

## TENSIONS RISE AT THE SEPTEMBER GENERAL MEETING

October 25, 2022



*By Sara Ivry*

Like autumn leaves in a howling gale, insinuations flew at the September 27 General Meeting of the Food Coop when attendees turned attention to a proposal concerning Joe Holtz, the Coop's general manager and treasurer, and the penalty he faced last

summer in response to violating staff COVID protocols. Imposed by the Personnel Committee, the disciplinary action consisted of a 30-day suspension without pay and barred entry for Holtz to the Coop for that same time period.

“We believe an injustice has been done and should be remedied,” said Gillian Chi, a Coop receiving coordinator and buyer, who presented and wrote the proposal with member Dorothy Siegel. They drafted it, they said, with Holtz’s knowledge but not at his behest. The proposal seeks twin outcomes: the payment of Holtz’s garnished wages and the issuance by the Coop of a public retraction of the punitive action.

“This treatment was unprecedented,” Chi said, adding that “at least 25% of paid staff have violated COVID protocols at one time or another,” or so she has observed. She said she has seen staff remove masks, eat in areas where they should not, and more. “Perhaps warnings were given. But nothing more. None of us were suspended without pay.”

#### LIKE AUTUMN LEAVES IN A HOWLING GALE, INSINUATIONS FLEW AT THE SEPTEMBER 27 GENERAL MEETING OF THE FOOD COOP

“The ultimate motivation to our proposal is not just to reverse one decision about one person,” Chi said. “The real issue is, can the Coop be a good employer? Can we be confident our employer will have high ethical standards?”

Having offered an overview of the evolution of, and limits to, the power of the Personnel Committee, Chi maintained that the committee lacks the right to hire or fire people without general membership consent.

“Membership has authority to redress this harm,” Chi said, and she and Siegel want their proposal to go before the membership for a vote at the next general meeting.

Jean Callahan, a member of the Personnel Committee, defended the actions of her committee, clarifying that it is a body elected to advise on hiring and firing matters. It did not act on a whim and consulted with a labor lawyer, she said. "We considered a full range of responses. We decided [the punishment] was a fair and proportionate response."

Moreover, the rifts over whether Holtz was singled out for punishment or deserving of it belies a bigger issue "undermining the morale of the paid staff." In the course of the Personnel Committee's investigation into Holtz's action, some Coop staff expressed fear of reprisals for being whistle blowers and requested anonymity in their conversations.

"Some were fearful of Joe's power," Callahan said. "At the moment there are some deep and painful divides. Individual staff members feel silenced and unsafe."

Among them was General Coordinator Ann Herpel, who said the very fact that this proposal was on the agenda at the General Meeting represented a form of retaliation against those who complained about or investigated Holtz, and that there is much more to the story of Holtz's infraction than what has been reported previously or presented by Chi and Siegel.

MEMBERS WILL NO LONGER BE REQUIRED TO SHOW PROOF OF VACCINATION TO WORK A SHIFT AND UNVACCINATED WORKERS MAY RETURN TO WORKING THEIR SHIFTS.

"I'm really dismayed that people are saying that the members have the final say on personnel issues," Herpel said. "That could have a chilling effect... Why would people complain or participate in investigations if they thought that this body would make a final decision that could overrule a decision by another body that investigated? Why would anyone participate?"

According to Herpel, the Personnel Committee has taken action against general coordinators in the past “without controversy,” she said, “which leads to the conclusion that Joe Holtz is not accountable” given that the penalty imposed against him is being challenged and may lead to him being given a pass for his transgression.

“I’m angry. I’m dismayed. I’m appalled. I feel unsafe,” she said before departing the meeting.

Terry Meyers, a staff member in the accounting office, similarly defended the Personnel Committee’s action. What the proposal is saying “is that the leadership does not have to follow the rules. That innuendo and excuses mean more than an investigation involving statements from, I am sure, more than one person. People in power should be held to higher standards, not lesser standards,” she said. “Joe being away for 30 days did not hurt the Coop, though it created more work for staff. Reversing the decision of the committee would.”

Others sided with Chi and Siegel, questioning the mandate of the Personnel Committee and the lack of transparency in policies and proceedings.

“It’s our Coop. We own it. We are responsible for making sure it’s a safe and fair employer,” said Cheyenna Weber. “I also encourage the Personnel Committee to bring a proposal for a Human Resources Committee.”

And Siegel, like Herpel before her, said she was dismayed by the turn of events but did not blame the Personnel Committee, whose disbandment she originally planned to propose. She moreover took umbrage at the slurry of innuendos this entire episode has begat.



A file photo of Joe Holtz, the Coop's General Manager and Treasurer

"A lot of this rancor, 'if only you knew what really went on you wouldn't feel this way,' but then you can't expect members to accept insinuations or the red meat of Joe McCarthy," Siegel said. "The last thing I want is for Ginia Bellafante to write an article about the precious Coop where people are wounded and people are fired and people throw out accusations about each other." She added, "I'm sorry it has come to this."

*[Editor's Note: On October 1, Chi emailed the office to drop this proposal and it will not be going up for a vote at the October meeting.]*

Controversial though it was, the conversation about the proposal was not the only issue raised at the meeting.

General Coordinator Elinor Astrinsky announced that as of November 1, the Coop would comply with Mayor Eric Adams' new rules regarding COVID protocols at work. Members will no longer be required to show proof of vaccination to work a shift and

unvaccinated workers may return to working their shifts. Whether shoppers will be required to wear masks in the Coop will depend on the will of the membership, who are invited to respond to an online survey on the matter that was live until October 12.

In response to a question about determining what is suitable for composting and what could go to a soup kitchen, Astrinsky said members on produce shifts might benefit from more information on how to determine what should be composted. She invited anyone to make some kind of illustrated poster detailing, she said, “This is compost. It has things growing on it. It’s too mushy. It’s not going to make it two days. We want sample images, maybe a little blurb.”

Astrinsky shared the news that a property adjacent to the Coop has been leased by the Board of Education and will be undergoing some kind of construction, which will limit or potentially eliminate bicycle parking as well as have other potential and unforeseen impacts on the Coop. She also announced the hiring of part-time Receiving Coordinator Tanya Steinberg and full-time staffer Masha Bezlekina in a role supporting perishables like meat and bread. Astrinsky said Food Processor Gabriel Feliciano has left his position.

“It’s been a very long time since our staff have had any celebration or party to acknowledge their hard work throughout this time,” Astrinsky said. “We have decided to hold a staff party, which hasn’t happened in two, three years now.” To that end, the Coop closed at 5 p.m. on October 6 so that all staff might attend.

LEADERSHIP NOW NEEDS TO CONSIDER QUESTIONS LIKE WHETHER TO ADD BACK SHOPPING HOURS, WHETHER TO ALLOW MORE SHOPPERS ON THE FLOOR AT ANY GIVEN TIME, WHETHER TO INVESTIGATE AND IMPLEMENT A HOME DELIVERY OPTION, AND WHETHER TO RESTORE CHILD CARE AS AN INCENTIVE FOR PEOPLE TO SHOP AT THE COOP.

Donning his metaphorical treasurer's hat, Holtz reported that the Coop is operating currently at a loss, but is optimistic that a typical fall surge in shopping, along with a rise in membership, could help ease the Coop out of that hole "if we control expenses adequately," he said, "but it's a big 'if' during this inflationary time."

He noted that in October 2020 the General Coordinators marked up prices to 25% from 21%, with the intention of returning to the 21% mark up when membership returned to full work conditions or the Coop was breaking even. The General Coordinators plan now to discuss whether these conditions are being met to their satisfaction. Holtz also said that the Coop is owed tax credits of \$1.5 million that represents the part of the \$6.2 million from government support that we are still waiting to receive, and that leadership now needs to consider questions like whether to add back shopping hours, whether to allow more shoppers on the floor at any given time, whether to investigate and implement a home delivery option, and whether to restore child care as an incentive for people to shop at the Coop.

Labor Committee member Eric Frumin shared both good and bad news. He reported on the Coop's collaboration with the Fair Food Program, which supports agricultural workers in Florida and Georgia, noting that the Coop pays a six percent premium for tomatoes from these growers. That translated most recently to \$4,100 that the Coop paid to make sure the workers in Florida earned good wages and worked in environments free from sexual violence.

Frumin's bad news related to Amy's Kitchen Company, which has been dogged by reports of abusive and unsafe working conditions in its factories and by its hostility to unionizing efforts. Frumin said the Coop had sent a letter to Amy's CEO last spring, which was ignored. They resent it to no avail before turning to help from the National Coop Grocers, a membership organization of 149 coops nationwide.

"One of the disturbing thing we learned is that Amy's has failed to disclose important information on rates of injuries," Frumin said. "Its largest factory in Idaho has a 20 percent rate of disabling injury. This is triple the industry average in frozen foods. And

it goes against the Coop's mandate."

*A long-time Food Coop member, Sara Ivry worked as a shopping squad leader before joining the Gazette earlier this year.*

---

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

October 25, 2022



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.

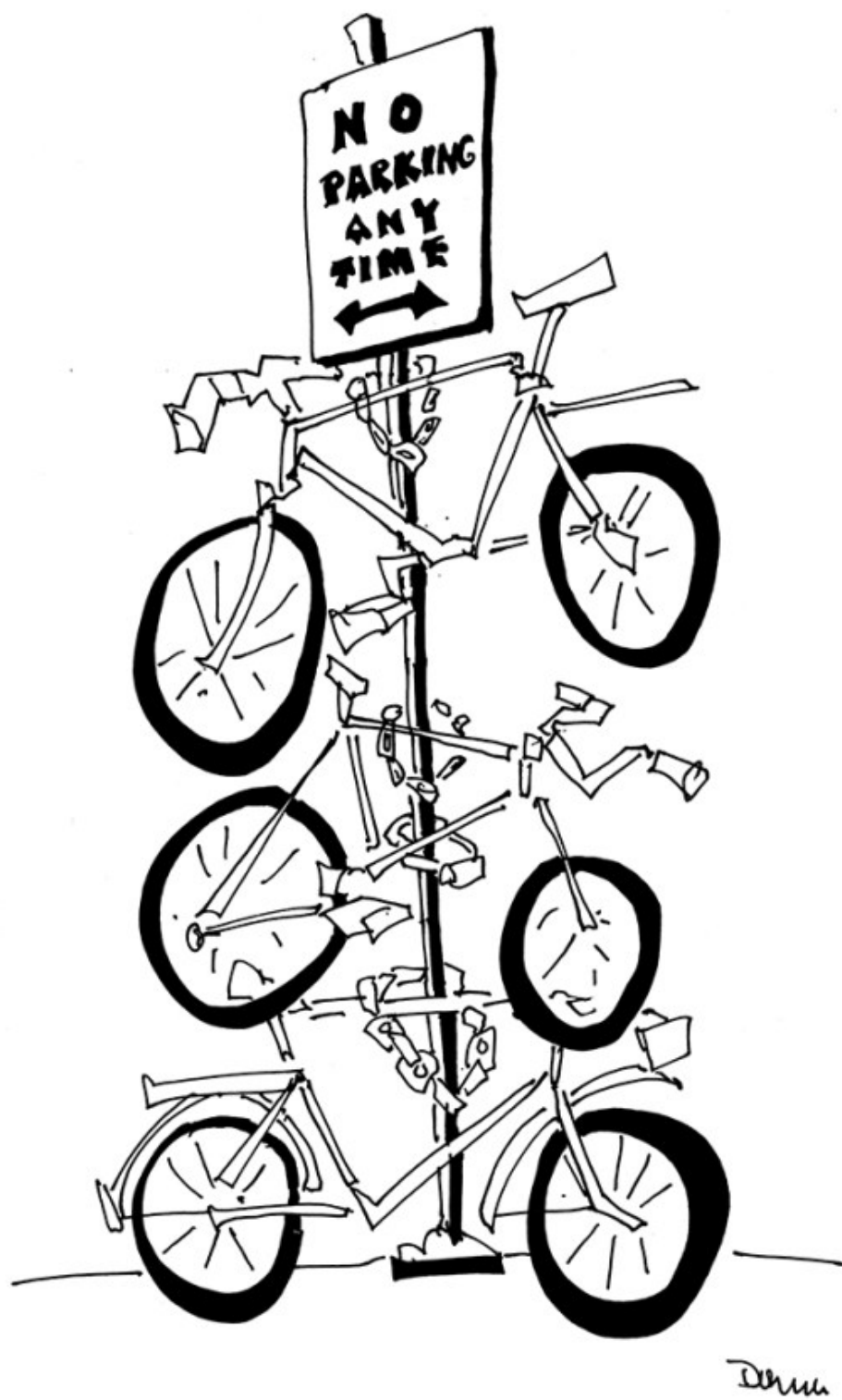


ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN DONOHUE

## **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.

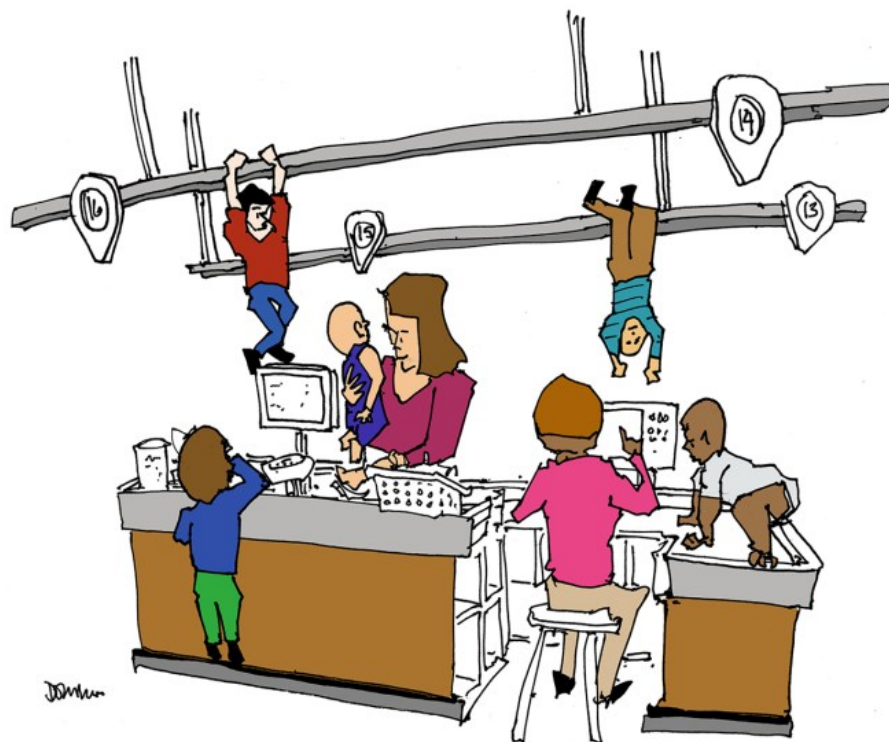
## **CALL TO IMPROVE THE GM AGENDA**

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](mailto:beruck@hotmail.com) or [georgeolken@gmail.com](mailto:georgeolken@gmail.com) with suggestions.



## 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*

---

## REPORT ON THE 7/27 GENERAL MEETING

October 25, 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.*

---

## A SECOND LOCATION FOR THE COOP: STATUS REPORT

October 25, 2022



*By Christopher Cox*

The pandemic was a great wrecker of plans, large and small. In early 2020, long-time member and Squad Leader Jonathan Farber and the committee studying the possibili-

ty of opening a second location of the Coop was ready to address the General Meeting. But then there were no General Meetings, and the report the committee had prepared was set aside. The Coop was fighting for its survival, not looking to expand.

In the months that followed, the Coop lost over 5,000 members. Financial losses rose as high as \$120,000 a week. But gradually, as members returned, first as shoppers and then as workers, the Coop's finances stabilized. New members began signing up. "We've had over 2,000 [prospective] members express the desire to join," General Coordinator Joe Holtz said. "We haven't let them all in yet."

Farber concluded that, with the Coop growing again, it's time to return to the subject of opening a second location. "I'm of the opinion that the Park Slope Food Coop is an amazing institution with a great history and a great mission. And I felt that because we were very successful, it was part of our mission to expand, to share what we have with others." Holtz echoed this idea: "When you have something good, you should share it."

**"WHEN YOU HAVE SOMETHING GOOD, YOU SHOULD SHARE IT." GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE HOLTZ.**

In November 2021, Farber asked to be put back on the agenda for a General Meeting so that he could present his committee's report on the possibility of opening a second location. He said he wanted to save any details from the report for discussion during the meeting but did reveal the report's final recommendation: "We do think it's feasible to open up a second location somewhere in Brooklyn."

## **A Multiyear Process**

The second-location committee was established by a vote of the General Meeting in 2016, but Farber says he's been thinking about expanding the Coop since 2010. He

began talking with one of the general coordinators about the idea. At the time, the Coop was overcrowded and orientations were being limited to reduce the number of new members joining each year. “We had basically grown to our full size and we didn’t have the plan for what came next,” Farber said. “It’s taken us a decade of really hard focused work and attention to detail to get us to this point.”

Farber, who joined the Coop in 1993, ended up going in front of the General Meeting four times before the proposal to create the committee passed. “I introduced it as a discussion item in, I believe, 2012 for the first time,” he said. “We didn’t get so far.” But he was determined. In his professional life, Farber is a farmer and a landscape architect, and he knew from talking to organic and sustainable food producers in the region that they would cheer on an expansion. “The stronger the Coop is, the better for our food system in general,” he said.

Finally, at the General Meeting on November 29, 2016, a nine-person committee was elected to begin an 18-month feasibility study. The committee’s original members—Kubi Ackerman, Eugenia Di Girolamo, Andrew Kimball, Michael Freedman-Schnapp, Adam Lubinsky, Dan Miller, Margaret Stix, Thomas Storck, and Farber himself—were drawn from a pool of over 50 applicants. The committee also includes General Coordinators Holtz, Elinoar Astrinsky and Joe Szladek.

Opening and operating a grocery store is devilishly complicated, and the committee members were chosen to represent each of the areas of expertise required to accomplish the task. “They were leaders in real estate and planning and architecture and finance,” Farber said. One was a real estate attorney, another worked in the Department of City Planning.

The 18-month process ended up requiring more than three years to complete. They began by mapping where the Coop’s members lived. They wanted a location that was more convenient for some existing members but that could also bring in a new cohort from elsewhere in Brooklyn. They also didn’t want to undermine the original location: “Close but not too close,” as Farber put it.

When the committee was created, they assumed they would buy rather than rent the location of the new store. Now, Farber says, both options are on the table. Holtz said that in either case, the Coop should be prepared to lose money on the second location in its first few quarters of operation, until enough shoppers arrive. “If you pick the right neighborhood, you could have a tremendous number and you could get up to speed pretty quickly,” he said, “but it’ll still take a little while.”

## OPENING AND OPERATING A GROCERY STORE IS DEVILISHLY COMPLICATED.

Farber was confident that the expansion wouldn’t risk the Coop’s financial stability. And, ultimately, by increasing the Coop’s buying power and storage capacity, the second location could help lower prices for everyone.

### **What’s Next?**

The report may be ready to present to the General Meeting, but that’s no guarantee that it will be on the agenda anytime soon. Fran Hawthorne, who serves on the Agenda Committee, said that they are working through a backlog of discussion items that keeps getting longer and longer. That’s the result of several factors: General Meetings are shorter in the Zoom era; pandemic-related updates take up a lot of the allotted time; and many other proposals delayed by the disruptions of the last two years are now coming up for discussion.

Hawthorne said that because of a longstanding rule that big changes to the Coop aren’t put up for discussion during the summer General Meetings, the second location wouldn’t be on the agenda until the fall at the earliest. Farber said that though he was eager to present the committee’s work, he was prepared for the delay. “It is very difficult to get items into and through the General Meeting,” he said. “It takes a tremendous amount of tenacity and there are a lot of rules.”

The report itself will be the same one that was ready in March 2020. Though both Brooklyn and the world are different places now, Farber said the committee's underlying recommendations remain the same. "We're going to speak to how things have changed," he said, "but we're not going to update the proposal."

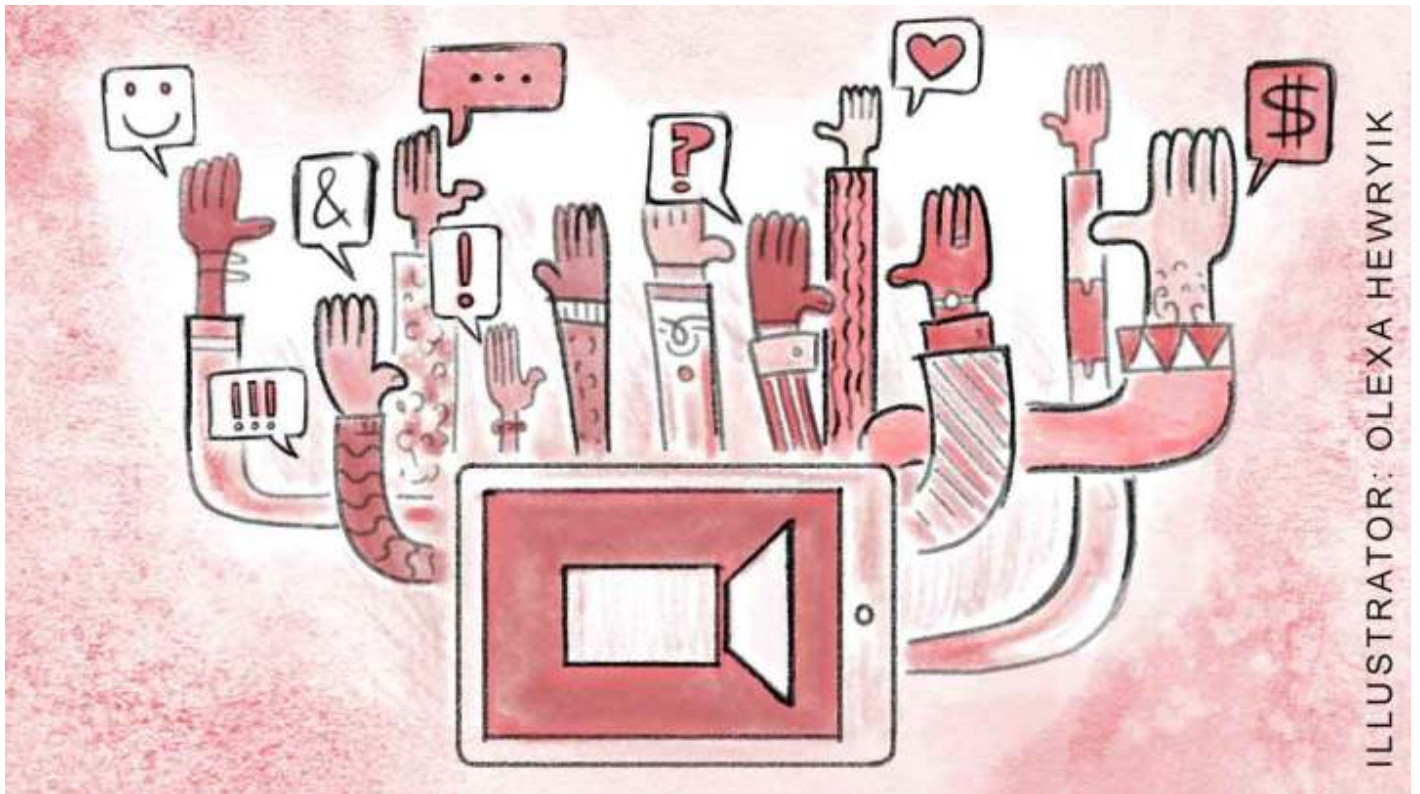
Once the report is presented, members will have a chance to offer feedback. If the committee's recommendations are adopted, a new committee will be formed to enact them. If that sounds like another in a nearly interminable series of steps, Farber doesn't seem discouraged: "My hope is that a year from now, we will be looking at real estate."

*Christopher Cox is the author of The Deadline Effect, out in paperback on July 12, 2022.*

---

## MEMBER VOICE, ZOOM PAINS AND JELLYBEANS: MARCH 29 GENERAL MEETING REPORT

October 25, 2022



*By John B. Thomas*

The Coop attempted to continue its tradition of virtual General Meetings on March 29, but cracks in the seams of this approach started to show. A meeting that was supposed to be about electing a new member to the Agenda Committee and three members to the Dispute Resolution Committee had to be tabled to the May GM due to an attendance limit of 100 on the Coop's Zoom account. This occurred because the Chair Committee made a Zoom scheduling error, and has been resolved for future GMs, with a limit raised to 500. At this meeting, however, the 100-person cap was reached and additional members were subsequently locked out.

DURING THE PANDEMIC, THE COOP'S MEMBERSHIP DROPPED FROM 17,000 TO 11,750. HOWEVER, IN RECENT MONTHS THE COOP'S MEMBERSHIP HAS INCHED BACK UP TO 13,000.

In spite of these challenges, there was a lively General Coordinator update from Eli-

noar Astrinsky, impassioned comments about the Coop's vaccine mandate from two members during the Open Forum, and an opportunity for candidates to the Coop Board of Directors to answer questions from members.

## **Open Forum**

The GM kicked off with an Open Forum that touched on the process to evaluate accommodations to the Coop's Covid-19 vaccine mandate, as well as a request for more detail on the farming procedures used to raise and slaughter all live animals, a question about whether the Terracycle program would return, and a request for videos of the Board Member discussions to be posted on the Coop website.

## **Vaccine Mandate**

General Coordinator Joe Holtz explained the Coop's process for evaluating accommodations requests to the mandate, letting members know that he made decisions in accordance with New York City's Covid-19 guidelines. Of the approximately 300 people who have applied for accommodations, around 60 were granted. Holtz did not provide details pertaining to why certain members were approved and others not, other than referring to the New York City Department of Health guidelines. Those whose accommodation requests were denied have the opportunity to appeal, should they so desire. Holtz is still working through all of the requests.

## **Treasurer's Report**

Holtz proceeded to present the Treasurer's Report, which included some bright spots for the Coop's finances. Although the Coop is still showing a loss on its income statement, the expectation is that the Coop will be back to break even within this fiscal year. The key factors in enabling this move back to breaking even are the continuation of the 25% markup (up from 21% pre-pandemic), increased shopping hours, rules allowing more shoppers to be present in the store at once, and plans to reduce prices

again (which will spur sales) and recover the Coop's size of membership.

On this last point, more good news. During the pandemic, the Coop's membership dropped from 17,000 to 11,750. However, in recent weeks the Coop's membership has inched back up to 13,000 and there is a backlog of 600 people who have completed orientation but who haven't yet joined due to limited new member enrollment appointments. While certainly not out of the woods yet, the Coop appears to be on the trajectory to return to some version of pre-pandemic normal.

## **General Coordinator Updates**

Elinor Astrinsky provided a lively update from the General Coordinators that touched on the Coop's masking policy and updates to recurring shifts as well as the Coop's food and non-food items in time for the arrival of spring.

## **Masking Policy**

The Coop's masking policy requires all members, regardless of vaccination status, to wear a face covering at all times when working or shopping. This policy includes children ages 2 and up. More detail (including on Coop-approved face coverings) can be found [here](#).

## **Food and Non-Food Report**

Astrinsky provided a lighting-round introduction to new and seasonal products at the Coop. In terms of food items, the Coop has all of the items in stock to meet members' Passover and Easter needs. The Coop now stocks all kinds of matzoh—regular, organic, gluten-free, and egg. For Easter, the Coop is stocking chocolate bunnies that are Fair Trade, organic, and also vegan—and even some chocolate bunnies that have gummy bears inside. The Coop is also stocking egg-shaped candles for the season.



FOR EASTER, THE COOP IS STOCKING CHOCOLATE BUNNIES THAT ARE FAIR TRADE, ORGANIC, AND ALSO VEGAN—AND EVEN SOME CHOCOLATE BUNNIES THAT HAVE GUMMY BEARS INSIDE.

For a seasonal taste of New York, Astrinsky encouraged Coop members to try Raaka chocolate, which the Coop now stocks. Raaka has partnership with the New York Botanical Garden to use herbs from the NYBG in their locally-produced chocolate.

New non-food items include several cleaning products that use less plastic than other brands, as well as seeds, soil, and gardening needs for spring plantings. Astrinsky recommended that Coop members try out the Eco Next Detergent Sheets, True Earth, and Eco Egg for reduced-plastic laundry needs. The Coop now stocks seeds from the Hudson Valley Seed Company, a local source for heirloom and open-pollinated garden

seeds.

## **Agenda Items**

The meeting then proceeded to the Agenda Items which included an Interim Agenda Committee election, a Dispute Resolution Committee election, and a Board candidates discussion. Due to a technical issue limiting the number of members who could participate via Zoom, a motion was raised to table the voting items until the May GM in order to make sure more Coop member voices could be heard. The Chair Committee also wished to note that there is an opening on the Chair Committee, and interested members are encouraged to apply by reaching out to [psfcchair@gmail.com](mailto:psfcchair@gmail.com).

Member voice was the key item of discussion during the Board Candidate discussion. After each candidate gave a two-minute statement (candidate statements were printed in the prior issue of the *Gazette*), the Chair Committee opened the floor to discussion, which was the primary purpose of this Agenda Item. Board Candidates included George Sarah Olken, Brandon West, Amy Cao, Jesse Rosenfeld, Imani Q'Ryn, and Tim Hospodar. Questions immediately returned to the issue of member voice, specifically related to how the increase in centralized decision-making during the pandemic was limiting opportunities for participation and dialogue, and also how to increase participation in the GM given declining attendance.

On the Coop's Covid-19 rules, questions centered around how Board candidates would approach issues of perceived discrimination due to not being vaccinated against Covid-19. Board Candidates largely made similar statements, with Olken and Cao encouraging discussion of the Coop's Covid-19 rules and perhaps even a vote on them at the GM so that membership could voice opinions about what would be best for the most number of members. Q'Ryn made a point that was likely on most members' minds: that these are scary times, and that the Coop was set up to have discussions about big topics, and that forum is the GM.

As to improving participation in the GM, the main topics of discussion were around

the ways in which decision-making has become more centralized at the Coop during the pandemic (often by necessity) and also around the desire to bring back work slot credit for GM attendance. Board Candidates had differing views and interesting ideas on these points.

Rosenfeld made the point that for years members had been requesting online GMs to enable greater participation, and Olken brought up the point that the Coop was now in much more regular email communication with members. Brandon West made an astute observation that active outreach in the form of canvassing may help to bring more people back into the GMs. Hospodar suggested doing some brainstorming among members to explore hybrid GM models that could include in-person and video options.

Across both topics of conversation, it seems clear that the Coop's central governance mechanism—the GM—is not operating in a way that allows maximum participation and also gives adequate voice to Coop member concerns.

*John B. Thomas is a consultant working on environmental policy. He has been a Coop member since 2012.*