

TENSIONS RISE AT THE SEPTEMBER GENERAL MEETING

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ILLUSTRATION BY OLEXA HEWRYK

By Sara Ivry

Like autumn leaves in a howling gale, insinuations flew at the September 27 General Meeting of the Food Coop when attendees turned attention to a proposal concerning Joe Holtz, the Coop's general manager and treasurer, and the penalty he faced last

summer in response to violating staff COVID protocols. Imposed by the Personnel Committee, the disciplinary action consisted of a 30-day suspension without pay and barred entry for Holtz to the Coop for that same time period.

“We believe an injustice has been done and should be remedied,” said Gillian Chi, a Coop receiving coordinator and buyer, who presented and wrote the proposal with member Dorothy Siegel. They drafted it, they said, with Holtz’s knowledge but not at his behest. The proposal seeks twin outcomes: the payment of Holtz’s garnished wages and the issuance by the Coop of a public retraction of the punitive action.

“This treatment was unprecedented,” Chi said, adding that “at least 25% of paid staff have violated COVID protocols at one time or another,” or so she has observed. She said she has seen staff remove masks, eat in areas where they should not, and more. “Perhaps warnings were given. But nothing more. None of us were suspended without pay.”

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“The ultimate motivation to our proposal is not just to reverse one decision about one person,” Chi said. “The real issue is, can the Coop be a good employer? Can we be confident our employer will have high ethical standards?”

Having offered an overview of the evolution of, and limits to, the power of the Personnel Committee, Chi maintained that the committee lacks the right to hire or fire people without general membership consent.

“Membership has authority to redress this harm,” Chi said, and she and Siegel want their proposal to go before the membership for a vote at the next general meeting.

Jean Callahan, a member of the Personnel Committee, defended the actions of her committee, clarifying that it is a body elected to advise on hiring and firing matters. It did not act on a whim and consulted with a labor lawyer, she said. "We considered a full range of responses. We decided [the punishment] was a fair and proportionate response."

Moreover, the rifts over whether Holtz was singled out for punishment or deserving of it belies a bigger issue "undermining the morale of the paid staff." In the course of the Personnel Committee's investigation into Holtz's action, some Coop staff expressed fear of reprisals for being whistle blowers and requested anonymity in their conversations.

"Some were fearful of Joe's power," Callahan said. "At the moment there are some deep and painful divides. Individual staff members feel silenced and unsafe."

Among them was General Coordinator Ann Herpel, who said the very fact that this proposal was on the agenda at the General Meeting represented a form of retaliation against those who complained about or investigated Holtz, and that there is much more to the story of Holtz's infraction than what has been reported previously or presented by Chi and Siegel.

MEMBERS WILL NO LONGER BE REQUIRED TO SHOW PROOF OF VACCINATION TO WORK A SHIFT AND UNVACCINATED WORKERS MAY RETURN TO WORKING THEIR SHIFTS.

"I'm really dismayed that people are saying that the members have the final say on personnel issues," Herpel said. "That could have a chilling effect... Why would people complain or participate in investigations if they thought that this body would make a final decision that could overrule a decision by another body that investigated? Why would anyone participate?"

According to Herpel, the Personnel Committee has taken action against general coordinators in the past “without controversy,” she said, “which leads to the conclusion that Joe Holtz is not accountable” given that the penalty imposed against him is being challenged and may lead to him being given a pass for his transgression.

“I’m angry. I’m dismayed. I’m appalled. I feel unsafe,” she said before departing the meeting.

Terry Meyers, a staff member in the accounting office, similarly defended the Personnel Committee’s action. What the proposal is saying “is that the leadership does not have to follow the rules. That innuendo and excuses mean more than an investigation involving statements from, I am sure, more than one person. People in power should be held to higher standards, not lesser standards,” she said. “Joe being away for 30 days did not hurt the Coop, though it created more work for staff. Reversing the decision of the committee would.”

Others sided with Chi and Siegel, questioning the mandate of the Personnel Committee and the lack of transparency in policies and proceedings.

“It’s our Coop. We own it. We are responsible for making sure it’s a safe and fair employer,” said Cheyenna Weber. “I also encourage the Personnel Committee to bring a proposal for a Human Resources Committee.”

And Siegel, like Herpel before her, said she was dismayed by the turn of events but did not blame the Personnel Committee, whose disbandment she originally planned to propose. She moreover took umbrage at the slurry of innuendos this entire episode has begat.



A file photo of Joe Holtz, the Coop's General Manager and Treasurer

"A lot of this rancor, 'if only you knew what really went on you wouldn't feel this way,' but then you can't expect members to accept insinuations or the red meat of Joe McCarthy," Siegel said. "The last thing I want is for Ginia Bellafante to write an article about the precious Coop where people are wounded and people are fired and people throw out accusations about each other." She added, "I'm sorry it has come to this."

[Editor's Note: On October 1, Chi emailed the office to drop this proposal and it will not be going up for a vote at the October meeting.]

Controversial though it was, the conversation about the proposal was not the only issue raised at the meeting.

General Coordinator Elinor Astrinsky announced that as of November 1, the Coop would comply with Mayor Eric Adams' new rules regarding COVID protocols at work. Members will no longer be required to show proof of vaccination to work a shift and

unvaccinated workers may return to working their shifts. Whether shoppers will be required to wear masks in the Coop will depend on the will of the membership, who are invited to respond to an online survey on the matter that was live until October 12.

In response to a question about determining what is suitable for composting and what could go to a soup kitchen, Astrinsky said members on produce shifts might benefit from more information on how to determine what should be composted. She invited anyone to make some kind of illustrated poster detailing, she said, “This is compost. It has things growing on it. It’s too mushy. It’s not going to make it two days. We want sample images, maybe a little blurb.”

Astrinsky shared the news that a property adjacent to the Coop has been leased by the Board of Education and will be undergoing some kind of construction, which will limit or potentially eliminate bicycle parking as well as have other potential and unforeseen impacts on the Coop. She also announced the hiring of part-time Receiving Coordinator Tanya Steinberg and full-time staffer Masha Bezlekina in a role supporting perishables like meat and bread. Astrinsky said Food Processor Gabriel Feliciano has left his position.

“It’s been a very long time since our staff have had any celebration or party to acknowledge their hard work throughout this time,” Astrinsky said. “We have decided to hold a staff party, which hasn’t happened in two, three years now.” To that end, the Coop closed at 5 p.m. on October 6 so that all staff might attend.

LEADERSHIP NOW NEEDS TO CONSIDER QUESTIONS LIKE WHETHER TO ADD BACK SHOPPING HOURS, WHETHER TO ALLOW MORE SHOPPERS ON THE FLOOR AT ANY GIVEN TIME, WHETHER TO INVESTIGATE AND IMPLEMENT A HOME DELIVERY OPTION, AND WHETHER TO RESTORE CHILD CARE AS AN INCENTIVE FOR PEOPLE TO SHOP AT THE COOP.

Donning his metaphorical treasurer's hat, Holtz reported that the Coop is operating currently at a loss, but is optimistic that a typical fall surge in shopping, along with a rise in membership, could help ease the Coop out of that hole "if we control expenses adequately," he said, "but it's a big 'if' during this inflationary time."

He noted that in October 2020 the General Coordinators marked up prices to 25% from 21%, with the intention of returning to the 21% mark up when membership returned to full work conditions or the Coop was breaking even. The General Coordinators plan now to discuss whether these conditions are being met to their satisfaction. Holtz also said that the Coop is owed tax credits of \$1.5 million that represents the part of the \$6.2 million from government support that we are still waiting to receive, and that leadership now needs to consider questions like whether to add back shopping hours, whether to allow more shoppers on the floor at any given time, whether to investigate and implement a home delivery option, and whether to restore child care as an incentive for people to shop at the Coop.

Labor Committee member Eric Frumin shared both good and bad news. He reported on the Coop's collaboration with the Fair Food Program, which supports agricultural workers in Florida and Georgia, noting that the Coop pays a six percent premium for tomatoes from these growers. That translated most recently to \$4,100 that the Coop paid to make sure the workers in Florida earned good wages and worked in environments free from sexual violence.

Frumin's bad news related to Amy's Kitchen Company, which has been dogged by reports of abusive and unsafe working conditions in its factories and by its hostility to unionizing efforts. Frumin said the Coop had sent a letter to Amy's CEO last spring, which was ignored. They resent it to no avail before turning to help from the National Coop Grocers, a membership organization of 149 coops nationwide.

"One of the disturbing thing we learned is that Amy's has failed to disclose important information on rates of injuries," Frumin said. "Its largest factory in Idaho has a 20 percent rate of disabling injury. This is triple the industry average in frozen foods. And

it goes against the Coop's mandate.”

A long-time Food Coop member, Sara Ivry worked as a shopping squad leader before joining the Gazette earlier this year.