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A Survey of Comintern Auxiliary Organizations - Part 7: Comintern Engagement in the Global Cooperative Movement

Defending Unity in a Reformist-Led International

Tuesday 26 October 2021, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 2 October 2021).

Among the Communist International's "auxiliary" work areas, the workers' cooperatives were unique in terms of the Communists' focus on working through a mainstream, reformist-dominated movement. The Comintern made no attempt to form a separate International of revolutionary-led cooperatives.

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This self-limiting policy may help explain why Communist involvement in cooperatives received relatively little attention either in the Comintern at that time or in subsequent historical writing.

Then and now, cooperatives have made up a vast and heterogeneous category of commercial and social enterprises. The [International Cooperative Alliance \(ICA\) defines a cooperative](#) as an "autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise."

In such a cooperative enterprise, capitalists play no role – at least, not directly.

Prior to the emergence of Marxism, cooperative models were prominent in early attempts to articulate a vision of socialism. The ideas of Robert Owen (1771-1858), the most prominent early exponent of cooperative enterprise, receive detailed discussion in Frederick Engels' [Socialism Utopian and Scientific](#).

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Cooperatives spread widely in the nineteenth century and during subsequent decades, extending beyond the industrial heartlands into the Global South. Today the ICA claims one billion members of affiliated cooperatives around the globe.

Historically, socialists viewed cooperatives as a wing of the workers' movement, indeed as its largest component, with total membership far larger than that of either trade unions or workers' political parties.

As Italian political scientist Bruno Jossa has noted, Marx, Engels, and Lenin all supported workers' cooperatives, seeing them as agencies for both promoting of workers' wellbeing within capitalism and assisting them in the transition to socialism.[\[1\]](#)

The Marxist approach to the cooperative movement was well summarized in a resolution of the 1910 Copenhagen congress of the Second International:

[Distributive cooperative societies are not only able to secure for their members immediate material advantages, but are also capable of first increasing the influence of the proletariat by the elimination of private commercial enterprise, and, secondly, by bettering the condition of the working classes by means of productive services organized by themselves and by educating the workers in the independent democratic management of social means of exchange and production.

The congress warned, however, that "cooperatives alone are incapable of realizing the aim of socialism," which it defined as "the acquisition of political power for the purpose of collective ownership of the means of production." [\[2\]](#)

The international cooperative movement was then based mainly in Europe, the USA, and other European-settled countries. The movement was coordinated by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), founded in 1895. The ICA disclaimed any political involvement and was among the very few international associations to survive the two world wars without a split.

A Marxist Reorientation

Following the birth of the Russian Soviet republic and its expropriation of capitalist property, cooperatives in Russia assumed the main burden of assuring food distribution of and the exchange of goods. At first, these associations were led, in large measure, by reformist opponents of the Soviet government. Nikolai Meshcheriakov, who headed up the Comintern's cooperative work in the 1920s, recalled in 1922 that Soviet authorities experienced at first "great difficulties" in utilizing cooperatives due to the proletariat's failure to "take command of the cooperative movement" in advance of this economic transformation.[\[3\]](#)

Meshcheriakov explained that the Comintern had to make good a shortcoming of the revolutionary socialist movement prior to the 1917 Russian upheaval:

Before the [Russian] Revolution the workers' movement consisted of three parts. First, the political work in a political party; second, the trade unions; and third, the cooperative movement. And these three movements functioned quite independently one from another. Before the Revolution, the Communists and the Social Revolutionaries took little part in the work in the cooperatives, which seemed to them to be too dull. The work in cooperatives was therefore left to the reformists, which is the reason why this work is not yet imbued with revolutionary and Communist ideas.[4]

The Comintern's orientation was laid out in the reports by Meshcheriakov at the Third and Fourth World Congresses in 1921 and 1922 and in the theses adopted by these gatherings. The Third Congress theses defined the Comintern's task as to "transform the cooperatives into instruments for revolutionary class struggle without disaffiliation of individual cooperatives from their national federation." [5]

A year later, the Fourth Congress was more specific:

Party members [must] also be members of consumers' cooperatives and carry out Communist work in these organisations. Communist members of cooperatives must form cells - whether openly or secretly - in each cooperative..... Communists in the cooperatives must not seek to break revolutionary or oppositional cooperative members away from the cooperative association, or to split this association." [6]

The Comintern Executive Committee (ECCI) was instructed to set up a cooperative division to convene "cooperatives consultations, conferences, and congresses, as required" to carry out the tasks set down in the [Fourth World Congress cooperative theses](#) (See Riddell, ed. *Toward the United Front*, pp. 821-4). The first such conference took place in Moscow from November 1-6, 1922, with two sessions each day. Thirty-six representatives attended from twenty countries. [7] Further conferences of the cooperative division took place in June 1924 and April 1926.

The overriding barrier to Communist work in the cooperative arena was the ICA's long-established policy, imposed by the reformist leadership, that cooperatives should abstain from any engagement in political activity. A resolution of the Comintern's Third Enlarged Plenum in June 1923 pointed out the urgency of changing this policy given the rise of fascism, which had triumphed in Italy six months previously. "Fascism's immediate goal is to methodically destroy all the workers' organisations, to deprive the workers' movement of every point of support, and to block off its sources of financial sustenance," the resolution stated. "Wherever fascism is developing and especially wherever it achieves power, it aims its hardest blows against the cooperatives." [8]

Defending Cooperative Unity

During the first years after establishment of the Russian Soviet republic, from 1917 to 1921, Soviet cooperatives were not yet recognized by the ICA. The "White" (anti-Soviet) cooperative structures, now dissolved and no longer functioning in Russia, still occupied the seats for Russia in the global association.

In August 1921, however, the ICA voted by a narrow margin to replace the White delegates with representatives of the Soviet cooperatives, thus assuring the Alliance's continued unity.

The Communist movement encouraged cooperatives to affiliate to the ICA, despite disagreement with many of its reformist-inspired policies. The Comintern applied to it a version of its united-front policy that prevented the ICA's disruption by a split between reformist and revolutionary forces.

In December 1922, however, the ICA set up collaborative structures with the reformist-led International Trade-Union Federation, also known as the "Amsterdam International." The Amsterdam body's pro-Communist rival, the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), was excluded from this pact.

The Comintern Executive condemned this bloc as "a barrier to protect the bureaucracy from involvement in a serious and united defensive struggle by the working class." It warned against allowing the rift in the world labour movement to spread into the cooperative movement and called for "masses of cooperators with revolutionary inclinations" to rally around the groups of Communists in ICA affiliates.

At the next international cooperative congress, held in Ghent September 1-5, 1924, the disputed issues were debated at length. Delegates from the Soviet cooperatives, supported by a small number of Communist delegates from other European countries, held about a quarter of the voting mandates. A Communist-sponsored motion for the ICA to open relations with the Red trade unions won support from 30 percent of congress mandates. A resolution for the ICA to declare its support, in principle, for the class struggle was rejected by a similar margin.

Historian E.H. Carr remarks, "The Ghent congress set the pattern of communist activity in the cooperatives for several years."[\[9\]](#)

Carr's summary account ends in 1926; no study of later activity by Communist cooperators in capitalist countries has come to light.

However, developments in Spain after the outbreak of civil war and revolution there in 1936 reflect a profound shift in the Comintern's approach to cooperatives, as well as to other issues. In the first stage of the Spanish struggle, workers expropriated a wide range of agricultural and manufacturing establishments in Republican-held territory. Their management was placed under a form of cooperative governance.

This upheaval might seem to have realized the Comintern's original goal of forming revolutionary cooperatives. However, it was anarchist forces that led these takeovers. The Spanish Communist Party, by contrast, pressed to renormalize industrial relations within a capitalist framework.

The Fascists' ultimate triumph in Spain took place in 1939, a few months before the outbreak of World War 2. The war's end led to a new global wave of working-class militancy and subsequent capitalist expansion that offered new scope for the cooperative movement but with only limited involvement the revolutionary socialists.

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Notes

[\[1\]](#). Bruno Jossa, "Marx, Marxism and the Cooperative Movement," *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 28, pp. 3-18. See also Engels' remarks on Robert Owen in [Socialism Utopian and Scientific, part 1](#), and Lenin's 1923 article, "[On Cooperation](#)."

[2]. Mike Taber, "Under the Socialist Banner: Resolutions of the Second International, 1889-1912," Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021, pp. 129-31. Also found in this volume is the alternative resolution on coopeartives introduced by V.I. Lenin, pp. 159-60.

[3]. See the report by Nikolai Meshcheriakov to the fourth Comintern congress in John Riddell, ed., *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth World Congress, 1922*, Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket, p. 814.

[4]. Riddell, ed., *To the Masses: Proceedings of the of the Third World Congress, 1921*, Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket, 1915, p. 808.

[5]. Riddell, *To the Masses*, p. 967.

[6]. Riddell, ed., *United Front*, p. 822.

[7]. Riddell, ed., *United Front*, p. 815.

[8]. Taber, ed., *The Communist Movement at a Crossroads: Plenums of the Communist Internaitonal's Executive Committee, 1922-1923*, Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket, 2018, p. 672.

[9]. E.H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 1010-13.

P.S.

• John Riddell's blog. October 2, 2021 :

<https://johnriddell.com/2021/10/02/comintern-engagement-in-the-global-cooperative-movement/>