



**Tech-Coops:**  
No masters, no slaves





## Introduction: Why tech-coops?

# Why?

- As tech workers we can either work
  - as freelancers
  - in (big) corporations
  - in startups etc.
- But as freelancers we are mostly on our own, big corporations suck our life out and startup culture makes us sick...
- And we want to use technology for good, e.g. as activists in movements, to support the solidarity economy, progressive software projects etc.



# Why

- Let's try something else:
  - Work together **horizontally**.
  - Grow and be part of the **solidarity economy**.
- Let's build tech cooperatives!
- Should be easy!
  - Great demand on tech work.
  - No big investments needed.



# What are tech-coops?

- Different definitions. Here we talk about worker-owned cooperatives:
  - *„Worker-owned cooperatives are business enterprises that are owned and governed by their employees. All worker cooperatives have two common characteristics: 1) member-owners invest in and own the business together, and share the enterprise’s profits, and 2) decision-making is democratic, with each member having one vote.“ – community-wealth.org*
- **Tech-Coops are coops in the IT sector.**



# Notes on solidarity economy and wording

- In German there are three words:  
*Kollektivbetriebe*, *Genossenschaften* and *Kooperativen*
  - *Kollektivbetriebe* are often understood as egalitarian worker-owned cooperatives.
  - *Genossenschaften* are a legal structure, which are not necessarily egalitarian.
  - *Kooperativen* are used more commonly to express a group of people, who self organize to fulfill their needs (like funding ecologic farmers to get food...).



# Notes on solidarity economy and wording

- In English *coop* is often used for both models.
- There is not one perfect legal form for worker-owned coops in Germany.
- We settled with a GmbH (Ltd.) with equal shares and special bylaws.



# Notes on solidarity economy and wording

- A *Genossenschaft* was not an option for us.
  - Expensive
  - Forced membership in *Genossenschaftsverband* limits freedom and enforces top down influence.
  - The *Vorstand* (executive body) is not tied to the will of the *Genossen*.



# Reality not as bright

- Problems we noticed in other coops:
  - Self-exploitation.
  - Inequality between workers who are owners and workers that are not.
  - *Green-Economy lifestyle* businesses that are no longer part of a broader movement.
- We want to try to do it differently.
- Goal: Just conditions between all actors (collectives, worker-owners, customers, contractors).





# The IT-Kollektiv



# 2015: Initial start

- Participants from „*the left scene*“ and *Federation of German speaking Anarchists* (FdA).
- Research and creation of magazine issue on worker-owned cooperatives.
- Main desires: Alternatives to 40 hours wage labour and location independent work (which may resulted from an activist POV).



# 2016: Founding

- Developing of egalitarian and crisis-resistant bylaws with the help of a lawyer.
- Separation of informal group (collective) and formal organization.
- Founding of GmbH.
- Financing of founding by first contractual work and without outside capital.



# 2017: Further development

- Active exchange with other coops.
- Building of network and infrastructure.
- Smaller projects/contracts.
- Getting slowly bigger.
- Chicken-Egg-Problem: Everyone still works in traditional jobs because of missing money inflow, but without people quitting jobs not enough time to bring in money...



# 2018: Startup

- Since autumn of 2018 4-5 people are working „full-time“ on the coop.
- Active customer acquisition.
- External communications professionalized.
- Building of decentralized infrastructure.
- First steps to build stronger collaboration between (tech-)coops.



# The Network

## 2. Netzwerk Entwicklung

- Slidapunkt ausarbeiten / gemeinsames Selbstverständnis
- Home page schaffen → gemeinsames Label
- AGs bilden
- Städtegruppen → Co-Working
- Fachabteilungen → Kompetenzgruppen
- Netzwerk getragen durch beteiligte Kollektive (föderalistisch)
- aktiv Kollektive reinholen
- Ressourcen besser teilen & darstellen (nicht aufen & innen)

- Außendarstellung: Weniger Politik (weniger verbindliche Abschlüsse)
- Onboarding-Prozess (Buddy/Partner)
- Wie schnell und mit wem wollen wir...



# Initial concept

- *IT-Kollektiv* project started with the idea of a further network around the core collective.
- People that want to join the coop in the future or work with us as freelancers can join the network.
- Also a general place to get to know each other and organize.
- Part of the bylaws:
  - Freelancers have right to join coop after a certain time.



# Network etiquette (mission statement, code of conduct)

- Network is not a random freelancer network but a **community based on solidarity**.
- We are part of **political movements** and the **solidarity economy**.
- We work **together** not against each other. We communicate **respectful**.
- We practice **solidarity in daily life** with each other.
- We want to build local structures, not just on the internet.
- Members of the network participate equally in decisions on budget and operation in projects.



# Ongoing development

- After a short time more than one coop became part of the network.
- We meet at least once a year since 2016.
- Today **four coops** are members of the network + single persons (interested / freelancers).
- Development towards a **network of multiple tech-coops** with single persons.
  - From a network connected to **one** coop.



# Ongoing development

- First steps towards international exchange, e.g. with CoTech in UK and at 34c3, 35c3
  - Tech-coops are a relatively new thing in Germany
- We finished the first stage
  - Internal infrastructure is running
  - Bringing interested persons and tech-coops together





Next steps, lessons and questions

# Next Steps

- Process to become a more structured network of multiple tech-coops.
- More international exchange and organizing.
- Cockpit: Internal software that fits our organizational structure (budgets of projects, skill database etc.).
- Getting paid from coop work...



# Some lessons

- Not so easy.
  - Everything needs its time.
  - Hard (for us) to get well paid contractual work.
- Where there are people there is a potential for conflicts.
- Care work is important.



# Some open questions/issues

- IT could play a vital part in growing and connecting the solidarity economy. How?
- Diversity is an issue.
  - Especially in connection with the quite insecure financial situation and white/male dominated tech and left scene.
- Work vs wage labour, work vs work time. What is work? Who gets paid what? A lot of unpaid Work in the beginning.



# Similar projects

- CoTech (UK): <https://coops.tech>
- Enspiral (NZ): <https://enspiral.com>
- FACT[TIC] (AR): <https://facttic.org.ar>
- Tech Co-op Network (North America):  
<https://techworker.coop>



# Where to find us

- Web: <https://it-kollektiv.com>
  - Currently only in German but we are happy to answer mails in English.
- Twitter: @IT\_Kollektiv
- At 35C3: Find us at the tech-coops/IT-Kollektiv assembly inside 1komona
- If you're interested in joining: Hit us up at congress or mail us at [info@it-kollektiv.com](mailto:info@it-kollektiv.com)
- **Tech-Coops Meetup after this talk!**

