

NEW COMMITTEE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE SEEKS TO DEMYSTIFY COMMITTEES FOR MEMBERS

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By John B. Thomas

For most of the Coop's 14,000 members, fulfilling our workslot credit requirement is as simple as regularly signing up for a receiving, checkout or food preparation shift.

But for a subset of members, there is a different path to fulfilling the workslot credit requirement: service on a committee. But what is a committee? What do they do? Who runs them? How do they benefit the Coop? What oversight do they have? And how do members join them (or leave them)?

These are the questions that motivated Rachel Porter, longtime Coop member (and member of the Revolving Loan Fund Committee), to look into the status of committees at the Coop. In Porter's estimation the Coop has somewhere around 35 committees that vary widely in size, structure, transparency, function, as well as power and influence.

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Some, like the *Linewaiters' Gazette*, have nearly 60 members. Others like the Firehouse Committee (established to liaise with the firehouse next door to the Coop, and now seemingly defunct) were just one person. Some have an inordinate amount of power, such as the Chair and Agenda Committees that run the General Meeting or the Personnel Committee who can hire or fire General Coordinators. For the average Coop member, some are highly transparent in their communication to members, such as the International Trade Education Committee which runs its own WordPress site. And some appear to be defunct, such as the Tree Bed Committee. And some clearly contribute to the Coop's mission such as the Environmental Committee, one of the longest-running committees responsible for many of the Coop's environmental stances. And some are more a project of passion, such as the Hudson Valley Farm Committee tasked with expanding smallholder agriculture in the Hudson Valley. The myriad of committees is clearly as varied and diverse as the Coop itself.

Porter estimates that several hundred Coop members work across the Coop's approximately 35 committees, which represents a not-insignificant number of the Coop's

member-workers.



According to Porter, “All the members of the Coop should know what the committees are, what they do, and who works for them.” This was the subject of her proposal for the Committee Oversight Committee (COC), a recently-approved committee by the July 2022 GM whose mandate is to regularly report to the GM and LWG on Coop member committees’ work. The COC is comprised of 6 members who were elected at the July 2022 General Meeting. The proposal for the Committee contained three main elements that were approved by the Coop membership:

1. Committees should report to the GM one to three times per year, report in the *Line-waiters’ Gazette* two times per year, and should have a current entry on the Coop’s website that includes the committee members and is updated annually.
2. Committee membership requirements should be transparent and public.
3. It should be clear that you can only do as much work through a committee as the

membership generally works.

These elements should provide transparency to the membership about the number, scope and activities of the committees. Porter feels that this is a critical step in providing both transparency to the membership but also accountability for committee members, where the contribution to the Coop is not as obvious as stocking shelves or working checkout. This ambiguity about workslot credit goes both ways however, with some committee jobs likely requiring significantly more work than a normal workslot, and some committee jobs likely requiring significantly less work.

A key issue the COC will need to resolve is what exactly constitutes a committee, and what kind of oversight is required depending on the type of committee. According to Membership Coordinator Jana Cunningham, there seems to be some confusion on even the basic definition of what is in scope for the COC: “We have used the words ‘committee’ and ‘squad’ somewhat interchangeably.” In Cunningham’s view, the more operational committees or squads should not be subject to the COC’s mandate as the visible nature of the work and the coop staff engagement ensure accountability. These include squads where there is visibility into the work that is being done for the Coop (e.g., receiving, checkout, food prep) and where there is direct and close contact with a member of coop staff. Cunningham says, “I think the intention of the [COC] proposal was that there are Committees that are more ambiguous in terms of what they do for the Coop. [For these committees] having a report written in the *Gazette* or a presentation to the GM makes sense.”

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Another key challenge for the COC will be defining where to prioritize oversight and the limits of its mandate. According to Cunningham, “In some of the communications

with staff and committees the COC members have been using language like ‘investigate’ which I don’t think the proposal approved by the GM mentioned.” Additionally, Cunningham is surprised by some of the committees being targeted by initial outreach from the COC. “It seems like [the COC is] focusing more on committees where there is already a lot of visibility and accountability, like the Agenda Committee, instead of committees where the work might be less apparent, there’s not a website presence, and they’re not connected to a PSFC staff member.” She continues, “[The COC proposal] was a great idea. Let’s clearly define roles of committees and have more oversight for committees that we don’t know what they are. But we need more clarification on what the COC should actually be doing.”

One element of Porter’s initial proposal did not pass—which was a proposal to have term limits on committee membership. Porter felt that this was an especially critical piece for some of the more powerful committees such as Personnel, Agenda, Chair, *Linewaiters’ Gazette*, and Dispute Resolution Committee that have tremendous power in shaping the staffing, membership, and direction of the Coop. Upon joining these committees, members can effectively stay on for as long as they wish with no ability to remove them unless they choose to step aside. *[Editors’ note: Gazette staff are subject to editorial oversight; members can be and are removed from their jobs for a variety of reasons. Also, It is not a given that the Gazette has the level of influence described by Porter.]* The implications of this unchecked power became clear with the furor surrounding the disciplinary action taken by the Personnel Committee against General Coordinator Joe Holtz for coming back to work after taking a COVID test that later turned out to be positive (covered in the *Linewaiters’ Gazette* here and the subject of numerous Letters to the Editor).

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Issues with these more powerful and influential committees—such as the Personnel Committee—may not be able to be solved through the COC. As a long-time staff member for 25 years, Cunningham makes the point that “the Coop has tried to use volunteer labor for as much work as possible to be able to keep our prices competitive. When we were a mom and pop shop we could get away with that. But now we have 80 employees and we’re a multi-million dollar organization so maybe it’s time now for us to look at different organizational tools, like an actual Human Resources department.”

The Coop’s mission statement articulates the spirit of cooperation with which the organization is supposed to function: “working together builds trust through cooperation and teamwork.” However, Porter notes that the current lack of transparency around Committees “demonstrates a preference for secrecy that creates this divide between staff and committees on the one side and membership on the other.” She continued, “I don’t think our cooperative model is about that. [Our model] is so special and unique.”

Porter’s hope is that the Committee Oversight Committee can begin to bridge that divide through a foundation of increased transparency and communication, noting: “We put a lot of time and money into these committees. We should really start to take them seriously.” Cunningham agrees: “The people who proposed the COC have the best of intentions. I think we just need to clarify its application.”

John B. Thomas works on the sustainability and social impact team for a purpose-driven apparel company.