COORDINATORS' CORNER: BOYCOTTS AND THE INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF COOPERATION

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Over the past several weeks, a group of members have been on the sidewalk in front of the Coop, asking members to sign a petition supporting "boycotting products imported from Israel," products from companies that have "a proven record of complicity with Israeli apartheid," and that are "produced/manufactured by a company (Israeli or not) that is known to operate in the occupied territories in violation of international law." The group, identifying themselves as "PSFC Members for Palestine," were also in front of our January General Meeting (GM) venue distributing literature and asking members to sign their petition.

We felt it necessary to inform the membership of 1) the concerns we've heard and how we are trying to address them, 2) clarify the Coop's position on this issue, and 3)

explain the Coop's history of boycotts and the interaction with the International Principles of Cooperation to which our Coop adheres. We were moved to write after many members expressed deep concerns to the Coop staff about the petitioning and we observed how this issue is dividing our Coop.

CONCERN #1

The petition campaign to boycott Israel makes some members feel unwelcome at their Coop because they hold a different position. Further, the methods and wording used by the petitioners in front of the Coop makes some members feel harassed when entering, leaving or standing/sitting in front of the Coop or space rented by the Coop.

It is legal to petition and hand out flyers on a public sidewalk or area in New York City as long as the activity does not block pedestrian traffic. The Coop has not, cannot, and will not do anything to stop the petitioning. The sidewalk is an acceptable place to petition. In contrast, it wouldn't be acceptable in the Coop's aisles, elsewhere in the building or in a rented space.

CONCERN #2

The petition gives the impression that the Coop—as an organization—is supporting and endorsing the campaign to boycott Israel.

One source of confusion is the name the group has adopted. Initially, the group called themselves "PSFC for Palestine." After the General Coordinators (GCs) requested to remove Park Slope Food Coop/PSFC from their group's name, the group changed it to "PSFC Members for Palestine," contending that adding the word "members" clarified that they did not represent the entire Coop. However, a Google search for "PSFC Members for Palestine" lands on the website PSFC4Palestine.org. That homepage does not indicate that the website is not an official Coop or GM-approved initiative.

To address this issue, the GC team has made additional requests to the group to re-

move any variation of the Coop's name from their name, URL, or social media handles, as they haven't received explicit permission through the Coop's governance system to use the Coop's name in this way. However, the group has argued that there is no confusion or expressed need to change, despite being told their name is causing some people to think they are endorsed by the Coop. The Coop is a member-owned and -operated organization, and its name should not be used without explicit permission from the Coop's governance system.

We are responsible for ensuring that the Coop's name is not used in a way that could misrepresent its official actions or lack of action. We encourage this group to embrace the GCs' request and help us maintain the Coop's standing as a welcoming community for everyone.

THE COOP'S POSITION

The Coop—through its governance process—has taken no position on a boycott of Israel or related companies. The decision to boycott or not boycott must occur through the GM and the Board of Directors.

The GCs, in our role as Chief Administrative Officers, are obligated to support the Coop's democratic processes. How are we accomplishing that? We have resumed the search for a large space to hold a GM to discuss the agenda item submitted by the PSFC Members for Palestine.

After the 2012 meeting of 2,000+ members at Brooklyn Tech HS to vote on holding a referendum to join the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Movement, the NYPD and the NYC Department of Education provided guidelines to be followed if this topic is on a future agenda:

1. We must disclose the agenda when asking to rent a venue.
2. We must inform the NYPD beforehand about the meeting's subject matter.

3. We must hire a private security firm to supplement the building's security.

We will continue to update members on the status of the search for a meeting venue.

BOYCOTTS AT THE COOP

Some may think this boycott proposal is no different from past boycotts. However, it is important to examine why and how this current matter differs from the history of boycotts at the Coop, and how that history fits in with the International Principles of Cooperation.

The Coop is a democracy that complies with the democratic rules in the NYS Cooperative Corporations law, the NYS Business Corporation law (where applicable), and the International Principles of Cooperation.

International Principal of Cooperation #1, "Voluntary and Open Membership," essentially states that coops welcome people from different ethnicities, races, genders, religious groups and political persuasions. Coop Principal #2, "Democratic Member Control," states that Coops should function democratically.

Members have a right to advocate for boycotts. Previous member-sponsored boycotts—such as the boycott of products from Chile, California lettuce/grapes, Nestlé's and Coca-Cola—had the support of close to 100% of the members, thus avoiding any potential problems between these two Cooperative Principles. Since the support was overwhelming, virtually no members felt unwelcome due to their political beliefs. Several years ago, the GM did take a step toward limiting the tension between these two cooperative principles. A GM proposal sponsored by a member was passed: Future boycott proposals required approval of 75% of those voting at the GM in order to pass.

BALANCING INTERNATIONAL PRINCIPAL #1 AND PRINCIPAL #2 IS AN OBLIGATION OF ALL MEMBERS, NOT JUST THE GCS. CONCERN FOR THE COOP'S SUSTAINABILITY AND CONTINUED GROWTH FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS.

Boycotting Israel or Israeli products is the only proposed boycott that has numerous members in support of, opposed to, or neutral on the issue. Regardless of the vote's outcome, thousands of members could feel unsupported by their Coop and may choose to withdraw their membership. The GCs firmly believe that our cooperative must continue to be welcoming to all people who are willing to abide by the Coop's policies and procedures and expected cooperative behavior. We believe in diversity, and the diversity should extend to welcoming all groups of people, including encompassing people who have different political views.

We support the principles as expressed in the Coop's Mission Statement: The Coop is committed to diversity and equality and opposes discrimination in any form. We strive to make the Coop welcoming and accessible to all and respect the opinions, needs, and concerns of every member. We seek to maximize participation at every level, from policy making to running the store and we welcome all who respect these values.

Balancing International Principal #1 and Principal #2 is an obligation of all members, not just the GCs. Concern for the Coop's sustainability and continued growth for the next 50 years and beyond is also the obligation of all members.

Joe Holtz is a General Coordinator and the General Manager of the Park Slope Food Coop.