

DECEMBER GENERAL MEETING: BDS TENSIONS FLARE AGAIN

December 30, 2025

spin the meeting dial



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

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By Kayla Levy

During the final General Meeting of 2025, held on December 2 at the Prospect Park

Picnic House, tensions over a proposed boycott of Israeli goods, which have simmered all year, burst into the open again.

As members filed into the rows of white folding chairs, Jan Clausen, a writer and Coop member since the 1970s, stood in the center aisle handing out copies of “The Olive Press,” a zine published by Park Slope Food Coop Members for Palestine. Shortly before 7 p.m., General Manager Joseph Szladek approached and asked her to stop.

“Members aren’t allowed to pamphlet while someone is shopping for milk, and being at the General Meeting is akin to that,” Szladek said in a follow-up interview, adding that the Coop would always allow members to distribute materials in a public space, like the Union Street sidewalk.

Clausen responded that for decades there was a literature table at the general meetings, where members handed out all sorts of pamphlets, including political materials. “I’ve seen a lot of rules made up to suppress speech,” she said.

This exchange foreshadowed much of what came next: an update from the Chair Committee on a long-debated proposal for hybrid meetings, a communications proposal related to the staff’s ability to send “do-not-reply” emails, and, in less contentious news, a rundown on Thanksgiving shopping.

OPEN FORUM LEADS TO BOYCOTT DEBATE, AGAIN

The majority of the nine members who took to the floor during the open forum discussed issues related to the boycott debate. Meeting chair Dan Hegwood read aloud a letter from Noah Potter voicing dissatisfaction with the Board of Directors, who broke with typical protocol and authorized a referendum vote on hybrid meetings at the April GM.

While ostensibly about virtual attendance at general meetings, the issue of hybrid voting has become tied up in the fight over the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions move-

ment (BDS). In his letter, Potter said the Board's decision to proceed with the vote marked "the end of member governance of the Coop."

Opponents of BDS say the push for hybrid meetings actually represents an effort by BDS supporters to get their proposal approved by the Coop, since in-person votes on the matter have been canceled. They say in a hybrid meeting, a BDS vote is more likely to pass.

At the June meeting, it was announced that hybrid voting was supported by 66.43 percent of members in a referendum, which was not enough for the 66.67 percent needed for a bylaw amendment.

The Board then independently decided to authorize hybrid meetings in September.

Later, Barbara Mazor, a Coop member since 1988, asked four board members that she termed "activists"—who have shown support for BDS or the April motion—if they would adhere to hypothetical future votes where Coop membership rejected BDS. She and Board Member Keyian Vafai had a muffled exchange, after which Mazor said, "I'll take that as a no."

Vafai, however, spoke up five minutes later: "Yes, I absolutely believe in voting with the membership." Board members Tess Brown-Lavoie, Tim Hospodar and Brandon West, who Mazor also called out by name, did not comment.

Two members made non-BDS-related comments. Hospodar raised concerns with an amendment passed in August affirming that the Coop Treasurer must be an upper-level management staff person, and former General Manager Joe Holtz asked attendees to support a developing co-op in Brazil, which he previously wrote about in the *Line-waiters' Gazette*.

THE NUMBERS: COOP FINANCES & THANKSGIVING SALES

The General Coordinators' reports largely centered on numbers—including the standard update on the financial health of the Coop from General Manager and Treasurer Szladek, and a seasonal report on Thanksgiving sales.

Year-to-date sales through November 9 were up 8.5 percent over the previous year, but the cost of goods and running the Coop were, too, meaning the business had a \$372,000 deficit, Szladek said. The General Manager reassured members that sales usually pick up during the fall and winter and he expects the Coop to come “close” to breaking even by year's end.

Szladek attributed some of this year's deficit to costly one-off expenses and rising healthcare expenses for personnel, as seen nationally. He said the Coop is seriously considering how to balance rising healthcare costs while maintaining a strong staff plan, and noted in follow-ups that the current self-insured, premium-free plan has saved the Coop “a tremendous amount of money over the years.”

Next, Elinoar Astrinsky, a General Coordinator since 2009, detailed Thanksgiving sales—a staggering volume of food totaling more than a Boeing 787's cargo load. Shoppers bought 38,000 pounds of produce, 7,760 pounds of cheese (cheddar was the most popular) and plenty of walnuts (about 1,000 pounds), she said.

Astrinsky concluded with a shout-out to staff for keeping the store well-stocked and relatively line-free, which elicited applause from the audience. Meeting chair Hegwood, who repeatedly asked attendees to hold their applause during politically fraught moments, joked that applause was only appropriate “when we're having Thanksgiving sales numbers.”

AN UPDATE ON HYBRID MEETINGS

Following a brief committee update from the International Trade Education Squad about the Trump Administration's trade policy (which, in summary, remains volatile but still impacts the Coop far less than other grocers thanks to our focus on local

goods), the Chair Committee issued a progress update on hybrid meetings.

After the Chair Committee solicited support for the transition to hybrid meetings, nine people expressed interest, seven responded to an outreach email and six were selected for the role, explained Committee member Josef Szende. The positions are short-term and will be evaluated for long-term participation, he added.

During a period for questions, Mazor took to the stage again to ask whether members will be able to comment on the Committee's eventual proposal, expressing specific concerns about how the meetings will be kept civilized. Szende responded that he couldn't speak to specifics (the Committee hasn't yet met), but that the transition will be collaborative.

"This is not a consulting firm delivering a product. This is a community. We're working together and we need to dialogue," he said "It's going to be a process and it's definitely not going to be perfect."

TWO ELECTIONS & A PROPOSAL ABOUT ELECTIONS—PLUS A DISCUSSION ABOUT RESPECTFUL COMMUNICATION

Chair Hegwood opened the GM agenda by urging members to be "civil and generous," a request that was mostly respected during the 90-minute session covering two proposals and votes.

The meeting opened with member Michael Freedman-Schnapp, who brought his earlier proposal for a member-led Financial Advisory Committee to a vote. Most members expressed support for the Committee, especially since Freedman-Schnapp added a revision in response to feedback that reserves two of the seven seats for members without financial expertise.

"I don't have a lot of expertise, but I have thoughts about what are socially responsible investments that I would want the Coop to make," said Alyce Barr, a member of nearly 50 years, explaining that a Committee with a mix of backgrounds would foster

cooperation. The vote passed 111 to 11.

Next came a hotly debated agenda item from Coop member Rosa Palermo, who proposed reserving the “do-not-reply” email—used for one-way staff communications—for operational updates and announcements, not personal opinions or advocacy. Her proposal came in response to a controversial message that Holtz sent from the “do-not-reply” email weeks before the Board of Directors Election (and his retirement).

In the message that staff said was sent to 34,000 active and inactive members, Holtz said that he was speaking only for himself, but encouraged all recipients to vote against Dan Kaminsky and Taylor Pate—pro-BDS candidates endorsed by PSFC Members for Palestine. Kaminsky and Pate both lost the election.

In her opening statement, Palermo mentioned the email, saying that it made her think about how “our communication tools support equal member voice and align with our cooperative values.” However, she maintained that the proposal was about communication structures, not specific political views, and never named Holtz explicitly.

This caused confusion for at least one member, who took to the mic to ask for clarification on the email, but most speakers understood its subtext, and many expressed support for the proposal, citing frustration with Holtz’s message.

However, the response wasn’t all positive. One member questioned whether the proposal even merited consideration, noting he was sure “Joe was very sorry,” which drew applause that the chair quickly curtailed. Later, while Palermo discussed how communication can be used to strengthen cooperativism and increase access, an audience member shouted, “why the lies” prompting the chair to intervene again and remind members not to shout out.

The discussion concluded with a member named John, who said he was present in support of Palermo, emphasizing that there are already participatory channels where

members can share personal viewpoints, namely, the GM or *Gazette*.

Next, the evening saw two elections: Members re-elected Jacob Heyman-Kantor (120-5) and elected Josh Geller (93-31) to serve on the Hearing Officer Committee (HOC), following brief presentations of their qualifications and a question-and-answer segment.

Directly following the HOC election, members George Sarah Olken and Sophia Li presented an aptly timed proposal on establishing an Election Committee to administer open elections on a consistent schedule. As it currently stands, committee elections are not held on a fixed schedule. Typically, when a committee has an open seat, sitting members solicit interest from Coop members and contenders are asked to make a case at the GM (or join in a less formal manner).

“Those elections work, in general, the way we just saw,” said Olken, referencing the HOC election. “It’s not exactly an election because we don’t know how many other people applied, it’s two people running for two positions, members often don’t know what the committee even does and then in almost all cases the nominees slip through.”

Olken and Li’s proposal, by contrast, presents a more thoughtful vision of open and participatory elections overseen by the Election Committee. Their plan centers on two meetings: first, a nomination GM where members can put themselves or others forward for open positions from the floor. Then, a vote in June, aligning with the Board of Directors Elections. This model closely mirrors that of the Brooklyn Public Library Union, where Olken is President.

Members queried and discussed the advantages and disadvantages of this proposal. While some appreciated how it could make elections more open, many raised concerns about practicalities, like how long and chaotic a nomination meeting could be, or how devoting two of ten annual GMs to elections could deter from other work members need to do.

Li and Olken waived most of their allotted wrap-up remark time to let others speak, and then gave a brief thank-you at the end. “This is exactly the conversation I think we need to have,” said Olken. “I am glad this proposal engendered this and I’m hopeful that by trying to change our systems we will figure out what exactly we want them to be.”

At the conclusion of the meeting, all board members voted in favor to accept the members’ advice on the Financial Advisory Committee and Hearing Officer Committee Elections held earlier in the evening.