

**Working Together: recording and preserving the heritage of the workers' co-operative**

**movement**

**Ref no:**

**Name:** Sam Eardley

**Worker Co-ops:** Unicorn Grocery

**Date of recording:** 26/04/2018

**Location of interview:** Unicorn Grocery

**Name of interviewer:** Lucy-Kay Brownson

**Number of tracks:** 1

**Additional Material:** n/a

**Copyright/clearance:** Assigned to the National Co-operative Archive

**Transcript compiled by:** Philippa Lewis

**Number of transcript pages:** 11

**Interviewer's comments:** The interviewer Lucy, is a casual worker at Unicorn Grocery.

**Summary:**

[00:00:00] Sam outlines how he first came to be involved with Unicorn Grocery (Chorlton, Manchester). [00:01:43] Discusses decision to move from a casual worker to a full-time member of Unicorn. [00:04:14] Talks about decision making at Unicorn. [00:06:28] Discusses introducing new members to ways of working at Unicorn. Talks about the idea of sociocracy. [00:10:23] Talks about the different structure of Unicorn over time. [00:13:09] Talks about difference between working in a workers co-operative vs other types of business. [00:15:26] Sam outlines what he likes most about working at Unicorn, and what he'd like to see improved.

**Transcript:**

[Recorded outside, can hear traffic noise in background/wind]

[00:00:00]

*Interviewer: Ok, so if you just want to start by telling me a little bit about how you became involved with the worker co-op movement, and Unicorn in particular.*

Sam: Yeah, well, essentially I kind of fell into it, yeah, I started as a casual worker, and, yeah I had no idea that it was a worker co-op when I started, somewhere along I first thought, my first day or first week or something I probably said, you know 'who's the boss round here?' [incomp] and I didn't really know what it meant either, yeah, and I guess if you kind of fast forward to know, I so kind of ingrained in it that yeah, it's a struggle to work in any other way but, yeah, so kind of chance that I ended up here really, and then yeah, stayed [laughing].

[00:00:57]

*How long have you been working here?*

I've been a member for, I think it's about 14 years

*Long time then*

Yeah, yeah, and yeah was a casual<sup>1</sup> for a little bit before that as well.

*Did you know, so I take it you didn't, did you not really know much about the worker co-op movement, did you kind of pick it up as you started working here?*

---

<sup>1</sup> Casual worker as opposed to a member

Yeah, I mean like I said I didn't know that Unicorn was a worker co-op, didn't really know what a worker co-op was, and I certainly didn't know that a worker co-op movement existed, so yeah I was pretty ignorant to start with, yeah.

[00:01:43]

*Sorry give me one second[shifting/testing the recorder] So what kind of, what interests you, I guess now or, thinking about when you became driven to, to get a bit more involved with Unicorn, and take up membership and stuff, what interested you about those, about the different sort of aspects of a worker co-op as opposed to a regular workplace?*

Yeah, again, sort of deciding to go from, a casual worker to a, a member of the co-op was, probably again sort of, that was the only route to stick around I think at the time and, so, yeah, I can't, pretend that I had, you know I was full of these, principles that, that drove me into it, but retrospectively I'm all about it and, yeah, it's...yeah it now, like I say it's kind of ingrained on me now and it seems like such a natural way to work that if I, now, started again in a, hierarchical business, it would, seem completely kind of alien to me, the idea of someone sort of telling me what to do, which isn't to say that...within a workers co-op there isn't, it's all a complete free for all by any means, and, it's just all about, one moment you're kind of in a kind of supervisory role and then, later in the day you're, someone else is kind of, kind of in a supervisory role, but you're kind of answering to it in a way and, but most of the time it sort of feels invisible really, you don't, there isn't, there isn't a sense of any, you don't have sense of any of the structure, and again, I don't mean that in a bad way, in a sort of, anarchic kind of way, it just, things for the most part, just work, you don't have to think about it, and then now and again, yeah, you have to stop and, make a decision and, in a collective way but, yeah, it's, it's something that's [incomp] very used to now, yeah I don't, I don't kind of stop to think about it in this way very often I suppose.

[00:04:14]

*Yeah, yeah I guess I mean, I guess when you're within a structure like that I guess so often that you're getting on with your working life that you don't really think of how radically different it is to other places, like this is definitely way different in, even in primarily like, mostly flat structure, than anywhere else that I've experienced I guess. Do you think that that, it generally works cohesively here, and for instance like the collective decision making and stuff, the consensus voting and things like that, how do you think that works?*

Yeah...yeah for the most part it works for a, sometimes it can feel, sort of slower than it might be with sort of one person at the top going 'I've made a decision, the decision is made', but, at least, from my point of view, that's not a, that's not a bad thing to kind of slow it down a little bit, it can be, it can feel a bit frustrating sometimes but yeah, and any of the decision that, are a bit sort of controversial, and just sort of are a bit, yeah, not kind of, no brainers, yeah, it can, yeah, sort of I guess there's no, there's no system in the world that could make that any less so, so yeah, sometimes it can be, it can get...a little bit more difficult, when discussing difficult things, but the structure, yeah, in a way, since, since sort of growing a bit larger, it can make it, make it a little bit more difficult to...have a sort of natural, discussion in a group of 70 odd, we are, we are looking at different, different, ways to, for, ways to sort of increase peoples participation and sense of participation, in those decisions.

[00:06:28]

*Do you think that, this is just I guess kind of a question off the bat really, but do you think, that, as a bit more of an experienced co-op worker here, a bit of a long term one, do you find, how do you find that I guess like, I imagine that you must feel quite confident now in that decision making process, how do you think, it is for newer members, for instance we've had the new members recently, how do you as a co-op member help them to feel still on quite a level playing field in that respect? If that [incomp] a really convoluted question yeah [laughing]*

No, no, it's bang on actually. It's, and yeah, and it is something that you have to kind of remind yourself about from time to time, because yeah, there is, there is a slight, contradiction in, and I remember it from when I started as, as yeah you do feel like you're entering on this level playing field, but when I started I was sort of, it was almost a sense of not exactly sort of guilt exactly, but it's just like, 'ok, right, I am now at the level of these

people that have been here for a long time, I'm being paid the same, how do I kind of make myself, how do I sort of make myself ok with that, and make sure that, you know, they're ok with it and, yeah', but now with the, with the sort of hindsight of being one of the, sort of long-serving people, I don't, yeah, I don't kind of see new people and think 'come on, come on you've got to' [clapping to hurry up] 'come on you're on the same money as me here', [both laughing] it doesn't, yeah I genuinely don't think of it like that, but, yeah, I guess it, you have to be conscious of, yeah, especially if you kind of like the sound of your own voice [laughing] which I sort of do and don't at the same time, yeah, it's easy to, to get a bit, yeah perhaps a bit overconfident and think I have the experience of sort of, so yeah there are, there are times when you, when you have meetings and you think, 'you know what, it's kind of the same people that are contributing here', and I think that's why we're now looking at, yeah, we're always kind of looking at ways to, to, in a natural way, bring people on, so there's yeah, there's something well, it would take me a long time to go into it, and I'm kind of very new to it as well, there's something called sociocracy which is a, yeah a...yeah a, a sort of structure for, people working together that, yeah, we're just sort of at the very beginnings of looking into it at the moment so, yeah, so we were trying sort of these smaller groups where we would talk, in a circle where you don't, you wait for the person to finish saying what, they're saying, so having broken all, the whole membership into sort of smaller groups, everyone has said something in a kind of equal way, nobodies butting in, over each other and, the downside is that, some, what you said in smaller groups may not fully get represented back to the larger group but, yeah, it felt, I think people are quite, a lot of people are quite excited about it, and yeah, and sort of you know people getting a lot of sort of good feelings about that so, but then again, it's something perhaps that we could've done, 10 or 15 years ago, which is what I mean about sometimes things can work very slowly [laughing] and you only think about, sometimes you do things for a while and when you change them you think, 'I don't know why we didn't change this a long time ago but', seems to be the nature of things.

[00:10:23]

*Oh but it's good that you're making that change though, it seems like the kind of place where, I don't know, I think progress does get, it could, the business seems like it's constantly progressing in different areas and stuff so...*

Yeah, yeah.

*In that way I guess it's really good. Can you remember much about what it was like before that, when it was just, sort of a bit of a larger open forum?*

I started when it was...yeah, there was a, a fairly long time where there was a membership of 15, and we sort of deliberately capped it at 15, I think it's what was described as a family sized group or something like that, a group that's, you know there's a sort of, you can sit in a circle and you can have a discussion where everyone is able to kind of contribute, in a sort of natural discussion kind of a way, and it was deliberately, sort of capped at that, at that number for a while, and then there was a, there was a big...well yeah, it was when we, when we expanded the shop and bought the premises and expanded the shop, the sales went, sort of through the roof rather and, the staff, the casual staff started going through the roof and then at that point they realised that, yeah in order to keep it, as a co-op it would have to go beyond that 15, and so at that point, the thing, that was a, genuine, difference of structure at that point you know, instead of every two weeks the whole membership would meet and have a members meeting, there would be, yeah, there was, lots of splitting into , task forces, groups, teams, and then representatives of their teams meeting in a smaller group, so yeah, I was sort of, but I wasn't, I was at the start of that so I didn't see it before...beforehand, I was around as a casual but, yeah I was never in the meetings.

[00:12:28]

*Yeah, I guess before that, I mean, with such a difference in size, in terms of membership it must've been, probably a lot different in terms of how easy it was to control the flow of conversations, you know, although arguably, a room full of 15 people that's still [laughing] quite a lot.*

Yeah, yeah, there was a few meetings where I, where I, when I was sort of on the shop floor while everyone was in a room somewhere and then came out, and I was like 'oh glad I wasn't

in that meeting' [both laughing]

[checking microphone]

[00:13:09]

*Yeah, so, I guess, another thing that I wanted to ask you about, we kind of touched on it a little bit, was, you're quite a long term member here and stuff but, can you, what, would you say, is quite different, apart from the obvious differences, than working at another place you might've worked at in the past? I guess primarily in terms of...the, work ethic you might experience that kind of thing.*

Yeah, definitely feels like there's a, again it's slightly kind of invisible in a way, and you start to take it for granted, but, yeah, there is a sort of collective thing that...

*Sorry, that's quite a hard question isn't it [both laughing]*

Yeah, in a way that, yeah, I, like I said, I'm slightly kind of brainwashed, into, co-operative working, and, the only, I did a few sort of brief jobs, at quite a young age, in, you know, as a constructor, I haven't spent masses of time in them so, yeah spent [incomp] there's yeah, yeah it does feel probably when I think back to, how it was it's completely different, and in terms of, the idea of kind of responsibility, you just kind of, yeah, when you're at the kind of bottom of a, a hierarchical structure it's a bit of like, you know everything is someone else's problem and, you know, you just, yeah but there's a, but I suppose there is a sort of, [someone talking and laughing in the background] you can kind of be, social within a hierarchical structure, it's never quite as natural as in, [incomp] yeah, I guess the co-operative structure kind of mirrors, a kind of social, kind of democracy in a way, so you can be friends with your boss in a hierarchical [incomp] but it's never quite, it's never sort of, it's always, there's always something slightly unnatural about it, I suppose.

[00:15:26]

*Yeah totally. Yeah I always think that the notions of co-operativism and particularly when you apply it to a work place, are very similar to notions of how to build a community and stuff, when you think about, [incomp blocked out by background noise] social scale, and [incomp] scale [incomp] very similar I guess. Yeah, I guess the final thing I want to round it off was, was, what would you say you, most like about working here, and then by contrast what do you think you kind of, dislike or, just [incomp] you don't enjoy as much.*

Yeah, like I think, it's difficult to narrow it down properly, there is, yeah, like I said, the thing about the, the kind of structure [incomp] kind of social, structures is kind of really important to me, it kind of, just...I don't come here just to talk to people but it, it's kind of a massive, it, if this was suddenly taken away, it would kind of, life would feel very different in a kind of social way, and, but yeah, also the, the sense of, of...yeah the...there's a sort of tangible sense of what you're doing is something to be proud of, and something that you're connected quite directly with, and if you don't, you're not doing it for someone else, for ultimately someone else's gain or, under someone else's, kind of ideology, you do it because, it's something you're part of and, the things that you do are, directly, and because we kind of work in multiple different ways throughout the day, sometimes you can kind of do something, and I don't know, you've kind of bagged up a bag of peppers backstage and then you're on to the till, and you're like 'alright I did that', and then you talk to the person about it, or maybe you've kind of talked to the person on the, on the shop floor as well, and yeah, you just kind of, see things through from, very different parts of the business, in terms of things I dislike about it [pause] I don't want to sound too rose tinted but [pause] yeah, like, well it's obviously, it's not coming...I wasn't ready with an answer so I guess it can't be that bad [both laughing] I was like 'right I'll tell you what's right', but...yeah I suppose, I suppose, the only thing that I'm slightly kind of, perhaps a bit, a little bit jealous of in the way of, so, I guess if, if someone, outside of here, if some person with a load of money thought I want to roll Unicorn out across the country, in a way that I think could be done, you know, we know in works, Chorlton's quite a specific place and we're sort of very lucky with it, we just are, one location [someone comes outside and speaks in the background] it's... it is, I don't know, yeah I think if someone threw a load of money at it, you could have Unicorn's all over the country, but we aren't in a position to do that, certainly not, you know we're

thinking about a second shop, but that's kind of small fry in comparison to what someone else could do, so yeah I guess if there's a frustration it's, I think this is amazing, if I could click my fingers and have it, rolled out over the country, overnight I would do, I mean I don't see why it couldn't be done, but there's no way we can do it, and it would also, has a lot to do with...the personnel really, it's just, it takes us a long time to build up this core of people that, we really kind of, that we all feel comfortable with each other and, we're really proud to work with each other, it takes a long time to do that, and it would be very difficult for us to suddenly recruit 40 people to run a new shop out of the blue, and 100's of people to run multiple shops out of the blue and think that they would work, because it's not just the, it's not just the kind of structure of Unicorn, it's also the...yeah, it's absolutely the way that the team works, this isn't just something that's happened overnight, it's over years and years of, recruiting in a way, that has kind of worked for people.

[00:20:42]

*Yeah, no, there's something very true in that definitely, I think a question that you get quite a lot, and that I've got quite a lot as a casual is, what will happen with the [incomp] next door?, And are you going to extend that, and have you ever thought about opening a place in such a such a town? And the key thing with that is like you said the, I guess the trust element of that, and knowing that people can commit, to that and are ready to commit to that and like, the co-operative structure is, a very, yeah, as you kind of said, it's very, very different from anywhere else, and not, I think off-the-cuff, lots of people can say that they can, deal with that, or get used to that, but it does take quite a long time, and definitely takes quite a while to build up that sense of cohesion between all the members and stuff like that, and how it works.*

Yeah, I mean hopefully it's not too kind of cult-y and cliquey as well [both laughing] but it absolutely could, we could, there's a sense of you know certain [incomp] kind of, you know fits in with the Unicorn type or something, which is actually a very, very broad type, I think we're in many ways very different, and in other ways we've got, yeah, there is perhaps some kind of single thread that holds us together. Yeah, as long as we don't get too stuck in our ways, and don't think about, always trying to get the same kind of people to do it.

*Cool, I think that's about all I've got for you, but yeah, thanks very much for talking to me.  
I'll stop there.*