

REPORT ON THE 7/27 GENERAL MEETING

August 27, 2022



GM Reacts to Holtz Suspension, Debates Coop Mask Requirement

By Hayley Gorenberg

COVID-19 controversies dominated the July General Meeting, from the first moments of the freeform Open Forum to the discussion on whether the Coop should continue requiring masks.

Several members used the Open Forum to assert their opposition to the Coop's requirement that members—as workers—be vaccinated against COVID-19. Some complained they had not been allowed medical exemptions from vaccination. Others claimed that the Coop should not require vaccination, believing it would not slow transmission of COVID-19.

“WHAT ARE THE LIMITS AND CHECKS ON THE PERSONNEL COMMITTEE’S POWER? I BELIEVE THAT WE ALL DESERVE ANSWERS, AND I WOULD LIKE TO DEMAND ANSWERS.”

RECEIVING COORDINATOR GILLIAN CHI

Coop bookkeeper Kathy Hieatt urged members to read the *Linewaiters’ Gazette’s* July 25 article on the Personnel Committee’s month-long suspension of General Manager and Treasurer Joe Holtz, which concluded on July 30. Hieatt called for an explanation of the committee’s rationale.

“You took away a month of his salary. He may need that to exist, to pay his rent or his mortgage,” said member Bhakti Sondra Shaye. “It felt bad to me, and it makes me feel terrible about the Coop—and I love the Coop. I feel this is extraordinarily extreme.”

“What are the limits and checks on the Personnel Committee’s power?” asked Receiving Coordinator Gillian Chi, who had previously objected to barring Holtz from Coop premises for a month. “I believe that we all deserve answers, and I would like to demand answers.”

Personnel Committee member Yolanda McBride responded that the committee is elected and invested with authority by the General Meeting to advise the general coordinators on human resource functions and to hire, fire and discipline top staff, in consultation with the general coordinators. McBride asserted that the disciplinary penalty meted out to Holtz was not personal, “was based on facts uncovered in the investigation,” and would have been imposed on any Coop general coordinator.

McBride said the *Gazette* article covering Holtz’s 30-day suspension without pay, plus barring him from Coop premises was “not an accurate reflection of the facts based on what was gathered in the investigation.” Referencing confidentiality requirements,

McBride did not provide any specific information (see sidebar below).

Responding to McBride's reference to confidentiality, member Rachel Porter noted that confidentiality could be waived (as Holtz had done in speaking with the *Gazette*). "The Coop, I think, has too long suffered from hiding behind confidentiality," Porter said.

COMMITTEE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE CONSTITUTED

The GM elected members to serve on the newly created Committee Oversight Committee, which will facilitate regular reporting to the GM and the *Gazette* on Coop member committees' work. All who stood for election were voted in: the originator of the committee, member Rachel Porter; attorney and mediator Diana Colon; 12-year Coop member Brian Shuman; Kristian Nammack, who previously served on the Environmental Committee and expressed a proclivity for shopping "European-style" (visiting the Coop four or five times each week); member Ned Lochaya; and Sara Bouzas, a member since 2011 who works as a Spanish interpreter in courts and jails, and so places a premium on listening carefully "as required by my job—and I do this in my life as well."

FINANCIAL REPORT

General Coordinator Joe Szladek presented a brief financial report indicating that the Coop's rate of loss had decreased and that a recent eight-week period showed the organization had started to turn a profit before a usual summer downturn while many members are out of town.

Szladek predicted the Coop would likely run in the red for the year overall, estimating the potential for a \$100,000 deficit. "That's a pretty small amount, given what we've dug out of," he said, emphasizing, "it's not just about one year; it's also about the trajectory."

Szladek flagged that the 25 percent pandemic markup is still in effect, highlighted the

number of new members signing up as a “really positive” indicator, and noted efficiencies gained through the new online workslot system, as well as the decision to extend the usual shift cycle to working once every six weeks, instead of the previous requirement to work every four weeks.

GENERAL COORDINATORS’ REPORT

General Coordinator Elinoar Astrinsky reported “a string of wallet thefts,” and cautioned members to keep valuables with them and lock lockers when using them. “Don’t leave your bags strewn about in your cart,” she said. “Let’s all be vigilant.”

She said police had been informed of the thefts, and that the general coordinators were discussing further security measures.

Ending on a positive note, Astrinsky highlighted that Sycamore honeydew melons, peaches, cherries and corn are in season and are “luscious and delicious and sweet.” Watermelons abound, with seeds and without: “They’re both really, really, really good. Buy them!”

TO MASK, OR NOT TO MASK?

Member Elizabeth Tobier, who had submitted a discussion item noting that New York State had largely lifted mask requirements, presented slides that she said supported her argument for lifting the Coop’s mask mandate.

GC Astrinsky had noted earlier in the meeting that the Coop “as an employer and business” has the right to mandate masks, and reported a falloff in members’ readiness, with a “huge uptick in having to hand masks to people to come in and shop.”

“I believe that masks do work,” countered a member who became a temporary worker during the pandemic and, as such, had to wear a mask for full working days—far longer than a typical shift or visit to shop. “This is not a huge sacrifice,” the member concluded.

Another member noted New York's still-high transmission rate, urging, "Until cases start to go down, the mask mandate needs to stay!"

A member who said she is immunocompromised voiced concern that information presented about masks had been inaccurate to the point of being "completely debunked," and that lifting the mask mandate at the Coop would put her "at great risk."

"WE ALL FACE FATIGUE ON MASKING. BUT I AM WILLING TO CONTINUE BEING FATIGUED."

STAFF MEMBER JASON WEINER

A member who said she worked with health-care providers said that "now would be a terrible time" to change the Coop's mask requirement. "We owe it to each other," the member said. "We have been saving each other's lives, and we need to keep doing that."

"Masks work; that's why hospitals use them," another member said.

Staff member Jason Weiner read a prepared statement referencing the Coop's "many immunocompromised members," acknowledging that there was "no question" that "we all face fatigue on masking." But he promoted policy based on science, rather than fatigue, concluding, "I am willing to continue being fatigued."

Masks provide a measure of safety that allows the Coop to maintain its volume of shoppers, said General Coordinator Ann Herpel. She said that cutting the use of masks could lead us to reconsider increasing shopping capacity and likely deter many members from working, ultimately steering the Coop in the "wrong direction" and hurting the organization financially.

Toward the conclusion of the discussion period, one member suggested a medical committee to help the Coop assess its policies as needed.

Hayley Gorenberg joined the Coop in 1993 and became a Gazette reporter soon thereafter.