not just the most skilled business people. I do not think the model is holding us back, we are really in a very difficult, competitive market where a profit is hard to find. Hopefully a new opportunity will open up soon for us to once again expand the LOCO and to experiment with the model in a bigger way.



