

## CAL SOLAR EMPLOYEES VOTE TO EXPLORE BECOMING NEVADA COUNTY'S FIRST WORKER-OWNED CO-OP

By *BriarPatch Co-op Community Market*

*from California Solar*

*BriarPatch is proud to work with locally-owned California Solar Electric Company, or Cal Solar, to build our new photovoltaic solar energy system. They were a great fit for the project for a variety of reasons, and we can be even more proud of the partnership because California Solar is actively exploring converting to a cooperative business structure — they may even be California's first worker-owned solar co-op!*

Founded on the triple bottom line ethics of respect for people, the planet, and profit, since 2000 California Solar has been cultivating a workplace that relies on the values and knowledge of its entire staff to determine the company's direction. Now, in a move to formalize this democratic environment, our staff of 24 is studying converting to a worker-owned cooperative business structure.

Cooperatives are enterprises that are owned, controlled, and operated for the benefit of the members, and are democratically governed on the principle of one member, one vote. In a consumer cooperative like BriarPatch, the voting members are the people who buy the goods from the business. A worker cooperative's members are the people who work in the co-op, and are referred to as worker-owners.

Solar companies are a natural fit for the cooperative model. Businesses such as Namaste Solar in Boulder, Colorado; PV Squared in Greenfield, Massachusetts; and South Mountain Company in Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts have been operating successful cooperatives for years. Since the typical solar energy system has a life span of at least 40 years, maintaining long-term relationships with customers is essential. A worker-owned co-op fosters high job retention and encourages sustainable business practices, which helps build a strong, meaningful connection to the local community.

“We have been incredibly lucky to find a staff of value-aligned solar professionals who love their jobs and want to see the company succeed. Since deciding through a staff training and vote to formally convert to a worker co-op, nearly every member of the staff is part of a working group or committee to draft our founding documents and create a strategic plan, and is also intimately involved in our finances,” said Lars Ortegren, California Solar owner.



Lars Ortegren, Owner

In October 2015, Cal Solar partnered with Project Equity, an Oakland-based nonprofit that supports businesses as they transition to worker ownership through their Cooperative Business Incubator program. They provide targeted outreach and training to help business owners find out if employee ownership is a good fit, and then support businesses as they make the transition.



Through biweekly meetings, Project Equity is providing tools, expertise, facilitation, and advice to help Cal Solar shape their new cooperative. This work includes employee education, the structuring of governance and decision-making, negotiating the sale price and terms, and navigating other legal, financial, and cultural

aspects of the conversion to a cooperative model.

“The Cal Solar team has been incredibly committed to engaging their entire employee group. We’ve been impressed with the care they have taken, from incorporating communication trainings to ensure that everyone felt comfortable expressing their opinions, to including employees’ significant others in a full-day meeting about the co-op plans and process. Every company is different, and given their existing workplace culture, this approach has been the right fit for them,” said Alison Lingane of Project Equity.

Cal Solar hopes to be the first worker-owned co-op to incorporate under the new co-op designation in the state of California, and the first worker-owned solar co-op in the state.



Brandon Davis

**Brandon Davis, Sales Manager:**

“The idea of a co-op has been kicking around in the company for years. I’m excited we’re finally putting our thoughts into action. Working with Project Equity has been key. Their knowledge and resources have taken this discovery process to the next level and allowed us to take real steps toward making the co-op a reality. It hasn’t been easy. The many hours of meetings, research and discussions have been grueling, but I know that in the end we’ll find out what is best for our company.”



Reid England

**Reid England, Lead Solar Electrician:**

“We have a very democratic working environment, which is unlike any other workplace I’ve ever experienced. We are all already deeply invested in this company and want to see it succeed. The co-op model only works with people who care, who hold themselves accountable. Converting to being worker-owned would be an organic evolution for us. We are very lucky to have the group of people we do. My favorite part about the prospect of being a worker-owner is being able to own a business and run it with my friends. I keep joking that people usually say to not take your work home with you, but we do take work home with us all of the time — because we really care about what we’re doing.”

**Kris Phillips, Office Manager:**



Kris Phillips

“We have volunteered countless hours after work exploring the idea of becoming a worker-owned cooperative. We’ve spent many nights learning about governance, internal capital accounts, buy-in and buyouts, and trying to determine the best structure for us. A lot of hard work and dedication has gone into this effort, and the level of employee commitment has only escalated in the process. It’s a pleasure to be working side by side with these amazingly talented people, and it will be extremely fun and rewarding to work with them side by side as co-owners.”



Robert  
Totoonchie

**Robert Totoonchie, Sales & Design:**

“Transitioning from a traditional business to a cooperative business model means a new level of commitment to the company, our customers, and our co-workers. While it takes a lot of groundwork and involves lots of meetings, the result will strengthen our personal investment in our work, which means a better experience for both employees and clients. I look forward to continuing on this path of growth.”