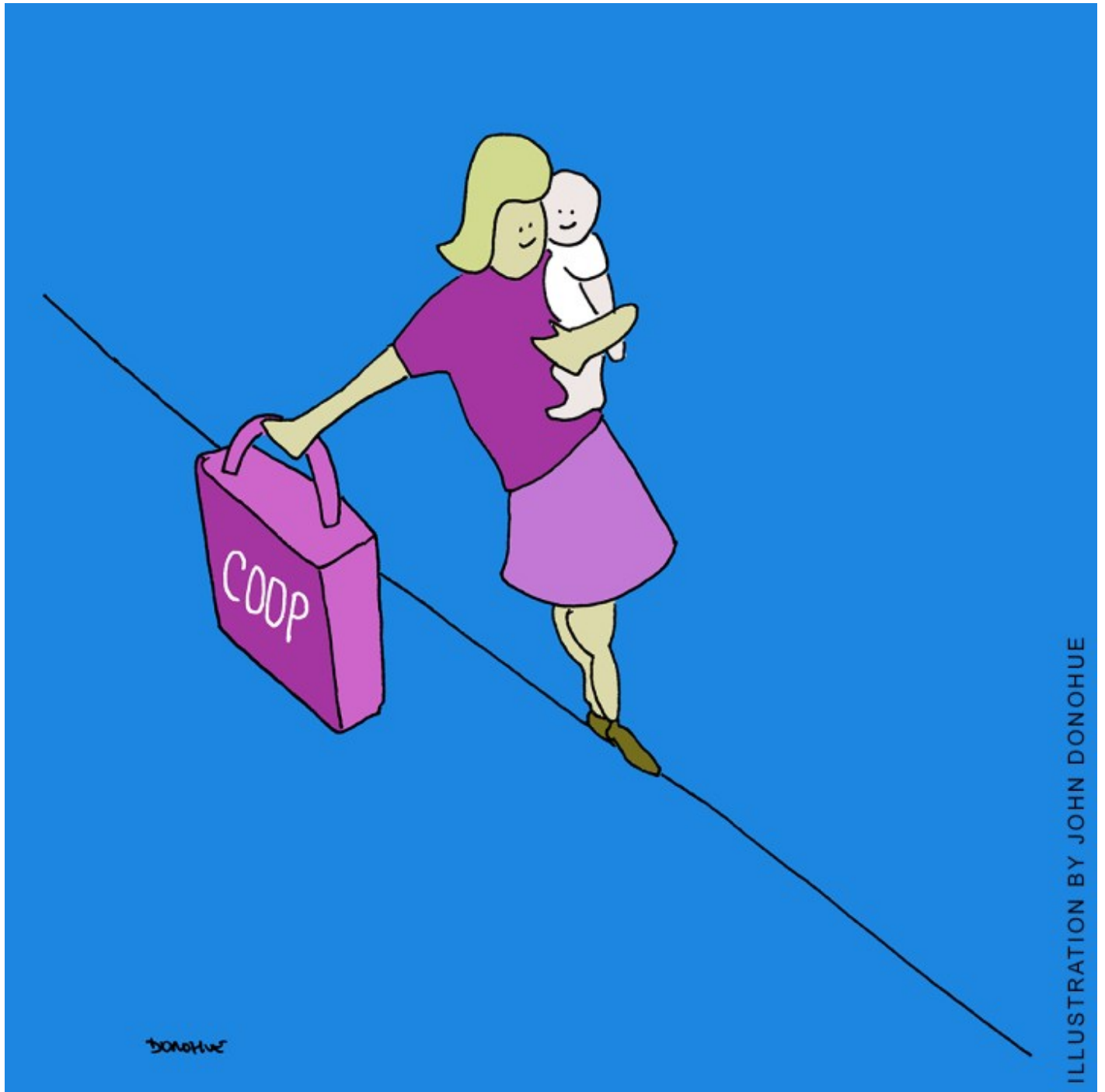


SINGLE MOMS STRUGGLING TO FIND COOP SHIFTS

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BY HAYLEY GORENBERG

The high-wire act of snagging and balancing Coop work shifts, while being a single parent of young children—especially in an era when the Coop lacks childcare—took center ring in the Coop Confidential Facebook group in recent weeks, with many sin-

gle mothers venting their frustration about whether or not they are truly welcome at the store.

WORKING SHIFTS

In April, changes in work shifts extended work cycles, and adjusted the release of new shift opportunities, so they trickle out more steadily over time—rather than flooding online at odd hours, and quickly getting scooped up. The Coop also considered the return of reliably recurring shifts in July. But these improvements still left mothers of young children jockeying for swaps through flurries of social media posts, and wishing for both structured flexibility to swap shifts, and childcare coverage at the Coop. Some said they had felt unwelcome at the Coop from the start.

“I don’t mind working at all, but it’s a little bit complicated, and they’re not flexible,” said Alla Tice, an immigrant from the former Soviet Union who joined the Coop in 2018, motivated in large part by stellar tomatoes. “‘Wonderful tomatoes!’ That’s what everyone said at orientation. The food is amazing. The choice is amazing. Prices are good. It’s three small blocks away, my local supermarket.”

Tice, a self-described “single mother by choice” of two children, now four and almost eight years old, said she was dismayed to be met with suspicion about her household from the outset. When she first arrived at the Coop and explained that she was the only adult in a household with two children, she said the response was incredulous, “Yeah. Right.” She felt she was being tacitly accused of lying.

THE COOP SHOULD INSTITUTE A “GRACE PERIOD,” TO ALLOW SINGLE PARENTS WHO LACK ROUTINE CHILD CARE TO REMAIN MEMBERS.

—KIKI RAKOWSKY, COOP MEMBER

She forged ahead anyway, and did appreciate the Coop’s parental leave policy, applied when her younger child was born. After her leave, she got some help from her mother, or from friends on occasion, and successfully worked checkout for almost a year, before COVID-19 put member work on hiatus. But when member work resumed, with the childcare room shut down indefinitely, and other care options constrained by COVID risks, she started to struggle with meeting shift requirements. She stopped by the Coop office to try and work out a solution—and described speaking with an individual in the office—who, she said, told her, “Maybe the Coop is not for you.”



Shopping with a baby in a stroller along the produce section of the Coop.

BANKING SHIFTS

Tice scrambled to bank shifts for a full week when she had childcare in early 2022. She said she worked so steadily that a staff member asked whether she had joined as a paid employee. But with her banked shifts running out, Tice said she checks “al-

most every day” for shifts she can manage—and she’s having a hard time finding them. She rhapsodizes about the childcare room: “My daughter loved it! They got bagels. They played. I know my youngest now, she would appreciate it.” However, she vacillated in her feelings about a childcare space during the era of COVID. “I’m not sure how I would feel about bringing back childcare—but I would still say it would be really nice if childcare were available. It would be helpful.”

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—*ALLA TICE, COOP MEMBER*

Ultimately, she wondered about the possibility of a documented proof of need for excuse from work during a period of time, comparing the situation to excusing jurors who are primary caretakers of young children. “I don’t want to sound lazy,” she hurried to add. “I don’t want to sound like I want to avoid work.”

LOOKING FOR A SHIFT



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

Coop member and single mother Kiki Rakowsky, a Coop Confidential member, also advocated for lessened shift requirements with documented proof of need—perhaps a tax return excerpt showing that a parent is “head of household” with young dependents. Rakowsky likened searching for shifts that worked in her schedule to buying choice concert tickets the moment they are released. She said fellow Coop members told her to “wake up early, 4 or 4:30,” to find “plenty of slots.”

Rakowsky, a funeral director, said, “I don’t have the privilege of knowing when I’m going to be at work. Let’s say I schedule a shift four weeks in advance—and someone dies?” In the absence of a formal shift-swapping procedure, even the revisions to the work slot system fall short of addressing her need for flexibility. “It’s almost like the Coop has turned into ‘Lord of the Flies,’” she exclaimed. “Kill or be killed there! Eat or be eaten! Everyone’s stretched really thin.”

A Coop member for more than a decade, Rakowsky brought her now-seven-year-old to the Coop in a baby carrier, and nursed him during her checkout shift, until he was old enough to go to Coop childcare.

ON LEAVE

Part of the “sandwich generation,” Rakowsky now also takes care of her father—and she is on leave until June for that reason. She said she’s not sure how she will maintain her membership after her leave ends—but she remains convinced the Coop can solve the problem.



Pushing a baby in a stroller along the busy bulk section of the Coop.

“I think it’s an amazing institution,” she said. “I think it’s a great place with great people, and the model has worked for so long and so many.” She pointed out that the pandemic has laid bare the deficits in many systems, including, but not limited to, PS-FC. “It’s nothing against the Coop,” she said. “I sing the praises of the Coop! The Coop should be modeling how to shop for all of its members. If we had elderly shopping on Thursday mornings, why haven’t we solved for single parents? You can’t pick and choose which marginalized community to solve for. When I hear that people can no longer shop at the Coop because of their single-parent status, I’m with you!” she said. “We have to have the intellectual wherewithal to come up with a solution.” Until then, she suggested the Coop should institute a “grace period,” to allow single parents who lack routine child care to remain members. For now, she said, “I’m just tired!”

COOP CHILDCARE ON HOLD



The Coop bulk room.

PSFC Membership Coordinator Matt Hoagland, on staff for more than 17 years, acknowledged childcare at the Coop was on hold “indefinitely”—because of COVID concerns, but also because using the space for bulk processing equipment has radically improved packaging bulk items, to the point where what was once a week’s worth of work can be accomplished in a day. That capacity is all the more critical when COVID safety measures necessitate moving shoppers efficiently through the high-volume bulk aisle, “traditionally one of the worst aisles for traffic.”

Hoagland deemed creating a system for excusing single parents of young children from work slots “above pay grade” for his position—meaning it would require a rule change. Noting that he grew up in a household headed by his single mother, he asked, “How much can we get into the management of people’s lives? It’s hard, and some of the answers don’t sound friendly at times.”

He also pointed out that even when childcare existed at the Coop, pre-pandemic, there was no guarantee it would be open or available at any particular time. “If we didn’t have workers, we didn’t have childcare, and that was what it was. So there were always limits on it.”

Hoagland expressed hope that newly available recurring shift options and improvements to online scheduling would help single parents, but acknowledged that there’s currently “no adequate answer.” He said, “We’re hoping people do the best they can. We’re making our way, trying to figure out what will work for most of our members—whether that’s single parents, hardcore planners, people who don’t plan very well, or people who only think of their status when they’re about to be suspended.”



Bags of produce being prepared for bulk sale.

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