

Co-operative Democratic Workers of the West (TRADOC)

Adjacent to a small Mexican town called El Salto which is located less than 30 kilometers south of the city of Guadalajara, Jalisco you will discover one of the newest and most successful worker co-operatives in the world. The worker co-operative is called TRADOC, which is short for Trabajadores Democráticos de Occidente Co-operative, which in English would be called the Cooperative Democratic Workers of the West. This co-operative is now just over 10 years old and makes all kinds of vehicle tires.

As in other worker co-operatives, not everyone working in the plant becomes an immediate owner member in TRADOC. At this time, there are some 1,250 persons working at the plant, all of which are partners in a co-operative called Producción Empresarial Profesional, SC (PROEM). Approximately one-half of all PROEM partners are owners of TRADOC. After five years as a partner in PROEM, persons become eligible to join TRADOC. The cost to become a member of TRADOC is small. PROEM was created in an agreement with TRADOC and Corporación de Occidente SA (COOCSA), which is a shared ownership management company described in more detail later in this report.

This is one story of how the TRADOC came into existence and of their success as a co-operative business enterprise.

The Back Story

On February 15, 2016 the President of our co-operative and myself plus three colleagues¹ spent the morning speaking with President Jesus Torres Nuño², speaking on behalf of TRADOC.



This rather remarkable story has been pieced together based on what we have learned from President Torres, as well as other public reports and material available to us. The following are some of the highlights of that discussion and of our research. We learned that the enterprise has a remarkably long history beginning first in 1931 when it started making tennis shoes, and switching in 1935 to manufacturing rubber tires.

Jesus Torres Nuño, President COOCSA, and leader of the Cooperative Democratic Workers of the West (TRADOC)

¹ Our meeting was arranged by Sr. Luis Ceneviz the Senior Executive responsible for Cooper Tires. Also present with me were Alfredo Molina, Sandy Wallace, Patrick O'Connor and our President Greg Wallace. Ms Ashley Hermsillo Bagwell assisted and served as our excellent translator for what was a very energetic and fast paced discussion. She also provided great assistance in finalizing the draft of this paper.

² Jesus Torres Nuño is the President of Corporación de Occidente, S. A. de C.V, which is an enterprise jointly owned and controlled by the workers' co-operative called TRADOC, and by Cooper Tire. Sr. Torres is also a member of the TRADOC workers' co-operative.

The name of the first corporation was called EUZKADI.

In 1950 BF Goodrich took ownership of Euzkadi. From 1992 to 1998 Carlos Slim, one of the world's richest men and a Mexican business man, together with the likes of General Tire were owners of Euzkadi. In 1998 Carlos Slim, perhaps seeing trends in the tire world sold his ownership in the enterprise to the Continental Tire Company headquartered in Hannover, Germany.



The Battle Lines Are Drawn

In 1998 with increasing competition resulting from globalization, the new owner Continental demanded the union workers who were operating the plant in El Salto switch to seven-day production and a 12-hour day, accept a pay cut, speed up work, allow job cuts, eliminate seniority for job bidding, and drop benefits like the company-paid vans that brought workers to the plant, and profit sharing. A new work agreement was also imposed.

At that time Continental was a large multinational corporation operating some 25 plants in different countries around the world.



Continental argued that the plant in El Salto Mexico needed to operate like the one in Portugal, but the union responded by saying Continental had many other plants not

operating any better than the one in El Salto and that they should not be compared to Portugal. The union responded by suggesting Continental should look at what workers in Germany and in the USA were making and earning. Clearly the tire industry around the world was experiencing difficulty and in those other plants many workers felt they had no choice but to accept the owner's demand. In El Salto the union leaders and its workers refused! Shortly afterwards Continental fired 18 of the El Salto workers, all of whom were union leaders, in hopes of bringing the workers to their knees. The current President, Jesus Torres Nuño, and the person we met to hear its history with was one of those fired. It was at that point that the union decided to take action and to fight back to protect their jobs and their livelihoods. It undertook to continue to pay wages to those dismissed – a common practice that started in the 60's - and it elected Senior Torres as their General Secretary.

Continental Locks Out Workers

Since the union workers refused to accept their demands, on the evening of December 16, 2001, Continental decided to close the plant and locked out employees from entering the plant. This later proved to be a bad strategic business move that later proved costly to Continental, because it was an illegal measure.

This was a very difficult and emotional time for the workers. With very little to live on financially many workers were forced to leave the area and seek work elsewhere. At the same time those remaining stayed vigilant and shortly afterwards manned barricades to prevent anybody from taking machinery out as well as others from entering or leaving the plant. The barricades had to be operated 24 hours every day.

A little more than one month later the union members voted to formally take strike action against the plant owner who had locked them out. This meant other family members often needed to help out by bringing food and drink to those in the barricade, and by taking work outside of the home to help cover expenses.

It also meant that workers had to literally use sand bags to blockade Continental, who intended to use large trucks to break the strike and remove over 70,000 tires sitting in the plant at the time. The workers' slogan became "Not a Single Screw Will Leave".



Shortly afterwards Continental began pressuring the government asking that police force be used to break what they referred to as an illegal strike. The President of Mexico, Mr. Vicente Fox publically stated that such incidents as this needed to be dealt quickly with as they were bad for foreign investment. The workers stood together in solidarity. They did not stand together quietly however.



The workers protested, locally around the plant, and in Mexico's second largest city Guadalajara. They marched and held demonstration in cities all the way to Mexico City gathering support for their cause along the way. They were involved in incidents around the plant and in legal proceedings almost non-stop! Police and hired trouble-makers were often used by Continental to harass and intimidate union workers. In the end the union workers countered Continental's actions at the local level by taking the matter of their 'illegal strike' to the Federal Labor Court of Mexico! After two year's efforts and legal battles (and 1141 days without income for the workers) a Three-judge Labor Court of Mexico ruled that the union's actions were in fact legal and were within the laws of the country, and that their strike was 100% legal. This was a significant defeat for Continental as they were now responsible for back wages to that point and were still sitting with an idle factory, and with no obvious practical solutions in sight. This was certainly not the outcome that Continental had anticipated.

President Torres explained to us that circumstances of that time were very grim economically, and that with globalization of markets, competition was increasing everywhere. Continental at that time was shutting down plants in Austria, Sweden, and Holland. Other tire companies such as Goodyear, Uniroyal and Firestone were all struggling to survive. This was a time of heightened anxiety and increased uncertainty around the world. This was also the time of when the twin towers in New York were attacked, and the war on terror around the world was ramping up.



President Torres explained that in spite of the circumstances elsewhere in the world this was also a time of unity within the workers themselves. Their very long three-year battle had made

them even more determined and convinced that if they persisted then they would one day have jobs again.

The workers used to encourage one another by saying “We will resist one day longer than Continental.” The battle had made the workers stronger as a group. With their legal win, and a windfall of back wages coming, the workers still needed to continue their fight for jobs. They were not alone. Their family continued to support them, other Mexican unions supported their cause and even some of union workers elsewhere who had given in to Continental’s demands, urged the workers at Euzkadi to continue fighting for their jobs. Other unions offered their support and encouraged the workers to carry on their struggle. They also received help from the Pascual Co-operative. President Torres explained to us “We had to stay positive – and each day take the good with the bad.”

Moving on to Another Battle



It was clear to those in local leadership and the workers that even with this win over Continental that the fight was not yet over. They were still without jobs. They knew they needed to take the fight publically to Hannover Germany, Continental’s Headquarters and to the shareholders of the company to force further concessions. They did so by attending and demonstrating at Continental’s annual assemblies between 2002 and 2005.

Knowing that Germany was bidding to host the 2006 FIFA World Cup Soccer Tournament and seeking to avoid any negative international publicity gave the workers extra leverage in pressuring Continental to agree some form of settlement with their dissatisfied former Mexican employees. During the strike union representatives and others supportive of the workers made three separate trips to Germany to demonstrate and to bargain. The goal was to take the problem to the core of the corporation.

The strategy of going public in Mexico and in Germany worked! Soon senior political leaders in both Mexico and Germany began urging that this matter be dealt with in a prompt and responsible manner. The watchdog “German Watch” and others including the Deutsche Welle DW TV began publically reporting within Germany and abroad concerning what was taking place.

Moreover, the German documentary maker Michael Enger, had been following the conflict since 2002, and he was able to broadcast a video through the German network Deutsche Welle (DW) and the German-French channel *Arte*, which made the problem public in Germany. There were also many newspaper articles published in Germany.

In August 2004, Continental's CEO, Manfred Wennemer made the union a firm offer!

The offer was to hand over 50% of the plant to the workers for their back wages, and sell 50% to their Mexican distributor, Llanti Systems. This was not exactly what the union leaders or their workers were expecting. They simply wanted their jobs back. However, Llanti Systems was not interested in buying the plant and taking on the union and its workers, at any price. They had something else in mind. Llanti System's management openly stated "We're not crazy. We know what you guys are capable of. We're interested in you as our partners, not as our employees." At that point President Torres said "So we said, 'There's no other way out? Well, we have to try it.'" As negotiations were being finalized, Continental³ also agreed to sell the new owners raw materials, buy the plant's production, and give technical advice for a year. When Continental representatives signed the assignment papers handing over the plant to the new owners said "We've come to deliver the corpse." Incidentally, none of Continental's commitments were faithfully kept, and after only 5 months Continental's management claimed they could buy tires cheaper elsewhere, and were no longer willing to continue working with the new owners.



Here are the changes in ownership that started in late 2004:

One of the first steps was the creation of a formal co-operative organization.

A new co-operative called Trabajadores Democráticos de Occidente (TRADOC), was formed and owned by 587 former workers from the Euzkadi plant.

At the same time a new legal entity called Corporación de Occidente SA (COOCSA) was created. The ownership of COOCSA was held:

Corporación de Occidente SA (COOCSA) was owned by the newly created Trabajadores Democráticos de Occidente (TRADOC), was a co-operative owned 50% by the 587 former union workers, and 50% by Llanti Systems.

³ It seems clear Continental was tired of dealing with the workers of Euzkadi in El Salto Mexico and simply wanted this now public matter to be simply go away. It is worth noting that at the end of 2004 Continental had various diversified investments around the world with consolidated assets of in excess of \$10 billion USD.

Corporación de Occidente SA (COOCSA) then purchased from Continental a 100% ownership of the plant and equipment under terms of various agreements in which:

- Continental received an estimated payment of \$40 million USD from Llanti Systems, and
- Continental received relief from its debts to its former employees for lost wages and severance, also estimated at roughly \$40 million USD.

All of these complex changes in ownership took place in the last quarter of 2004 and in the first month or so of 2005. The details as to how costs (including labor inputs) and revenues would be shared between COOCSA, TRADOC, and Llanti Systems, as the tire distributor, also were agreed upon at that time.

In a short paper such as this it is difficult to properly capture all of the rapid fire activities that took place and the highly charged sentiments of the key players involved. Clearly the workers from Euzkadi under their determined and committed leaders proved to be a serious and determined irritant to the Continental Corporation's CEO⁴ from Germany. While it is not discussed in detail this paper, this clearly was a battle between the power of a major global corporation and the will of a relatively small group of workers who were prepared to stand up and fight for what they believed was fair and right.

Getting Tires Rolling Again



In February 2005 the gates of the plant were opened, and the former employees entered for the first time as owners. Of the 940 employees when Continental closed the plant in December 2001, some 587 remained. The other 353, for economic and survival reasons had abandoned the cause⁵ by accepting their severance pay from Continental, and were not party at the time to the changes in ownership described above.

So getting things up and the large plant month running after more than three years of idleness and neglect took a tremendous effort on the part of the new owners. Much of the equipment needed repair from weather (dust, and rust and damage to equipment from electrical storms). For the first month or two there was no electricity and workers had to take care not be bitten by snakes who had taken up residence inside of the idle plant. It took time and a lot of manual

⁴ The Continental Corporation 2005 annual reports indicates that with share options the CEO of that company received more than \$3 million USD in compensation and rewards for the year. There was also a short note in the annual report stating the plant at El Salto, Mexico has been sold with no loss of earning for Continental.

⁵ Those workers who for whatever reasons accepted funds from Continental were considered as traitors to the cause and were not allowed in the new co-operative.

labor to get the plant into production again. Five months later at the beginning of July of 2005, the plant and its new owners produced their first tire. Less than one year earlier the workers could not even have dreamt how such a thing could happen. Salvador “Chava” Hernandez one of the workers present at that day is quoted as saying “We all ran to get our picture taken with the first tire. It was a truck tire. And many, many people worked on that tire, each doing a little adjustment.”

Organizational and Financial Affairs

The transition from being employee union members to owner members of a co-operative enterprise that was part of a joint venture with a private company was a first ever event in the tire world. While workers now understood they were owners they needed to work out many details and solve many technical and other problems themselves. They also needed to learn what was involved in being the ones directly responsible for the outcome of their labors.

President Torres explained that they really didn’t know how to manage the technical aspects of the plants, and also had to teach themselves how to operate as a co-operative enterprise. They received advice from some NGOs as well as from other worker co-operatives, such as Pascual Co-operative, also located in Mexico. In most areas of production, workers figured out what would work for them and simply did what seemed sensible. They set up regular training workshops and created an entirely co-operative work culture within their workplace. Everyone worked together to ensure that the quality of their tire products was high. They knew they were now the ones responsible for thousands of people’s lives who were riding on their tires.

During that time a lot of other organizational, administrative, and financial affairs also had to be attended to. Figuring out what would be fair to the partners in terms of income and benefits in a highly competitive world, and at the same time thinking about what would be sustainable was something they had never had to consider previously.

While the back salaries helped with the purchase of 50% of the business, there was day to day startup costs in getting production and sales up and going again. One of their first big sales was 150,000 tires to Walmart. The tires were sold below cost just to help keep production lines running and cash flowing. However, this was the only time they ever needed to sell their tires to Walmart.

There were the changes taking place in the tire industry. Radial tires were rapidly replacing the more traditional tires. New equipment and new materials and new processes were required. More expenses and more funding was required. For the enterprise to get up and running it was essential to obtain financial support from both state and federal governments. Although President Torres did not elaborate during our meeting, we have learned from other sources that he was instrumental, after numerous attempts, in obtaining the needed financial support.

For the first four years the joint venture operated financially in the red. The leadership of TRADOC recognized that another partner was required in order to bring in raw materials at

volume prices, as well as to help market greater production volumes internationally. They approached other potential partners, including Pirelli and Bridgestone. TRADOC was looking for a partner who was willing to respect their co-operative values and their work culture. In President Torres words their “talks with Pirelli ended quickly and with fireworks!” We are guessing those involved were not exactly speaking the same language, or with the same purposes in mind.

Afterwards the owners of COOCSA began discussions with Cooper Tire about buying an ownership interest in the enterprise. Although Cooper Tire is a publically traded company whose main purpose is profit maximization for shareholders, their traditional corporate values and management culture seemed to be in line with those of the co-operative, and of Llanti Systems. Plus Cooper Tire was in a position to bring in enough and better priced raw materials and to reach international tire sale markets. Therefore, after some discussion and negotiation in 2008 Cooper Tire agreed to purchase 30% of the ownership interest held by Llanti at the time, and 8% of the ownership interest held by TRADOC.

Cooper Tire agreed to manage the sale of almost all of COOCSA production into Mexico, the USA, (and later Brazil), and also to supply at volume prices the raw products needed for production.

Here is how the second set of financial transactions in 2008 occurred:

Llanti Systems sells its 30% of its 50% interest in COOCSA to Cooper Tire

TRADOC 's interest saw an 8% decrease of its 50% interest in COOCSA to Cooper Tire, because of their first investment, which resulted in a significant capital increase.

These transactions mean COOCSA ownership is:

- TRADOC has 42%
- Cooper Tire has 38% and
- Llanti Systems has 20%

In 2009 Cooper Tire purchased the remaining 20% ownership share held by Llanti Systems. with the following result in COOCSA ownership...

Llanti Systems sells is 20% interest in COOCSA to Cooper Tire

This transaction means COOCSA ownership is:

- Cooper Tire has 58%
- TRADOC 42%

Organizationally in COOCSA, Cooper has four members on the board of directors and TRADOC has three. Also decisions can be made only if 75 percent of directors agree, or 100 percent of directors agree for important decisions such as investments or asset sales. It has also been agreed that there will be no further dilution of ownership by either TRADOC or Cooper Tire.

TRADOC as A Worker Co-operative

TRADOC holds a general assembly twice each year, with all major decisions being voted on by members. The general assembly is also responsible for electing the three COOCSA board members, from within their membership. Jesus Torres Nuño who is the President of COOCSA has been elected by the general assembly as a board member. Under the agreement with Cooper there is a revolving presidency every 2 years. There is an Administrative Council that handles the day to day decision-making of TRADOC. There is also a Surveillance Council which review the co-operative's finances, and can have input into the decisions of the co-operative. Administratively in the co-operative there are 7 pay ranges. Salary ranges are based on physical effort and responsibility. Members of the Administrative Council will typically be at the highest worker pay grade. Meaning they cannot have a higher income that the highest paid partner, which sets a limit to the income of the council members, unlike many other cooperatives.



As of the present time we understand the income for TRADOC members are the highest of any in the tire industry in Mexico. It is also worth noting that women now also work as members in TRADOC.

Working as an owner in a co-operative is different than operating under as an employee in a union. Over time, the worker co-operative will continue to need to change and evolve as it expands its membership and as its

environment and its circumstances changes.

I found it interesting to note as I was researching this story to learn that representatives from TRADOC have been offering advice and support to another textile producing co-operative in nearby Ocotlan. TRADOC given its origin as a solidarity workers union often offers encouragement and support to union groups elsewhere in Mexico. TRADOC as a successful co-operative also helps and supports other co-operatives and labor fights both in Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America. At times co-operative values and beliefs can clash with the values and beliefs of large corporations. Nevertheless, both the Cooper and TRADOC have remained respectful of each other in this rather unique and yet successful relationship.

Intrinsically in the co-operative business model is the notion that the interests of all stakeholders should be well served. From TRADOC's vantage point stakeholders generally include owners, employees, suppliers, partners, clients, as well as its broader community.

Challenges Now and in Future

COOCSA, through Cooper Tire, markets its production into the USA and into Brazil. Some 800 or so workers produce roughly 18,000 tires per day on 3 shifts six days per week. During March and April plans are underway to raise the workforce to 1,200 and move to 3 shifts 7 days per week with a targeted production capacity of some 22,000 tires per day.

Such an increase in production and workforce will in itself be expected to create technological, human resource, and logistical challenges. Nevertheless, President Torres is optimistic that all of these can be overcome.



President Torres explained some of the things that he sees as challenges facing the co-operative. He indicated that the tire business is highly competitive. Some of the actions TRADOC has had to take to remain competitive with other manufacturers have not always been pleasant, but as owners as well as workers, the actions have

been accepted as necessary from time to time. In some ways that is a strength unique in this type of structure.

Interestingly President Torres said that getting and involving younger people in TRADOC is becoming increasingly difficult. People who haven't been involved previously often have different values and priorities.

President Torres also appreciates that expanding operations and bringing on board a large number of new workers will create various issues and challenges, and will require training of new people about their work and also about the co-operative's values and principles. President Torres indicated that training is always a challenge for the co-operative.

In discussing challenges, it is interesting to hear President Torres, as the leader of a relatively new enterprise stating a perceived need to re-inventing the business in order to succeed in future. As our meeting time was coming to an end, we left the comment remain as it was made, without questioning it further. Perhaps that statement will be the basis for another future discussion.

While it was not part of our original intention, we ended our meeting by asking if they might be interested in exploring marketing TRADOC branded tires to a national co-operative for sale in Canada. President Torres response was typical... "Certainly why not?" So we will begin in the near future looking to see if there might be interest first of all, and secondly explore if there is a business case to be had for doing so, under our existing trade agreements.

In Closing

After having read this paper, we think you can appreciate the circumstances and the struggles that workers have had to face to creating TRADOC (Co-operative Democratic Workers of the West) as it exists today.

To the best of our knowledge this is a unique ownership arrangement and one which has not been carefully analyzed recently. There appears to be much to learn concerning the respectful relationship that has been developed between Cooper Tire and TRADOC.

We sense such a review could help to raise and perhaps address important questions concerning the future sustainability of the co-operative and its relationship through COOCSA with Cooper Tire. Any such review would need to be very carefully and more formally organized and structured in such a way so as to serve the mutual interests and needs of TRADOC and Cooper Tire. Ideally it would, require the support and approval of both organizations and COOCSA to proceed. We would be interested in discussing this matter further should there be interest.

Also as mentioned earlier in this paper, with the approval of President Torres, and possibly of the COOCSA board, we should like to undertake an inquiry (informal) as to the feasibility of marketing TRADOC CO-OP branded tires to Canadians through one of Canada's largest retail co-operatives (Federated Co-operatives Limited). This inquiry is in keeping with the International Co-operative Alliance 6th principle for co-operatives, that being "Co-operation among co-operatives". We would be pleased to do so as a courtesy over the next 2-3 months as we do not expect this inquiry to require significant time or expense.

We sincerely wish to thank President Torres for his kindness and courtesy in openly and frankly sharing the story, as he has lived it, of TRADOC - the Co-operative Democratic Workers of the West.

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The Global Co-operative Development Group Inc (www.co-operativeenterprise.coop)

The Global Co-operative Development Group Inc. is a co-operative which was created to:

- Provide a space for co-operative practitioners, researchers, developers, and educators to contribute their experience and expertise to support the development of co-operative enterprises globally.
- Help promote awareness, understanding and appreciation of the unique aspects of the co-operative enterprise business model.

- Stimulate positive growth in and across co-operative systems of enterprises through research and development, evaluation, and strategic intelligence activities and initiatives.
- Acquire or create and deliver information technologies which help to empower, inform, involve, educate and connect co-operatives and their members.

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This story is only partially complete in that many of the details involved in the dispute between the workers and Continental Tire have not been included to ensure brevity.

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