

With Nancy Neamtan, of RIPESS

Integration with trade unions is key to the success of Social/Solidarity Economy initiatives

Neamtan is coordinator of the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of a Social/Solidarity Economy (RIPESS), and president and general director of Chantier¹ de l'économie sociale, Quebec, Canada. SIREL met up with her at the 2010 National Summit on a People-Centered Economy, held in Ottawa, Canada on May 30 through June 1, where she discussed several aspects of the relationship between Social/Solidarity Economy initiatives and the labor movement.

-How would you describe your organization, Chantier de l'économie sociale?

-It's a large meeting point where different stakeholders come together to promote and develop a **Social/Solidarity Economy** in Quebec. What this means is that we are a group of networks of cooperative and associative companies operating in various sectors, such as housing, environmental issues, work cooperatives and early childhood education (daycare centers). In addition to these collective companies, we gather other networks that work in the development of their local communities, both in urban and rural areas. Also involved are large social movements that support the development of a **Social/Solidarity Economy** as a way of contributing to the democratization of the economy. The participation of these movements is immensely important to us. I'm referring, for example, to Quebec's two leading labor confederations, the youth and women's movements, and the associative movement for cultural democracy, among others.



Chantier's goal is to further a **Social/Solidarity Economy (SSE)** so that people will be able to carry out undertakings geared to meet the needs of their communities. It also provides a number of tools that can be used to coordinate efforts among all the agents involved in the various actions. Our structure is in itself a space for coordinating actions and for working jointly on the issues that bring us together.

-Could you give an example?

-We have a working conditions committee that meets with a network of companies to examine current labor conditions in collective companies, and, together with the green movement, it studies possible ways of improving our companies' environmental practices.

It's a space for coordinating efforts, for discussing differences and inconsistencies, and for seeking common solutions.

We also have a representation mandate, so that we're recognized by the government of the province of Quebec, and by all of civil society, both at the provincial and at the international level, where we act as Social Economy representatives.

-What historic ties are there between social economy efforts and trade unions in Quebec?

-Their integration is an issue of the utmost importance, and I believe it is key to the success and the strength of the **SSE** movement in Quebec. This is not a recent development, as cooperatives and associations have existed for ages in our province. But there has been a renewal of the citizenship movement at the heart of the economy, which began in the early 1980s with the emergence of two simultaneous debates, both of great social importance.

One of these debates arose within the labor movement. While society was searching for ways out of the economic crisis that we were suffering at the time -other crisis would follow-, the Quebec Workers' Federation (**Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec - FTQ**) began to question whether it should continue indefinitely with a defensive strategy (which includes one of the basic functions of trade unions, the negotiation of collective bargaining agreements and working conditions), or if it should instead adopt a "proactive" stance, that is, if it should take action to solve underlying problems, such as the need to generate and protect jobs.

FTQ then sat down with the government to negotiate the establishment of a legal framework that enabled the creation of **Canada's** first workers' fund, called "Fonds de solidarité FTQ."

This pension fund, which complements the general pension scheme and is wholly-controlled by **FTQ** affiliates, was set up with the aim of encouraging workers who had no pension benefits, or who were not in the habit of saving, to start putting money aside for their retirement. Once sufficient resources were raised, the Fund was required to invest in the generation and preservation of jobs in the province of Quebec. At present, sixty percent of the money collected by the Fund must mandatorily be allocated to that goal.

This brought about an enormously significant change in terms of social conditions, and it created a ripple effect, with other labor federations replicating the experience, but at the same time, it helped the associative movement solve a dilemma that it too was facing. Although we were directing our efforts towards defending labor laws, especially those protecting poor urban populations, we feared our efforts were actually contributing to reproduce poverty, as the development model that prevailed at that time -the heyday of neoliberalism, with **Ronald Reagan** in the **United States** and **Margaret Thatcher** in **Great Britain**- precluded any alternatives.

-How was it that this change came about?

-There weren't many of us back then, and that made things a little easier, but at time these discussions became brutal. In the end we arrived at the conclusion that we had to address economic issues, but with a different approach. We were working from a southeast **Montreal** neighborhood, in the industrial heart of **Canada**, and we were seeing

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factory after factory closing down; also, there was already a second-generation of unemployed. So labor and cooperative struggles crossed paths on the field.

We started working together with the labor movement to save our factories, generate jobs and train workers, as we quickly realized that many lacked basic training and skill-development.

So we established what we called Community Development Corporations, which are still operating today and have even influenced Quebec's public policies in community matters, and which above all have shown that establishing a policy of alliances is key, not just socially but economically.

This associative movement continued to develop over time, and when a new crisis came in the 1990s we saw that we could promote a **Social/Solidarity Economy** as a response to that crisis, as a way of addressing employment generation needs. The labor movement worked with us from day one to develop that idea.

That's not to say there were no discussions among us, as logically some fears and uncertainties existed, which gave way to significant debates. For example, public sector unions were wary of the government, because they feared it would take advantage of the communities' capacity for self-management by using it to meet social needs through cheaper means, and that it would take it as an opportunity to eliminate public-sector jobs.

But in this framework of shared goals and joint efforts, we were able to have this debate openly, transparently and productively. We were able to define where public service ends and where communities must begin to self-manage initiatives to solve their own needs, without employment being affected. Moreover, with the passing of time and as our undertakings grew, we saw the emergence of a trade union of **SSE** workers, which, in contrast to conventional employers, we considered a very positive thing.

It's also true that we asked trade unions to rethink their union practices, as the methods that are applied in, say, General Motors or a transnational corporation cannot be applied in a small neighborhood school run by parents. Unions are a good thing in all cases -we don't argue that. But labor relations cannot be the same everywhere.

All of this has led to a very smooth and intense dialogue with the labor movement, to the extent that labor federations are now present and actively involved in the structure of Chantier, as are all the other organizations that have been formed for **SSE** development in Quebec.

-Do trade unions in SSE companies observe labor laws like trade unions in any other company?

-Of course they do, and workers there usually earn better salaries than workers who perform the same tasks in conventional companies. But the aim is to go beyond that and develop improved methods for working together. In cases in which part of the income is guaranteed by government subsidies, efforts are directed towards fighting together to

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improve wages and ensure that workers receive better training. There have even been successful initiatives aimed at building new skills.

One innovation, for example, is a company that offers homecare services for elderly people who are no longer able to live fully on their own but are not yet ready to be committed to a nursing home. This service was not institutionally available, and it's a highly skilled task, because it's not just about cleaning and cooking, but also about spending time with the other person, establishing a relationship of trust and care, and there are many delicate matters that caretakers must tend to. In some cases it may even be necessary to make a decision to alert social or healthcare services about the situation of the persons cared for. For that reason, together with the community-based companies that provide this service, we developed a training course that has received government recognition, and the first generation of students have just graduated.

We've developed a similar initiative in waste management, forming several companies that recycle and reduce the volume of waste. These initiatives consist in first identifying anything that can be recycled, instead of dumping it. This has given rise to a trade, which is performed upstream in the waste disposal process, and which we call "valuing, whereby workers select, for example, fabrics -cotton, silk, synthetic fibers, etc.- and determine the value of each material. It's a process that has considerably increased the productivity of these companies. This would've never been possible without partnering up with trade unions.

More recently, by gathering together youth organizations, women organizations and **SSE** undertakings, a complementary "multi-employer" pension fund was created, which small businesses can join so that they can provide coverage for their employees. This wasn't possible before, because pension funds were only available for large companies or public sector jobs.

Another very important level of collaboration with labor federations are, of course, the solidarity funds. **FTQ**, for example, has a seven-billion-dollar fund. According to these funds' bylaws, 60 percent of the money they collect must be allocated for investment projects within the province of Quebec.

The National Confederation of Trade Unions (**Confédération des syndicats nationaux - CSN**) of Quebec has a smaller fund, but which is more **SSE**-oriented, is managed in a participatory manner and focuses on environmental issues. We've also created a 20-million-dollar fund with **CSN**, for investing in social capital companies that are controlled by local agents, as opposed to what happens in the regular credit markets, where the companies that apply for financial aid must relinquish some control over their activities to the financing partner. In this fund, productive agents are fully respected, as are their social, environmental and cultural goals.

-What's the difference between an SSE company and a cooperative?

-What happened was that we realized that Quebec had very old cooperatives, such as the province's leading financial institution, which was created more than a century ago. In 1996, we had the opportunity of getting together and adopting a common **SSE** vocabulary, where **SSE** companies are defined as collective companies -either associative or cooperative- that are non-profit oriented, managed democratically and operate

billion-dollar fund -, which are mandated by their bylaws to allocate 60 percent of the money for investment projects within the province of Quebec.

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independently from the state, and which place people over capital.

We learned that if we all came together - cooperatives, associative organizations, mutual funds- we would be able to show that we had significant economic weight and represented a different way of doing business. From that realization there was only one step to demanding that the government adopt public policies to contemplate the specific needs of these companies.

You could say that some of the large and old cooperatives have kind of lost sight of their roots, but the vast majority of small cooperatives are members of Chantier and, therefore, they are part of this great movement that seeks to transform the economy and society.

Chantier was built on an accumulation of past experiences. The labor and cooperative movements were born simultaneously as a reaction to capitalism. The labor movement emerged to protect workers against abuses from management and employers, and the cooperative movement was created with the aim of democratically controlling the means of production. But what happened was that both sectors often failed to see each other as members of the same family. So we made sure from the start that our structure was not based solely on **SSE** companies, but drew also on social movements working for social change and on agents working on the field, to find a long-term internal balance that would guarantee that **SSE** companies would continue to be a work-in-progress and not an end in itself.

-You've been appointed for a one-year term as coordinator of the Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of a Social/Solidarity Economy (RIPESS). What is the Network doing now?

-RIPESS has decided that the policy that will be followed from now on will be to rotate these positions, a policy I agree with completely. We're a network of networks that is still developing from a dynamic that began in 1997 in **Latin America**, more specifically in Lima, and which continued in Quebec in 2001, and then in **Senegal** in 2005 where **RIPESS'** structure was finally formalized.

We define ourselves as "intercontinental," as opposed to "international," because we believe that ours must be a network that grows from below, with local, regional, national and continental expressions, with their own realities and characteristics that we want to respect. Which is why we planned to form a network in every continent.

In this way, a network is being developed in **North America**, throughout the **United States** and **Canada**; the network in **Latin America** is expanding, as this is the region where, without a doubt, **SSE** networks have been better implemented and acknowledged; and in **Europe**, after the Second Intercontinental Meeting held in **Luxembourg** in 2009, a movement emerged with the aim of establishing a **RIPESS** chapter next year. In **Africa**, several networks are being formed and there's a continental meeting planned for next October in **Morocco**, where the **RIPESS Africa** chapter will probably be formalized. And the same process is underway in **Asia**, with **RIPESS'** Third Intercontinental Meeting scheduled to be held in the Philippines in 2013.

So, little by little and with our own dynamic, we're building our movement with genuinely local, national and regional roots, avoiding other approaches often imposed by organizations whose sole aim is to co-opt society-built initiatives.

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From Quebec, **Carlos Amorín**
Rel-UITA
July 5, 201



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July 5, de 2010



1- In French, "chantier" means construction site, building, or work under construction.

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