

# A BELOVED MEMBER'S PASSING, LOVE FOR THE LOUDSPEAKER & THE AMY'S KITCHEN SITUATION: NOTES FROM THE FEBRUARY 28 GENERAL MEETING

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*By Sara Ivry*

More than 100 Coop members gathered on Zoom for the February 28 General Meeting, which focused on two issues: the tragic loss of long-time member Rachel Porter and how to boost member involvement in General Meetings.

Porter, who died earlier this year from cancer (see related article), was a vocal and impassioned participant in the Coop since joining in the 1990s. As the meeting kicked off, Chair Committee Member Josef Szende invited participants to share their

thoughts on her passing, while noting that in her spirit the meeting should also be productive.

Joe Holtz, the Coop's general manager, treasurer and a general coordinator, praised Porter's commitment to the Coop and to its ideals, noting that she founded the Committee Oversight Committee, now getting off the ground. She also co-founded and chaired the Revolving Loan Committee, a fund meant to help launch coops elsewhere.

This year is the Coop's 50th birthday. "In 2013, the only reason we had a fortieth birthday party was because Rachel Porter made it happen," Holtz said. "She was a person who loved the Coop, loved the model of the Coop, talked about how important our Coop model was all the time and what she meant by that was member involvement. She just cared so deeply about the Coop, and she will be extremely missed. I will miss her deeply."

Other Coop members and staff echoed Holtz's sentiments. General Coordinator Elinor Astrinsky remembered Porter making a presentation on how the Coop operates at an event on ways of tackling hunger in New York City presented by Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez.

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*GENERAL MANAGER JOE HOLTZ*

"She was very well spoken and very passionate about the Coop. I too will miss her," Astrinsky said, also recalling Porter's thoughtfulness and culinary talents. "She was the best baker around. She made the staff Christmas cookies just of her own volition."

Member Mitzie Rothzeit pointed out that members who run the *Linewaiters' Gazette* had recently refused to publish a submission about matters including member-staff relations by Porter, alleging it was too long and too negative. The *Gazette*, Rothzeit said, owes it to Porter given her passing to publish it in full after all. (Editors' Note: Porter's letter did not comply with the guidelines for publishing letters in the *Gazette*; these guidelines are available in the newsletter's About section.)

Pivoting to a discussion of Coop finances, Holtz presented preliminary data comparing gains and losses in the year that just ended at the close of January 2023 with those at the end of the close of January 2022. The data are preliminary as the Coop is currently undergoing an audit. That said, total expenses for the year just ended were about \$1.7m less than they were the year before. Holtz explained that at the height of the pandemic, the Coop employed more staff than it did in the past year. He also observed that the operating income loss was less in the past year than the year prior, and that cash flow was now up more than \$2 million thanks to government assistance in the form of employee retention credits. In addition, the temporary price mark-up from 21 to 25 percent—imposed to offset pandemic-related losses—is still in place.

Several members wondered whether the mark-up should become permanent to guard against unexpected economic downturns or other challenges in the future. Holtz countered that “low prices are part of our strength, so I would like us to keep recovering from Covid, keep our sales higher and controlling our expenses and hopefully we could lower the mark-up over time and get back to where we used to be, or as close as possible, while being financially prudent.”

In her report from the general coordinators, Astrinsky observed there has been a shortage of people signing up for cleaning slots at the end of the day and truck unloading first thing in the morning, and encouraged members to take these shifts if they are able. She noted the hiring of Receiving Coordinator Miles Golightly and reported that Coop leadership sent out a survey regarding member preferences over whether to continue a mask requirement.

(Since the survey went out and the February General Meeting took place, the Coop lifted its mask mandate.)

Member Rachel Bergstein took issue with the survey, objecting to the lack of opportunity to add notes and its limited range of questions. “The survey now,” she said, has “no way to bring in a disability justice point of view and center the voices of people who have the most need [for masks].”

JD Davids seconded this opinion, noting that the point of the survey should not hinge on member preference but on need. If there’s even one member who needs others to be masked because they are medically vulnerable, then the spirit of the Coop and cooperation demands that we keep them.

But member Daniella Liebling said that since both the Centers for Disease Control and the city had lifted mask mandates, so too the Coop should lift it post-haste.

The Labor Committee’s Erica Smith reported on the Coop’s stance regarding Amy’s Organics, which has laid off some workers after they tried to form a union. Smith said that Amy’s is in the process of building a facility in the New York area. Given the amount of business the Coop does with Amy’s, perhaps it can play an influential role in encouraging the company to condone and respect unionizing efforts.

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*GEORGE SARAH OLKEN, MEMBER*

Members introduced two proposals in the General Meeting’s agenda portion. The first

was presented by Beth Ruck and George Sarah Olken, who picked up a discussion they first introduced last summer: the creation of the Member Involvement Committee (MIC), which aims to create new channels of communication between and among members.

According to Olken and Ruck, there is a need for a body or vehicle for members to communicate with one another and share ideas outside of the General Meeting, which a small minority of members attend.

“We all love the paging system at the Coop,” Olken said. Along those lines, then the “mission of the Member Involvement Committee would be to increase a culture of informed self-governance by creating new ways for members to communicate with each other and to participate in cooperation.”

Among Ruck and Olken’s suggestions are signs posted alerting members to the big issues at future General Meetings near check-out; a table set-up outside the front door where a broad swath of members might be solicited to answer surveys; open mic events; a bulletin board where news might be posted.

“This committee will be a resource for membership,” Olken said. “Outreach and education is core to its mission. We need to understand what we want, who we are, and so we’re going to create more spaces for members to weigh in and more spaces to communicate.”

He suggested that the work of the proposed MIC would lessen the burden on Coop staff who field questions from members.

Ruck added that the committee would strive to get involvement from diverse members, and would have a multi-tiered management structure and offer members work-slot credits.

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*BRIAN SHUMAN, MEMBER*

While some members at the General Meeting praised the idea of seeking out more member input into the all decisions at the Coop—noting that out of a membership of thousands, there were just over one hundred attending at the meeting—others took issue with the need for creating another committee, and one that seems inessential and redundant given that channels of communication already exist, including the *Line-waiters' Gazette* and social media accounts.

General Coordinator Ann Herpel questioned the assumption that low attendance at General Meetings indicates membership disengagement with the Coop. “In fact, 12,000 people are engaged on a regular basis through their work slot,” she said. “We don’t know what happens on their work slot where they’re engaged with other members, and they’re engaged with staff. That might be the level of participation they want in the Coop and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

She furthermore noted that asking for work slots to incentivize participation in such a committee takes away from more urgent work needs, referring to the shortages Astrinsky reported. In addition, she said the Coop is a complex organization and many member queries are in fact ones only staff can answer. Olken’s suggestion, therefore, that this proposed committee would ease staff workloads is misguided.

Wally Wentworth suggested one way to increase attendance at General Meetings is to offer work credit for attendance, as was the case before the pandemic. His comment foreshadowed a proposal presented at the meeting—the last of the evening—by Daniella Liebling designed to encourage greater membership attendance and partici-

pation at General Meetings. Her idea is that meetings be simultaneously in person and remote for those who cannot physically attend. She also proposes restoring work credit for attending, and that remote attendees be required to keep their cameras on for the duration of the meeting to receive credit.

Holtz objected to the idea of giving remote attendees credit. He also said that to assume greater attendance at meetings means necessarily greater engagement is false, as January General Meetings used to have very high attendance rates owing to the fact that people were making up shifts they had missed over the holidays, and not because they suddenly were proof of a desire to participate in democratic processes.

For his part, member Brian Shuman finds attending General Meetings is its own reward.

“I find it nourishing to see this forum and this exchange of views and so many other people with different experiences who bring it all to bear and speak,” Shuman said. “I don’t always agree with what everybody says, but I think it’s a wonderful forum and that in and of itself makes meetings worth attending whether in person or remotely.”

*Sara Ivry is a long-time member of the Park Slope Food Coop. She lives in Clinton Hill with her son and her dog.*