

# Watt's Happening? #220

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## Cooperatives: NOT business as usual



**Above left:** *the Dawson Creek home office of Peace Energy Co-op, BC's first renewable energy cooperative. This investment cooperative is based on the very successful European co-op model. In Germany, 1.4 million solar*

*installations and 25,000 wind turbines are owned locally creating over 400,000 jobs. Denmark is now about 40 percent powered by renewables (mostly wind) 85 percent owned by small players like farmers and co-ops.*

**Above right:** *Bear Mountain Wind Park, BC's first wind facility, was initiated by Peace Energy Co-op which receives a yearly royalty from the clean energy it produces.*

I push my cart down the aisle and pick up a few groceries, then grab a coffee and say howdy to a few familiar faces. On the way out I stop at the gas bar, fill my tank and buy a magazine. Then it's across the street to the Credit Union to pay a few bills and pick up some cash.

On my way home I look to the west and there along the ridge are 34 slowly spinning wind turbines, together powering the city behind me, plus tens of thousands of homes all around me, (including my own) all with some of the cleanest energy ever invented.

I have some pride when I see them spin: as a member of Peace Energy Renewable Energy Cooperative, I had a role to play in making that wind park happen, and I receive a little bit of income from

that state-of-the-art facility. Not much, but a lot more than nothing.

I have just been going about my day-to-day affairs, but each stop was actually a revolutionary act and a political and economic statement: I have just had the cooperative experience.

### A ZILLION VARIETIES

The Dawson Coop Union is a food cooperative, credit unions are financial cooperatives, and Peace Energy Co-op is a renewable energy investment cooperative. There are also worker cooperatives where employees own and democratically govern their own businesses, and there are producer cooperatives, where farmers and

others band together to market their products.

And on and on . . . a zillion varieties, so seamlessly woven into our world that they are virtually invisible, yet representing a profound and fundamental shift in the way the world is doing business.

Co-ops are profit-making entities, but they are not profit maximizing. It's a model designed to serve customers, not take as much profit from them as possible. It does not funnel wealth up to the top, but rather distributes it to those at the bottom.

Cooperatives are intensely democratic, governed from the bottom up, not from the top down: each member has one and only one vote, period. Co-ops are designed to serve not just their members but also their communities, and often have a clear commitment to the environment and principles like "fair trade."

## **BIG AND GETTING BIGGER**

Even though it has grown side-by-side with the corporate economy for some two hundred years, few people realize the size and scope of this distinctly different economic model. In the United States, more than 130 million people are members of a co-op or credit union, more than Americans who hold shares in the stock market.

Worldwide, some 2.6 million cooperatives have close to a billion members, and about three billion people use products or receive services from cooperatives. The U.S. is home to some 30,000 cooperatives that provide 2 million jobs, \$75 billion in wages and benefits, and \$500 billion in annual revenue. Total annual revenue for cooperatives worldwide approaches \$3 trillion. These diverse enterprises, if grouped together into a

single nation, would be the 9th largest in the world.

And it's growing. Why? Cooperatives are more resilient in crisis. While banks foundered, credit unions fared relatively well during the 2008 financial collapse. They had handed out fewer toxic mortgages that required fewer bailouts, and had half the number of delinquent loans. Millions have flocked to credit unions since.

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## **A PATH TO SANITY**

Many people are also disillusioned with our corporate-dominated world, marked by ridiculous wealth inequity and careless environmental destruction.

It is becoming clear to many that the corporate model has reached both its environmental and financial limits: it is eating itself, while alienating and disempowering the very consumers it relies on for its profits, and destroying the very planet it relies on for all of its wealth. When labour and land, people and the earth itself become mere commodities to be bought and sold, used and destroyed at will, something is dreadfully wrong.

The cooperative model restores control of land, capital, labour and the environment to the community, where it all used to be not that long ago. It will continue to grow, from the grass roots up, not from the top down, and it will help us make the critical transition to a saner world where people, their communities, and the environment on which they depend are important again.

*It's about time.*