

AUGUST GENERAL MEETING: DISAPPOINTMENT ABOUT BIKE RACKS AND CHILDCARE, BUT FINANCES LOOKING UP

October 4, 2022



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

By Jess Powers

Roughly 122 people attended the end-of-August Coop General Meeting on Zoom. The meeting covered Joe Holtz's suspension, Coop finances, the removal of bike racks, a call for the return of childcare, labor issues at Amy's Kitchen and other topics.

During the Open Forum, Coop members expressed appreciation for General Coordinator Joe Holtz and dismay with his recent 30-day suspension without pay. Staffer Gillian Chi shared that she and a member submitted a proposal for back pay and an apology. Later, Brian Shuman of the Oversight Committee shared that they received com-

plaints about the suspension and expect a report on the Personnel Committee, which levied the penalty, from the Oversight Committee. Other members asked whether the *Linewaiters' Gazette* will concurrently publish in print and whether members can be emailed upon publication. General Coordinator Ann Herpel said it wasn't possible to produce a web and a print version without a lot more work. She also recommended signing up for *Gazette* email notifications [scroll to the bottom of this page to do so].

THE COOP HAS AROUND 13,500 ACTIVE MEMBERS, WITH JUST OVER 10,000 WORKING MEMBERS. THE REMAINING 3,000 ARE ON WORK EXEMPTIONS.

TREASURER'S REPORT

Holtz updated members on the financial health of the Coop and shared five points that also appear in the summary of the financial statement.

First, the Coop is losing less money overall due to the return of member labor; second, the 4 percent increase in the markup, which went from 21 to 25 percent, contributed to an increase in income; third, projections show an average of 10 percent more sales than the previous year; fourth, there is a good financial cushion and the Coop is owed \$1.5 million by the IRS. Another issue: the Coop needs to eventually pay into the pension plan. He also said there are pending questions about whether or not to lower prices, increase the number of checkouts, expand hours and up the number of people allowed in the Coop at the same time. A pilot of a home delivery system is also is being planned.

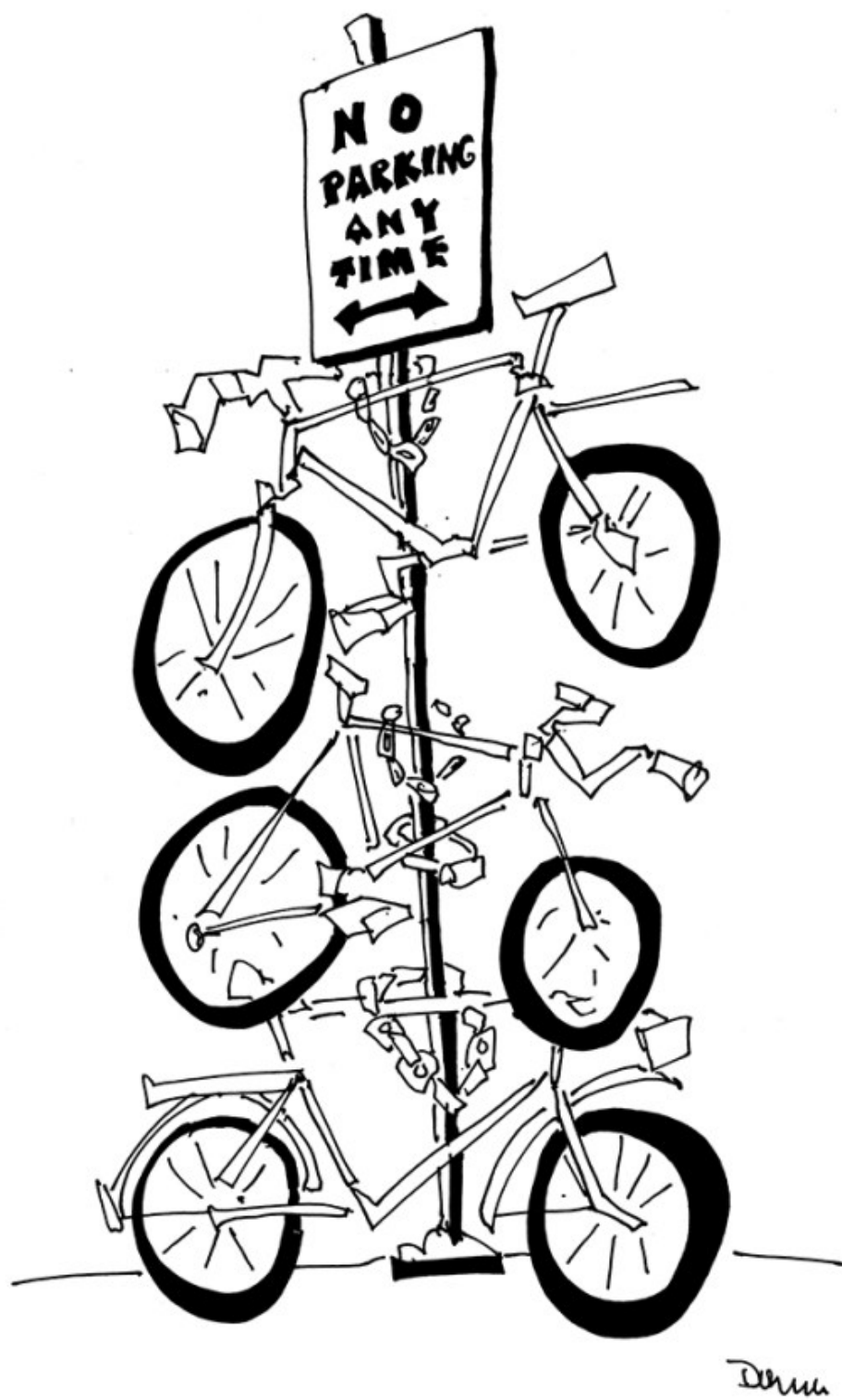


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REMOVAL OF BIKE RACKS AND OTHER UPDATES

In the General Coordinator report, Ann Herpel acknowledged two new part-time membership coordinators to work on weekends: Karina Gee, who was previously a shopping squad leader, and Elly Dittmar, who floated in a variety of shifts.

Herpel noted that construction work is occurring next to the Coop at the former St. Francis Xavier School, now leased to the Department of Education. The Coop was informed by the contractor that during the next phase of construction a dumpster will be partially placed in our loading zone and that sometime in the fall the bike racks closest to the mural will be removed. They were installed by the Department of Transportation and approved by the former principal of St. Francis. She continued that the Coop will also likely lose the bike racks closest to the street and that the news was “disappointing.” The Coop and its members can make an appeal to city agencies for other bike racks to be placed on Union St.

There was no food report this meeting.

MEMBERS AND WORKERS

As of the date of the meeting, there were around 13,500 active members of the Coop, with just over 10,000 working members. The remaining 3,000 are on work exemptions. The new member orientations fill up every week with an average of 81 new members assigned to work shifts. This growth, she stated, will “strengthen and fortify the bottom line.” Attrition is seasonal, at about 17 percent, similar to pre-pandemic numbers.

Bookkeeping Coordinator Kathy Hieatt, who writes the member investment refund checks, added that she completes roughly 30 per week, fewer than the number of new members. John Tucker, a member recently eligible to retire, inquired whether his member labor—and that of other retirees—was needed. Herpel said that if an open shift appears on the calendar, it reflects the operational needs at that time.

LABOR CONCERNS AT AMY'S KITCHEN

Eric Frumin of the Labor Committee presented a report on Amy's Kitchen, a family-owned company that manufactures prepared frozen foods carried by the Coop. The Labor Committee was created in 2017 at a GM and reports on workers in the food chain, engages with suppliers and works to be a constructive force within that space. The labor story broke on NBC News and pieces followed on KQED and Eater.

In May, the Committee sent a series of investigatory questions regarding labor conditions to the company. After not receiving a response, they sent them again. At the last GM, the Committee asked the Coop to contact Amy's Kitchen, with the intention that, as the Coop is a significant customer, the company would take the obligation seriously. In turn, the GCs decided to ask the National Co+op Grocers (NCG), which serves as an intermediary between coops and producers to get better deals. Their spokesperson was already aware of the issues and agreed to send a letter to Amy's "at a high level" to press for an answer. Frumin believes that the questions had gaps but would enable us to get a more accurate picture of labor conditions.

Research by Labor Committee members was "distressing," according to Frumin. There are repeated injury rates and the company has failed to act. At four major facilities in California, Oregon and Idaho, reports on injuries from one plant are more than triple those of their peers in the frozen processing business. He compared the situation to Amazon's poor reputation among its peers in the warehousing industry. Amy's Kitchen is not reporting injuries and is having a "safety meltdown," he continued. The Committee is following their process to continue investigating and make a recommendation to membership.

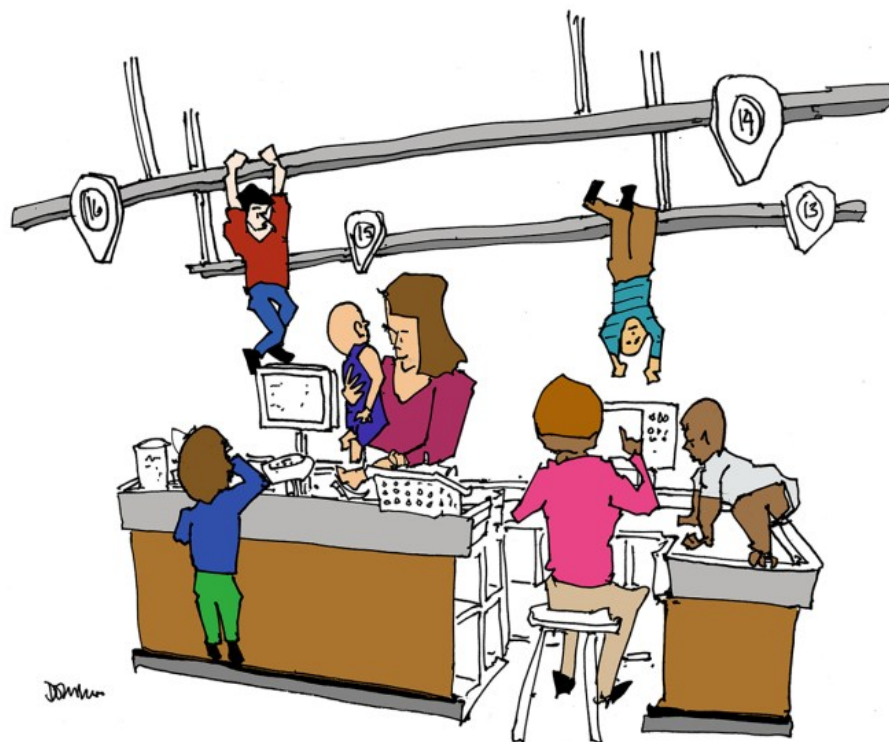
CALL TO IMPROVE THE GM AGENDA

Beth Ruck and George Sarah Olken presented a discussion item on how members can help shape the GM agenda. With enthusiasm, Olken shared that they "love going to the GM for the promise of connecting. And while it isn't perfect, that means we can make it better, more vibrant and participatory." The pair were not advocating for a

specific proposal, but sought ideas and promised to return with ideas.

In a brief PowerPoint presentation, they explained the current process, by which any member-owner can propose an item. These are selected in order of submission, but some are prioritized due to urgency. One concern named was that the queue is not public, so members don't know if their proposal is already being addressed by someone else or if they can collaborate. The process can take a while, so one suggestion was a "vote-a-rama" for appointments to committees, for example. Another suggestion was to alternate the GM format to allow for more discussion time.

A lively discussion ensued with members suggesting chat rooms, utilizing Pol.is to create consensus, affirming the necessity of writing articles in the *Gazette* to publicize agenda items and emphasizing the need to be mindful of minority opinions as well. Coop member Bhakti Sondra Shaye also agreed that separating a discussion and a vote at two different meetings "doesn't seem logical" because the same people won't necessarily attend and it "detracts from democracy." Please email beruck@hotmail.com or georgeolken@gmail.com with suggestions.



CHILDCARE UPDATE

Lauren Belski, a PSFC member for 15 years, and her husband, Brian Russ, brought forth a discussion about the current status of childcare at the Coop. She shared that her first shift was in childcare, at a time when she never thought she'd be a mother herself. Years later, she brought her children, connected with other parents and observed her kids making friends at childcare. "It was a special place and I really missed it," she said.

In a nod to the previous topic about agenda items at the GM, Lauren shared that they used the options available to them to lift up this issue: Brian published a letter to the editor in the Gazette, they repeatedly spoke with other parents, they waited for the return of childcare, and, finally, added it to the GM for discussion. Lauren lamented that during the "last six months especially, there are certain elements of procedures that exist and a lack of transparency about why they exist." She observed that member labor returned and childcare didn't, that masks aren't required in public places and that day cares are back open. She also experienced frustration with the response to their letter as well as with paying for a babysitter in order to do her work shift. Other families are experiencing the same hardships and falling behind on shifts, she shared, and the Coop should "stand up and welcome families back. Profits will go up. [Parents] buy for more than themselves; they're spending lots of money."

Lauren observed that the main thing holding the return of childcare back is the new bulk item machine currently housed in the former childcare space. She said, "they allocated a space that should be used to help working families for single use plastic bags."

Members responded to the presentation as "heartfelt and sensible." Another parent, David, stated that "parents are ready to leave the Coop if things don't change" and it's a "much less joyful place." He urged the Coop to "reassess where we are now." Nicholas, a member without children, was mindful of groups at the Coop that "may not have sway" and was in support. Beth Ruck thought that the childcare issue tied to-

gether many of the themes from the night's meeting, from financial health and stability to the "things that distinguish our institution from the myriad ways people have to shop and . . . centering community." While George agreed, they also raised the concerns of immune compromised members and eldercare.

General Coordinator Ann Herpel, in response to questions about how many children were accommodated at a time in childcare, explained that up to three childcare workers could be in attendance at a given time, caring for up to 12 children. Each childcare worker could bring up to two children of their own, limiting the number of available slots. Priority was given to working members over shopping members and there were times when childcare was closed because "no one showed up to work." GC Joe Holtz shared that childcare evolved around 1980 and, while he is committed personally to its return, there is a need to balance fears, public health considerations and to find a place for the bulk item machine.

The minutes for the previous meeting were approved and the meeting was adjourned.

Jess Powers works in emergency management and enjoys adventures in nature and eating. IG: @foodandfury