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LIMERICK LEADER

Limerick to open new 'democratic supermarket'

by **Nick Rabbitts** 7 Jan 2013

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For the last year-and-a-half, the Meitheal Mid-West group has been working towards a sustainable job-creation business, in the tradition of the co-operative worker's movement.

And it is hoped opening a shop selling "good healthy wholesome food" in the city is just the start.

For the uninitiated, a workers' co-operative enterprise is one which is owned and controlled by those who work in it.

This, it is argued, leads to greater worker protection, and a more equal structure, with the top earners in any company only able to earn an agreed multiple of the lowest wage rate.

Privacy

Following a high-profile launch last year, by Finance Minister Michael Noonan, one of their objectives is to open the store selling “good healthy wholesome food” in the second quarter of this year.

The concept is based on a similar idea, the Unicorn Grocery, in South Manchester, which has been in operation since 1996.

The Unicorn Grocery has grown year on year from it's original four members to a total of fifty worker owners today. While competing successfully with the high street multiples, it maintains high ethical standards and supports local producers.

Meitheal Mid West currently has five directors - chairman David Browne, secretary Bill Kelly, alongside Joe Kennedy, Phil Mortell and treasurer Karl Shanahan and two advisors Professor Eamonn Murphy of UL and Miriam Garcia Mortell, media advisor.

“It is incumbent on all of us to see how we can improve our common lot, because of the ten worst unemployment blackspots, seven of them are in Limerick,” Bill says.

In a refreshing change to conventional business, David explains how the worker's co-operative movement is inclusive.

Bill says their shop: “will be competitive, innovative and profitable. Just like the Unicorn Grocery is in Manchester. Having said that, it will also embody the co-operative principles. We will have a flat structure: the salary differentials will be minimal, and it will provide a platform for people in Limerick to see the co-operative model working.”

If the shop is a success, Bill added they hope to develop their space - perhaps around 800 square feet in the city centre - into a “co-operative hub for other economic endeavour.”

With any small business, the question always is how they intend to compete with big retailers.

Rather than directly competing, Bill feels Meitheal can carve out a niche, in a similar manner that their counterparts in Manchester have done.

The shopping statistics for the Manchester store, show a diverse background of customers.

"Their customer breakdown shows that they come from the average industrial wage. We feel we can replicate this. If you can be competitive, and thereafter show you are working cooperatively, people will come," he said.

The directors have set up three aspirations for the shop - which will create around 10 jobs initially.

"We want to help the long term unemployed and people with disabilities. This is central to our thinking. And we want volunteers to help this concept develop," David explained

Through it's web site - www.meitheal-midwest.org - the group is currently looking for expressions of interest from people willing to volunteer just two to three hours a week for a maximum of six months to help the concept develop.

Despite the worker's co-operative's popularity across Europe - notably in France, Spain and Italy - it is not as well-known in these parts.

Bill believes this is because there is not a "supportive legislative framework in place" at the moment. But it is hoped this will be forthcoming in 2013.

The directors say they have also won the support of shopping centre managers, and retail bosses from across the city.

Bill puts this down to the fact that if their venture does well, it will benefit the city as a whole.

"Limerick City is dying on its feet, and anyone with an ounce of love for Limerick will do something. These managers recognise to some extent that they are responsible for taking people out of the city centre in their full time jobs, so they want to give something back - to try and help the city live again. If Limerick prospers, everybody prospers," Professor Murphy ^[1]_{SEP} said.

The group has also been working closely with the new economic director of Limerick City and County Tom Enright to put together an application for European funding. An application to Interreg is expected to be worth some €2.5m to the co-operative movement here. Ultimately, the ambitious group have the goal to rebrand Limerick as 'co-op city': the most co-operative friendly business city in Ireland.

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