VOLUNTARY ARTICLE: IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

June 24, 2025

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By Jan Clausen

As we welcome incoming General Manager Joe Szladek, a referendum on hybrid General Meetings (GM) is underway. The Coop has entered a time of dramatic transitions. New beginnings offer openings for positive change. It's worth a look back at recent developments to help us plan wisely for the future.

At the April GM, the Coop's Board took action to let members vote on the popular hybrid proposal. They did this after an expected GM vote was taken off the agenda due to the cancellation of our rental agreement with City Tech. That large facility bowed out in the wake of a scurrilous email pressure campaign by a non-Coop group (End Jew Hatred). The Board needed to address the resulting governance crisis once it be-

came apparent that the General Coordinators (GCs) would not. Otherwise, our ability to decide matters vital to the Coop would have been permanently undermined.

The Board clearly acted within the scope of our bylaws, which specify that it may issue a referendum "on any matter." There was overwhelming support from the member-owners at the April GM. Nevertheless, two out of the five Board members present (including Joe Holtz and Imani Q'ryn, both outgoing) argued strongly against the action, claiming it violated the tradition whereby the Board limits itself to affirming the results of a formal member vote. In the wake of the Board's split decision to issue the referendum, the GCs solicited a legal opinion. That opinion not only confirmed the propriety of the action but stated that no change to the bylaws is required for the Coop to adopt hybrid General Meetings! Yet, because the GCs had previously dug in their heels on claims that the bylaws change was needed (requiring a two-thirds majority "yes" vote, not a simple majority), the referendum will be subject to the bylaws change threshold.

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Critics warn of an "activist board," failing to distinguish between arbitrary Board action and the Board's support of members' right to vote when normal channels have been blocked. We've heard claims that the work of PSFC Members for Palestine on behalf of the hybrid measure is sneaky or suspect. In fact, seeking a boycott of Israeli products and supporting an expansion of member democracy are both cherished goals of PSFC Members for Palestine.

Just as the Board (our elected leadership body) is charged with safeguarding the Coop's financial survival, so it must act to support member-led democracy. If its recent move comes as a surprise, perhaps that's because we've gotten used to a rela-

tively quiet role for the membership. The Board has often accepted member advice based on GM votes whose outcomes were heavily influenced by the views and interests of the GCs. One important example is the March GM vote in 2012 rejecting a proposal that would have mandated a Coop-wide vote (referendum) on a pro-Palestine boycott. Prior to that meeting, Joe Holtz weighed in to urge a “no” vote, strongly implying that to do otherwise would mark the voter as anti-Coop. Holts also vocally supported the 2016 measure that saw the GM adopt an unprecedented 75% supermajority requirement for approving boycotts.* Recently, an extraordinary series of Coordinators’ Corner columns collectively signed by the GCs has sought to replicate this pattern of GC influence over votes. What this strategy may fail to recognize is that an energized membership is a plus for the Coop.

A new situation requires new thinking. At the May GM, Szladek cautioned us not to take the Coop’s success for granted and vowed to prioritize stability. Stability is important but shouldn’t be confused with a “tradition” of resistance to member input. Stability and democratic decision-making must be partners for success over the long haul.

Jan Clausen is a writer, teacher, and activist with Park Slope Food Coop Members for Palestine.