

JULY GM OVERWHELMINGLY APPROVES BLACK LIVES MATTER STATEMENT

August 16, 2020



Illustration Tommy Kane

“The Park Slope Food Coop unequivocally supports Black lives and the dismantling of all systems that propagate and empower systemic racism. #BlackLivesMatter”

Coop Finances, Temporary Markup Strategy, Return to Member Labor Also Explored

By Frank Haberle

Coop members overwhelmingly approved a statement of solidarity and support for the Black Lives Matter movement at the July General Meeting after a number of members expressed disappointment that it took so long for the Coop to take a stand on such a heartfelt issue.

“The Coop can do more to find our place to fight against racism,” said Jasmina Nikolov on the Zoom meeting that was attended by 341 members. She said she was disappointed that “we as a community could not come forward faster.”

In other business, Coop members debated a staff plan to raise food prices as a temporary measure for dealing with the financial stress created by the pandemic which is causing losses of \$95,000 per week. Also, Coop staff members presented General Coordinator reports on the current financial situation and the volume and quality of fresh produce coming into the Coop this season.

The Vote on Black Lives Matter



Coop member Toisha Tucker authored the Coop's statement on solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Photo Toisha Tucker

The Black Lives Matter statement passed with 260 of the members on Zoom voting yes and 10 voting no. It said: "The Park Slope Food Coop unequivocally supports Black lives and the dismantling of all systems that propagate and empower systemic

racism. #BlackLivesMatter”

The statement was authored and presented by Coop member Toisha Tucker with fellow Coop members Trish Tchume, Summer Stephanos, Rebecca Pristoop, and Hayley Gorenberg. The presenters began by expressing their concerns that it has taken so long for the Coop to make a statement of support for the BLM movement.

Tucker stated that 66 days had passed since the death of George Floyd, but in its social media postings the Coop had not made any mention of BLM that was not accompanied by reports on the Coop’s bottom line. “We needed to make a strong statement as an anticapitalist, antiracist organization,” Tucker said.

Stephanos, a member since 2007, added: “95% of members voted in support of this statement in our June GM. It saddened me that the Coop leadership chose not to make a statement at that time. The Coop needs to meet this moment.”

Tchume stated, “I think it is wrong that the approval of this statement has become such a process for the Coop. Smaller stores had statements in May. It is deeply upsetting that it has taken not one but two of these meetings to approve this statement.”

Gorenberg, a 27-year member of the Coop, added “I’m saddened that we spent this much time, that we failed to use our mission statement, and we deferred to processes. We chose structures that perpetuate racial harm. I think we need to do better.”

Members applauded the efforts of Tucker and the other Coop members to create a clear and strong statement on behalf of the Coop. A resident of Bedford-Stuyvesant, member Efe Osaren stated that “I was shocked that I was hearing nothing from the Coop. It’s July 28. I started shopping at Green Hill Coop because it supports Black people and Black lives and the Black community. I appreciate you Tucker and Trish and Summer and Hayley.”

Paul Warren added: “I really appreciate this statement. I was very disappointed that

we couldn't adopt a statement (in June.) This is a statement from the Coop to the world."

Eric Frumer said "thanks to the authors for this statement, which puts us on the right side of history. The Coop can do more to find our place to fight against racism."

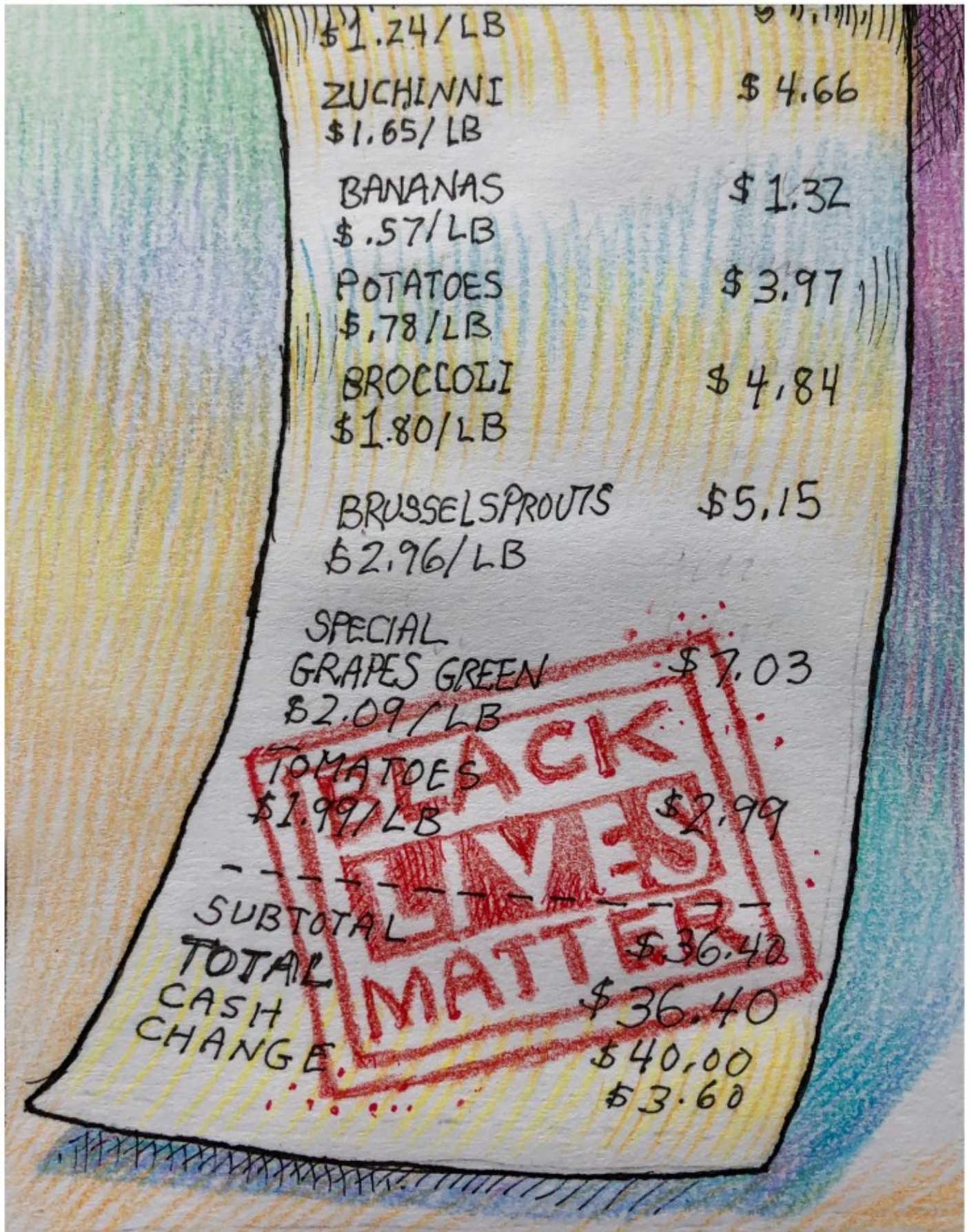
Maitefa Angaza, of the Coop's Diversity and Equity Committee, proposed an amended longer statement that explored the Coop's positions on diversity and inclusion. The amendment was then discussed.

Tucker objected to the new statement. "My statement is crafted for social media," Tucker said. "The Coop needs to make an unequivocal statement that we support Black Lives Matter. This amendment is too broad a statement; it is a laundry list of procedural stuff."

Marion Yuen, member since 1988, said: "I fully support what Tucker has drafted. The message needs to be loud and clear, as Tucker had it: Black Lives Matter."

Elliot Hetterly thanked Tucker and added, "I support your statement which is clear and brief. It should not be this hard. We need to approve this now, and there is much more work to be done. This is long overdue."

The proposed amendment was voted down, with 225 members voting no and 46 members voting yes.



\$1.24/LB
ZUCCHINI \$ 4.66
\$1.65/LB
BANANAS \$ 1.32
\$.57/LB
POTATOES \$ 3.97
\$.78/LB
BROCCOLI \$ 4.84
\$1.80/LB
BRUSSELSPROUTS \$5.15
\$2.96/LB

SPECIAL
GRAPES GREEN \$ 7.03
\$2.09/LB

TOMATOES \$2.99
\$1.99/LB

SUBTOTAL \$36.40
TOTAL \$36.40
CASH \$40.00
CHANGE \$3.60

Illustration Tommy Kane

Temporarily Raising the Markup

The financial pressure on the Coop is partly resulting from increased costs for such things as protective equipment and more paid workers. Meanwhile revenues have dropped because of reduced hours and safety-related restrictions on the number of members who can shop at one time.

To deal with this pressure, Coop staff has proposed raising the Coop's markup from 21% to 25%. The proposal will be voted on at the August 25 meeting. If it passes it would have the effect of increasing a shopping trip that would normally cost \$50 to \$52.

Two Coop staff members, Receiving Coordinator Margie Lempert and General Coordinator Joe Szladek, presented the markup increase proposal for discussion. "In March, with the suspension of member labor, hiring of members as part-time staff and departure of several full-time staff, the Coop lost 80% of its workforce overnight," Lempert explained.

"At the same time, COVID-19 protocols required that we reduce hours and limit shopping to 35 members at one time. After the largest shopping week in our history, with sales over \$1.6 million, we fell off a cliff," Lempert said. "Since then we've kept staff healthy, we're up to 77 shopping hours weekly and our revenues are up to \$750,000 a week."

But Lempert pointed out that "weekly losses of \$95,000 per week aren't sustainable. At the current rate of losses, the Coop's reserves will be exhausted by May 2021," she said.

The Coop stopped using member labor out of health concerns. Reintroducing it would cut costs but it also would increase risk, Lempert said. "We have to reintroduce member labor gradually, given the times. We are looking at a small 4% markup increase—from 21% to 25%—to help meet the gap," she said.

Szladek added that “increasing sales will reduce weekly losses from \$90,000 to \$40,000. We need a short-term strategy. Reducing our weekly loss will extend our financial runway.”

The proposed markup would turn what is today a \$50 shop into a \$52 shop and a \$100 shop into a \$104 shop, Szladek said. “We are discussing an exemption option for people experiencing hardship. We are all more emotionally invested here than a traditional grocery store,” he said.

The markup is a temporary solution, to help cover the gap until we return to member labor. “We want to include a sunset clause,” Szladek added, “where 90 days after we return to member labor this markup ends.”

The Coop’s current goal is to increase weekly sales to \$900,000.” Along with the markup, we also think we can get more hours open and increase people on the shopping floor. All 3 make sure we can make it through 2021,” Szladek said.

Questions and comments included member and long-time staff member Janet Farrell, who said: “I am totally against raising the price 4% because we haven’t tried anything else. I don’t think it’s responsible to say ‘oh, let’s just get more money.’ “

COVID-19 SAFETY

TIPS

• WEAR A MASK

• STAY 6 FEET APART

• WASH HANDS

• PAY 4% MORE?

Illustration John Donohue

George Olken stated: “We know that a small price raise will affect our lowest income members. The Coop we love is going to be very different. Will this cause more vulnerable members to not shop?”

Leah Schwartz asked: “This markup doesn’t work for everybody. Can we look back at our greatest strength, our 17,000 members, and find a feasible way to get our member labor back on track?”

Szladek’s response was: “We all want member labor back, but we have to be prepared for uncertainty. What if we have to pull it back again?”

Reports of the General Coordinators



There’s a host of amazing products in the produce aisle. Photo by Rod Morrison
Prior to the agenda items, Eleanor Astrinsky provided a colorful report on the many

amazing products now available in the produce aisle, and Joe Holtz presented a preliminary financial report for the past 20 weeks of the fiscal year, compared with the same period a year ago. Sales are \$5.2 million below last year, while expenses are up \$493,000, mostly from hiring temporary staff. This represents a swing of \$1,444,000 from last year.

“This is not a good situation,” Holtz said. “If we maintain weekly cash burn of \$90,000 a week we will lose all the money we have by May 2021.”

Holtz also pointed out that we have more cash in hand at the moment—\$4 million, as opposed to the \$3 million we had last year, thanks to the federal Payroll Protection Plan loan of \$1,454,000 and \$689,000 in increased membership investments we received from members.

“Had we not gotten the [federal rescue money and increased membership investments] we would have \$2 million, not \$4 million. I would encourage members who haven’t yet, to go to our website and learn how to increase owner equity investment.”

One member asked, “Does this mean we will be out of business by May, 2021?”

Holtz responded, “No. It means we have a serious problem and if we don’t increase shopping hours, and increase people coming in to shop, and get our members back to working at the Coop—which is what makes our Coop feel unique and special—we’re in trouble. If we do these things, we can stay in business a long time.” ■