PERSONNEL POLICIES LEAD TO COOP DIVIDE

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Photograph by Caroline Mardok

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At the April 30 General Meeting, General Coordinators Joe Holtz and Lisa Moore introduced an agenda item to update personnel policies, which they described as outdated compared to current human resources (HR) practices. In a surprising turn, the item was rejected, in part because of organized opposition from PSFC Members for Palestine.

Prior to the meeting, PSFC Members for Palestine published a memo arguing that the proposal “concentrates even more executive power in the hands of the General Coord-

inators," with "alarming" implications for labor practices and union busting.

Those opposed to the group have since responded. Ramon Maislen, candidate for Board of Directors, wrote in a recent *Linewaiters' Gazette* letter to the editor, "[The PSFC Members for Palestine] are encouraging members to vote against Coop interests even when they are unrelated to a boycott."

THE QUESTION REMAINS: HOW DID AN AGENDA ITEM RELATED TO EMPLOYEE HANDBOOKS BECOME SO DIVISIVE?

In addition to the debate around the proposal's content, the vote itself was controversial. There were not enough written ballots, and the Chair Committee was forced to initiate two hand counts, both of which resulted in the rejection of the proposal. Park Slope Food Coop staff and PSFC Members for Palestine both criticized the lack of organization. But the question remains: How did an agenda item related to employee handbooks become so divisive?

THE PERSONNEL COMMITTEE

Holtz and Moore first proposed changes to the personnel policies at the March GM. They designed the proposal to address "deficiencies" in current policies and centralize all policies in a single place.

PSFC Members for Palestine voiced several concerns, writing that the proposal did not "address the problems that led to the Personnel Committee's current dysfunction." In a statement to the *Gazette*, the group added, "The proposal's language was unclear. The first and second paragraphs contradicted each other."

The first clause states that the "GCs shall be solely responsible for all personnel-related matters," while the second states that the "Personnel Committee, in collaboration

with the General Coordinator team, shall be solely responsible for all personnel-related matters."

The proposal consolidates Coop HR practices already in place, and therefore may not alter the GCs' authority over HR. Jana Cunningham, Membership Coordinator, wrote to the *Gazette*, "The identical HR practices are listed in several different GM mandates. General Coordinators have the responsibility for HR and the authority to take disciplinary actions, in accordance with the Employee Handbook in regards to the Area Coordinators, this remains the same."

> PSFC MEMBERS FOR PALESTINE STATED, "PEOPLE ALSO WANTED TO KNOW WHY THE PERSONNEL COMMITTEE HAS REMAINED SEVERELY UNDERSTAFFED FOR ABOUT 15 MONTHS. THE PROPOSERS DIDN'T ANSWER."

The Personnel Committee was created in 1981 to be a five-member elected council. Its mandate, as reiterated by the Committee in 2022, has been the following: "The Committee is an elected group of members that serves in an advisory capacity to the General Coordinators, supporting them with personnel matters such as performance evaluations, succession planning and developing human resources policies."

At present, the Personnel Committee only has two members. Speaking about the March GM, PSFC Members for Palestine stated, "People also wanted to know why the Personnel Committee has remained severely understaffed for about 15 months. The proposers didn't answer."

In July of 2022, the Committee faced intense criticism after suspending Holtz without pay for 30 days after he breached COVID-19 protocols. In August of 2022, in a letter published in the *Gazette*, Safe Food Committee staff member Margaret Maugenest wrote, "One has to wonder about the agenda of the Personnel Committee. Who are these people? Why is there no appeal process to challenge the Personnel Committee's

decision?”

In another letter published in November of 2022, Coop member Claudia Joseph added, “It is time to rethink the structure of the Personnel Committee: Five members who were elected by uncontested vote are clearly not qualified to wield this much power.”

DEBATING THE PROPOSAL

The Personnel Committee proposal introduced by Holtz and Moore was ostensibly designed to address structural issues that became apparent in the aftermath of Holtz’s suspension. But it remains unclear how the proposal updates policies to meet “widely accepted HR practices.”

Holtz and Moore noted that the proposal had been designed with consultation from the two-member Personnel Committee and with input from an employment lawyer recommended by the National Co+Op Grocers. On its website, the latter describes itself as “a business services cooperative for retail food co-ops located throughout the United States.”

Cunningham noted that the GC proposal would correct the Coop’s current practices, some of which she called “outdated and potentially libelous.”

At the March GM, the GCs agreed to take members’ feedback into account when reintroducing the proposal at the following meeting. The policy introduced in April returned with one addition: “The complaint policy includes the provision to employ a neutral third-party employment lawyer to thoroughly investigate these complaints and provide recommended courses of action for any offenses committed.”

> THE LETTER ALSO CRITICIZED THE “POLITICIZED EFFORTS”: “THE PSFC MEMBERS FOR PALESTINE GROUP ENCOURAGED THEIR MEMBERS TO VOTE AGAINST THE BEST INTEREST OF THE COOP AND THE STAFF.”

No alternative proposals—such as contracting an outside HR service to bear responsibility for all personnel issues—were considered. PSFC Members for Palestine commented to the *Gazette*, "No proposal, including one presented by a general coordinator, is automatically entitled to a yes vote. A new proposal must address the ambiguities and contradictions that a majority of members voted down in April."

Following the April GM vote, a group of 43 Area Coordinators—non-GC paid staff at the Coop—signed a letter to the Agenda Committee criticizing the "no" vote and the handling of the agenda item.

The letter also criticized the "politicized efforts" of the PSFC Members for Palestine: "The PSFC Members for Palestine group encouraged their members to vote against the best interest of the Coop and the staff and we believe this leaves the Coop vulnerable to any potential wrongdoing by senior staff."

The letter supports the GC's GM proposal, stating that it puts "the Personnel Committee and the General Coordinators in a better position to make much needed decisions on personnel issues that are currently not possible." Despite this expressed backing, the letter also proposes significant amendments to the GC proposal—amendments yet to be introduced in the April GM.

The Area Coordinators' amended proposal excludes the first item of the original GC-supported proposal, which places responsibility for personnel-related matters in the hands of the GC. Instead, the amended proposal suggests: "The Personnel Committee, in collaboration with the General Manager and General Coordinator team, shall be responsible for the hiring, compensation and employment policies for the General Coordinator team."

The amended proposal also sets forth a plan for selecting the Personnel Committee—a feature absent from the original proposal—that would include the participation of two GCs, the General Manager and four Area Coordinators.

While the amended proposal diverges from the GC proposal with these two changes, the Area Coordinator staff who signed “resent this [GC] proposal having been hi-jacked by a member group whose purpose is unrelated to the matter at hand.” The letter continues, “Nothing in the GC proposal mentions Palestine.”

This concern was echoed by individual staff. Cunningham, who signed the letter, commented to the *Gazette*:

What concerns me is that an organized group of members can make a statement like “the GC proposal had alarming implications for labor practices and union-busting,” which was inflammatory and completely inaccurate, influence others to vote against the best interest of the Coop staff and put the Coop at financial risk.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Personnel policies will undoubtedly reemerge as a central issue in future GMs, but the discussion risks veering into debate around PSFC Members for Palestine’s tactics and right to organize.

Responding to criticism around their involvement, the PSFC Members for Palestine stated:

We believe meaningful member participation strengthens our democratic governance system and upholds our cooperative principles[…] Rather than acknowledging the weaknesses in their proposal, the GCs chose to undermine our Coop’s democratic tenets by vilifying member engagement.

For Cunningham, the most important step is to move forward with changes to the personnel policies. “My colleagues and I (more than half of the ACs) firmly support the GC proposal and want to see its implementation as soon as possible,” she added.

Amid the debate, all seem to agree that the most important goal is for the Coop to be

a safe, welcoming work environment, in which issues of fairness, discrimination and labor standards can be handled in a confidential and professional manner.