

JOE HOLTZ REFLECTS ON A HALF-CENTURY WITH THE PARK SLOPE FOOD COOP

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Photograph by Michael Berman

Part 1 of 2

By Hayley Gorenberg

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On the cusp of retiring after a half-century, Park Slope Food Coop General Manager and first-ever staff member Joe Holtz reflected on pivotal moments for the Coop, including the guiding light for starting the Coop in 1973 in the face of war and prejudice. Holtz recollected:

“We led with cooperation, even though we were into good food. We realized the same

people who brought us the Vietnam War brought us discrimination against Black people, gay people, women. The most important thing about the Coop was building an institution where we could have a community success—not access to the best short-grain rice from California and oils produced without poison. Our line in the sand was, ‘Can we build this community institution?’ Whereas a lot of people in other places say, ‘At least we still have the food. We’ll go forward anyway, and charge people different prices.’ That sets up a class system and comes with a bundle of problems—could be legal problems, as well. So we were willing to risk the whole thing. We bet the whole Coop.”

He acknowledged that Brooklynites were well-situated overall to access good food. “If we went out of business, we could still go to a place in lower Manhattan and get short-grain brown rice, go to Sahadi’s on Atlantic and get good stuff. That said, we wanted to eat better, and couldn’t afford it. We needed the Coop because we needed the low prices. We read *Diet for a Small Planet*. We knew it’s a good thing to avoid pesticides, eat lower on the food chain.”

“WE KNEW COOPS WERE ALREADY FAILING BECAUSE THEY COULDN’T FIGURE OUT HOW TO DIVIDE WORK. ‘EVERYBODY DOING THEIR SHARE’ WAS BREAKING DOWN ALL OVER THE COUNTRY.”

The commitment to an egalitarian approach meant trying different labor systems, even if they could have driven the Coop to the financial brink. “We were willing to risk the Coop by figuring out how to make the work system work,” Holtz said. But the first two efforts at cooperative work systems failed. Holtz described the idealistic initial concept: “Everybody in the world is a member. We don’t need to write people’s names down, because this is such a wonderful thing, people will be happy to do their share and all [will be] excited about the Coop, and sign up to work next week.” But the work chart soon developed problems and holes.

“That concept of it being everybody’s was a beautiful thing,” Holtz said. But when someone didn’t show up to receive deliveries, a founding member would typically step into the breach. Then, members of a small, core group started to do so every week. “Not sustainable!” Holtz added. Tuned into a ’60s movement of groups pooling resources to buy in bulk from farmers and alternative sources, with coops often dubbed “food conspiracies,” Holtz and co-founders were aware of structural vulnerabilities.

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“We knew coops were already failing because they couldn’t figure out how to divide work. ‘Everybody doing their share’ was breaking down all over the country,” Holtz recalled. “It was hard to measure, hard to say you can’t shop anymore. ‘Superhero members’ would come forward and do a lot of extra work. But you can’t have a member-labor coop that is based on superheroes.”



Joe Holtz at the Coop. Photograph by Michael Berman

“The Coop hobbled through until the fall of 1973, then closed for a ‘planning interlude’ to hatch the second system,” Holtz said. Components of the revised system included, “Maybe everybody in the world isn’t a member. We write it down, and [members] have to pay a fee and have a requirement of working monthly. Everybody has to work.’”

That system held up for a little while. “But it became clear we were naive to think everybody would show up,” Holtz added. “Telling people they have to and actually doing something about it when they don’t is really different.” He continued, “A significant number of people realized they could keep putting off work and that no one was really keeping track of who’s behind, ahead, even. No recordkeeping system, no enforcement, no consequences, no one thought about it.”

“A COMMITTEE MEMBER GREETED THE FIRST PERSON WHO SHOWED UP TO SHOP WITHOUT HAVING WORKED, LOOKED HIM UP IN THE NEW SYSTEM, AND SAID, ‘OH, YOU CAN’T SHOP.’”

Another planning session devised the third and longest-running member labor system—with consequences. Holtz reflected:

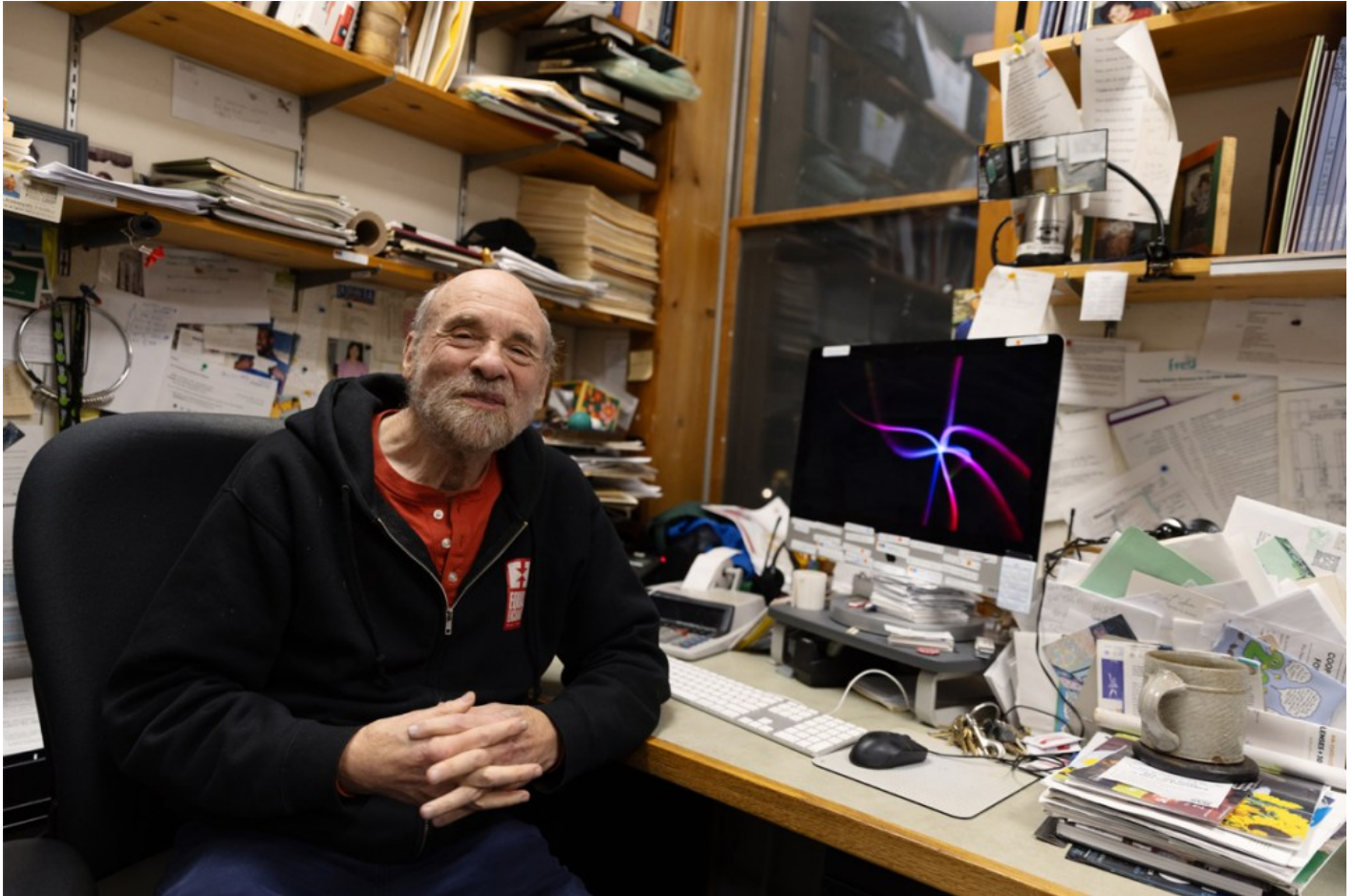
“The most important day in the history of the Coop was that day in late 1974, when we had our third system, and someone came to the door, and there was a new committee there called the Records Committee. A committee member greeted the first person who showed up to shop without having worked, looked him up in the new system, and said, ‘Oh, you can’t shop.’ It’s the most important day in the history of the Coop—we weren’t going to look the other way because this person came with their money, and they need the food, and we’re going to let them get away without keeping up on their work. We protected the people that were actually doing their share. Because eventually those people would get wind, and say, ‘My life is busy, too.’”

By early 1975, the Coop had established a functioning, accountable system that required working a shift every four weeks, guided by member “squad leaders.” But, despite an excellent, functioning member labor system, “some things were falling between functioning groups that were not passing the baton efficiently.” Holtz recalled that the early member Janet Schumacher raised the need to hire a paid staff member. “We needed someone hired to make the system work,” he said. Schumacher let him know she would bring the hiring issue to the General Meeting, and told Holtz that she wanted him to apply for the job. (Schumacher later joined the staff in the 1980s.) Holtz was hired part-time, but says he “worked full-time from the beginning, because there was always full-time work to be done!”

(After COVID-19 in 2020, the Coop moved to its fourth member labor system, with work requirements every six weeks, and a system Holtz describes as more like a mar-

ketplace, with worker-friendly cancellation options and a more centralized leadership system.)

Part 2 will be published in the next issue of the Gazette.



Holtz reflects on his long career. Photograph by Michael Berman