

I. INTRODUCTION.

We — Timothy Bazemore, Celia Cherry, Lila Dudley, Steve Dawson and I — as dissimilar a group as you could expect to find struggling to found a member-owned, worker-managed cut and sew cooperative anywhere (but particularly in rural Windsor, North Carolina) — commenced our efforts sharing two goals for starting a garment factory: to make demanding, often monotonous work pay off equally for all permanent employees, and to encourage democracy in the workplace they owned. We were thrown together in this improbable undertaking when another Windsor sewing factory, Bertie Industries, Inc., went bankrupt, leaving nearly one hundred thirty persons, most of them women who headed households, without jobs in one of the nation's most impoverished counties. Dawson and I, the only members of the founding group who did not live in or near Windsor and who had not worked for Bertie Industries, had been asked by Bazemore and the others to help try to keep the ailing firm from going under. There is much to tell of the business which came to be called Worker's Owned Sewing Company, Inc. This account, however, focuses on the educational process we decided upon and implemented, rather than on other essentials such as marketing, planning, financing, or the firm's brief but dramatic history.

Each of us, Bazemore, Cherry, Dudley, Dawson and me, had firsthand experiences with cooperatives of one sort or another. Collectively, therefore, we knew some of them failed because of improper management or faulty organization. Others fell victim to competitors organized in capitalism's traditional forms or factors beyond their control. Technological changes, politics, national financial conditions and market forces buffet all business enterprises, and cooperatives are no exception. Dawson and I speculated that the lack of democratic experience among workers themselves may have been a determining factor in the demise of other cooperatives. To correct the perceived shortcoming in previous efforts to make the transition from traditionally managed firms to democratically managed ones, we determined that a principal objective in the founding of the Workers' Owned Sewing Company would be the creation of an educational process devoted equally to the encouragement of production and of democracy.

Work at Bertie Industries taught the founders, particularly Bazemore, Cherry and Dudley, that each employee had to possess or quickly acquire skill at producing garments at rates of speed sufficient to insure profits. The volatile nature of the garment industry overall, plus the ruthless competition between the multitude of small sewing firms in the South, demanded high productivity with regularity. Our dream of a worker-managed and owned firm demanded experience with democracy's less quantifiable rights, responsibilities, and methods. We asked: Could the workplace become a learning place, too? Could supervisors become teachers rather than demanding bosses seeking only higher performance levels? Could workers with no previous authority learn to make decisions about their work and empower themselves with the capability for collaborative problem-solving?

Our decision to devote as much energy to education as to manufacturing appears to represent a first of its kind in non-formal education, as well as a new stage in the maturing of production cooperatives in America. The energizing questions and resulting process propelled my life for two years. This study is not without its