

Expanded abstract

Cooperative development based on labor union impulse. The case of Artist and related trades Cooperatives in Uruguay

The relation between cooperatives and trade unions is envisioned as increasingly necessary, as stated in the Declaration of the Second International Meeting on Cooperativism and Trade Unionism in Latin America in 2017. In this regard, it should be noted that Uruguayan cooperativism has been characterized since its origins by its strong links with trade unions (Bertullo, Isola, Castro and Silveira, 2004). Likewise, unions have opted for the cooperative model as a tool to provide solutions to the needs of their members on many occasions (Rieiro, 2008).

One of the most recent examples is the creation of a new cooperative type: the Cooperatives of Artists and Related Trades (CAOC). This legal figure emerged in 2008, from an innovative proposal of the Performing Arts Unions to enable the inclusion of this informal sector in the social security system, immersed in labor precariousness and traditionally unprotected.

Objectives

Against this backdrop, the objective of this paper is to understand the relationship between the Performing Arts Unions who promoted the Artist's Law, establishing the Artists' Cooperatives, and the creation of the first CAOCs in the country. More specifically, the aim is to analyze the role of the unions in the agenda and decision-making processes of these cooperatives, in which ways they have been strengthened and in which ones they limit their development. Finally, we explore how they have managed the COVID-19 crisis.

Methodological approach

On the basis of a qualitative case study, which furthers the findings of previous research, we analyze the functioning of two artists' cooperatives of union origin in Uruguay (COOPAUDEM and VALORARTE). They were selected due to the nature of its inception as a tool for social inclusion and their exclusive composition by union members, which makes them a unique case both within the CAOCs and the Uruguayan cooperative system as a whole.

The qualitative approach is based, on the one hand, on 7 semi-structured interviews, in 2022, to the leaders of the 2 cooperatives under study, as well as to the 3 performing arts unions linked to them, and to referents of the cooperative movement. On the other hand, it is built on the analysis of documentation presented by the institutions to visualize the way in which they perceived and presented themselves to potential members. In addition, we resorted to elements generated in the previous research on CAOCs conducted by this research team in 2018:

the interviews conducted with leaders of Coopaudem and Valorarte, the former national director of Social Security of the MTSS, a member of the Honorary Cooperative Commission (CHC) and reference in the drafting of the LSC were used for this research, as well as the records of the Focus Group carried out with leaders of Coopaudem, Cooparte and Valorarte. These interviews were conducted within the framework of the research by). The fragments cited in this document were not used at the time in the previous article (Etcheverry et al, 2019).

Results

We found that its conception as a “tool” to solve the artists’ need for formalization has been kept. The cooperative manages the funds generated from the work of its members, makes contributions to the corresponding organizations, and deals with labor contracts. The union defends the rights of the artists, in particular those of its members, and also generates job opportunities, since it is the one who negotiates the contracts and establishes artistic fees in some specific cases.

However, the non-participation of the cooperative sector as a whole in the creation of this new type of cooperatives has caused different expectations over the CAOCs. In turn, it has generated a weak feeling of belonging between the new cooperatives and the wider movement that includes them, perpetuated, although to a lesser extent, up to the present day.

According to the interviewees, member participation in decision-making structures is low, particularly in the cooperatives. In a certain way, they say, because it is difficult for them to feel part of, to embrace the cooperative: “it has been very difficult for us to make the member understand (...) that it is not only the office that bills” (Interviewee, C, personal communication, February 23, 2022), and in general the artists feel more identified with the union than with their cooperative, “in the cooperative nobody participates (...) participation is in the union” (Interviewee E, personal communication, March 10, 2022).

However, among the managers of all the organizations consulted, there is consensus that this relationship between the union and cooperatives is beneficial. They do not think of one without the other (especially the cooperative). Such is the commitment assumed by the union towards the cooperative that in one of the cases the union member who is not part of the cooperative “is half a member” (Interviewee E, personal communication, March 10, 2022). Likewise, in order to be a cooperative member, besides the legal requirements, one must be a member of the union. Therefore, an artist who is not a union member and wants to be part of the cooperative, must first join the union “to which the cooperative belongs”.

This communion between the union and the cooperative finds the opposite situation in the relation between cooperatives and the rest of the cooperative sector. This translates into a lack of knowledge of the cooperative sector about the functioning, particularities, successes or difficulties presented by these cooperatives, as well as the underutilization of available resources by the CAOCs, and the possibility of including their demands and claims in the development plans of the cooperative sector at the national and international level.

During the pandemic, the union and the cooperative functioned in an articulated manner in terms of the support they gave to the artistic sector, and in which the CAOCs responded to the

needs of the artistic sector in general and not only to the needs of their members. What stands out again is that the place of the cooperative is to accompany the definitions of the union, operationalizing the demands, achievements and union policies, without resorting to the support of the cooperative sector, and without integrating itself to the demands of that movement.

Research limitations

In relation to the limitations of this work, one of the main ones is related to the fact that the voices are those of the leaders: it would be enriched by including the voices of members who are not part of decision-making bodies or occupy responsibility positions in the management of the organizations.

Conclusions

After analyzing the findings, we can conclude that the leading union role is maintained. It is understood that the cooperatives belong to the unions and function, in short, as a single organization with two major areas of responsibility, complementing and supporting each other, with differentiated roles in decision-making, but with a clear slogan: the cooperative is a tool of the union.

This symbiosis, as proposed by the cooperative sector, calls into question the fulfillment of the principle of free membership and organizational autonomy, which are constitutive of cooperative organizations. It is not only an articulation or a strategic alliance that strengthens the artists who are members of both organizations, the cooperative is not conceived without the union. To such an extent that this is the reality that if the unions were able to invoice and make the corresponding contributions for the work of their members, it is possible to venture that these two artists' cooperatives would not exist and possibly neither would the CAOCs legal figure.

In addition, the relationship of the majority of the artists with their cooperative is indirect and based on necessity. This translates, as was mentioned by the interviewees, into poor participation in decision-making processes and, therefore, few demands to the cooperative and few contributions to the innovation and development of the organization.

However, based on the evaluations made by those who are or were members of the Directive Commissions, the benefit of this joint work between cooperatives and unions is highlighted. The strength and solvency provided by the union support to the cooperative, mainly in terms of labor security and guaranteed labor conditions for their members through joint negotiations, is underlined. In this sense, the pandemic shows a virtuous alliance between these organizations, since the performance during its development was the result of the articulation between unions and between unions and their cooperatives. That said, the need for dialogue between the two movements to strengthen shared principles and values is evident.

Original value

Finally, this article makes it possible to disseminate a valuable, novel and scarcely-studied experience in an analytical and critical approach; it points out the synergies and limitations of the union-cooperative articulation in the specific case of these CAOCs, and promotes an exchange with other experiences that seek similar solutions for the artistic sector. Likewise, it tries to encourage the rest of the cooperative sector to ponder the need to promote strategic alliances and advance, with the workers at the center, towards their common goal, a democratic and solidarity-based economy.