

# FOOTPRINT WORKERS CO-OP

Location: Leeds (UK)

Operative since: 2000

Practice organised as a: co-operative not for profit company

<http://www.footprinters.co.uk>

Footprint Workers Co-op is a small, ecologically-minded printing shop owned by its workers. The five-strong co-op specialises in the risograph-printing of booklets, zines, leaflets, stickers, etc. As there is no boss, it is the workers who decide how to run the business. The printers run their business as ethically as they can: printing on recycled paper, subscribing to a green electricity tariff, using the least environmentally damaging processes they can find and rotating positions within the co-op. A percentage of the money they make goes to activist projects whose ethos and aims they support.

## What desires, values and elements of support/discouragement made your practice evolve over time?

We had the chance to buy a printing press incredibly cheaply. We didn't know what we were doing with it at all - one of us went to college to learn print finishing and we were lucky enough to find someone who could show us how to use the machine and how to fix it when it broke! The main objective was to get people active in environmental and social direct action movements off the dole and into some employment that met our wider politics and supported the campaign. We've always been part of Radical Routes - a network of radical housing and worker co-operatives in the UK, whose members are committed to actively work towards social change. We're also active in local, national and international solidarity struggles. This helps to keep our politics embedded in what we do.

## What are in your case the advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses of working collectively?

Working collectively means you make your working practices fit with who the members of the collective are and what they need, instead of simply what the clients or bosses need. This means that if there is a campaign that one of us wants to throw their time and energy into, we allow our members the flexibility to be able to go off and do that. This means we can decide to give money away or do printing for free for campaigns we want to support. We all have equal responsibility for the business. That's great, but we do have a tendency to focus on the day-to-day work of meeting client deadlines, which can mean that some of the overview-type work - thinking about the future of the business, etc. - something that in a conventional company would be more the role of the boss, can be neglected.

## How do you deal with money and wages between the components of your group?

### How do you deal with tensions and power relations within your group?

I think we don't really deal with power relations and tensions that well really. Not that we have any big problems, but we just get on with it if someone is being a bit of an arse, and it generally gets better. It is usually related to personal difficulties that someone needs to work through that aren't to do with the co-op. Occasionally we bring up issues like that in meetings. Money-wise, all of us work part-time and we're all paid £8 per hour, regardless of expertise or experience. By committing to work part-time, we allow ourselves time for life and activism outside work. Deciding to work more would only result in having the money to pay others to provide for our needs - for

example, rather than having time for gardening, you would pay others to grow your food.

How do you access meaningful commissioned work and how do you finance and carve-out time for self-initiated projects? What strategies and tactics are you making use of?

We do print jobs for customers. They contact us; we don't do a lot of advertising - it's mainly word-of-mouth through other customers, or through social media and finding us on the Web. During quiet times, we put more effort into thinking about promoting ourselves. We also go to lots of zine fairs and organise the Leeds Zine Fair ourselves to stay part of the UK zine scene. Lots of our work is printing zines: we are the definition of "niche". We also each have a personal fund into which we pay 50p of every £8 we earn. With this money, we can decide to support a campaign, either by paying the printing costs through the fund or by directly sustaining campaigns we consider particularly worthy.

How do you organise your time between work and non-work? What systems do you use to keep track of where you invest your time?

We don't pay ourselves for going to zine fairs or for our involvement in the Radical Routes network of radical co-operatives - we couldn't afford to continue to do it if we did. So that part of the cooperative's activity is basically extracurricular, but with expenses paid, such as travel. We keep daily timesheets for working hours. In co-ops, you also spend a lot of time in meetings, but you have more control and you don't give rich people more money. At our monthly meeting, we all put forward our hours for the next month so we can see where the gaps are and to make sure there are at least two people in each day, or at busy times, three. We all make sure we have time to do other things in life - we're quite flexible with that one. For the company, it would be more efficient if people specialised at certain tasks, but being efficient is boring. People working part-time and doing a bit of everything is grossly inefficient, but maximising profits is not what this place is about.

How does your current working and living environment (geographic location, spatial arrangement) reflect (or not) the ethos, methods and dynamics of your practice?

We really believe in co-ops as a way for people to take control of their lives. Half of our co-operative live in housing co-operatives and our print room is in the basement of one of these co-ops. Most of us have lived in co-ops at some point.

Please draw a diagram of all the elements and structures that support your design practice (monetary & non-monetary resources, people, spaces and institutions, family, other assets, ...)? Can you note how these elements support you and the flows of exchange related to them? Can you also include elements that “threaten” your practice?

