

Political Forms

In discussing the political aspect of NB we look to the legal forms that were established during different stages of the process and connect this to how NB's political function was served.

There were three distinct forms of organization which, in general, reflected three different political stages of NB:

- 1) 1976-79 as PCB, where we operated functionally as a People's Co-op (the nominal legal forms were individual or partnership ownership).
- 2) 1979-81 as a legal Corporation
- 3) 1981-85 as a legal Co-operative

The first period, from 1976-79 was when NB served as the co-op bakery for the PCM co-ops. At the time we consciously were a co-op to our customers and to the workers of the bakery. During this first period there was a quantity of volunteer labor, an underdeveloped workforce and an inexperienced management team. As the PCM declined, the decision was made to develop the business as a successful whole grain bakery with the key aim of commercializing whole grain breads and to promote good nutrition. It was around this period that the business became a legal corporation.

As a corporation from 1979-81, cadre began to take on more functional managerial roles (this period coincides with the

periods of depersonalization and technicalization in production). We gained increased legitimacy and financial strength by obtaining credit and financing. We also began to develop team management practices and standard business procedures (employee handbook, written job descriptions, employment policies and procedures, etc.). Some had a hard time making the shift from being a co-op to being a capitalist business. We were uncomfortable in our new roles as "bosses" and "owners". But this was an important stage of development for both the business and the cadre involved. For the business, it meant increased legitimacy with our new markets. It also set clear conditions that we had to make it as a well run economic enterprise, or not make it at all. For cadre, the new condition required us to consolidate standard business practices and helped us to understand the laws of the capitalist economic system.

In 1981 there was another transformation- from a Corporation to a legal Co-operative. The stated goal of the Co-op was to provide preventive health care to consumers through high quality bakery products and through sound nutritional education. This new form reflected the whole internal process of NB having been transformed from a backward, poorly run bakery into a relatively efficient, well-managed business. In fact, we had come through a negation of a negation: from a co-op at a very low level of production and business management, we became a capitalist business (the first negation). Once we had applied scientific production and business practices to the operation we were able

to transform once again to a co-operative (negation of the negation) but at a new, higher level.

This transformation was initiated due to objective advances in the business process as well as a number of concrete economic and political reasons. By forming a legal co-operative we changed our relationship to the State in terms of taxes and employer/employee relations (workers were now part owners of the business). Politically, this step was the basis for building a greater commitment to the business from the workers. We saw that this could bring people forward- to see themselves as having a legitimate stake in the business. This proved to be very beneficial in the difficult financial years that followed.

Each of these political stages reflected different sets of relations to the workers. While a non-legal co-op, we relied heavily on volunteer labor. Workers were promised "development" and a positive (co-operative) work environment. What, in fact, people got was a lot of hard work in a relatively poorly organized production condition. However, production skills/discipline were a concrete result of people's labor.

As a Corporation, our goal was to improve our organization and efficiency. Workers were paid for the hours they worked. Our common interest with the workers during this period was in developing the business to improve wages, working conditions, and organization of the jobs.

As a Co-operative, we were able to establish more clearly defined political goals with workers. There was education in the economic theory of co-operatives, preventive nutrition, and general business practices. Before filing for Chapter 11 protection, workers were informed of this development and the reasons that such a course of action was being considered. Workers were encouraged to make a commitment to the co-operative's development. Most important, by this stage we offered workers systematic development in production, computer, and managerial skills.

The important lesson here is that the content of what we had to offer at the bakery reflected the material level of the business. As this level advanced, so did our ability to provide people with some concrete benefits, and not just high sounding ideals about co-operatives.