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THE COOPERATIVES OF MONDRAGON

Employment and one of the best-kept secrets of the second half of the twentieth century.

If you are genuinely concerned about employment, perhaps you should add some information about the Cooperatives of Mondragon to your thoughts.

A priest Don Jose Maria Arizmendiarieta started the Industrial Cooperatives of Mondragon in 1956.

Today they comprise 120 companies, employing at present some 42 000 people. These companies compete on the international stage in the spirit of true free enterprise.

The difference with these companies is that the employees truly own and control every aspect of everything they do. They have incentive and pride in their work and they don't have demarcation disputes, strikes, fights with the boss or union trouble.

No one is claiming they have found utopia however, they are doing better than most workers anywhere in the world, regardless of government or union.

This does appear to be free enterprise not capitalism.

This system would never suit everybody however, do have a look and at least think about it as a possible option and safety net that would suit many people.

The Mondragon Cooperatives in the Basque country of Northwest Spain are one of the best-kept secrets of the second half of the twentieth century.

In the mid seventies i saw a program on Four Corners about Mondragon and believed that at least the union movement would have seized upon the information to offer something to the workers whom they professed to care about so much. Alas, the silence was deafening.

At that time, i was working as a building demolisher and so, had to be in the union called the Builders Labourers Federation the BLF.

Thinking that they had just not heard of the cooperatives of Mondragon i attended some of the meetings and attempted to talk to some of the power brokers in the organisation. Well i might as well have been talking to the proverbial 'brick wall'. Cooperatives were most certainly not on the agenda, and it took me some time to work out why. Although the union movement always starts out with the best of intentions, times change and direction is somehow lost.

In third world countries where many have to work under slave like conditions for a pittance, union organisers often disappear at the hands of the fascists who run many of these countries as their own empires.

People, deep down, are basically the same the world over. There is no doubt that, even in a country like Australia, if there were no 'watchdogs' it would not take too many years for the feudal systems of not too long ago to start springing up in the workplace. There are those among us who would be happy to run systems just as brutal as those countries that use child slave labour today. Because, those same people that run such a system in the third world are among us everywhere, they only need the opportunity. They would put you and your children to work, blood, sweat and tears at the point of a gun; and have you believe that it is god's will. These types of people are in the minority however, you pass such people on the street everyday.

If you think that this suggestion is outrageous then ask yourself if people are any different today than they were two hundred or three hundred years ago or a thousand for that matter. History tells us that they are exactly the same people.

There are those with a social conscience and there are those without and, to those without, everyone and everything is expendable. Whether or not this phenomenon in a person's character is conditioned or genetic or a bit of both i do not know, suffice to say that this is a fact.

Without the original union movements and those people who spoke up and acted on behalf of ordinary people, much of the world today would be a barbaric place in which to live.

I'd like to pose some questions if i may. Do you believe it should be the way of the world for example, for dentists to recommend food that will decay your teeth just so they can be kept in employment? Most people would answer that, with a resounding no! Or perhaps, should the police encourage crime just to make themselves appear more useful? Well of course they should not. I'm not suggesting for a moment that the time will come when we will never need police. I do believe however, that for the police to be doing their job properly they should be sincerely trying to make themselves redundant.

If this sounds like a strange way of looking at things, then perhaps it's the first time that you have thought about it so, give yourself a chance and perhaps the penny will drop.

If we needed a million police in Australia then it would not be a very nice place to live, right? If we only needed a thousand police it would be a very good place to live. If we only needed one hundred police in Australia then the police would have effectively done their job, and i mean really done their job. And i do not mean because they had locked up so many people, but because, they did not need to lock people up.

They could then retire from the force and on top of the skills that they had learnt up till then; they could learn some more and then get their teeth into something that they had only dreamt of doing.

The same goes for the union movement especially in the developed world because they, of all professions had, and in some cases still have the chance to make themselves redundant. Not because people were fed up with them or felt they could get a better deal without them. But, because they had finished the job that their predecessors had started when people were actually living and kept in abject poverty. There will be, for many years to come a reason for some to seek help from a union but that is not the point. If the unions just get pushed aside, then they have failed the worker, because they were too selfish to see their true potential. The niche they have created, gives them the possibility and where with all, to make themselves almost completely redundant. If at this juncture they do not seize the opportunity to do so, then history must repeat itself, with unions having to look for or stir up conflict to justify their existence. That cannot be an intelligent way to go about life for people who are supposed to be smart.

In the early eighties i was talking to someone who i think tended towards a communist type ideology and, he seemed to know something about Mondragon. However, he said that those cooperatives did not amount to much because there were factories in Germany just as efficient as those of Mondragon. Somehow the fact that those who worked in these factories also owned them, did not mean much to him. I have met people who call themselves socialists, who are quite ecstatic about cooperatives in a third world country, where the impoverished, get a chance to run

their own lives. However, any suggestion of cooperatives in a developed country and the standard answer is "cooperatives don't work" The same socialists have a standard answer when small business is mentioned and that is that "small business can take care of itself".

Look at the 'late night', the 'all night' and the 'weekend shopping' saga. Or shopping 24 hours a day. Oh so convenient! However, for how long will the convenience last? Small family businesses cannot compete twenty four hours a day against the monsters.

So, what is to become of the small family business? My guess is that most of them will never be able to compete in the long term and so will be sent to the wall. So much for free enterprise.

If the government or the unions did actually care for small people then a solution could have been arrived at by them both and, set in concrete.

A possible solution could go like this. Businesses that employ from between one to twenty people or even one to fifty people can open when they like. All other businesses can open weekdays from 9am till 6pm and on Fridays till 9pm . On Saturdays they can open from 8am till 1pm and that is that.

If we do not give our small family businesses such a chance then eventually, when they have all been sent broke, the big businesses will open when they like and you will like it or lump it. You see they will then have the monopoly and you will have no other choice. That is capitalism not free enterprise.

It seems to me that we should encourage and take care of small people, cooperatives and also small business where at least the boss recognises and knows the names of the employees. The only other alternative would appear to be giant corporations where we all become a number and as you know, numbers are expendable.

I sincerely hope that there is not only one solution for the world, because if that is so , then the world will become a very boring and drab place. The beauty of the world will always be in the difference. The lessons from the cooperatives of Mondragon can never be the only answer for all the unemployment problems facing us. However, they will give many people a chance to follow a dream, learn skills and develop an inventiveness that is seldom allowed to blossom and bloom. If people can follow their dreams and be content then the benefits will flow on to us all.

In one of the link sites below, there is a story by Robert Gilman called:

'Mondragon'

The Remarkable Achievement'

In his story Robert Gilman writes:-

The Mondragon Industrial Cooperatives have pioneered a new social invention that makes Capitalism, Communism, Socialism and all the squabbles between these "isms" crude, irrelevant and obsolete.

There is a link to the Mondragon sites at snakeshow.net.au. The first site is that from the cooperatives themselves. Their story is written in English, Spanish (Castellano) and Basque (Euskara). Basque is the language spoken by the Basques in an area in Northwest Spain around the Bay of Biscay of which the capital is Bilbao. Mondragon is in the Basque country where this story all started in 1956.



From the Snake Man