

## COMMENTS OF RUSTY SIVILS TO THE FBFC BOARD OF DIRECTORS NOV. 17, 2016

A little co-op history: About twenty years ago the Board hired as the new GM a man named Jim DeLuca, who was very smart, narcissist, seemingly unable to feel remorse, megalomaniac, and an expert salesman and manipulator—not unlike Donald Trump. He eventually proved to be such a tyrant that the staff were driven to unionize. In his hiring interview with the Board, he made the following statement: “It’s a grocery store. It’s not about saving the world.” When I heard that, I thought “Excuse me, it *is* about saving the world—that’s exactly what a cooperative should be about. It’s about empowering a local community to take control of their own lives, of their own economy, to be more than just customers, to be a model of democratic governance in a world that’s going to hell in a handbasket and where people feel powerless to stop it. These are the things we need to do to save the world. If it’s just a grocery store then why am I putting in all this time and energy into serving on this board—I could just as well shop at Earth Fare if the Co-op is just a grocery store.” I expressed this feeling to the other Board members but they hired him anyway, starting the Co-op on a long downhill slide from being a real cooperative.

I bring this up because I would like to prompt each of you to ask yourselves, why are you here? Are you here to represent the interests of the members of the Co-op who elected you? Are you here to promote the exercise of democratic member control, as stated in the second of the International Cooperative Principles? (There has been very little evidence of that in the last few years.) Are you here because it’s interesting and fun to be on a board? Are you here because it will be a star on your resume? Are you here to protect the interests of the staff? Our mission statement says that we will strive to provide our employees with a living wage and a sense of right livelihood. It does not say that we will run a jobs program, and advancing and protection the interests of the staff is the job of the Union, not the Board. When I was on the Board there was usually at least one staff mole on the Board, who tried very explicitly, though not openly, to advance staff interests.

The attitude at the Co-op seems to have been, keep your head down, don’t offend anyone and focus on making money. But making money for what? Just for the sake of growth? So we can have a bigger jobs program? To support the cooperative movement? That can hardly be the case when this is not a genuine cooperative.

A cooperative should be about saving the world, so to speak—in the sense that it should be an alternative to the dominant corporate economy (which is the engine that is destroying the world), it should be a model of democratic participation and it should be a community of people working together for a shared purpose. Right now the FBFC is none of these. We have drifted away from being a real cooperative because of a general lack of interest among our members in having a meaningful worker-member program because of their lack of a need for a discount, as well as the union contract.

Our members like the idea of belonging to a cooperative because, in my view, they yearn to support something that is an alternative to the corporate model, but they generally don’t notice that there is little reality behind the claim that this is a cooperative. And it doesn’t matter that much to them since the Co-op is not important to their lives. It doesn’t provide them with affordable food, or a sense

of community, or a sense of meaningful endeavor in the world. And it doesn't give them an opportunity for real participatory democracy, a sense of ownership and agency in what the Co-op does. Democratic member control should be one of the last shreds of the cooperative movement that the FBFC could offer. Our members will never again have a meaningful worker-member program and the sense of community that comes from that. But they could have real democratic control over what the Co-op does, the course it takes, and it would be much stronger for that and ultimately more successful. For instance, the whole question of the expansion could be referred to the members—they could decide the direction, the extent, the level of debt, etc. This would be so much more meaningful than having information and input meetings and surveys.

If anyone would like to discuss any of this with me, please call at 242-6073.