

Food For People, Not For Profit

By John Curl

The Attack on the Bay Area People's Food System and the Minneapolis Co-op War: Crises in the Food Revolution of the 1970s

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We are traveling in the footsteps
Of those who've gone before,
And we'll all be reunited
On a new and sunlit shore.
- "When The Saints Go Marching In"

Introduction

Veritable Vegetable is the oldest distributor of certified organic produce in the Nation today. Founded in 1974, it is woman-owned and socially responsible. They employ over eighty full-time workers, including over twenty drivers. Their 25,000 square foot warehouse at 1100 Cesar Chavez Street in San Francisco contains over 9,700 items, of which 97 percent are Certified Organic. Their fleet includes five bobtails and nine semi-tractor trailers. They buy from 340 produce vendors in California, New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado, and sell to approximately 300 stores, restaurants, and buying clubs. "We see our work as an opportunity to be both individually creative and cooperative, and we see ourselves as both a business and an instrument for social, economic, and environmental change."¹ Veritable Vegetable started as part of the San Francisco People's Food System, and retains many aspects of the mission, internal structure, and values of its mother organization.

Food for People, Not for Profit was the unifying principle, and byline, for the community based food distribution network of which Veritable Vegetable was a part during the 1970s. Our motivation was control of the food supply for the common good, not profit seeking. It may be an outdated slogan, but today the words are still relevant to our business. Our goal is sustainability for our farmers, our customers and ourselves; to be sustainable we must be economically viable. Operating with the greater community in mind, offering fair prices when buying,

selling and hauling, while providing good wages, benefits and equipment for ourselves, has enabled us to thrive.²

Another still-thriving enterprise that traces its roots to the People's Food System is Rainbow Grocery Cooperative. Housed in a supermarket-sized warehouse at 1745 Folsom Street today, it is a cooperative corporation, with over 260 worker-members. Organized into fourteen autonomous departments, they coordinate day-to-day operations through an elected steering committee, and in larger issues and long-term planning, by an elected board of directors drawn from the workers:

Our goals include, but are not limited to: Providing affordable vegetarian food products which have minimal negative impact ecologically and socially. Buying goods from local organic farmers, collectives, bakers, dairies and other local businesses whenever possible. Providing our customers with the best possible service. Providing Rainbow Grocery Cooperative's workers with a livable wage. Creating a nonhierarchical work space based upon respect, mutuality and cooperation. Offering low-cost health care products and resources. Supporting other collectives and worker-owned businesses. Supporting fair labor practices. Donating to local non-profit organizations and schools. Encouraging bicycling, mass transit, and alternative transportation. Composting all in-store green wastes; recycling, reducing and reusing resources whenever possible. Creating a diverse, non-discriminatory multilingual environment. We maintain an ongoing commitment to make Rainbow Grocery Cooperative an inclusive environment that is welcoming to everyone.³

Other Avenues Food Store Cooperative at 3930 Judah Street, a beloved neighborhood grocery with twenty-four worker-owners, started in 1974 and is the third still-successful alumna of the People's Food System. Still preserving the legacy of their early years, they describe their mission today as "To provide our community with reasonably priced, high quality products free of excessive packaging. To support organic agriculture and local wholesalers. To promote sustainable development. . . . Workers manage the business democratically by making business decisions using the consensus model. We believe that it is as important to sustain a healthy democratic business as it is to nourish our bodies with healthy food."⁴

Finally, Good Life Grocery, a very popular neighborhood business with two stores today, one on Potrero Hill and another in Bernal Heights, shares its origin with the others in the Food System. Although Good Life dropped its cooperative structure after leaving the network and went through a long period under the proprietorship of its two main founders, today it is an employee-owned business with those same founders still working in key management roles.⁵

Rainbow and Good Life both left the Food System when it started to become more centralized than they liked, and Other Avenues stopped attending meetings around that time. Veritable Vegetable however, was caught in the thick of the conflicts that brought the System down, wound up flat on its back, then rose triumphantly from the ashes.

The San Francisco Bay Area People's Food System (PFS) sprang from humble

beginnings between 1973 and 1975, and involved thousands of people as workers, volunteers and customers. At its peak between 1975 and 1977, it consisted of about thirteen co-op/collective stores and about the same number of collectively run support enterprises. Some groups were short-lived, some were peripheral, and sometimes it wasn't clear who was in and who wasn't. The saga of PFS has attained a somewhat underground legendary status among a certain circle in the Bay Area. Perhaps that is because of the extraordinary circumstances surrounding its demise, which have never been totally aired. But the waters were so muddied back then, and have been so further obscured by time, that many details of the history may always remain shrouded. However, one can still discern the drama played out against that clouded backdrop.

When a leader dies a premature, unnatural death under extraordinary circumstances, you always have to wonder what he or she might have done and if it might have changed the world. Organizations are a little different than people, but not that different. The Food System's works had repercussions up and down the West Coast and across the county, and mention of its name still elicits strong emotions today. Because food is so essentially a political issue, many of the most volatile forces of the '70s interacted inside the ever-shifting walls of PFS during its short existence, and sometimes clashed. It suffered a mortal wound in 1977.

The Bay Area and the West Coast were not alone in trying to organize a counter-institutional food system in the 1970s. Groups across the country did the same. The movement in Minneapolis-St. Paul sprang from most of the same sources, and got hurled against a similar wall, in a series of clashes known as the Co-op War. Like the Bay Area, several Twin Cities co-ops today trace their roots back to that era. Wedge Community Co-op and Seward Co-op were in the thick of it; Hampden Park Co-op began as Green Grass Grocery, connected to St. Anthony Park Foods Co-op; Linden Hills Co-op was just starting in 1976 as the Co-op War was winding down, and received assistance in getting off the ground from the old All Co-op Assembly; North Country Co-op continued until 2007.

The food system movement of the '70s was a pioneer of today's cooperative movement, particularly of social enterprises, solidarity enterprises, and food hubs. It was also a precursor of many of today's food movements, involving organic and natural foods, food justice, food security, food sovereignty, local food, slow food, and community-supported agriculture.

Today's Food Hub movement is in many ways a renewal of the '70s food system movement. Springing up almost spontaneously in many regions of the country today, food hubs bring together all of the other movements in ways similar to the food systems of four decades ago. The current movement flows from almost all of the same goals, spirit, and inspiration, is likewise fueled by the energy of a generation of young visionaries, is based on cooperation, and involves large numbers of ordinary and extraordinary people.

That is why it is important today to take a closer look at the history of the 1970s food system movement, and the San Francisco People's Food System and the Minneapolis Co-op War in particular. A deeper understanding can strengthen today's movement, and hopefully help it avoid some of the hidden pitfalls that stood in the way of what the earlier movement was trying to build.



Peoples Food System at the US Bicentennial parade, 1976

Food Conspiracy Roots

By means of the easy and the simple
we grasp the laws of the whole world.
- I Ching

On the cover of *Life* magazine, December 11, 1970, beneath the headline, ORGANIC FOOD: NEW AND NATURAL, stands a young woman carrying a backpack overflowing with vegetables. Inside is a photo of a group on a porch packing boxes of produce, with the caption, "Saturday morning, leaders of the Food Conspiracy, a local coop in Berkeley, pick up their produce then take it to their areas." This was one of the earliest recognitions in the national media of the organic and natural food movement, so ubiquitous today. A photo spread, "Staples of a 1970 natural food market," displays whole grain breads and crocks of nuts, beans, seeds, grains, and dried fruit, curious objects rarely seen in middle America at that time. "New converts to organic food are sprouting up all over: The Move To Eat Natural." The article explains, "On a mass scale, organic foods and a supermarket economy are incompatible, although a few small chains do stock organic produce. In the main, the demand is met by small country-style stores. . . . Where local stores are nonexistent or inadequate, devotees solve some of their problems . . . by forming co-ops."⁶

I was a member of the Berkeley Food Conspiracy in 1971-1973. It was a loose, ever-shifting network of autonomous food buying clubs or *collectives*, mostly organized on a neighborhood basis, among networks of friends, many from communal households, or some common organization. Representatives from the households would gather weekly at their neighborhood center to work out the orders and volunteer for jobs. Our

group was called Bay Duck. It was a typical neighborhood food conspiracy. Volunteers kept it together. Jobs rotated. Members got a written list once a week that we used to place orders. Each week, a couple of people would go down to the Oakland wholesale market and other locations early in the morning to buy produce, cheese, grains, beans, eggs, and other dairy products. The group might decide to buy a case of peaches or a sack of pinto beans to divide among members. The jobs rotated, but usually fell on a few dedicated core people, like my friend Leif. He and I and others would rouse ourselves, meet at 4 a.m. and drive in his van down to the produce market. The regulars knew all the good places to go. We brought the haul back to Bay Warehouse Collective, at 5th and Gilman streets, where we both worked, and where conspiracy members divided the loot into boxes and bags with each person's name on it. Members would come in to pick it up, or in some cases it would be delivered. There was always a basic box of mixed produce that you ordered for a certain price. You never knew what was going to be in it, and in what amounts, for that would depend on what deals the buyers could negotiate. It was a good package, but you had to be prepared to sometimes wind up with things like twenty Jerusalem artichokes or rutabagas. Many of the core members of Bay Duck worked in Bay Warehouse Collective, a group of shops in the warehouse, sharing income and dreams, running the operation by direct democracy and consensus. We pooled all the income of the print, auto and wood shops, and paid workers according to need, which was not a simple thing to do. In the fall of 1973, when Bay Warehouse fell apart, so did Bay Duck.

The larger Berkeley Food Conspiracy officially called itself the Organic Food Association. They explained themselves in the local "underground" newspaper *New Morning*:

The reasons for starting or joining a Food Conspiracy are everywhere. . . . It is getting away from the poisoned food, outrageous prices, and glaring sterility of a Safeway's or Lucky's. . . . It is practicing self-reliance, using 'politics' as an active verb and forming visions of a rational and loving future. . . . By providing a secure market for organic food, the conspiracy enables small farmers to make it. By encouraging ecological agriculture and by defending it, Food Conspiracy does subvert the institution of monopoly landholding under which California has been ravaged for a hundred years. . . . Food Conspiracy is also work. In order to buy, load, divide vegetables, cheese, milk, chickens, eggs and dry goods, *everyone* must share the labor. Responsibilities are rotated so that everyone becomes familiar with all of the jobs.⁷

These impromptu food co-ops first appeared in San Francisco in the late 1960s, inspired by the free giveaways of scavenged food in parks started in 1966 by the Diggers, a "leaderless" countercultural activist group. The Haight-Ashbury neighborhood was the locus for the first few years. No one person claims credit for originating the San Francisco Food Conspiracy; from all reports it was a true grass roots community formation, springing up from several sources at about the same time. Groups of friends, including communal and cooperative households, began to pool their resources and buy directly from small wholesale distributors and the local farmers' market, bypassing the corporate supermarket system and bringing home healthier food at the better prices. The

countercultural community in Berkeley, home of the Free Speech movement, directly across the bay, quickly became a second hub. The networks interacted closely as the Bay Area Food Conspiracy, and in many ways formed a single community with two centers. The Haight-Ashbury Food Conspiracy, the largest neighborhood group in the Bay Area, began in 1968 and in 1973 reached 150 member houses, involving around 700 people. The Berkeley-Oakland Organic Food Association had some twenty-eight affiliated neighborhood conspiracies in 1972. Many other conspiracies were unaffiliated. The Bay Area Food Conspiracy at its height probably involved around 2,000 people.⁸

The hippies, the counterculture, the Diggers' giveaways, the food conspiracies, were all made up of volunteers giving freely of their time, all based on mutual aid for survival outside the system. At their core was the idea of creating a nonviolent revolution by living it, changing the world by seizing power over our lives, as we interfaced with everyday activities. The countercultural revolutionaries wanted healthier food, and began to focus on direct action to change the food chain. By circumventing the corporate food distribution channels, and opening paths for new and better foods, members saw themselves as participating in a radical nonviolent social transformation.

Most of the people involved in the Food Conspiracy were under thirty years old. Money was scarce in the counterculture community, and many had more time than cash. Decisions were made by consensus, often by whoever showed up at a meeting. Some political groups also operated food conspiracies. The early conspiracies distributed foods that were not generally available in supermarkets, and were often the first place that many people came in contact with bulk, natural and whole grain foods.

The food conspiracies were owned by no one, in part because there was nothing to own. There was no property outside of the products, and those were entirely distributed each week, so there was no stock. The conspiracy was not a business, so it had no monetary value of its own. The conspiracies were nonprofit, informal, below the social radar of business licenses and taxes. Their flexible, ever-changing, minimal structures reflected their countercultural origins. They were by their very nature egalitarian, making decisions by direct democracy. Leadership was determined by whoever was willing in put in the work, and by force of personality. Jobs rotated, with few or no fixed positions. Most of the planning, division and distribution took place in somebody's home, porch, or garage.

For some, the conspiracy was primarily a way to get inexpensive foods that were not usually available in supermarkets, and were exorbitantly expensive when you could find them. These included a wide variety of vegetables, cheeses, tofu and other soy foods, and organic pesticide-free foods. For many, the conspiracy was also about having some control over where the food came from, how it was grown, transported and processed. For many others it was part of a larger movement to transform society.

The counterculture was at its roots a movement of social transformation, with much of its power stemming from the concept that if each of us lives the Revolution, it will result in vast social changes: the personal is political. But others saw that any serious attempt to fulfill a social mission had to extend beyond the counterculture enclaves whose population was predominantly young, college-educated, and white. The early movement reached its natural limits and stalled there.

Many in the food conspiracy wanted to reach beyond those limits. Issues involving the politics of food were constantly hitting the mainstream news, such as

farmworker strikes and boycotts, and many food conspiracies became deeply involved in their support. Various political activist groups became involved in different neighborhood conspiracies. The government was using what was called “the food weapon” in foreign policy, and that became a hot issue.⁹ Some food conspiracies published newsletters which commonly included anti-war demonstration alerts, rent control activism, guidelines for boycotting grapes, lettuce, and wines, and updates on United Farmworkers Union activities. John Carter, editor of *Communications*, newsletter of the Haight-Ashbury Food Conspiracy, looked back decades later and commented, “It was at least as much about building a new society as it was about getting ourselves fed. . . . We were changing the world in every aspect of our lives. Our food conspiracy newsletter became a housing resource, a study guide, a tool for organizing our anti-war protests. We’d use it to coordinate who was bringing the cloths soaked in vinegar to use when we got tear gassed.”¹⁰

But the Food Conspiracy “had grown so large that it became very difficult to manage,” as Carter put it.¹¹ The structure was based on small, dedicated core groups putting in long hours of work for no pay to keep things organized. This resulted in a dynamic movement, but an unstable one. Each local conspiracy was like a start-up business, sustained by what is usually considered sweat equity if the business becomes successful. But there was no payback anywhere in sight. Key people would burn out and be suddenly gone. Many of the core people lived marginally, on very little money, and were having their survival needs met through methods such as savings, loans, a part time job, help from family, food stamps, unemployment insurance, or other public assistance. Though still young, the counterculture generation was quickly getting to the age where they were starting families and careers, and most didn’t want to continue on the economic margins. Many stopped living communally. Certain jobs in each local food conspiracy clearly required more work and responsibility than anybody could volunteer to do permanently. If the Food Conspiracy was going to be sustainable, key workers had to be paid. Patty Siegel, who hosted the Inner Sunset Food Conspiracy for several years in her house, explained that they “realized that the Food Conspiracy just got too big to happen out of our house. . . . Eventually, ours transformed into a little store, the Inner Sunset Food Co-op.”¹² The “new wave” food co-op movement was the Food Conspiracy’s—and the counterculture generation’s—entry into mainstream economics.

Early Collective Stores and Distributors

The Food Conspiracy was not the only place to get organic produce in Berkeley in the early 1970s. There were also three collective stores, Westbrae, Ma Revolution, and Wholly Foods. Like almost all counter-institutions, they began with a small number of people, visionaries or social entrepreneurs, who drew a larger group around them. In the early period, the three stores interacted a lot and shared resources at times. There was enough space between them, so they served different neighborhoods. Of the three stores, Ma Revolution was the most political in terms of connections with the broader movement for social justice. The other two stores primarily promoted natural and organic foods, while making a living for the workers. Westbrae and Ma Revolution also spun off what were probably the two earliest natural foods wholesale and distribution companies on the West Coast.¹³

Westbrae Natural Foods store on Gilman Street was started by Bob Gerner and Kristin Brun in 1970. The early store ran as a collective, experimenting with democratic work and decision-making structures. However, after a while the collective structure didn't work for them, and they reverted to a partnership, which they had been legally all along. Westbrae natural foods wholesale and distribution company spun off early in their history.¹⁴

Wholly Foods was at the corner of Shattuck and Ashby. It was more of a hippie store than the others, according to legend started with money from pot sales, had no notable politics beyond those of natural and organic foods, and lasted the shortest time.

Ma Revolution Natural Foods was started in 1971 by Aaron Michael Kruger and Kathleen Fusek. They began by selling natural foods (as they were defined then) and their own brand of carrot and orange juices in a tiny space on Telegraph Avenue, then moved across the street into a larger storefront at 2525 Telegraph. A collective in concept from the beginning, by the time the new store opened they had at least a dozen members. Their mission statement was simple: "Food for people, not for profit." That became the mission statement of the People's Food System as well.

Kruger was also a founder in 1971 of Altdisco (Alternative Distributing Company), along with Paul Stone and Ken Hammermesh. Altdisco was a pioneer in the growing natural foods wholesale industry, and operated as a collective throughout its history, although legally a partnership. They moved foods north from the Los Angeles and San Diego regions, to the Bay Area and on to Portland and Seattle, doing drop shipping to small food stores all along those routes. Always undercapitalized and hanging on by its teeth, Altdisco suffered from some risky business decisions and went bankrupt in 1975-'76. But at that time Ma Revolution was flourishing, and had joined the Bay Area People's Food System.

While no corporate supermarket stocked organic produce, the old Berkeley Co-op supermarkets began carrying it in 1970. Organized on the Rochdale system, Consumers Cooperative of Berkeley, with several stores, had been a pioneer in nutritional education and food activism ever since its founding in the 1930s. In 1971, they opened a specialty Natural Foods Co-op on University Avenue, which featured "organically grown foods, diet specialties, salt-free products, natural beauty aids, certified raw milk, natural cheeses, fertile eggs, [and] bulk products."¹⁵

Other food-related collective businesses were located in Berkeley. Collective enterprises doing food service were the Swallow Restaurant Café (located in the University of California art museum), the Juice Bar, and the Brick Hut. The Cheese Board, a retail specialty cheese shop, founded in 1967 by Elizabeth and Sahag Avedisian, became a worker cooperative in 1971 when they and their six employees converted it by distributing equal shares in the business among all the workers and equalizing wages.¹⁶

The Natural and Organic Food Movement

"The social lesson of soil waste is that no man has the right to destroy soil."

- FDR's Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace ¹⁷

The modern natural and organic food movement goes back much further than the 1970s. Farmers since time immemorial have used organic methods. The New Deal promoted

farming techniques that we would call organic today. The 1938 USDA Yearbook of Agriculture, entitled *Soils and Men* is a manual on organic farming still in use today. Meanwhile, British scientist Albert Howard was investigating the management of soil fertility through composting, and demonstrated the connection between healthy soil and plants' ability to fight off pests and diseases in *An Agricultural Testament* (1940). During World War II twenty million Americans planted Victory Gardens, which were almost all without chemicals. At that same time, the early 1940s, chemicals first began to be used in significant amounts in commercial American agricultural production. In response, in 1942 J.I. Rodale published the first issue of *Organic Farming and Gardening* magazine, which became enormously influential in the following decades.

Chemical farming increased considerably in the 1950s, and in response came increased consciousness of the herbicides, pesticides, insecticides, fertilizers and other dangerous substances being inserted into the food chain. Many foods were by then highly processed, with added white sugar, chemical preservatives and stabilizers. Along with consciousness of this development came increasing demand for organic and natural foods. Hundreds of "health food" stores appeared in the United States during the 1950s, but they were primarily focused on vitamins, minerals, and other dietary supplements, and many did not even handle produce. In 1966 César Chávez, Dolores Huerta, and others launched the United Farmworkers Organizing Committee, and through strikes and marches began to publicize the harm that corporate farming methods and pesticides were causing farm workers.

In the mid-1960s, the organic and natural foods industry began to emerge nationally. Distributors often grew out of stores. Besides co-ops and collective-related stores, a number of social entrepreneurs played key roles, and deserve credit. In San Francisco, in 1965, a year before the Diggers staged their first free food giveaway, Fred Rohé opened one of the first natural foods stores in the United States, New Age Natural Foods in the Haight. He followed that with Good Karma Café natural foods restaurant in the Mission District, New Age Distributing Company in San Jose, and Organic Merchants natural foods trade association. In 1966 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Aveline and Michio Kushi opened the first Erewon store, selling macrobiotic and natural foods, and Paul Hawken turned the store into a successful business. In 1969, under Bruce Macdonald, Erewon became arguably the first natural foods wholesale and distribution company in the United States.¹⁸

In the following months and years, many natural foods retail stores grew into distributors: Eden Organic Foods (1969, Ann Arbor), Food for Life (1970, Chicago), Westbrae and Altdisco (1971, Berkeley), Essene (1971, Philadelphia), Laurelbrook (1971, Maryland), Shadowfax (1971, New York), Tree of Life (1971, St. Augustine), Janus (1972, Seattle), The Well (1973, San Jose), Ceres (1973, Colorado Springs). In 1971 Fred Allen, West Coast field editor of *Organic Farming and Gardening*, initiated the earliest organic certification program in California. Gail Haczela of the Berkeley Food Conspiracy is also credited with contributing to the early beginnings of certification. Barney Bricmont and five other organic farmers founded California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF) in Santa Cruz in 1973, a mutual assistance and organic certification organization. In 1974 the Oregon Tilth certification agency was founded.

The People's Food System

Children of the future age,
Reading this indignant page,
Know that in a former time,
Love, sweet Love, was thought a crime!
- William Blake

The San Francisco Bay Area People's Food System (PFS) was a spontaneous movement arising out of the forces set in motion in the Food Conspiracy. However, all social movements need a spark. In this case the immediate spark bounced from San Francisco to Minneapolis and back again.

In 1970, several young friends from the Midwest lived in San Francisco for a few months and were inspired by their experience in the food conspiracy. When they returned to Minneapolis, one of them, Susan Shroyer, organized a bulk foods distribution depot on a friend's back porch. Others became involved and in 1971 it developed into North Country Co-op. From there it sprang into a thriving movement of autonomous neighborhood co-ops.¹⁹

The earliest Minneapolis food co-op stores were organized essentially the same as the San Francisco Food Conspiracy, with no formal structure and run entirely by unpaid volunteers. As they grew, they developed legal structures and a common wholesale and distribution system, Minneapolis People's Warehouse (MPW), which broke away from North Country and became autonomous during that co-op's first year, in 1971.²⁰ The warehouse at first used volunteer labor, but needed greater organization, and was soon run by a collective of the workers. Step by step Twin Cities activists developed a concept by which the core group of each neighborhood co-op—each worker collective—would take over the running of the store, supplemented by volunteer labor, and would start getting paid as soon as that became economically feasible. Each core collective was small enough to run through direct democracy. The basic idea was a network of nonprofit collectives running stores and support groups, and getting paid for their work. Paying the workers was needed to keep the project alive, but was not the primary goal.

From Minneapolis the idea bounced back to San Francisco. Three young people from Iowa—Mark Ritchie, Margie Keller, and Betty Carlson—who had lived in Minneapolis and participated in the co-ops there, traveled to San Francisco in 1972. Seeing the limitations that the Food Conspiracy was going through, they thought that the Minneapolis concept could be successful here too. They connected with a neighborhood food buying club run out of St. Peter's Church on 24th Street, one of the main drags in the Mission district, a Latino and working class neighborhood. With the help of Father Jim Hagan, they arranged to rent a storefront at 3021 24th Street, between Treat and Harrison, that the church food buying club had been using to warehouse bulk items. There in January, 1973, they opened a co-op/collective store called Semillas de Vida/Seeds of Life.²¹ Its stated mission was making inexpensive nutritious food available to the community, not for profit, changing the way food is dealt with from seed to table, and helping to bring about greater social justice and equity. It was to be democratically run by the collective, also using the volunteer labor of the customers. Seeds had several advantages over the Conspiracy. With a storefront and inventory, food buyers no longer

needed to pre-order once a week, put up front money, or deal with distribution. A back room of Seeds was quickly taken over by another collective, People's Bakery, which originally started baking just for the store. Seeds was the first store in the People's Food System.

Meanwhile, in many regions of the country in the early '70s, similar collective businesses were springing up independently in a wide spectrum of small industries and services, not uniquely in the food industry. Collectives became a social movement in their own right, a movement for workplace democracy, with the Bay Area as one of the movement's centers. These small cooperative businesses were run by non-hierarchical egalitarian worker collectives, and based on self-help and mutual aid. The idea was in the air and anyone could pick it up and run with it. Outside the food industry there was no networking organization among these collectives in the early years, and each enterprise was somewhat an island unto itself.

Organic and natural food was the only industry in which the economic conditions encouraged extensive networking among collective businesses, a vertical and horizontal movement of small inter-connected groups. Not just stores, but farms, distributors, and restaurants could be and were organized by collectives, in many parts of the country. The older Rochdale consumer co-op movement called this latest development the "new wave."

The next San Francisco collective store developed out of the Noe Valley Food Conspiracy. Inspired by Seeds, that neighborhood food club gave birth to the Noe Valley Community Store at 1599 Sanchez in October, 1973. The two stores, Seeds and Noe Valley, were in close touch, and began talking about themselves as the People's Food System. Both stores needed warehouse space, so they jointly opened the San Francisco Common-Operating Warehouse (SFCW), also sometimes called the *Cooperating Warehouse*, on Bancroft Street in Hunters Point. The Warehouse quickly became an autonomous collective and a center for the growing movement. It soon moved to a larger warehouse at 155 Barneveld Avenue, in the industrial zone below Bayshore Boulevard.

Over the next two years, the collective idea begun at Seeds burgeoned into a growing network of groups scattered around the city. Food System workers staged a communal effort to help key members of the Bernal Heights Food Conspiracy to open Community Corners at 47 Powers in 1974. A group of the most active core members of the Haight-Ashbury Food Conspiracy opened the Haight Community Food Store at 1920 Hayes. Early in 1975 a fifth store, Good Life Groceries opened at 1457 18th Street.

Meanwhile, support collectives were forming: Veritable Vegetable, Merry Milk, Red Star Cheese, Yerba Buena Spice Collective, and Honey Sandwich Day Care, a child care center for Food System workers. These support collectives were all housed in a warehouse dubbed the Food Factory, at 3030 20th Street, not far from Seeds. People's Bakery moved in with them. Affiliated was also a distribution collective, People's Trucking. The three people who started Seeds all moved on to different support collectives, Mark to Red Star, Betty to the Warehouse, and Margie to People's Bakery. Seeds became mostly run by a collective of Latina women, some of them refugees from the civil wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

The new stores involved a large increase in property and responsibility over the Food Conspiracy. Some of the workers in the core collectives received wages from the beginning, but at very low rates. The core collective's job was keeping it together, but on

a day-to-day basis, the enterprises were run mostly by volunteers, with decisions made in the same collaborative democratic spirit that shaped the original food conspiracy. Usually anybody could volunteer, and it was extremely easy to become a member of the store collective, since many workers were still waiting to get paid a living wage. This ease of entry was a strength of the early collective stores, but it also became a vulnerability. By every report, the early stores were all a little funky, by middle-class standards. Morris Older, a worker at Uprisings Bakery, later remarked, “All of these stores were capitalized by volunteer labor—as a result, prices could be kept very low. The stores operated on a 15 percent markup (most stores mark up food from 40 percent to 75 percent above their cost) and so the idea spread very quickly among the nutrition-conscious white countercultural Bay Area community. Yet running the stores meant keeping them stocked and staffed, paying bills and making orders on time, all of which meant that consistent trained labor was at a premium.”²²

Some people who shopped at the new stores did not have the time or inclination to put in volunteer labor; on the other hand various individuals put in large amounts of time, primarily from enthusiasm and in belief in the goals. Older observed that “Some had a vision of a people’s food system that would completely bypass the large corporations and supermarkets that now supply the food most Americans eat. Organic farming collectives would grow it, and trucking collectives would bring it to the city to be sold at community food stores.”²³

But at first, most collective stores could barely to pay their workers. The idea was that they were putting in sweat equity, as in any small startup business, that would eventually pay off. The rule of thumb in startups at that time—as today—is to not expect to make a profit for at least the first two years. All the early stores were undercapitalized, and those that survived did so despite all odds. Few collective workers knew standard business practices very well and improvised as they learned. Many groups had no idea how to keep books. They thought of themselves as nonprofit or anti-profit, and had endless debates about what those terms meant. Even defining what *profit* meant was not an easy thing. Some collective members had read a little anarchist literature or Marxist economic theory, and numerous discussions became filled with jargon and concepts that many found confusing, alien, doctrinaire. But even the most committed people could live only so long without income, and most soon came to the point that they could not continue unless they were adequately paid.

There always remained some ambiguity over control of SFCW, the Common-Operating Warehouse. Should it properly be autonomous, or controlled by the stores and support groups that used it? Many issues formed inside that ambiguity. SFCW had a dual identity. The Warehouse started as a community resource, and all felt that they had to support it. All the stores were stakeholders, and wanted a fair share of control. At the same time, everyone supported self-management and worker control. The question was between ownership by the community of stores that used the warehouse or by the worker collective that ran the warehouse. That fuzzy concept is sometimes called *social ownership*, the notion of social property belonging to everyone and at the same time belonging to no specific individuals.

As the volunteer core groups abandoned the Food Conspiracy, the White Panther Party (WPP) started running much of the network. WPP turned what was left of the Conspiracy into a social enterprise with paid workers. At the same time they were also

involved with the People's Food System, and WPP members worked in several PFS enterprises, including the Warehouse and Veritable Vegetable.

Collectives and Legal Structures

From the beginning the question of structure, legal as well as informal structure, was a knotty one for the collectives and cooperatives. Because their primary purposes involved social goals, and not simply a maximization of profits, they did not fit well within the usual categories of capitalist enterprises, or even cooperative law as it existed in California at that time. The collectives were continually reinventing themselves. The participants did not all agree about what they were doing or why they were doing it. The great majority however did agree that they were not doing it primarily for profit and had social missions. Today the structures that many of them were struggling toward are usually called social enterprises or solidarity enterprises—nonprofit cooperatives or semi-cooperatives with a social mission—of which there are now many worldwide.

Since the collective structure was a spontaneous revolutionary formation, collectivists did not feel that they had to conform to the standard capitalist structures dictated by our society. The Bay Area at the time was rife with groups formed for numerous purposes that used the collective direct democracy structure. Many of these groups needed no legal structure beyond an unincorporated association. However, the Food System existed where the rubber hits the road: they were businesses. Outlaw businesses perhaps, but businesses: they had to have legal structures.

The Noe Valley Community Store was the first to file incorporation papers with the state, on October 12, 1973, with the founding directors listed as Michael Martin, Carl Fauset, Susanne DiVincenzo, and James Ploss. Their original name was actually the Noe Valley Free Store, and their original purposes were much broader than food. The Free Store refers back to store that the San Francisco Diggers ran in 1967. The structure that Noe chose, and even the words they used to describe their organizational purposes, set the pattern for the entire Food system. They chose the structure of a nonprofit corporation for educational purposes, and not a cooperative corporation, under California law. This is very important in understanding the Food System and many other pioneering social enterprises of the era. The problem of legal structure cropped up at the very beginning of the counterculture in the mid-1960s. The rural communes of that era always had that issue. Somebody had to own the land and property, and if you ran a business, you had to have a legal structure.

In Noe Valley's incorporation papers, running a food store was not presented as their central focus. They listed their "primary and specific purposes" as "to promote social welfare by conducting an educational program":

The educational objectives of this program are to teach by participation and by example the following ideas, practices, and techniques:

- (1) voluntary commitment of substantial and regular amounts of unpaid labor to the benefit of others and of the community as a whole
- (2) self organizing of community groups to solve shared problems as an alternative to reliance on the use of government or private enterprise for that purpose

- (3) the essential unity of work, community service, and individual and group educational development
- (4) direct democracy in the governing of group's affairs
- (5) business and retail sales management skills
- (6) nutritional science and economics; particularly with respect to organic natural, unprocessed or fresh foods ²⁴

They went on to state that they intended to conduct “a publication program, discussion groups, panels, and on-the-job skills training of high turn-over, temporary, unpaid or subsistence-paid staff in a retail food store.”

Almost all the People's Food System collectives followed Noe Valley's lead and incorporated as nonprofit educational organizations, using much the same language. The next collectives to incorporate were the Warehouse, Seeds, and Red Star. They all filed on the same day, December 11, 1974. The directors of SFCW were Charlotte Woods, Nina Saltman, and Ellen Helford; of Seeds were David Reardon, James Jackson, and Elizabeth Perry; and of Red Star, Jerry Walker, Maxine Lieberman, and Dahlia Rudavsky.

SFCW and Seeds filed identical papers:

the primary and specific purposes are to promote social welfare by conducting educational programs in the areas of human nutrition and food distribution. The programs will be directed at the public as a whole in subjects beneficial to the community and useful to individuals. The educational objectives of this program are to teach by participation in practical work situations the following ideas, practices, and techniques:

- (1) Self organizing of community groups to solve shared problems as an alternative to reliance on the use of government or private enterprise for that purpose.
- (2) Direct democracy in the governing of group's affairs.
- (3) Nutritional science and economics; particularly with respect to organic natural, unprocessed or fresh foods.
- (4) Skills necessary for all phases of retail food distribution.²⁵

Red Star's papers contained a few minor differences, but did not mention its primary focus, distributing cheese. The Haight Community Food Store followed, incorporated by Ira Schwartz, Marin McCall, Ruby Newman, and Omar Benoit, copying Noe's purposes word for word, and adding the development of a childcare-community center. Good Life Groceries used the same typical structure, although its core was really not a collective group but a couple, Lester Zeidman and Kayren Hidiburgh.

Shortly before incorporating, Veritable Vegetable, the produce distribution collective, wrote an expansive description of their purposes in *Turnover*, the Food System newsletter:

- a) supply high quality, low cost produce to non-profit community cooperating food distributors (stores, clubs, etc.)
- b) buy produce from small growers

c) buy organic produce whenever possible.

Veritable Vegetables strives to be a non-hierarchical collective workplace where all decisions are made by the workers. We are non-profit, by which we mean that all net profits after wages, rent, capitalization, depreciation, liabilities (debts), taxes, and other costs do not go into the pocket of any one person, but are put back into the business or the community.²⁶

However Veritable Vegetable, unlike the others, actually incorporated as a for-profit corporation, with a total of 500 shares, all of one class, with the par value of \$10.00 per share. Stock was non-transferable “except as approved by a unanimous vote of the board of directors.” Their purposes were described in their incorporation papers as:

(a) To engage primarily in the specific business of purchase and distribution of produce to the stores in the group commonly known as the San Francisco Co-operating food system and its affiliates;

(b) To engage generally in the business of education as to the values of collective effort, worker control of workplace, direct marketing, and minimal use of petrochemicals in the production and preparation of food.²⁷

Veritable Vegetable’s first board of consisted of Richard Comberg, Stuart Fishman, Shirley Freitas, Margaret Janosh, Mary Masterson, and Janet Ploss. According to Mary Jane Evans, “Stuart was the main force behind Veritable. . . . He had very well thought out the reason why he was there. He was compelled by whole structure of agriculture in California. He was also involved with a work structure that had to do with collective participation. The emerging idea of sustainability and organics in agriculture.”²⁸

While Veritable wanted the stores to buy produce exclusively from them, because they needed the volume to make their business work, some collectives continued to buy part of their produce directly from the produce market. This created an ongoing conflict that eventually focused into a polarization between Veritable and Ma Revolution.

All Co-op Meetings

In the spring of 1975 the People’s Food System—twelve groups at that time—made their first attempt to get better organized by initiating All Co-op and All Collective meetings. In April they held the first All Co-op meeting at the Warehouse, with all the five stores and the various support collectives in attendance. It was reported on in the second issue of the Food System’s new newsletter, *Storefront Extension* (later called *Turnover*), which was published out of an upstairs room at the ubiquitous Food Factory:

On April 10, a meeting was held of all the stores and support collectives in the food system to discuss the need for all of us getting together on an ongoing basis. The question was raised as to what form the all food system meetings should take. A conference of one or two days duration was proposed as was an ongoing meeting. We decided on having ongoing meetings for now which would perhaps at some time generate a conference.

People felt the need for two different sorts of ongoing meetings, one dealing with the practical details of everyday work and their political implications, the second dealing with a philosophical overview of the food system and its practical implications.

Each group will meet once every two weeks, on alternate weeks. The following agendas were set for the next two meetings:

Monday, April 14, 7:30 Storefront Overview meeting

1. Survey of groups—what we're doing in each
2. System-wide decision-making process, the questions of autonomy, authority, expansion, accountability
3. Separatism of women, etc.
4. Ownership of property, buying, etc.
5. Leadership
6. How to disseminate our ideas—education

Monday, April 21, 7:30 Storefront—Day to day operations (what we were calling “practical”)

1. People's Trucking role in collectives
2. Centralization of trucking
3. Announcements
4. Wages
5. Authority for decisions made
6. Day coordinator/volunteer relations

Monday, April 28, 7:30 Overview—agenda to be set by April 14 meeting

Monday, May 5, 7:30 Operations—agenda to be set at April 21 meeting

Each collective should have one representative at least at each meeting.

People should represent only one collective at a given time at a given meeting.

We should plan for continuity, especially when one topic is discussed for several meetings running.

The same person should not be expected to cover both the overview and operations meetings.

To facilitate continuity if one person can't continue to attend over a long period of time, collectives should have dual representation during the period of transition. (rotation by overlap)

Representatives should keep good notes to keep their collectives informed and to facilitate rotation.²⁹

Another All Collective meeting followed on May 12. Attending were people from three stores and six support groups: Seeds, Noe Valley, Good Life, SFCW, Veritable Vegetable, Yerba Buena Herbs, Red Star Cheese, People's Trucking, and the childcare center that would later be called Honey Sandwich.

Minutes of All Collective Meeting, Monday May 12, 1975:

People came, mostly late, and sat around talking about things like the contradictions between working in a cooperative food system while living in a capitalist society; the food system as a means to end versus the food system as an

end in itself; etc. Some folks expressed a desire to move beyond the mechanics of moving food to do things in addition to try and effect a change in the space around us by supporting in word and action other active organizations. It was pointed out that we may have more active and dedicated workers in the food system (sheer numbers that is) than any other radical organization in the Bay Area.

We considered for a while asking each representative to go back to her/his collective and discuss how each group felt about themselves as an individual collective or the food system as a whole supporting the farmworkers, and about whether or not a committee should meet with representatives of the farmworkers to discuss ways in which we could best support them.

We decided instead to ask collectives how each felt about supporting the rent control initiative because it is pressing in as far as if enough signatures aren't gathered within the next few months, it won't even get on the ballot, let alone get voted on. Seeing as how we are dealing with one necessity (food), we could selectively decide to try to affect another (shelter). Therefore, each collective is being asked how it feels about the food system as a whole backing rent control, and each store in particular is being asked how it feels about it and how signatures could best be gathered from shoppers should we decide to do so.

All collectives are asked to discuss this at their meetings and to have a representative at the next meeting discussing this which will be Monday 5/26, to report any resolutions, questions, suggestions, etc.³⁰

The Bay Area was widely recognized throughout the United States as the most radicalized region in the country at the time. That the People's Food System had a very open membership and possibly "more active and dedicated workers . . . than any other radical organization" in the area, started out as a strength, but also had the potential of dangerous consequences.³¹ According to David Loeb of People's Bakery, "Groups of us were trying to figure out how we were going to advance the revolutionary cause, whether or not to use the Food System as a basis for that. . . . Our ideology was that we were going to create an alternate system, and people would come to this system because it was so much better for you. But the Food System as a functioning pole of alternative ideology also attracted people who weren't as committed to the basic mission of providing good food to people and developing a worker collective culture, the two pillars that started it."³²

Below the minutes in the newsletter was a sketch of two people touching hands, and an anonymous poem combining the personal and the political, imbued with the high spirit of many people in the People's Food System:

Together we will grow older
together we will grow old
we will hold
each other close we will hold each other closer
We will hold each other
as the country changes;
we will hold each other

as the world changes.

While the People's Food System was meeting, the Vietnam War was finally ending. The helicopter evacuation of Americans from Saigon was completed on April 30 1975, resulting in a sea change in the American countercultural youth movement. Almost overnight, large numbers of young activists took a deep breath, then scattered off to start careers or families, go back to school, or play a guitar. The personal rose to the central political agenda. Almost everyone became more self-oriented, self-absorbed, dealing more with their personal oppressions. But this was all about human liberation anyway, which is always personal. In celebration of the end of the Vietnam war, People's Bakery inserted a little label-sized poster into all their bread packages, beginning a tradition of political bread labels, later often fliers for progressive events.

Meanwhile, the Food System continued to grow, and added new members through 1975. By early '76, PFS included twelve more co-ops and collectives. The new stores were Rainbow Grocery at 3159 16th Street, Other Avenues at 4035 Judah, the Tenderloin Store at 451 Ellis, Inner Sunset (also from a food conspiracy) at 1224 9th Avenue; in Berkeley, Ma Revolution at 2525 Telegraph, and Flatlands Community Food Store at 1853 Ashby, and New Oakland at 2710 Park Boulevard. Flatlands was an outgrowth of the East Bay Food Conspiracy. A new bakery was formed in Berkeley and joined the system, Uprisings at 2575 San Pablo, with help from People's Bakery and loans from the Warehouse and Rainbow Grocery. Amazon Yogurt, Flour Power Mill and People's Refrigeration joined the crowd in the Food Factory. People from Red Star started Left Wing Poultry and opened a farm in Morgan Hill. An autonomous trucking collective, Truckaderos, worked closely with the system.

Other Avenues, Inner Sunset, Rainbow Grocery, Ma Revolution, Flatlands, People's Bakery, and Uprisings Bakery all followed the standard Food System structure, incorporating as educational nonprofits, each with a slightly different twist in its incorporation papers.

Rainbow Grocery had a unique origin in that it was started by a San Francisco ashram—a spiritual community—led by the East Indian Guru Maharaji. The ashram needed a fairly large supply of vegetarian “pure” foods on an ongoing basis, as inexpensively as possible. They began a bulk food-buying program, with Rich Israel as coordinator, who also worked at the Warehouse. Israel was instrumental in convincing the ashram to start the community food store. A core group of four formed: Israel, Janet Crolius, Bill Crolius, and John David Williams. They used Noe Valley as a model. The new store was located on 16th near Valencia, a run down area near neighborhoods with many countercultural young people. Until they incorporated as a nonprofit, Rainbow was under the legal ownership of their main coordinators, the Croliuses. They began with entirely volunteer labor, but within a few months were able to pay the coordinators a minimum wage.

Rainbow quickly became the busiest and most successful store in the Food System, and took on more paid staff into the collective, mostly from people who started as volunteers. Beyond its favorable location, Rainbow's founders attributed the store's success, in comparison to the other PFS stores, as due to their service orientation, attention to business, and a wider selection of healthy products beyond bins of whole grains and strict ideological criteria for product selection.

In retrospect, Rainbow was later critical of the nonprofit structure they took:

When incorporating, Rainbow workers simply adapted the corporate documents of the People's Warehouse, which included the Warehouse's statement of six political principles underlying the Food System. Including the six principles was done, in part, as an attempt to appease the Warehouse's activists who thought Rainbow was not political enough. Copying from the Warehouse's incorporation documents also simplified the legal work; unfortunately, the Warehouse's legal model was not very appropriate or functional. The Warehouse had written up their incorporation documents with the hopes of obtaining tax-exempt charitable status, which they were unable to do. While Rainbow's workers already knew Rainbow would not qualify as a tax-exempt charity, they still incorporated using the nonprofit model of the Warehouse.³³

Toward Unification

Although there were no official leaders in the Food System, many of its activities revolved around the Warehouse, so the strongest voices at SFCW were looked to for leadership in PFS. According to Nina Saltman, "Roger was a very smart businessman and largely responsible for the growth of the Warehouse. He showed a lot of leadership. Very political. Largely his perspective became accepted by the group. Adam was vocal. Betty was a strong leader, the moral thermometer of group. Ellen and George Hightower were very practical. Yokini and Hibosheshe were very influential. The warehouse was the de facto leadership of the Food System in many ways. That was because we were the biggest business. It had something to do with the financial aspect of the business itself. Members of every collective who were the leadership of that collective were also very respected in the Food System. Mark Ritchie and Allison and B.G. of Red Star. Margie at the bakery was very influential. Michael Ota who started Good Life. People from Ma's."³⁴

The All-Co-op meetings (or All-Collective or All-Worker meetings, as they were variously called) were established "to create a system-wide forum for discussing political and organizational concerns" in order to meet the collectives' common needs.³⁵ However after a few meetings they remained unable to agree on procedures for making decisions and carrying them out.

A contradiction developed between the need to make system-wide decisions and the need of the collectives for time to discuss and criticize proposals. A series of frustrating and unproductive meetings followed and attendance dwindled as the issues remained unresolved.

In September 1975, several collectives decided to authorize representatives to make decisions for them at the All-Co-op meetings. Other collectives took the position that their autonomy was primary and would only agree to send delegates with instructions to report back about to them about each and every issue.

However, by that time they did work out a Criteria Statement, in which the Food System began to more clearly define itself. It stressed that PFS was not just about food and collectivity, but was part of larger struggles, particularly "against an oppressive capitalist profit-oriented economic system."³⁶ The Criteria Statement listed twelve

benchmarks that a group needed to fulfill in order to belong to the Food System, including: operate collectively, preferably making decisions by consensus; hold open meetings for community input; struggle to eliminate hierarchy of worker/manager relationships; state a definition of profit and nonprofit; make an effort to understand and eliminate racism, sexism, ageism; challenge participation in imperialism and worker exploitation; not use food to coerce a group or individual to act or think a certain way; not sell food to groups in conflict with these criteria.

Many of the issues and debates that engaged the Food System over its entire life were encapsulated in that statement. Since the politics of people working in PFS spanned a wide spectrum, these political criteria proved very controversial.

Meanwhile, their stasis in decision-making was exacerbated when a dispute arose between Red Star Cheese and People's Trucking over control of the Red Star truck.³⁷ They brought it to All-Co-op meetings, which aired the issue several times but was unable to resolve it. Rumors began to fly about fights over control of trucks and tools. Trucks were vandalized. The fragility of the network became apparent to everyone. The inability of the All-Co-op meetings to resolve this controversy led many members to conclude that the Food System needed to become more organized, and to set up a structure that could make decisions. However, this remained complicated by the contradiction between the need to make decisions as a system and the need of the collectives to discuss and criticize proposals. Frustration mounted.

According to Paul Kivel of Earthwork, "constant tensions escalated over time between those who were much more political and wanted the Food System to come together as a larger more powerful voice around either food issues or other political issues, and the folks who were just into food and providing healthy food. Some collectives didn't want to create a big system that was powerful and directing the individual co-ops. They wanted the collectives to be more autonomous. Other people wanted to create a more centralized structure and leadership... The nonpolitical people just drifted away. At Earthwork we were grappling with the question, are we just providing food or are we trying to change the structure of this system that makes food inaccessible and unhealthy for everybody? We were at the center of one of the largest food production areas in the world."³⁸

On April 4, 1976, an All-Collective conference, with seventy-five workers attending, discussed setting up a system-wide decision-making body and more economic unification. The day began with a presentation by Margie Keller of People's Bakery and Stuart Fishman of Veritable Vegetable on the "State of the Food System."³⁹ They discussed the lack of a clear method of decision-making, which resulted in serious problems when groups made unilateral decisions that affected the entire system, such as priorities for funding a new store, or if a new production unit should form, or how the Food System should relate to co-op controversies in other parts of the country, like one that was taking place at that time in Minneapolis. They discussed unequal economic development: some groups were generating large financial surpluses, while others couldn't pay living wages. They stressed the lack of system-wide organizing on solidarity issues such as supporting farm worker struggles and food-stamp counseling. Another problem was that they had no single resource on legal questions, and no means of pooling bookkeeping skills. Two contrasting structural proposals were made, one by Mark Ritchie and Allison of Red Star Cheese and other by Roger and Janet of the Common-

Operating Warehouse. Red Star asserted that “Political unity would be more likely when a stronger material basis for working together existed.”⁴⁰ The Warehouse reversed that equation, and asserted that more economic unity would follow greater political unity.

Red Star presented a “model for economic merger” among groups, which would change PFS into a “unified food production and distribution collective.” They proposed a decision-making structure in which the “work teams”—the collectives—would each send two representatives to a “representative body,” which would have certain powers delegated to it by the “all-worker assembly,” which would be the overall decision-making body. The work teams would have day-to-day decision-making power each in its own area.

In contrast, the Warehouse proposed that the Food System use “democratic centralism” as its decision-making process. They explained, “In a democratic centralist system, representatives would be elected from each participating collective. The collectives should recall these representatives if they weren’t satisfied with them.”⁴¹ They criticized the previous year’s “loosely organized and voluntary all-co-op meeting” for having “bogged down in indecisiveness and finally collapsed.” In SFCW’s proposal basic decisions in the Food System would be made in a “committee comprised of representatives democratically elected from each participating collective. Each representative is subject to recall from his/her collective, and the committee as a whole is subject to the criticism from the collective, [but] once a policy has been determined by the committee and discussed fully and accepted by the food system, no individual or collective has the right to undermine that policy.”

The Red Star merger proposal claimed that “present divisions with their resulting material inequalities are not a real progression away from the established economic structure where workers are pitted against one another by trade or material competition.” Red Star called for making immediate changes in work relations and economics, reorganizing the economics and daily life of Food System members, with a common wage fund, combined accounting, and provisions for childcare.⁴²

The conference then broke down into small discussion groups, each with workers from different collectives. After discussion of the “merger model” and the “democratic centralism proposal,” each group chose representatives who made statements to the reconvened assembly, followed by a general discussion.

The assembly then decided to create a democratically elected body “as a first step toward unifying the Food System both politically and economically.” Each co-op store and support collective would elect two representatives who would meet in a body “with the initial basis of unity being the development of a mass base for socialism.”⁴³ They made no attempt to try to define *socialism*. The Representative Body’s first agenda would be: 1. Create a proposal for decision-making. 2. Decide what groups are to be represented in the elected body. 3. Discuss economic centralism, and in particular the creation of a central fund. 4. Establish a mechanism for mass educational forums for all workers in the Food System.

This simple formula of “the initial basis of unity being the development of a mass base for socialism” contrasts sharply to the complex twelve Criteria for belonging to the Food System promulgated by the meeting of the previous September.

The West Coast Food Network

The San Francisco Bay Area People's Food System was not the only local network of food collectives and co-ops on the West Coast. Over a dozen collective warehouses serviced an extensive web of hundreds of grass roots co-op stores and food buying clubs scattered from Southern California to British Columbia. All of these had sprung up independently in the same time period. Each warehouse did some of its own local trucking, but independent trucking collectives ran most of the routes between the warehouses and the rural stores. The warehouses served as depots and exchanges for local products and loads transferred between truckers in different routes. The warehouses, and to some extent the truckers, took the leadership in raising the alternative food network to a more highly organized level.

Truckaderos, an independent trucking collective of five members and one truck, was based in the Bay Area and did much of its work for the Food System, running the routes to the south and east. Truckaderos worked only for food co-ops and collectives. North of San Francisco was the territory of other collective truckers. At that time there were at least fifteen different cooperative trucking groups in California, with different routes crisscrossing the state and beyond.⁴⁴

Truckaderos usually arrived at the Food Factory on Monday evening between 5 p.m. and 9 p.m.. Everyone in the Food System was invited to come down to help unload or just hang around, dig the scene, and pick up information about what was happening in other West Coast co-op warehouses. Truckaderos kept up on what was happening in the West Coast food collective and co-op world.

They made two weekly runs. Their east run was to Davis, north to Yuba City, Oroville, and Paradise, then back to San Francisco. The next day Truckaderos were off to Gilroy, Los Baños, Fresno, Tulare, Bakersfield, winding up at Southern California Cooperating Community (SCCC) in Los Angeles. On alternate weeks they continued south to Solano Beach, Ocean Beach and Linda Vista, sometimes east to Indio-Coachella, then back to Los Angeles. They returned north via the same route in reverse, except sometimes they cut east to Lindsay and Fresno before heading back to San Francisco.⁴⁵

In early 1974 Truckaderos founders Leon Willard and Peter Waring decided to drive north and tour the collective and cooperative warehouses between San Francisco and British Columbia, which they'd never visited. They wanted to better understand the situation and the movement, and to help improve interconnections and communications among groups. They went "from collective to collective, meeting the people involved, and gathering first-hand information, . . . consolidating this information, and making it available to the rest of the food system."⁴⁶ They explained that before they started Truckaderos, "One of us had been a member of the Desert Collective [Coachella], doing most of their trucking, and the other of us had been with Southern California Cooperating Community (SCCC) [Los Angeles-Santa Monica] as a warehouse worker and trucker. Our reason for leaving our respective collectives was to form a trucking collective to provide the food system with a reliable and efficient trucking service, something that did not exist at that time. It was our belief that we were not just moving food, but participating in a new economic and social system as well."⁴⁷ When they used the term *food system*, they were referring not just to the San Francisco Bay Area Food System, but to the regional network and beyond. They saw themselves as part of a growing community building an alternative society, "a model which demonstrates the viability of

the things we believe in.”

They thought they knew what had gone wrong in the failures of two local pioneering collective distributors: Westbrae was financially successful but no longer a collective; Altdisco went bankrupt because it was too isolated from the movement. (Altdisco, closely connected with Ma Revolution, would surely have disputed that.) Truckaderos concluded that, “a collective could not survive unless its consciousness extended beyond the confines of its own structure. . . . Westbrae [Natural Food Distributors] had come to believe that collectives could not work, and had opted for the corporate structure. They were no longer an alternative to anything except in the kind of food they carried. Alternative Distributing [Altdisco], though now defunct, always presented themselves as a collective, but did not work very collectively with other groups.”⁴⁸

Outside of the Bay Area, the most developed region on the West Coast was said to be around Seattle. “Workers’ Brigade was generally considered the most righteous, but no one really knew for sure who or what Workers’ Brigade was, or how they related to C.C. Grains or Community Produce. Starflower was generally considered just another corporation like Westbrae, though rumor had it that they were a *Feminist Collective*. But no group had checked it out to see what that meant.”

In September, 1975, Free Spirit printing collective in Oakland published the result of that tour in a pamphlet entitled, *Beyond Isolation: the West Coast Collective Food System As We See It*. It was distributed widely among the West Coast food collectives, co-ops, and warehouses. Mostly written by Willard, the pamphlet presented a snapshot of many of the warehouses, and laid out many of the controversies within the network. Truckaderos explained that from SFCW, they “learned of the worker controlled, anti-profit approach to meeting our needs. . . . SFCW was an inspiration from the very beginning, and contributed greatly to our establishing guidelines and sticking to them.”

SAN FRANCISCO COOPERATING WAREHOUSE: SFCW is the most politically consistent warehouse we know of. They were the first example of a worker-controlled anti-profit collective we came in contact with, and reflect less individualism than most other collectives. They [refuse] to sell to profit makers, . . . and once they decide to support a group or effort, that support is considerable. . . . SFCW is readily open to suggestions or criticism, and are quick to correct errors in judgment if and when they make them. Their collective consciousness has always reached beyond their individual collective, and is often visionary. . . . Their internal structure seems at times to be overly rigid, making input from outside the SF community difficult. Many of the persons in SFCW have worked and struggled together for quite a long time, giving each a great deal of experience with collective organization, and a high concentration of political awareness.

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA COOPERATING COMMUNITIES: Except for PPW [Portland People’s Warehouse], SCCC is the newest of the collective warehouses. They began basically to meet the needs of Los Angeles area buying clubs, many of which have not moved beyond cheap food or organic food in consciousness. Being in LA, and being in close proximity to the LA central produce market has presented special problems for them. There is a heavy

emphasis on market price by the people they serve, and LA is not noted for its strong community spirit. In a very short time, however, they have begun to evolve a strong collective consciousness, and have attracted some very capable and politically oriented people. . . . They have pledged strong support behind our effort to meet the food needs of PPW, and have a good grasp of the general problems facing us all.

STARFLOWER [Eugene, Oregon]: There are 13 women and 2 men, and they relate to themselves as a feminist collective. They, perhaps, do the best job of meeting the needs of their workers of any of the collectives. They have always paid themselves \$140 per month, and have free medical and dental privileges. A great deal of thought has gone into their internal structure so as to be fair to everyone over an expanded period of time. . . . It appears their only real “sin” is having no community base, and selling to profit-makers. They are, however, actively engaged in struggling with the same inequalities the rest of us are, and are committed to significant social change.

PORTLAND PEOPLE’S WAREHOUSE [PPW]: Four or five stores around the Portland area had been buying their needs from Starflower and C.C. Grains, among others. As their volume grew, and as more stores began to open, they established a dry goods warehouse. The warehouse grew out of the needs of the stores, and was supported by them, although at times it was inconvenient to do so . . . because Starflower and C.C. Grains were selling to them at their normal markup less one cent per pound, and no longer delivered to the stores.

Apparently PPW was not financially sustainable under that arrangement with Starflower and C.C. Grains. Intervening in the delicate situation, Truckaderos cut a deal with PPW “to obtain what they needed directly from the sources, thus eliminating the 10-15 percent markup.” Starflower and C.C. Grains both “subsequently went along with the deal, though Starflower more reluctantly.”

[SEATTLE] WORKERS’ BRIGADE: About a year ago [1974] there was an effort in Seattle to bring a group of individual collectives together under one umbrella group called Workers’ Brigade. There were about five, including C.C.Grains, Little Bread Company, a bookkeeping collective, and a maintenance and trucking collective. C.C. Produce was asked to join, but declined and changed their name to Community Produce, resulting in some bad feelings, only now dying down. Workers’ Brigade would share resources (money, equipment, political ideas, etc.) to build a stronger community base, and pay workers \$350 per month, enabling them to attract workers from the community at large. . . . They would rotate jobs (millers becoming bakers, etc.), and through more workers and increased volume meet their growing economic needs. . . . These efforts, by their own admission, were less than successful. . . . Internal problems began to develop, and rumors of bankruptcy appeared, alarming Starflower who was financially involved. Workers’ Brigade reduced their wages to subsistence, and began to get on top of their problems, and are now somewhat stabilized. Workers’ Brigade has a high collective spirit, and a strong political awareness. They are anti-profit, but do sell to profit-makers out of what they consider necessity. About

30 percent of their volume goes to profit-makers, but they would like to eliminate that if they could see a way.

COMMUNITY PRODUCE: C.C. Produce came close to joining Workers' Brigade, but declined for fear of economic failure. They have, historically, had a hard time getting support from the stores in their community. . . . They handle fresh produce, a few fruit juices and dried fruits. The combination of handling perishables, and the weak community support, causes them to take a rather conservative approach to social change. . . . They do, however, have a high collective consciousness internally, and genuine solidarity among the workers. . . . [They] supply food to FED-UP, a Canadian warehouse supplying its food to conspiracy-type outlets, at a very low markup, and are participating in the establishment of a Coop Federation which will include most of the stores in Washington. . . . [T]he newer people at Community Produce . . . showed the greatest interest in, and were most willing to put energy toward, efforts to unify the collective network.⁴⁹

Truckaderos further remarked that both CC Produce and Starflower "have always met the needs of their workers." Since Starflower was paying a monthly salary of \$140, their workers must have been living very close to the bone. Apparently in the West Coast collective world at that time, the \$350 per month that Workers' Brigade wanted to pay was considered a fully living wage.

Workers' Brigade traced its history back to Puget Consumer Cooperative (PCC), a Rochdale-type consumer cooperative founded in 1961, which grew out of a buying club started in 1953.⁵⁰ PCC became focused on natural foods. Besides the store it also included a group of neighborhood natural food buying collectives. In 1971, PCC financed the creation of Cooperating Communities (CC), which began as a support network for farm produce, including cooperatives retailing produce and dry goods. CC became a network of cooperative businesses committed to ecological principles and worker self-management, reaching beyond food to encompass groups providing day care and health care. Several of the CC groups decided that they wanted to get into a closer relationship, and came together to form Seattle Workers' Brigade. SWB consisted primarily of Corner Green Grocery (in Pike Place Market), C.C. Grains, and Little Bread Company (in Lake City), while Community Produce declined to join. A mill worker at C.C. Grains named Gwen described her collective: "I look at C.C. Grains and I see something wonderful. A place where I could learn and grow non-oppressively. A place where I could dare to challenge my own socialization in a supportive atmosphere. The time, the energy, the tears and hurts, joys and laughter all rolled into a group of women committed to finding another way besides hierarchical, capitalistic, imperialistic ways."⁵¹ Meanwhile, Puget Consumer Cooperative changed from its original Rochdale system to worker management, then to a combination whereby staff served on the board and all workers received equal pay.

Truckaderos finished their survey by describing an Arizona warehouse at the far end of the desert route:

TUCSON PEOPLE'S WAREHOUSE (TPW): We do not have much firsthand information about TPW, since we have not visited there, though we have met

their truckers (mostly women) from time to time at other warehouses. . . . [T]hey are active in the collective food system, and have a real spirit of cooperation. They are not, however, organized as a collective. . . . We have heard they have strong community support, and have been instrumental in encouraging support between themselves and other warehouses. We feel they would be quite willing to participate in an effort at unification.⁵²

Tucson People's Warehouse (TPW) was started in 1973 by five people from the Tucson Food Conspiracy—the first natural foods market in the city founded two years earlier. They formed the TPW “to provide access to natural and healthy foods not available at that time.”⁵³ In 1974, it incorporated as Tucson Cooperative Warehouse (TCW). At first it was primarily a volunteer operation. Volunteers packed organic and natural grains, juices and other bulk items and drove them to their destinations in a single truck. Cooperative stores and buying clubs quickly expanded as well as the product line.

Trucaderos also visited many co-op stores on their trip, and found that almost all of them had “a strong prejudice against canned, non-organic, or non-food items.” Now that they had made their tour, the Truckaderos offered observations, criticism, and suggestions. “Many places we went we saw signs of the same predicament: Too much work, too few people, and inadequate equipment for the magnitude of the task we had undertaken. About the only thing we had in abundance was youth and enthusiasm.” They observed that, despite their different locations, the various warehouses had a common set of problems, while the stores had a distinctly different common set of problems. The stores were “essentially volunteer-run by non-paid workers resulting in high worker turnover, thus the constant need for training of new workers, and the resulting inefficiency. There may be some token ‘food credit’ but never enough to meet all of the needs of the workers, forcing them to obtain the rest of their survival needs from outside the food system. The existing stores are too small and too few to actually supply the total needs of any communities they believe themselves to be serving.”

In contrast, most of the warehouses were run almost entirely by paid workers.

Most warehouses are organized as collectives, and those few that aren't are rapidly moving in that direction. . . . These warehouses, whether born out of a need by their community stores, or coming into existence on their own, carry those items stocked and sold by the coop stores. . . . The warehouses, like the stores, are working at near capacity. . . . [They are] too small, too inefficient, and self-limiting internally by attitudes against size, expansion, and technological aids, to adequately deal with any sharp increase in the number or size of stores. . . . Although the collective food system has substantial economic power as a whole, the fact that each warehouse continues to buy independently, greatly reduces that collective strength, keeping most of them in precarious financial situations unnecessarily

They found among the West coast warehouses “no on-going effort to unify, though it would be in everyone's best interest to do so. . . . [A]lthough some collectives were, in fact, working together, it was being done mostly where it was to their economic advantage, rather than out of any sense of solidarity or mutual commitment.”

Truckaderos proposed that they try to move toward an economic merger, and were encouraged by recent exchanges between SFCW, Minneapolis People's Warehouse, and Tucson People's Warehouse, as indications that a higher level of collectivity among food warehouse collectives was possible. "Buying together and cooperating in food distribution. . . . Not for profit, but to meet their own needs and the needs of the community in which they lived. It seemed like a dream come true."

They ended their tour on an optimistic note: "The collective is the core of it all. Collectives have, over the past few years, grown stronger within, and now it is time to extend that strength, to unify and strengthen the collective network. From that, along with the ability to feed ourselves, comes the foundation upon which to build the new society. . . . We must learn to believe in ourselves, for it is from among us, that the solutions will come."

Truckaderos did not discuss a number of other warehouses and collectives which were active in the West Coast food system and beyond. Those included Arcata Co-op, Desert Collective, Fresno Collective, Red Clover Brigade and Country Peoples' Warehouse (Santa Rosa), Mountain Peoples Warehouse (Lake Tahoe), and Fed-Up (Vancouver, BC). There were similar networks in other parts of the country, but these were outside the West Coast trucker circuit, such as Minneapolis People's Warehouse, Austin Community Project, Federation of Ohio River Co-ops, and New England Food Cooperative Association. I will discuss some of these later for comparison.

Collective and Co-op Farms

The cooperative/collective network did as much business as possible with the significant number of cooperative and collective farms that operated in the 1970s. Cascadian Farm, today a huge natural foods corporation quietly owned by General Mills, and a vivid example of the impact the corporate system has had on agricultural and food-related co-ops over time, began as a collective farm connected with the Seattle-area Cooperative Communities food system and did business with Seattle Workers Brigade. In a 1977 article in *The Tilth Newsletter*, Gene Kahn, one of the farm's founders (and now a General Mills vice-president), wrote:

Cascadian Farm is a collective commercial farm located in the upper Skagit Valley about 50 miles east of Mount Vernon, Washington. The farm has been growing various vegetables since 1971, and began an expansion into field crops such as rye, barley, and potatoes in 1975. Our crops have been sold primarily to CC Grains and Community Produce in Seattle, and to the Fairhaven Cooperative Mill in Bellingham. The five farm members live together in various small houses on the home farm near Rockport; we are currently (1977) cultivating about 75 acres of crops on four different leased farms. . . . It was a wonderful feeling when we arrived at CC Grains in Seattle with the first load from our first harvest. There was a feeling of unity and appreciation for the cooperative food distribution system. . . . Historically, farmers (and particularly small farmers) have found it necessary to form cooperatives in order to survive. Such coops, which generally are established to take over processing functions and—to an extent—vertically integrate farm production, help to give small farmers a much greater chance of

success. This can best be accomplished through the formation of local rural producer's cooperatives.⁵⁴

Many Latino farmworker groups started cooperative farms in California in this period, and the collective food distribution network was very happy to have them onboard. By one estimate, forty to fifty of these "limited resource" cooperative farms started in the early 1970s. The most successful were Cooperativa Campesina and Cooperativa Central, which both planted strawberries, typical of most of these co-ops. Campesina put in their first crop in 1971 on 80 acres of land near Watsonville; by 1976, the cooperative had 178 acres of berries and an annual gross income of over \$1.4 million. Central grew its first crop in the summer of 1973 near Salinas, and by 1975 its assets had grown to over \$650,000.⁵⁵

Initially financed through cobbled-together public and private funding sources, the farmworker co-ops ranged in size from several families to seventy-three families. Almost all were organized by the parcel system, with the cooperative usually responsible for planting, irrigation, mulch, etc., and each member family responsible for maintenance and harvesting of parcels totaling 3 to 5 acres. Most cooperatives required collective marketing, and returned to each family the market price of its produce minus the co-op's operating expenses and a contribution into a revolving fund.

Some of these "limited resource" cooperative farms were short-lived, and in 1976 only 15 remained in the state. However, organizing again took an upswing, and five years later there were at least that many in the central coast area alone, and many more statewide.

Minneapolis People's Warehouse

Events at Minneapolis People's Warehouse (MPW) had a particularly strong impact on the movement around the country.⁵⁶ Minneapolis People's Warehouse was started in 1971, when the wholesale collective of North Country Co-op, in its first year of operation, became an independent entity controlled by its users. Of all the collective warehouses in the West, MPW and San Francisco Common Operating Warehouse had the greatest influence on the movement on a national scale.

The Twin Cities movement traced its origins back to the summer of 1970, when Susan Shroyer, her husband Keith Ruona, and Diane Szostek returned to Minneapolis from San Francisco, where they had participated in the Food Conspiracy. Shroyer had the idea of opening a sort of informal bulk foods distribution depot, which she called People's Pantry on Szostek's back porch.⁵⁷ Originally, it was not a cooperative or a food buying club, but a location with stock where people could buy "natural" food at wholesale prices. They were looking for economic and ideological independence from supermarket chain stores. As the Pantry grew in popularity and volume, Shroyer envisioned stores where the work and effort were shared by many and each neighborhood would have its own community store. Szostek began to write articles for the underground newspaper *Hundred Flowers*, encouraging people to open their own neighborhood stores. Shroyer was also instrumental in the beginnings of the People's Bakery and People's Clothes cooperatives. Pantry organizers sold \$2,000 of shares, received a \$1,000 noninterest loan, recruited volunteers, and in 1971 incorporated as the North Country Co-

op.

Other key people included Shroyer's sisters and her husband Ruona. North Country's business and volunteer base grew and inspired other neighborhoods to start co-ops. Cooperative storefronts and food-related collectives quickly blossomed around the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area: Seward Co-op, Whole Foods Co-op, Riverside Cafe, and People's Company Bakery in Minneapolis, and Selby Co-op in Saint Paul. At first, North Country acted as a warehouse and purchasing agent for new co-ops. But the wholesale purchasing and storage needs of the local cooperatives outgrew North Country's resources and that function was split off to become the People's Warehouse. By 1975, MPW was servicing twenty co-ops in the Twin Cities and throughout the state.⁵⁸

These were far from the first co-ops in Minnesota. The state and the Twin Cities had been dynamic centers for cooperative movements in earlier decades. There had been a great struggle in the Finnish cooperatives in the Iron Range in the 1920s and '30s, involving the Communist Party.⁵⁹ In the '30s and '40s the Twin Cities had a number of consumer co-ops connected with regional farmer marketing co-ops. In 1969, leaders of the Black community on Minneapolis' North side set up a food co-op, People's Cooperative Union (PCU), to support themselves as an alternative during a boycott of white-owned groceries. After a few months of success, PCU was shut down by arson.⁶⁰

The West Coast Network Meets

During the last weekend in September of 1975, food co-op and collective groups from the West Coast and beyond held their first meeting as a network in a conference of about a hundred people at a campground in the Sonoma County wilderness. Attending were San Francisco Common Operating Warehouse, Veritable Vegetable, and Red Star; Seattle Workers Brigade and Community Produce; Portland People's Warehouse; Eugene's Starflower; Santa Rosa's Country People's Warehouse, Arcata Co-op, Fresno Co-op, Southern California Cooperating Community, Vancouver's Fed-Up Co-op, Tucson People's Warehouse, and from Wisconsin and Michigan, Madison's North Farm Intra-Community Cooperative and Ann Arbor People's Food Co-op/Wherehouse.⁶¹

They set up an extensive agenda, but apparently actually spent a lot of the time socializing. "There were a lot of things to discuss: who we are, racism, sexism, who to sell to, community education, private ownership vs. socialism, childcare, insurance, bookkeeping, and more." They began several projects: working out collective trucking arrangements; collective buying and bargaining, a regular newsletter, a regular conference, and a study project. "We came away with a revitalized sense that what we are doing in San Francisco is being done by many groups of people all over the country. We began the process of working together. It is the beginning of a West Coast cooperative food network with collective strength to unify our struggle to provide food for people." The food, of course "was luxurious by campground standards."

The next conference took place a few months later, over the weekend of January 30, 1976, at the Arcata Co-op.⁶² From San Francisco came SFCW, Veritable Vegetable, Red Star, Flour Power, Noe Valley, and Left Wing Poultry. Joining them were Seattle Workers' Brigade, CC Grains and Bakery; Food Front Olympia; Portland Area Food System and Community Warehouse; Starflower; Country Peoples' Warehouse; Southern California Cooperating Communities; Tucson Peoples Warehouse; San Diego Co-op;

Fresno's Our Store; Sierra Food Coop; Santa Cruz Bakery; Monte Rio Community Food Store; Davis Coop Newsletter; Free Spirit Press; Chico Food Store; Truckaderos; Willow Creek Store; Vancouver's Fed-Up, and Minneapolis People's Warehouse. There were also people there from two Midwestern groups, Greater Illinois People's Co-op (GIPC) in Chicago, and Trung Brokers, an independent collective set up by a group of Midwest warehouses (including GIPC), to coordinate their purchasing and trucking.

The question of profit was a major debate at the conference. What is profit and how should cooperatives and collectives deal with it? Is being nonprofit or anti-profit one of their basic principles? Should they do business with profit making businesses? Where should they draw lines? SFCW was strongly against selling to "profit makers," while Seattle Workers Brigade was strongly for it.

Like the Sonoma County conference, Arcata turned out to be a pretty laid-back affair. "[C]heese, bread, treats from the bakery and beer and wine appeared. Cindy found us all places to crash. One brother traveled miles with his guitar to warm us up with old songs from the I.W.W. struggles. . . . Dandelion from Tucson courageously takes on the task of chairing the mass meetings. Agenda up for grabs. Land for people, new stores and clubs, cheese buying—Kris posted four time slots to lead discussion on the Twin Cities split. . . . Broke into four groups to discuss 'who to sell to?' . . . Kris tries to get support for PW [Minneapolis Peoples Warehouse] resolution . . . [but] we polarize. Frustrations beginning to show. . . . Still no clear basis for unity. We did agree that one major concern at the next conference will be our understanding of class and class struggle. Next conference should also have equal space for warehouses and stores. . . . Time for a few hugs and goodbyes as we collectively fall apart for long rides home."⁶³

The most controversial issue at the conference was the struggle taking place among the food co-ops in Minnesota. It was deeply relevant to the San Francisco People's Food System, since they did exchanges. Minneapolis People's Warehouse had sent a representative to the conference asking for support in their struggle against DANCe, a new warehouse that a breakaway competing group had formed. The conference declined to get involved.

But several weeks later SFCW unilaterally decided to jump in, threw their support to MPW, and boycotted DANCe. The SFCW boycott statement was written for a February 27, 1976 conference of Midwest warehouses:

SFCW STOPS SELLING TO DANCe⁶⁴

We at San Francisco Common Operating Warehouse have decided we can no longer remain neutral in the struggle in Minneapolis between two competing warehouses. Our decision is to critically support Peoples Warehouse and to stop selling to DANCe.

Our reasons for not selling to DANCe are based on their following actions:

- 1) After a power struggle at PW, one opposing group, instead of organizing and struggling with the Coop Organization, began using economic warfare by starting a competing warehouse, obtaining some of the funds by having sympathetic Coop stores run up credit and giving the money to DANCe, and also withdrawing large "individual" loans from PW.

- 2) Calling the police against Coop Organization members and never

repudiating the action and/or disciplining the members who participated in this use of armed state power against coop workers.

3) Attempting to reinstate the concept of a consumer coop rather than worker controlled coops, by selling voting shares in DANCe.

4) Lack of class analysis by the DANCe people and their assuming an “apolitical” stance when the above actions and their literature demonstrate a definite political stance (petit bourgeois and anti-communist).

We feel that the Peoples Warehouse has a responsibility to progressive workers in DANCe who are willing to engage in principled struggle with Peoples Warehouse and who support their overall goals. These workers should be given a chance to work in the Minneapolis Coop structure.

Why we give support (critical) to the Peoples Warehouse

We support PW and The Co-op Organization because they helped to clarify the question of class control in the co-ops and raised a lot of questions that the coops all over the country have had to start to deal with. We support their overall aims as stated in their poster “The Aims of the Co-op Movement.” We respect their class analysis and agree with their class position. We are currently trying to work out our own analysis of who we are and who we serve. The struggle in Minneapolis has raised our level of political consciousness. We hope other warehouses and collectives are trying to deal with the same issues. We, as PW, see the coops as a political rather than an economic movement. We criticize PW for being overly dogmatic and rhetorical (“We fulfilled our historic mission by taking over the warehouse,” etc.). Nor do we understand their use of the term “democratic centralism” as they have yet to describe to us any accountable structure of the Coop Organization. We disagree with some of the tactics used by the CO because they seem to us to have alienated and divided many sectors of the community that are not the enemy. We hope that this criticism is accepted in the spirit in which it is offered, that of support and hope that we all can learn from our errors.

Onward in struggle,

Feb. 27, 1976 SFCW Collective

The Co-op Organization poster mentioned in the SFCW letter read as follows:

THE AIMS OF THE COOP MOVEMENT⁶⁵

1. To be a weapon in the struggle against the monopolistic profit structure of the food industry.
 2. To help alleviate the high cost of living by selling food at low prices.
 3. To educate the unemployed and the working masses on the politics of food: that is, the interconnectedness of:
 - A. working class low wages
 - B. high cost of living
 - C. billions of hungry and starving people in the world
 - D. farmers forced into bankruptcy
 - E. huge profits for monopoly capitalists.
- ... AND BELIEFS

1. Cooperation and mutual help in relations of production bring out all positive aspects of the individual's personality.
2. In contrast, the existing order of social oppression and economic exploitation brings out the negative aspects of human relationships.
3. Human labor produces capital, surplus value, and profit. Wealth is based on labor.
4. Labor, unpaid labor of thousands of people, built the coops, therefore a concerted effort must be maintained to STOP and ELIMINATE all trends to privately own coops.
5. Mutual help in relations of production and volunteer labor are the cornerstone of the coop movement. Upon this cornerstone thousands of coops will be built and will prevail because this cornerstone is the working masses.

When the SFCW letter was later distributed to other collectives in the People's Food System, many were angry that the Warehouse would decide something so important without the consensus of the Food System or a vote of the Representative Body. An open meeting on the subject was held, but finished inconclusively. Until it was settled, SFCW decided to yield to pressure and temporarily stopped serving as a staging area for any Midwest loads. Another PFS open meeting was called for April 4 to discuss the organizational structure of the San Francisco People's Food System and their relationship to Minneapolis.

The Minneapolis Co-op War

Susan Shroyer and Keith Ruona, two of the earliest leaders of the Minneapolis co-op movement, quit North Country Co-op in the fall of its first year, 1971 and moved to a rural communal farm in western Wisconsin, Winding Road Farm, where they lived for the next two years. Joining them was Ruona's friend Bob Haugen, who had worked at the warehouse. The land was owned by a Sears-Roebuck heiress, wife a radical sociology professor at Northeastern Illinois University. At Winding Road Farm, Haugen and Ruona teamed up with Theophilus Smith, a former organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the 1960s Civil Rights Movement organization. Ruona had once been active in the local chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Smith led a Marxist study group at the farm, and eventually became the behind-the-scene's leader of an association they formed, called the Co-op Organization (CO).⁶⁶ They formulated a plan to return to the Twin Cities, transform the co-ops and use them to promote a revolutionary movement focused on class struggle. "It was all planned from the very beginning. They knew exactly what they were doing," Shroyer said later.⁶⁷ Although married to Ruona at that time, Shroyer was never a member of the CO; she was, however privy to many of the early meetings.

Thus, the organization that launched the Co-op War did so with the street credentials of several highly respected co-op leaders, some of the original activists who had been key in initiating and guiding the movement.

Haugen, Shroyer, and Ruona returned to Minneapolis in the fall of 1973, and rejoined the co-op circuit. The two men formed Marxist study groups, from which they recruited CO members. Other early CO leaders included two women—Rebecca Comeau

and Michael Rachlin—as well as Dean Zimmerman. Meanwhile, Smith started a construction business there, began hiring co-op activists for painting and sheet rock work, and personally checked out their politics as they worked at job sites. He never became a visible member of any of the Minneapolis co-op collectives, and was unknown in the co-op movement except to a few in the CO inner core.

A native of Alabama, Smith joined SNCC in the early 1960s, and became a follower of James Forman. Those were heroic, idealistic years. Smith marched in the historic 1965 Selma to Montgomery March led by the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. When Stokely Carmichael was arrested in Prattville in 1967, Smith and a group of supporters were shot at and beaten by a mob of klansmen and police. Trapped in a house, they defended themselves with guns; eventually Smith and others were charged with inciting to riot. In 1968, Smith directed the SNCC economic programs in Mississippi, including organizing rural cooperatives. He was on the speakers' platform in Selma with MLK on the Poor People's March in 1968, only a few weeks before King was assassinated.⁶⁸

By the time Smith organized the CO, he was a changed person. After SNCC fell apart in 1969, he reportedly went to Chicago and helped organize the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM); then worked in Detroit with autoworkers in Forman's Black Workers Congress (BWC). Rank-and-file CO members were led to believe that the CO came out of BWC and that there was an ongoing organizational connection, although that was never explicitly stated.⁶⁹

The early '70s were a radicalized time throughout the country. The inability of massive protests to end the Vietnam war, and the violent repression by police and the FBI of the Black Panthers and other groups struggling for social change, led many activists to conclude that it was not possible to make fundamental changes in American society by nonviolent means. The end of the war, with the defeat of a demoralized army on the field of battle, resulted back home in many social justice activists without an immediate focus, and many turned to radical ideologies aimed at overthrowing the system. The CO was one of many such groups that sprang up around the country at that time.

Smith organized the CO with the strict hierarchical structure of a Leninist revolutionary party. Each recruit was assigned to a small circle with a contact person communicating to a higher level. Members assigned jobs were expected to perform them unquestioningly. The rank and file were sworn to secrecy about the organization's inner workings, and most were never told the identities of the core group. Behind the scenes, Smith ran the organization with cult-like thoroughness, under the guise of revolutionary discipline controlling intimate aspects of members' personal lives. Later, many accused the CO of being “infiltrated, provocateur-ridden,” although no smoking gun has ever emerged.⁷⁰

The first salvos of the Co-op War were fired from the Beanery Co-op, in South Minneapolis. The Beanery had been in bad shape, with a leaderless structure and a lethargic membership. Haugen and Comeau, both CO members who had worked in the warehouse, stepped into the vacuum, took over and transformed it into a well-organized store. In March 1975, they issued a manifesto, *The Beanery Paper*.

The Paper asked, “Who is the Beanery for?” and answered, “The Beanery serves the working class—the class whose labor produces and maintains the materials necessary for human survival.”⁷¹ It challenged all the co-ops and the entire movement to ask

themselves the question, “Who do we serve?” Up until then, the apparently self-evident answer had been that the co-ops served their members. However, these were almost entirely the countercultural community, people into inexpensive natural and organic foods, young people with college backgrounds seeking an alternative way of life. While many working people and people of color relied on convenience foods, most of the co-ops sold only whole foods. Yet most of those working in the co-ops also got involved because they wanted a more equitable society, the Paper expounded. Most co-op activists saw cooperation as a way to move beyond economic domination of the majority by a small corporate elite, a way to create a new social order. However, those activists were working from revolutionary ideals, not revolutionary analysis, and therefore not capable of achieving their goals. The CO, in contrast to the current co-op leadership, the Paper claimed, had studied revolutionary theory and developed working class leadership capable of taking the co-ops forward to achieve those revolutionary ideals.

Heated discussions ricocheted around the co-op network. What the kinds of food should the co-ops carry? Could the co-ops actually serve the people without challenging the entire food distribution system? Could socialist counter-institutions be actually built within a capitalist system? Who should own the co-ops and the warehouse, the members and collectives or the larger community? How centralized or decentralized should the system be?

At its peak, the network in the Twin Cities consisted of the warehouse, North Country Co-op, Seward, Good Grits, Whole Foods, The Beanery, Mill City, Selby, Powderhorn, Southeast, Northeast, Northside, Green Grass Grocery, St. Anthony Park, Wedge, Merri Grove, Bryant Central, People’s Bakery, Our Daily Bread Bakery, Red Star Herbs, and Riverside Café. The warehouse also served other co-ops that were scattered about the region.

The CO won new supporters in a number of other co-ops, including Selby, Mill City, Green Grass Grocery, and People’s Bakery. More importantly, they were approaching a majority of the workers at People’s Warehouse. They also alienated many people, however. The tone of their critique was strident, and clothed in Marxist and Maoist jargon that many found incomprehensible. The secrecy surrounding the CO disturbed numerous people who otherwise sympathized with aspects of their positions and perspectives. Two leaders at Mill City Co-op issued a paper refuting each of the COs positions. The warehouse’s governing body was the Policy Review Board (PRB), made up of representatives from all the co-ops, and reflecting their diversity. The PRB monthly meetings were the main forum for the movement as a whole. Reflecting the strengths and weaknesses of the movement, it did not provide very efficient leadership. On May 3, 1975, at the next monthly PRB meeting, the warehouse’s financial coordinator, who was affiliated with the CO, reported that People’s Warehouse was in grave financial trouble, could face collapse, and blamed the current leadership. The warehouse and co-ops had to become more businesslike and productive, and new leadership was needed to accomplish that task. After a heated debate, the PRB took no action. In response, twenty to thirty CO-affiliated people walked out, then returned, started a shouting match, and made a mass exit again. The meeting adjourned inconclusively for the night. When they reconvened the following morning, Mike Larson, a CO supporter from Powderhorn Co-op, announced that “The People’s Warehouse now belongs to the people.” During the night the CO had taken the checkbook and financial records from the warehouse office.⁷²

The PRB condemned the action and empowered four of its members as executive officers to deal with the situation. That night, a group of ten PRB supporters decided to sleep at the warehouse to guard it. At 3 a.m., about thirty-five CO supporters appeared, some carrying clubs, told them they had thirty minutes to leave, and forcibly expelled them. At 8 a.m., a crowd of PRB supporters gathered outside, and the two groups shouted at each other. Warehouse collective members who did not support the takeover were not permitted to enter. At 9 a.m., PRB leaders went to the bank and convinced them that they were the legal representatives. However \$6,000 had already been withdrawn, and had gone to the Beanery. Emergency meetings at all the co-ops found strong support for the PRB, but unanimity against bringing in the police. At 10:30 a.m., the two sides met again. The CO announced that it was changing the structure of the warehouse to empower the worker collective over the PRB, and replacing some warehouse workers with “members of the working class.”⁷³

The next day, a group of about seventy-five PRB supporters planned a boycott of the warehouse and cobbled together an alternative distribution system. The warehouse truck had been in a garage being repaired. The CO claimed it, but the mechanics hid it and gave it to the PRB; the drivers stole around on secret delivery routes.

The CO had possession of the warehouse, but no bank account. Two of the original signers of the warehouse incorporation papers, now CO supporters, went to the bank and challenged the PRB for control. The Beanery returned the \$6,000 to the account. The bank froze the account, so neither group had access to funds, but bills had to be paid immediately or the warehouse would collapse.⁷⁴ The two sides got together and agreed on mutual check signers to keep it afloat.

As the two groups vied for power, the struggle extended into individual co-ops and collectives, and into the larger community. The Beanery, Powderhorn, Our Daily Bread Bakery, and the Riverside Café continued to do business with the warehouse, while the rest of the co-ops joined the boycott. The CO held a “cheap food sale,” but the PRB set up a picket line at the door.

The two sides went into mediation and, on May 15, issued a joint statement that formally ended the occupation. As an interim solution, the warehouse collective was given decision-making over warehouse policies and new products. Two-thirds of the warehouse collective (fifteen members at that time) were required for decisions. The boycott ended and the warehouse reopened under temporary control of the CO, but the struggle continued. The CO went to co-ops outside the Twin Cities and urged them to come to the next PRB meeting. Position papers from different sides flew back and forth around the network. Everyone geared up for another showdown at the next PRB meeting in June, when the ownership and structure of the warehouse would be decided. Four different proposals were made, but only two had strong support. Kris Garwick, a warehouse worker, made the CO proposal. In practice most of the warehouse daily work was done through “working committees” in areas such as purchasing, distribution, and farm. The CO proposed expanding these working committees as the basic structure, with their representatives forming an Administration Committee for coordination. Chuck Phenix, a worker at Mill City, presented the “decentralist” proposal, under which the warehouse would become a worker-owned business, no longer owned by the entire co-op network. It would also cease being the communications center for the network; communications, education and outreach would be taken over by an All Cooperating

Assembly (ACA).⁷⁵ This proposal ceded the warehouse to the CO, but removed it from the center of the network. After a long discussion, the decentralist proposal was passed almost unanimously, with three abstentions.

The All Cooperating Assembly held its first meeting in August. Meanwhile, an ad hoc group had already started meeting at North Country to plan a new alternative warehouse, owned and operated by the community of co-ops, like the original People's Warehouse had been. Up until then, with the end of the boycott, the co-ops had all returned to People's Warehouse as their supply center. But since People's Warehouse was becoming an autonomous enterprise now, the individual co-ops could buy through it or do their business elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the CO took control of three more co-op stores, Selby, Powderhorn, and Bryant Central. Selby and Bryant Central were particularly important to them because they were in predominantly Black neighborhoods.

At the September PRB meeting, the restructuring was still in process and conflict broke out again. The factions argued and fought for two days, and ended in a final split. Shortly afterward, the new warehouse, Distributing Alliance of the Northcountry Cooperatives (DANCe), opened for business, named after Emma Goldman's quote, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."⁷⁶ Dave Gutknecht, a longtime activist, became a central board member of DANCe. The previous winter, People's Warehouse had been grossing about \$90,000 per month, but now it fell to about \$30,000, with DANCe doing \$25,000 in its first month. A number of co-ops refused to pay their bills at People's Warehouse. Ordering from DANCe were North Country, Seward, Good Grits, Whole Foods, Mill City, Southeast, Wedge, and Merri Grove. Ordering from People's were The Beanery, Selby, Powderhorn, St. Anthony Park, Our Daily Bread Bakery, and co-ops in the towns of Manako and Marshall.

The CO published a booklet entitled, "The Indictment of DANCe," claiming that the Twin Cities could not support two warehouses, that DANCe was created to destroy People's and to hurt the co-op movement. They demanded, "DANCe must close its doors permanently" and liquidate its inventory in favor of People's.⁷⁷

Struggles heated up in various co-op stores. In Bryant Central Co-op, Moe Burton, its strongest leader, who was African American, had started out as a supporter of the CO, but began to waver. At that point Bob Haugen of the CO picked a fistfight with him. Burton, a much larger man, easily subdued Haugen. Shortly afterward at 3 a.m. the next morning, someone cut Burton's home phone line and firebombed his truck. Haugen quickly left the area, apparently accompanied by Theophilus Smith, and both resettled in Chicago, where they set up a computer software company.⁷⁸ The CO afterward claimed that Haugen had been their leader, and had been the source of "errors" which they were "rectifying." Smith apparently continued to lead the CO from a distance.

Two days after the firebombing, groups of ten to fifteen CO supporters entered Seward and Mill City co-ops, announced they were taking over, and forced resistant workers to leave. A shopper at Mill City called the police as the CO barricaded themselves in the store. Police shut down both stores, and the city attorney later that day ruled that the stores would reopen under their former groups. At an emergency community meeting the next day, Mill City workers and shoppers voted to prosecute the invaders, although collaborating with the police was very controversial in the movement, and strongly condemned by many. Seward Co-op followed suit by seeking a restraining

order against the CO members, and directed their board to file a damage suit. Two workers at Seward who had been physically attacked, Kris Olsen and Leo Cashman, filed assault charges.

At 4:30 a.m. the next morning, someone threw two bottles of gasoline through the windows of Bryant Central, starting a fire that was discovered and extinguished before it spread.⁷⁹ The next day, about fifty CO supporters marched on Mill City Co-op, chanting, “Workers unite! Set the co-ops right!” They paused at the corner storefront. City police clustered on the sidewalk nearby, nervously watching. The store, in a small brick building with plate glass windows, was packed inside by about two hundred DANCe supporters singing in round, “Row row row your boat gently down the stream, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.”⁸⁰ The CO chanters tried to push through the doorway into the store. The DANCe singers blocked their way and threw sticks of butter at them. After a shoving match that got nowhere, probably because of the police presence, the CO marchers finally acknowledged the stalemate and dispersed. Two weeks later the Mill City coordinator received a phone call saying there was a bomb in the basement. A police search found nothing.

The CO then moved the struggle to the original co-op in the network, the Mother Co-op, North Country, whose worker collective was split between factions, and who did business with both warehouses equally.

It was during this period, after all these events had taken place, the end of February, 1976, that the San Francisco Common Operating Warehouse decided to take the side of People’s Warehouse and the CO, and to boycott DANCe. SFCW probably knew only fragments of the story.

After a round of tumultuous neighborhood community meetings, both factions in North Country Co-op tried to fire each other. The DANCe group in North Country set up a new “interim board,” which legally took control of all the store’s assets. A group of about forty CO supporters appeared at the store, and were quickly met by about sixty supporters of DANCe, who told them to leave. After a tense standoff, the interim board called the police, and the CO left. The next day about thirty returned; the police were called again, and four were arrested. A final confrontation came at a large community meeting on March 16, which broke down in wild shouting and ended in chaos.⁸¹

Meanwhile, People’s Warehouse was going bankrupt. Almost all the co-ops moved their business to DANCe. On April 1, 1976, a judge gave control of the warehouse over to the PRB and a restraining order removed the last CO supporters from the warehouse. In July the PRB began proceedings to disband the business and sell the warehouse.

After the Co-op War, the movement in the Twin Cities was never the same. Many of the people involved dropped out. Many friendships and relationships had been destroyed.

Nevertheless, many of the co-ops bounced back, DANCe began to flourish, and the natural and organic food movement took off nationally. Kris Olsen and Ellen Wersan, workers at Seward, and Chuck Phenix from Mill City did tireless outreach work for the All Cooperating Assembly as volunteers. By the end of 1976, almost seventy co-op stores and buying clubs in the region belonged to DANCe, and they had sales of almost \$200,000, although their board of directors, like the old PRB, was not very effectual and had similar shortcomings.⁸²

The Representative Body

Meanwhile, back in the Bay Area, the new Representative Body (RB) of the San Francisco Bay Area People's Food System was meeting in April 1976. Their first order of business was representation. Twenty-one groups attended their first meeting, but eleven were objected to by other groups, mostly on the grounds that they were not yet producing any products, or were less than three people, or were uncertain of the definition of "collective." There were also differences among RB reps over the time line of developing a more unified system, some wanting to plow quickly ahead, while others wanting the organization to develop at a slower, more organic rate. They discussed the "initial basis of unity" and found significant differences among the collectives over how important the building of "a mass base for socialism" was to the goals of the Food System.⁸³

At their second meeting, twenty-three groups were in attendance. By majority rule, with each collective having one vote, they accepted all the groups present into the decision-making body of the Food System. They then defined *collective* as "a group struggling to become non-sexist, non-racist, and remain anti-capitalist. . . . Each individual must make a collectively agreed upon minimum time commitment. There should be non-hierarchical sharing of responsibility and initiative within the collective. Each member is accountable to the collective as a whole."⁸⁴ They added that the means of production should be owned by the workers, and those that were not, should be changed as soon as possible; if the business were to dissolve, the assets would go to the community. Another issue raised at the second meeting was whether groups present were balanced in terms of Third World persons, and what was being done to serve Third World residents of our communities.⁸⁵ The discussion was expanded to include male-female, straight-gay, and age balances. Finally, the Food System meeting discussed developing an orientation process for new groups, including help in how to run a small business, and the history and politics of PFS.

At their third meeting, twenty-three groups were again present and fourteen made presentations. Decision-making was again discussed, and majority rule was accepted "as a temporary measure."⁸⁶ Discussion included the idea that majority rule must have some reflection of minority opinion; that procedures should reflect the seriousness of the subject to be decided; and that criticism of decisions could be incorporated into the method for the next decision.

They discussed the issue of diversity in the Food System. Volunteers working in the stores were primarily white, young, and members of the counterculture. Until Ma Revolution in late 1975 decided to change their racial make up through affirmative action, there were few people of color in the System. Some made the argument that the refusal to stock many foods that were familiar to the neighborhood, the priority of natural and organic foods, which were often more expensive, the reliance on voluntary labor, and the tendency of many stores to arguably be crowded, funky and inefficiently run, tended to isolate them from the Latino and Black communities in which they were often located. Many collectives replied they had made efforts to include Third World people and older people, and to serve a wider community, but few groups had made it a long-term high priority item. Most collectives said they had considered issues of sexism, but that the

topic had not been thoroughly discussed. Most groups felt that low wages (under \$200 a month) were one reason it was difficult to recruit Third World people to join.⁸⁷ The meeting decided to try to come up with a strategy for increasing the participation of Third World, gay, and older people. They also discussed the problems that parents encounter in trying to be active in the System, and agreed to try to find solutions. The meeting ended with projections that the next meeting would try to produce concrete plans for further racially and ethnically integrating the Food System.

To help facilitate the process, *Turnover* printed Ma Revolution's hiring questionnaire, which had been prepared by that store's Third World Caucus. The introduction stated that the "present hiring committee at Ma's is made up of all non-white people, and only nonwhite people are being considered for all presently-available job openings." The questionnaire began, "These statements are being considered in an evaluation of a basis to struggle. . . . A challenge that is necessary to initiate a search into what is real and valuable for sound political development." There would be a one month trial period, and a six-month "commitment to struggling and working with each other." Included were questions such as:

Job Background: What are your feelings toward collectives and collective work? Experience with collectives, if any. Define what collective means to you. Class Background: Include background and politics of parents. Describe politically why or why you don't support their attitudes. Have you had or do you now have any affiliations with any groups that are pro or con capitalism? As stated in the principles of unity, our struggle will be purging ourselves of these three forms of oppression. What is your position on racism, sexism and elitism? What is your politics of food? How do you view agribusiness in California, the U.S., the World?⁸⁸

As a result of this discussion, a number of the collectives, including the Warehouse and the Haight Store, implemented preferential hiring plans to try to change the class, racial, and heterosexual makeup of their collectives.

A new collective store, Food For People, opened briefly near the Golden Gate Park Panhandle, but soon closed. In June, Good Life Grocery was taken over by the Peace and Freedom Party, and dropped out of the Food System.⁸⁹ Later that year, Mechanics United, a much-needed support collective, housed at 209 Prospect Street, joined the System.

In May, 1976, PFS played host to the next West Coast Co-op conference, billed as "The Food System's Position in the Class Struggle." SFCW was the host and Red Star facilitated the Planning Committee. The only report on the conference published in *Turnover* was that a program for agricultural workers was approved:

We call on all class conscious co-op food workers to join with us in supporting a four point program to correct our neglect of the agricultural workers, with and without documents, who produce most of the food grown in California, where out of a 1973 average farm employment of 280,000, only 65,000 were family workers, while 215,000 were hired workers.

POINT 1. To coordinate with the UFW to supply people from the food

system to help in boycott and picket lines.

POINT 2. To offer the food system information network, both local and national, to the UFW; to help inform consumers on agricultural workers' plans and problems.

POINT 3. To educate/agitate among food system workers on the problems of agricultural labor under a capitalist system.

POINT 4. To offer our food distribution resources to the UFW and help organize agricultural workers' food buying clubs, to help alleviate their high cost of living.⁹⁰

On May 23, the RB met all day and discussed "racism and its effects in our work and with the communities where our businesses are located."⁹¹

The RB formed three key committees: basis of unity and criteria for inclusion; decision making; and economic centralization. These reported back at the July 15th meeting.

Basis of Unity Committee

The Basis of Unity Committee distributed a second working copy of the proposed Basis of Unity. Members of the committee are now scheduling meetings with all collectives to hear comments and criticisms. The Basis of Unity will provide the context in which future Food System decisions will be made.

Economic Centralism Committee

The Committee on Economic Centralism proposed that .2% [sic] of the gross income of collectives be paid into a central fund to be administered by a committee for purposes to be decided by the entire Food System. This proposal is pending a clearer idea of what our spending priorities will be.⁹²

That same RB meeting also accepted by a majority vote a proposal from the Decision-making Committee, with the proviso that it would be re-evaluated in January, 1977. Each collective had two representatives. Collectives with ten or fewer members had one vote and those with more than ten had two votes. For representation purposes, one member equaled fifteen worker-hours per week, whether done by one or several persons. Collectives with two votes were not allowed to split their votes except in case of emergency or on-the-spot decisions. RB representatives could decide issues directly affecting the entire Food System, conflicts within and between collectives (if they could not be settled by other means), questions of political alliances into which the entire Food System might enter, and the operation of a Food System central fund. Decisions affecting the workplace and single-collective political alliances would continue to take place in the collectives themselves.

Any proposal brought to the RB would be preliminarily discussed and a vote taken whether to consider it. A considered proposal would be sent back to the collectives for discussion, then voted on at the next RB meeting. Decisions would be by majority rule, subject to a three week period of re-evaluation and criticism, after which all decisions were final: "However, we need to be realistic about both the Food System and the RB. . . . The Food System is not a unified political organization but a mass organization with many varieties of political and personal opinions and experience. Given

our differences, it would be destructive rather than progressive to expect that all of us will act together on every issue. Therefore we establish a procedure for *principled* non-compliance with a decision.”⁹³ They established an “evaluation committee” to investigate those cases and bring their evaluations to the RB.

By the end of 1976 the RB had formulated a Basis of Unity that had been approved by most of the collectives and by the RB as a whole. Committees formed to provide improved childcare, to increase economic centralization so that resources could be shared and wage levels equalized, to develop a system-wide hiring policy, to develop a program of political study, and to unite food activists with progressive community groups through a solidarity program. They established a central fund, to be supported by donations from all collectives, based on income, to fund projects approved by the Food System. Loans were made to Uprisings and to Ma Revolution. For the first time the workers at Seeds of Life and Community Corners received anything approaching a living wage.

But it was too late for Seeds, which had become isolated from the wider Mission community. Faced with severe economic and organizational problems, Seeds closed the storefront and merged into the Latino St. Peter’s Church buying club, that originally had helped them get started.⁹⁴

In January, 1977 the RB decided to elect a steering committee to facilitate the work. Although various people were uneasy with some of the candidates, or actually opposed them, the desire for unity trumped all misgivings, and the selection process resulted in all nominated candidates being elected unanimously.⁹⁵

While many in the Food System applauded these developments as progress, others found them increasingly disturbing. Charlie from Inner Sunset Co-op later expressed the sentiments of many: “I think that in the development of the RB and further in the creation of the steering committee, we didn’t really see a representation of the people who were in the collectives. . . . Within each of those collectives I think there were people who ranged from being not interested in politics at all to not being interested in that kind of centralized form of politics. So what happened was the people who *did* have an interest in a more centralized form of politics and in using the Food System in that way tended to go to RB meetings and ultimately many of those people ended up on the steering committee, where even more power was concentrated. . . . The steering committee was originally intended to facilitate RB meetings, prepare agendas, make things go more smoothly at meetings. But in fact, they had all the power at the meetings and they controlled the meetings and they also then controlled the whole Food System insofar as what these meetings dealt with.”⁹⁶

The steering committee then unilaterally rewrote the Basis of Unity, de-emphasizing the politics of food and making democratic centralism into the organizational structure of the System.⁹⁷ They sent representatives to all the collectives to try to gain support for the new document. Many collective workers objected strongly to the rewriting of the document previously agreed upon. Charlie from Inner Sunset continued: “They came to our store and talked to us about the new Basis of Unity, which they had rewritten, asked us for financial statements and all this other stuff. We just totally trashed the person that they sent. That was what stimulated us to withdraw immediately after that. . . . [T]he thing that ultimately destroyed the Food System was the movement toward centralization of power which ultimately set up a situation where either

police agents could come in and provoke and disrupt and destroy, or for a few individuals to take power, and in that way no longer represent the Food System anyway. So either way we lose.”⁹⁸

At that point, Rainbow Grocery withdrew from the Food System, and chose to go it alone. Other Avenues also stopped going to meetings.

An All-Worker Conference was scheduled for April 17, 1977. The agenda included a discussion of the new Basis of Unity, and criticism and self-criticism of the steering committee. It was going to be a pivotal conference.

Economic Unity

What goes around comes around.

- Proverb

The contradiction between the Food System as a federation of small businesses and as a political movement resulted in people and groups having conflicting priorities. Some thought that the core mission of the Food System was to provide good, inexpensive food and to develop and promote collectivity, while others thought that the core mission was to aid progressive and revolutionary struggles going on in the world around them. The stores and support collectives were functioning at a variety of levels of economic success. Of the support collectives, the Warehouse and Red Star were the most viable: ⁹⁹ “Many false starts were made—an apple orchard and a pasta factory never got off the ground. Left Wing Poultry was a financial failure, and Amazon Yogurt and Flour Power Mill were started, half-finished, and then ran out of money. The collectives that did make it did so with loans and grants from liberal and church foundations, through personal loans from the early activists and their friends, through the low cost of voluntary labor and with help from other collectives.”¹⁰⁰

One point of view held that the collectives in the Food System should pool all their resources, so that the more struggling groups would get support from the more affluent ones. But there were obvious obstacles. The entire System was struggling, and the stronger groups were understandably reluctant to try to shoulder impossible burdens. And how could an association of autonomous groups become economically integrated without hierarchical relations? The merger tendency in the Food System was based on a collectivist ideology that was to some degree an extension of the communal movement of the 1960s. Some collectives proceeded to explore the possibilities.

Starting on May 24, 1976, six collectives—Red Star, Merry Milk, People’s Refir, Left Wing Poultry, Earthworks, and Free Spirit Printing—decided to meet “to discuss how we could work more closely.” On June 7 they issued a Statement on Merger, which included ten Points of Agreement.

Points of Agreement

We are a political collective. We have come together because we share dissatisfaction with life and work in the world around us, and a vision of a new way of living in a classless society. We share economic resources, moving toward common wages based on need. We have begun a labor exchange with the potential for working more closely in all aspects of daily life. Each work team

makes its resources available to others regardless of anyone's ability to pay. One area of active cooperation is the integration of work (trucking, warehousing, egg processing) between cheese, dairy and poultry teams. We are committed to cooperate to satisfy other needs: housing, transportation, childcare, education for all ages, laundry and other household chores, food for ourselves and friends at work and at home, medical care. Day to day decisions are made by work team, ultimate authority rests in the collective of all workers. Committees are formed to coordinate between work teams. We want to treat each other with respect, and treat our tools and workplaces with respect. We are gathering a library of political and technical literature and organizing a study group among ourselves. We are researching the legal aspects of merger trying to find the form that best suits our needs. We are very interested in uniting with all groups in the food system and others outside it. We see the need for specific coordination among all groups distributing food. We are open to everyone who is in essential agreement with these points.¹⁰¹

This was followed by statements by three individual groups—Red Star, People's Refir, and Free Spirit—which reflected some of the threads of the different ideologies that were circulating in the Food System. Red Star tended to be ecological and Marxist, People's Refir collectivist and anarchist, and Free Spirit, communalist and Situationist.

At their next meeting on June 21, all the collectives that decided to merge were to bring financial statements.

Meanwhile, Food System members who were deeply involved in social activism brought the entire organization together in support of a variety of political causes that were not food-related.

The first major event that PFS participated in as an organization was the People's Bicentennial celebration on July 4, 1976, a progressive alternative to the patriotic hoopla that was going on in much of the country. It included a parade and rally in downtown San Francisco. Each collective was visited by rally organizers; impromptu task collectives were organized to raise money, to publicize the mobilization, and to provide food for the rally. Several collectives made banners to carry in the march. Literature tables were set up outside a number of stores, leaflets were placed in bread packages, and a special issue of *Turnover* was prepared.¹⁰²

In the same period, other workers organized support within the Food System for elderly Asian tenants fighting eviction from the International Hotel. A phone tree was established to put Food System workers on the streets whenever the struggle required, and the Food System shared responsibility for the night watch at the International Hotel. As a result some Food System workers came to play leading roles in the International Hotel support organization.

Food System workers were also active in a medical drive to aid Zimbabwe; in helping the South West African People's Organization in Namibia build a print shop; in the campaign against reconsideration of the Bakke decision upholding affirmative action. Later, contingents of food workers marched in Gay Pride parades and sold food and literature at marches against unemployment and police repression.

In the spring of 1976, Earthwork: The Center For Rural Studies, a resource center with an organizational and educational focus on land and food issues, joined the Food

System as a support collective. Started by Mark Ritchie and others, Earthwork's stated purpose was to "expand awareness and understanding of the social, economic and political issues related to food and land . . . [and to] develop and strengthen cooperative efforts to organize the production and distribution of food."¹⁰³ It was based at The Farm, at 1499 Potrero by the freeway. The Farm, later known as Crossroads Community, was organized by Bonnie Ora Sherk in 1974, on seven acres adjacent to highway overpasses. Sherk was an artist, and described it as "a life-scale environmental and social artwork." It eventually housed a preschool, art gallery, performance events, dances, community gatherings, domestic farm animals, and vegetable and flower gardens. It became a center where various Food System meetings and conferences were held, an alternative site to the Food Factory, the Warehouse, the back rooms of various stores, or Peoples Restaurant and Cultural Center on Valencia Street (which had been started by Akinyele Sade and Adam Raskin).

The Newsletter Collective, publishing *Turnover* bimonthly, set up shop at the Food Factory. Their first issues, begun in the spring on 1975 and originally called *The Storefront Extension*, had been simply a few stapled sheets. Now in early 1976 they changed to a saddle-stitched format. *Turnover* covered internal issues, but was also increasingly outwardly focused, used as an organizing tool, exposing the corporate food industry and government food policies, and promoting alternatives. In the first issues, the newsletter group was anonymous. Gradually, first names began appearing with some articles. This practice was very much in keeping with the spirit of the times, in its attempt to get away from individualism. However, certain people were putting in most of the work, and a staff collective spontaneously stabilized, "three women and three men developing and sharing our skills to publish the newsletter."¹⁰⁴ In their May, 1976 issue, they noted that "We are struggling to work collectively, but we find a division of labor is necessary." The core group stabilized at four people: Rich Tokeshi, Carol Horowitz, Pam Peirce, and Carole Grossman.

The title of the newsletter contained a wordplay: over**turn**overt**urn**. "Say Turnover and people laughingly say apple. We say turnover and think of the spring; of turning over the soil (and then, the land); of turning over the inventory (and then, the ownership); of turning over the traditions which keep us exploiting each other. We think in short, of *fanshen*." William Hinton in his book *Fanshen: A Documentary of Revolution in a Chinese Village*, explained that Mandarin word: "Literally, it means 'to turn the body' or 'to turn over.' To China's hundreds of millions of landless and land-poor peasants it meant to stand up, to throw off the landlord yoke, to gain land, stock, implements, and houses. But it meant much more than this. . . . It meant to enter a new world."¹⁰⁵ On the cover of the April 1976 issue of *Turnover* were the words, "*We have only to act with our own hands. Then we can all fanshen.*"

Free Spirit Press, the publisher of *Beyond Isolation* and *Common Ground*, newsletter of the West Coast food network, officially joined the Food System as a support collective.¹⁰⁶ With the *Turnover* Newsletter Collective, Free Spirit, and Earthwork, the Food System had three support collectives publishing literature. However, Free Spirit's publications became increasingly critical of the Food System, and conflict between the publishing collectives grew.¹⁰⁷

Free Spirit consisted of three people who worked out of a friendly commercial shop in Oakland, and lived in a commune in San Francisco, King Collins, Peter

Galbraith, and Susan Crane. They had originally formed in New York City during the Columbia University anti-Vietnam war building occupations led by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1968. Calling themselves Radical Action Cooperative (RAC) at that time, they disliked SDS and considered it oppressive.¹⁰⁸ A small well-organized group, they staged successful interventions both at Columbia and Harvard. Peter Waring of Truckaderos and People's Refir had been a member of RAC, and was still close to Free Spirit. Their ideological leader was Tony Verlaan, who had no direct connection with the Food System. He was a Dutch citizen who had been active in the Situationist International (SI) in Europe, particularly in the actions at Strasbourg University in France during the 1968 rebellion, and now made his living in America as a travel guide for Dutch tourists. Verlaan had actually been expelled from SI for using small communal groups such as Free Spirit to stage entrism-type interventions. The Situationists stemmed from a group of French artists, students, and intellectuals who adopted the perspective of outsiders intervening in what they called "the Society of the Spectacle" to heighten contradictions and ignite revolt. Now Verlaan's cohorts—and Verlaan himself—were in California under a new name, and staging an aggressive critique of the People's Food System and the West Coast food network through Free Spirit publications. *Beyond Isolation* was their first volley, although the underlying critique in that pamphlet was subdued. They followed it up by volunteering to publish *Common Ground*, the newsletter of the West Coast food network that had been forming at the various conferences. But when the newsletters came out, the network would discover that Free Spirit had made last-minute changes to include harshly critical content.¹⁰⁹ After the third issue the network discontinued the newsletters. Free Spirit moved on to get a foothold in a new publication, the *Directory of Collectives*, and continued to critique the Food System from there.¹¹⁰ Later they attempted to take control of *The Grapevine*, a newsletter of communal/cooperative households and collectives, and were also rebuffed. According to Geoph Kozeny of the Grapevine collective, who went on to work with *Communities* magazine for many years: "They embraced the struggle of conflict between people as a growth process. They encouraged it. They discussed things among themselves beforehand, and at our meetings it felt like we were dealing with a bloc while the rest of us acted as individuals. . . . Another heated issue was that we defined ourselves as an 'open collective.' To some of us this meant we were 'open' to all ideas, that we encouraged participation and feedback from anyone involved or interested in the broader community. To the advocates of internal struggle, being 'open' meant that anybody who wanted to be involved, could be involved. If somebody showed up at production they had to be plugged in."¹¹¹

Free Spirit used the *Directory of Collectives* to promote this ideology in the Food System. They proposed that PFS return to All Worker Assembly meetings instead of the Representative Body, and apparently wanted anybody to be able to participate, whether or not actually working in one of the Food System enterprises. At the same time as they supported economic merger of all the Food System groups, they opposed the idea that PFS was a closed system. In a dialog included in the pamphlet accompanying the first *Directory* (1976), they criticized the RB as "a step backward . . . a total hindrance in a revolutionary moment . . . when large masses of people organize themselves and work groups take over all aspects of production." One of their voices, Tony B, who was not a member of any food-related collective, asserted, "I resent feeling I am excluded [from the

Food System] if I am not a member of a collective.” Collins agreed: “The possibility of a non-exclusive organization is seen as a threat to those who want to exclude, to maintain control over others.”¹¹²

Although Free Spirit’s critiques were usually geared to undercut any attempt by the Marxists and others to get more tightly organized, and served to open a wedge for outsiders to enter into the organization, some of their critiques did offer insights into the Food System that leave no trace in *Turnover*. For example, Leon Willard of Truckaderos vented (arguably unfairly) in *Common Ground*, “I was at an upstairs SFCW meeting once and heard them discuss the fate of workers downstairs. When I asked why the downstairs workers were not at the meeting where they were being discussed, I was told that they were being paid too much per hour to spend that time in a meeting. Further, to include them in a meeting was an ‘ultra democratic idea’ and would only lead to confusion. Besides, they were not part of the collective. Substitute ‘management team’ for collective, and that discussion would sound identical to many I have heard in corporations.”¹¹³

But at the same time as the Situationists of Free Spirit were slipping around sniping at the Food System Marxists, the very existence of the System was being menaced by much more formidable forces.

Politics in Command

“A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous.”

- Mao Zedong

The lead article of the November, 1975 issue of *Storefront Extension* was a letter to the Food System from a group called Prairie Fire Unemployment Committee (PFOC).¹¹⁴ Prairie Fire had been formed earlier that year by one faction of the Weather Underground Organization (WUO), the clandestine revolutionary group that had begun as part of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and had been putting into practice the slogan, “Bring The War Home” by bombing government and corporate buildings, and similar acts. WUO was a primary focus of FBI and COINTELPRO infiltration operations. One of their leaders, Bernardine Dohrn, was on the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted List.

Dear Food System,

We of the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee Unemployment committee would like to establish good relationships and eventually close ties between our group and yours. We see ourselves as having many things in common with you: desire for workers to control their jobs and lives, to build a system based on the needs of people not profit, to combat imperialism in all its economic, racist, and sexist forms. Reading the latest issue of your *Storefront Extension*, we came across an article by Paula Giese, a longtime co-op activist from the Mid-West.¹¹⁵ For someone who is involved heavily in the co-op movement, she came to some rather exciting conclusions, one in particular which we would like to emphasize: she says that co-ops and alternative food systems cannot, by themselves pose a

threat to capitalist economy, not while the huge corporations have such a stranglehold on the means of production. She states that alternative systems are bound to cop out or self-destruct *unless they link up with larger struggles going on elsewhere in society.*

We very much agree with your analysis. Alone, none of us are strong. United, we are unstoppable. We would also like to point out how we as the unemployment committee have particularly close links to the Peoples' Food System. . . . *The food system is a direct inheritor of the results of battles waged by courageous working people of the '30s.* Today we are faced with another economic crisis, and our response should be the same. The government does not respond to mere appeals. It moves in our interest only when we, through mass action, make it move. The P.F.O.C. unemployment committee wants to help to set up councils similar to those in the '30s to achieve even greater accomplishments. There are several ways in which food system people could help. One would be to join and participate in the San Francisco Unemployed and Welfare Council which is now forming. The first meeting will be on Mon., Nov. 10, 7:30 p.m. at Mission Family Center, 3013 24th St. Please Come!

. . . .

Eventually we want to work with the food system in an organizational way. For now we would like to have contact with many of you as individuals. If you have any questions or would like to contact us we can be reached at 497 3rd St., 495-7230. Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday mornings are the best time.

In Solidarity,

P. F. O. C. unemployment committee, in support of building the San Francisco Unemployed and Welfare Council

On the surface it seems pretty strange. Underground revolutionaries, hunted by every force the government can throw at them, publishing an address and phone number where they can be reached, and the best days and times to call or come by. What could they have been thinking? Can you image that meeting at the Mission Family Center? Of course, not everybody would associate Prairie Fire with the Weather Underground, so maybe some people other than FBI and police agents did show up.

Actually PFOC was not WUO per se. PFOC was not a cadre organization, but a mass above ground organization, albeit connected to the underground. Those were very radical times in the Bay Area, as a cursory glance at any of the "underground" newspapers of the time will demonstrate. Underground revolutionary organizations with political goals needed to interface with the above ground world beyond the moments of revolutionary acts. They usually wanted to take credit for their actions and explain their motives, goals, and demands. This was commonly done through the media. They would send a note to a newspaper. If they wanted to publish something, they used one of the radical print shops, of which there were a number in the Bay Area. Working in those print shops were people sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. The radical print media were the interface, Alice's rabbit hole or looking glass. Although that media was called "underground" because its content and methods of dissemination were not mainstream, they were not actually underground. Far from it. They formed the interface between the real revolutionary underground and the above ground. In the Bay Area at that time, the

underground weekly newspaper *Berkeley Barb* had become one of the main venues for these kinds of communication. Communiqués from revolutionary groups appeared regularly in their Letters pages. False communiqués also arrived, and denials, so there was always confusion as to whether the communiqué was actually sent by the underground group or by the FBI. One former FBI informer claimed that her handler, FBI agent Charles Bates, had been told that there was a mole at the *Barb* who made sure they edited out anything too embarrassing to the agency.¹¹⁶

The political orientation of *Turnover* appeared with increasingly clarity, alongside food articles. The issue of December 1976 had a focus on prisons and, right above a notice for a “Sea Vegetable Cookery Class,” was a picture of prison revolutionary George Jackson accompanied by a quote, “Settle your quarrels, come together, understand the reality of our situation, understand that fascism is already here.” In the following issue, across from an article about a coffee boycott, was a picture of Che Guevara, and a quote, “When we were engaged in guerilla warfare we studied Comrade Mao Tse Tung’s theory on guerilla warfare. Mimeographed copies published at the front lines circulated widely among our cadres; we called them *food from China*.”

Many other radical groups entered into the Food System, looking for recruits, a forum for their ideas, and funding. According to Paul Kivel of Earthwork, “there was a bigger and bigger push to do something with the Food System, make it into something that it wasn’t. . . . There was a lot of fighting for virtually no power, but people playing it as if there were high stakes. . . . They didn’t realize that getting control of the Food System would not actually give them access to the warehouse’s money. It looked tempting I’m sure to a lot of sectarian groups. There were folks from all kinds of groups who just showed up or started working at different stores. And of course there were government infiltrators as well. There were folks who were just looking for information that they could use to disrupt things or provoke things. It was such an unsophisticated system and there were such complicated forces set against it. . . . This was only a year or two before Reagan was elected. This was at the end of the period of the hopes and idealism of the late 60s and early 70s.”¹¹⁷ While control of the RB did not equal access to the cash flow going through the Warehouse, however the economic unity movement led increasingly in that direction.

Another group in the Food System was the White Panthers, with members in Veritable Vegetable and other collectives. The White Panther Party (WPP) in the Bay Area organized communal houses in San Francisco and Berkeley, as well as street fairs and free concerts. The core group consisted of a few dozen people. A feature of White Panther street fairs was a huge banner on which was written the entire Bill of Rights. Central leaders in the Bay Area were Tom Stevens and Larry Weissman, both in their early thirties. Weissman worked at the Warehouse. Shirley Freitas, the wife of Tom Stevens, worked at Veritable Vegetable. During the period that many core members of the Food Conspiracy left to work in the Food System collectives, the White Panther Party took over running a large part of the Conspiracy. WPP was also targeted by the FBI CONTELPRO program, and was the subject of their warrantless wiretapping. Stevens served time in San Quentin prison following a 1974 shootout between the White Panthers and the San Francisco police. WPP claimed they were defending themselves against a violent, unconstitutional police raid on their home. Later they organized a campaign to try to recall then-mayor Diane Feinstein. John Sinclair, Lawrence Plamondon, and Leni

Sinclair founded the White Panther Party in 1968 in Detroit in response to an interview in which Huey P. Newton suggested that white people could form a White Panther Party in support of the Black Panther Party. WPP dedicated its energies to anti-racist “cultural revolution.” A case against Sinclair and Plamondon for bombing a CIA office in Ann Arbor was thrown out of court because of illegal gathering of evidence. Plamondon and Sinclair defined the White Panthers as “fighting for a clean planet and the freeing of political prisoners.” Like the Black Panthers, they had a ten-point program:

White Panther State/meant

1. Full endorsement and support of the Black Panther Party’s 10-point program and platform.
2. Total assault on the culture by any means necessary, including rock and roll, dope, and fucking in the streets.
3. Free exchange of energy and materials—we demand the end of money!
4. Free food, clothes, housing, dope, music, bodies, medical care—everything free for every body!
5. Free access to information media—free the technology from the greed creeps!
6. Free time & space for all humans—dissolve all unnatural boundaries!
7. Free all schools and all structures from corporate rule—turn the buildings over to the people at once!
8. Free all prisoners everywhere—they are our comrades!
9. Free all soldiers at once—no more conscripted armies!
10. Free the people from their phony “leaders”—everyone must be a leader—freedom means free every one! All Power to the People!¹¹⁸

In many ways, the Food System and the West Coast food network were plums waiting to be picked. The natural and organic food movement, although in its early stages, already showed enormous potential, not only for changing the world, but for channeling large amounts of power, money, and energetic young activists. That was a great attraction to groups with radical political orientations looking for sources of power and income. While these entrust groups had many sincere and dedicated members, some had leaders with calculated and cynical motivations. The police and FBI were closely monitoring all Bay Area radical groups at that time. Provocateurs often intentionally spread internal strife and “bad jacketed” sincere leaders by rumor-mongering that they were the undercover agents.

The counterculture was at core a peaceful transformational movement primarily of young people, fueled by the inequities and injustices in American society, most emphatically by the Vietnam War and the draft. From its beginnings in the mid-1960s through the 1970s, the San Francisco Bay Area was ground zero for the countercultural movement. American politics had been shattered by a string of political assassinations: JFK in 1963, Malcolm X in ‘65, MLK and Robert Kennedy in ‘68. In the minds of many people, particularly working people, poor, young, and minorities, their murders left the country in deep despair about any possibility of progressive social change. Since the system had cut off social change from internal channels, it had to come from outside the system, if it was to come at all. Revolution was in the air, by any means possible, and a great debate resonated over what was possible.

Many who thought they were involved in a nonviolent countercultural revolution, got swept up into the logic or illogic of ideologies. The Vietnam War was the watershed of the era; it was still raging during the construction phase of the food system movement, and ended only with the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

Most of the people in PFS who were concerned primarily with international issues came from the widely held perspective that the proper role for “white” revolutionaries was in solidarity, in playing assisting roles. This was the era of “solidarity politics” on the Left. While anarchists held that the general population could rise up at any particular moment and abolish social injustice, Marxists turned to theories of history and class development. Ever since the late nineteenth century when the industrial working class did not fulfill its “historical mission” of leading a successful uprising, Marxist revolutionaries had been looking around for a substitute vanguard. Revolutionary theory in the Marxist tradition had devolved into a bewildering variety of theories as to what group or groups would be the new vanguard: peasants, prisoners, students, women, African Americans, all people of color, etc. Che Guevara proposed that small, armed revolutionary bands establish beachheads in the mountains. Mao was all about mass struggle and peoples war. Ho Chi Minh represented Third World anti-colonial and anti-imperialist “national liberation struggles.”

The Black Panther Party reflected a Maoist perspective; their first serious fundraising project involved selling Mao’s *Little Red Book* at the UC Berkeley campus. However, according to Bobby Seale, the Black Panthers “didn’t evolve out of Marxism. . . . In terms of the concept of economics at that time, what I developed best was a concept of community-controlled cooperatives in the Black community, which largely I picked up from W.E.B. Dubois.”¹¹⁹

During this decade anti-colonial “national liberation” struggles raged around the world. One of the keystones of their ideology was Frantz Fanon’s book *The Wretched of the Earth*, which expounded the idea that “national liberation” struggles, the leading force in this era, were in essence socialist, and by their very nature would inevitably ultimately become Marxist revolutions. From this perspective, the primary role of progressive groups in the imperialist countries, led by the United States, was to support these efforts, as well as to support the struggles of minorities in the imperialist country. The world was surely finally throwing off the yoke of European colonialism, country by country. But what would replace it? This was still the era of the Cold War, and the “Socialist Bloc” tried to define the worldwide aspiration for social justice in terms of international power politics and competing economic-political systems.

The air in the Bay Area was thick with this stuff. You could easily have thought that a revolutionary cell was working out of every garage, by what you read in the papers. Meanwhile through the FBI’s COINTELPRO (Counter Intelligence Program) and related activities, agents were watching, surveilling, infiltrating, attempting to disrupt, discredit and destroy every progressive political group. In September, 1968, J. Edgar Hoover declared the Black Panther Party the “greatest threat to the internal security of the country,” and focused government forces to destroy them. Hoover personally targeted the Panthers’ breakfast program for children for destruction, because it was giving the Panthers too good a reputation in the community. Among the numerous police agents infiltrated into the Panther Party were the security chiefs of the Chicago and L.A. branches. Later another FBI agent would become the head of security for the American

Indian Movement (A.I.M.). In the early 1970s, many small radical and revolutionary groups were operating in the Bay Area, and agents worked in most of them.

At the time, California had an “indeterminate sentencing” system, by which prisoners with good behavior could get an early release, particularly if they had a job waiting for them on the outside. Judges would give defendants sentence ranges and parole boards would decide when to release prisoners. This was based on the philosophy that the state should do more than just punish offenders, and prepare them for more constructive lives through education. Some of the more progressive collectives in the People’s Food System offered jobs to former prisoners, including Ma Revolution, Veritable Vegetable, and the Warehouse. According to Nina Saltman of the Warehouse, “We were providing jobs and it was a good way for ex-cons to get back into the system. We also brought in ex-political prisoners, a number of people who had escaped from Chile, ‘illegals’. We had jobs, and who better to give them to?”¹²⁰

However, there was a dangerous down side: along with the ex-prisoners came the prisoner organizations.

Under the Thumb

“I envy you. You North Americans are very lucky. You are fighting the most important fight of all—you live in the heart of the beast.”

- Che Guevara, 1964

Until 1977, very few people in the People’s Food System would have recognized the names Earl Satcher and the Tribal Thumb. Satcher never belonged to any of the collectives or co-ops. But he had an enormous impact on the fate of the organization.

A mainstream glimpse into the Bay Area’s radical netherworld in that era is provided by the cover article of *Time* magazine, Oct. 6, 1975, entitled, “Radicals: California’s Underground.” The immediate impetus for the article was two recent attempts on President Gerald Ford’s life in San Francisco, and the bizarre saga of Patty Hearst and the Symbionese Liberation Army. It does not even mention the Black Panther Party, founded in Oakland but by that time decimated by the FBI and police. The article draws sketches from federal and state “dossiers” of a number of small revolutionary groups operating in the Bay Area, including the Tribal Thumb: “Tribal Thumb. With 25 members, predominantly men, the group is centered in Palo Alto. Its leader is Earl Satcher, a reputed black karate expert and ex-con with an 18-year criminal record. When some members were arrested for parole violations recently, they were found to have quantities of revolutionary tracts. But one member said that the pamphlets were for show; he asserted that the organization sought money from radicals but actually is chiefly interested in nonrevolutionary crime.”¹²¹

Satcher founded Tribal Thumb in Long Beach, California in the early 1970s. In a letter to the *Berkeley Barb* of August 8, 1975, he expounded on what he claimed to be the Thumb’s aims, although in reality the rhetoric may have been mostly a smoke screen for a very different agenda: “[T]he dangerous task of bringing down oppression in all its forms yet prevails and we intend to participate in destroying it. . . . Our regards to all the strong men, women and children fighting to attain the new world.”¹²²

According to an article in *Grassroots*, a Berkeley community newspaper, Satcher,

about thirty-five years old at the time of the Food System incidents, had a criminal record dating back to 1960.¹²³ While imprisoned on charges of auto theft and armed robbery, he apparently became politicized, or picked up the language of the revolutionary movement. Released from prison in the mid-'60s, he got involved in the Black Panthers and attracted the attention of the FBI, which asked the Department of Corrections to keep them informed of his movements. In 1969, Satcher joined forces with Bennie S., who had also served time and later worked for Veritable Vegetable.

During the 1960s, many Black Panther leaders were imprisoned, and articulate convicts such as George Jackson became radicalized while in prison. This resulted in the Left tending to idealize all prisoners as vanguard revolutionaries. A widespread slogan of the time stated, "All prisoners are political prisoners." Satcher insinuated that he was a friend of George Jackson and San Quentin Six member Hugo Pinell, and belonged to the Black Guerrilla Family (BGF), but none of that was apparently true. Far from it. The Black Guerrilla Family was an African-American prisoner organization, which George Jackson and others founded in 1966 at San Quentin State Prison, with a revolutionary Marxist ideology and the stated goals of eradicating racism, maintaining dignity in prison, and overthrowing the government.¹²⁴ BGF and Tribal Thumb became bitter rivals.

Meanwhile, a number of ex-convicts got jobs at Ma Revolution. According to Katherine Fusek of Ma Revolution, "Many of these people who were involved with the prison movement were very articulate and intelligent. Some of them worked at our store, then they'd bring a friend of theirs who was part of the prison movement. They had been very politicized while they were in prison. They were young. They saw some of the bigger picture. They were trying to educate us that all prisoners are political prisoners, and we were starting to get that kind of talk at our collective meetings. It got a little difficult, because some of it didn't seem to fit. Some people wanted to just deal with accessibility to food, and support the small farmers and venders, and didn't want to enlarge that mission."¹²⁵ Among the people who had been political activists while in prison, and then joined the Ma Revolution collective, was Willie Sundiata Tate, who had actually been a member of the San Quentin Six and truly a close friend of George Jackson. Tate and the others in his group were well aware of the history and reality behind Satcher's Tribal Thumb.

A *Berkeley Barb* article reported: "Although it is not clear whether Tribal Thumb was a provocative outfit deliberately set up by police agencies as part of some covert COINTELPRO-style war on the local Left, there is no question that the group's actions benefited police red squads and the Right wing. It is suggestive that at several crucial points in Tribal Thumb's history, the intervention of FBI agents and police officials either enabled the group to continue operating or helped it accomplish tasks which ultimately had a devastating effect on radical political organizations."¹²⁶

In 1972, federal agencies intervened in a parole revocation proceeding against Satcher, allowing him to remain out and relocate to Northern California. The following year, Satcher, living with a group in a Berkeley apartment, organized a robbery of the local Bank of America, apparently to raise funds for the organization. Doing the actual robbery were six women, with Satcher as the getaway driver. But he failed to show up in front of the bank; the robbers fled on foot and were quickly arrested. Satcher was caught with all the loot. But the FBI reported that they lost all the evidence against him, and again he was released. The five women were convicted and sent to federal prison. He set

up headquarters at Honeydew ranch in Mendocino county, where he began a business of raising Arabian horses, and which the Tribal Thumb used as a retreat.

In 1974 several Tribal Thumb members became involved in the United Prisoners Union (UPU), where they spread rumors that its chairman, Popeye Jackson, was a police agent, without any evidence, causing harsh internal disruption. Meanwhile, the FBI assigned an agent named Sara Jane Moore to infiltrate UPU. Her FBI “control agent” was Burt Worthington and her San Francisco police department primary contact was Inspector Jack O’Shea. Moore brought Popeye Jackson an offer from Randolph Hearst to pay for his son to go to school in exchange for information about the SLA. According to the *New York Times*, Moore also claimed to have loaned Jackson \$2,000 and let him use her car.¹²⁷ Jackson reportedly turned down Hearst’s offer. Meanwhile, up at Honeydew Ranch, Thumb members were learning marksmanship from undercover FBI agent Walter Hansacker, their weapons instructor, including how to fire the pistol that one of them would use on June 8, 1975, to assassinate Jackson around the corner from Moore’s apartment.

The local police found the barrel of the murder weapon at the scene; a Tribal Thumb member turned the rest of the pistol over to undercover agent Hansacker.¹²⁸ But for the next eight months, the FBI withheld the hot weapon from police investigating the case. They finally turned it over, the police put the pieces together and charged a Tribal Thumb member with the murder. The Grand Jury named five other Thumb members as co-conspirators, including Bennie S., a woman named E.P., and a man named Gary Johnson, but charges were never filed against them. Johnson was actually another FBI agent. The killer was convicted.

That summer, E.P., one of the un-indicted co-conspirators, moved in with Moore, and both of them spent time at the Thumb’s Honeydew Ranch. At some point during that period, Moore apparently did a bipolar flip: she turned on her employers. On September 22, 1975 in front of the downtown St. Francis Hotel, she attempted to assassinate President Gerald Ford. The Assistant U.S. Attorney in charge of the case “refused to confirm or deny the information about the relationship” between Moore and Tribal Thumb.¹²⁹ The investigation began and ended with Moore, the most probable reason being the deep involvement of the FBI. Once again, the government let Satcher and the Thumb off the hook.

At that point, the Tribal Thumb apparently set their sites on the People’s Food System. In addition to providing a power base, the Food System offered a ready source of legitimate income and jobs waiting for other associates when they got out of prison. Convicts could get early release on parole if they had a job waiting. The ex-prisoners at Ma Revolution, along with some of the other Food System workers, knew the truth about the Tribal Thumb and their actions against the United Prisoners’ Union, and suspected that Satcher intended to use Tribal Thumb’s foothold in PFS, in alliance with the White Panthers, to take over the Food System.¹³⁰

The Thumb got their first foothold into the Food System through a small vegetarian restaurant called Wellsprings Communion, which was run by a collective. It was listed in the 1976 and ‘77 editions of the *Directory of Collectives*. An Indian guru had reportedly started it, but when he went back to India, Tribal Thumb took control. Wellsprings was incorporated by three members of the Tribal Thumb as a charitable and educational nonprofit corporation. Unlike any of the Food System nonprofits, they

actually received tax-exempt status from the State. Their reported purposes were “to operate a food service providing 1) at-cost nutritionally balanced meals to people of limited income—the handicapped, welfare recipients and their children, the unemployed, the elderly and prisoners; 2) job training for the unemployed in food service; 3) instruction in food cultivation, preparation, nutrition, and health.”¹³¹

A number of Tribal Thumb members, most of them ex-convicts, worked at Wellsprings. Also working there were members of the White Panthers. They got most of their produce through Veritable Vegetable. With the help of the White Panthers, they were able to land jobs for two Tribal Thumb members—Bennie S. and “Red”—at Veritable Vegetable, which at that time was seeking to involve ex-prisoners and other working-class people in their collective.¹³²

Wellsprings tried to get accepted into the Food System, but was rejected because restaurants were outside their purview and many of the Food System workers who were aware of the Tribal Thumb sensed danger.

After a while, food deliveries began to disappear from various stores, and some Food System workers suspected that the Tribal Thumb members inside Veritable Vegetable might be diverting goods from the stores to Wellsprings Communion.¹³³ Veritable Vegetable workers had easy access to most Food System co-ops because they delivered the produce. But no concrete proof ever surfaced.

Many of the former prisoners at both Ma Revolution and Veritable Vegetable were furloughed under the same San Quentin prison work program, but some at Ma Revolution were connected with the Black Guerrilla Family, while those at Veritable were part of the Thumb. The tension between the ex-prisoner groups polarized the Veritable Vegetable and Ma Revolution collectives.

Meanwhile, Veritable Vegetable was having cash flow problems, and fell behind in their rent at the Food Factory building. They blamed it in part on Ma Revolution, claiming that Ma was the only collective not paying them on time, and was showing a lack of solidarity by continuing to buy some of their produce at the Farmers Market instead of exclusively from Veritable. Ma Revolution had quite a large volume, so it was significant for Veritable.¹³⁴ At the same time, some collective members in other Food Factory groups began to demand that Veritable catch up on their rent or leave the building.¹³⁵ The Veritable Vegetable collective thought they saw the hand of Ma Revolution behind that demand. Others in the Food System thought that the White Panther Party, allied with Tribal Thumb, was trying to take over Veritable Vegetable, and didn’t want to work with them because of it. The White Panthers apparently remained in naïve denial about the Tribal Thumb throughout the events.

On April 17, 1977, the Food System convened a system-wide All-Workers’ Conference, originally scheduled to discuss the Basis of Unity, but the burning issue of the moment took over the agenda, the escalating conflict between Ma Revolution and Veritable Vegetable.

According to Nina Saltman of the Warehouse, who chaired the fateful meeting, “Many at the warehouse thought the Food System was being targeted. There was a lot of suspicion. Part of what that meeting was about was who’s really real and who’s really an agent. . . . There were other people who were on the fringes of the Food System, who were they, where did they come from? We clearly thought there was some attempt to break us up, to make us less functional, both before and after the shooting. It was obvious

there was something going on.”¹³⁶

Paul Kivel of Earthwork saw it from a different perspective: “Those who were grappling for power one way or another in the Food System wanted it to succeed, because that was the power they were trying to gain. They had no interest in destroying the Food System; they were working to control it, to gain control over aspects of it, over the resources, so in that sense I would say it was collateral damage.”¹³⁷

Some Veritable Vegetable members came to the April 17 meeting with several outsiders—Tribal Thumb members who wanted to act as “observers” during the conference, including Earl Satcher. The women doing security at the door told them they couldn’t enter, but they pushed their way inside. Satcher and the others demanded to be allowed to participate, and were twice refused permission by the chair of the meeting. Satcher insisted that he “had the right to stay.” An overwhelming majority of the Food System workers present voted to expel them, but they still refused to leave. A shouting match broke out. A Food System worker began to snap pictures of the Tribal Thumb members. Satcher confronted the photographer and offered to buy the film. The man refused. Tribal Thumb members began to surround him; the photographer bolted for the door. Tribal Thumb members began punching Food System workers and struggled with the photographer over the camera, which was passed to a female worker. She ran away with it, but was tackled by “Red,” who opened the camera, took out the film, and hurried to Satcher with it. The entire Tribal Thumb-Veritable Vegetable group then left immediately. The rest of the Food System meeting was spent discussing the disruption. A resolution was passed to suspend Bennie S., one of the Veritable Vegetable-Tribal Thumb members involved in the fight.

Shortly afterward, Tribal Thumb issued an “Open Statement” in which it accused the Food System of “lynch-mob behavior” and “fascism,” and suggested that the PFS workers who opposed them were police agents: “It is overwhelmingly evident that the only body that has reason to fear Earl Satcher or anyone connected with him [is] the SYSTEM, its agents and its provocateurs!”¹³⁸

On April 21, the following Thursday, the Representative Body met and confirmed the All-Workers Conference’s suspension of Bennie S. Veritable Vegetable tentatively agreed to the suspension but later refused to cooperate in an investigation.

On April 26 a special RB meeting was convened at the Warehouse, to discuss the possibility of expelling Veritable Vegetable from the Food System.

Many people from the Veritable collective attended the special meeting. Satcher appeared at the door, accompanied by two Doberman guard dogs and another Tribal Thumb member, claiming they were there to provide protection to Bennie S. After unsuccessfully attempting to gain entrance, they waited outside while the debate over the suspension went on upstairs.

According to one account, Tribal Thumb members of the Veritable Vegetable contingent became disruptive, refused to recognize the chair, tried to change the agenda, and refused to go along with RB decisions. The meeting took a short break to allow Veritable Vegetable to caucus before the issue was to be brought to a vote. As they broke, the entire Veritable Vegetable contingent started downstairs, presumably to speak with Satcher.¹³⁹

At this moment, a car with Willie Tate and three other people, two of them Ma Revolution workers, pulled up near the warehouse door. As Tate approached the

entrance, Satcher began firing a pistol at him. Tate, unarmed, fell to the ground, wounded. Answering fire came from some unidentified source. Several volleys were exchanged. In the end, Satcher lay dead and Tate critically wounded. All the Tribal Thumb members fled.

The police arrived within seconds, as if they had just happened to be passing by, or were waiting around the corner. The three who had come with Tate were arrested and charged with Satcher's murder. All were eventually freed for lack of evidence. No Tribal Thumb member was ever arrested or charged. Tate recovered.

In the wake of the shootout, police and DA investigators harassed Food System workers. The Warehouse office was ransacked in the middle of the night. Health inspectors swooped down on the Warehouse, searching for health code violations. Food System energy was channeled into a defense fund for the workers in jail. Key workers abruptly left. Rumors abounded. Various people were suspected of being provocateurs.

Two weeks after the shootout the RB told Veritable Vegetable to leave the Food System, and initiated a boycott of the organization.¹⁴⁰

The Food System immediately sank into a period of decline. Several collectives stopped attending meetings; many food activists were scared off, leading to the collapse of some collectives. The effect was greatest and most immediate on Ma Revolution. Its windows were boarded up and workers poured much energy into getting their co-workers out of jail. The community reacted with estrangement. Many were afraid to shop there, and sales fell off by a third. The store was unable to pay any of its bills or borrow more money, and went bankrupt in August of that year. Several other collectives soon fell. The Flatlands store and the Oakland Community Food Store had always been out of touch with their communities, key workers left, nobody remaining knew how to run a store, and the customers stopped coming. According to Morris Older, "certainly there were people who by their actions hastened the disintegration of various collectives and of the Food System as a whole. Most workers felt that the disruption of the Food System that had occurred was the work of police agents."¹⁴¹

The RB ceased meeting. A planning committee drew up a new simplified Basis of Unity that was approved by a worker's convention in May 1978. But by then, the energy that had sustained the Food System as an organization was gone.

After the debacle at the Warehouse, Tribal Thumb members disappeared from Veritable Vegetable and from town almost overnight. Most of the Veritable collective quit, but three courageous women held on to Veritable Vegetable's core purposes and values throughout this terrible period, toughed it out, stayed firm, picked up the pieces that were left, and took over the company.¹⁴² With the guidance of Mary Jane Evans, Karen Salinger and Bu Nygrens, Veritable Vegetable rose from the ashes and became a wonderful women-run enterprise.

Economics in Command

It doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.

- Deng Xiaoping

Since their beginnings in the nineteenth century, food cooperative movements in the United States have risen and fallen in recurring waves. By their very nature, cooperative

movements follow changes in the economy and demographic changes as their original members age and society changes. That recurring wave pattern is built into human society, rising, subsiding, and eventually reviving and sprouting again like an annual plant, in a new body or a new form.

A recent study by the University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives provides a succinct summary of the cycle of retail food co-ops:

Consumers' interest and participation in retail food cooperatives tends to increase in periods of social, political, and economic turmoil. . . . Growth periods also occur when large numbers of consumers experience economic difficulties and develop an interest in ownership and control of their retail food sources, when they become concerned for food safety, and when they experience a strong desire for an ethical society. Failure of cooperatives is consistently traced to decline in member participation, lack of management skills, inadequate capitalization, strong competition, increasing concentration in food retailing, and "loss of the cooperative spirit."¹⁴³

In the larger picture, the "new wave" co-op/collective movement between the early 1970s and the mid-1980s followed a normal and inevitable pattern. Around 1979, there were perhaps 5,000 small "new wave" collective/co-op stores and buying clubs in the United States and Canada, probably doing about \$500,000 in sales.¹⁴⁴ But by the early 1980s, the "new wave" movement all around the country was faltering and by 1990 had subsided. Its rise had been based on serving the countercultural community, but that community no longer existed. Cooperatives had been the primary outlet for the early natural and organic foods movement, but when larger numbers of people wanted them, supermarket chains made them (or counterfeits) a standard part of their stock. Today supermarkets and large chains have about 54 percent of the organic market, with co-ops and independents dividing the rest.¹⁴⁵

Despite corporate cooptation, natural and organic foods have remained a strong niche for small retail markets. Some food co-ops achieved long-term success by carrying a wide enough variety of products and produce to successfully maintain a customer base, while remaining true to their values.

The collective/cooperative wholesale distributors of the 1970s faced similar economic forces. The pressure in the market economy to "grow or die" forced them into constant expansion. Eventually all of the early distributors succumbed or were combined into larger co-ops, and eventually taken over by corporations. That was almost inevitable in this economic system. By its very nature corporate capitalism destroys all the weakest enterprises, and puts enormous pressure on the survivors to place profit above all else, to "grow or die." Finally the system takes over and absorbs almost all of the most successful enterprises, transforming them into parts of capitalist conglomerates.

The '70s generation of organic farmers fared better than the wholesales in some ways, although they typically needed another source of income to survive. Some experimented with collective production, but most used co-ops primarily for marketing. Like the others, many of the more successful farms were taken over by large corporations.

Like all enterprises, some individual co-ops are able to change and thrive for long

periods of time, while others lead short intense lives before they succumb and die. However, many extraordinary food cooperatives that started in the 1970s are still successful today, widely scattered in many regions of the country.

Aftermath in San Francisco

Beyond the extraordinary events that tore the Food System apart, economic forces that many in PFS were not adequately focused on, were working to undermine them. In the analysis of Nina Saltman of the Warehouse, “A lot of factors led to its demise. One was possibly outside police intervention. Another was a large focus on politics and outreach instead of good business practices being followed, and clearly businesses faltered because of things like that. . . . People were not focused on running the businesses, that didn’t seem to be the priority.”¹⁴⁶ Mary Jane Evans of Veritable echoed the thought: “As far as I’m concerned, some of the fundamental cracks and the problems in the Food System had nothing to do with those outside groups. It had to do with, how does a group of people go about an endeavor of this sort? How do people work together? How do you structure doing your work, and have an integrated approach? How do you support those who supply you and those you’re selling to, and really make it a continuum and understand how you’re all in it together? . . . We at Veritable figured it out by really concentrating on the relationship. Relationship has really carried the day for Veritable since we stepped away from the Food System.”¹⁴⁷

Rainbow Grocery, which bailed out from the Food System well before disaster hit, offers an online encapsulation of some of the economic challenges they faced following the demise of the System:

[T]he natural foods business has become a competitive industry, one that strongly mimics the industrial agribusiness complex against which many of the first community food stores rebelled. . . . Rainbow’s place in this new agribusiness is at times uncomfortable and challenging. We strive to compete with giant chains who falsely mimic our collective structure with “teams and team leaders,” although they still maintain oppressive hierarchical structures in the workplace. We are constantly forced to examine the products we buy as smaller local businesses are swallowed up by multinational corporations who may not have the same values as the original owners. With health food becoming part of our national awareness, the lines between “healthy” and “unhealthy” are not so clearly drawn. Herbal remedies are now being mass-produced and sold in pharmacy chains. . . . Soymilk can now even be found at many local corner stores. . . . With the advent of Genetically Modified foods and the lack of government requirements when it comes to testing and labeling, we face even more challenges. And occasionally, certain government organizations decide they want to change organic standards to include practices that we abhor.¹⁴⁸

Aftermath in Minneapolis

The Co-op Wars had a disastrous effect on many Twin Cities co-ops. “Many stores faced deteriorating memberships, low sales, and bankruptcy. People who stayed within the

movement became suspicious of radical politics, preferring to keep the focus on food.”¹⁴⁹

But in the late 1970s the co-op movement there revived and flourished again. By 1979, the All Co-op Assembly had grown into a regional network of over 280 food co-ops, buying clubs, and worker cooperatives. This was mainly due to the efforts of ACA organizers. But there were internal splits, and midway through ‘79, ACA instructed its staff of two to stop organizing new co-ops, and the next year fired them. Nonetheless, the movement continued to flourish. “In 1981, the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area had twenty-seven food co-ops, three co-op restaurants, three co-op bakeries, six co-op warehouses, three formal child care co-ops, seven housing co-ops, eight theater and dance collectives, one worker-owned clothing store, one worker-owned hardware store, four cooperative construction companies, one worker-owned print shop, one bicycle co-op, one electronics repair co-op, four co-op book stores, and one cooperative loan fund. Almost all of these were worker self-managed, though many had ill-defined channels for community input.”¹⁵⁰

Susan Shroyer, who in some ways initiated the movement in Minneapolis, went on to help organize a new co-op supermarket in a West Bank neighborhood.

But the recession of the early 1980s was hard on the co-ops and on ACA, since it relied on member dues for its income. As fewer co-ops survived, the resource pool of ACA dropped. Finances and membership tumbled. In 1984, in debt and with no unity of mission, ACA folded.¹⁵¹ In 1988 DANCe was sold to another co-op warehouse in Iowa.

The Twin Cities movement is today in the midst of another revival. Co-op stores dating from the ‘70s and still successful are Wedge, Seward, Hampden Park, and Linden Hills.

Aftermath of Food Co-op Wholesales

Amigo Bob Cantisano, who had worked at Fred Rohé’s New Age Natural Foods and Good Karma Café in San Francisco, started We the People Natural Foods Cooperative in Lake Tahoe in 1972, which developed into the Mountain People’s Warehouse, which then became part of the cooperative United Natural Foods Inc. (UNFI). UNFI is today the leading independent national distributor of natural, organic and specialty foods in the United States, but it is now a corporation and no longer a co-op.

In 2003, Honest Weight Food Co-op, in Albany, NY, published an article in its newsletter presenting an outline history of the consolidation of Northern regional cooperative wholesalers into UNFI. Although this narrative focuses on certain regions, the process it describes took place everywhere. The five distributors mentioned in the article as the only ones of that size left standing in 2003 no longer exist today. However, we are today seeing a new cycle of creative distributors and warehouses connected with the Food Hub movement.

As recently as five years ago, Honest Weight was serviced by four “major” distributors, as well as several smaller ones. The four big ones (in terms of sales volume to our store) were Northeast Cooperatives, Hudson Valley Federation of Food Co-ops, Cornucopia, and Stow Mills. Stow Mills merged into Cornucopia to form UNFI (United Natural Foods Incorporated) back in 1997. Hudson Valley, a cooperative distributor, went bankrupt in 1999. As I’m writing this, Northeast is

planning on merging into UNFI as well, leaving us with just one major distributor—UNFI. This is all part of a much larger consolidation of the natural foods industry, which has gone from having more than fifty distributors twenty years ago, to having only five (with sales of \$10 million or more) today. All this is part of an even larger, international consolidation movement of which the natural foods industry is just a tiny part.

When you look at the history of the companies rolled into UNFI, you get an even clearer picture of just how much consolidation there has been.

Cornucopia originally a small East coast distributor, began its acquisition phase in 1995 when it acquired Rainbow Denver, giving it a Southern Midwest stronghold. In 1996, Cornucopia merged with Mountain People's Warehouse (a West Coast distributor) and formed UNFI. UNFI then merged with Stow Mills in 1997, bought out Blooming Prairie (one of the last cooperative wholesalers) this year, and should see the merger with Northeast pass next year.

Stow Mills is itself a consolidation of three distributors (Stow, Llama, and Harvest). Stow Mills also acquired Rainbow Chicago in 1996. Similarly, Northeast was formed from a merger of three smaller cooperative warehouses: NEFCO (New England Food Co-op Organization), Western Massachusetts Coops and Connecticut Co-ops. It then went on to merge with FORC (Federation of Ohio River Co-ops) in 1999. . . .

We were part owners of Northeast. We're customers of UNFI. . . . Furthermore, I've no doubt that we haven't seen the end of the mergers and acquisitions trend. While the current CEO of UNFI has a strong background in natural foods (he's the founder of Mountain People), who knows what the next CEO will be like—and what happens when UNFI gets swallowed up by some even bigger company?¹⁵²

Aftermath of Regional Networks

More typical than the histories of the collective/co-op food movements in San Francisco and Minneapolis in the 1970s, were the vicissitudes of the regional collective and cooperative networks in places like Santa Rosa (CA), Arcata (CA), Seattle (WA), Vancouver (BC), and Austin (TX). Their successes and failures, as a backdrop of the norm of the period, help to put the extraordinary events in San Francisco and Minneapolis into perspective.

RED CLOVER BRIGADE¹⁵³

On June 25, 1975, Country People's Warehouse (CPW) and Santa Rosa Community Market opened for business. Within a year Country People's Warehouse was serving ten stores, three dozen buying clubs, and several restaurants. In 1976, CPW incorporated as a nonprofit. The store was operated by volunteers from the membership. In December of 1975 the co-op members resolved to begin paying the staff when funds became adequate. In early 1976, Sunshine Produce Distribution was founded to truck organic vegetables from local growers and from the San Francisco produce market. When Truckaderos went out of business, CPW organized Morningstar trucking, a small team of

all-woman truckers who made runs from San Diego and Fresno, and later from as far as British Columbia and Arizona.

Country People's Warehouse, Community Market, Sunshine Produce, and Morningstar Trucking banded together in April 1976 under an umbrella organization, Red Clover Workers' Brigade (RCWB), which took over CPW's nonprofit status. The Brigade had a central accounting team, some joint management, and the potential for workers to move around as needed from one business to another. The Brigade transitioned from a co-op into a collective worker-run business, and opened Red Clover Bakery in late 1976.

Over time a philosophical split developed between the warehouse and the bakery over the nonprofit status. In 1980 the bakery workers bought themselves out of the Brigade, changed their name to Alvarado Street Bakery, reincorporated as a worker cooperative, and started operating independently. Sunshine Produce and Morningstar Trucking both folded that same year. Country People's Warehouse became an all-woman company, but continued to lose money until it finally closed in 1987, leaving Santa Rosa Community Market as the only remaining enterprise in the Red Clover Brigade. It found success again at a new location. In 1997, it gave up its nonprofit status and became a mutual-benefit corporation. It continues to flourish today, with thirty-five workers. Alvarado Street Bakery, still a worker cooperative today, is now the largest organic bakery in the country, producing over 30,000 loaves a day.

SEATTLE WORKERS BRIGADE¹⁵⁴

The Seattle Workers' Brigade lost over \$27,000 in 1975, its first year of operation. In '76, wages remained at \$232 per month for most of the year, rising a little in December. Work hours were long. Still, the situation improved as the year went on. The bookkeeping and budget committees guided the Brigade into a stronger financial position. The bakery and market, Little Bread Co. and Corner Green Grocery, both lost money in the first part of the year but were beginning to show a profit by the end. CC Grains, the warehouse, was making a profit of \$3,000 to \$6,000 per month, which largely went toward reducing debts. CC expanded its product line, moved to a larger building, and bought a forklift. However, Brigade meetings remained tedious and unproductive, the business was rife with structural inefficiencies, and high turnover of workers was the norm.

In 1976, the political emphasis of the Brigade changed from socialism and joining mass movements, to feminism and becoming successful self-managed businesses. An effort was made to hire more women. The milling operation became all-women, but the mills needed extensive improvements which the Brigade could not afford, so the mills were sold to another collective. The Brigade then voted to have CC Grains become all woman-run. In January 1977, CC Grains decided that it wanted to leave the Brigade. The warehouse workers were tired of the amount of energy it took to keep the Brigade running, of high worker turnover, and lax financial management. They thought that the Brigade's structure was too complex and its workers too inexperienced, and that they could be more successful running one business than three. The other workers feared that the bakery and grocery would not be able to survive on their own, since the warehouse generated most of the Brigade's income. Many were also upset about the political

implications of splitting up the Brigade. However, everyone reluctantly concluded that the Brigade's deficiencies outweighed its positive aspects. Little Bread Co. and Corner Green Grocery decided not to remain together in the event of a Brigade split.

In March 1977, a vote was taken and it was agreed to dissolve the Seattle Workers' Brigade. Each business kept its machinery, tools, and supplies, divided shared assets according to need, and the businesses ended their formal relationship. While Seattle Workers' Brigade collapsed, its parent organization, Puget Consumer Cooperative, became PCC Natural Markets, and is today the largest consumer-owned natural food retail co-op in the United States, with nine stores in the Puget Sound region and nearly 45,000 members.

NORTH COAST CO-OP (ARCATA)¹⁵⁵

The Arcata Co-op began in 1973 as a retail grocery store, open to the community. Near the end of 1975, it incorporated as a collectively operated consumer co-op. At that time Arcata was comprised of seven collectives, each with its own work responsibilities and budget: the retail Bulk Food Center (selling food in bulk at a 10 percent mark-up); the Co-op Bakery (baking whole-grain breads); the warehouse (distributing to other co-ops and buying groups at a 5 percent mark-up); the retail grocery store (selling a variety of foods, including canned goods and frozen foods but no meat or poultry, at a 20 percent mark-up); the bookkeeping/accounting collective (responsible also for budgets); and the communications/education group (consumer information, nutrition programs, newsletter and community services). The Co-op operated a semi and made weekly runs through Northern California to San Francisco. In 1975 Arcata's gross monthly sales were \$110,000. The grocery store was housed in a 2,000 sq. ft. building, and all the other collectives were in a 15,000 sq. ft. old Safeway building. The twenty-seven workers each received \$2.75/hr. with medical/dental benefits and childcare pending for workers with children. There was an 800-family membership which met four times a year and was represented by a board of representatives that met on a regular basis to talk about matters of policy, budgeting, capitalization, and community involvement. "Since the workers are striving to eliminate worker/manager divisions, they operate under a system of worker self-management. Effective self-management is facilitated by collective decision-making and shared responsibilities."¹⁵⁶

North Coast Co-op today remains very successful and runs two full-service groceries, the original one in Arcata, and a second one in Eureka, CA.

FED-UP¹⁵⁷

Fed-Up started in 1972, a group of fifty-six member-run consumer co-ops that collectively owned and operated a warehouse in Vancouver, B.C. Most of groups were prepaid order co-ops, a few kept a small inventory, and only three ran storefront. Internally some operated by consensus, while others were strongly centralized. Fed-Up policies were determined at quarterly council meetings of representatives, with each co-op having one vote. "The entire council then attempts to reach a consensus decision on the topic/issue . . . , while being 'fair' to each group or individual." The Fed-Up warehouse collective made operational decisions for itself and acted for the organization

between council meetings. The warehouse collective consisted of three subgroups. The *work week collective* had six to twelve members who filled orders, maintained stock in the warehouse, shipped, received, and did light bookkeeping. Each co-op sent two people to the workweek collective for one week four times a year. Two *rotating coordinators* taught each new workweek collective how to run the warehouse and take care of business. One of the rotating coordinators was teaching and one was learning. The *paid collective* were three people who handled ongoing relationships with suppliers and the more complicated bookkeeping. The paid collective determined its own membership and working conditions, paid itself out of the Fed-Up's markup, and had one vote on the council of representatives. "[Our] relationship is cooperative because it is democratic, anti-profit and based on the good of the whole rather than the individual. . . . The relationship is collective in that it is not exploitive to ourselves or others, anti-hierarchical and building on the relationships between us that will make us stronger as a whole." The Fed-Up warehouse did a half million-dollar business in 1974. Although Fed-Up fell apart and disbanded in the 1980s, a number of co-ops that were part of it still flourish, including East End Food Co-op, Kootenay Country Store Coop, Lardeau Valley Food Co-op.¹⁵⁸

AUSTIN COMMUNITY PROJECT

Austin Community Project (ACP) started in 1972 as a collective buying association for a group of collective/cooperative restaurants and stores, aimed at eliminating middlemen and acquiring as much organic produce as possible.¹⁵⁹ When co-op houses and neighborhood buying clubs were added, it developed a broader focus on community. By 1976 it became a federation of three co-op stores, two neighborhood food buying clubs, ten housing co-ops and communes, four organic farms, seven worker collectives doing produce distribution, tools maintenance and rentals, canning, a bakery, recycling, and a vegetarian restaurant totaling between 1,000 and 1,500 members with 25 to 30 on payroll. Associated but not a member proper, was the Yellow Rose Co-op Warehouse. All members were required to do three hours of work monthly for any of the co-op stores, collectives, or farms. "Our purpose is to build a cooperative community . . . economically independent and self-sufficient in the following respects: It shall provide us with goods and services we want; it shall provide livelihood for its members; and the goods and services it provides shall be priced fairly. . . . Our community must be ecologically sound. . . . To provide maximum self-control of our lives together, we shall try to produce, as much as possible, what we consume, and to consume, as much as possible, what we produce."¹⁶⁰ However, in 1977, ACP collapsed and disbanded:

[T]he organization dissolved amidst panic, accusations and lots of bad feelings. . . . It was no longer able to provide a feeling of unity with other activists, rather they were divided into various camps in dispute with each other. The burnout had hit in a big way. . . . The vision had by far outreached our grasp. Our organization was economically premature and impractical. We had a pathetic lack of capital and a gross lack of specific skills. We had a lot of *bozo* ideas. We started a warehouse, for instance, before we had the business to support a warehouse. The problem went beyond economics and into ideological conflict.

We couldn't even agree on how our jobs were to be structured. At one point some people felt that the chief responsibility of all paid workers in the federation was to make their paid positions obsolete by organizing that function so that the *people could do it for themselves*. Others felt that the creation of paying jobs in the cooperative community was a major goal. These ideas did not mix, and this was only one of many conflicts.¹⁶¹

Although the federation folded, a number of groups continued successfully on their own. Yellow Rose Cooperative Warehouse, a regional distributor of grains, dried fruits, nuts, cheese, and juice, begun in 1975, lasted only a few years. But Wheatsville Food Co-op, started in 1976 as an extension of ACP, today is still flourishing, with an 8,400 square foot store and \$10 million in annual sales.¹⁶²

Murder on the Food Train?

Almost thirty-five years have passed since the disastrous People's Food System meeting of April 26, 1977, yet many Food System activists still remain quiet today about what happened. The Food System continues to be a very hot button. But when a generation reaches a certain age, it is critical to rethink and reevaluate, so I have tried to do that with the Food System. It is important to look at its life, its goals and missions, its conflicts and struggles. It is important to explore what it might have become if it had lived, by comparing it to the life cycles of similar organizations of its time, including the sister movement in the Twin Cities that, with uncanny parallels, suffered through the Co-op War. It is important to try to figure out what actually happened and why: to what degree was the Food System's death due to natural causes, suicide, or murder?

We must remember that most of those involved were between twenty and thirty-five years of age, many of them deeply idealistic and devoted to societal change and social justice. Their youth was both a strength and a weakness. Many were politically naïve, as young people naturally are. Many expressed the type of pure and extreme politics that young people often express—before songs of experience force them to moderate their views—often hoping that the purity of their intentions and naïveté will protect them, as innocents sometimes seem to have a miraculous protection in the midst of peril, but sadly not always. These young people had many vulnerabilities and few defenses against the powerful and cynical forces that they challenged. A spectrum of points of view were involved. They all wanted to change the world, but some wanted to do it primarily through food politics, others primarily through personal politics and social relations, still others saw food primarily as an entry into broader social change. There were anarchists, libertarians, collectivists, cooperators, communalists, hippies, liberal Democrats, Situationists, feminists, gay activists, social reformers, revolutionaries, evolutionaries, socialists, syndicalists, communists and commonists of every description, with as many varied visions of social justice and ideas of ways to get there. All of these forces met in the People's Food System, most tried to work together, and many often clashed. The Food System was tearing itself apart, and at times seemed almost suicidal. Yet even when they strongly disagreed, as for example over decision-making structures (Representative Body vs. All-Worker Meetings; “direct democracy” vs. “democratic centralism”), sincere positions were held on the various sides, although not always

adequately thought out or informed. Almost all were struggling openly toward a shared constructive future. Some had connections with various outside political organizations, which often had agendas of their own. This was exacerbated by the widespread “underground” revolutionary activity in the Bay Area at that time, which by its very nature involved shadowy organizations that had to be accepted partially on faith, if they were to be accepted at all. And of course there were those people in the Food System, a handful but consequential far beyond their number, whose motivations and actions were not sincere, open, or constructive.

Of the many stores and support collectives that were members of the Food System at its height, only three stores and one distributor are still in operation today. By every account, Other Avenues Food Store, Rainbow Grocery, Good Life Grocery, and Veritable Vegetable are all thriving today, and in basic ways still true to their missions. Other Avenues and Rainbow remain cooperatives today, Good Life is employee-owned after being owned by its two managers, and Veritable Vegetable is owned by a small group of women.

Veritable Vegetable, the enterprise that was caught in the center of the conflict that tore the System apart, today captures many of the purest ideas and practices of the Food System at its height:

We at Veritable Vegetable are creating and fostering sustainable culture, integrating the environment, the economy, and society as sustainable systems. Sustainable systems are inherently life affirming, balancing input and output, conserving, if not augmenting, energy and resources. Veritable Vegetable has chosen to influence these areas by distributing organic produce and promoting sustainable agriculture. . . . We are pursuing and applying participatory management systems and sound, ethical business practices. Veritable Vegetable supports diverse communities and businesses. . . . We support co-op natural food stores and place a maximum priority on their partnership. These relationships allow us to strengthen local economies by working with community-based businesses. We have long relationships with neighborhood co-ops all over California, and in 1996 expanded our service to co-ops in Arizona, New Mexico, and recently, Southern Colorado. . . . We maintain a 4:1 ratio in terms of salaries, highest to lowest. That means that no one working in the organization can make more than four times as much as anyone else. We share the fruits of our labor company-wide. . . . We make special efforts to recruit women for roles traditionally held by men in a male-dominated industry. . . . Surplus produce is donated to the San Francisco Food Bank, who then distributes it to charitable organizations serving meals to the homeless and needy in the Bay Area. . . . Any produce that is unsuitable for the Food Bank goes to SF based compost programs. We recycle.¹⁶³

In the early 1970s, when the Food System began, natural and organic foods were known only to a small group. Food in America was highly processed from seed to supermarket. Family farms were disappearing, strangled by agribusiness. Increasingly larger corporations grew, processed, distributed, and sold the dominant portion of all foods that reached American tables. Farmers markets were actually illegal in most places

in California, although in San Francisco one had been grandfathered in. At the same time, the U.S. government was using “the food weapon” as a tool of foreign policy.

Today a strong resurgence of food-related movements are exploring many forms of cooperation related to food and agriculture. Food co-ops and buying clubs are back in force, along with farmer cooperatives, urban farmers’ markets, community gardens, and newer forms such as CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), crop swaps, and Food Hubs. Connected are social and solidarity enterprises, and barter networks. The Food Justice, Food Security, Local Food, and Slow Food Movements, are also all closely related.

So did the movement of the 1970s fail or succeed?

Alternative cooperative food networks and systems were built in almost every region of the country in the early 1970s. The problems and issues were similar almost everywhere, and most met the same fate. The movements in the Bay Area and in the Twin Cities however were different. Although they were among the most successful, or because of it, they were both entered into by outside radical groups. Some members of those groups were sincerely working for progressive social change, but other members had different motivations. Many sincere people wound up surrendering their critical faculties to charismatic leaders, and being used. To what degree was the radical rhetoric just a cover, and to what degree did the entrust groups really see the co-ops as just a cash cow?

Cooperative movements by their very nature arise and subside, based on many factors. People become interested in alternative organizations when the mainstream organizations of society are not working. Since co-ops are based on the power of people in very specific situations, when the situation changes, people tend to drift away. Sometimes those changes come about because the economy has shifted but sometimes for simple reasons such as their members getting older. Cooperative movements tend to be generational. For whatever specific reasons, the movement faded in the mid-’80s, and that was a natural phenomenon under conditions of corporate capitalism.

That FBI and police agents infiltrated into the radical groups that were working in the Food System, is indisputable. Whether there were police agents involved in Minneapolis, too, can only be guessed it, since no compelling evidence has surfaced. But even assuming that there were agents in the radical groups in both cities, the question still remains as to whether the attacks on the co-ops were directed or incidental, whether they were targeted because of their stated radical goals or were the incidental victim of collateral damage, and attacked only because the radicals were in them. All the evidence is not yet in, and may never be.

Yet, the FBI does have a documented history of targeting movements for social change, including at least one food movement. When the FBI’s COINTELPRO attacked the Black Panther Party a few years previously, they specifically targeted their social programs: “During this campaign, [Special Agent in Charge in Chicago Marlin W.] Johnson received repeated directives marked to his persona attention from J. Edgar Hoover, demanding that he instruct his COINTELPRO personnel to . . . eradicate its ‘serve the people’ programs. In May and June of 1969, the Director specifically and repeatedly instructed Johnson to destroy the Panthers’ broadly acclaimed Free Breakfast for Children Program in the city.”¹⁶⁴

So how do we answer the question of what caused of the demise of the San

Francisco People's Food System and the movement in the Twin Cities? Did they die by murder, suicide, or natural causes? The answer must be all three.

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The following bibliographical references relate to the movement in the Bay Area and the Twin Cities. References to the rest of the topics discussed are too vast to compile here, and are referenced in the endnotes.

SF People's Food System

Despite its almost legendary status in local underground history, the volume of printed literature about the San Francisco People's Food System is slight. Most of the materials published during its brief life are in the newsletters *Storefront Extension* and *Turnover*. Related materials can be found in the newsletter *Common Ground*, which focused on the larger West Coast network, and a little in the early *Directory of Collectives*. Beyond those is the pamphlet *Beyond Isolation*, various papers, ephemera, and materials about the different enterprises. That is pretty much it. The *San Francisco Chronicle* had a brief article the day after the shootout (April 27, 1977), and a more extensive one in the following day's edition. Since there were never trials, the story dropped out of sight for a year and a half, until Imilla Cabral and Bill Wallace published a four-part investigative series in the *Berkeley Barb* between December, 1978 and January, 1979.

In 1981, I coordinated a workshop at a conference sponsored by the InterCollective, a network of people working in collectives that included the first public discussion of the rise and fall of the Food System by someone who had been part of it, Morris Older, a baker from Uprisings Bakery. The following year, I published his talk in *History of Collectivity in the San Francisco Bay Area*, together with an article on the same subject by Charlie of Inner Sunset food store, and a transcript of the workshop discussion.

Meanwhile, the Berkeley neighborhood newspaper *Grassroots* also published Older's narrative, along with an article about the events at the Warehouse. Bits of history of the Food System also began appearing on various websites, usually in connection with one of the enterprises that had been part of it. Jesse Drew discussed it briefly in "Call Any Vegetable, The Politics of Food in San Francisco" in *Reclaiming San Francisco History, Politics, Culture* (1998). More recently, Pam Peirce contributed a short memoir, "A Personal History of the San Francisco People's Food System" in *Ten Years That Shook The City* (2011). Until this current narrative, that remained the extent of published materials.

In 2011, I interviewed and communicated with the following people who had worked in the People's Food System: Kathleen Fusek, Nina Saltman, Mary Jane Evans, David Loeb, Adam Raskin, Shanta Nimbark Sacharoff, Morris Older, Max Weinryb, and Paul Kivel.

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Minneapolis Co-op War

There are two essential published histories of the Minneapolis Co-op War: Craig Cox's *Storefront Revolution, Food Co-ops and the Counterculture*, and an online archive from the Minnesota Historical Society, written by Kris Olsen. Both authors were active participants, both siding the DANCe group, so these accounts could tend to be one sided; Cox in particular, however, includes adequate CO materials to let them make their own case. Further materials can be found in the newsletters *Scoop* and *Changes*, numerous papers and ephemera, as well as in the West Coast newsletter *Common Ground*. More information about the inner cult-like workings of the CO came out in 2002 in Alexandra Stein's *Inside Out*.

Cox, Craig. *Storefront Revolution, Food Co-ops and the Counterculture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994.

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Rizzo, Mary. "Revolution in a Can," In *Eating in Eden, Food and American Utopias*,

edited by Etta M. Madden and Martha L. Finch. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. 8.

¹ Veritable Vegetable, "About Us," <http://www.veritablevegetable.com/About%20Us/Our%20Present/>.

² Ibid., "Our Past," <http://www.veritablevegetable.com/About%20Us/Our%20Past/>.

³ Rainbow Grocery Cooperative, "History," <http://www.rainbow.coop/history/>.

⁴ Other Avenues, "Our Mission and History," <http://www.otheravenues.coop/who-weare/oa-history/>.

⁵ QDRO, "The Goodlife Grocery Profit Sharing Plan," <http://www.qdrodesk.com/plans/THE-GOOD-LIFE-GROCERY-PROFIT-SHARINGPLAN-38563.shtml>.

⁶ *Life* magazine, December 11, 1970, 44-49.

⁷ *New Morning*, August, 1972, 13.

⁸ John Case and Rosemary C.R. Taylor, *Co-ops, Communes and Collectives: Experiments in Social Change in the 1960s and 1970s* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), 90.

⁹ Many in the Food System, having emerged from the anti-Vietnam War movement, were deeply concerned about U.S. imperialism, and their primary motivation was to change the way the United States related to the rest of the world around food. In the 1960s, proponents of the so-called Green Revolution claimed that new, high-yield grain varieties (particularly of wheat and rice) along with chemical fertilizers and pesticides would enormously increase world agricultural productivity, ending world hunger. However, the 1970s quickly became a decade of world crisis in food supplies and prices. Something had gone very wrong. Many observers held that more than enough food was being produced to supply the basic nutritional needs of everyone on earth, that the problem was equitable distribution, and that this was being undercut by U.S. corporate and governmental policies. The analysis went like this: large parts of the "underdeveloped world" had been made dependent on U.S. grains; the U.S. government was using this power to further international corporate and "strategic" interests. That was called the "food weapon." Multinational corporations and local elites in each country monopolized resources, exploited workers and small farmers, and used technologies destroying the environment, producing food only for those with money to buy it. The U.S. government provided credit to "friendly" foreign governments to buy U.S. farm surpluses; those governments then sold the food commercially, with little of it actually reaching people in need; and many governments receiving food aid used its distribution as a punitive weapon against rebellious sectors of their populations. The U.S. accepted local currency in repayment, and used that money to further various U.S. "interests" in each country. It was a neat arrangement, with corporations emerging the big winners and poor and working people the big losers. The struggle for world food justice became a deep motivation for many in the Food System, and *Turnover* devoted many pages to it.

¹⁰ Laurel Rosen and Sally McGrane, "The Revolution Will Not Be Catered: How Bay Area Food Collectives of the '60s Set the Stage for Today's Sophisticated Tastes," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 8, 2000, http://articles.sfgate.com/2000-03-08/food/17639721_1_san-franciscans-food-organic.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Interview with Kathleen Fusek, recorded May 13, 2011. Also Interview with Max Weinryb, recorded May 6, 2011. Much of the information of the early years of Ma Revolution and Altdisco comes from these interviews.

¹⁴ According to another version, the original founders of Westbrae were Gerner and his sister, with Brun acting as treasurer when they filed their first papers. In the late 1980s, Bob Gerner and Kristin Brun sold Westbrae Natural Foods (the food company) to a group of investors. In 1997, it was acquired by Hain, a national corporation. Gerner, however, returned to manage the original store, under a changed name, The Natural Grocery Company, with branches in Berkeley and nearby El Cerrito. These two popular stores have become employee-owned enterprises, retaining Gerner as manager. (El Cerrito Patch, "The Natural Grocery Company," <http://elcerrito.patch.com/listings/el-cerrito-natural-grocery-company>.)

¹⁵ Robert Neptune, *California's Uncommon Markets*, (Richmond, CA: Associated Cooperatives, Inc, 1971), 51.

¹⁶ *Bay Area Directory of Collectives 1977*, (Berkeley: Collective Directory Group, 1977-1985); "Cheese Board," *Directory of Collectives*, 1980-81.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture, *Soils and Men, Yearbook of Agriculture 1938* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938).

¹⁸ In 1981, Erewhon Trading Company filed for bankruptcy. Reorganized in 1986, it merged with U.S.

Mills, which distributes their line of cereal products. Erewhon Natural Foods Market remains a very successful store in L.A.

¹⁹ Minnesota Historical Society, "North Country Co-op: History,"

<http://www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00074.xml>.

²⁰ Craig Cox, *Storefront Revolution, Food Co-ops and the Counterculture*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 40-41.

²¹ Morris Older, "The Peoples Food System," in *History of Collectivity in the San Francisco Bay Area*, ed. John Curl, (Berkeley: Homeward Press, 1982), 38-39; "The Rise and Demise of the Peoples Food System," *Grassroots*, Berkeley, July 1, 1981, 6-7. The role of Father Hagan is from an email from Adam Raskin to John Curl, November 8, 2011.

²² Older, "Peoples Food System," 39.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ "Articles of Incorporation of Noe Valley Free Store, Inc.," filed October 12, 1973.

²⁵ "Articles of Incorporation of San Francisco Common-Operating Warehouse, Inc.," filed December 11, 1974; "Articles of Incorporation of Semillas de Vida, Inc." filed December 11, 1974.

²⁶ "Veritable Vegetable," *Turnover* 10, March, 1976, 15.

²⁷ "Articles of Incorporation of Veritable Vegetable, Inc.," filed June 14, 1976.

²⁸ Interview with Mary Jane Evans, recorded July 25, 2011.

²⁹ *Storefront Extension*, April 14, 1975, 16.

³⁰ *Ibid.* May 28, 1975, 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Interview with David Loeb, recorded May 3, 2011.

³³ Rainbow Grocery Cooperative, "History."

³⁴ Interview with Nina Saltman, recorded June 20, 2011.

³⁵ Older, "Peoples Food System," 39-40.

³⁶ *Storefront Extension* 5, September 8, 1975, 6-9.

³⁷ Older, "People's Food System," 40.

³⁸ Interview with Paul Kivel, recorded July 11, 2011.

³⁹ *Turnover* 12, May-June 1976, 3-6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴¹ The two models reflect the classical anarchist/Marxist split in progressive and revolutionary politics dating back to the 1860s. Democratic centralism, however, did not come from Marx, but was devised by Lenin in 1904 (as described in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back*). The anarchist structural approach is based on egalitarian and voluntary association, with unhierarchical power always retained by the individual or small group. Democratic centralism in contrast is the hierarchical structure used by Communist parties around the world, invented by Lenin when the tsar ruled Russia with an iron fist and the Bolshevik Party was illegal and conspiratorial. It is based on a set of organizational principles: "the Party must be organized on the principle of *centralism*, having one set of rules and uniform Party discipline, one leading organ, the Party Congress, and in intervals between congresses, the Central Committee of the Party; the minority must submit to the majority, the various organizations must submit to the centre, and the lower organizations to the higher organizations" [*History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*, (San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1939), 49]. Lenin, ever the pragmatist, considered that under conspiratorial conditions the Party could not actually hold democratic elections for representatives to the Party Congresses, so the centralist factor had to temporarily predominate until tsardom was overthrown. When the Party could become open and legal, the Party organizations would be built on the principles of democratic elections. However, in practice, the Party Congresses never became more than rubber stamps, and the actual structure of democratic centralist organizations always remained highly centralized and disciplined.

⁴² *Common Ground: Newsletter of the West Coast Cooperative and Collective Food Workers* 3, April 1976, 14-15.

⁴³ *Turnover* 12, May-June 1976, 4.

⁴⁴ *Turnover* 10, March 1976, 35.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ A Peoples Cooperating Communities Trucking Collective, *Beyond Isolation: The West Coast Collective Food System As We See It*, (Oakland: Free Spirit, 1975), 4.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

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- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 3.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 5-8.
- ⁵⁰ Peg Pearson and Jake Baker, "Seattle Workers' Brigade: History of a Collective," in *Workplace Democracy and Social Change*, eds. Frank Lindenfels and Joyce Rothschild-Whitt (Boston: Porter Sargeant Publishers, 1982).
- ⁵¹ Gwen, "C. C. Grains: Sharing the Changes," *Out and About*, April 1978, 12. Quoted in Gary Atkins, *Gay Seattle: Stories of Exile and Belonging* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 140.
- ⁵² *Beyond Isolation*, 8.
- ⁵³ About Us, "TCW Food Coop," <http://www.aboutus.org/Tcwfoodcoop.com>.
- ⁵⁴ Gene Kahn, "Building the Granary at Big Lake," *The Tilth Newsletter* (Summer, 1977).
- ⁵⁵ Miriam J. Wells, "Political Mediation and Agricultural Cooperation: Strawberry Farms in California," *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 30, no. 2 (January 1982): 413-432.
- ⁵⁶ This narrative is primarily based on Kris Olson's account for the Minnesota Historical Society, and Craig Cox's history in *Storefront Revolution*, which are in general agreement.
- ⁵⁷ Minnesota Historical Society, "Minnesota Food Cooperatives: A History of the Food Cooperative Movement in Minnesota by Kris Olsen," <http://www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00561.xml>. Olsen, a movement activist, provides a reliable narrative of its origin.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid.
- ⁵⁹ Cy O'Neil, *Origins and Legacies, The History of a Cooperative Movement* (Minneapolis: Scoop Collective, 1979).
- ⁶⁰ Cox, *Storefront Revolution*, 37.
- ⁶¹ *Storefront Extension* 7, November 1975, 6.
- ⁶² *Common Ground* 3, 13, 19.
- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 1-2.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 15.
- ⁶⁶ Cox, *Storefront Revolution*, 52-54, 68-69.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid., 84-85.
- ⁶⁸ "Seige at Prattville," *The Movement* 3, no. 7, (July 1967): 4; H. Rap Brown, "SNCC Statement," *The Black Panther* 1, no. 5, (July 20, 1967): 4; Sandra Colvin and Franklin Howard, "For The People of Prattville," *Southern Courier* 3, no. 25 (February 17, 1967): 1, 6; Robin Reisig, "SNCC's Pickets Appeal to Kids," *Southern Courier* 3, no. 29, (July 15, 1967): 5; V. English, "Things Are Not Right In This Country-King," *Southern Courier* 4, no. 8 (February 24, 1968): 1.
- ⁶⁹ Cox, *Storefront Revolution*, 84.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid., 107.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., 61-62; "The Minneapolis Situation," *Common Ground* 3, 2.
- ⁷² Cox, *Storefront Revolution*, 68-71
- ⁷³ Ibid., 71-74.
- ⁷⁴ Ibid., 74-76.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid., 79-82.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., 97-98.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., 99.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid., 104.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid., 108.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid., 109.
- ⁸¹ Ibid., 112-118.
- ⁸² Ibid., 129.
- ⁸³ "The Food System Meets," *Turnover* 12 (May-June, 1976): 3-5.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid., 5-6.
- ⁸⁵ The term "Third World" was often used in America at that time to loosely mean anyone not entirely of European descent. It comes from the Maoist theory of the "three worlds." Many Americans assumed that the first two "worlds" were the Capitalist World and the Socialist World, lumping China and the USSR together. However, the First World actually consisted of the two cold war superpowers, the U.S. and the USSR; the Second World were the industrialized nations of Europe and Japan; and the Third World were the "developing" nations, or everybody else. According to this Maoist analysis, China was the natural leader of the Third World. Ironically, Many indigenous people considered themselves a Fourth World.

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- ⁸⁶ *Turnover* 12: 6.
- ⁸⁷ Older, "People's Food System," 41.
- ⁸⁸ "Ma's Questionnaire," *Turnover* 12, May-June, 1976, 7-8.
- ⁸⁹ *Turnover* 13, July-August 1976, 24.
- ⁹⁰ *Turnover* 16, November 1976, 23.
- ⁹¹ *Turnover* 13, July-August, 1976, 21.
- ⁹² *Turnover* 14, September, 1976, 8.
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, 7-8.
- ⁹⁴ Older, "People's Food System," 41.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ⁹⁶ Charlie, "Another View of the Food System," 50.
- ⁹⁷ Older, "Peoples Food System," 42.
- ⁹⁸ Charlie, "Another View," 50-51.
- ⁹⁹ Rae, "To Red Star Cheese," *Common Ground* 3, 7.
- ¹⁰⁰ Older, "Peoples Food System," 39.
- ¹⁰¹ "Statement of Merger," June 7, 1976.
- ¹⁰² Older, "Peoples Food System," 40.
- ¹⁰³ *Yoga Journal* (January 1978):10.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Turnover* 9, January 1976, 2.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Turnover* 11, April 1976, 2.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Turnover* 13, July, 1976, back cover.
- ¹⁰⁷ Letter to Earthwork from the Newsletter Collective; Letter to *Turnover* from the Directory Collective; *Profits still going up. Collectivize*, (pamphlet to accompany *Directory of Collectives 1976*), (San Francisco: Collective Directory Group, 1977), 14.
- ¹⁰⁸ King Collins, "From Student Life to Political Commune: The Radical Action Cooperative And The Situationist International," http://www.greenmac.com/CCE/RAC_01.html
- ¹⁰⁹ "Why we changed the Newsletter," *Common Ground* 3, 20.
- ¹¹⁰ See also King Collins, "Reincarnation of the Rebel Spirit: What Happened to the People's Food System?" *Directory of Collectives 1980-1981*, 50-53.
- ¹¹¹ Geoph Kozeny and John Curl, "The Collective Network in the San Francisco Bay Area," *Collective Networker Newsletter* 97 (June 1986). A dialog between two activists.
- ¹¹² "Minutes of Directory of Collectives Meeting at Paul's," 15.
- ¹¹³ *Common Ground* 3,10.
- ¹¹⁴ *Storefront Extension* 7 (November 1975): 2-4.
- ¹¹⁵ Paula Giese, "How the Old Co-ops Went Wrong," *Storefront Extension* 5 (September 8, 1975); *North Country Anvil* 11 (May 1974), 12 (July, 1974) and (September 1974); Lindenfels and Rothschild-Whitt, *Workplace Democracy and Social Change*.
- ¹¹⁶ Geri Spieler, *Taking Aim At The President* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009),140.
- ¹¹⁷ Interview with Paul Kivel, recorded July 11, 2011.
- ¹¹⁸ John Sinclair, "White Panther Statement," *Guitar Army, Fifth Estate* (1968): 105.
- ¹¹⁹ Spartacus Educational, "Bobby Seale, interviewed by CNN in August 1996," <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAseale.htm>.
- ¹²⁰ Interview with Nina Saltman, recorded June 20, 2011.
- ¹²¹ *Time Magazine*, Oct. 6, 1975, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,913516,00.html>
- ¹²² "Satcher Replies to BGF," *Berkeley Barb*, August 8, 1975, 4.
- ¹²³ The Rabble Rousers, "Murder, Bank Robbery, and the People's Food System," *Grassroots*, July 15, 1981, 5.
- ¹²⁴ Wikipedia, "Black Guerrilla Family," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Guerrilla_Family
- ¹²⁵ Interview with Kathleen Fusek, recorded May 13, 2011.
- ¹²⁶ Imilla Cabral and Bill Wallace, "Get those crazy people off the streets!" *Berkeley Barb* 28, no. 7 (January 4, 1979): 12.
- ¹²⁷ Tom Buckley, "For Sara Moore, Brilliant Roles Enriched a Drab Life," *New York Times*, December 21, 1975, 32.
- ¹²⁸ Cabral and Wallace, "Off the streets!"
- ¹²⁹ Tom Buckley, "For Sara Moore."
- ¹³⁰ Imilla Cabral and Bill Wallace, "Showdown and Shootout," *Berkeley Barb* 28, no. 6, December. 21,

1978, 8.

¹³¹ “Articles of Incorporation of Wellsprings–Communion, Incorporated,” January 6, 1977. Franchise Tax Board tax exemption issued January 6, 1977.

¹³² The Rabble Rousers, 5.

¹³³ Cabral and Wallace, “Showdown and Shootout.”

¹³⁴ Interview with Mary Jane Evans, recorded July 25, 2011.

¹³⁵ Interview with Morris Older, recorded July 30, 2011.

¹³⁶ Interview with Nina Saltman, recorded June 20, 2011.

¹³⁷ Interview with Paul Kivel, recorded July 11, 2011.

¹³⁸ Cabral and Wallace, “Off the Streets!”

¹³⁹ Cabral and Wallace, “Showdown and Shootout.”

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Older, “People’s Food System,” 43.

¹⁴² Interview with Mary Jane Evans, recorded July 25, 2011.

¹⁴³ “Research on the Economic Impact of Cooperatives Project: Grocery Cooperatives,” University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives, Revised June 19, 2009, <http://reic.uwcc.wisc.edu/groceries/default.htm>.

¹⁴⁴ Case and Taylor, *Co-ops, Communes and Collectives*, 90.

¹⁴⁵ Organic Trade Association, “Industry Statistics and Projected Growth: 2011 Organic Industry Survey,” <http://www.ota.com/organic/mt/business.html>.

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Nina Saltman, recorded June 20, 2011.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Mary Jane Evans, recorded July 25, 2011.

¹⁴⁸ Rainbow Grocery Cooperative, “History 2,” <http://www.rainbow.coop/history2/>.

¹⁴⁹ Minnesota Historical Society, “North Country Co-op,”

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¹⁵⁰ Ibid., “Minnesota Food Cooperatives,” <http://www.mnhs.org/library/findaids/00561.xml>.

¹⁵¹ Cox, *Storefront Revolution*, 137.

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¹⁵³ Alvarado Street Bakery, “About Us,” http://www.alvaradostreetbakery.com/about_us.html; Steven van Yoder, “California Dreaming Becomes a Reality: How Alvarado Street Bakery Went from Hippie Collective to Commercially Successful Co-op,” *Ode*, October 2010,

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<http://www.srcommunitymarket.com/storehistory.html>.

¹⁵⁴ Peg Pearson and Jake Baker, “Seattle Workers’ Brigade: History of a Collective,”

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¹⁵⁶ *Common Ground* 2, January 1976, 5.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁵⁸ The Co-operative Learning Centre, “East End Food Co-operative,”

<http://www.learningcentre.coop/resource/east-end-food-co-operative>; Galleria, “Stories of

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Cooperative,” <http://bcics.uvic.ca/galleria/bc.php?group=15&tourtype=1&story=22>

¹⁵⁹ “Austin Community Project: Building a Cooperative Community,” *Communities*

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¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 44.

¹⁶¹ “Austin, a Time of Changes,” *Communities Magazine* 26, May, 1977, 27.

¹⁶² Michael Owens and Dan Gillote, “Learning While Leaping: Wheatsville Food Coop’s expansion,” *Co-op Grocer* No. 146 (Jan.–Feb. 2010).

¹⁶³ Veritable Vegetable, “Our Heart,”

<http://www.veritablevegetable.com/Our%20Heart/Our%20Mission/MissionNew.php>.

¹⁶⁴ Ward Churchill, *Agents of Repression*, (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 68.