

REPORT ON THE 7/27 GENERAL MEETING

August 27, 2022



GM Reacts to Holtz Suspension, Debates Coop Mask Requirement

By Hayley Gorenberg

COVID-19 controversies dominated the July General Meeting, from the first moments of the freeform Open Forum to the discussion on whether the Coop should continue requiring masks.

Several members used the Open Forum to assert their opposition to the Coop's requirement that members—as workers—be vaccinated against COVID-19. Some complained they had not been allowed medical exemptions from vaccination. Others claimed that the Coop should not require vaccination, believing it would not slow transmission of COVID-19.

“WHAT ARE THE LIMITS AND CHECKS ON THE PERSONNEL COMMITTEE’S POWER? I BELIEVE THAT WE ALL DESERVE ANSWERS, AND I WOULD LIKE TO DEMAND ANSWERS.”

RECEIVING COORDINATOR GILLIAN CHI

Coop bookkeeper Kathy Hieatt urged members to read the *Linewaiters’ Gazette’s* July 25 article on the Personnel Committee’s month-long suspension of General Manager and Treasurer Joe Holtz, which concluded on July 30. Hieatt called for an explanation of the committee’s rationale.

“You took away a month of his salary. He may need that to exist, to pay his rent or his mortgage,” said member Bhakti Sondra Shaye. “It felt bad to me, and it makes me feel terrible about the Coop—and I love the Coop. I feel this is extraordinarily extreme.”

“What are the limits and checks on the Personnel Committee’s power?” asked Receiving Coordinator Gillian Chi, who had previously objected to barring Holtz from Coop premises for a month. “I believe that we all deserve answers, and I would like to demand answers.”

Personnel Committee member Yolanda McBride responded that the committee is elected and invested with authority by the General Meeting to advise the general coordinators on human resource functions and to hire, fire and discipline top staff, in consultation with the general coordinators. McBride asserted that the disciplinary penalty meted out to Holtz was not personal, “was based on facts uncovered in the investigation,” and would have been imposed on any Coop general coordinator.

McBride said the *Gazette* article covering Holtz’s 30-day suspension without pay, plus barring him from Coop premises was “not an accurate reflection of the facts based on what was gathered in the investigation.” Referencing confidentiality requirements,

McBride did not provide any specific information (see sidebar below).

Responding to McBride's reference to confidentiality, member Rachel Porter noted that confidentiality could be waived (as Holtz had done in speaking with the *Gazette*). "The Coop, I think, has too long suffered from hiding behind confidentiality," Porter said.

COMMITTEE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE CONSTITUTED

The GM elected members to serve on the newly created Committee Oversight Committee, which will facilitate regular reporting to the GM and the *Gazette* on Coop member committees' work. All who stood for election were voted in: the originator of the committee, member Rachel Porter; attorney and mediator Diana Colon; 12-year Coop member Brian Shuman; Kristian Nammack, who previously served on the Environmental Committee and expressed a proclivity for shopping "European-style" (visiting the Coop four or five times each week); member Ned Lochaya; and Sara Bouzas, a member since 2011 who works as a Spanish interpreter in courts and jails, and so places a premium on listening carefully "as required by my job—and I do this in my life as well."

FINANCIAL REPORT

General Coordinator Joe Szladek presented a brief financial report indicating that the Coop's rate of loss had decreased and that a recent eight-week period showed the organization had started to turn a profit before a usual summer downturn while many members are out of town.

Szladek predicted the Coop would likely run in the red for the year overall, estimating the potential for a \$100,000 deficit. "That's a pretty small amount, given what we've dug out of," he said, emphasizing, "it's not just about one year; it's also about the trajectory."

Szladek flagged that the 25 percent pandemic markup is still in effect, highlighted the

number of new members signing up as a “really positive” indicator, and noted efficiencies gained through the new online workslot system, as well as the decision to extend the usual shift cycle to working once every six weeks, instead of the previous requirement to work every four weeks.

GENERAL COORDINATORS’ REPORT

General Coordinator Elinoar Astrinsky reported “a string of wallet thefts,” and cautioned members to keep valuables with them and lock lockers when using them. “Don’t leave your bags strewn about in your cart,” she said. “Let’s all be vigilant.”

She said police had been informed of the thefts, and that the general coordinators were discussing further security measures.

Ending on a positive note, Astrinsky highlighted that Sycamore honeydew melons, peaches, cherries and corn are in season and are “luscious and delicious and sweet.” Watermelons abound, with seeds and without: “They’re both really, really, really good. Buy them!”

TO MASK, OR NOT TO MASK?

Member Elizabeth Tobier, who had submitted a discussion item noting that New York State had largely lifted mask requirements, presented slides that she said supported her argument for lifting the Coop’s mask mandate.

GC Astrinsky had noted earlier in the meeting that the Coop “as an employer and business” has the right to mandate masks, and reported a falloff in members’ readiness, with a “huge uptick in having to hand masks to people to come in and shop.”

“I believe that masks do work,” countered a member who became a temporary worker during the pandemic and, as such, had to wear a mask for full working days—far longer than a typical shift or visit to shop. “This is not a huge sacrifice,” the member concluded.

Another member noted New York's still-high transmission rate, urging, "Until cases start to go down, the mask mandate needs to stay!"

A member who said she is immunocompromised voiced concern that information presented about masks had been inaccurate to the point of being "completely debunked," and that lifting the mask mandate at the Coop would put her "at great risk."

"WE ALL FACE FATIGUE ON MASKING. BUT I AM WILLING TO CONTINUE BEING FATIGUED."

STAFF MEMBER JASON WEINER

A member who said she worked with health-care providers said that "now would be a terrible time" to change the Coop's mask requirement. "We owe it to each other," the member said. "We have been saving each other's lives, and we need to keep doing that."

"Masks work; that's why hospitals use them," another member said.

Staff member Jason Weiner read a prepared statement referencing the Coop's "many immunocompromised members," acknowledging that there was "no question" that "we all face fatigue on masking." But he promoted policy based on science, rather than fatigue, concluding, "I am willing to continue being fatigued."

Masks provide a measure of safety that allows the Coop to maintain its volume of shoppers, said General Coordinator Ann Herpel. She said that cutting the use of masks could lead us to reconsider increasing shopping capacity and likely deter many members from working, ultimately steering the Coop in the "wrong direction" and hurting the organization financially.

Toward the conclusion of the discussion period, one member suggested a medical committee to help the Coop assess its policies as needed.

Hayley Gorenberg joined the Coop in 1993 and became a Gazette reporter soon thereafter.

MOODOMETER: THE RETURN OF CROWDED AISLES

August 27, 2022



By Miranda Purves

On a recent July Sunday afternoon outside the dear old Coop, things were feeling positively *Sesame Street*. Receiving workers paused to chat with friends, walkers sauntered in with carts, and children celebrating a birthday party raced into the foyer to find a scavenger-hunt clue. Suddenly, the mood darkened. “I was in line, you [expletive]! Didn’t you see my kid holding my spot?” a man yelled. He was about 6’4”, and

the object of his rage was a somewhat shorter shopper waiting to enter the store. Other than him, the line consisted of a child who, up until that minute, had been darting around the place-marker pylons, spraying the laminated numbers from a bottle, his face behind a plastic shield.

“I didn’t know he was in line,” the recipient of the onslaught uttered, pulling back from the finger jutting into his face. The crowd quieted as the angry man continued to step toward him. “Don’t talk! Have some respect,” he said menacingly. The neon NEXT sign flashed and the man strode inside, commanding his child to wait by his cargo bike, while the victim of the aggression tried to regain his composure—as did the now-silenced crowd.

Despite the pandemic accouterments of the masks and spray bottles, the rest of the scene resembled the before times: the density of people outside; the genial, lively mood; the sudden altercation. In the past few months at the Coop, other than Coop co-founder and General Manager Joe Holtz being barred without pay for a month, the big news is old news: just as we’d gotten used to shopping under what former Governor Andrew Cuomo once called the “new normal,” the normal-normal Coop has begun to seem possible again, including the defining feature of the return of somewhat more crowded aisles.

There are currently 62 orange shopper tags, aka “carrots,” that the Coop uses to count and limit shoppers in the aisles. According to General Coordinator Ann Herpel, this number has been the same since fall of 2021. But those 62 carrots are running through more shoppers’ hands throughout the day. We’re also filling our carts at a less-harried pace.



Members are seeing the return of a familiar sight in the Coop: crowded aisles.

“Shopping had become utilitarian; you were coming to get your five things and get out,” said Caroline Todd, a transportation planner with the MTA who was waiting outside for her shift to start. “Now it’s somewhere between the old days and that.”

The evolution of hyperexpedient shopping during the pandemic is a lovely example of what design and management theorists call *emergence*. This refers to novel behaviors and innovations that spring into existence organically when different elements within complex systems interact.

“As we all got accustomed to what was happening, people developed tools to make it easier for themselves,” Herpel said. The management quickly adapted to the crisis by combining recommendations from New York state—enforced traffic-flow patterns and decals on the floor marking distances—with new paid employees at the front of the Coop.

“No one was really interested in spending a lot of time in here,” Herpel said. “We were trying to facilitate that, and members responded and began to come in extraord-

inarily prepared to shop, with very detailed lists, schematically working out where things were on the shelves.”

Now some of the fear has lessened, and so has the distance between us. People are reaching over and under, navigating right-of-way and even—*gasp!*—gabbing in the aisles. Inevitably, this means more snapping as well as pleasantries. “People are forgetting about personal space again,” said Todd. But she quickly added that she loves the Coop. “We’re used to some chaos in the lines!”

The Coop’s commercial certificate of occupancy allows for 250 people within its 6,000 square feet. If you divide 6,000 by 250 you get 24 square feet per person, which sounds great: roughly a five-foot radius. But once you take into account the shelving, the checkout areas, the dairy stocking case, the individual carts and the Hollywood and U-boats, that space cushion evaporates.

In other words, we have plenty of legal leeway to sardine ourselves. Until the pandemic, that left the Coop management to determine a reasonable capacity. They had some experience managing crowds on the fly before. Herpel described the scene in October 2012 as Hurricane Sandy blew in: people shoving inventory in backpacks, totes, anything, because all the carts and baskets were in use (they kept more out than), while the checkout line snaked around and then doubled up in produce.

“If someone had passed out in an aisle, the firefighters from next door would’ve taken minutes to get through,” Herpel said. “You could just tell it wasn’t safe.” They decided to hand shoppers numbers and warehouse them upstairs in the meeting room, calling them down as people left.

But it wasn’t until the peak lockdowns in the spring and early summer of 2020 that the store faced external strictures. The state said that essential businesses that remained open needed to operate at no more than 50 percent occupancy and provide six feet of distance between customers. At the Coop, having 125 people in the store wouldn’t allow for six feet between them.

“We settled on 30,” recalled Herpel, “then for a long time we stayed at 40.” The store increased capacity incrementally, two at a time. After the staff was fully vaccinated, they became more comfortable with letting more shoppers in. Once member workers returned in July 2021, they decided to try 56 orange carrots and 20 blue, for workers to shop after their shifts, before settling on the current 62 and ending the requirement that member workers take a carrot to shop post-shift.

The state has long since lifted its capacity limits, but the Coop is so far sticking to its own, finding that this number allows in most members who want to shop without long outside waits. But membership is beginning to creep back up. Before the pandemic, it hovered above 17,000. In 2020, either because members faded away or decisively left, the number was down by 50 percent. Currently, there are 13,500.

Many of the members outside on that Sunday relished the increases and were happy that shoppers were back in the aisles. “I don’t want a line outside!” said Adam Pollock, a Park Slope resident and father of the birthday girl on the scavenger hunt. “I’d rather it be crowded inside, as COVID recedes.” His partner, Michal Lewin-Epstein, added, “I want non-member visits to resume!”

“THE MORE THE MERRIER! DURING THE PANDEMIC, SHOPPING WAS A HORROR SHOW, A KUBRICK MOVIE, AWFUL.”

MEMBER JAMES RUSCHAK

James Ruschak, a member for over 20 years, was standing outside while his cousin, who was working, brought him New York State cherries that had just hit the shelves. “The more the merrier!” he said. “During the pandemic shopping was a horror show, a Kubrick movie, awful.”



Coop member James Rushak

The new members interviewed for this article—who, it’s important to note, have never experienced the pre-pandemic crowds that were once the norm—echoed Ruschak’s sentiment, describing shopping as less stressful now that the store is busier.

Emily Seager, a Rockaway Beach resident, joined almost a year ago in July 2021. “People were on edge then,” she said. “I value people feeling more comfortable now, walking closer to each other. There’s not as much anxiety.”

But Kate Barrow, a social worker and management consultant for nonprofit organizations, still remembers holiday shopping and the different kind of tension generated by Coop crowds, even when they’re not the possibly-contagious, burned-out, masked zombies we’ve all been in the more-recent past.

“I had so many of those experiences [of personal space invasions] pre-pandemic that

anytime it was super crowded I would just end up leaving, as in: I can't handle this stress. 'I think I'm being really polite, you seem to think I'm being really rude, I don't know what to do,'" Barrow said.

Laura Tucker, a writer, noted that shopping in the 35-people days did have a certain luxuriousness. "This is the first Sunday that I am struck by how crowded it is. But I understand they have to do what they have to do," she said.

Some of the Coop pandemic changes will serve to make the store a little less crowded even if we do zoom back up to 17,000 and do away with the carrots. Now, shift changes are staggered. "It took a pandemic to figure this out!" laughed Herpel. "We used to always complain pre-pandemic on a Saturday afternoon at 3:30 when a bunch of people would come off of checkout, food processing and receiving shifts, 'Why did you come shopping at shift change?'"



General Coordinator Ann Herpel

“THERE IS A CAPACITY TO THE COOP. I DON'T THINK THERE'S AN AGREEMENT AS TO WHAT THAT CAPACITY IS. WHAT COULD WE FINANCIALLY SUPPORT?”

GENERAL COORDINATOR ANN HERPEL

Management has also gotten better at comparing revenue with membership information. Because each transaction is tagged to a household membership number, they can see which members are actually shopping and how much each household buys. The store has always had access to these numbers but didn't make use of them until trying to survive the financial crisis in 2020 with the help of federal aid, when both capacity limits and membership cut sales by about 30 percent. Going forward, this data analysis will help us determine how, and when, to grow.

“There is a capacity to the Coop. I don't think there's an agreement as to what that capacity is,” said Herpel. “What could we financially support? It depends on what you want to do.”

If shopping is more pleasant at a \$42 million business rather than a \$58 million business, the Coop would have to make choices, such as having fewer staff members, which is the biggest expense, she said.

But the Coop has to plan for some growth to keep up with inflation, which puts pressure on operating expenses. Even when the economy isn't grappling with runaway numbers, the Federal Reserve aims for a 2-percent-per-year target. To stay solvent, the store needs either to increase the number of shoppers, which equals crowded aisles, or encourage fewer shoppers—via incentives, refunds, minimums or other mechanisms—to buy more food. Or there's the option of markup increases—which would be about as popular as solar power in coal country.

How we feel about crowded aisles is an issue central to how we want to structure our-

selves, what we want to take away from the pandemic and what we don't. Barrow mused that it might be preferable to keep a capacity limit permanently, particularly since there isn't a clear-cut end to COVID-19. But Ruschak's in favor of letting it all resume: "I'm a closet sociologist so I kind of liked the old way. Even when it was bad, it was good!"

Miranda Purves is a writer who's lived in the South Slope since 2005.

COOP SHOPPERS AND BUYERS FEEL IMPACT OF SURGING FOOD PRICES

August 27, 2022



By Leila Darabi

On a recent Tuesday evening in August, Coop member Sabrina Ramos stood in front of the cereal shelves in aisle seven, comparing her granola options. Any other week she might have made her own, but in 95-degree weather, she had dropped by the Coop to avoid turning on the oven at home. After careful consideration, Ramos selected a favorite variety of Early Bird brand granola, noting that the price, while still high-

er than pre-pandemic, seemed to have dropped from an all-time spike of around \$10 to just over \$8 per bag.

“MY SHOPPING BILL IS RIDICULOUS EVERY TIME I SHOP. I KEEP TRYING TO BE CONSCIOUS TO JUST DO TWO BASKETS, BUT I CAN’T GET OUT OF HERE UNDER \$250 A WEEK.”

COOP MEMBER SABRINA RAMOS

A lifelong Coop member whose parents joined in the 1970s, Ramos now shops for her own family of three and finds herself far more conscious of price tags in the past year. Like many Americans, Ramos has noticed a dramatic spike in food costs recently. The Consumer Price Index Report put out by the US Department of Labor recorded a 10.4 percent increase in overall food costs between June 2021 and June 2022, with more dramatic hikes in specific categories of food.

“My shopping bill is ridiculous every time I shop. I keep trying to be conscious to just do two baskets [instead of a full cart], but I can’t get out of here under \$250 a week,” Ramos said. “When I do come in below \$220, I feel somehow victorious.”

COOP BUYERS SEEK DEALS

Reflected in the ebb and flow of granola prices are a range of national and geopolitical issues, from supply chain interruptions to surging fuel prices to global conflict. As previously reported in the *Gazette*, the Coop buyers are the heroes keeping wholesome, affordable food on the shelves despite these intersecting challenges.

“WHEN THE SUPPLY-CHAIN ISSUES STARTED, IT HIT US RIGHT AWAY. ALL OF A SUDDEN OUR DELIVERY TRUCKS WERE NOT SHOWING UP. IT WAS ACROSS THE

BOARD, AND IT WAS DRAMATIC.”

RECEIVING COORDINATOR GILLIAN CHI

Gillian Chi, the receiving coordinator and buyer for many of the store’s shelf-stable items, recently crunched the numbers for the *Gazette*. They illustrate a startling trend in the costs of household staples:

- Cascadian Farm cereal is up 42%, from \$4.05 to \$5.75 a box
- King Arthur Baking Company flour is up 20%–30%, depending on the size of the bag
- Some varieties of Natural Sea tuna are up as much as 42%
- Bionaturae pasta is up 33%
- Rao’s pasta sauce is up 25%
- Murray’s Chicken is up 25%–30%, depending on the cut
- Slope Farms ground beef is up 12%
- Natural by Nature whole milk half-gallons are up 11%, from \$4.84 to \$5.39
- Grindstone eggs are up 7%
- Cabot unsalted butter is up 19%

A notable outlier, said Chi, are Alderfer’s Omega eggs, the Coop’s top sellers, which dropped by 6% thanks to the sharp negotiation skills of Chi’s colleague, Receiving Coordinator Glorina Phillip.

A number of factors contribute to rising food prices, Chi explained.

“When the supply-chain issues started, it hit us right away,” Chi said. “A few weeks before it was in the news, we were feeling it. All of a sudden our delivery trucks were not showing up. It was across the board, and it was dramatic.”

The scramble to find a steady supply of food meant buyers looked less at the price tags and more at the availability of food staples. Now, with fewer stockouts, Coop buy-

ers are refocusing their attention on negotiating deals.

“The first thing is to compare prices across distributors,” Chi said. “A year ago, I would buy from whoever has [a given product]. Now it’s probably back in stock across three companies.” This availability frees her up to comparison-shop and negotiate discounted prices.

A COOPERATIVE OF COOPERATIVES

To keep costs down, Coop buyers rely on membership in the National Cooperative Grocers (NCG), a relationship that allows member coops across the country to collaborate on bulk purchases and buy into negotiated prices. By representing approximately 160 food coops of various sizes, NCG can bargain and lock in prices with the influence of a large national supermarket chain.

“DOMESTIC CHEESE HAS GONE UP CONSIDERABLY, BECAUSE THE PRICE OF SHIPPING AND MOVING THINGS AROUND FROM POINT A TO POINT B HAS GONE UP, AND THE PRICE OF MILK HAS GONE UP.”

COORDINATING RECEIVER YURI WEBER

The NCG relationship allows the Coop to purchase goods at lower prices through UNFI, a major wholesale distributor and, as previously reported in the *Gazette*, the Coop’s largest shelf-stable food supplier. These relationships help, but have not shielded the Coop from supply-chain stockouts and other price increases.

“NCG negotiates a great price, but UNFI doesn’t always have what we need, and if they don’t we have to find other options,” Coordinating Receiver Yuri Weber said.

Weber is responsible for buying for the bulk aisle, including grains, pulses, rice, nuts

and dried fruit. He also buys the Coop's imported cheeses, a category that was hit hard by Trump administration tariffs in 2019 but has remained fairly stable over the past year. Weber attributes this flat pricing to the strength of the dollar against the euro, which balances out any cost increase.

"Domestic cheese has gone up considerably, because the price of shipping and moving things around from point A to point B has gone up, and the price of milk has gone up," Weber said.

His colleague Lisa Hidem has similarly seen the rising cost of ingredients drive up the price of fresh-baked goods.

"In a lot of the very local stuff, we're seeing price increases. And we try to get bread [from suppliers] as local as we can," Hidem said. "I've seen bread prices go up anywhere from 5 percent to on average at least 15 percent. One went up 45 percent." She attributes the rising cost of bread and pastries to the Coop's supplier's commitment to locally sourced grains and the increased cost of butter, flour and milk.

Both Weber and Hidem noted that suppliers have started to add fuel surcharges as the price of gas has gone up. Makers of prepackaged foods, which Hidem also buys for the store, have seen increased expenses in packaging, driving higher prices. "A lot of [food packaging] is plastic; that's a petroleum product. And we all know the price of gas has gone up."

MEMBERS FEEL THE DIFFERENCE

"I've been amazed by how dramatically prices have risen," Coop member Clara Goetz said. "Not just by 30 or 40 cents, but by very significant amounts. My favorite bread, Runner and Stone buckwheat baguette, was \$3.84 (or something close to that) and is now \$4.49."

A member for 18 years, Goetz said the increased cost has affected her shopping. "In

the past, I would get one if I had bread at home or not. Now I'll pass it up if I don't really need it. Now I hesitate before buying what I consider inessentials. No chocolate-covered almonds, which are now over \$15 a pound. I just can't imagine how people on fixed incomes are managing."

Member Hilda Cohen has also felt the cost increase when shopping for her family of four. "I was just saying this to my kids, I feel like my Coop bill has increased about 20-25 percent," Cohen said. "It does affect the way I shop, but more that I am particularly sensitive to wasting anything, so I am simply getting less and we run out quicker."

FUTURE PREDICTIONS

Coop buyers predict further price increases before the bubble bursts. Citing recent articles on a chickpea shortage, Hidem notes that the premade hummus she buys for the Coop could soon become more expensive.

Weber acknowledges that prices of dried fruits and nuts have remained stable, but that could be because the current supplies may not yet reflect the increased costs of this year's crops. As he updates stock in the store, he anticipates having to pay more.

"I'm super-convinced that we're going to see [more price increases] once the new crop comes in that factors in some of the higher food prices and the shipping," Weber said.

Leila Darabi joined the Gazette as a reporter in 2016. She is the cohost of the podcast Cringewatchers and shares photos of the things she cooks with Coop ingredients @persian_ish on Instagram.

JOE HOLTZ SUSPENSION

August 27, 2022

Letters to the Editor



Dear Editors,

I am writing to express my dismay at Joe Holtz's egregious suspension. I don't dispute the facts of the case; Joe's coming in to work while awaiting results of a Covid test was not the best choice, but the punishment is excessive. To withhold a month's

salary from anyone is shockingly misguided, but to do so to a founding member of the Coop, someone who has worked tirelessly on behalf of the Coop for decades, not to mention someone integral to keeping the Coop functioning during Covid, is short-sighted and beyond comprehension. Shame on the Personnel Committee. The only way to make this right is to return Joe's docked salary. If that is not possible, I suggest a bonus in the amount of this lost income—let's call it an acknowledgement of the outstanding work he has done for the Coop over the years.

Best,

Helene Davis