

United Steelworkers Ally with Mondragón Co-ops

Excerpted from a speech by Rob Witherell of the United Steelworkers on March 6, 2010

In the middle of the worst recession in the past 70 years, conservative politicians in Washington are putting the purity of their ideals before the reality of the painful consequences. People need help, not talking points.

Wall Street executives, who were part of creating this crisis, were the first ones asking for help from Main Street taxpayers. We gave them billions of dollars. In response, corporations cut pay, laid off workers, and closed operations—too often as the first option rather than the last.

Our manufacturing sector has been hollowed out and our standard of living stagnated or declined. We need to rebuild from the ground up. But how?

Let's imagine the Spanish Basque region in 1943—devastated from the Spanish Civil War, and then punished by Franco's regime. Thousands were murdered for supporting the Republican forces, leaving high unemployment, no social safety net, no pensions and little access to capital and investments.

In this context Father José María Arizmendiarieta started up a polytechnic school that was the seed for the phenomenon we know today as the Mondragón Cooperatives (see page 7). I visited Mondragón in September 2008. We found our organizations shared many key principles and ideas. Over the year that followed, more conversations involving more people began to turn to specific ideas on how we might work together on projects in the U.S. and Canada.

I've heard people wonder openly about whether such an idea could take root in an American culture steeped in individualism. I would reframe such ques-

tions in a different way. In the midst of economic devastation and oppression, the people who originally formed and supported the Mondragón Cooperatives did so out of necessity to feed and provide for their families. They started their own schools, created their own jobs, provided their own health care and met their own banking and financing needs. There is a story about self-reliance and pragmatism, not just idealism. Shared values such as self-reliance and ownership have deep roots in our culture and history. In the middle of this economic crisis, people are desperate for answers. Since announcing our work with Mondragón, I've gotten emails and phone calls almost every day from people asking, pleading, for help.

We have an opportunity to rebuild our economy from the ground up, in a way that is sustainable and creates good jobs. We cannot afford to wait for someone else to do it for us.

With Mondragón's assistance, we will seek to implement their worker-owner model in combination with our collective bargaining model in a way that makes the workplace more participatory and more accountable to the workers, but also protects the interests of the workers and establishes guidelines to ensure that all workers are treated fairly.

Ownership means more than just the value of a share. We must ensure a dynamic labor-management relationship rooted in partnership, understanding the needs of both the business and the workers, and respect for the advocacy roles each must take on. We are in this alliance with Mondragón because we believe there's got to be a better way to run a business that is sustainable and accountable to its workers and its communities.



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