**Headline:** Software Developers in Oakland Are Putting People Over Profit

**Teaser:** How coders are working on creating community participation and democratic design.

By Damon Orion

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**[Article Body:]**

The webzine ShiftMag [points out](https://shiftmag.dev/unhappy-developers-stack-overflow-survey-3896) that 80 percent of software developers worldwide are unhappy with their jobs, yet 68 percent code outside the workplace as a hobby, according to a May 2024 survey by Developer Survey. This suggests that the dissatisfaction of these developers stems from job-related factors such as pressure-induced burnout and frustration with bureaucracy rather than the act of coding itself.

The digital solutions company Svitla [lists](https://svitla.com/blog/what-causes-a-lack-of-motivation-in-software-developers-and-how-to-prevent-it/) poor management, “excessive workload,” and “a lack of challenging or fulfilling projects” as catalysts for these conditions.

Two cooperatively owned and governed software development teams in Oakland, California, are finding potential solutions to these issues. One of these establishments is a [self-described](https://www.zinc.coop/) “open-source volunteer coding group of diverse individuals” called the Zinc Collective. Launched in September 2019, Zinc supports values-aligned organizations and “strive[s] for a post-scarcity society by creating and capturing value with human-centered, sustainable digital products and services.”

Zinc’s founder, Zee Spencer, is also the creator of [Cohere](https://www.cohere.coop/), a [worker-owned](https://www.cohere.coop/) software development group establishedin January 2018. While Zinc is strictly volunteer-based, Cohere is the primary source of income for most of its staff. Like Zinc, Cohere is rooted in cooperation, collaboration, and mutual aid and prefers to work with nonprofits and other values-aligned clients. [Ana Ulin](https://anaulin.org/), a worker-owner at both Zinc and Cohere, says Cohere also favors “small and medium businesses, as opposed to better-funded but less values-aligned clients.”

**Community Development**

Zinc’s two main products are [Moment Park](https://www.momentpark.com/) and [Convene](https://convene.zinc.coop/).The former is a collection of apps for restoring, protecting, and enhancing digital photos and videos. Sales from Moment Park generate a small amount of income that helps cover Zinc’s administrative and server costs.

[Convene](https://convene.zinc.coop/) is a digital platform where values-aligned individuals, communities, and businesses can build, maintain, and host web spaces, sometimes with the assistance of Zinc members. One such business is [Piikup](https://piikup.com/), an Oakland delivery service that works to uplift Black, queer, and justice-impacted individuals, survivors of abuse, and people with disabilities. Piikup delivers catering orders placed through the Convene-hosted [Piikup Marketplace](https://marketplace.piikup.com/).

Zinc’s website [states](https://convene.zinc.coop/) that during weekly community work sessions on Convene, coders “build features together, discuss project trajectory, and chat about building a digital solidarity economy together.”

Ulin explains, “For a long time, Zinc had subgroups: ‘Oh, there’s this handful of people who want to get better at [a certain] aspect of software building. They can get together every second Sunday and [work on a project that requires that skillset].’ Some members of the community who are more experienced in this area would also show up, work with them, and help them hone their skills.”

**Income Blending**

Zinc and Cohere are designed to be as democratic as possible. Members are encouraged to participate in the governance of these groups by attending meetings and discussing agenda items. “We strongly believe that if we all had more practice at running things together, whatever those things may be, that would [help create] a better world,” Ulin says.

This democratic ethos applies to Cohere’s pay structure as well. Rather than being paid by the hour, worker-owners declare the amount of time they plan to work per quarter in advance. “I might say, ‘For the next quarter, I want to work part-time for roughly 16 hours,’” Ulin explains. “It’s understood that it’s okay if some weeks I work a lot less or if I go on vacation, get sick, or have an emergency. The goal is to be a little bit kinder to ourselves and each other with the time we spend working and how we relate to the work.”

She contrasts this with the traditional hourly wage system, which “means that if I’m sick, I’m still trying to work. If I need to take a break for a week, I’m carefully thinking, ‘Hmm… can I afford that?’ It also means if an organization needs help but cannot pay our full rate, I’ll get paid less if I give them a discounted rate.”

Cohere’s compensation policy affords staff members greater freedom in their choices of clients. “If I decide to work for someone who pays less by the hour and one of the other members decides to work for someone who can pay more by the hour, we don’t take that into account when we make our payments,” Ulin says. “We blend all those rates and all of our income.”

**Striving for Diversity**

Besides striving to create an environment where everyone gets equal treatment, Cohere “tries to cultivate a membership that is not mostly white, male, and in their 20s,” Ulin says.

White males are especially overrepresented in the software development trade. According to [Data USA](https://datausa.io/profile/soc/software-developers), in 2022, 85.9 percent of the software developers were men, and 54.3 were white.

Ulin acknowledges that cultivating diversity “is challenging, because Cohere is very small, and everybody has come through our personal networks, which always comes with a certain bias. It would be our dream to have enough extra work so that people could [respond to] job postings, and we could broaden our networks that way.”

**Widening the Circle**

Zinc, for its part, broadens its networks by collaborating with solidarity circles in and around Oakland. For instance, members of the group have participated in and volunteered for events organized by the [Network of Bay Area Worker Cooperatives](https://www.instagram.com/nobawc/) (NoBAWC—pronounced “no boss”), an association of “democratic workplaces building community and power in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond.”

Ulin says the members of Zinc are “trying to figure out what we want to be and can be. We always welcome new people coming in, reaching out to us, and telling us what their dreams and inspirations are and seeing how those might fit within our collective.”