

Applying Lessons Learned from the History of the African American Cooperative Movement

For African Americans, cooperatives were a way to survive in a racist/white supremacist society/economy. It took courage, creativity, and a definite hunger to make cooperatives happen in a hostile world. This workshop will look at the ways cooperative businesses, mutual aid societies and other acts of cooperation grew out of the struggle of Africans for survival in America. The lessons that came from those struggles can still be applied to cooperative work today in communities of color as well as the larger society. We must all cooperate or die.

Introduction

- A. Before Jessica Gordon Nembhard wrote her book *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Thought and Practice*, many people thought that cooperatives were a white hippie thing.
- B. Now since her book was published last year, we now know that cooperatives were part of what she calls the “long civil rights movement,” – the tool that Africans brought to America as slaves were using to create an independent means of meeting their own needs and protecting themselves in efforts to obtain political and human rights.
 1. Formal co-ops were used with labor organizing in the 1880s
 2. Farmers created the Colored Farmers Alliance and Cooperative Union 1886
 3. Mutual aid societies and other forms of “economic cooperation”
 - a. In 1907 DuBois identified 154 co-ops.
 - b. At the 1907 conference at Atlanta University he said: “we unwittingly stand at the crossroads—should we go the way of capitalism and try to become individually rich as capitalist, or should we go the way of cooperatives and economic cooperation where we and our whole community could be rich together?”
 4. A. Phillip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters worked with the Ladies Auxiliary to the Brotherhood to do co-op education and keep money circulated in the black community in the early 1900.
 5. Nanny Helen Burroughs started the Cooperative Industries of DC in DC selling brooms and mattress and a cooperative farm in Maryland.
 6. Ella Jo Baker was executive director of the Young Negroes Cooperative League in the 1930s.
 7. Also in the 1930s, In D.C. blacks started the Capital Cab Company, which was the largest taxi fleet in the country at the time because whites would not

- service the black community.
8. Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association had factories with joint stock ownership to produce clothing and other commodities. He sold stock for \$5 a share. He also bought three ships known as the Black Star line to trade with Africa and repatriate Blacks to the continent.
 9. In D.C. one of the first food co-ops in the country was started in 1969 in the basement of a homeowner as a buying club. The co-op later moved to In Mount Ranier Maryland, just outside of the District.
 10. Dorothy Height founder of the National Council of Negro Women helped Fannie Lou Hamer to buy her first 20 pigs that were part of the Freedom Farm in Mississippi in the 1970s.
 11. In the 1980s, DC Mayor Marion Barry had a plan to make DC a demonstration city in America for co-ops. Part of his plan was to create credit unions, energy co-ops, housing co-ops, producer co-ops and worker co-ops and a charity to develop schools and hospitals and other social action agencies. Today DC has the second largest number of housing cooperatives in the country. New York has the highest.

II. Lessons

- a. A. Black co-ops developed because there was a need. It was the only way to survive.
- b. B. These co-ops were financed with little or no money. Campaigns were supported with as little as \$1.
- c. C. Every Black co-op started with a Study Group – Education was key.
- d. D. The organizing was done despite violence. The idea of blacks organizing for self determination sparked violence and sabotage.
- e. 1. Black Wall Street, in Tulsa OK was bombed because of racial jealousy of successful black businesses and communities in 1921. Recently a sheriff apologized but no reparations have been collected.
- f. III. Using these lessons today
 - The economy has marooned many Blacks, and others including the white middle class.
 - Cooperatives are appealing to more and more people because of economic need and alienation.
 - We can use similar ideas and tactics used in the past to create cooperative economies like those envisioned by Marion Barry; use the study groups that the Ladies Auxiliaries created; organize fundraising and grassroots organizing to support businesses.
 - Use the faith and courage to overcome obstacles.
 - The capitalist economy is eating up a larger portion of the people and it will take more cooperative efforts for people to survive.
 - Groups like Us Lifting Us near Atlanta, Cooperation Jackson in Jackson, Ms., and Ujamaa in Pittsburgh are seeing the need to organize economies that take care of all needs.
 - These are efforts that all people can study, learn from and apply,

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