LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

March 19, 2024



Editors' Note: The *Gazette* is ending its pause on the publication of member letters and articles related to the war in the Middle East. As is the case for letters on all topics, letters should be no more than 300 words in length. The Letters Editor reserves the right to run a representative selection of letters on any given topic, in the event

multiple letters make identical points.

ARE YOU TOO INDULGENT WITH YOUR PLASTIC BAG USE?

Dear Coop,

10:30am. Doing my shift at the Coop. Checkout. My first client of the day, a young man with a hat comes to the checkout, and says “Hi,” timidly. He has a light basket, full of fruits, cereal bars, grains and pasta. Apples in a plastic bag, bananas in a plastic bag, oranges in a plastic bag. How can I discretely convince him not to pack the fruits he will peel before eating in a plastic bag?

11am. A smiling elderly woman. She’s cold and mentions proudly that she’ll be very happy to cook a soup and a chicken broth, when she gets home. She bought carrots, celery, celeriac, beets, leeks and chicken. All in separate plastic bags. How can I kindly convince her not to pack her vegetables in plastic bags?

11:30am. A tall man with broad shoulders rushes to checkout. No time to say hello, no time for a smile. Four bagels, four plastic bags. How can I politely convince him he may not need so many?

12:00pm. A jovial man arrives, loaded with two big full baskets, and asks me to check out them out separately, with two different receipts. He tells me that he shops for a neighbor who broke his arm. Bags of cereals, bags of dry fruits, bags of bananas, bags of carrots, bags of potatoes, bags of sweet potatoes, bags of beans, bags of zucchinis, bags of eggplants, bread in a bag, eggs in a bag, pork in a bag. How can I gently convince him to rethink his approach?

12:30pm. A couple with a beautiful baby. They seem tired but fulfilled. They help each other, one unloading the basket, the other packing: plastic bags in a plastic bag.

How can I softly suggest alternatives?

Nathalie Van Braekel

The following letters were originally submitted for publication in the February 27 issue of the Gazette:

OUR COOPERATIVE NATURE REMINDS US: BOYCOTT

Fellow members,

Food—like art, science and sport—is political, simply on the basis that it is inseparable from human affairs. The Coop has naturally understood this truism, as evident from our history of boycotts. And so, as I read recent letters arguing against a boycott on Israeli goods, I cannot help but wonder if at some point we have lost part of our progressive spirit.

Namely, vague appeals to “keep the peace” (and, I sincerely ask, for whom?) strike me fundamentally as calls to place civility over morality. All they do is center our mere want for oblivious comfort over the urgent need to reckon with what’s happening. The counterfactual I sadly entertain is that if only American civil society—the Coop included—had held Israel accountable when it was imperative, perhaps the enormous loss of life we continue to witness could have been averted. Tragically, the borne-out reality is genocide.

I’m thinking of a friend of mine from Gaza who was raised as a farmer. Even before the current crisis, Israel would besiege their family farm every few years. Greenhouses, countless crops, the family home—all lost. Each time, they’ve managed to rebuild for the survival of their family and community, as they are endeavoring to do once again.

With them in my thoughts, I ask us to keep a humble perspective. I myself come from a place recovering from war. Our community at the Coop is beyond fortunate to be in safety and abundance. We will be fine. Instead, fellow shoppers, think (and speak) about Gaza. A boycott is not only principled—it's the least we can do.

For a just peace,
Abdi-Hakin Dirie

TO HELP THE COOP COOPERATE, WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT BDS!

Dear Coop members:

Much of the discourse around a boycott will likely revolve around the conflict itself. Here, I'd like to put that charged issue aside and point out the immense importance this conversation has to the functioning of the Coop in general.

The PSFC mission statement states: "We seek to maximize participation at every level, from policy-making to running the store." Our mission statement sets this lofty goal, but for years we have been falling short. A typical General Meeting sees less than 1% of members turn out to make their voices heard. Compare this to the last time BDS came up: nearly 10% of members showed up to engage in the discussion. While the issue is undoubtedly contentious, this level of engagement is healthy for the democratic process, as is learning to discuss charged issues in respectful ways.

Due to increased engagement demands, members are pushing for GM's to become hybrid. Currently, the maximum capacity for our GM's is around 240 people, meaning less than 2% of the Coop can participate on any given night. This is a structural barrier to creating a thriving democratic institution.

Hybrid meetings would increase our capacity for engagement while enhancing acces-

sibility for our disabled and older adult members, working parents, students and those with limited capacity in their schedules. Such a foundation would bring the Coop into the 21st century, allowing it to fulfill its democratic ideals for generations to come.

Moriah Engelberg

IN SUPPORT OF DEMOCRACY AT THE COOP

Dear members,

Many of the arguments against a PSFC boycott of targeted Israeli goods rest on the idea that voting on the issue would be dangerous for the Coop. While some of these claims intentionally mischaracterize the boycott movement as violent, others may be grounded in genuine concern. For those who worry that the Coop can't withstand conflict, I'd like to share my experiences canvassing with PSFC Members for Palestine.

Many members I've spoken with have been excited to sign our petition. One said, "nothing else would have made me stop!" One person engaged with me for several minutes before calmly stating, "I strongly oppose this." No one was hurt in the disagreement! My most memorable interaction was with a woman who told me that signing our petition was emotional for her because she had been part of the debate in the past organizing against BDS at the Coop and had done a lot of work and learning since then.

I was moved that she shared this, and since then I've been thinking about the bravery of changing one's mind, and how often it is necessary for progress. When I was growing up, many Democrats opposed gay marriage; many people who now view MLK and Nelson Mandela as heroes once saw them as terrorists. Our progress beyond these backward ideas is largely due to activism, conversation, and the democratic process.

We may not all agree on the strategy of using our money and collective voice to stand against Israel's oppression of Palestinians, but if we believe in democracy and progress we must be allowed to engage. My interactions with Coop members have shown me that we are capable of participating in democracy, even when a topic is challenging.

In cooperation,
Sophie Glickman

CENSORSHIP WON'T SOLVE ANYTHING

To the editor:

There have been calls to censor members who want to boycott Israeli products. For example, the January *Linewaiters' Gazette* featured arguments that the Coop should refuse to publish op-eds that promote BDS.

BDS aside, it would be wise to remember the Coop's roots—we are a radical experiment in direct democracy. The statement of cooperative identity says Coops "are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions." Not only do our principles embrace active input by members; democratic deliberation is at the core of how we function. Democracy can be messy and uncomfortable, but silencing those we disagree with will not quell that discomfort. A thriving democratic institution tolerates dissent and creates space for a variety of different perspectives.

The common response to that argument is that our democratic principles shouldn't apply to hate speech. This argument rests on the notion that boycotting Israeli products is a violent display of anti-Semitism. As a Jew, and someone who is committed to fighting for justice, I care deeply about combating hate in all forms. Anti-Semitism is

all too real and on the rise. Yet, fundamentally I don't believe boycotting Israeli products is anti-Semitic.

A useful working definition of anti-Semitism is acts of hatred, hostility or prejudice targeted toward Jews due to their identity. Firstly, boycotting is not an act of hatred; it is an act of nonviolent civil disobedience against governmental policy. Secondly, a boycott of Israel is not being called for due to the religious or ethnic identity of Israelis. It is a direct response to atrocities being committed against Palestinians.

On contentious issues, regardless of our opinions, we must fight the instinct to censure those we disagree with and let the democratic process unfold.

Dan Kaminsky

NO, A BOYCOTT DOESN'T SINGLE ISRAEL OUT

To the Editors:

In a recent edition of the *Linewaiters' Gazette*, members argued that a vote to boycott unfairly singles Israel out when there are many extremist regimes in the world. Yes, there are many oppressed peoples worldwide. If those making this argument are concerned about them, they should propose boycotts against other oppressive entities too. Discussing BDS doesn't mean we can't also extend the boycott conversation to promote justice and liberation in other geographies.

The idea that we are singling out Israel overlooks PSFC's rich tradition of boycotting products (or companies) from countries perpetuating injustice. The Coop boycotted South Africa for decades to protest apartheid. We boycotted Chile during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship. In 1995, we boycotted products from Colorado when it passed sweeping anti-LGBTQ+ legislation. In 2004, we boycotted Coca-Cola for their

record of mistreating workers. We boycotted Domino Sugar and Flaum Appetizing products over their labor practices. We've pulled our money from Citibank over their support of the Dakota Access Pipeline. These are only some of the boycotts the Coop has voted for in its 50-year history.

Building on this tradition, Israel's actions demand that we have a membership-wide conversation about BDS. Since October 7, Israel's U.S.-funded military assault on Gaza has killed at least 27,708 Palestinians, including at least 11,500 children. At least 67,317 people have been wounded. 10,000 are missing under the rubble. Horrifying as these numbers are, they will only have grown by the time you read this letter. Gaza is on the brink of famine. Israel is blockading life-sustaining supplies and deliberately destroying hospitals. BDS is a non-violent movement to put pressure on Israel to stop this devastation. It is morally imperative that the PSFC membership discusses it openly.

Zahra Khalid

BDS DEBATE WASTES COOP RESOURCES

Dear *Linewaiters' Gazette*:

A group calling itself "PSFC Members for Palestine" are exploiting Coop resources to promote the anti-Israel BDS movement. They are wasting their time and the time of our coordinators and GM attendees by insisting the coordinator pursue securing a location for an item [a boycott of products made in Israel] that has no chance of passing the 75% boycott threshold.

The results from the January Harvard CAPS/Harris Poll show this group is out of touch with how the majority of Americans view the conflict. It is folly to assume the diverse Coop population would differ significantly from these results.

The murders, beheadings, rapes, mutilations and kidnappings committed by Hamas on October 7 are considered to be terrorist attack by 80% of the respondents, and 74% believe Hamas is genocidal. Seventy-five percent say the attack on Israel was not justified. Eighty percent support Israel over Hamas. Sixty-nine percent think Israel is trying to avoid civilian casualties. Most importantly, 79% think Hamas needs to be removed and 67% think there should be a ceasefire only after the hostages are released and Hamas is removed from power.

The letter on the group's website implies support for the opposite of the above-stated positions.

If this group truly cared about human rights they would be advocating for co-existence, Palestinian democracy, removal of the tyrannical Hamas kleptocracy and release of the hostages. But they don't. They should not be permitted to further abuse Coop resources. Their behavior is very uncooperative.

Barbara Mazor

A COOP BOYCOTT OF ISRAELI GOODS CAN MAKE WAVES

Dear Editors:

From the Montgomery bus boycotts to apartheid South Africa, boycotts are a non-violent, effective tactic in achieving justice. For those concerned about the genocide in Gaza yet argue that a Coop boycott wouldn't make an impact, let us not underestimate PSFC's reach.

Boycotts withhold money as a means of political action. We stock over 20 Israeli products. Based just on Soda Stream sales, it likely exceeds $100,000 annually. A boycott begun last decade would have redirected $1 million away from the Israeli military. We

can find new suppliers closer to home and more aligned with our principles.

A boycott is about much more than money. The Coop is a well-respected institution. In 2012, when BDS last came up at the PSFC, it made national and international news. Prestigious papers like the *New York Times* covered the story. Then-Mayor Bloomberg and other elected officials weighed in. Many people and institutions are interested in our little Coop.

The megaphone the Coop holds isn't just aimed at the press. In Congress, PSFC is represented by Dan Goldman, who has refused to call for a ceasefire and voted to censure Rashida Tlaib. A boycott would signal he is not aligned with the constituents and institutions he represents. Some of the most powerful people in the world, Hakeem Jeffiries and Chuck Schumer, live mere blocks from the Coop and neither have even called for a ceasefire. This proposed boycott can show our elected that Brooklynites stand for peace and justice.

A Coop boycott isn't just a drop in the bucket; ripples create waves!

Ann Schneider

BDS DEBATE THREATENS SAFETY OF SOME COOP MEMBERS

Dear Editors:

Following the horrific racially motivated murder of George Floyd and other tragedies, it was heartening to see the coop swing into action to support our Black community members. The Coop adopted a strong statement rejecting racism in all its forms, and a squad was formed to address issues of unconscious bias at the coop. Sadly, this compassion and support has not extended to our Jewish community members.

Since the barbaric atrocities committed in Israel on October 7 by terrorists, and the resulting massive explosion of anti-Semitism and horrific violence against Jews worldwide, a group of Coop members have inexplicably decided that this is an ideal time to try to bring BDS to the Coop. It goes without saying that if the Coop stops carrying the 10 Israeli products we currently carry, events in the Middle East will not be affected in the least. What such a vote will do, and the aggressive campaign to push this vote upon the Coop (a vote that failed by a very wide margin in the past), has already done, is to make many of our Jewish members feel unsafe and unwelcome.

We are a community of many religions and races. When a group of us is facing global hatred and violence, it is incumbent upon us to support that group. How anyone could look at what Jewish people are facing worldwide, and conclude that the best response for our community is to make our Jewish members feel vulnerable, unsafe and unwelcome is shocking and in conflict with our mission.

Please keep abreast of the votes coming up at our general meetings. If a vote on BDS is forced upon our beloved Coop, please show up at that meeting and cast a vote for kindness, compassion, empathy and unity.

Thank you.
Sondra Shaievitz

COMMITTED TO THE COOP AND TO EACH OTHER

To the Editor and Fellow Coop Members:

As the campaign to boycott Israeli products at our beloved Coop proceeds, it is essential that we all commit to acting with integrity and respect for the Coop, our Mission Statement, our fellow Coop members and the dignity and worth of all peoples. We must take our mission statement seriously and avoid products that depend on the ex-

ploitation of others. Though we may disagree about boycotting Israeli products, and though emotions will sometimes run high, a commitment to those core values and to our wonderful Coop will see us through. Ultimately, we—and the Coop itself—will emerge the stronger. I have faith in you, my fellow members!

Carol Wald

A GROUNDED RESPONSE

Dear PSFC:

I am a new PSFC member, but first joined a food coop in 1983. I am also Jewish and a third-generation Holocaust survivor. I have family in Israel, from infants to pensioners. Finally, I am a lawyer and have long been politically engaged.

In sum, I have deep grounding to respond to two themes in some members' objections to a PSFC boycott of Israeli goods.

1. A boycott would be divisive; the Coop shouldn't take sides; the Coop shouldn't get involved in international affairs.

This ship has sailed. The Coop is not neutral. With every order placed for Israeli goods (Sabra hummus, SodaStream products, produce), the Coop is actively being divisive and taking a side. Every day, the Coop is choosing to purchase and sell goods from a nation which the World Court held is plausibly committing genocide with forced displacement, detention, looting, death, maiming, starvation, thirst and disease.

2. The Coop should be "safeguarded" from a boycott of Israeli goods.

To the contrary, the Coop is taking unreasonable risks by choosing to sell Israeli prod-

ucts. Daily, the Coop mocks its own mission, specifically its commitment “to avoid products that depend on the exploitation of others.” All products originating from Israel depend on that nation’s exploitation of Palestinians. By carrying these goods, the Coop offends its values and risks losing members, including me, who expect the Coop to honor its mission.

I’m informed that over 1,100 members have already signed a petition asking the Coop to boycott Israel goods. It is unreasonable for the Coop to risk losing these and other members.

To safeguard its integrity and longevity, the Coop should voluntarily cease selling Israeli products and actively facilitate a member vote on an Israeli goods’ boycott.

In struggle,
M.J. Williams

CROSSWORD: “GARAGE”

March 19, 2024



MEMBER SUBMISSION: FAMINE IN GAZA IS A COOP ISSUE

March 19, 2024



ILLUSTRATION BY ERIK SCHURINK

By Jan Clausen

People in Gaza are starving. On January 29, the *New York Times* reported that "people are eating animal feed to survive" and quoted Bob Kitchen of the International Rescue Committee: "It is the most intense hunger crisis I have ever seen. Almost everyone is now hungry." The crisis stems from Israel's near-total blockade in tandem with a merciless military assault. Foodstuffs that do filter in can't be properly distributed. Desperate people in search of supplies have been slaughtered by Israeli forces.

On January 15, Dr. King's birthday holiday, I attended a vigil to mourn this manufactured crisis. Sponsored by organizations including Jews for Racial and Economic Justice and NY-10 Neighbors, the event was held at the Irish Hunger Memorial. Speakers of Irish and South Asian descent pointed to famine as a universal weapon of colonial regimes. For example, in 1943 the British colonial government in Bengal refused

famine relief and millions died. In Palestine, hunger serves a genocidal project openly celebrated by Israeli officials like reservist Major General Giora Eiland, who wrote that "Creating a severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza is a necessary means to achieve [Israel's] goal." (Following the Hunger Vigil, the International Court of Justice found a credible case that Israel is committing genocide, based partly on such statements.)

> FOOD IS AN ELEMENTAL NEED SHARED BY ALL HUMANS. IT BINDS US TOGETHER AS COOP MEMBERS AND LINKS US TO PALESTINIANS WHO ARE NEEDLESSLY STARVING THOUSANDS OF MILES AWAY.

For years I've advocated for a PSFC boycott of Israeli products in solidarity with Palestine. I knew that Israel long ago "put Gaza on a diet," allowing in just enough foodstuffs to meet minimum per capita caloric requirements. In recent weeks, I'd read a U.N. official's warning that Gazans "live through the unlivable, with the clock ticking fast towards famine." I'd felt guilty about enjoying my good Coop food as I thought of children going days without a meal. Yet what I heard at the Hunger Memorial brought home the connection between food and human freedom in a new way. I remembered that the vicious weapon of hunger was used by some of my own ancestors against Dakota people whose lands they stole in a place now called Minnesota.

Food is an elemental need shared by all humans. It binds us together as Coop members and links us to Palestinians who are needlessly starving thousands of miles away. I believe in our moral obligation to use our Coop's purchasing power to combat oppression, as we've done with many past boycotts including our boycott of apartheid South Africa. Following the Hunger Vigil, my sense that food justice is the pivot of the Palestinian struggle makes even more meaningful the chance to leverage our purpose as a Coop to enact solidarity.

I hope that by the time this article appears, a Gaza ceasefire will be achieved. Yet that won't be enough to end the acute hunger crisis, especially now that the U.S. and

allies have cruelly halted support for UNRWA, the U.N. agency largely responsible for meeting Gaza's nutritional needs. I will redouble my work on behalf of a PSFC boycott of all Israeli products.

Author's Note: This article was submitted at the end of January. Since that time, the manufactured famine in Gaza has massively accelerated, with starvation deaths on the rise and atrocities such as Israel's "Flour Massacre" further underscoring the need for concerted Coop action in support of Palestine.

Jan Clausen is a writer, teacher, and activist with Park Slope Food Coop Members for Palestine.