**Headline:** How One Organization Is Helping to Grow Cooperative Businesses in New York City

**Teaser:** Green Worker Cooperatives nurtures co-op startups in the South Bronx.

By Aric Sleeper

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**[Article Body:]**

Mention a worker cooperative or a cooperatively owned business in casual conversation, and most people will be left scratching their heads and will need some elaboration on the concept, despite there being a 36 percent [increase](https://www.fiftybyfifty.org/2020/02/worker-co-ops-show-significant-growth-in-latest-survey-data/) in the number of cooperatives operating in the United States between 2013 and 2019. In addition to their recent growth, businesses owned and operated by employees, or worker cooperatives, have a long history in the United States and beyond.

“The idea of worker cooperatives has been around for a long time in the United States and in New York City. For example, in the Bronx, there is one of the [largest](https://community-wealth.org/content/cooperative-home-care-associates) worker cooperatives in the country called Cooperative Home Care Associates, with about 2,000 members, and there are many [worker cooperatives] internationally that have a long history, like the Mondragon [Corporation] in Spain,” says interim director and co-op developer at [Green Worker Cooperatives](https://www.greenworker.coop/) Danielle LeBlanc.

Green Worker Cooperatives is an [environmentally](https://www.greenworker.coop/mission) focused cooperative business incubator founded in the South Bronx by social entrepreneur Omar Freilla during the economic downturn of 2008. Cooperative developers like LeBlanc and her colleagues at Green Worker Cooperatives facilitate a five-month-long workshop series called the Co-op Learning Institute. They also provide one-on-one coaching and pro bono legal assistance for nascent cooperative businesses through their partner organization [TakeRoot Justice](https://takerootjustice.org/) and provide access to non-extractive financing through another partner organization, the [Working World](https://www.theworkingworld.org/us/).

“There is a strong need for this kind of work in New York City and outside of the city as well,” says LeBlanc. “Before the pandemic, we did the workshops in person and were constrained by the space we had. We would do two [workshops] a year and had a maximum of about 20 to 30 people who would fit in the space. After switching to virtual workshops [during the pandemic], we had more than 100 people who registered and about 75 people who committed to participate in the entire series.”

The workshop series begins with the world history of the cooperative model, which has its foundation in the [seven principles](https://www.greenworker.coop/faq) of operating a cooperative business that were established in England by the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers in 1844. The series then examines the advantages that cooperative businesses have over other business models.

“This model can work for any sized business and even existing businesses where, for example, the owner wants to retire and sell [the] business to the employees, who can then transform it into a cooperative,” says LeBlanc. “The positive thing about a cooperative is that everyone has ownership and makes decisions, which is important especially now when [workplace] health and safety issues are so important. Think about the [[incident](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/kentucky-tornado-factory-workers-threatened-firing-left-tornado-employ-rcna8581) in the] candle factory [in Kentucky in December 2021] where the workers were afraid to leave during a tornado [as they would have been fired]. Because the workers are owners [in a cooperative], they tend to find a balance between taking care of each other and making a profit.”

However, there are some real challenges inherent in the cooperative business model, according to LeBlanc. By definition, the owners of a cooperative business need to cooperate in order to get things done, and not everyone finds it natural to work well in a group.

“In life, we are not always used to working together to make collective decisions,” says LeBlanc. “We don’t have a lot of opportunities in life to make collective decisions, but that’s what a cooperative business is all about. You have to really think things through and learn how to deal with collective decision-making, which is why it’s one of the first topics we talk about in the… [Co-op Learning Institute]. You have to know yourself, and that can be a challenge sometimes.”

Green Worker Cooperatives has graduated a number of entrepreneurs from its institute over the years, and helped to form many cooperative businesses, such as the [White Pine Community Farm](https://www.greenworker.coop/whitepinecommunityfarm), [Revolutionary Seeds of Harlem](https://www.greenworker.coop/revolutionaryseedsharlem), [WE ARE EARTH](https://www.thewae.earth/) and [Solar Uptown Now Services](https://www.weact.org/campaigns/solar-uptown-now-services-solar-workers-cooperative/).

“Solar Uptown Now Services was formed by a number of individuals who went through solar installation training [conducted] through a workforce development program, but couldn’t find jobs after they completed their training, so they decided to start their own solar installation company,” says LeBlanc. “They went through our [Co-op Learning Institute] program and started their own cooperative. Now they have a number of projects and are working to get their general contracting license so they can bid for work themselves.”

Green Worker Cooperatives [received](https://www.nycommunitytrust.org/newsroom/october-2020-grants/) a grant from the New York Community Trust, which is a community foundation for the city, to work in collaboration with three doula cooperatives in New York City that graduated from the Co-op Learning Institute like the [Uptown Village Cooperative](https://www.uptownvillage.coop/). With the funds, the doula cooperatives established partnerships with local hospitals, and a mentorship and training program for future doulas. Through these doula cooperatives, more than 13,000 services have been provided to families in New York City.

“The funds allowed them [the doula cooperatives] to stay viable and move their services online during the pandemic. It also helped them to build out the doula network in the city, and it was a great success,” says LeBlanc.

Guiding entrepreneurs through the process of creating and growing a cooperative business into a viable enterprise is the most rewarding aspect of LeBlanc’s work, as the unique businesses that emerge from the Co-op Learning Institute may never have existed without the help of Green Worker Cooperatives.

“What’s the chance that some economic developer or someone from up high would come and try to start a cooperative business in Brooklyn that transforms shipping containers into community farms, or start a compost cooperative, or a doula cooperative? The people we help are so invested in their own communities, and just hearing them talk about their business is a joy as well.”

Moving forward, LeBlanc and her colleagues at Green Worker Cooperatives are looking to expand their resources. After seeing a rise in interest in their online workshops, they want to hire additional economic developers so they can offer more workshops and increase their outreach.

“Right now, we have about 75 people attending one Zoom meeting, and it would be great if we had the resources to offer classes more nights in the week or at different times of the year,” says LeBlanc. “Figuring out a way to spread the word to bring more resources to cooperative [business] building here in the city is my dream and goal.”