

Do You Take Democracy with Your Coffee?: White Electric takes on a radical new experiment

A Providence favorite reopened its doors on May 1 under new ownership. **White Electric** has been a Westminster Street mainstay for years. Like many other local businesses, in the last year it's been the victim of intermittent hours, COVID regulations and state-mandated lockdowns and pauses. Now it's back for good, and the workers have transformed it into the state's first workers' cooperative coffee shop and a radical experiment in workplace democracy.

"It's about having a meaningful impact in your workplace, having an actual voice and an actual say in how your workplace should be run," said **Danny Cordova**, a member of **CUPS Cooperative Inc**, the workers cooperative that now owns the shop. The cooperative was born out of the original service workers union White Electric workers created last year. White Electric is now the first workers cooperative coffee shop in the city and the state. "We live in a democracy. We vote for our representatives, we vote for senators, we vote for a president and why can't we do the same thing [at work]? We can't vote for CEOs, we can't vote for managers, and you can get fired for any reason," continued Cordova.

Under the new cooperative structure, there's no single owner of the business. Each worker is also an owner with equal say in how it is run. There are no managers, and no one is above anyone else in the workplace. Day-to-day operations behind the counter were largely self-directed before it became a cooperative, as all the worker-owners draw from a rich past experience in food service. Much of the division of labor for them now comes from tasks that management or owners typically would do.

"Working in a cafe is not inherently a menial job, there's no reason for it not to be a respectful job," said **Amanda Soule**, another worker-owner of the cooperative. "People don't respect coffee shop workers generally, and I think that that is often inherent in the structure of the cafe itself."

White Electric's workers didn't originally intend to form a cooperative. Last year the shop closed due to COVID restrictions, and reopened in June. In the interim, George Floyd was murdered and protests for racial justice were kicking off everywhere. Inspired by the movement, White Electric's workers started reaching out to managers about workplace issues. Then-employees also wrote an internal letter asking for diverse hiring practices, anti-racism, sick pay and wheelchair access to the shop, among other requests.

Management soon after laid off a lot of the workers. In response, workers started to organize and form a union. "[We wanted] to make sure people's jobs would be protected beyond any of us as individuals and to make sure the things we had been asking for would actually be implemented," said **Chloe Chassaing**, a worker-owner.

Workers received a lot of community support at this time as they formed the union, and much of the customer base of White Electric are fellow service workers. White Electric's then-owners voluntarily recognized the union. In August, the union performed a card check so that it would be officially recognized by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). That same night, the owners sent out an

email listing White Electric for sale.

But the owners were willing to sell to a worker's cooperative, which was one of the suggestions workers made in the letter they wrote earlier in the year. Efforts to form a union changed gears entirely to start a cooperative. CUPS started raising money that autumn. A GoFundMe with the explicit mission of turning White Electric into a workers' cooperative raised \$25,000, and other funding came from bank loans. For months, it was not clear the shop would become a cooperative, with CUPS only reaching a sale agreement this past January. Closing date was mid-April, and the cooperative has been rushing to get the necessary permits to reopen.

The cooperative started with eight worker-owners. When White Electric announced they were hiring, they got more than 60 applicants in the first three days, seemingly defying the current popular media narrative of people preferring to stay on unemployment. The worker owners have pledged to pay above minimum wage, but see workplace democracy and culture as integral to its attractiveness for prospective employees.

"It's not that people don't want to go back to a food service job, it's that people don't want to go back to being disrespected by their employers and their customers every day," said Soule. "There's a bunch of people we interviewed on unemployment because they know this is a different kind of work environment."

Any new employees will be tried out for six months before receiving the full share of ownership in the cooperative. The system for pay increases in the past left a lot of inequities, and the cooperative intends to make the process transparent and fair. In addition to base pay and tips, each worker-owner of the cooperative is entitled to a share of the money left over every year. But as with any new business, it might take a year or two before that happens. Worker-owners can also expect a set schedule, as opposed to some of the flexible schedules found in most mainstream coffee shops.

"We just work as a team, and that's been a very winning strategy for a very long time," said Cordova.