

## HEY-HEY, HO-HO! GET TO KNOW JOE 2.0

August 5, 2025



PHOTO BY JENNIFER MACFARLANE

## INCOMING GENERAL MANAGER JOSEPH SZLADEK ON SNACKS, CYBER ATTACKS AND THE COOP'S NEXT CHAPTER

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*By Anita Bushell*

It took eight months and a nationwide search to identify a successor to Joe Holtz, who announced his retirement in October after 50 years at the Coop, but the food cooperative has a new General Manager. Joseph Szladek, who has worked at the Coop for fifteen years, began his new role on June 23.

Szladek, 46, held managerial roles at Whole Foods Market in New York and Boston before joining the Coop staff in 2010. His first job was as a Produce and Meat Buyer. Since 2015, he has served as the General Coordinator for Purchasing and Operations, overseeing a team of 16 buyers and managing \$50 million in annual wholesale purchases. He also co-managed the 45 Receiving Coordinators who supervise over 1,000 weekly member-workers.

Over his career at the Coop, Szladek has used technology to enhance operational efficiency, developing an in-house inventory system and introducing electronic shelf labels. He played a crucial role in stabilizing the Coop's finances throughout the pandemic and was pivotal to ensuring a smooth return to member labor. We sat down with him to hear about his vision for the Coop's next chapter.

**As you think about the health of the Coop going forward, what would you say your biggest concerns are?**

So many things. Increased competition, supply chain instability, food inflation, automation, for starters. These are all serious challenges, and each one is becoming more acute, seemingly by the day. I'm also concerned about internal divisions among some members, particularly around how to move forward on issues like governance, General Meeting formats and boycotts. These tensions are putting a strain on the Coop's membership body, committees, staff and operations. That said, between the membership and staff, the Coop has a *tremendous* amount of institutional knowledge and institutional resilience. We've navigated tough situations before, and I believe we're well prepared for whatever comes next.



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## **What can we look forward to with you stepping into this new role?**

Another 50 years [of the Coop's existence], at the very least! And, continuity. Of course, we'll remain committed to the values and practices that have kept the Coop running strong for so long. Beyond that, we're preparing to join Coop Deals, a program through National Cooperative Grocers (NCG), where members will see lower prices on about 100 rotating items every two weeks. We also have plans to expand our prepared foods offerings, building on the success of the Court Street sandwiches and Chez Chrystelle salads.

## **How is the Coop addressing the financial realities of recovering from the pandemic?**

We've made it through the more intense financial challenges that the pandemic brought—most notably the suspension of member labor in March of 2020 due to Covid protocols and its resumption in the Summer of 2021. Operating the Coop without member labor was extremely difficult for the Coop financially. We weathered that period by raising the markup from 21% to 25% with General Meeting approval, receiving increased investment from members, tapping into federal pandemic relief programs and availing ourselves of the help of over 150 members who worked at the Coop as temporary staff members. We're so grateful for their support during that time!

Looking ahead, we're not confident that similar federal programs would be available to grocery stores in the event of another pandemic, so we've committed to keeping larger cash reserves on hand.

**"MY NAME IS ALSO JOE, BUT I SUSPECT OUR APPROACHES WILL DIFFER IN SOME WAYS."**

**If you were able to address each Coop member individually, what would you like to say to them?**

When I speak with members I ask some of the same questions about the Coop that you're asking me right now. What do you value most about the Coop? What concerns you? What frustrates you? What changes would you most like to see in the future?

I'd say to each member that I know I need to earn your trust in me in this new role as General Manager. And I thank you for giving me that chance.

**When you shop at the Coop what frustrates you the most?**

An empty shelf when I know we have that item in the basement!

**How does the Coop represent your personal values?**

The Coop provides amazing food at low prices to 17,000 working members. In the process, we support small farms and small businesses. We are a great employer and strong member of the community. My personal values align with so much of what we do. That's why I'm here. I know so many members and staff feel the same way.

**What did you buy last week at the Coop?**

It was my daughter's tenth birthday so I bought something that I've never purchased before: Harry's Berries Strawberries. She loved them, but I told her to not get used to them—they're so expensive! Otherwise, I picked up lots of peaches, mangoes and cherries, in addition to the regular assortment of produce. We eat a lot of medjool dates and dried figs at home. I also bought my favorite snack combination: Mi Niña Pico De Gallo chips and Momo Edamame dip.

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**If someone were to ask you why it's better to shop at the Coop than Costco, how would you respond?**

Well, for one, you don't have to buy a gallon of Bonne Maman if you just need some jam. Costco is a great employer, better than most in grocery retail, but the intersection of selection, quality and price at the Coop is unmatched. That's only possible through Cooperation. Members contribute over 80% of the labor needed to run the store—and they own the place! It's a model rooted in community, not profit. This allows us to prioritize small local farms and small businesses whose values more closely overlap with ours. It also provides a real alternative to both big-box consolidation and giant jars of Bonne Maman jam.

**How do you see your role as being different from Joe Holtz?**

Joe was such an integral part of the Coop's founding. His fingerprints are everywhere, from developing our electronic inventory system back when that was unheard of to writing the bylaws, to everything in between. My role, working alongside staff and members, is to build on that foundation while preserving its strength. There are systems to improve and opportunities to increase transparency. I want to continue Joe's legacy of using technology thoughtfully, while focusing on updating operations, strengthening communication and keeping the Coop strong into the future. My name is also Joe, but I suspect our approaches will differ in some ways.

**Did Joe have any advice for you?**

Joe has so much excellent advice to share but one thing that stands out is when he says we should never be overconfident about the Coop's future and continued success. Joe injects humor into nearly everything he talks about, but come to think of it, not so much when he's talking about risks to the Coop's future.

*Anita Bushell is a freelance writer who has been published in Friends Journal, Ford Foundation Report, and Uncensored: American Experiences with Poverty and Homelessness. She just published her debut novel, One Way to Whitefish.*