

AUGUST GENERAL MEETING REPORT

September 24, 2024



By Sanoja Bhaumik

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The August 2024 General Meeting (GM) focused on the Coop's two-day-per-week mask policy on the shopping floor. The discussion led to renewed calls for hybrid meetings so that immune-compromised members could easily attend GMs. At the meeting, there were also procedural questions around the agenda and Coop referendums.

GENERAL COORDINATOR JOE HOLTZ PRESENTED THE COOP'S 24-WEEK FINANCIAL REPORT. NOTABLY, THE COOP SAW A NET INCOME LOSS OF \$33,298, WHICH HOLTZ ATTRIBUTED TO SLOWER SUMMER SALES.

OPEN FORUM

In the Open Forum, Coop member Tim Hospodor inquired if merchandise credits, which can expire, could be used as credits towards member investment. Coop secretary Elizabeth Tobier brought up the question of hybrid GMs over Zoom, especially in cases where venues will not rent to the Coop (Brooklyn College Tow Center agreed and then later reversed on their decision to rent a larger meeting space to the Coop earlier this year). Another member noted that an agenda item on the issue of amending the Coop's bylaws to allow for hybrid GMs has been pending for eight months, and there has been no update on when it will be included in the agenda. Dominique Bravo, a member of the Agenda Committee, responded that the issue will be heard: "It's happening," she said.

COOP FINANCES

General Coordinator Joe Holtz presented the Coop's 24-week financial report. Notably, the Coop saw a net income loss of \$33,298, which Holtz attributed to slower summer sales and increased spoilage in the warm weather. During the same period last year, the Coop had a net income gain of \$283,586. When questioned on the difference between the two years, Holtz attributed it to a change in the Coop markup, from 25% in 2023 to 24% this year, as well as to a rise in staff healthcare costs. He concluded, "Nothing I've said concerns me about the Coop's financial health." The Coop has done almost \$27 million in sales in this fiscal year.

As Holtz explained in the August GM, the Coop raised its markup from 21% to 25% during the pandemic, then lowered it just before the beginning of the current fiscal year; the power to make this change had been given to General Coordinators by a pri-

or GM. Holtz had also explained in August that the Coop's income should bounce back by the end of the fiscal year and that its mission is to make food affordable and break even.

Members also asked about increases in *Gazette* costs and repairs: the *Linewaiters'* *Gazette* needed a software purchase, and the Coop made repairs to the floors in aisles 2 and 3. The Coop also recently converted the childcare room to storage, since the Coop no longer provides childcare as a result of rising insurance costs.

HOLTZ EMPHASIZED THAT FUTURE PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS NECESSITATED A HOME DELIVERY SYSTEM, AND A PILOT DELIVERY PROGRAM WOULD BEGIN SOMETIME NEXT YEAR.

One member asked how the Coop invests its balances to take advantage of high interest rates. Holtz gave an overview of the Coop's investments—the bulk of which is held in Vanguard treasuries, money markets, and CDs—and added that the Coop earned approximately \$136,000 in interest this fiscal year so far. One member asked about a line item for a pilot home delivery program, which had been delayed from January 2020. Holtz emphasized that future pandemic preparedness necessitated a home delivery system, and a pilot delivery program would begin sometime next year.

SUMMER PRODUCE

General Coordinator Joe Szladek gave a produce report, highlighting all the fresh, local summer produce available at the Coop, including local cucumbers, zucchini, eggplant, melon, peaches, nectarines and apples. Szladek also noted that the first week after Labor Day tends to be one of the busiest at the Coop, as members return from holiday and children go back to school.

One member asked about excess packaging waste. Szladek stated that the Coop considers plastic and wasteful packaging when ordering items, but he acknowledged that excess waste is an industry-wide problem. He also reminded members that the Personnel Committee, which works with the General Coordinators to provide guidance and support human resources and operational issues, is looking for new members. To learn more, read about it [here](#).

MEXICAN MAIZE

A member of the International Trade Education Committee gave a report previewing a piece in this issue of the *Linewaiters' Gazette* on Mexico's ban on genetically modified corn, in an effort to protect Mexico's vast array of indigenous corn. Mexicans are the largest maize consumers in the world, and maize is the country's staple crop. The US is the second-largest importer of Mexican maize, and Mexico is the largest importer of US corn. This ban would have major effects on US corn exports to Mexico, and the move has since led to a dispute with US trade representatives, who are challenging the ban under the US Mexico Canada Agreement (USMCA).

THE MAJORITY OF THE GM MEETING WAS SPENT DISCUSSING A PROPOSED REFERENDUM ON THE COOP'S TWO-DAY-PER-WEEK MASKING POLICY.

MASK UP?

The majority of the GM meeting was spent discussing a proposed referendum on the Coop's two-day-per-week masking policy. The agenda item sponsor, David Bartner, briefly introduced the proposal. Bartner's main point was that the vote on the mask policy took place at the October 2023 GM, on Halloween night, when many parents could not attend. He described the decision to hold a vote on this night as "joyless." Instead, Bartner pointed to an earlier 2023 Coop survey on the question of masking sent through email. That survey had over 4,700 respondents, with 68 percent voting against a mask mandate, and Bartner argued that this survey was more representa-

tive of members' opinions than a 100-person GM. This comment sparked discussion around the effectiveness of GMs versus referendums in deciding Coop policy. Several members noted that they had advocated for hybrid GMs for several months in order to expand access to the forum.

A member later added a point of information that the cited survey asked for opinions on a 7-day-per-week mask mandate, not a two-day-per-week mandate as is currently in place on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Thus, the survey was not representative of members' opinions on the standing Coop mask policy.

The agenda item stated that masking at the Coop should be voluntary and not required two days a week; in addition, any future decision on masking should be decided by referendum. Several members cited concerns around the text of the referendum, which was limited by presenting two choices:

__Yes, I agree masking should be voluntary, and any future decision on masking should be decided by referendum.

__No, I do not agree that masking should be voluntary. The Coop should maintain its current masking policy.

Members noted that there were many possibilities between the two options, such as a decision to vote on a masking decision by referendum, while maintaining a two-day mask mandate on the shopping floor, altering a mask mandate to one-day-per-week, or adjusting the mask mandate to certain hours of the day. Members asked Bartner if the Coop would retain its ability to implement an emergency mask mandate, as during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Bartner replied that the referendum would not impede emergency decision making.

MEMBERS ALSO NOTED THAT THIS DISCUSSION WOULD BE MORE APT IN A HYBRID SETTING WITH A VIDEO OPTION, WHERE THOSE WHO FELT UNCOMFORTABLE

ATTENDING AN UNMASKED, INDOOR MEETING COULD PARTICIPATE IN A DISCUSSION THAT WAS PERTINENT TO THEM AND THEIR SAFETY.

The agenda item also spurred debate around the Agenda Committee's process. As the Open Forum discussion revealed, the agenda item on hybrid meetings had been stalled for eight months. A member asked why the masking agenda item was back on the GM agenda when the issue had been discussed less than a year prior. Agenda Committee member Dominique Bravo responded that the new item considers a referendum, a new subject in the discussion, and the committee was concerned about the perception that the October 31 GM vote was unfair.

Members also noted that this discussion would be more apt in a hybrid setting with a video option, where those who felt uncomfortable attending an unmasked, indoor meeting could participate in a discussion that was pertinent to them and their safety. The Chair Committee then urged members to discuss the content of the proposal and not the process.

Several members commented that they would vote "no" on the agenda item and the referendum. They argued that the two-day-per-week mask mandate seemed like a "reasonable" accommodation for vulnerable members and those with health conditions that required masking, and it was in line with the cooperative spirit. Member Elise Barr spoke about fellow Coop members who only feel safe shopping with two-way masking. She also questioned the posts on the Coop's Instagram account, which promoted the GM discussion around mask mandates with an image of a large trash bag filled with disposable surgical masks. Members suggested that concerns about the excess waste produced by free disposable masks could be addressed by encouraging members to bring reusable masks (as members bring their own shopping bags) or even charging a small fee for a disposable mask at the Coop.

Others disagreed. One member suggested that the mask mandate was "offensive, oppressive" and "hateful," as it reduced individual choice. Member Amir Bar-lev argued

that through the mask mandate, the Coop had chosen “ideology over science,” because no government or scientific body has currently urged a mask mandate. Another member responded that government bodies often make recommendations based on expectations of compliance, and the current policy seemed like a good compromise. One member involved in the 2023 survey noted that the two-day-a-week mask policy was based on staff input, and survey results in which 32% of respondents wanted a seven-day mask mandate.

Although a small number of present members opposed the mask policy and signaled their approval of the proposed referendum, the majority of present members appeared hesitant to move forward with the agenda item, both due to procedural questions around the use of a referendum and COVID-19 transmission concerns.

Following this lively discussion, the Board of Directors voted to accept the advice of membership in reference to the minutes of the July meeting. After the vote, the meeting was adjourned.

CLEAN CORN: MEXICANS PROTECT A GLOBAL STAPLE

September 24, 2024



International Trade Education Committee (ITES) Report

By Helen Beichel for the ITES Committee

September 24, 2024

A February 2023 Mexican Presidential Decree banned the growing of transgenic corn, in order to protect the people's constitutional right to a clean environment and native species from cross-pollination by genetically modified (GMO) species.

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME THAT AN INDIGENOUS RIGHTS GENERAL EXCEPTION IN ANY TRADE AGREEMENT INVOLVING THE US WILL BE EXAMINED.

The decree included restrictions on GMO corn usage in minimally processed foods, such as masa and tortillas. It set a deadline of March 2024 for the elimination of glyphosates in the country, setting a long-term goal of removing GMOs fed to animals. In August 2023, the US Trade Representative, eventually supported by the Canadian government, opened a case against the Mexican government in the secretive Investor State Dispute System tribunal (ISDS). The case asserted that Mexico is violating the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) by preventing the importation of GMO corn. The U.S. claims that Mexico did not present scientific evidence in its report to back up its claim that GMO corn and herbicides are dangerous to the Mexican people.

This is the first time that an Indigenous Rights General Exception in any trade agreement involving the U.S. will be examined. USMCA Article 32.5 on Indigenous Peoples Rights, which was insisted upon by Canada, allows any of the three USMCA countries to create measures “necessary to fulfill its legal obligations to Indigenous Peoples.” In addition, the Environmental chapter in the USMCA points to the connections between Indigenous People’s rights and biodiversity.

Mexican nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) support their government’s policies, saying that they are in line with the USMCA, as well as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade Agreement (GATT)’s Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures. These measures allow taking a precautionary, proactive stance regarding protecting corn as there are no conflict-free scientific studies proving the safety of GMO maize. The involvement of GATT provisions makes this a case with global implications.

GROWING GMO CORN IS DESTRUCTIVE TO THE MILPAS GROWING SYSTEM, A PRACTICE THAT INTEGRATES CORN, BEANS, PUMPKIN, BROAD BEAN, QUELITES AND MEDICINAL PLANTS AND THE RESILIENCE THEY GENERATE IN THE FACE OF CLIMATE CHANGE AND SOIL DEGENERATION.

Mexican NGOs point out that in 2020, 40% of the Mexican diet was corn-based. The

average Mexican eats around 432 lbs of corn per year. Mexico also says that by defending itself in front of the ISDS, it is defending its corn biocultural heritage and preserving its native corn species.

Mexico is a gene reserve for 64 different breeds of corn, 59 of which are native, used and preserved for 300 generations by Indigenous Peoples and the ancestral practices of peasant groups. Mexico points out the decree is not a ban on importing corn; it merely regulates the end use of corn for human consumption. Growing GMO corn is destructive to the milpas growing system, a practice that integrates corn, beans, pumpkin, broad bean, quelites and medicinal plants and the resilience they generate in the face of climate change and soil degeneration.

Analysis by U.S. NGOs such as Food and Water Watch highlights that U.S. approval of GMO corn is based on industry assertions, not science. Assessments of reproductive, developmental, neurological, metabolic, microbiome or gastrointestinal-tract-related health risks have not been addressed through the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) process. Nor has any other process in the public or private sector addressed those risks. The U.S. government has never done its own assessment of GMOs.

Technical comments coauthored by Friends of the Earth and Food Tank pointed out that the U.S. government's submission to the tribunal lacked information about the toxins expressed in contemporary GMO corn varieties, and their levels. It ignored dozens of studies linking the insecticidal toxins and glyphosate residues found in GMO corn to adverse impacts on public health.

OUR BODIES WERE NOT DESIGNED TO DIGEST THESE NEW PROTEINS EXPRESSED IN GMO SEED STRAINS. THESE TOXINS ARE DESIGNED TO KILL INSECTS BY BREAKING DOWN THEIR DIGESTIVE SYSTEMS.

The toxicity of GMO corn has been increasing since it was introduced 30 years ago.

First, insecticidal toxins, in the form of new proteins, have been engineered into every grain of GMO corn. Early varieties had just one new protein, but today, two thirds of GMO corn varieties have been engineered to have three or more. Levels of these toxins in GMO corn grain now measure 50–100 parts per million (ppm), up from 2–6 ppm.

Our bodies were not designed to digest these new proteins expressed in GMO seed strains. These toxins are designed to kill insects by breaking down their digestive systems. The same seems to be happening to us. The Center for Food Safety's analysis submitted to the tribunal documents increasing allergenic responses to transgenic corn. There are now antibodies against these Cry toxins, which are proteins that attack the gut lining, in at least 8% of Americans. Also, 85% of field corn in the U.S. expressed endotoxins, including non-GMO fields contaminated through wind pollination.

Next, consider the herbicides that are integral to GMO corn. Originally, GMO corn was engineered to withstand just the weed killer glyphosate. Glyphosate usage has increased in the U.S. more than tenfold since the introduction of GMO crops. Now, 86% of GMO corn varieties are engineered to handle two to four toxic herbicides.

Friends of the Earth calls on the U.S. to provide science addressing these concerns in its USMCA response. The tribunal is expected to issue its ruling on the dispute in the fall.