

SEPTEMBER 21 GENERAL MEETING ROUND UP

October 18, 2021



Above: General Meeting Zoom Participants

By Meredith Kolodner

Rebuilding Coop community and making the general meetings more interactive

The Coop's General Meeting grappled with one of the central issues of our time - how do people communicate, feel connected, and make important decisions in the age of COVID?

An informal group of Coop members who call themselves the "Coop Study Group" have been meeting for the past several months to discuss ways to improve member participation and to support the Coop. This group brought those questions to the

September GM and asked for feedback on several concrete suggestions to improve communication and participation during the GM; they also sought new ideas to make the GMs more community-minded, transparent and democratic.

On the one hand, virtual meetings might have allowed more people to attend who lived far away or lacked child care, said the presenter, George Olken. At the same time, people who are less tech-savvy or don't have stable Internet access have lost out. But the "Study Group" argued that all members—and the Coop itself—have lost something in the fog of Zoom. Overall attendance has decreased on Zoom versus in person meetings.

"Zoom is frustrating and isolating," Olken said. He acknowledged that the in-person meetings had also sometimes been frustrating but that Zoom meetings lack the energy of being in-person. One can't get a sense of the room, see how people are reacting or who's stepping out for a side conversation.

The study group was not blaming the Chair Committee for the problems, and several members of the Chair and Agenda Committees said they appreciated the constructive tone of the presentation. Two suggested changes had already been made—there is closed captioning available during the meeting and speakers are told how much time they have to speak and everyone is kept to the same number of minutes.

Another suggestion, which garnered some support, was to change the meeting format from "webinar" to "meeting" format. In the current webinar set up, participants can only see the hosts of the meeting and the person speaking. In a meeting format, you can see the faces (or names if participants want their camera off) of everyone attending. It also allows for reaction icons (thumbs up, clapping, etc) that everyone can see, and it allows everyone see who and how many people have their hands raised to speak. Break-out rooms are available, which facilitates smaller groups of people to meet and talk.

The other main suggestion from the study group was to turn the chat function back

on to let members communicate directly with one another. One-on-one chats could be used to say hello to people you know, and the group chat would be another mode of communication among all members. The chat script could also be copied and made public, allowing more members to see what happened during the meeting beyond reading the official minutes.

“Democracy is messy,” Olken quipped, “but in the messiness is the joy.”

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Additionally, the study group suggested that members could volunteer to provide live technical assistance to anyone having difficulty with any of the Zoom functions, like voting. Another suggestion was to use slides for presentations to help people follow the discussion.

“These are ideas, just food for thought,” Olken said as he wrapped up his presentation. “Our goals are greater participation through transparency and expanded accessibility. Our hope is to create more feeling of community at our meetings. When we can see each other we feel less alone. And when we can see who is here we feel part of a community. We’d love to hear your ideas.”

Several speakers said they liked many of the ideas proposed by the group.

“I’m new to the Coop,” said one member, who identified herself as Mary. “I really like the idea of being able to see people.”

General Coordinator Joe Holtz agreed. “I really appreciate the suggestions,” he said. “I so miss being able to look out at the audience and see the reactions I’m getting, see how many hands are up.”

David, a member of the Chair Committee, said he appreciated the tone of the presentation and reminded members that they did vote on the meeting format and the creation of a committee to carry them out.

He wasn’t in favor of re-instating the chat. While most members are respectful, he said, there are people who are “trolls,” there’s hate speech and “brigading” which make moderating a chat very challenging. He suggested posting a link in the chat for a Slack or Discord channel (which are other messaging platforms) for member communication.

Another member suggested that the chairs use an alternative channel, since they’re familiar with the technology, and leave the chat to meeting attendees to make it more accessible to people who aren’t as tech-savvy.

Treasury still struggling but there’s hope on the horizon

The Coop has lost \$2.1 million in the last year, Joe Holtz reported. The IRS, however, owes the Coop \$2.9 million in employee retention credits, and it is hopeful some of this will come in soon.

The number of paid staff went from 77 before the pandemic to more than 200 people during the height of the pandemic. On July 12, with the restoration of member labor, 80 percent of the temporary staff was laid off, and the goal is to no longer have tem-

porary staff by the end of October, which will save the Coop an additional \$10,000 per week.

In response to a question about raising revenue by accepting more members, Holtz answered that the Coop is down 4,000 members since March 2020. By mid or late-October there should be an online onboarding system with appointments to visit to Coop to complete the joining process.

The Coop used to have 100 hours of shopping time, and it is now at 84. As the Coop adds more members, the General Coordinators hope to add more hours to keep the same limits on the number of people who are in the building.

Buyers report

If you've noticed some of your regular items missing in the cans aisle, it's not because your friends are suddenly buying all the same things that you are. The Coop's biggest dry goods distributor has been facing serious labor shortages. The Coop usually gets an 18-wheeler full of food five or six times a week, and they've been sending a quarter trailer or less. Buyers have been working very hard to find other distributors so even if your favorite brand isn't there, there should be a good substitute.

A bit of controversy

Members of the Hudson Valley Farm Coop Committee, which was formed to help launch an organization in the Hudson Valley with a goal to acquire and operate up to 15 farms, presented their structure and reporting proposal, which was required by the provisional approval granted at the April 2021 GM.

The goal of the group, said Teresa Santamaria, is to create "safer, saner and more sustainable food systems." The committee said they would report quarterly to the GM, open the first half of committee meetings to all members, and post meeting notices in advance. The proposal sponsors will recruit and interview members with expe-

rience in agriculture, real estate, finance law and business management, and the new members will be approved by a simple majority of the proposal's sponsors. Members will get credit for work on the committee, and committee members' bios will be posted on the Coop website.

There were questions about committee members being able to benefit from the creation of the Hudson Valley Coop, and in particular committee member Jonathan Farber. (Farber has been a member of the Coop for 28 years and is a landscape architect and farmer.)

Farber answered that his company could help to get the company up and running, but that would be up to the committee.

The proposal was approved.

Committee reports

Paul Warren, from the Equity Access and Community Committee, requested space on the agenda to vote on collecting demographic information of new members to find out who the Coop community is.

The Labor Committee, the International Trade Education squad, and the Agenda Committee are all looking for new members. There are links to these committees Coop website if people are interested in more information.

Open Forum

One member requested that the text of complicated issues be distributed in advance of the meetings so members had a chance to read and digest proposals. Coop staff said that they could provide link in the Google doc that has the agenda, which is posted in advance.

Another member asked when child care would be available. Joe Holtz said there weren't plans about when to bring back child care since the room is being used to package food so that Aisle 2 doesn't get too crowded. There is also a safety issue in terms of the virus. Holtz said he doesn't have answer as to how to make it happen but that the Coop is committed to bringing it back and that the issue needs further discussion.

One more vote

Two sitting members of the Hearing Officers Committee Election, which has had no hearings since the start of the pandemic, were overwhelmingly re-elected.

STOCK SHORTAGES AT THE COOP ARE LIKELY HERE TO STAY

October 18, 2021



Above: Sorry, there is no back-stock of papaya!

By John B. Thomas

With increased numbers of fully vaccinated individuals and the subsequent reinstatement of the member labor requirement, summer and fall of 2021 were supposed to bring a return to normalcy at the Coop—or if not normalcy, something close to it. Yet an email sent to the full Coop membership on September 22 punctured that bubble, putting words to a reality that has crept into Coop members' consciousnesses as many of us have resumed shopping and working our shifts: that the supply shortages that members had become used to during the pandemic appear to be here for the foreseeable future. Specifically, the email outlined that both grocery and household items are more out of stock than usual.

The email mentioned that widespread labor shortages across the country are a key driver of these issues. A shortage of warehouse workers and truck drivers appears to be affecting the grocery world acutely. Along with these issues are some fundamental limitations to the Coop's space, namely its ability to only store several days of groceries at a time, as opposed to several weeks for many other grocery stores.

The Coop's distributors appear to all be affected by the shortage of truck drivers. According to Coop Grocery Buyer Gillian Chi, most of the Coop sources' distributors have their own trucks and hire their own drivers. Now, those same distributors do not have enough drivers on staff, so they often have to outsource to a third-party trucking company, or otherwise cut back on orders—sometimes as much as 50%.

The Coop is not alone in facing this new reality. The Forbes article linked in the email to members identified four key factors that are driving these labor shortages. Namely, workers now have more leverage to push back against historically stagnant wages; there is a broader desire for better working conditions (some truckers work 70 hours each week and often spend weeks away from home); workers now prioritize a better work-life balance and scheduling flexibility; and there are increased child and family care responsibilities.

At least when it comes to the warehouse and trucker shortages, these four dynamics certainly seem to be at play. One trucking company is reported to have increased

wages by 35% over the previous year, and this still may not be enough: the Bureau of Labor Statistics report that the trucking industry is still down 33,000 jobs from February 2020. The fact that so many jobs still need to be filled reflects the broader trend—“The Great Resignation”—where the pandemic seems to have shown low wage workers that they can and should demand more from their employers. This trend seems to be especially prevalent in restaurants and hospitality.

While these labor market dynamics in the U.S. may explain some of the stock shortages Coop members are seeing, supply chain issues may be more widespread and last longer than the Coop email suggests. This is due to a mix of COVID-related disruptions, but also policy choices that have created our highly interconnected, globalized, and (pre-pandemic) efficient economy.



Shortages in the bulk aisle.

On the COVID side, highly globalized supply chains are still adapting to a world reeling from a pandemic that is far from under control in most parts of the world, with the pandemic and its associated restrictions causing major disruptions to all transport sectors responsible for moving goods around the world. A recent letter by the International Chamber of Shipping to the United Nations General Assembly warned of a “global transport system collapse” if transport workers are not given freedom of movement and priority to receive vaccines. Consumers, too, have a role to play, with the reopening of economies increasing demand significantly, and supply chains being unable to keep up after more than a year of disruption.

While these global supply chain challenges may not seem directly relevant to food produced in the U.S., these shortages can build on each other. For example, if a truck engine breaks down and the parts to replace it are stuck on a container ship at a port in Asia, then the trucking company not only can't pick up the goods to fix the truck, it also cannot deliver the original goods it was supposed to.

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Many of these fundamental challenges were created over decades by trade policy that prioritized producing cheap things abroad for consumers in a low-wage economy

at home. Or, in the words of The Guardian, “policies that led to our supply constrained world are lax antitrust, deregulation of basic industries like shipping, railroads and trucking, disinvestment in domestic production, and trade policy emphasizing finance over manufacturing.” In the case of trucking, deregulation in the 1970s led firms to compete against each other—primarily by offering lower prices, which were then passed on to truck drivers in the form of lower wages, reduced safety, and unreasonable scheduling that crushed drivers—trends that continue to this day.

On top of these fundamental weaknesses in how goods are moved around is rampant inflation, with prices rising for consumers at the fastest rate in 30 years—without a commensurate increase in wages. The Federal Reserve appears to be deeply concerned that inflation will not just be a short-term phenomenon and that the supply chain disruptions causing it are far from getting better, and have few quick fixes.

All of this points to supply shortages becoming the new normal, not just a passing blip on the road to recovery as was predicted and desired by experts. These supply shortages are not just leading to empty shelves at the Coop and other grocery stores, but also to higher prices—and not just because of constrained supply. The Coop tends to get its best prices from large distributors. Due to the shortages, the Coop’s buyers have had to begin buying the same number and quantity of goods across multiple smaller distributors. And due to economies of scale, those smaller distributors can’t offer the same lower prices as their larger counterparts—sometimes by a significant amount. For example, switching to a smaller distributor increased the price of a case of black beans from \$19.73 to \$22.99, by 17%. This trend is not just for groceries. The price the Coop pays for Dr. Bronner’s liquid soap has increased four percent, from \$8.96 to \$9.32, by moving to a smaller distributor. Even though these prices are higher, says Chi, “You’re still going to get a good price, and less than you would likely pay outside the Coop.”

The strategy the Coop is taking to address these shortages—approaching alternative distributors, ordering from different warehouses, and finding “best alternative” substitutes—may be a reality for the foreseeable future, as are the associated higher

prices. Chi said, “the difficulties started with one distributor, and then it became one after another. It’s only been about a month but the trend is worse, not better. I can’t imagine how [these systemic issues] are going to be resolved.”

In spite of all this disruption, this period may present some new opportunities, both for the Coop and for our globalized economy. It appears that policymakers have taken notice of these fundamental weaknesses and appear poised to invest more in domestic production in certain sectors. Corporations are increasingly seeing the need for greater regulation to bring stability and predictability back to their sectors, especially in the transportation industry. And workers now have some of the highest leverage with employers than at any time in modern history, with the prospect of real wage growth combatting years of stagnation.

And as for the Coop, some of these changes may have unseen upsides. For example, many of the smaller distributors are more local which is generally good for reducing the carbon footprint of products as they have to travel shorter distances to get to consumers. But this switch comes with a cost, in the form of the time and logistical challenges associated with dealing with unfulfilled orders, smaller product volumes, and finding alternatives across multiple distributors. Said Chi, “we sell over 10,000 products at the Coop, and we’re switching like crazy—it’s very tedious work going through items one by one. We are trying very hard not to keep shelves empty.”

All of these dynamics suggest that members will need to get used to a new pandemic normal. Members may discover new products they hadn’t tried before, and the Coop will build new relationships with domestic producers. So while the pandemic is still causing widespread challenges, there may be some bright spots on the horizon—even if that horizon looks a little different than before. Said Chi, “what we’re managing is a global crisis, and we’re working with all the resources we have—including our own time—to make our way through it and keep the store full. I would credit my amazing coworkers for keeping our shelves as full as they have been. And I would ask members for patience, understanding, and flexibility with your purchasing choices.”

HOW CHILD CARE ISSUES ARE AFFECTING COOP MEMBERSHIP

October 18, 2021



Above: The Room Formerly Known as Childcare.

By Suzanne Cope

As of July 12, the Coop has reinstated member work requirements, requiring that every adult member of a household work a shift every seven weeks, for now.

Members can ask for a COVID exemption through October 31st (for reasons that in-

clude having a child at home who is too young to be vaccinated), but after that date nearly every adult member will need to sign up for shifts through the new scheduling system accessed via the online Member Services site. Hopes are that the Coop will begin to return to a new normal. Although there is one notable exception: the indefinite closing of the child care room.



No more choking concerns.

PHOTO BY NANCY ROSENBERG

While I didn't hear from any parents who want the child care room open, and the office has yet to field any requests, some parents who relied upon Coop-based child care to facilitate their work shift pre-pandemic find themselves in a challenging spot that echoes broader societal conversation around parenting and working in a pandemic.

Countless articles have highlighted the plight of working parents with limited or nonexistent childcare during the pandemic, who have had to negotiate work and sudden school closures and classroom quarantines, and whose mental health has suffered from the non-stop working and care-giving. Further, there are a record number of people leaving positions—often citing a disconnect between their own work-life balance and job expectations.

Here at the Coop, too, there is evidence that the return to in-person work requirements, with no flexibility for parents of young children, is taxing some parent-members.

Nell, a new member and parent to two elementary-aged kids, was excited to join to expand her family's access to healthy and affordable foods. But she has become disillusioned with the seeming lack of flexibility of work requirements for parents of young kids, and worries that she will have even fewer options as she job-searches.

Nell said, "an issue I encountered is that there are few shifts that I can sign up for because I have to schedule the times where I know the kids are at school," which are not plentiful. She had signed up for one on Monday, October 11th but then realized that she would have to reschedule because it was a school holiday. She added, "and once I find a new job, my options will dwindle down to nothing." Gone, for the time being at least, are the days when one could bring their children in during the late afternoon or early evening, grab some snacks from downstairs for dinner, and have them work on homework or play during a parents' shift.



Maya and Dora Solovey, mother and child. Maya says that she has to shop more frequently since there is no childcare, and that her daughter would love to play at the Coop. Sergio and Caetano Krakowski were the only other parents shopping together with their children at 11:00 a.m. on October 12.

A solo mom with a one year old said she might take a leave of absence after the October 31 COVID exemption is over, and another new parent, Sarah, has echoed the same. She says, “we’re definitely worried about what it will be like when [parent leave] runs out and we both have to do shifts with two kids and both of us working full time. We’re already thinking we might have to take a leave from the Coop.”

But the Coop is also in a tough position. The Coop has lost around 4,000 members in the last 18 months and has not been accepting any new members (although they will begin to do so soon). More members are needed both to provide people-power—and

to shop to bring in revenue.

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The lack of child care has had an effect on shopping habits as well. Stephanie, a parent to a two and six year old, praised how the Coop has handled safety and resiliency over the last year and a half, and also loves the flexibility and ease of the new shift sign-up system. She says that her family has been “able to deal” with completing their shifts, but adds, “the combination of an earlier closing time and no child care means that we go less.”

For her, these factors greatly limit when she can schedule solo shopping since she can't go after her childrens' bedtime, nor does she bring them over the weekend as the Coop had initially requested that children not accompany parents while shopping. She suspects other parents have limited their shopping for similar reasons, which frustrates her, because, she says, “I love the Coop and I want it to survive!”

Childcare challenges have affected my family as well. My new work shift on the *Gazette* is virtual, which fulfills my work requirement. But my husband Steve is the primary caregiver to our two year old, who is only in daycare part-time, and he must also pick up her brother from school by early afternoon. He has yet to schedule a shift

because he would be forced to give up some of the few hours he has to meet colleagues during normal work hours.

I work outside of the house and don't return until after the last shift starts. Most weekends are spent visiting extended family in upstate, leaving few options. "I would literally be paying daycare and losing money from lost work so that I can work at the Coop," Steve says. Luckily he had banked a number of FTOP shifts from years ago, so we have some time to figure out a workable solution.

Annette Laskaris, PSFC Membership Coordinator, has responded to these concerns noting that the decrease in members has made the work requirement more urgent. But she has some hopeful news as well, adding that she expects shopping hours to be lengthened again "within six months or less."

Annette also commented on the request to not bring children shopping, saying that it was done in the beginning of the pandemic when the lines were long and capacity limits were first introduced, with an aim to allow more shopping members into the Coop. The Coop has decided to continue these capacity limits but, she said, bringing children shopping is becoming less of an issue as there have been few, if no lines lately. "We want people to come shop," she said. "We need people to shop!"

Annette also noted that she has heard only a few complaints about the work requirement from parents with childcare challenges, and doesn't see the child care room opening in the foreseeable future.

Rather, she said that parents need to get creative about finding ways to schedule their work shifts. "You already have to manage your life outside of the Coop without anybody watching your kids," she says. "You can schedule whenever you have time, or can get a friend to watch your child... I think you can manage, even as a single parent."



The Coop still serves children.

Once the COVID exemption expires in a few weeks, time will tell if parents of young children can fulfill their work requirement, or if it becomes a reason they might have to leave the Coop as some have indicated. The grace period for suspension has been extended to 35 days, so that might give some caregivers time to find needed child-care. But perhaps the Coop can use this time to come up with a more tenable solution, possibly inspired by approaches that came up during the research of this article.

Often parents of young kids would use working in the childcare room as their work requirement, allowing them to contribute while still being with their children. Can we reframe the care of young children as a shift in and of itself: that one partner of a family with young kids might receive an earned work credit automatically to show we value the work done in the home to keep our young members healthy and safe? This would allow the Coop to be seen as a leader among institutions on prioritizing family care over traditional productivity, as they have shown themselves through their leadership keeping shoppers and workers safe and healthy during the last 18 months.

Or at the very least perhaps the Coop administration can model a program based on the long history of mutual aid in progressive communities, creating a formal system where members can contribute FTOP shifts for those who most need it. Certainly many families can “make it work”—as more than one interviewee told me—but why push already taxed families to the limit? Why create one more barrier to being a part of our community for access to affordable and healthy food?

Long-time member Carl, who is also the dad of two elementary-aged kids, supported finding easy avenues for Coop members to help out caregivers in need. He and his wife have some scheduling flexibility and will be able to manage their work shifts, but he acknowledges their privilege. “It’s people like me who should be stepping up to support the Coop for those who aren’t so lucky,” Carl said. “That’s the part of being in the Coop community that is meaningful to me.”

STORE CREDITS AND RECEIPTS

October 18, 2021

On August 25, I received a \$10 store credit at the office and forgot to give it to the cashier when I checked out. I wrapped the little credit receipt paper around my Coop card, so I wouldn’t forget the next time I shopped. When I returned, on September 28th, I was informed that 30 days had passed and my store credit had expired. So I’m writing to ask: why do store credits expire? I’m sure it has to do with tracking revenue. But the Coop is capable of accepting and tracking member investments over decades. Why should members lose money because the Coop won’t track member credits for more than 30 days? And why are store credits paper receipts? The Coop should track store credits electronically. That way losing the receipt wouldn’t also mean losing the money.

Thanks,

A HASHTAG IN LIEU OF LASTING CHANGE

October 18, 2021

In July 2020, a statement adorning our homepage was approved that “The Park Slope Food Coop unequivocally supports Black lives and the dismantling of all systems that propagate and empower systemic racism.” The same month, I attended a virtual seminar open to all members entitled “White Now? Being White at the Coop and Beyond.” When asked what BIPOC meant, the white moderator noted that “B” stood for biracial. While this was a safe space for sharing and learning, it was disappointing that a lack of information diluted Blackness at the onset, setting the tone for an already thematically problematic session.

An essential, albeit difficult, part of deconstructing a racist system is looking internally to see how we are perpetuating the problem—especially unintentionally—and where we must do better.

Developing a mandatory racial microaggression and implicit bias training for all existing and new members, similarly to how organizations onboard employees, is a step in demonstrating that the Coop is serious about inculcating the values we profess to uphold. Deploying a trending hashtag in solidarity is not enough.

Facing challenges with no simple solutions—like revenue regeneration and labor shortages impacting supply—I have tremendous admiration for the resilience and stamina the full-time and temporary staff has demonstrated during the pandemic to keep the Coop operational and its members protected, informed, and nourished. As we move through this next phase, my hope is that the Coop will also proactively prioritize and implement actions that foster an anti-racist community.

Respectfully,

Mandira Ghai