

## Union Cooperative Organizing

### Background

There is a long and rich history of union cooperative organizing in the labour movement across North America and Europe. Helena Gutteridge, a labour organizer and the first woman elected to Vancouver's city council in 1937 [organized union cooperatives to provide work and training opportunities for unemployed women](#).

The Knights of Labour organized producer and consumer cooperatives across the United States in the late 1800's to restore worker independence and control over their work in the emerging factory system. Mine workers and other rural resource-sector unions organized [cooperative hospitals](#) across British Columbia to provide for the healthcare needs of their members and the broader community.

Union cooperative organizing has more recently re-emerged in the labour movement in both Canada and the United States. This has been [driven by a historic agreement](#) between the United Steelworkers and the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation of Spain to develop unionized worker cooperative businesses across the United States and Canada.

### Union Cooperative Organizing

The rise in precarious gig work across North America has led to an emerging movement of union cooperative development as a new organizing tactic.

The union cooperative model is also being utilized by local, national, and international unions to organize independent contractors who do not have the right to unionization under labour codes. Through the development of a union cooperative, independent contractors are converted to contract or term employees of a new cooperative entity that the UCI supports in development and incubation.

## **Independent Contractor Organizing**

In addition to the right to unionization, these formerly independent gig workers benefit from a shared administrative structure, community of support, democratic control over their workplace, and government employment protections through the cooperative as their Employer. Some examples of this organizing in action:

IATSE International chartered a new Local B778, the Arts and Cultural Workers Union, in Vancouver to organize precarious artists into a [commercial production centre called VALU CO-OP](#).

Lobster workers across Maine came together with the support of the [Machinists union to create LOBSTER 207, a new union local and consumer cooperative](#), as a way to increase catch prices and cut out near monopoly corporate control of lobster distribution. Surplus profit is reinvested into the cooperative and issued as dividends to the worker-owners.

[Allied Up Cooperative](#) is a new healthcare staffing cooperative by SEIU-UHW to provide temporary union workers to their various hospitals and healthcare facilities across California.

## **Strike, Layoffs, and Worksite Closures**

Labour unions have also used the union cooperative model to support existing members in lockouts, strikes, and through worksite closures. The new union cooperatives created by workers through their local unions provide valuable income opportunities in addition to strike pay, stronger bonds with the union, and can lead to new full-time jobs.

In 2017, IBEW Local 3 launched [People's Choice Communication](#) with a group of striking member electricians from Spectrum Cable System, one of the longest strikes in US history.

In Vancouver, IATSE Local 118 partnered with VALU CO-OP at the outset of the pandemic to launch [a commercial mask making production project](#) to provide valuable work and income for their laid off costume shop workers due to pandemic theatre closures.

The [Musicians Union in the United Kingdom](#) has supported the development of 9 worker cooperatives to organize independent music teachers in response to layoffs throughout the education system from national funding cuts.

## **Worker/Union Buyouts & New Worker Organizing**

SEIU Local 2 in Halifax organized the non-union workers at Smiling Goat Coffee Shop through a traditional organizing drive in response to low pay and wage theft. The owner immediately sold the business and the new owners resisted collective bargaining with the newly formed union.

After years of bargaining impasse, a worker led buy-out offer was made with the support and backing of the union and the business was [converted to a union worker cooperative now called the Glitter Bean Cafe](#).

[Cooperative Home Care Associates \(CHCA\)](#) is a state-funded homecare agency providing services across the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. Founded in 1985, the organization has grown to over 2000 workers and was organized by SEIU in 2003.

The union worker-owners set the policies and direction of the cooperative and employ a non-union management staff to direct the day-to-day operations. The union and CHCA have partnered on state-level campaigns to increase funding and wage rates for homecare services.

[Shine Nurture Centre](#) is a private childcare centre in Cincinnati, Ohio, that converted to a worker-owned cooperative in January 2022. The 5 worker-owners were [supported by CO-OP Cincy and a business legacy transition fund](#) to convert to a cooperative and pursue unionization with a CO-OP Cincy union partner.

All of these organizing models can be used both proactively, as a part of strategic organizing initiatives, or in response to emerging priorities or issues.

Check out the [Union Toolkit for Cooperative Solutions](#) by Rebecca Lurie and Bernadette King Fitzsimons at City University of New York for detailed background and case studies.

## **Developing a Partnership**

Local, provincial, and national unions are partnering with the Union Cooperative Initiative and sibling organizations across North America and Europe to advance this work. In British Columbia, a number of both public and private sector unions are working towards building union worker cooperatives.

The partnership process steps :

- **Step 1:** Union partner applies for membership in the UCI.
- **Step 2:** An exploratory partnership meeting with UCI and partner union is held outlining union goals and jurisdiction. UCI and the union sign a non-disclosure and jurisdiction agreement.
- **Step 3:** Union partner and UCI designate project leads and prepare an organizing proposal for the local union leadership and UCI Board.
- **Step 4:** Union partner leadership provides direction and approval on the organizing proposal and a one-time initial project start-up grant. Grants or loans have ranged from \$500 to \$50,000 based on the scope and timeline of the project development.
- **Step 5:** The UCI prepares a project financing plan and accesses funds from internal development budgets, partner credit unions, foundations, and government economic and workforce development agencies.
- **Step 6:** Long-term development partnership is signed providing a pathway to union membership for the cooperative workers and a joint recruitment and organizing campaign planning takes place. Long-term partnerships include a 10% contribution to the UCI from the partner union of dues revenue from the cooperative(s) project.

## Getting Started

The UCI offers workshops, presentations, and training for staff and elected labour leadership and rank-and-file member worker organizers. If your union is interested in pursuing a partnership, please reach out to UCI Managing Director Jonny Sopotiuik at [jonny@unionci.ca](mailto:jonny@unionci.ca).



**Union Cooperative Initiative (UCI) is building an economy that works for all** through the development, incubation, and operation of union co-ops that are good for people and the planet. We are a non-profit solidarity cooperative with a mission to build a worker-centred social and solidarity economy.

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