

2001

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Elizabeth A. Hoffmann

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Confrontations and Compromise: Dispute Resolution at a Worker Cooperative Coal Mine*

Research on dispute resolution consistently demonstrates that unequal distribution of power is a key factor in determining how grievances are resolved. Power imbalances can range from structural inequities between employer and employees (Edelman, Erlanger et al. 1993), to societal effects on gender interactions (Grillo 1991), to unequal levels of access to information and strategic positioning (Galanter 1974). Power, therefore, is a critical factor in studying grievance resolution. However, while few studies have investigated dispute resolution within organizations that attempt to minimize power imbalances, this paper does: It examines how grievances are resolved in a large worker cooperative.

A worker cooperative is a business in which all employees are owners, all owners are employees, and employees, themselves, manage the business. In addition, worker cooperatives usually adhere to an ideology that all members of the cooperative are equal (Linehan and Tucker 1983; Cornforth, Thomas et al. 1988). This type of organization is in contrast to more mainstream uses of the cooperative concept, which includes employee stock option plans (ESOPs) and employee management programs.

Through both ideology and structure, worker cooperatives attempt to achieve that which most sociology deems is impossible: From the classical writings of Weber and Michels to more recent studies, such as that of Lipset, Trow, and Coleman (1956), scholars have dismissed this more egalitarian workplace alternative. Weber argued that bureaucracy would come to dominate all aspects of life, replacing previous forms of organization, and that, once established, bureaucracies would be the most difficult type of social structure to destroy (Weber 1946). For Weber, the goal of creating an organization without authority would be utopian; he would consider this impossible to achieve in modern society. Other scholars also doubt the possibility of cooperative organization without hierarchy (Rothschild and Whitt 1986). For example, Robert Michels' famous statement vehemently expresses this sentiment: "Who says organization, says oligarchy" (Michels 1981: 49). Still today, hierarchy is seen as an inevitable development as organizations grow. Most researchers continue to doubt the possibility of large-scale success in achieving the type of democracy pursued by worker cooperatives: equality

among all workers and managers along with the elimination of hierarchies of power (Rothschild and Whitt 1986).

Nonetheless, other researchers have begun exploring these cooperative organizations (Kanter 1972; Swidler 1979; Henry 1983; Rosen, Klein et al. 1985; Russell 1985; Rothschild and Whitt 1986; Kleinman 1996; Oerton 1996; Isaac, Franke et al. 1998; Cheney 1999). These studies have found that an absent or limited hierarchy alters more than the organizational structure. Interpersonal dynamics, the languages of power and authority, and available means and procedures are all affected. While some of these studies have explored worker cooperatives, none has examined workplace grievance resolution specifically. Others have focused on grievance resolution, but instead of worker cooperatives they have looked at housing cooperatives, cooperative communities, and so on.ⁱ Nevertheless, these studies have begun and continue the growing scholarly interest in cooperatives of various types, including worker cooperatives.

By studying worker cooperatives, one can explore whether the workplace dynamics that are common in hierarchical businesses, as documented by earlier empirical data, are similarly present in these alternative organizations or if these alternative organizations truly offer an alternative. The cooperative ideology and flatter management structure may create no change, or it may radically affect myriad aspects of the business in positive or negative ways: Organization-wide functions might be more complex, involving more people, or less complex, comprising only a portion of a single position; organizational procedures could be conducted in a less bureaucratic, more cooperative manner, or in an inflexible authoritarian style; interactions between individuals might become more open or more stifled; or no change might occur.

Thus, cooperative workplaces may be indistinguishable from their conventional, hierarchical counterparts, or they may significantly differ from them. The key focus for exploration of these alternative workplaces is the area of grievance resolution. This inquiry is important for several reasons. First, grievance resolution is often a barometer of other aspects of the organization. Second, the success of an organization's grievance resolution will often affect other areas of the organization. Finally, grievance resolution is clearly important in its own right, providing a means for employee concerns to be answered and complaints to be addressed.

Although studies have been done on the raising of grievances in the workplace, few have examined disputes in nonhierarchical businesses. Businesses that operate without an emphasis on power divisions and formal hierarchy may produce a more egalitarian atmosphere with fewer articulated inequalities among workers. The nature and ideals of worker cooperatives raise the possibility that the barriers that workers face in raising a grievance in the workplace would be eliminated in a cooperative.

This paper will explore the resolution of grievances at a Welsh coal mine (colliery) at two different times: when it was government owned, as part of a large, very rigid, national hierarchy and after it had been bought by the employees and converted into a worker cooperative with a dramatically flattened hierarchy and more egalitarian management system. Comparisons of disputes were made between these two periods, based on interviews conducted after the conversion to a worker cooperative.

A. Theoretical Background

In order to move from encountering an injurious experience to actually claiming redress through a grievance or other formal means, a victim must pass through several stages. First, one must name the experience as injurious; next, one must blame someone for the injury, and finally, one must state a claim for redress (Felstiner, Abel et al. 1980-81). However, various individuals may have difficulty accomplishing the naming, blaming, and claiming stages of bringing a grievance because of disparities of power and status – possibly the very inequalities that caused the wrong to be done originally.ⁱⁱ A combination of one’s individual nature and one’s social position affects the victim’s ability to transform an injurious experience into a dispute (Felstiner, Abel et al. 1980-81; Grillo 1991).

In her path-breaking study of men and women, and their decisions about whether to pursue grievances, Bumiller found that one key reason why people did not pursue their claims is that they “legitimize their own defeat” (Bumiller 1988: 29). Many characterized the struggle against perpetrators as unwinnable: “me against the corporation” (Bumiller 1988: 52). Victims said they felt defensive when they did confront their perpetrators, and felt as if the confrontation was a “double punishment” (1988: 25). In addition, victims justified their inaction by exaggerating the tyrannical power of their opponents, often managers and supervisors.

According to the commonly professed cooperative ideology, such hesitancy toward bringing grievances will not be present in a worker cooperative (Thornley 1981; Cornforth, Thomas et al. 1988). Because each worker is an owner of the business, each should be empowered to assert her/his needs, feelings, and frustrations without the fear of having to face any “tyrannical power” or of her/his struggle being “unwinnable.” Rather, the cooperative structure and ideology should enable the members to raise issues, concerns, and problems, even unpopular ones. Success could be viewed as highly possible, since all members are formally equal, and thus, all have an equal chance to be heard. Rather than “tyrannical,” the cooperative grievance procedure might be supportive and conciliatory. Tucker’s research on an employee-owned business, although it was not defined as a cooperative, supports this possibility (1999). This study found that flatter organizations will deal with conflict less adversarially and more through conciliation and therapy. Knowledge that a problem would be dealt with therapeutically might make workers feel that the resolution of grievances is a safer, less frustrating, and certainly less “tyrannical” process.

However, merely changing the employment situation to a worker cooperative does not eliminate the presence of power, power struggles, and abuses of power. Although the cooperative ideology aims to remove unequal levels of power (Linehan and Tucker 1983; Cornforth, Thomas et al. 1988), such power is everywhere and such imbalances of power are ultimately unavoidable (Foucault 1978). While cooperatives try to remove the formal powers of conventional, hierarchical management systems, they cannot remove all other relationships from which power emerges (Henry 1983). Power is the effect of the inequalities that occur in numerous relationships, such as gender, economic, experiential, and knowledge relationships (Lukes 1974; Foucault 1978; Pfeffer 1978; Gaventa 1980). These dynamics are present everywhere, including in worker cooperatives.

Indeed, some central qualities of a worker cooperative may actually intensify certain forms of informal power and exacerbate workers’ inability to raise grievances. A perception of the needs of the cooperative as being more important or more valid than individuals’ needs may prevent some workers from voicing problems and bringing grievances forward. In studying hierarchical organizations, Bumiller found that victims who did not raise a grievance often held the belief that the authority responsible for the unjust action was benevolent and would not deliberately harm them (1988). This belief contributes to a more passive and accepting attitude of

victims toward mistreatment by superiors; this behavior may be even more pronounced in cooperative workplaces. The worker cooperative ideology may even strengthen this belief, increasing the levels of “trust” in managers; since these managers would also be members of the cooperative, it is understandable to trust that they would only wish to help the other workers. However, by assuming this type of paternalism, a victim may fall into an acceptance of unfair actions and conditions, inhibiting her/his ability to assert her/his needs and rights at each stage of the grievance process (Felstiner, Abel et al. 1980-81; Bumiller 1988). A strong worker cooperative ideology has the potential either to empower or disempower its members. How this ideology is manifested may be determined by who holds informal power, how that power is exercised, and how dispersed the power is (Henry 1983).

Power, however, is not necessarily easy to identify and study (Lukes 1974; Pfeffer 1978). Kanter states that power is “not equivalent to hierarchical position or to such measures of formal authority as numbers of subordinates. It is a much more subtle and elusive concept, referring to something often masked or hidden in organizations and is thus a concept that is difficult to measure” (1979: 62). Kanter differentiates two ways that organizational power can be obtained: through formal position attributes and through informal network connections (1979). Formal position attributes are the characteristics and activities associated with one’s job; informal network connections are the alliances made between workers throughout the organization (Kanter 1979).

In a cooperative, however, the boundary between these two becomes blurred. Both types of power may be present in a worker cooperative, but the exercise of formal power is less likely since cooperatives possess a specifically articulated ideology against such power. A primary tenet of worker cooperative ideology is that all work is equal and that certain jobs should not provide greater power (Linehan and Tucker 1983; Cornforth, Thomas et al. 1988). Although this ideology does not prevent formal position attributes from developing into power, it should inhibit both the growth of such power and any obvious displays of formal power deriving from formal position attributes. Informal power, however, may be more difficult to curtail either through egalitarian ideology or through a less hierarchical structure. Informal power may elude collective or individual efforts to redistribute power evenly. Because informal power may shift and realign less obtrusively, it also may be harder to identify. Both formal and informal power could affect a worker’s ability to raise a grievance in a

cooperative. Both types of power could silence potential grievances, preventing concerns from being raised, and both, also, could determine the outcome of disputes (Lukes 1974; Gaventa 1980). If power is unchecked in worker cooperatives, the raising of grievances would be even more difficult than in conventional businesses.

However, other aspects of the cooperative's organizational culture might counter this effect and act to heighten members' ability to raise grievances. Many would argue that the experience of being a member in a worker cooperative would strengthen one's ability to pursue wrongful actions and provide the confidence and empowerment necessary to raise a grievance over unjust treatment. Linehan and Tucker argue that by "participating in cooperatives, workers acquire new skills in organization and in self-management. Together they achieve what none of them could do alone. In this way, workers' cooperation allows people an opportunity to gain self-confidence" (1983: 18). Although it is unclear from earlier research how fully these goals are realized, ideology, structure, and ownership clearly have the potential to affect members' decisions regarding whether and how to raise grievances.

Additionally, the grievance behavior in worker cooperatives might be affected by the level of procedural justice found in the business. Tyler and Lind assert that if disputants receive procedural justice, they accept a wider range of distributive-justice outcomes (2000). Perceptions of procedural justice depend on whether disputants trust the authorities handling the dispute ("trust"), whether disputants feel that authorities see them as having full status in the group or society ("standing"), and whether disputants believe that they received nondiscriminatory, neutral treatment ("neutrality") (Tyler and Lind 2000). According to Tyler and Lind, trust reflects the individual authority's character, assures (or fails to assure) the disputant of the authority's future behavior, and is linked to inferences about the authority's sincerity. A disputant's feeling of standing in the group is strongly linked to her/his treatment; if the disputant is poorly treated by the authority, the implication is that s/he is not a full member of the group (Tyler and Lind 2000). Neutrality involves "honesty, unbiased treatment, consistency, and factual decision-making" and the perception of a "level playing field" (2000: 76). If people feel that authorities are fair in their decision making, they believe they can obey authorities' orders without fear of exploitation. However, if authorities seem to act unfairly, people fear exploitation, and obedience becomes less likely. Tyler and Lind explain that if people feel they are fairly treated (procedural justice), they enter "group mode," in which they are cooperative and establish behavior based on fairness rather

than expected outcomes. However, if they feel poorly treated, they enter “individual mode,” in which they act primarily to maximize their own short-term outcomes rather than focusing on fairness (2000).

Thus, the degree to which an organization’s authorities are trusted, respect members’ standing, and exercise neutrality affects how much its members will be reassured of procedural justice. In organizations that lack procedural justice, members will be self-centered and focus on their own benefits, pay, and workloads. In organizations that achieve procedural justice, members will work cooperatively with a sense of fairness toward the group. Worker cooperatives may or may not achieve such procedural justice. However, the equality and importance of every member symbolized by coownership, enabled by the flattened structure, and reinforced by the cooperative ideology imply that worker cooperatives are more likely to establish procedural justice and the subsequent “group mode” behavior described by Tyler and Lind (2000). A shift from “individual mode” to “group mode” has tremendous implications for dispute resolution.

In fact, the research presented in this paper suggests that cooperative ideology, shared ownership, and flatter structure together do affect dispute resolution. This paper examines an organization that has undergone a transition from a conventional hierarchical business into a worker cooperative. In the organization, the conversion to a worker cooperative appears to have changed how grievances were resolved, how many grievances were raised, and what was considered an appropriate grievance.

B. Methods

The comparisons of grievance behavior before and after the worker buyout are based on workers’ and managers’ perceptions. Below, I provide a description of the site, a brief history, and a few important statistics about the organization discussed here. Next, I explain why this particular site was chosen. Finally, I discuss the methodology used in this study.

1. The Company

This Welsh colliery had been owned by British Coal, the government board that took over the coal industry after nationalization.ⁱⁱⁱ In 1992, the mine was closed for a little less than one year, and the miners and other workers were given “redundancy money,” a large cash payment based on the duration of employment.

The closing of this mine meant the end of deep-pit mining in Wales. As part of the then-Tory government's privatization program, it was offered for private sale. Rather than remain unemployed or enter a lower-paid, lower-status occupation, many workers organized to buy it, with approximately 200 former employees putting in £8,000 (approximately \$13,000) each for the purchase price.^{iv} Some employees had enough money to do so from their redundancy pay. Others had to use their savings or negotiate loans. Today, this mine is the only worker-owned colliery in Europe.

Not all the workers employed at the colliery under British Coal came back to join the cooperative. Many older employees, whose redundancy payments were more substantial, chose retirement. Also, while all workers were invited to invest their money initially, those who hesitated too long found the mine no longer had a position for them.

Additionally, the members of this new cooperative were not only the former rank-and-file employees. By law, a mine must have certain professional managers in charge of various specified aspects, such as safety, engineering, and finance. These managers also had to buy into the cooperative with £8,000 each.

While these managers do have some significant day-to-day power over the miners, they are no longer in the position of privileged power they previously held. First, they are fewer in number; the mine has only one third the managers it had under British Coal even though it employs approximately the same number of miners. Moreover, the decisions of these managers can be overridden by the board of directors, which is elected annually by membership.^v Also, the managers who were invited to join the cooperative were carefully chosen. The majority were brought in from elsewhere, or had been working at the colliery previously, but only as undermanagers. The managers vary in the degree to which they support a cooperative ideology: one is so worker-identified that he is a member of the miners' union, while others view their current position as just another job and resent the interference by the Board of Directors and the cooperative ideology.

Thus, a minimal degree of hierarchy remains at the coal mine, even while the organization is much flatter and includes fewer supervisory levels than would be present in a conventional organization. Additionally, while some positions are still arranged within a hierarchical system, no position has complete power; decisions can be overridden by the elected board. Consultation with, and inputs by, those who are managed is the governing ideology. Thus, this organization is ideal for studying worker cooperatives: It has

embraced the cooperative ideology and structure, yet it maintains enough hierarchy to facilitate comparisons to conventional counterparts. The basic structure of the mining hierarchy for division of labor and safety maintenance -- surface workers, excavating miners, team captains, and managers -- is still sufficiently in place that direct comparisons can be made.

2. Selection of the Cooperative

The site described in this paper is ideal for examination of disputes and grievance resolution because it allows for special insights and exploration into the organization. First, the new company is a true worker cooperative -- as opposed, for example, to a housing cooperative or a collectively run organization owned by a private individual. Second, unlike many smaller worker cooperatives, it has a system for formal grievance resolution. Finally, it is sufficiently large that a formal grievance system is appropriate.

While people living in cooperative housing, shopping at a food cooperative, or processing and distributing their goods through a producer cooperative may encounter problems and raise disputes over various issues, these issues are unique to membership in that particular type of cooperative. However, issues that arise in a worker cooperative will often be similar to those that occur in a conventionally organized workplace. Problems concerning overtime, quality of work environment, harassment, safety, and pay increases are all common to both types of workplaces. Moreover, some may argue that a worker cooperative, in particular, is the type of cooperative that poses the greatest challenge to the argument that organizations must be hierarchical. While such activities as buying groceries and living with other people do not seem to necessitate a high level of organization, working together to earn a living must be highly structured and hierarchical in order to succeed. Also, shoppers in conventional stores and tenants in traditional rooming houses are not in a more hierarchical relationship to one another than shoppers in food cooperatives or tenants in housing cooperatives.

Because this study focuses on the resolution of grievances, the organization for this study had to have formal grievance procedures in which members had access to a formal way of resolving disputes and, potentially, the option of resolving the issues informally. Also, since most small worker cooperatives lack formal grievance procedures, the organization had to be at least moderately sized: with 50 or more employees.

Additionally, a larger organization was preferred in order to encompass workplace problems that arise only in larger companies as well as disputes that can occur in both large companies and small businesses.

This site met all the criteria. The mine has formal grievance procedures. These had been in place when the mine was owned by British Coal and incorporated the grievance rules of the local union. When the coal mine re-created itself as a worker cooperative, the members decided to continue with the union's grievance system, arguing that it would be ill-considered to remove a layer of worker protection that was already in place. The presence of unions in worker cooperatives is common in U.K. cooperatives, but is quite rare among cooperatives in the U.S. Also, the organization was moderately sized. The colliery presently has 240 members.

This study was conducted in 1997, four years after the mine was reopened as a worker cooperative. Because several years had passed between the conversion to a cooperative and the timing of this study, I minimize the possibility of the findings being blurred by new readjustment problems or "honeymoon" felicity.

3. Methodology and Interviews

Because of the subtleties in researching power and the complexities in studying dispute resolution, qualitative ethnographic methods were the most appropriate for this site and the research questions explored here. It is generally difficult to ascertain how well cooperative ideals are attained and to what degree they transform disputes because of the ambiguities in tracking and measuring power and the intricacies in the stages of grievance resolution. Informal power is often subtle, and its use is rarely as blatant as formal power. Moreover, it is frequently more variable than formal power, inconspicuously shifting (e.g., among individuals and subgroups, in degree, and throughout the organization). Informal power, therefore, is harder to study and poses some special methodological issues. I address these challenges through qualitative ethnographic methods, using a quasi-longitudinal comparison (Pfeffer 1978).

The data were drawn from 42 interviews of workers at the colliery, all conducted after the mine had become a cooperative. Interviewees were chosen in such a way to provide a thorough, representative mix of subjects. Of the 42 subjects, 5 were managers, 3 were undermanagers, 2 were heads of the local union lodge, 8 did surface work, 36 worked underground, 39 had worked at other mines, all were white, 41 were Welsh, and 4 were women. Occasionally, I oversampled, -- for example, interviewing four of the six women who worked at

the colliery. The majority of those interviewed had worked at the coal mine before it became a worker cooperative. Systematic comparisons of the two time periods were made, contrasting and comparing how similar difficulties would be dealt with when the mine was hierarchical and after it became a cooperative.^{vi}

Each interview was open-ended and lasted about an hour, with a few interviews lasting several hours. Everyone was asked similar core questions, although people with unique experiences (such as managers, directors, or those on the buyout team) were asked additional questions tailored to them. Because the interviews were very open, interviewees could, and often did, share additional information not directly requested. During the interviews, all subjects were asked to recall problems or concerns they had experienced when the coal mine was run by British Coal and when it was a cooperative, and then were asked what actions they contemplated, what actions they undertook, what others did, and what finally happened. All interviewees were also asked to respond to a few hypothetical cases and describe what would happen under British Coal and the cooperative. In addition to interviews, data were also gathered from semiparticipant and nonparticipant observations, with a few potential grievances being observed.^{vii}

To avoid the potential for self-selection bias, volunteers were not requested. Since a significant focus of this study is the raising of grievances, interviewing only those inclined to step forward could create an unrepresentative sample of perspectives on grievance behavior. Additionally, those who would readily volunteer might have the agenda of portraying the cooperative in a particularly positive or negative light. The assertiveness and extroversion necessary to volunteer to be interviewed by a stranger may be correlated with both attitudes on raising grievances and ability to resolve disputes. Instead, then, potential interviewees were approached before work, after work, in the canteen, during breaks, and during their workshifts, with agreements made to hold the interview after their shifts ended.^{viii}

The possibility exists that the entire cooperative is a select group, that the people who would form a worker cooperative or become coal miners are not typical in terms of their orientation toward resolving workplace grievances. However, this potential bias is mitigated to a great extent because approximately 80% of the workforce of the cooperative is the same as when the mine was owned by British Coal. Additionally, all but 1 of the 41 workers in my sample were at this colliery both before and after the employee buyout. This means that much of the self-selection bias is neutralized because the cooperative workforce is not very different from

the previous hierarchical workforce. This is significant: The people were the same before and after, yet their grievance behavior changed after the conversion to a cooperative. Moreover, before the crisis of the closing of the mine, almost no one at the colliery had considered working in a cooperative. They came upon the idea to buy the company themselves out of need, rather than because of ideological or emotional proclivities. This last point will be discussed further in the results section.

Using a quasi-longitudinal comparison, asking interviewees to report on how the mine currently runs and how it worked in the past, provides both benefits and disadvantages. The main advantage is that the past hierarchical site is a near-perfect match with the present cooperative. By studying the same company at two different times, this study avoids many comparability problems that arise from comparisons of two or more companies, such as variation in the composition of the workforce, different situational challenges at the separate work sites, and dissimilar institutional histories. The workforce is very similar, miners address similar geological and market problems, and the mine maintains the same history before and after the conversion to a worker cooperative.

The main drawback is that the data rely on interviewees' memories. Since these miners were interviewed only after the conversion of the mine into a cooperative, the data rely on their recollections of the organization at least four years earlier, when it was owned by British Coal. The study thus accords a high level of credibility to the interviewees' memories. The possibility exists that interviewees minimized the effectiveness of the prior organizational structure and exaggerated conflicts under British Coal. Although the interviewees' reports of past conditions cannot be verified using only present-time interviews, their responses do triangulate each others' statements of the differences in the company before and after the buyout, heightening the credibility of these recollections.

C. Results

This study yielded an expanse of intriguing data regarding cooperative work arrangements; however, this paper focuses specifically on how the resolution of disputes changed when the workers bought the mine. The data imply that grievances were handled with greater flexibility by all parties involved and with a heightened sense of cooperation after the employee buyout. Interviewees report that much of this change

occurred by resolving more grievances informally, as well as raising more grievances through the formal system. This new inclination to resolve problems through informal confrontation and compromise also allowed the raising of issues that had been silenced under British Coal. Thus, while more issues are being raised since the conversion to a worker cooperative, they are frequently addressed before reaching the stage of formal grievance procedures. The data are well triangulated, reported by both workers and managers; however, they are based on interviewees' retrospective reports after the mine converted to a worker cooperative.

A. Dispute Resolution under British Coal

When the colliery was owned by British Coal, dispute resolution was very confrontational. This is not surprising, given that British Coal, with its rigid chain of command, myriad rules, and strict procedures, is a classic example of Morrill's "mechanistic bureaucracy" (1995). Morrill found that these mechanistic bureaucracies were more likely to deal with problems in confrontational ways. At British Coal, problems were usually handled by the workers' union, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). The union generally resolved these issues formally, with such means as written grievances and day-long walkouts. Just as the union preferred formal means, the managers, as well, refused any on-the-spot negotiation and sent workers home, calling for a lockout, if their orders were challenged. Compromise was viewed as a sign of weakness and was rarely used.

Workers viewed management as often behaving unfairly and with great condescension toward the miners. Because of this lack of trust between workers and managers, the miners focused on their own individual concerns -- e.g., pay, hours, specific job description. They lacked what Tyler and Lind refer to as a "group mode" and, instead, operated in "individual mode" (2000), so that their focus was not on cooperation, but on protecting their own benefits. This meant, for example, that if a problem arose in one section of the mine, workers from another section would not volunteer to assist without promises of bonuses and overtime wages.

The decision to create a worker cooperative was novel for the rank-and-file membership. Before British Coal threatened to close the mine, few members of this cooperative had given much thought to worker cooperative ideology. Some had never even heard of such businesses. However, faced with the possibilities of

unemployment or of very low-wage, low-prestige factory jobs, these workers decided to take a gamble and buy their place of work from the government.

Overall, the workers felt the gamble was worthwhile. Furthermore, the majority described a wide array of ways that working at the mine had changed since the employee buyout, with only 2 of the 41 members interviewed (5%) believing that there was little difference between the colliery as a cooperative and the colliery when owned by British Coal. The key change interviewees cited is the managing of disputes and grievances.

B. Greater Worker Flexibility

Many miners explained that grievances under British Coal formerly resulted in work stoppages by either the managers or the workers. Nearly all miners interviewed discussed how problems used to result in lockouts, walkouts, or union grievances, but that potential dispute situations are now more often settled earlier and informally.^{ix} Many explained that a key reason for fewer difficult disputes under the current structure is that the workers were more flexible in upholding the work rules. Many current issues and conditions would have been formally contested under British Coal, warranting a grievance or other union action. Today these potential disputes do not develop into grievances. Furthermore, these potential disputes are not “lumped,” or simply tolerated (Galanter 1974); instead, they are no longer seen as injurious experiences (Felstiner, Abel et al. 1980-81).

The following quote from a face worker, who operates the machinery that carves out the coal face, explains how workers are more “easy going,” not asserting grievances that might be within their rights to protest. This miner, who speaks first in the following exchange, attributes the informal resolution of issues to the fact that the workers now own the business and so are more willing to compromise.

There doesn't seem to be that many problems [anymore].

So, fewer than under British Coal?

Oh, yeah. There's less, far less disputes. Good gosh, yeah.

What kind of disputes did you have under British Coal?

Everything. It's a bit hard to explain. So, those disputes were over money, and working conditions and different things. And as it is now, it's easy going. Very easy going. The wages are pretty good. The best thing that happened to us was that British Coal closed the place down.

Could you give me an example of a problem that might have arisen under British Coal and then how it would be dealt with now?

Well, one of the problems was work in the mines. Under British Coal, if a face [the wall of the mine being cut] is supposed to have seven men on a team, and there were only five men, well, we wouldn't work. And they'd say, "Work." And we'd say, "No!" We wouldn't work. But now we'd work undermanned. If it's at all possible, they will try to get another man to us, but if not, we work undermanned. That's one of the things.

Why will you work now, but not before?

It's ours. You know? It's ours.

Others also spoke about the less-dispute-oriented attitude of the workers, recalling recent incidents when men worked overtime, for no additional pay, in order to resolve a problem on the mine's face. Interviewees also described voluntarily helping fellow miners in another part of the mine before a shift began in order to "catch up" that part of the mine, rather than bringing formal grievances for being made to do such work.^x These are examples of what Tyler and Lind would classify as an example of "group mode" behavior (2000).

The miners' responses were quite uniform in explaining this accommodating attitude of workers by emphasizing the powerful effect of the cooperative ownership system. For example, the following miner explained that because the workers themselves are owners, they feel a strong disincentive to raise formal disputes, such as the stopping of work.

The difference is if you have any disputes or anything, they settle within the union and the management. They get together and resolve them. Probably both sides have got to give in at the end of the day, but they are settled amicably and, obviously, for the best interests of both sides.

And under British Coal what would have happened?

We'd probably be going home. That was their attitude. If British Coal couldn't have their own way, they'd send the men home.

I see, so they would close the mine down.

Yes. Or we would take the decision down ourselves and go home. It all depends what situation arose, but I can't see that ever happening here, now, to be honest with you. Because, obviously, all the men have a stake in the colliery and it's in their best interest just to keep it going. Isn't it?

Similarly, another surface worker explains how many disputes are avoided because the workers' sense of ownership promotes an ethic of compromise.

The only way I would have addressed [the problem] under British Coal was to take it to the [union] lodge committee and ask them to sort it out. But now, you do get occasional problems, but you don't seem to get the problems that we used to get under British Coal. Because you have men now [who] will do things for the sake of the company. You wouldn't have it before.

Why is that exactly?

I suppose it's because we are all part of the same company now, whereas we weren't before. We weren't before. Now, we get whatever benefits. Prior to that it was the fat cats, if you like, or higher management would get the benefits. But now it's the workmen who get benefits as well. That's the way I look at it.

Managers also echoed this change in dispute resolution. One manager who had worked under British Coal at several mines offers the example of how an order from management to do a small task outside a miner's job description could result in a walkout by an entire shift. Now, at the cooperative colliery, managers will request the task from workers, and the workers, in turn, will be more likely to help out.

Management would say, "Right. Get that pump underground and it has to be in that way around." And you might bring two of the boys off the face to get it down. The boys on the face, under British Coal would say, "It's not my job. You get a fitter." And if they insist, that's it. Management will say, "Either take it down or walk out." "All right, we'll go." And off they'd go, and they'd take the rest of the face [workers] with them.

But now, the management will say to the boys who are going down to the face, "This has got to go down to the face it has already dropped down so far. Can you get it down there?" "Yeah, no problem." And the boys will pick it up and off they trot.

Thus, it appears that after the conversion to a cooperative, some potential problems were no longer perceived as injurious experiences, with potential grievances avoided even before the earliest stage of disputing (Felstiner, Abel et al. 1980-81).

C. Sharing Power and Information Rather than Disputing

This impact of cooperative ideology, flattened structure, and shared ownership might not have resulted in greater flexibility if it had not also caused important changes in the approach to management. In addition to the sharing of financial ownership, power and information are also shared at the worker cooperative, strengthening what Tyler and Lind would describe as members' perceptions of their own standing and

managements' trustworthiness (2000), and thus weakening workers' belief that formal grievances and disputes are the only or best way to resolve problems.

Many members of the worker cooperative shared the sentiment expressed in the quote below, that another important reason for the change to resolving more disputes informally, and with greater compromise, is the more widely dispersed power. They explained that this greater dispersion of power is due to the new cooperative structure and ideology. This change in power has generated a shift in attitude by the management and the workers: a greater willingness to compromise and a greater feeling of cooperation, rather than an inclination toward formal grievances.

As it was before under British Coal and the management, they seemed to distance themselves from the workforce. There was them and us. Whereas, now, the cooperative is we're all in it together; one big team, as such, or a family, you can say. That everything we work for today is distributed equally amongst us, and our aim, obviously, at the colliery, is to prolong the life of the colliery as long as possible and give everybody a good salary and a living. And expand as much as we can to help the community around the colliery.

In addition to sharing power, information about the mine is also shared. Interviewees emphasized that this is in contrast to their recollections of British Coal, where managers gave out no information to the workers and accepted no input from the miners' about the needs of the mine. Rather, managers asserted full power, giving orders that could not be questioned. This often led to grievances or even more drastic union action. Today, information is shared in both directions: from managers to miners and from miners to managers. This quote from a miner who worked at this colliery for over a decade describes the tremendous impact of this change.

The other [big change] is company policy -- and management well knows it -- that information is readily available to the workforce 'cause they're shareholders. People come in, ask their questions, and get the truthful answers. So, that is a lot different than what is was under British Coal. Because you only knew what they wanted you to know.

He went on to explain how this is accomplished:

The door [to management and directors' offices] must always be open. There's a newsletter. The unions, as much as possible, are involved to feed back to the workforce. We have the shareholders' meeting quarterly. [All workers are shareholders.] Also, if anything serious happens, like loss of market or some serious problem, every endeavor is made to have pit head meetings with every shift. If there's a hundred people on a shift, working days, this morning, the board, before they start work, meet them in the canteen, explain to 'em fully. And they do that to the day shift, the afternoon shift, and the night shift.

Over half the interviewees cited this increase in worker knowledge about the company as a key reason for the greater disposition toward compromise rather than dispute. Greater understanding about the financial or industrial problems facing the mine made workers more flexible regarding their own needs and rights, and increased their perceptions of their full “standing” in the cooperative. This sharing of knowledge, with the subsequent strengthening of procedural justice, is essential in achieving a cooperative workplace. Russell emphasizes that this is an important hurdle in creating workplace equality (1985).

Information flowing *from* workers *to* managers also lessens the need for formal grievances. The following quote from a chocker, a miner responsible for the wall and ceiling supports underground, explains how workers’ knowledge is shared with, and incorporated by, managers. This miner contrasts the present cooperative system with his memory of British Coal, which as he recalls often produced disputes and formal grievances. He describes how the mine workers now have a great deal of input into the day-to-day running of the mine.

Like the problem that we have at the face at the moment now. Under British Coal, they wouldn't talk with the men who are actually working the face -- they know how to work the face. But under British Coal, they would tell you how they wanted it done. No matter if it succeeded or not.

As it is now, the captains meet with a manager once a week. The captains talk among themselves about the problems with the face. [Then] they turn around and say to the manager. “This is the way the men want to work this particular face at the moment.” If it is a good policy, he agrees with them. If it isn't a good policy, well, if the manager thinks it's not a safe practice, he still won't allow them to do it.

But under British Coal, you didn't have that power to do that. They would say to you, “That's the way it will be worked.” No matter if it would succeed or not. They say to work it that way.

Naturally, then we have a dispute.

Other interviewees echoed the importance of the information sharing between managers and workers in reducing disputes.

The greater flexibility permitted by the sharing of power and information could only have been realized if the possibility for informal compromise existed. This means that it is insufficient for the workers, alone, to be willing to compromise to avoid disputes. The management, as well, must be willing -- or forced to be willing -- to do so.

D. Managers’ Behavior Facilitating Informal Resolutions

In discussing the shift in disputing from formal to informal means, many interviewees noted that the current head manager, one of the positions all collieries are required by law to have, seemed open to workers' opinions and workers' empowerment. This is in dramatic contrast to the manner of the previous head managers. Many complained about the degrading way the miners had been treated by managers under British Coal at this and other collieries. Nearly everyone expressed the importance of the attitude of this new head manager toward the miners as a key aspect in the change in grievance behavior at the colliery. According to interviewees' recollections, under British Coal, the miners matched the lack of respect the men felt from the managers with their own lack of respect toward the managers, resulting in strained relations of mutual resentment. Such strains often grew into formal grievances. Now, however, the managers are in informal contact with workers, showing respect and openness. Drawing the following comparison between the way managers interacted with workers in the two eras, another miner said:

Today, the manager will come out and talk to you. He very rarely goes through the pit without saying, you know, stopping and talking to everyone.

Whereas before, the manager used to come down and he wouldn't talk to you. He'd probably tell somebody else who would tell you to do something. They felt they were some super-human! You know, we were down there and they were up at the top like. And it was all, "Do this!" They tell you rather than ask you.

Today, now, the manager comes down and he'll ask you "Any chance you could?" You know? "Can you do me a favor?"

Before it was, "Oh you get and do that!" And obviously the respect had gone from the men for the management under British Coal.

Now at the colliery the men have got a lot of respect for the manager, because, at the end of the day, he owns as much of the colliery as we do. We all have equal-share basis and he's in it for the same reason we are: to get the best out of the colliery.

This greater openness by the managers to the opinions of the miners was occasionally attributed to the break from the British Coal Board. Since becoming a cooperative, the colliery has the autonomy of an individual self-owned company rather than being answerable to a larger governing structure. When the colliery had been owned by British Coal, the top managers reported to the area representatives in Cardiff, who then reported to the Coal Board in London. Several interviewees explained that now the colliery could make its own decisions, set its own policies, and resolve its own disputes without having to get decisions approved by an outside authority. Thus, an important element in changing disputing behavior seems to be the cooperative's independence from British Coal or any higher governing structure. Decisions were no longer imposed from

outside, nor were profits reaped by officials who had little to do with the actual work of mining. The miner below contrasts how a grievance would be resolved in the cooperative versus under British Coal.

All problems, now, are resolved here, at this colliery. Whereas under British Coal, [a grievance] went off the colliery to Area. If it couldn't be settled with a manager, it would go to Area, then it would go to National.

All the problems and decisions, now, are made on this piece of ground here. Before, people in gray suits elsewhere, bureaucrats, would make decisions. But now, that's all done away with. All the decisions now, regarding this colliery and the men and everything else to do with it, are decided here.

This “home rule” not only gave the managers the authority to make immediate decisions without fear of reprisal or being overridden, but it also seemed to give workers an empowering sense of autonomy. The possibility that this new autonomy could pose an alternative hypothesis will be addressed further.

Increases in Formal Grievances

Despite the shift to more informal dispute resolution, some formal grievances are still raised. This is particularly true in the area of safety, where members described themselves as actually less flexible than they were under British Coal.

Although the colliery had an exemplary safety program under British Coal, attributed by many to a very vigilant union, even greater strides have been made in safety since the mine's conversion to a cooperative. The colliery now has a record for the lowest number of worker accidents in the United Kingdom. Interviewees explained that this heightened level of safety is due to both higher standards and greater adamance about not taking any risks on the job. For example, one of the more senior miners used safety as an example of where the cooperative membership allows managers less, rather than more, flexibility.

When we've come to situations where they're [managers] doing something they shouldn't, every time you've got to say “Stop! You can't do that.” Because at the end of the day, we all want to live to 55, and we all want to be happy when we retire at 55. Not arms gone, legs gone, fingers missing, and it does happen. You do something that's not safe and you could get hurt, seriously hurt.

Thus, safety, especially when an injury has occurred, is the main area where formal grievances are still being filed.

About a third of those interviewed mentioned grievances currently raised at the cooperative that would never have been raised under British Coal, neither as formal grievances nor as informal confrontations. Some

workers saw these newly voiced grievances as inappropriate, while others saw them as indicative of the large-scale transformation the mine underwent in becoming a cooperative. Several (five) workers described these newly voiced concerns as ungrateful complaining that would never have been tolerated under British Coal. They characterized this behavior as whining, as this miner explained: “We have it good now, but some people are never happy. They want something else and something else, and the company can only give you so much. You aren’t happy, go somewhere else.” While seven others also described people bringing “small complaints,” this second group saw the complaints as legitimate rather than inappropriate. One electrician, for example, spoke of how issues that would have been deemed not sufficiently important for a formal grievance under British Coal were acceptable to be raised in the cooperative.

Another thing they wanted changed when we came back as a cooperative was the toilet paper. The toilet paper [the miners used], they were the old government bloody thick paper. A simple thing like that. And the managers, under British Coal, their toilets up there, they had the soft, bloody soft, pink paper. The things like that. Silly little things. But it matters. It says, “I’m no better than that manager over there and he’s no better than me.”

Other complaints that interviewees said would have been quietly tolerated under British Coal, such as those regarding the food in the canteen, were given greater legitimacy within the cooperative. Rosen, Klein, and Young emphasize that such seemingly minor changes are important in providing “constant reinforcement of the ownership idea” (1985).

Discussion

This study raises important questions about the effect of workplace hierarchy and employee ownership and empowerment on dispute resolution. According to the interviewees' recollections, after the coal mine had been reopened as a cooperative, the miners were more likely to raise concerns, but less likely to resolve them through formal action. Informal negotiation and compromise became the preferred way to address most problems. This reported change in the company's grievance behavior is explained by several key changes in how the workers and managers approached potential disputes.

First, both managers and now workers are more willing to compromise. Rather than giving orders, managers consult with workers and make decisions incorporating worker input. No longer forbidding any questioning, managers accept negotiation with workers as integral to managing a worker cooperative.

Similarly, issues that would have been dealt with formally through union action are now negotiated informally. For example, workers no longer strictly adhere to the official rule regarding how many workers must be on each team. So long as no work team is grossly understaffed, the workers often perceive the potential harm to the cooperative posed by a work stoppage overriding the working conditions created when a team is short a worker or two.

Furthermore, concerns that would have been raised as grievances are no longer perceived as problems. For example, shifts' ending times are less rigorously maintained, with employees willing to work overtime in order to complete some task necessary for the mining to move forward. Under British Coal, employees recalled that they never worked overtime without full compensation. Now, the focus is on the company as a whole, with less focus on individual situations. Thus, a situation -- such as the need to work overtime without full compensation -- which occurs presently and also occurred under British Coal, no longer is perceived as a problem, and hence no longer necessitates formal grievances. Applying the categories of Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat (1980-81), unpaid overtime is no longer perceived as an injurious experience because it helps the cooperative as a whole.

Paradoxically, issues that workers remember as being dismissed under British Coal, or not mentioned due to fear of retribution, are now raised. The change in toilet paper, for example, had great morale implications, but would never have been taken seriously under British Coal.

Additionally, some concerns that were raised as formal grievances under British Coal, according to interviewee recollection, continue to be raised formally. Safety issues continue to be taken extremely seriously and comprise the vast majority of the few formal grievances raised at the cooperative.

Transformation of Disputes

The transformation of a dispute -- i.e., how an individual dispute evolves -- is an important theme in the law and society literature. The change in how disputes at the coal mine evolve and transform since it reopened as a worker cooperative offers important insights into the disputing process. Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat (1980-81) emphasized the importance of studying these stages in their classic article nearly two decades ago, yet much focus still remains on the fully formed, formal dispute: “The sociology of law should pay more attention to the early stages of disputes and to the factors that determine whether naming, blaming, and claiming will occur...because the range of behavior they encompass is greater than that involved in the later stages of disputes” (1980-81: 636). They added that the study of the emergence and transformation of disputes is an important component in the sociology of law because it provides insight into “the capacity of people to respond to trouble, problems, and injustice” (1980-81: 652).

In this often-cited article, Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat (1980-81) provided a framework for studying disputes from the initial injurious experience, through several transformations, to finally, the bringing of a formal suit. They described how first an individual must perceive an experience as injurious, which they call the naming stage. The next transformation occurs when the person attributes the injury to the fault of another, the blaming stage. The third stage, claiming, is reached when the person voices the concern at issue to the person or entity she or he has decided is at fault and asks for redress. The authors define a dispute as a claim that is rejected, either completely or partially (1980-81).

Under British Coal, disputes either developed into formal grievances or they were halted at the blaming stage, never being voiced. Now, in the worker cooperative, problems advance through blaming to the claiming stage, raising the issue of concern for either formal or informal resolution. Some issues are transformed further than they would have been under British Coal: moving from blaming to claiming; other concerns that would have evolved through claiming to become a formal grievance under British Coal are now resolved before

transformation into a dispute occurs. Thus, problems are transformed to various stages at which they are resolved, not leaving many problems unaddressed, avoided, or “lumped,” as under British Coal, where unresolved and unvoiced grievances festered. Using Morrill’s grievance schemas and organizational typologies,^{xi} one could interpret the data as confirming that with the change to a worker cooperative, the organization become more of a matrix, where direct confrontation is more common, rather than an atomistic organization, where offending parties are avoided, confrontation is minimal, and grievances are often lumped (Morrill 1995).

By using interviewees’ recollections to compare the grievance behavior under British Coal with the present behavior at the cooperative, important understanding of the transformation of disputes is possible. As most problems at the cooperative are informally raised and addressed rather than blossoming into full disputes as they would have under British Coal, these nascent grievances are removed from the disputing chain earlier. Such early-stage resolution does not represent mere problem-solving management, but a distinct change in grievance behavior. Nor is this change simply attributable to changes in management. Rather, this new grievance behavior reflects a new attitude toward disputing, as well as working, as a result of becoming a cooperative.

A key question, however, is what does “becoming a cooperative” mean?

Becoming a Cooperative

The coal mine changed in three important ways when it became a cooperative: (1) its structure became flatter, (2) all workers owned it equally, and (3) it adopted a cooperative ideology of shared power. It is difficult to ascertain which aspect of “becoming a cooperative” has had the greatest impact, since each aspect reinforces the others. The structure was flattened in response to the commitment to a cooperative ideology, but the flattened structure also reinforces this ideology. The coownership of the colliery and the flattened structure provide objective confirmation to members that the ideology is in place, while the ideology helps maintain the importance of a flattened structure and shared ownership.

Given this, I will talk about these three aspects together -- flattened structure, cooperative ideology, and shared ownership -- as what is meant by “being a cooperative.” However, one must recognize that one aspect

might be more or less critical than the others. For example, merely flattening an organization's hierarchy might sufficiently affect dispute resolution. Similarly, the equally shared ownership could be most responsible for the changes in disputing behavior.^{xiii} Or ideology alone could have the greatest impact. Or the impact may come from a combination. For example, the flattened structure may have enabled workers to buy into coownership, which then encouraged a cooperative ideology to flourish, which in turn affected dispute resolution, with each aspect equally necessary to changing disputing behavior.

Possible Explanations

Several competing explanations could be derived from these results. First, the transformation to a worker cooperative may have created the changes in grievance behavior. Second, the change in personnel, particularly management personnel, may have introduced new people with more cooperative ideologies that encouraged these changes in grievance behavior. Third, interviewees might have misremembered how well the mine worked under British Coal, exaggerating the differences between that period and conversion to a worker cooperative.

The data most strongly support the first explanation -- that the change to a worker cooperative is responsible, both directly and indirectly, for the changes in grievance behavior. The second explanation is not supported by the data because it incorrectly assumes greater cooperative ideology on the part of management, resulting from greater influx of procooperative managers than actually occurred. This will be discussed further in the following sections.

I will begin by briefly addressing the third explanation. Exaggeration or incorrect recollections on the part of the interviewees is indeed possible. The design used in this study is only quasilongitudinal and relies heavily on interviewees' memories. This reliance on memory is potentially a serious confound. Interviewees may have overestimated the number of problems that could only be addressed formally under British Coal. Similarly, the interviewees could have minimized successful informal resolution under British Coal. They also could have misremembered managers' attitudes, workers' responses, and the general atmosphere of the mine before the conversion to a cooperative.

These problems could have been addressed if this were a true longitudinal study. Unfortunately, conducting a true longitudinal study of this nature would be nearly impossible: One would have to find a conventionally organized business, study it, then wait several years for it to convert into a cooperative, and re-study the organization. One could attempt to find businesses who were contemplating becoming worker cooperatives, but this would seriously bias the study: The reports by interviewees at the “noncooperative” stage would already be tainted by the discussion of the possible cooperative conversion, and if the researcher has heard of the potential for a worker buyout, it is very likely that the workers are considering this possibility as well. One would need either a very large sample of businesses, which would be difficult using in-depth, qualitative methods, or extraordinarily good luck to find a business that will eventually convert to -- but has not yet considered the possibility of becoming -- a worker cooperative.

Fortunately, the reliance on retrospective reports in this quasi-longitudinal design does not seem to have diminished the accuracy of the data. Although serious recollection inaccuracies definitely are possible, I do not believe they occurred. The data are well triangulated, meaning that they show agreement in the recollections of workers as well as managers, of younger as well as older workers, of pit as well as surface workers, and of rank-and-file workers as well as those on the buyout committee and board of directors. This implies that the recollections on which I base my results and conclusions are accurate.

Next, then, let’s turn to the first explanation argues that the conversion to a worker cooperative succeeded, both directly and indirectly, in affecting the changes in grievance behavior. Directly, the change to a cooperative increased democratic control, created greater worker power, decreased management power, and promoted greater support for worker opinion and input. Indirectly, the conversion enabled the colliery to function independently, with managers no longer needing approval of their decisions from the British Coal Board.^{xiii} Also, the change to being worker owned allowed the workers to have some control over who the managers were, having the indirect effect of allowing people who might be less adversarial to a cooperative ideology to be placed in managerial positions.

All of these changes resulted in greater procedural justice. This heightened perception of procedural justice moved members into “group mode” (Tyler and Lind 2000), enabling them to be more flexible and less rule oriented, allowing for greater informal dispute resolution. Because the cooperative achieved a greater

sense of fairness, workers and managers were able to move away from sole reliance on the formal grievance procedures and resolve issues informally without the fear of being exploited.

Direct Effect: Democratic Control

The assurance of democratic control over the mine was very powerful for the new members of the cooperative. For example, members' confidence in the new flatter, more democratic structure alleviated their concerns over including professional managers in the cooperative. Members of the new cooperative felt that the greater democratic control, especially the power of the elected board to veto managers' decisions, would provide them with sufficient power to prevent the managers from taking control of the cooperative. One member of the employee buyout team voiced what others echoed.

It was right at the tail end when we recruited them [the managers]. When they came on board, it was very awkward. It was awkward at the beginning because the management was the same as under British Coal. But we weren't nasty to them [although] a lot of them were ex-British Coal management from this colliery that assisted the closure of this colliery, which we tried to fight.

You see, at the end of the day, we needed them on board for the [legally mandated] structure of the colliery. We knew them, and we thought that, with the new structure that we got here, with the board of directors, the five directors up there -- at least three of them being NUM [union] members - - the directors decide all the policy of the company, [so] they [the managers] wouldn't be able to do too much damage to us.

Direct Effect: Greater Worker Power

The new structure and ideology gave workers increased power. Further, this increase was not a result of more powerful, assertive, or rights-focused workers being selected to join the company; rather, the flattened structure of the cooperative and the cooperative ideology actively encouraged it. Over a third of those interviewed mentioned the difficulties, upon reopening as a cooperative, in reeducating the membership to embrace its new power, become more assertive with the managers, and try to resolve problems as they occurred rather than as formal grievances brought through the union -- in short, what Russell describes as equipping workers with the "self-confidence they need to participate with managers on equal terms" (1985). One head of the union local emphasized that it was hard to convince the membership to approach managers directly because they were accustomed to more adversarial dealings with the management:

If you can understand the men, if they got a problem, they come to the union. We try to tell them, “Look, no, you go to that department person. Right? And see if he can solve it. If he can’t solve it, then you come to the union.” The trouble was, in the first year: everybody was coming to the union. Because they used to under British Coal days. The management team, they wouldn’t, no -- so it’s only the union that would help them. Even now you have to tell them that. “Go on, look, I understand. But go see your head of department first.” But its an ongoing process. From day one I been doing that: trying to fuse the two [management and workers] together.

The high level of activism on the part of the cooperative’s leaders could raise questions about whether the changes in grievance behavior at the cooperative resulted from these particular members’ charisma, assertiveness, or other informal powers. While this is possible, I do not believe these individuals were, in fact, sufficiently powerful to cause these changes on their own. Rights cannot be realized without someone to assert them, as is well documented in the literature (e.g., Scheingold 1974). However, these leaders were not so powerful that they could bring about the changes in grievance behavior without the initial changes in cooperative structure and ideology. The men who took on leadership roles at the cooperative were also leaders or activists in the union when the mine was owned by British Coal. Yet, while these men had been powerful enough to call for walkouts that halted work for days at a time, they were unable to change the grievance behavior until the conversion to a worker cooperative.

Direct Effect: Management Power Decreased

This effort to help the membership embrace its new power also involved teaching management to respect the workers’ power, emphasizing that management’s own power had been lessened. An elected member of the board of directors, who was also on the team to organize the worker buyout of the mine, discussed the efforts to create a less authoritarian attitude on the part of the managers:

We knew how they [the managers] would react in a new-style company. Yes, we had to educate them a bit, too. Had to bring them around to our way of thinking.

How did you do that?

Before they started, we told them “At the end of the day, what you will have is the right to manage. But you are now not responsible to her Majesty's government, or British Coal. You are now responsible to shareholders, who are also the employees. But they will allow you to make the management decisions. But at the end of the day, you are only one of the owners of this company. And you stand equal with everybody else. But just because you are the manager doesn't mean no higher, no bigger, no different. Except that you are a manager and you are paid to do a job.”

Then we had to educate the management positions here to sit and listen to what the individual has got to say. Rather than just say, “No, that's not good enough. You was away yesterday, I don't care whether you broke your leg or you fell off a bus or under a train, you should have been at work.” That attitude is gone.

Thus, the leaders of the cooperative assisted the managers in embracing a more egalitarian ideology, reflecting the equality of all members -- miners and managers alike. This demanded a radical shift in management strategy from the authoritarian style practiced under British Coal.^{xiv}

The managers also spoke about their decreased power. Some felt negatively about the change in management's authority; others felt that this was ultimately an improvement. The manager quoted below, who had been at the colliery for more than a decade before the buyout, felt that managers' diminished power was a problem.

We [managers] haven't got any power. [*At all?*] Very, very little. I'll give you an example. What tends to happen is that the men want to finish early on a Friday. You know, they don't like working underground; they'll try and get out. That isn't new. It's been going on within every single pit. It's an understandable reaction.

Management used to have the power to crop people's wages or take disciplinary action against them. But, as an example, there was this one Friday when the face chief, who was supposed to finish the work at quarter past seven came out about five half five. That's two hours before they were supposed to. The manager decided to crop them -- you know, don't pay them those two hours. So, it developed and there were discussions between various people and it ended up that the manager was taken in front of the board of directors. And, the board of directors gave him a bollocking for letting it get out of hand in the first place. And, then paid all the men. So, what message does that give the manager?

Other managers were more positive. This manager (quoted below) who had worked at the colliery several years before the buyout, was transferred to another mine, and then brought back once the mine reopened as a cooperative, felt that the change has improved the mine.

There was very little feedback between manager and workforce [under British Coal]. It was almost by doctrine. “You *will* do!” “This is what I think is best and you will do it.” And it has taken us some time to break that mold. It's a long, slow process. Some people have taken it very well. And now, when they come to a decision-making process, we'll say, “Right. Let's involve the face man, let's do a consulting meeting. Let's involve the washery.”

But there are certain factions in the pit now who say, “No, no, we will do it this way.” And then, as a company, we say, “No, you don't do it that way, let's stop this process now, let's go back, let's involve everybody else.” You see, people worked for British Coal for 20 years, 30 years, it is very, very difficult to break the mold. Some people do it very easily but some don't. But we're getting there. The problems you get are when you come to heads at department level, because they see it as being a threat to their authority. Even myself [as a manager]. It *does* take a little bit of getting used to.

But our view is that three brains are better than two and four better than three. And if you get information and advice from various parties, you haven't got to take it. But at least you get it, you weigh it up. Somebody somewhere is going to come up with an idea that if you didn't adopt this method you would miss.

This transition in management style was complex, and it did not happen overnight. However, in the three years between the reopening of the coal mine reopened as a cooperative and the time of this study, the new management practices appear to have taken hold.

Direct Effect: Greater Ideological Support for Worker Opinion and Input

More than merely lecturing, the initial leaders of the cooperative worked to explain to the managers exactly how to manage cooperatively. Much of this involved emphasizing respect for those managed. This promotion of cooperative ideology helped managers understand the importance of workers' opinions and input, even if the managers did not truly believe in the ideology themselves. The chairman of the board of directors, for example, described how he had to both confront and re-educate managers.

We [retrained the managers] through setting examples. With the [workers], you set an example for the management staff, and I never crossed them [managers] in the room with them. If they [managers] step out of line when I got somebody in the room there, I never raised it in front of them [workers]. But immediately when that person has left the room then I say, "Now you don't ever do that again. That's totally out of step. You simpled [made a fool of] that person. Now those days are gone. You don't step on no one in this office anymore."

We give them a row; we put them right. On one occasion, the manager went overboard and said -- this guy 34 years of age, family man -- and he says things to him like "You're just useless. You know, you're a waste of time. I don't even know why you're employed here. If it was up to me, you'd be down the road. I'd never give you a job again!"

So I didn't interfere and then he [the manager] finished his speech. And then I spoke [to the miner], "In my opinion, a mistake has been made here, but I'm totally confident that you will learn from this, and you will be a better person for this as of tomorrow, and as far as I'm concerned, and I'll tell you in front of David now" -- who's the manager -- "that I've seen nothing in this meeting that puts your future here at the colliery under threat."

And he [the miner] left and then I said to David, I said, "Don't you ever simple anybody like that again." "One thing," I said, "It was uncalled for. Second, you've made an enemy of that man for the rest of your life. He'll always remember how you simpled him, and," I said, "if it takes him three or four years, he will get you back. He'll get you in a corner somewhere and he'll do the same to you." So that sort of thing.

Managers also spoke about the struggle to learn a new way of managing when the colliery reopened as a worker cooperative, as this surface manager did:

There were one or two [managers who had problems adjusting]. They had their funny moments, trying to get into the swing of things. Because they had been under British Coal and it used to be drummed into them that they were management, the workers were ... they were workers so they wouldn't talk to them sort of thing. And if they said it had to be done such-and-such a way, it might be the wrong way but you still have to do it. But now the men discuss it with management. "Can we try it this way? This way is slightly better." And they discuss it and nine times out of ten they try the man's way. Under British Coal you had no chance with that. But now everything is a lot easier.

When we first started, we had one manager, he was still [thinking] under the British Coal regime, and he used to talk to the men like dirt. He got called in for that and after that for a couple of weeks he is a lot easier going. Not in the sense that he doesn't get the work done with the men, and if anybody does anything wrong he still balls them out, but he doesn't talk to them like a piece of dirt anymore. Now he'll talk to the men, which he wouldn't do before. So in all everybody has settled down, come to realize it's their own company. Well, men aren't prepared to take it anymore as they used to under British Coal.

Another manager confirmed this change of attitude in describing his own work:

Mine is more supervisory than actual work. I still do a fair bit of work to help the boys out because we're all muckin' together. The week before, I was stuck inside one of the boilers breaking it out, which is a *nice* job [sarcasm]: You just have to squeeze through the hole to get inside the boiler itself. So, as I said, we're all mucking together -- but if anything goes wrong my head is on the chopping block, not theirs.

Rosen, Klein, and Young viewed this type of change in company culture as vital for ownership to become a "constantly renewed process, rather than a discrete event that happen[ed]" (1985: 10).

Indirect effect: colliery independent from British Coal

Although the managers have less authority over the workers, the managers are themselves more autonomous--that is, the managers only need answer to the colliery's board of directors, not the entire bureaucratic hierarchy of British Coal. Both managers and workers spoke about the impact of no longer being under British Coal's supervision. The manager below believed that the increased autonomy allowed managers at the colliery to focus on important issues rather than wasting time to report back to area -- and national -- level supervisors:

There was also a hierarchy above each individual colliery. There used to be Group Headquarters and Senior Headquarters. I'd say that 30% -- 35% of my time was spent satisfying those people rather than satisfying the [head] colliery manager.

We would never pick up the phone asking them [Headquarters] for help. They would always pick up their phone asking us for information. [But] you give them the information and they just give you a bollocking and tell you to sort it out. [The British Coal officials at all levels] all sent

instructions back down the line. That's all been removed, so we concentrate on things that are important to us. We can tailor whatever we want to do to the needs of the colliery.

This greater autonomy of the mine is an important indirect effect of the conversion to a worker cooperative that facilitated the new grievance behavior. The board's chairman explained that the removal of the threat from local and national headquarters' oversight allowed managers to work within the goals of the cooperative ideology:

The management said to me recently that what surprised them the most about the company now is that they can actually admit to mistakes. And without the worry of being sacked or sent to another pit.

It was terrible. Under British Coal, even the management were under threat all the time, and they say, "We've found out we can talk to you as directors and that you haven't come down with the heavy hand just supporting the workers. You've always given us the say as well."

And they found that the most helpful of all -- working without the threat of being sacked when you make mistakes -- because they were difficult times the last five or six years of British Coal.

The removal of British Coal's oversight does pose a potential rival hypothesis: that it is autonomy of the coal mine alone -- not management's ideology, nor the structure, coownership, or ideology of the cooperative -- that generated the changes in disputing behavior. While this study does not match this colliery with another former British Coal mine (all other mines British Coal sold were bought by large businesses that ran several mines together -- leaving no individual, noncooperative mine available for comparison), the extant literature does offer some insights. The past research (e.g., Curran and Stanworth 1981), has shown that workers in small businesses do not enjoy greater job satisfaction as compared to counterparts in large businesses. This body of literature would suggest that the change in disputing behavior at the colliery is not a function of autonomy or size alone. Before the workers' buyout, the managers had to respond to their line of superiors at British Coal. As an independent business, the managers at the cooperative did not have to answer to British Coal's regional and national offices, but rather to the coowning workers at the colliery itself. Thus, the data in this study indicate that, while the autonomy of colliery is important in that it allowed the management to run the mine as it wished, the direction that it chose to take is, in fact, more significant to the change in disputing behavior. This direction was more affected by the reestablishment of the mine as a cooperative, while the mine's autonomy merely allowed the mine to have this choice.

Indirect Effect: Workers Allowed Some Control over Hiring Managers

The data contradict the alternative explanation that the change in grievance behavior was caused by the placement of procooperative managers. This second indirect effect -- that being worker owned gave the workers some control over who the managers were, and, thus, the power to place people in managerial positions who might be less adversarial to a cooperative ideology -- might or might not support the alternate explanation, depending on the result of the manager selection. In fact, the manager selection resulted in very few managers who favored a cooperative ideology. Because the pool of potential managers was severely constricted by law and general availability, the hiring process rarely resulted in the selection of a procooperative or even proworker manager. Some managers were brought in because they were thought to be the best at what they did; others because they were thought to be more open to the cooperative ideology; others because they were seen to be the least hostile, even though avidly antiooperative; and others because they were seen as simply no worse than anyone else available for that particular position. For example, this member of the interview team (speaking first in the the exchange below) explains how they selected managers based primarily on ability.

Yes, we picked the best.

The most pro worker? Or...

Well, not so much pro-; the best at their job then.

The best at their job.

The electrical department, that kind of job.

So more about skill than ideology?

That's what I mean. We'd pick up their skills. The skills more than anything and the knowledge of their craft then. Whichever their craft was. You know, we got the safety engineer, who's the finest in the country. The mechanical engineer from British Coal, which wasn't far off of the best in the country. The electrical engineer, well, I'm quite happy with.

Three of the managers were especially invited in because they were thought to be more open to the cooperative ideology. As one miner explained; "Some of the ones who are managers now, they were here as undermanagers, or some of us had worked with them at another colliery. We knew they were in favor of the buyout. The deputy manager in surveying was even a member of our [national] union. That's rare." Some managers were deliberately brought in from outside the colliery. Although these managers were not in favor of

a cooperative ideology, merely their distance, as outsiders, from the bad feelings around the closing of the mine was seen as helpful. For example, one director explained the appeal of the manager of the electrical engineers: “The electrical engineer is somebody who’d come back in, as well. He wasn't here when, at the end, when British Coal finished. Since he wasn’t here then, there’s not so bad feelings between the work force and him.” Several managers were seen as both hostile and anticooperative. Nevertheless, they were hired because their jobs had to be filled and they were seen as no worse than any alternative candidate in the limited pool of candidates. One example is the financial manager. In discussing the invitation to this manager, several members expressed their frustration with his views but felt resigned to hire him because, they explained, all financial managers would hold similar positions. The interview team felt that all accountants were equally opposed to cooperatives and hostile to workers, as this member of the interview team explains:

The financial director: we interviewed about 50 accountants, that we brought in from outside. We wanted somebody new to do the finances who had never been involved with British Coal.

Did you look for someone sympathetic toward, and in support of, the worker cooperative concept?

It would be very hard to find somebody like that in that position from out there. Because it all, in their way, those people are very vicious. So we knew that whoever we brought on board, in here, any financial director, would have to be told how it’s run now.

Similarly, because the safety manager was resistant to the cooperative changes, some still disliked he, despite his technical expertise. Nevertheless, all but one person (2.4%) who commented on him, said he was as good a choice as any for the job: “The manager is the same manager that we had under British Coal. He was the undermanager under British Coal. But we took him on as our manager. He’s still the same, but what the hell. As long as he does his job, everything’s alright.

Clearly, while the process of choosing managers did allow the membership to prevent the worst managers from joining, it did not result in a procooperative, proworker, or even definitively accommodating management. Additionally, as the data above indicate, the reeducation of the management after the conversion to a cooperative would not have been necessary if only procooperative and proworker managers had been selected. Thus, the data do not support the alternative explanation that the change in grievance behavior was caused by changes in management personnel. Only a few of the managers supported the cooperative ideology - insufficient numbers to create this organizationwide change in grievance behavior. The other managers

resented, resisted, or opposed the cooperative ideology. For example, the safety manager, who had been a manager at the mine both under British Coal and now at the cooperative, expressed his frustration at the new structure:

The power of management has been very much removed under the cooperative. Under British Coal, there used to be a lot of punitive powers management could have. You could more easily discipline somebody. Could give them formal letters -- formal warning. Could crop their money if they came out of the pit early or could reduce their bonus. Could reduce their overtime.

These were tools which are necessary within any business to get the best out of people. Some people react well to payment. Other people react better to the threat of losing that.

The problem now is that we've lost that power. But we still got the same people 'cause everybody's come back. So that we still got the good workers. We still got the not-so-good workers. And the problem is that the not-so-good workers could be in danger of pulling the good ones down with them.

Yet, because of the cooperative structure and ideology, many of the managers not in favor of the new system have accepted it and adapted to a style of negotiating and managing more informally.

Another form of this alternate explanation could be that even if the management was not replaced with procooperative personnel, perhaps the workforce was. This, too, would be an incorrect conclusion. As mentioned earlier, approximately 80% of the workforce and 98% of my interview subjects were employees at the mine when it was owned by British Coal. This high level of worker consistency negates the conclusion that changes in the workforce could have generated the changes in grievance behavior. Additionally, the data discussed above demonstrate that the workers had to be reeducated after the worker buyout to embrace their new rights. This reeducation would not have been necessary if the workers who came back to the mine were rigorously procooperative.

Thus, the reopening of the mine as a worker-owned cooperative, the subsequent flattening of the organizational structure, and the organizational embrace of cooperative ideology, appear to have been responsible for the change in grievance behavior discussed in this paper. Specifically, the conversion to a worker cooperative enabled grievances to be brought that previously would have been silenced, facilitated more informal resolution of grievances, and prevented problems from arising initially, thereby making certain former grievances unnecessary.

Conclusions

The data seem to support the hypothesis that the change to a worker cooperative generated the change in dispute behavior. This conversion to a worker cooperative encompasses three components: shared ownership, flattened hierarchy, and cooperative ideology. All three components are intertwined and mutually supporting. Although it is unclear at this time which of these three aspects is most responsible for the changes in dispute behavior, the conversion to a cooperative does appear to have substantial effects on disputing behavior. With an increased perception of procedural justice, workers were able to focus less on distributive justice -- e.g., hours, wages, and strict job descriptions -- and resolve more disputes informally.

Comparison to Expectations

While some of the literature discussed at the beginning of this article anticipated the findings of this study, other research predicted contrary findings. This study's findings on grievance behavior are supported by the past research on increased worker assertiveness. That research argued that the flattened structure and egalitarian ideology of cooperatives promoted greater worker confidence and empowerment, which could then translate into the increased ability to raise issues and resolve grievances. It is also supported by the work on procedural justice, which predicts that workers in cooperative organizations would move to a "group mode" and could rely less on formal grievance procedures.

However, these findings contrast with those of other studies. For example, research that analyzed how prioritization of the group's best interest and assertions of benevolent authorities can silence potential grievances, as well as research that described the invasiveness of power, all imply that grievance behavior would be altered by the conversion to a worker cooperative, but not in the way documented by this study. This past research argues that the cooperative ideology would thwart grievance resolution by discouraging members from asserting their concerns and raising any issues that might create problems for others in the cooperative. Instead, my study found that workers felt more able to raise concerns, even resolving grievances informally more often than formally.

Larger Theoretical Relevance

The conclusion supported by the data, that cooperative structure, ideology, and ownership affect grievance behavior, facilitating greater resolution of problems and more informal resolution, is important for many larger issues. First, as mentioned above, this study strongly supports the assertions of other scholars: that power is a critical factor in grievance resolution. As the power shifted in the coal mine, as workers became more empowered, they were more able to resolve disputes, in general; specifically, they were often more able to resolve disputes informally.

Second, the findings that flatter management structure and cooperative ideology affect grievance resolution could impact the study and implementation of the popular employee involvement arrangements, such as employee stock option plans (ESOPs), and quality-of-work-life and total quality management (TQM) programs. All these programs seek decreased workplace disputes, either as ends in themselves, or as means to other corporate goals. The transformation of the mine into a worker cooperative is a much more radical and comprehensive change than any of these programs, but this study does suggest that worker ownership and control are effective in reaching these shared goals.

However, it is doubtful that the change described in this study would be achieved by merely changing management strategy without an accompanying flattened structure, cooperative ideology, or equally shared ownership. A number of researchers (e.g., Knights and McCabe 1998) have asserted that TQM and other programs are not as effective as initially hoped because they are often seen as merely a different display of management power. Indeed, such programs do not always illicit feelings of empowerment and allegiance in the employees, nor are other improvements in the work setting consistently achieved. For example, in their analysis of manufacturing firms, Lawler, Mohrman, and Ledford found that TQM practices were not related to satisfaction, turnover, absenteeism, or other quality of work life indicators (1992). Unlike the workers in those studies, the workers in the cooperative discussed in this paper did experience these improvements after the employee buyout. A possible explanation of the findings in those studies, as well as the results reported in this paper, may be that feedback requests and invitations for employee involvement are seen as insincere and mere manipulation if these management changes are not part of a larger conversion to a worker cooperative.

Indeed, the differences between the experiences of workers in companies with TQM, ESOP, and other programs and those in this worker cooperative underline the differences between these programs and actual

worker cooperatives. It may be that programs that encourage greater employee involvement or that allow employees to buy publicly traded stock in the company not only fail to produce the same worker environment as a true cooperative, but are qualitatively different employment concepts. This present study suggests that merely encouraging greater employee involvement will not produce the reported changes in disputing behavior.

Also, the data provide evidence of the feasibility of creating an organization with minimal hierarchy in a modern workplace and of the effects such an organization could have on grievance behavior. This evidence contrasts with the views of other scholars who believe that such an organization would be utopian or impossible. The organization studied in this article is typical of other organizations in its issues and problems, yet it has achieved a flattened structure with great worker empowerment and equal worker ownership. The cooperative has mechanized many parts of the mine, including excavation and processing of the coal, and uses highly technical instruments to monitor and prevent poisonous gasses, explosions, cave-ins, and other safety disasters. In addition to these technologically modern aspects, the organization is also quite modern in its recent marketing initiatives, employing sophisticated studies of their customers to maximize customer satisfaction and profits. In these ways, it is similar to many other businesses. However, while the organization, with 240 members is larger than most worker cooperatives, it is smaller than many businesses now found in the global economy. Therefore, these results might only apply to smaller businesses and the “worker cooperative” effect could diminish as the size of the organization increases.

Directions For Future Research

Given their unusual structure and alternative workplace ideology, worker cooperatives may prove to be excellent sites for exploring the effects of hierarchy, worker ownership, and cooperative ideology on dispute resolution in the workplace. This study begins the inquiry.

One way to expand on this study’s insights would be to change the methodology from a quasi-longitudinal examination of one site to a single-time comparison between two separate businesses.^{xv} Comparing grievance resolution at a worker cooperative and a separate, hierarchical business would allow for direct, simultaneous comparison of grievance behaviors at each site. While such studies could not control for differences between the employees of the cooperative and those of the hierarchical business as effectively as

one conducted at the same site but at different times, such research might provide other opportunities for comparisons, addressing similar questions about the effect of a flatter structure, coownership, and cooperative ideology.

Another important way to broaden the scope of inquiry into workplace dispute resolution would be to explore how gender differences in grievance behavior -- well documented in research on conventional hierarchical organizations -- might persist, change, or even disappear in worker cooperatives. Such studies could be conducted on matched pairs of hierarchical and cooperative businesses along a gender-density continuum from very male-dominated industries, such as coal mining in this paper, to very female-dominated industries, such as homecare businesses.

In addition to exploring grievance resolution at cooperative workplaces in mainstream society, future research could investigate grievance resolution at workplaces in cooperative societies. In communities where everything, including work, is organized along cooperative principles, approaches to workplace disputes may -- or may not -- be similar to grievance behavior in worker cooperatives situated within mainstream society. Sites that have had a generation or more born within the community would offer the opportunity to explore how people who did not self-select into a cooperatively run organization react to disputes in cooperatively run workplaces. Work sites at Mondragon in Spain or on kibbutzim in Israel might be ideal for this type of inquiry. In particular, future research might examine the new generations of Israeli kibbutzim's young adults who are leaving the rural communities for faster-paced, capitalist lifestyles. Although such studies might yield rich data and insights in disputing, careful methodological consideration would have to address the additional variables of potential cultural and ideological homogeneity such as Basque identity at Mondragon, and Zionism or Jewish identity among kibbutzim members.

While this study begins these inquiries by providing initial exploration into workplace dispute resolution in cooperative workplaces, these suggested avenues for research could build on these findings and further understanding of grievance behavior, workplace disputes, and the impact of cooperative structure and ideology.

Footnotes:

- * Elizabeth A. Hoffmann is an Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology; Purdue University; 1365 Stone Hall; West Lafayette, IN 47907. This research was supported by a National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant (SBR-9801948) and a University of Warwick Doctoral Dissertation Grant. I gratefully acknowledge Professors Mark C. Suchman, Howard S. Erlanger, Lauren B. Edelman, and Jane L. Collins for their helpful comments and continued assistance. I also wish to thank Professors Davina Cooper, Richard Hyman, and Joanna Liddle for their advice and assistance at the early stages of this research. I also appreciate the insightful suggestions of Joseph Sanders, Anne Grevstad-Nordbrock, Oren Kosansky, Joy Ochs, and Susan Richards.
- ⁱ Henry (1983) examines the concept of community justice in a variety of cooperative settings, including worker cooperatives. In this way, he does begin exploration into grievance resolution in worker cooperatives; however, this is not the specific focus of his research.
- ⁱⁱ Power imbalances could suppress grievances even if the grievances were also caused exogenously.
- ⁱⁱⁱ British Coal was public -- not a private corporation; therefore, this site does not provide an example of private ownership with hierarchy, but rather of a hierarchical nationalized industry. An argument for the nationalization was that everyone would have a feeling of ownership and a stake in the company. These goals were not realized at this coal mine, especially when the nationalized mine is contrasted to the cooperative mine -- where these goals have arguably been achieved.
- ^{iv} At one point in the buyout process, some managers proposed that they should have double shares, and also put in twice as much money. This idea, however, was resisted, consistent with Russell's assertion that such unequal sharing of equity inhibits democratic cooperation (1985).
- ^v All the members of the board were men, representing a membership that was 98% male.
- ^{vi} This technique differs from Nader's "trouble cases" concept in that my focus is broader. This study examines workers' attitudes and anticipated behavior, as well as individual disputes and specific incidents.
- ^{vii} I observed the control room for many hours; ate in and observed the canteen; and went the one mile down into the mine to where the coal was being excavated, speaking informally to the miners along the way. I also read numerous local newspaper articles, spanning a three-year period, about the mine.
- ^{viii} Members of the cooperative arranged seven interviews with key people for me .
- ^{ix} These comparisons between rates of grievances are drawn from interviewees' personal retrospective assessments. I could not gain access to actual numbers of formal grievances. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the

findings. Access to numbers of formal grievances would only reflect formally raised grievances, and would not reflect increases or decreases in informal grievances nor attitudes regarding formal and informal grievance resolution. The interviewees' reports -- those of both workers and managers -- are very consistent and well triangulated.

- ^x This voluntary work and willingness to be more flexible regarding procedures is not “lumping” (Galanter 1974). These workers do not view these incidents as injurious experiences that they decide to ignore and “lump.” These occurrences, such as overtime, are now perceived as necessary aspects of working as a cooperative.
- ^{xi} The overt structure of the coop’s management structure may also affect how and whether workers bring grievances. For example, Morrill found that atomistic organizations (workplaces where managers worked autonomously, with little contact with others in the official hierarchy) were more likely to deal with conflict through avoidance of offending parties, while matrix organizations (those organized with multiple simultaneous management layers) were more likely to deal with conflict confrontationally (Morrill 1995). A worker cooperative could be perceived as either atomistic, since each member is chiefly responsible for her or himself, or as a matrix, since each worker has all other members as supervisors. Thus, if the cooperative is mainly atomistic, one might expect to see more avoidance of issues, less formal or informal grievance resolution, and more quiet toleration of unresolved grievances. However, if the cooperative is primarily a matrix, one might expect more formal and informal grievance resolution, with few grievances left unresolved.
- ^{xii} I emphasize *equally* shared ownership in contrast to the employee ownership plans of some well-known businesses. These employees, in fact, have only the *option* of buying stock, own different amounts of stock, and collectively, own a minority of the total stock of the company. Although several of these companies have or have had much-publicized labor problems, these companies don’t offer much comparison for this study.
- ^{xiii} One could interpret this as indicating that the independence and smaller scale were responsible for the change in grievance behavior -- that when the coal mine was no longer under the control of the National Coal Board, it became similar to a small business. While this worker cooperative coal mine was suddenly independent and autonomous, this heightened autonomy alone is not responsible for the change in grievance behavior. In a parallel study discussed in a forthcoming article, I compare two independent, medium-sized organic food distributors, one privately owned and hierarchical and the other a worker cooperative. In that second study, I demonstrate that merely making a business autonomous does not produce the type of grievance behavior found at the cooperative mine discussed here. While the removal of an overseeing coal board helped create an atmosphere where change was possible, its absence is insufficient to create the difference in grievance behavior. Although the independence of the mine allowed managers the freedom to work within the cooperative structure and ideology, the conversion to a worker cooperative was the key to generating the changes in management behavior.
- ^{xiv} This cooperative strategy of dispute resolution is somewhat similar to Tucker’s finding about dispute resolution in a flattened organization (1999). Here he found “therapeutic” dispute resolution often combined with conciliation

(1999). Although grievance resolution at the coal mine was certainly not done through therapy -- for example, it did not include an acceptance of others, expression of feelings, or a goal of overall harmony -- the new, cooperative grievance behavior of the members of the cooperative was conciliatory. This is consistent with Tucker's theory of dispute resolution, which might explain the more conciliatory grievance behavior at the coal mine as being the result of everyone's new equal status: an aspect of "lateral therapy" (1999). The lack of any therapeutic nature in the grievance behavior, however, would be explained by Tucker in that the coal mine was neither homogenous nor intimate. Tucker asserts that "[d]emocracy alone does not produce therapy. Parties must be more than equal: they must be homogenous and intimate [for therapeutic dispute resolution]" (1999:124). The workforce at the mine was diverse, drawn from many parts of Wales and England, and, although friendly, could not be said to be one big family.

^{xv}An ideal comparison would have been to compare this coal mine with another that also was sold off from British Coal but was made private rather than cooperative. While other mines were sold to private industry, they were sold in clusters, so that those mines still are not run autonomously, but with an overseeing company running several mines.

