LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

December 19, 2023



CHILDCARE

Dear Editor,

Since the main purpose of childcare is to help working members, reducing the maximum time to two hours is not a reasonable solution to obtain insurance. Why not hire a contractor to cut through the wall and add a door to the offices? That solution sounds like the most effective way to obtain insurance. Having childcare for shopping parents is a convenience but having it for working parents is a necessity.

Best,

Stacey Sarnicola

Response from General Coordinator Lisa Moore: We understand that childcare is a crucial need for parents who work at the Coop. That's why the program was implemented in the 1980s. We are committed to finding a solution that works for everyone. The General Coordinators and the sponsors of Return Childcare to the Coop are working together to find additional insurance carriers who won't require us to have a childcare license. It's important to clarify that the November 7, 2023 issue of the Gazette incorrectly stated that the time children spent in childcare would be reduced to two hours. The General Coordinators would not restrict the time so drastically as it would defeat the purpose of having childcare.

As reported at two prior General Meetings, the Coop's childcare cannot be licensed because we do not meet New York's stringent requirements. One of these requirements is that the room must have two exit doors into a hallway or the street, known as egresses. Egress is a means of exit or a way of leaving, and fire egress is more specifically defined as a method for exiting a structure during a fire. According to New York City's fire code, all exits must have an accessible means of egress, i.e., a continuous and unobstructed way of egress travel from any accessible point in a building or facility to a public way. Cutting through the wall to add a door to the offices would not meet the fire code standards.

We are doing everything possible to restore childcare services at the Coop. We understand the importance of this service to our members.

The General Coordinators will provide another update to the membership on childcare in the near future.

‘TIS THE SEASON

To the Editor,

As gift givers prepare presents for their loved ones, many Coop members will be considering how to minimize waste. Using recycled wrapping paper, a reusable gift bag or creating your own wrap from extra fabric or paper are some options. While shopping at the Coop recently, I saw quite a bit of non-recycled wrapping paper on display in aisle two and later found rolls of recycled paper in a box in another part of the store.

We should not be carrying non-recycled wrapping paper. There are many vendors currently carrying recycled wrapping paper in a variety of sizes. And these vendors very likely do not have an environmental policy, as we do, which states that we are: “Minimizing disposable products, by seeking durable alternatives and/or alternatives which have recycled content“ and “The Coop will strive to support the best products and practices in regard to the health, safety and preservation of humans, animals and the overall biosphere that it can achieve.”

Looking at the countries of origin of the non-recycled wrapping paper on display, I noticed that some were from China. Old growth forests are practically non-existent in China today after years of reckless and poorly managed logging. There are more recent policies in place to maintain what is left and replant trees—but is that where the wrapping paper and wood products “Made in China” come from? Probably not. As China began to implement policies for their largely decimated forests, there was an impetus to keep manufacturing paper and wood products. Timber has been sourced from pristine forests in nearby countries like Russia, both legally and illegally.

Every purchase we make has wide-reaching environmental ramifications. So let's please be true to our environmental policy and more consistently carry recycled rather than non-recycled paper products.

In Cooperation,

Cynthia Blayer

NO TO BDS

Hello Editors,

It is imperative for the physical safety of PSFC to know that BDS explicitly supports violence.

Just check the BDS website. The call to use "armed resistance" (https://tinyurl.-com/2zxbu93h) is explicit. Support for 'armed reaction' is explicit (https://tinyurl.-com/yhdmk9hm). Omar Barghouti's justification for '…illegal or immoral acts of violence that the oppressed may commit…' in a *Guardian* article is explicit.

People around the world are being physically harmed and killed. That alone is the litmus test. PSFC is not equipped for this and cannot be perceived as taking sides among violence. Simply read the news to see how such a stance plays out in real time. As always, I maintain PSFC should remain explicitly non-violent.

The *Gazette*, PSFC's official voice, is now informed that it is giving a platform to a movement that explicitly supports violence. As an equal working member I feel unsafe and physically threatened through such letters. No working member or volunteer is allowed to feel unsafe. I unapologetically demand that the *Gazette* stop publishing letters supporting BDS.

Jesse Rosenfeld

THE SOCIAL IMPORTANCE OF CIVIL DEBATE

Dear Editor:

To support a democratic society we must have an appreciation for the social importance of civil debate. History is filled with moments in which communities came to a seeming moral impasse. But if in a democratic framework the best option for discourse across divides is to quietly agree to disagree, then what would this framework have to offer us when we face a genuine crisis of consciousness?

As organizing for and against BDS at the Coop rises again, it will be crucial to provide our community a genuine outlet for the expression of our views. An effective democracy enables and supports meaningful dialogue around complex and difficult issues. Strong communities work to bolster this capacity as needed, rather than relinquish it at the first sign of disagreement.

There are conflicting opinions regarding the BDS movement, at the Coop and beyond. But that sense of conflict is only exacerbated by the force of silence that we allow between us. We owe it to ourselves—as members of a community committed to equality, opposed to discrimination in any form, seeking to maximize participation at every level—to encourage a discussion that can clarify and expand our viewpoints concerning what response is required of us in this urgent moment.

Gratefully,

Morgan Võ

MISSED CONNECTIONS?

Dear Fellow Members,

It was a hot Friday afternoon in August and I was checking out a shopper who couldn't find corn syrup. He was roasting peaches later and the corn syrup was for the homemade caramel sauce that, along with homemade whipped cream, would transform them into peach sundaes. Obviously this was the best thing I'd ever heard and I told him so. We continued to chat pleasantly for a few minutes before he paid, introduced himself, shook my hand and left. Ten minutes later while checking out another shopper, it hit me: Peach sundaes are hot—and I'm pretty sure that guy was supposed to be my new boyfriend? Alas my peach sundae opportunity is long gone. But what if yours doesn't have to be? What if the *Linewaiters' Gazette* had… drumroll… a missed connections section!

During a recent shift, I asked a fellow member what she thought of the *Gazette* having a missed connections section and she was reminded of a missed connection of her own. While she was working a checkout shift, a shopper admired her outfit and she'd confidently told them it came from the Gap. Later she realized the outfit wasn't from the Gap at all—it was from JCrew! She wished she could tell them somehow—because somewhere out there perhaps they were clicking away on gap.com not finding what they're looking for. What could we possibly do about this? Missed connections!

And so dear reader, since a section in *Gazette* isn't actually an option, I did what people do in situations like this—I created a private Reddit community. In order to post and read missed connections, please sign up for a Reddit account, sign in, go to https://www.reddit.com/r/psfcmissedconnections/ and click "Request to Join." And should you wish to reach out with thoughts, questions or ideas, please email me at psfcmissedconnections@gmail.com.

Warmly,

Arpita Dey

DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES AT RISK

Dear members,

The largest threat to PSFC continuing to function as a democratically governed Coop is not whether our General Meetings are in-person or a hybrid of in-person plus on-line.

The Coop's dedication to democratic governing means that all of us are bound by operational changes determined by a simple majority of members present at a general meeting where a vote is held.

If a proposal had been voted on during the September meeting, it could have been decided by a simple majority of the 105 who attended: 53 individuals, representing just 1/3 of 1% of our current 15,500 members.

Pre-pandemic, 500-750 people attended the in-person GMs, representing, 3-4% of membership. The offer of earning a shift credit first attracted me, but I kept coming back to learn more. My experience of the online meetings, which attracted 150-250 participants, was that even though this represented only 1% of membership, there was a higher level of engagement in the details of a specific discussion or vote, general Coop governance, and/or sharing experience (personal, professional, or Coop institutional memory) about how a decision might affect members and staff. Since a voting issue requires a 2-step process (discussion at one GM before being scheduled for a vote at a second GM) there was a greater chance that those voting were present during the previous discussion so that they could better evaluate changes in the final

proposal.

It’s time for the Coop to think more creatively about how to govern democratically, or we will be governed solely those who have the time and motivation to attend monthly meetings. Or, using September as an example, decisions could be made by 53 members.

Jan Rigsby

PRINT GAZETTE?

Hello!

I’m wondering if there’s a plan/interest in bringing back the print Gazette? I’d be happy to help facilitate or participate in any conversations.

Alex Godin

THE OCTOBER GM: MASKING AT THE COOP, CHILDCARE AND A LOT MORE

December 19, 2023



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

By Zach Schiffman

The Coop's October General Meeting was well-attended, with more than 125 members in attendance at the Prospect Park Picnic House, many of them in costume, as it was Halloween. The bulk of the meeting was spent discussing and voting on a partial return to masking at the Coop. Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) was up first.



BOYCOTTING AND DIVESTING

An open forum item was brought forward by floor monitor George Olken about resuming the discussion of a referendum for the Coop to join the BDS movement, which calls for boycott, divestment and sanctions of Israel. The resolution failed in 2012 and has not been discussed since.

The BDS comment was met with applause. General Manager Joe Holtz responded by recounting the aftermath of the 2012 meetings. Brooklyn Tech, which then hosted general meetings, told the Coop they were unwilling to host meetings that discussed boycotting and divesting.

While the item was put on the Coop's agenda through the "democratic pipeline," Holtz said that the Coop has since been unable to find a venue that will house this discussion, despite continued staff efforts to find a location. "It's everyone's right to put an agenda item in," Holtz said, "and the Coop administration will take it seriously… we also feel an obligation to tell the location we are renting from what it's about. It's a difficult conundrum."

Holtz concluded by saying, “We just want to fill you all in on the difficulty we have had since 2012. We’ve been thwarted when we’ve tried to do it again.” The open forum discussion was then closed after Holtz’s explanation, albeit a few minutes ahead of schedule. The early end of the open forum discussion was met with cries of “shame” from the crowd. The meeting chair defended the choice to end the discussion early because the agenda was jam-packed as is.

POST-PANDEMIC FINANCES



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

Earlier this year, the General Meeting voted to maintain the Coop’s base markup at 25%. Members receiving income-based assistance can get an exemption, resulting in a 21% markup.

For Fiscal Year 2025, which begins at the end of January 2024, the base markup will go down to 24%. While there were some questions at the GM about keeping the markup that high, Holtz explained that the markup will remain at that level to keep the Coop’s reserve fund in the $7.5 to $10 million dollar range.

The gross margin for the year was 19.64%, which is above last year's, and is in line with the financial health of the Coop.

Between current sales, progress toward reaching a membership of 16,000, and the $6.1 million dollars pandemic aid received from the government, the Coop is in a good position to maintain its level of savings. While the reserve fund target is notable, Holtz also stressed the importance of having savings in case there is another emergency like the COVID pandemic.

A new member asked how often the board projections are correct. Holtz shared that last year, when the Coop had lower membership, we did about $20 million in sales during the last 20 weeks of the year. The Coop is on track to do 13% more than that during the last 20 weeks of this fiscal year.

Historically, the Coop leans toward making conservative projections, while assuming the actual finances will probably be better, in the interest of being "a robust, financially sustainable organization without a big bottom line."

Other new profit initiatives include plans for a robust home delivery service and the shift to electronic labels.

DESPITE A VOTE TO RESUME CHILDCARE AT THE COOP, IT WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE.

CHILDCARE IS STILL A NO GO

General Coordinator Lisa Moore told the crowd that, despite last year's vote to restart childcare in 2023, it will continue to be unavailable at the Coop. The facilities that previously housed the service do not meet the stringent requirements for New York State licensing, and the Coop's former insurer no longer offers policies to unlicensed facilities.

The General Coordinators worked with a broker and began a search in May to find an insurance provider willing to offer policies to providers that lack official licensing. However, as the September 30th deadline (set by the General Coordinators) came and went, the broker was unable to find a provider willing to carry the Coop. Holtz attempted to escalate the situation to a senior broker, but non-NYS carriers are not covering unlicensed childcare providers.

Moore said the broker had “essentially given up hope on securing insurance and does not believe the situation will change.”

MASKING TO RETURN TWO DAYS PER WEEK



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

Member Kristina Bassi brought forward a proposal to require masking for both workers and shoppers on the same two days each week to make the Coop accessible and safe for our medically vulnerable, immune compromised, and disabled member-owners. The idea behind masking two days a week came from the results of the survey sent out earlier this year to the membership, which showed 28% of members were in favor of masking.

A lot of the discussion was centered on how the vote should be carried out. John McNally, an IT coordinator, proposed an amendment that the vote be conducted as a referendum to include members at home, especially those who are immunocompromised and unable to attend a GM in person. Bassi, however, objected to the idea of a referendum instead of a GM vote. If the item were moved to a referendum, the membership as a whole would give it less thought, she suggested. In person, it was said that the present members could listen to one another and understand why they fought to bring this agenda item to the table. Bassi worried that "the process of doing an online system would delay and delay and delay it." The amendment to make the vote into a referendum ultimately failed.

Many staff members at the Coop objected to the proposal. Kathy Hieatt, a bookkeeping coordinator, said if she were required to wear a mask all day two days a week, she "would consider working somewhere else." Brian Robinson, a receiving coordinator, mentioned that the sixteen months of the pandemic without member labor were "the most challenging of his life. It was really hard to do all of this physical labor in a mask," he said, adding that he "didn't like the idea of making these shifts less appealing to sign up for."

Kristina Bassi and Sophia Tu's proposal also did not fully acknowledge who would be enforcing the two-day mandate. Membership Coordinator Anna Adelson reminded the audience that when masks were completely required, "people were jerks." General Coordinator Ann Herpel added "It's not just difficult for the staff. People were spit on, people were called names, people were kicked out of the Coop after how they acted

when they were asked to comply with the mask mandate.”

Another membership coordinator, Jason Weiner, who says he has voluntarily continued to mask himself in the Coop, added that he was against the item because he feared the Coop becoming an “arbiter of free will,” posing “how does this affect everything going forward.”

One concern during the meeting was the data used to come to the two-day-a-week proposal. The online poll was from earlier this year, and it’s unclear if that 28% would still be true today. Additionally, that poll was simply for or against masking writ large and included no language about partial masking. The “anti-democratic” nature of this in-person vote sparked emotive speeches. A retired coordinator Allen Zimmerman, who has been a part of the PSFC for 28 years and himself is “severely immunocompromised,” mentioned that over the years, he has voted against agenda items that he emotionally supported because he didn’t think they were best for the Coop. He said he feared that bringing back masking two days a week would harm the PSFC financially.

Shortly after, member George Olken brought forward the amendment to restrict masking to only the shopping floor, which no one objected to. After the robust discussion, the motion succeeded with an in-person vote of 72 yes to 50 no.

AGENDA COMMITTEE RE-ELECTION

While none of the three members up for re-election for the Agenda Committee were present, as it was Halloween night, Allie Essinger, Dominique Bravo and Kate Spota were all re-elected for their positions on the Agenda Committee.

COMMITTEE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE’S SCOPE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The final discussion item of the evening, brought forward by Member Coordinator Jana Cunningham, surrounded this nascent committee. She posed the following discussion items:

1. The Committee Oversight Committee (COC) was empowered to supervise committee reporting requirements, including scheduling updates and tracking work credit. Some of the Coop Initiative Committees are less transparent and may benefit from the assistance of the COC. However, there are many committees that are directly under the supervision of staff, who already account for members' attendance and work, and don't need additional oversight.
2. Is the COC empowered to investigate other committees? To what end? Or were they commissioned to assist new and current committees with structure and scheduling reports to the Membership?

Cunningham outlined the lengthy formation process that the COC underwent, during which the committee was repeatedly unable to clearly address its purpose, saying there was "endless resistance about clarifying what this committee was meant to do." She added that in the midst of this confusion, the COC also does not save the PSFC staff time or money.

The discussion, which was left unresolved as the meeting was running long, sought to determine which committees need oversight from an additional committee. The Committee Oversight Committee has taken on the role of a policing system with ongoing investigations, which is not something clearly outlined in the committee's mandate. The current chair of the COC, Brian Shuman—the fourth chair this year—added that the investigations began after the suspension of Joe Holtz, and have grown from there. The discussion was left unresolved but will resume to sort out the actual powers of the COC and how to make it more "harmonious with the staff."

COOP HOLDS FIRST IN-PERSON GENERAL MEETING IN THREE YEARS

December 19, 2023



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

By Rahima Nasa

Coop members gathered in late September for the first General Meeting since in-person meetings were put on hold at the beginning of the COVID pandemic. About 105 members showed up at Prospect Park Picnic House on the evening of September 27. Coop membership has decreased by about 9% since in-person meetings were put on hold. For many members it was their first in-person Coop meeting.

Mary Beth Bacha of the Chair Committee ran the meeting and explained how General Meetings worked. “The General Meeting is essentially the decision-making body of the Coop. Decisions are made democratically by a majority vote of members present,” Bacha explained while encouraging members to continue to attend the meetings, which enable the Coop to be more responsive to members’ views and wishes.

In the spirit of that ethos, the meeting opened with a forum for members to share questions. Member Carol Wald asked whether future GMs could be hybrid to better accommodate members unable to make it in person. Joe Holtz, the Coop's General Manager, responded that it would be logistically difficult to have hybrid meetings because of technical challenges and issues with how deliberations would be conducted. He did not rule out the possibility that meetings could be hybrid in the future, however.

After two more members shared statements, the open forum closed and the meeting turned to the treasury report. Holtz, who also serves as Coop Treasurer, broke down the numbers of the report for members. A copy of the report had already been sent to members prior to the meeting so that they could follow along.

Back in October 2020, members voted to change the Coop's markup from 21% to 25%; earlier this year, members voted to retain the higher markup. Coordinators noted that, in October, they will revisit the question of whether the markup will change for next fiscal year. "We can't change it higher, but we could change it lower," Holtz said. The general coordinators are expected to bring a comprehensive report about next year's spending projections to the October General Meeting to inform decisions about changing the markup.

When the floor was opened for questions, a member wanted to know how the Coop has continued to improve despite a difficult financial climate. Holtz responded, the reason was the Coop's decision to start letting new members join in December 2021. Holtz estimated that Coop membership shrank from approximately 17,000 members before the pandemic to about 11,750 after the Coop froze membership in March 2020. The decrease in membership led to a lower sales volume; gross margin dollars therefore decreased despite the higher markup. But when the Coop started allowing new members in again, sales volume improved. Membership is now at around 15,500 members. "When members shop, it's one way of supporting the Coop and making sure we're financially viable," Holtz said.

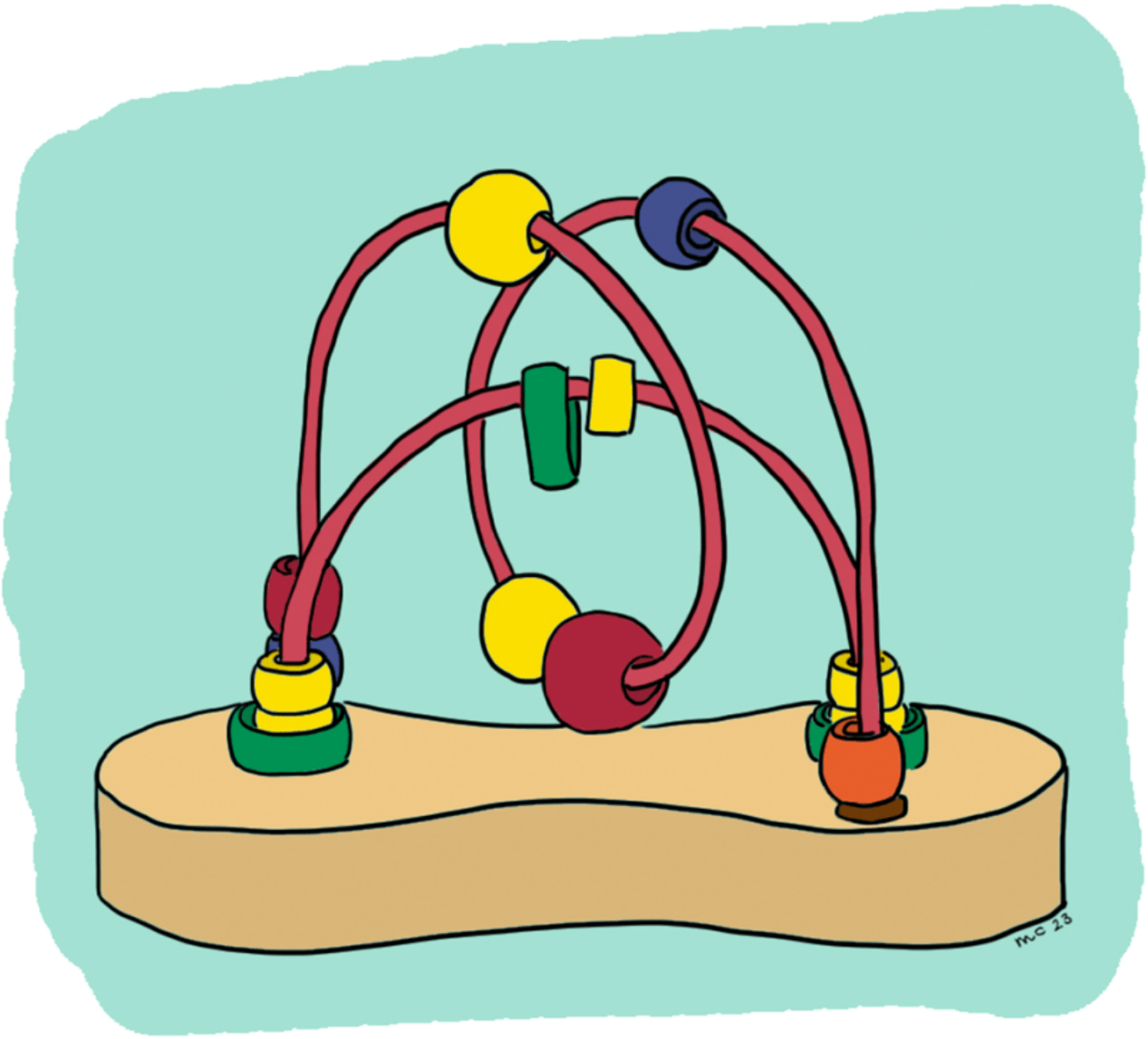


ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

General Coordinator Ann Herpel delivered an update about the plans for offering childcare again. The primary obstacle is obtaining insurance for the childcare room, which requires a separate policy than for the rest of the Coop. Herpel could not share a timeline for when the childcare room would open without a bid from an insurer, which has proved to be challenging despite significant Coop efforts over five months. The Coop's previous childcare insurer had dropped out of the childcare market after the Coop ended childcare during the height of the pandemic. Herpel explained that there

are not a lot of players in the childcare insurance market. The Coop is not a licensed childcare provider and it would be impossible for the Coop to obtain a license for the room as New York State requires license holders to have two exits in the room, which the Coop's childcare room does not have.

However, the Coop has worked with an insurance broker to make other changes to the childcare system so that it is more appealing to insurance providers. This includes reducing the number of children in the room to eight, reducing the time they spend in childcare to two hours, and requiring background checks for everyone working in the room. "Our broker is working with nationwide networks and we just have had no success, and so after five full months of trying, we can't promise what will happen," Herpel said.

Regardless of what happens to childcare, bulk operations will head to the basement as planned. Moving the bulk operations downstairs will enable more efficient management of labor in the basement by allowing one staffer to manage both cheese process and bulk operations.

Next, General Coordinator Joe Szladek addressed why it has been so hard for members to find shifts. Essentially, the Coop reduces shifts by 9-10% during the summer, because sales fall 15% when many members are away. The decrease in sales means that labor needs are also lower but Szladek added that there is another reason at play. "We were really very short on member labor from January through the end of May of this year, with only about 89 percent of available shifts filling on average," said Szladek. "So it made operating the store really tough. We want to avoid that same situation from occurring."

Szladek encouraged members to sign up for recurring shifts or sign up for shifts 2-3 weeks in advance so that Coop staff can have confidence that there is enough member labor to keep the Coop functioning. Overall shifts were increased by 15% over the previous year as of Labor Day weekend, and Coop staff expect that finding shifts will become easier in the coming months. The hope is to avoid labor shortages in the win-

ter as shifts become more available.

Members then discussed different strategies for getting shifts, including working with the Cooperative Economics Alliance of New York City (CEANYC) to get work credit. Members interested in getting a work credit in this way should email CEANYC General Coordinator Ali Issa at organize@gocoopnyc.org.

Once committee updates wrapped up, the agenda moved to discussion items submitted by members. There were no agenda items to vote on, but one new agenda item was introduced: whether to establish required masking hours for shoppers and workers. The presentation was initially to be given by Sophia Tu, but as she was unable to make the meeting, member Kristina Bassi presented on her behalf.



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

In October 2022, the Coop conducted a survey on whether members would be required to wear masks. The vote was close, with 51% of members voting to make masks optional while 43% of members responded that masks should be required for both shoppers and workers. Another survey was conducted in March 2023, where 68% of respondents voted to have masks optional while 32% voted that they remain mandatory for everyone inside the Coop.

There's been pushback on the decision, expressed in letters to the *Linewaiters' Gazette*. A petition had also gone out calling for two days of the week to be mandatory mask days to reflect the desires of 32% of members who wanted to keep the mask requirement for members who are disabled or immunocompromised. Bassi and Tu were not involved with the petition but Bassi explained that they agreed that having two mask days made sense. Bassi was open to which days that would be.

"We really want the Coop to live these values when we consider the lives and needs of our disabled and immune compromised member owners and we want to oppose policies that put medically vulnerable people in a place where they can't access participation to the Coop," said Bassi, referencing the Coop's mission statement.

Bassi was asked why everyone needed to mask if the vulnerable person already was wearing a mask, to which they replied that one-way masking is not enough to protect immunocompromised people. Other members had questions about the effectiveness of masking, how masking days and hours would be decided, and whether masking days were needed when COVID rates were low in the city.

Member Nancy Romer responded positively to the presentation: "It's a very minor accommodation and I think it's a sign of solidarity that we can have with people who have physical problems, are immunocompromised, and feel very beleaguered in general. We're probably going to have more pandemics, more viruses, more problems as climate change increases," Romer said.

When the vote for the proposal does come, one member urged, the Coop should ensure that the highest number of members, including high-risk immunocompromised members, are able to vote. They suggested that the next General Meeting either be held virtually or that masks be mandated during it. "This question isn't whether each of us individually wants to mask or not, it's about whether or not we are creating a space that is accessible for those who need it."

The agenda item will be brought to a vote at the next General Meeting in October.

Rahima Nasa has been a Coop member since 2022. She enjoys writing for the Gazette *because of all the members she's gotten to meet and because it allows her to learn about how the Coop works. When she's not writing for the* Gazette*, Rahima likes to experiment with new ingredients and is on a never-ending quest to make the perfect pie crust.*

MASK MANDATE, DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY, CHILDCARE DOMINATE DISCUSSION AT OCTOBER GENERAL MEETING

December 19, 2023



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

By Christopher Cox

The October General Meeting (GM) of the Park Slope Food Coop, held on October 25, 2022, was another in a series of tense gatherings since last summer. It was a busy night: David Moss of the Chair Committee noted that it was "the most heavy agenda we have had since we switched to the Zoom format." The proceedings were conten-

tious from the start, when the meeting's open forum almost exclusively addressed the General Coordinators' recent decision to keep the store's mask mandate in place.

In September and October 4,615 member-owners responded to a survey about whether the Coop should continue to require masks for workers and shoppers. The results, released a week before the GM, showed that 51 percent preferred to make masks optional for all; 43 percent wanted masks to be required for all. Several members spoke during the Zoom session about feeling frustrated that the general coordinators overruled the majority. "There was a questionnaire and the general coordinators didn't like the answer to that questionnaire, so they just decided to disregard it," said member Dani Liebling. Another member, Meilin Mehri, agreed: "The majority vote was disrespected. It was not honored." One member compared the decision to the election denial of Donald Trump and his supporters, calling it "Mar-a-Lago-esque." The general coordinators who spoke in defense of the mask mandate said that the poll was too close to warrant changing the policy. Coop General Manager and Treasurer Joe Holtz, speaking for the other general coordinators, held that the "vote" was actually an "advisory survey."

As with the uproar over the disciplinary action taken against Holtz several months ago, members seemed surprised that the Coop doesn't always work in a transparent—and transparently democratic—way. Until the GM specifically instructs the general coordinators otherwise, they have the power to run the Coop as they see fit. "We must decide things for the Coop where this [meeting] has not directed us," Holtz said. Because the process of bringing an agenda item to a vote takes so long, the coordinators' decisions tend to stand for a long time. That arrangement itself has been a source of tension at the General Meetings.

> WE MUST DECIDE THINGS FOR THE COOP WHERE THIS [MEETING] HAS NOT DIRECTED US.
>
> *GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE HOLTZ*

The Holtz affair came up again during the October meeting's open forum. Several members asked why the proposal to reinstate Holtz's lost wages was not on the agenda. Receiving Coordinator Gillian Chi, who had said at the last GM that she would be sponsoring the proposal, said that she had withdrawn it after some of her fellow coordinators had talked her out of it. Chi read a statement to that effect at the October meeting: "After listening to my co-workers, I no longer believe that that proposal was the best path forward. And I never [want to] go against the wishes of the majority of the staff and…[T]he opinion and the needs of the staff, to be honest, matter more to me than the opinions of membership because we're the ones who work there 40 hours a week…. I never meant to make any of my co-workers feel disrespected," Chi concluded. "I was trying to do what I believed was right and I realized that in many ways I was wrong."



ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

The rest of the meeting took a more positive turn when the treasurer reported the state of the Coop's finances to the member-owners, and several votes were taken. The Coop's finances are better than they were last year, Holtz reported, but the Coop still has not reverted to a break-even level of revenue. The upshot: the Coop will not be returning to the 21 percent markup anytime soon. General Coordinator Joe Szladek also informed the meeting about the Coop's Halloween plan to give out apples to trick-or-treaters.

In her report from the Committee Oversight Committee, for whom “transparency is the sole focus,” Rachel Porter noted that most of the Coop’s many committees had been forthcoming with information about their activities, with the exception of the Agenda Committee and the Personnel Committee, who were stonewalling.

The Agenda Committee had a chance to respond to Porter’s complaint during the next part of the meeting, when members voted on elections to the Agenda Committee, the Dispute Resolution Committee and the Hearing Officers Committee. David Warren, up for a two-year term (his first) on the Agenda Committee, explained why they were often slow to respond to questions from the membership: the committee’s policy is to only respond to emails on the Tuesday following the GM. Warren was elected to the Agenda Committee; Lee Bantle to the Dispute Resolution Committee; and Marian Hertz, Andrea Hirshman, Liam Malanaphy, Julie Vasady-Kovacs to the Hearing Officers Committee.

Next there was a discussion and vote on a proposal sponsored by the Equity, Access, and Community Committee (EACC) to collect member demographic information in a survey. EACC members Paul Warren and Isiris Isaac spoke in favor of the proposal. The survey had been years in the making, Warren said: “The committee has worked since 2016 to develop this demographic survey, where we would be voluntarily collecting demographic information about Coop members.” The goal was to create a “demographic profile of who the Coop membership actually is.”

Isaac stressed that collecting the information would allow the Coop to serve its members better, especially people of color and those with disabilities. She called it “a snapshot of the population of the Coop.” The survey would be anonymous, and the committee promised to protect the confidentiality of those who filled it out. It was a way to find out “who we are, essentially,” Isaac said.

COLLECTING DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION WOULD ALLOW THE COOP TO SERVE ITS MEMBERS BETTER, ESPECIALLY PEOPLE OF COLOR AND THOSE WITH DISABILI-

TIES.

Most of the members who spoke after the presentation were in favor of the proposal. Beth Ann Mastromarino asked how the committee would ensure a robust response rate. Cheyenna Weber assured everyone that this kind of survey was in line with best practices of food co-ops nationwide. Beth Ruck said she wanted the survey to become part of the orientation process of joining the Coop.

The proposal passed, by a vote of 83 to 42.

The final agenda item was a vote on returning childcare to the Coop. The childcare room on the second floor had been closed since the start of the pandemic. Recently, that room has served as a space to prepare some of the bulk items for the shopping floor. Now members Lauren Belski and Brian Russ offered a proposal to open it to families again.

Belski and Russ, who are both schoolteachers, began with an economic argument. Hiring a babysitter during a parent's Coop shift negated the cost savings of being a member in the first place, they said. If the Coop needed all the members it could get, then reopening childcare was a surefire way to get families to come back—and to attract new ones. "The word on the playground," Belski said, "is if you bring childcare back, I'll come back."

"Many members who quit will come back," Russ added. "And honestly, where did they go? They went to Fresh Direct, they went to Jeff Bezos, they went to this corporate model of grocery shopping." Belski and Russ closed by submitting their proposal: to reopen childcare within 60 days of the vote.

The debate that followed again broke down along staff vs. membership lines. Membership Coordinator Jason Weiner, worried that disrupting the bulk-item bagging before the holidays would be too disruptive. "How do you think that the Coop is supposed to

operate during the busiest holiday period, which is from November to January?" he asked. "How are we supposed to stop all operations in order to resume childcare, which serves a very important but small percentage of membership?" One member, Maya Solovey, replied, "The Coop has done it before and it knows how to do it again." Another member, Juliette Kennedy, said that restoring childcare was an equity issue.

The difficulty of the 60-day timeline came up again and again. Receiving Coordinator Craig Roberts, said that he was in favor of childcare returning to the Coop, but that more time was needed to figure it out. "It's a short-term process that needs a long-term solution," he said. The debate seemed to be reaching an impasse—and the possibility of a failed vote loomed—until Holtz suggested a revised proposal. Rather than bringing childcare back within 60 days, members could vote on a timeline that he described as "as soon as possible during 2023."

That deadline, with its combination of flexibility and rigidity, appealed to Russ and Belski, who quickly adopted it as their own, and the motion moved to a vote. After a tallying delay, the results were announced: 134 in favor to 18 against.

In 2023, the Coop will have childcare again.

Christopher Cox's book, The Deadline Effect, *is now out in paperback.*

COOPERATION, AN UNDERRATED VALUE

December 19, 2023



By Cynthia Blayer

Last January, when the local temperature hovered around ten degrees, my building and several others were affected by a nearby water-main break. No water for several days, the DEP outside drilling round the clock—first trying to locate the break and then fix it. We brought them coffee and donuts at night and thanked them. We learned that our local representative was posting updates on Facebook, through a group called Park Slope Together. I joined.

The situation was resolved and I continued to check Park Slope Together from time to time. Questions about physical therapist recommendations, restaurants, housing, lost pets and injured family members were met with numerous helpful answers. Someone wrote about their neighbor, a recently widowed woman who was deeply depressed by the loss of her husband, hadn’t had a job in many years and had not handled her own

financial matters. Within minutes people chimed in—one person recommended a widows' support group, another offered to craft the woman's resume. Another time someone posted about an injured street cat they wanted to help but had no car to get to a vet. Soon several people with cars asked for the location and volunteered to stop by. Someone had a cat carrier—help was on the way.

It's a good feeling to be part of a community that tries to help one another. Park Slope Food Coop was started for this reason. Almost 50 years ago, 12 friends and neighbors began the Coop, so that people in the community could work together to have healthy food available at reasonable prices.

At a recent General Meeting, some of that cooperative spirit was evident in the vote to bring back childcare, which passed 134 to 18. When some staff members expressed concern about the additional work this would create for them, the couple who presented the issue—both teachers, and parents of two young kids—volunteered their time and that of other parents they knew to make it work. They would help in any way they could—cleaning and setting up the childcare room, staffing it and starting a committee to oversee things.

When some pointed out that people needing childcare at the Coop were in the minority of the overall membership, General Manager Joe Holtz said that "as a cooperative all voices count, even when they are not in the majority."

And we do all get to have our say—at General Meetings, in letters to the *Gazette*, by voting. But then we have to put aside our differences and cooperate and come up with a workable solution for the greater good. The effects of lack of cooperation can be seen regularly in the outside world—mass layoffs and millions without health insurance, pollution rather than sustainability, war. But we can do better. In our relatively small community at PSFC, we can put aside polarizing anger and work together cooperatively. In the end, only cooperation will save the day.

Cynthia Blayer, a longtime coop member, has served on the Environmental Commit-

tee and as a board member of the Mid-Atlantic Food Cooperative Alliance (MAFCA).

AUGUST GENERAL MEETING: DISAPPOINTMENT ABOUT BIKE RACKS AND CHILDCARE, BUT FINANCES LOOKING UP

December 19, 2023



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

By Jess Powers

Roughly 122 people attended the end-of-August Coop General Meeting on Zoom. The meeting covered Joe Holtz's suspension, Coop finances, the removal of bike racks, a call for the return of childcare, labor issues at Amy's Kitchen and other topics.

During the Open Forum, Coop members expressed appreciation for General Coordinator Joe Holtz and dismay with his recent 30-day suspension without pay. Staffer Gillian Chi shared that she and a member submitted a proposal for back pay and an apology. Later, Brian Shuman of the Oversight Committee shared that they received complaints about the suspension and expect a report on the Personnel Committee, which levied the penalty, from the Oversight Committee. Other members asked whether the *Linewaiters' Gazette* will concurrently publish in print and whether members can be emailed upon publication. General Coordinator Ann Herpel said it wasn't possible to produce a web and a print version without a lot more work. She also recommended signing up for *Gazette* email notifications [scroll to the bottom of this page to do so].

> THE COOP HAS AROUND 13,500 ACTIVE MEMBERS, WITH JUST OVER 10,000 WORKING MEMBERS. THE REMAINING 3,000 ARE ON WORK EXEMPTIONS.

TREASURER'S REPORT

Holtz updated members on the financial health of the Coop and shared five points that also appear in the summary of the financial statement.

First, the Coop is losing less money overall due to the return of member labor; second, the 4 percent increase in the markup, which went from 21 to 25 percent, contributed to an increase in income; third, projections show an average of 10 percent more sales than the previous year; fourth, there is a good financial cushion and the Coop is owed $1.5 million by the IRS. Another issue: the Coop needs to eventually pay into the pension plan. He also said there are pending questions about whether or not to lower prices, increase the number of checkouts, expand hours and up the number of people allowed in the Coop at the same time. A pilot of a home delivery system is also is being planned.

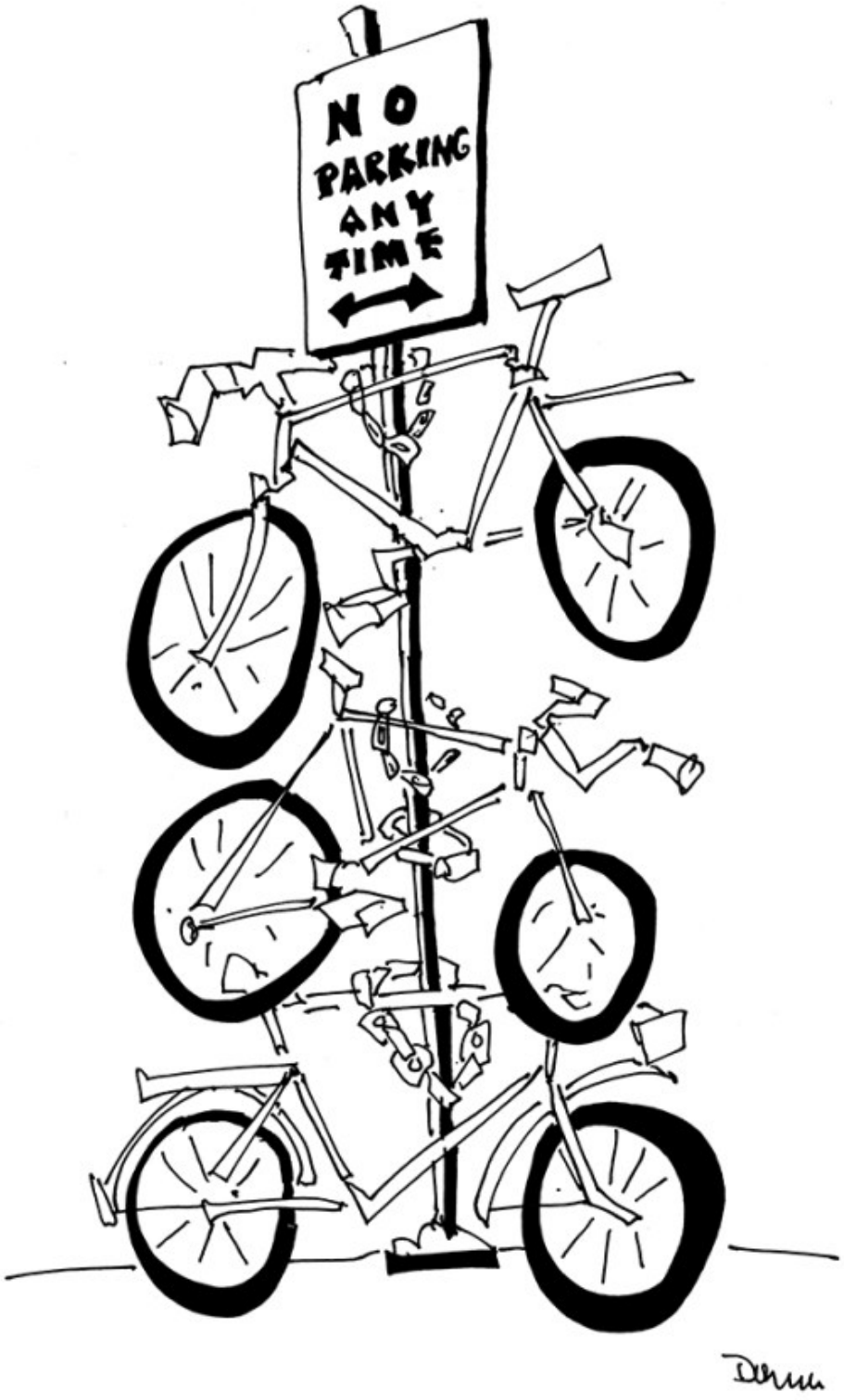


ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

REMOVAL OF BIKE RACKS AND OTHER UPDATES

In the General Coordinator report, Ann Herpel acknowledged two new part-time membership coordinators to work on weekends: Karina Gee, who was previously a shopping squad leader, and Elly Dittmar, who floated in a variety of shifts.

Herpel noted that construction work is occurring next to the Coop at the former St. Francis Xavier School, now leased to the Department of Education. The Coop was informed by the contractor that during the next phase of construction a dumpster will be partially placed in our loading zone and that sometime in the fall the bike racks closest to the mural will be removed. They were installed by the Department of Transportation and approved by the former principal of St. Francis. She continued that the Coop will also likely lose the bike racks closest to the street and that the news was "disappointing." The Coop and its members can make an appeal to city agencies for other bike racks to be placed on Union St.

There was no food report this meeting.

MEMBERS AND WORKERS

As of the date of the meeting, there were around 13,500 active members of the Coop, with just over 10,000 working members. The remaining 3,000 are on work exemptions. The new member orientations fill up every week with an average of 81 new members assigned to work shifts. This growth, she stated, will "strengthen and fortify the bottom line." Attrition is seasonal, at about 17 percent, similar to pre-pandemic numbers.

Bookkeeping Coordinator Kathy Hieatt, who writes the member investment refund checks, added that she completes roughly 30 per week, fewer than the number of new members. John Tucker, a member recently eligible to retire, inquired whether his member labor—and that of other retirees—was needed. Herpel said that if an open shift appears on the calendar, it reflects the operational needs at that time.

LABOR CONCERNS AT AMY'S KITCHEN

Eric Frumin of the Labor Committee presented a report on Amy's Kitchen, a family-owned company that manufactures prepared frozen foods carried by the Coop. The Labor Committee was created in 2017 at a GM and reports on workers in the food chain, engages with suppliers and works to be a constructive force within that space. The labor story broke on NBC News and pieces followed on KQED and Eater.

In May, the Committee sent a series of investigatory questions regarding labor conditions to the company. After not receiving a response, they sent them again. At the last GM, the Committee asked the Coop to contact Amy's Kitchen, with the intention that, as the Coop is a significant customer, the company would take the obligation seriously. In turn, the GCs decided to ask the National Co+op Grocers (NCG), which serves as an intermediary between coops and producers to get better deals. Their spokesperson was already aware of the issues and agreed to send a letter to Amy's "at a high level" to press for an answer. Frumin believes that the questions had gaps but would enable us to get a more accurate picture of labor conditions.

Research by Labor Committee members was "distressing," according to Frumin. There are repeated injury rates and the company has failed to act. At four major facilities in California, Oregon and Idaho, reports on injuries from one plant are more than triple those of their peers in the frozen processing business. He compared the situation to Amazon's poor reputation among its peers in the warehousing industry. Amy's Kitchen is not reporting injuries and is having a "safety meltdown," he continued. The Committee is following their process to continue investigating and make a recommendation to membership.

CALL TO IMPROVE THE GM AGENDA

Beth Ruck and George Sarah Olken presented a discussion item on how members can help shape the GM agenda. With enthusiasm, Olken shared that they "love going to the GM for the promise of connecting. And while it isn't perfect, that means we can make it better, more vibrant and participatory." The pair were not advocating for a

specific proposal, but sought ideas and promised to return with ideas.

In a brief PowerPoint presentation, they explained the current process, by which any member-owner can propose an item. These are selected in order of submission, but some are prioritized due to urgency. One concern named was that the queue is not public, so members don't know if their proposal is already being addressed by someone else or if they can collaborate. The process can take a while, so one suggestion was a "vote-a-rama" for appointments to committees, for example. Another suggestion was to alternate the GM format to allow for more discussion time.

A lively discussion ensued with members suggesting chat rooms, utilizing Pol.is to create consensus, affirming the necessity of writing articles in the *Gazette* to publicize agenda items and emphasizing the need to be mindful of minority opinions as well. Coop member Bhakti Sondra Shaye also agreed that separating a discussion and a vote at two different meetings "doesn't seem logical" because the same people won't necessarily attend and it "detracts from democracy." Please email beruck@hotmail.com or georgeolken@gmail.com with suggestions.

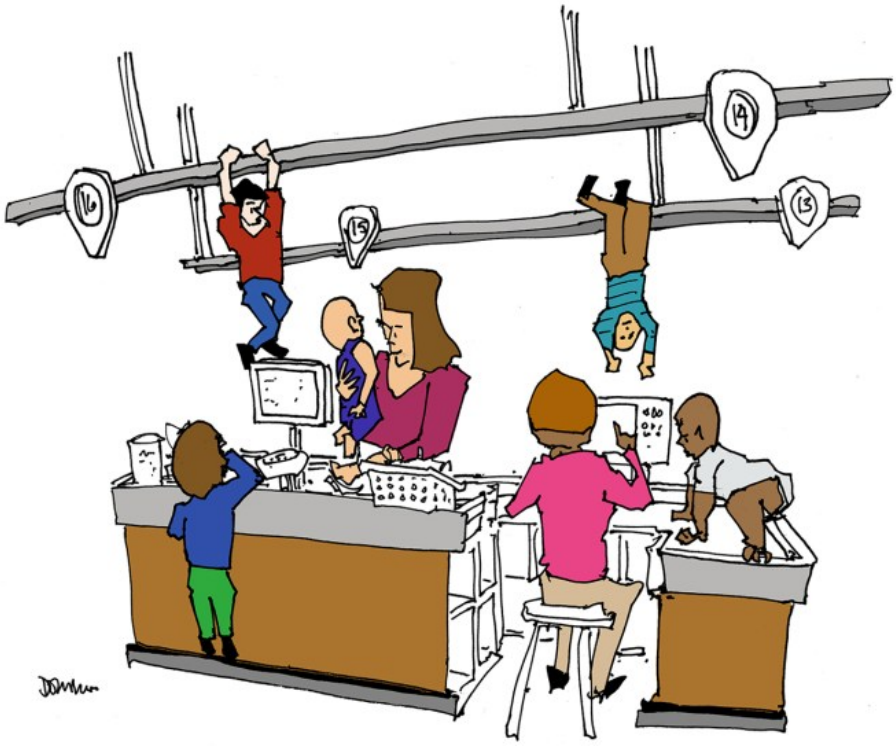


ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

CHILDCARE UPDATE

Lauren Belski, a PSFC member for 15 years, and her husband, Brian Russ, brought forth a discussion about the current status of childcare at the Coop. She shared that her first shift was in childcare, at a time when she never thought she'd be a mother herself. Years later, she brought her children, connected with other parents and observed her kids making friends at childcare. "It was a special place and I really missed it," she said.

In a nod to the previous topic about agenda items at the GM, Lauren shared that they used the options available to them to lift up this issue: Brian published a letter to the editor in the Gazette, they repeatedly spoke with other parents, they waited for the return of childcare, and, finally, added it to the GM for discussion. Lauren lamented that during the "last six months especially, there are certain elements of procedures that exist and a lack of transparency about why they exist." She observed that member labor returned and childcare didn't, that masks aren't required in public places and that day cares are back open. She also experienced frustration with the response to their letter as well as with paying for a babysitter in order to do her work shift. Other families are experiencing the same hardships and falling behind on shifts, she shared, and the Coop should "stand up and welcome families back. Profits will go up. [Parents] buy for more than themselves; they're spending lots of money."

Lauren observed that the main thing holding the return of childcare back is the new bulk item machine currently housed in the former childcare space. She said, "they allocated a space that should be used to help working families for single use plastic bags."

Members responded to the presentation as "heartfelt and sensible." Another parent, David, stated that "parents are ready to leave the Coop if things don't change" and it's a "much less joyful place." He urged the Coop to "reassess where we are now." Nicholas, a member without children, was mindful of groups at the Coop that "may not have sway" and was in support. Beth Ruck thought that the childcare issue tied to-

gether many of the themes from the night's meeting, from financial health and stability to the "things that distinguish our institution from the myriad ways people have to shop and . . . centering community." While George agreed, they also raised the concerns of immune compromised members and eldercare.

General Coordinator Ann Herpel, in response to questions about how many children were accommodated at a time in childcare, explained that up to three childcare workers could be in attendance at a given time, caring for up to 12 children. Each childcare worker could bring up to two children of their own, limiting the number of available slots. Priority was given to working members over shopping members and there were times when childcare was closed because "no one showed up to work." GC Joe Holtz shared that childcare evolved around 1980 and, while he is committed personally to its return, there is a need to balance fears, public health considerations and to find a place for the bulk item machine.

The minutes for the previous meeting were approved and the meeting was adjourned.

Jess Powers works in emergency management and enjoys adventures in nature and eating. IG: @foodandfury