

HOW MANY MEMBERS SHOULD THE COOP HAVE?

January 28, 2025



By Zach Schiffman

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ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

The Coop can often feel overcrowded, with shoppers jostling one another and the entry line flowing up the street. At the same time, membership size is still below pre-2020 levels—a decrease brought about by the pandemic—despite significant efforts to increase efficiency.

That is the tension that the Coop’s leadership regularly confronts: How many members should the Coop have?

This past fall, the Coop reached its 2023 goal of 16,000 members, which is 1,200 less than the 2019 peak. Still, General Coordinator Joe Szladek says the Coop hopes to add another 500 members this year. New members are crucial to the Coop’s long-term success because they help to bolster the Coop’s finances, typically spending more per visit.

It is estimated that adding another 500 members would bring roughly \$1.8 million in additional annual revenue.



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

Szladek says that figuring out the correct membership size has been a delicate balance since the stark fall to 12,500 members in 2020. “As we were starting to build back up,” he said, “we wondered, ‘What number do we get back to that is appropriate for the Coop?’ The initial hope was to take the edge off the crowdedness of the Coop pre-pandemic.”

“At 17,200 members, we had to keep finding new space for things. To fit deliveries, we had to move stacks of produce in the basement over two inches, and then another two inches, and then another two inches,” he said of peak membership. “We just didn’t have any more room. It was very challenging.”

Szladek said the staff discussed a target and agreed that if members were shopping at pre-pandemic levels, “we probably don’t want to be at 17,000.”

Here’s the catch: Coop members are not shopping at pre-pandemic levels.

In January 2024, members bought an average of 87 units of groceries per month, whereas in 2019, they purchased 97 units per month. Szladek said several factors contributed to the 13 percent drop, including the reduced shift commitment (from every four weeks to every six weeks).

“The six-week cycle means members are coming to the Coop fewer times per year to work,” Szladek said, “and it’s possible they’re splitting their shopping between more local options between shifts.” Despite the Coop’s beloved lower prices, rising housing costs are also a factor, with members forced to move farther away. “It’s very expensive to live near the Coop,” Szladek added, “so people aren’t always close to shop here.”



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

Even Membership Coordinator Karen Mancuso has moved farther away. “I am a Coop shopper through and through, but if I wasn’t here all week and able to shop while I am working, I might shop more at other places,” she said.

The Coop’s leadership also worries about competition from other grocery stores.

“We’re always thinking and wondering about who’s going to open near us and how that’s going to impact the Coop,” Szladek said. “When Whole Foods opened in 2012, we noticed a dip in sales. It was only 2 percent, and we were very resilient, but it’s a more complicated landscape now, with considerations like food inflation and online shopping.”

The Coop could increasingly face pressure from new low-cost grocery stores coming to the neighborhood, including Lidl on 5th Avenue (opening next year) and the long-rumored Gowanus Trader Joe’s.

The Coop plans to be open an additional hour every day starting on Monday, February 3, going from 84 hours a week to 90 hours. This move is intended to address both external competition from other grocery options and internal competition for shifts and room in the aisles. Szladek said the Coop continues to explore online ordering options, which would also counteract competitors like Instacart and provide a new swath of shifts for members.

As the Coop inches toward 16,500 members, the membership office is not operating very differently. “There are probably hundreds of people out there who want to join the Coop,” Mancuso said. “We tell everyone the same thing, ‘Look at the website, create an account, and it will tell you when we open appointments to join.’ We’re trying to be really transparent about it.”

If the Coop takes on too many new members, she said it’s relatively easy to slow down the flow.

"In 2007, we realized we had to start controlling the number of people who could join. That's when we created the online sign-up for orientations. We control things so much more now because it's all digital," Mancuso said. "We can cancel new member enrollments for the month of December, for example, because of the holidays, or maybe we just don't need more people right now. Before this, we just always had orientations every week, and the new members began to spiral out of control."

Despite concerns about overcrowding, Mancuso and Szladek both feel confident about the Coop's increased efficiency since the pandemic.

"I think at first it was a little scary," Mancuso said, "People thought, 'You guys really want to go back up to 17,000?' We couldn't really handle that before COVID, but now we can because of all of these new systems; the lines move so quickly, and there are way fewer people waiting on line in the store. I think most members appreciate that."

Zach Schiffman is a social editor and writer at New York magazine, comedian and Park Slope local.

JANUARY GM: MEMBERS VOTE TO RAISE THE WORK REQUIREMENT AGE TO 22

January 28, 2025



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE



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By Walecia Konrad

There was a lot of voting going on at the January Park Slope Food Coop General Meeting, held in person at the Picnic House in Prospect Park. Members voted to raise the work requirement age from 18 to 22, giving PSFC households with college students much sought-after clarity on how young adults should be represented.

In another vote, members voted yes to disband the Committee Oversight Committee,

a member committee designed to make sure other committees were meeting their work slot and reporting requirements. Going forward, Coop staff will provide that oversight.

OPEN FORUM

Before the votes, the meeting kicked off with the Open Forum, a time reserved for members to ask questions or bring up concerns not included in the meeting's agenda. During this time, a group from the Park Slope Food Coop Members for Palestine took turns voicing their concerns about the war in Gaza and asking Coop staffers to consider an online meeting to discuss a boycott of Israeli goods. This issue has come up during Open Forum in several recent GMs.

The speakers pointed out that more than 1,000 members had signed a petition in support of a boycott. Many asked for a status update on the General Coordinators' efforts to find a venue to discuss the matter that is large enough to accommodate the anticipated number of members expected to attend. Others reiterated their request to have an online meeting for discussion and voting, adding that the emergency in Gaza required this approach.

One Coop member for Palestine asked about fact-checking at the *Linewaiters' Gazette*, pointing to a recent letter that claimed—erroneously according to the speaker—that the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement promotes violence. Later, the letter's author, Jesse Rosenfeld, defended his submission, saying the included links proved his assertion.

AT THE MOST RECENT GENERAL MEETING, MEMBERS VOTED TO SAY GOODBYE TO THE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE.

THE GENERAL COORDINATORS' RESPONSE

General Coordinator Joe Holtz then took the mic for the Treasurer's report but began by answering some of the questions from the Open Forum.

Holtz said the General Coordinators were looking to rent a space large enough to accommodate a BDS discussion, which would likely include 2,500 members. So far coordinators have been turned down by places like the King's Theater, BAM, and many Brooklyn schools, Holtz said. In addition, Holtz reminded members that the Coop held a meeting at Brooklyn Tech High School in 2012 to discuss the referendum to join BDS, and voted no. At the end of the meeting, police asked Coop staff to inform them if the Coop ever had a meeting like that again, he said. Holtz also said that the police told the Coop to hire private security and that Brooklyn Tech said we should have alerted them in advance as to what we would be discussing.

Because of that 2012 event and the limited space, the coordinators took an "extraordinary action" shortly before the November General Meeting and removed the boycott discussion item from the meeting's agenda, Holtz said.

He added that in-person general meetings are mandated by the Coop's bylaws, which require the Board to meet in person at a time that members are invited to join them. As a result, having a Zoom meeting to discuss the boycott issue couldn't happen without a change in the bylaws.

During COVID, GMs were held on Zoom because of the emergency nature of the pandemic and the fact that public spaces were locked down. "We had guidance and rules on that from three governments," Holtz said.



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

COOP FINANCES

Holtz then moved to the Treasurer's report. The Coop's finances continue to recover nicely after the pandemic. Sales for the 48-week period ending Dec. 31, 2023 were \$50,533,000—a \$6.5 million increase from the same period last year. The Coop reported \$181,201 in operating income, a significant increase from the slightly more than \$266,000 loss reported last year. Holtz also reported that the Coop lowered its markup from 25% to 24% in late January, which was ahead of schedule.

Holtz also pointed out that the Coop's gross margin increased to 19.75% from 19.5%. The increase is great news, Holtz explained, because gross margin is crucial for the Coop's financial sustainability. He encouraged members to consult page two of the Jan. 30, 2024 financial summary for a detailed explanation of gross margin and its im-

portance to the Coop.

During the question and answer period after the Treasurer's report, a member asked if it would be possible to access current and past financial reports and GM agendas on the website. Holtz answered that he would discuss this with the other coordinators and look into this good suggestion.

CHILDCARE UPDATE

Next, General Coordinator Lisa Moore updated members on the Coop's longstanding attempts to bring back childcare after last year's vote to restart the service. Coordinators have not been able to find an insurer that will cover childcare at the Coop because it is not a licensed New York State childcare facility. Licensing requirements are quite stringent and the Coop's childcare room does not meet requirements.

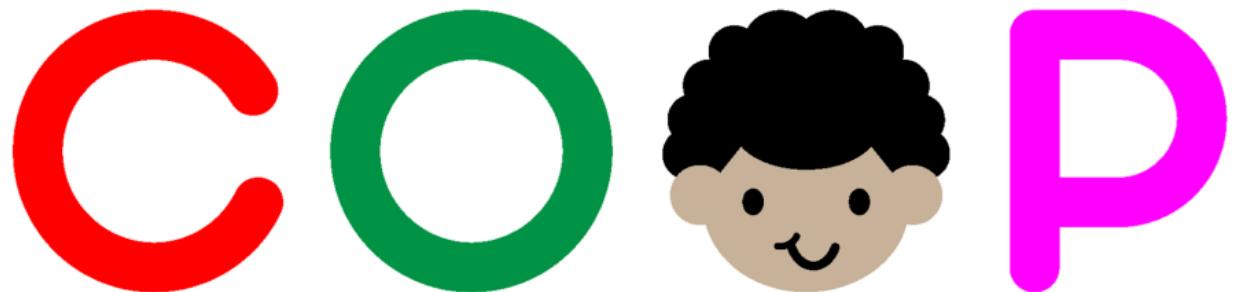


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

After many frustrating attempts to find an insurer that will cover a non-licensed facility, Moore reported that the coordinators recently got a bid from an insurance company for \$3 million per year, nine times the \$335,000 the Coop is paying for business insurance now. Since then, the coordinators approached three insurance brokers look-

ing for help. One said no, another didn't reply and the third said they are working on it. Moore said she is hoping to hear more from that broker soon.

COOKING CLASSES ARE IN FULL SWING—BUT STILL ON ZOOM

Jeff Bonar of the Food Coop Cooking Class squad reported that the committee has conducted six online cooking classes in the last six months. The next one, featuring "Personalized Chili" will be held on February 22. Bonar also announced that the committee is looking for guest chefs to lead future classes in return for work slot credit. For more information on guest chefs, future classes and links to past recipes, Bonar encouraged members to check out foodcoopcooks.org. He also said the committee is looking forward to holding classes in person soon.



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

DOES THE PSFC NEED A COMMITTEE TO OVERSEE COMMITTEES?

Coordinator Jana Cunningham presented the first agenda item up for a membership vote: her proposal to disband the Committee Oversight Committee (COC). As the proposal describes, the COC was started almost two years ago to reduce Coop staff time

spent overseeing member committees, to make sure committees post their mission statements on the Coop's website and to assist committees with reporting requirements and tracking work slot credit.

Cunningham explained that the COC oversees member-originated "initiative" committees, such as the Environmental or Food Safety committees, and not the operational or essential committees that make up the vast majority of work slots at the Coop. Only 80 members are part of an initiative Coop committee.

The COC is not meeting its objectives, Cunningham said, using a report card to make her point. While the COC has ensured that about 60% of committee mission statements are posted, in 2023 very few committees met the requirements to report to a General Meeting once a year (10%) or publish submissions in the Linewaiters' Gazette twice a year (1%), Cunningham reported. She also said that the Committee has not been effective in tracking work slots and thus was not saving staff time. As a result, Cunningham asked members to vote to disband the committee.

During the discussion period, the chairman of the COC vigorously defended the existence of the committee and expressed his surprise that the committee was "on the chopping block." There was also some discussion that disbanding the committee, which was started by longtime and extremely active member Rachel Porter, who has since passed away, would hurt her legacy at the Coop.

The vote was taken and the proposal passed 84 in favor, 34 against.

A NEW MINIMUM AGE FOR COOP MEMBERSHIP

Holtz presented the final agenda item—a proposal to amend the age for working at the Coop, which would help clarify the definition of a Coop household. Holtz explained that after hearing from many members that the current household requirement for 18-year-olds to join the Coop could be confusing and cumbersome for families with college-age children who were living away from home, the general coordinators decid-

ed to propose some changes.

Holtz proposed defining an adult person as someone who has reached the age of 21, and that all adults in a household are required to join the Coop and fulfill membership requirements. In addition, any person between the ages of 18 and 21 who wants to join the Coop will be allowed to become a full Coop member, but they will be exempt from the work requirement.

Holtz explained that the work exemption would apply to all 18-to-21-year-olds, even if they were a household of young people who were, for example, working or attending Brooklyn College and wanting to join the Coop. “We wouldn’t make some 18-year-olds work just because they’re not living with their parents. That wouldn’t be fair,” said Holtz.

During the discussion period, several members took exception to the work exemption for all 18-to-21-year-olds, arguing that if someone lives in the community and is a Coop member, it isn’t an unfair burden for them to work.

One member pointed out that many 21-year-olds are still in college, so 22 might be a better age for the upper limit. Holtz agreed and changed the proposal to age 22.

Members voted to amend the age to join the Coop from 18 to 22, with 69 in favor and 50 opposed.

The Board of Directors then voted to accept the advice of members and the meeting was adjourned.

COOP HOLDS FIRST IN-PERSON GENERAL MEETING IN THREE YEARS

January 28, 2025



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.

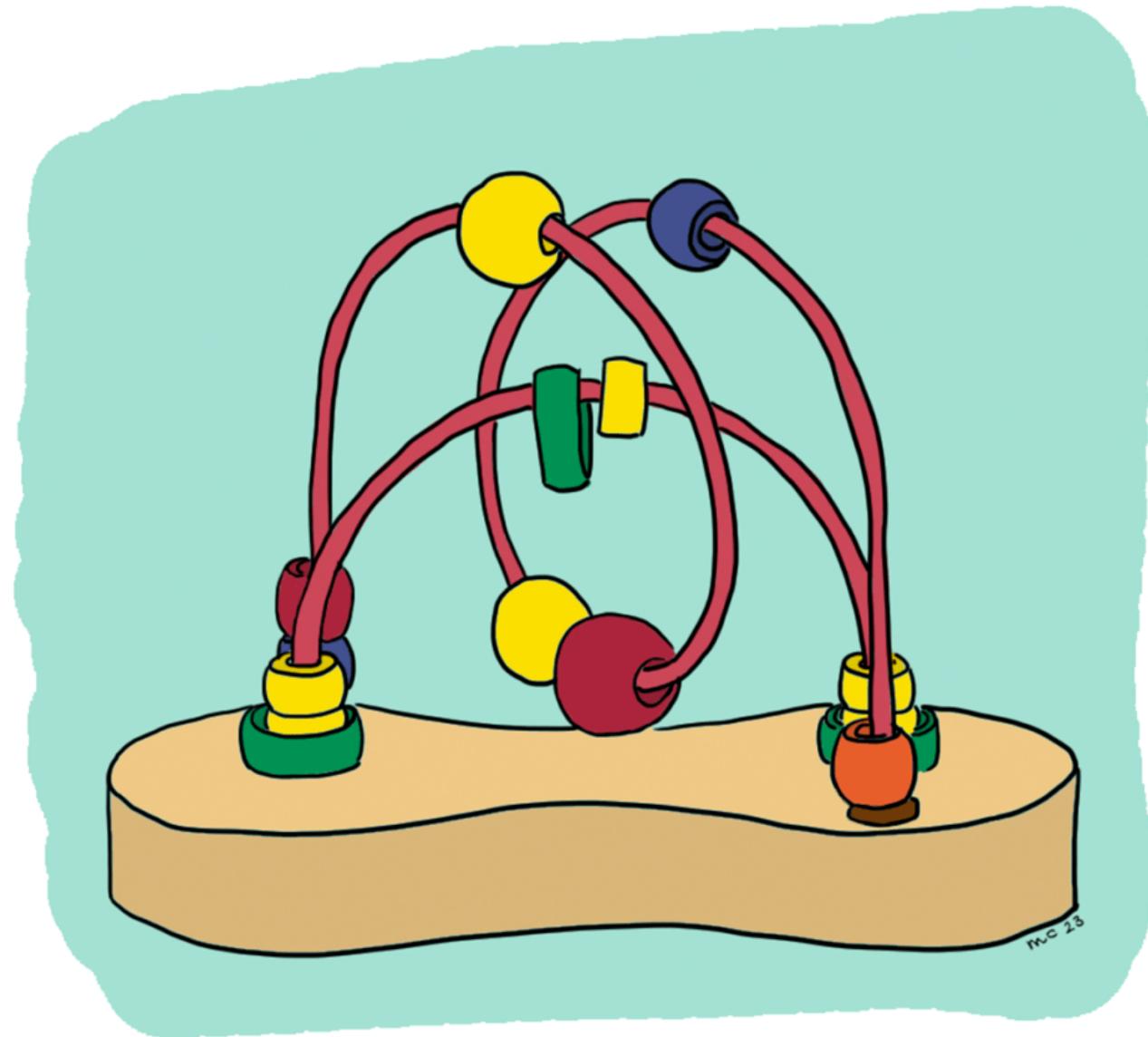


ILLUSTRATION BY MAGGIE CARSON

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.

INSIDE ANOTHER BROOKLYN FOOD COOP'S JOURNEY TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE

January 28, 2025



By Sara Ivry

The first rule of a Food Coop shop is: Arrive at its storefront. I'd forgotten this basic

tenet this past summer when I set out to buy milk and whatever else struck my fancy at the Greene Hill Food Coop (GHFC). When I was there last—several years and an entire pandemic ago—it was located on Putnam Avenue, around the corner from a bar, just near Fulton Street in Clinton Hill, the neighborhood I call home.

Now, it was nowhere in sight. That is, in my sight. It had moved a few blocks away, closer to the border of Bed-Stuy, and I had no idea.

And there's the rub: too few would-be shoppers know anything much about the GHFC's existence. And fewer still take the step of becoming a bona fide member. Indeed, membership has hovered around 300 for several years now. The GHFC General Manager Jake Boxenhorn wants to change that. He's making a renewed push to grow his member pool and ensure its longevity.

"I really had no idea what a coop even was until I got here to New York City," says the Long Island native. After graduating college two years ago, he moved to Brooklyn "right down the street from where Greene Hill is now, and I was looking for part-time work, as well as a good place to shop. Greene Hill happened to be offering a part-time job on the weekend, and to become a member at the same time."



Opportunity knocked and Boxenhorn welcomed it in. About eight months ago, he graduated from part-time weekend gig to full-time General Manager when his predecessor left.

Since then he's been stymied—as have others before him—by the question of how to gain new members, how best to spread word of the GHFC and how to get people to join up.

"WE DON'T BEAT THE PRICES OF OTHER COOPS. WE DON'T HAVE THE BIGGEST SELECTION, BUT WE HAVE A GROUP OF REALLY PASSIONATE PEOPLE."

"Everyone knows about the Park Slope Food Coop, and everyone shops there," he says. "I've done a lot of work on the floor at other coops and see that people just

don't really know who we are. We're pretty small."

General Manager of the Park Slope Food Coop (PSFC) Joe Holtz agrees the relative size of GHFC vis a vis PSFC presents a hurdle.

"A Coop like ours has 9,000 items, and 6,000 square feet, and theirs has many thousand fewer items because of the smaller selling space, and because of our size we can get better prices," he says. "We're a problem for Coops near us, so we try to help in every way we can."

PSFC members are allowed to shop at the GHFC, and support the tiny food coop. The *Linewaiters' Gazette* has covered the GHFC's efforts to shore up membership, the PSFC has given the GHFC loans, and Holtz has responded to Boxenhorn's request for semi-regular meetings to think of what policies and changes might work best for the GHFC to meet its growth goals.

Among them, having "open shopping" days this past summer, to entice passersby and members of the local community as well as allowing PSFC members to shop at Greene Hill without having to work there. So doing raises overall sales and encourages PSFC stalwarts to consider joining Greene Hill as well.

"They said, 'Can we let your members shop here?'" Holtz says. "And we said, 'You can do whatever you want for our members. But I'll tell you what we don't do: let your members shop here because that would be like us killing you.'"

"When I think of any Coop, your first job is will you survive, and your second job is will you thrive," Holtz says. "Surviving without thriving means you're still vulnerable."

At present, GHFC is vulnerable. It routinely does about \$20,000 a week in sales, Boxenhorn says, a figure it can live off of—if modestly.

"We'd like to get up to 25, that would help us thrive," Boxenhorn says. "Right now,

we're in a survival mode. And we're trying to get out of that through inward restructuring."



PHOTO BY JACKSON KRUELE

Getting there is contingent on growing membership; Boxenhorn is aiming for a base of a solid 500.

He says he and his board are discussing a lot of ideas regarding how to grow. He wants to improve the Coop's operation and its general presentation by patching up and painting the basement and the store's interior, fixing its flooring, and generally swapping its "original homey Coop look" for something less worn in and, hopefully, more compelling. He's also hoping to change how shifts at the GHFC are structured—to shorten them and make them more frequent and to implement more serious repercussions when a member is delinquent.

"WHEN I THINK OF ANY COOP, YOUR FIRST JOB IS WILL YOU SURVIVE, AND YOUR SECOND JOB IS WILL YOU THRIVE?" HOLTZ SAYS. "SURVIVING WITHOUT THRIVING MEANS YOU'RE STILL VULNERABLE."

"We've been very lax about how we maintain our shift structure," he says, contrasting it with the rigor of the PSFC. "What you guys do is much more strict. That's something that we're thinking of doing to make our membership more accountable in general."

He also has embarked on a semi-regular meeting with Holtz to brainstorm other ways that Greene Hill might start to thrive. Holtz welcomes this opportunity to lend his insight, accumulated over more than four decades as a PSFC staff member.



"When I was the only employee in June of 1975," Holtz says, "I was given a lot of freedom to try things. I would ask Jake if he feels like he has that freedom, because I think that's important—a certain entrepreneurial aspect."

Holtz says he'll also encourage Boxenhorn to consider lowering prices on produce and ensuring it is of a quality superior to what is generally available in the area. "Increase the sales on that, increase the turnover, and become famous for that," Holtz suggests.

Until then, Boxenhorn is buoyed in this work by the community he stumbled into.

"I feel so strongly about this Coop in the sense that we are so close knit," he says, noting that he knows the name of every single member. "We know each other so well. It's such a friendly environment that I don't think any other coop has. The vibe of the Coop is what makes it special and you have to experience that to understand. We don't beat the prices of other coops. We don't have the biggest selection, but we have a group of really passionate people."

"We've been around 12 years," Boxenhorn adds, "and we're still here. So whatever we're doing is working."

Sara Ivry is a long-time member of the Park Slope Food Coop.

MOODOMETER: THE RETURN OF CROWDED AISLES

January 28, 2025

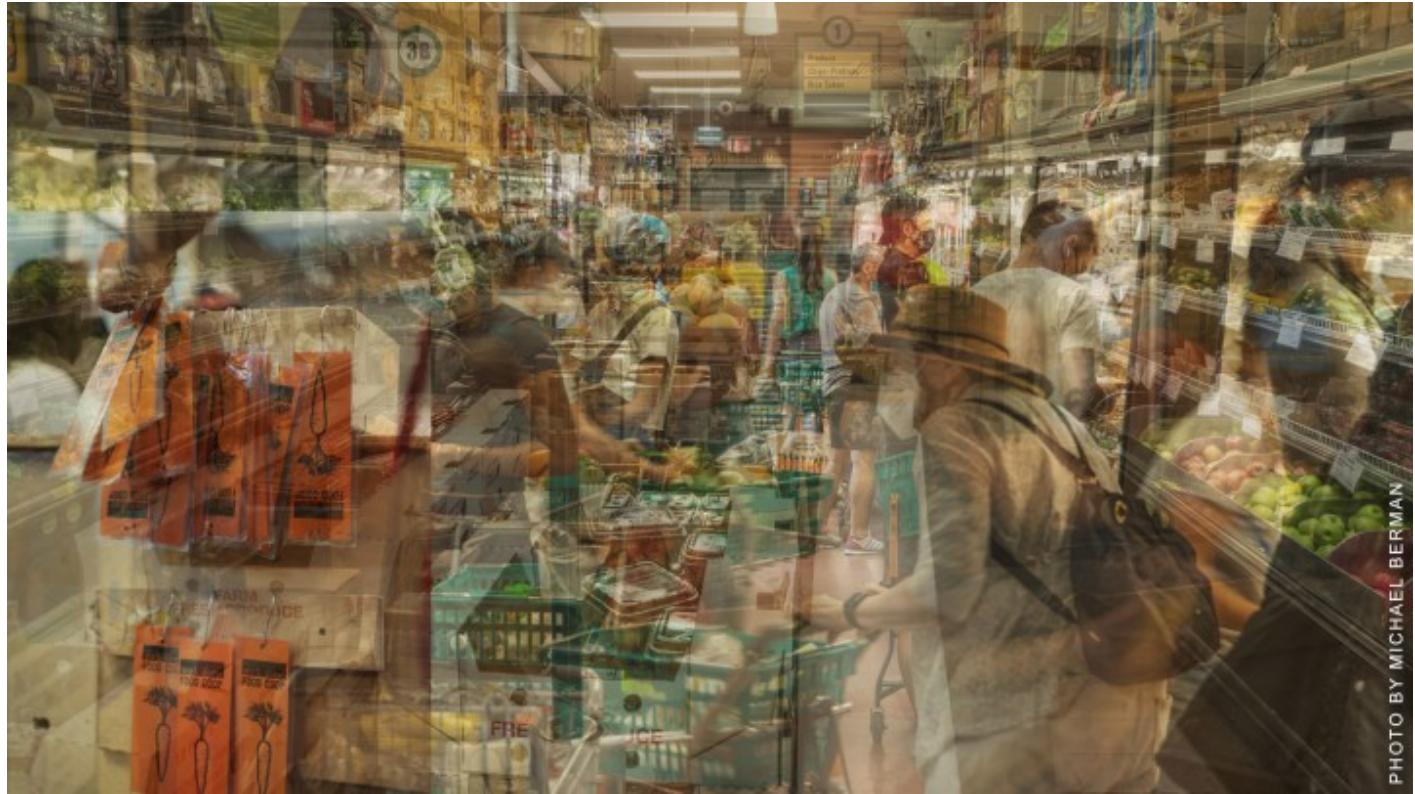


PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

By *Miranda Purves*

On a recent July Sunday afternoon outside the dear old Coop, things were feeling positively *Sesame Street*. Receiving workers paused to chat with friends, walkers sauntered in with carts, and children celebrating a birthday party raced into the foyer to find a scavenger-hunt clue. Suddenly, the mood darkened. “I was in line, you [expletive]! Didn’t you see my kid holding my spot?” a man yelled. He was about 6’4”, and the object of his rage was a somewhat shorter shopper waiting to enter the store. Other than him, the line consisted of a child who, up until that minute, had been darting around the place-marker pylons, spraying the laminated numbers from a bottle, his face behind a plastic shield.

“I didn’t know he was in line,” the recipient of the onslaught uttered, pulling back from the finger jutting into his face. The crowd quieted as the angry man continued to step toward him. “Don’t talk! Have some respect,” he said menacingly. The neon NEXT sign flashed and the man strode inside, commanding his child to wait by his cargo bike, while the victim of the aggression tried to regain his composure—as did the now-silenced crowd.

Despite the pandemic accouterments of the masks and spray bottles, the rest of the scene resembled the before times: the density of people outside; the genial, lively mood; the sudden altercation. In the past few months at the Coop, other than Coop co-founder and General Manager Joe Holtz being barred without pay for a month, the big news is old news: just as we'd gotten used to shopping under what former Governor Andrew Cuomo once called the "new normal," the normal-normal Coop has begun to seem possible again, including the defining feature of the return of somewhat more crowded aisles.

There are currently 62 orange shopper tags, aka "carrots," that the Coop uses to count and limit shoppers in the aisles. According to General Coordinator Ann Herpel, this number has been the same since fall of 2021. But those 62 carrots are running through more shoppers' hands throughout the day. We're also filling our carts at a less-harried pace.



PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

Members are seeing the return of a familiar sight in the Coop: crowded aisles. "Shopping had become utilitarian; you were coming to get your five things and get out," said Caroline Todd, a transportation planner with the MTA who was waiting out-

side for her shift to start. “Now it’s somewhere between the old days and that.”

The evolution of hyperexpedient shopping during the pandemic is a lovely example of what design and management theorists call *emergence*. This refers to novel behaviors and innovations that spring into existence organically when different elements within complex systems interact.

“As we all got accustomed to what was happening, people developed tools to make it easier for themselves,” Herpel said. The management quickly adapted to the crisis by combining recommendations from New York state—enforced traffic-flow patterns and decals on the floor marking distances—with new paid employees at the front of the Coop.

“No one was really interested in spending a lot of time in here,” Herpel said. “We were trying to facilitate that, and members responded and began to come in extraordinarily prepared to shop, with very detailed lists, schematically working out where things were on the shelves.”

Now some of the fear has lessened, and so has the distance between us. People are reaching over and under, navigating right-of-way and even—gasp!—gabbing in the aisles. Inevitably, this means more snapping as well as pleasantries. “People are forgetting about personal space again,” said Todd. But she quickly added that she loves the Coop. “We’re used to some chaos in the lines!”

The Coop’s commercial certificate of occupancy allows for 250 people within its 6,000 square feet. If you divide 6,000 by 250 you get 24 square feet per person, which sounds great: roughly a five-foot radius. But once you take into account the shelving, the checkout areas, the dairy stocking case, the individual carts and the Hollywood and U-boats, that space cushion evaporates.

In other words, we have plenty of legal leeway to sardine ourselves. Until the pandemic, that left the Coop management to determine a reasonable capacity. They had

some experience managing crowds on the fly before. Herpel described the scene in October 2012 as Hurricane Sandy blew in: people shoving inventory in backpacks, totes, anything, because all the carts and baskets were in use (they kept more out then), while the checkout line snaked around and then doubled up in produce.

"If someone had passed out in an aisle, the firefighters from next door would've taken minutes to get through," Herpel said. "You could just tell it wasn't safe." They decided to hand shoppers numbers and warehouse them upstairs in the meeting room, calling them down as people left.

But it wasn't until the peak lockdowns in the spring and early summer of 2020 that the store faced external strictures. The state said that essential businesses that remained open needed to operate at no more than 50 percent occupancy and provide six feet of distance between customers. At the Coop, having 125 people in the store wouldn't allow for six feet between them.

"We settled on 30," recalled Herpel, "then for a long time we stayed at 40." The store increased capacity incrementally, two at a time. After the staff was fully vaccinated, they became more comfortable with letting more shoppers in. Once member workers returned in July 2021, they decided to try 56 orange carrots and 20 blue, for workers to shop after their shifts, before settling on the current 62 and ending the requirement that member workers take a carrot to shop post-shift.

The state has long since lifted its capacity limits, but the Coop is so far sticking to its own, finding that this number allows in most members who want to shop without long outside waits. But membership is beginning to creep back up. Before the pandemic, it hovered above 17,000. In 2020, either because members faded away or decisively left, the number was down by 50 percent. Currently, there are 13,500.

Many of the members outside on that Sunday relished the increases and were happy that shoppers were back in the aisles. "I don't want a line outside!" said Adam Pollock, a Park Slope resident and father of the birthday girl on the scavenger hunt. "I'd

rather it be crowded inside, as COVID recedes.” His partner, Michal Lewin-Epstein, added, “I want non-member visits to resume!”

“THE MORE THE MERRIER! DURING THE PANDEMIC, SHOPPING WAS A HORROR SHOW, A KUBRICK MOVIE, AWFUL.”

MEMBER JAMES RUSCHAK

James Ruschak, a member for over 20 years, was standing outside while his cousin, who was working, brought him New York State cherries that had just hit the shelves. “The more the merrier!” he said. “During the pandemic shopping was a horror show, a Kubrick movie, awful.”



Coop member James Rushak

The new members interviewed for this article—who, it's important to note, have never experienced the pre-pandemic crowds that were once the norm—echoed Ruschak's sentiment, describing shopping as less stressful now that the store is busier.

Emily Seager, a Rockaway Beach resident, joined almost a year ago in July 2021. "People were on edge then," she said. "I value people feeling more comfortable now, walking closer to each other. There's not as much anxiety."

But Kate Barrow, a social worker and management consultant for nonprofit organizations, still remembers holiday shopping and the different kind of tension generated by Coop crowds, even when they're not the possibly-contagious, burned-out, masked zombies we've all been in the more-recent past.

"I had so many of those experiences [of personal space invasions] pre-pandemic that anytime it was super crowded I would just end up leaving, as in: I can't handle this stress. 'I think I'm being really polite, you seem to think I'm being really rude, I don't know what to do,'" Barrow said.

Laura Tucker, a writer, noted that shopping in the 35-people days did have a certain luxuriousness. "This is the first Sunday that I am struck by how crowded it is. But I understand they have to do what they have to do," she said.

Some of the Coop pandemic changes will serve to make the store a little less crowded even if we do zoom back up to 17,000 and do away with the carrots. Now, shift changes are staggered. "It took a pandemic to figure this out!" laughed Herpel. "We used to always complain pre-pandemic on a Saturday afternoon at 3:30 when a bunch of people would come off of checkout, food processing and receiving shifts, 'Why did you come shopping at shift change?'"



PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

General Coordinator Ann Herpel

“THERE IS A CAPACITY TO THE COOP. I DON’T THINK THERE’S AN AGREEMENT AS TO WHAT THAT CAPACITY IS. WHAT COULD WE FINANCIALLY SUPPORT?”

GENERAL COORDINATOR ANN HERPEL

Management has also gotten better at comparing revenue with membership information. Because each transaction is tagged to a household membership number, they can see which members are actually shopping and how much each household buys. The store has always had access to these numbers but didn’t make use of them until trying to survive the financial crisis in 2020 with the help of federal aid, when both capacity limits and membership cut sales by about 30 percent. Going forward, this data analysis will help us determine how, and when, to grow.

"There is a capacity to the Coop. I don't think there's an agreement as to what that capacity is," said Herpel. "What could we financially support? It depends on what you want to do."

If shopping is more pleasant at a \$42 million business rather than a \$58 million business, the Coop would have to make choices, such as having fewer staff members, which is the biggest expense, she said.

But the Coop has to plan for some growth to keep up with inflation, which puts pressure on operating expenses. Even when the economy isn't grappling with runaway numbers, the Federal Reserve aims for a 2-percent-per-year target. To stay solvent, the store needs either to increase the number of shoppers, which equals crowded aisles, or encourage fewer shoppers—via incentives, refunds, minimums or other mechanisms—to buy more food. Or there's the option of markup increases—which would be about as popular as solar power in coal country.

How we feel about crowded aisles is an issue central to how we want to structure ourselves, what we want to take away from the pandemic and what we don't. Barrow mused that it might be preferable to keep a capacity limit permanently, particularly since there isn't a clear-cut end to COVID-19. But Ruschak's in favor of letting it all resume: "I'm a closet sociologist so I kind of liked the old way. Even when it was bad, it was good!"

Miranda Purves is a writer who's lived in the South Slope since 2005.

HOW CHILD CARE ISSUES ARE AFFECTING COOP MEMBERSHIP

January 28, 2025



Above: The Room Formerly Known as Childcare.

By Suzanne Cope

As of July 12, the Coop has reinstated member work requirements, requiring that every adult member of a household work a shift every seven weeks, for now.

Members can ask for a COVID exemption through October 31st (for reasons that include having a child at home who is too young to be vaccinated), but after that date nearly every adult member will need to sign up for shifts through the new scheduling system accessed via the online Member Services site. Hopes are that the Coop will begin to return to a new normal. Although there is one notable exception: the indefinite closing of the child care room.



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PHOTO BY NANCY ROSENBERG

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While I didn't hear from any parents who want the child care room open, and the office has yet to field any requests, some parents who relied upon Coop-based child care to facilitate their work shift pre-pandemic find themselves in a challenging spot that echoes broader societal conversation around parenting and working in a pandemic.

Countless articles have highlighted the plight of working parents with limited or nonexistent childcare during the pandemic, who have had to negotiate work and sudden school closures and classroom quarantines, and whose mental health has suffered from the non-stop working and care-giving. Further, there are a record number of people leaving positions—often citing a disconnect between their own work-life balance and job expectations.

Here at the Coop, too, there is evidence that the return to in-person work requirements, with no flexibility for parents of young children, is taxing some parent-members.

Nell, a new member and parent to two elementary-aged kids, was excited to join to expand her family's access to healthy and affordable foods. But she has become disillusioned with the seeming lack of flexibility of work requirements for parents of young kids, and worries that she will have even fewer options as she job-searches.

Nell said, "an issue I encountered is that there are few shifts that I can sign up for because I have to schedule the times where I know the kids are at school," which are not plentiful. She had signed up for one on Monday, October 11th but then realized that she would have to reschedule because it was a school holiday. She added, "and once I find a new job, my options will dwindle down to nothing." Gone, for the time being at least, are the days when one could bring their children in during the late afternoon or early evening, grab some snacks from downstairs for dinner, and have them work on homework or play during a parents' shift.



Maya and Dora Solovey, mother and child. Maya says that she has to shop more frequently since there is no childcare, and that her daughter would love to play at the Coop. Sergio and Caetano Krakowski were the only other parents shopping together with their children at 11:00 a.m. on October 12.

A solo mom with a one year old said she might take a leave of absence after the October 31 COVID exemption is over, and another new parent, Sarah, has echoed the same. She says, "we're definitely worried about what it will be like when [parent leave] runs out and we both have to do shifts with two kids and both of us working full time. We're already thinking we might have to take a leave from the Coop."

But the Coop is also in a tough position. The Coop has lost around 4,000 members in the last 18 months and has not been accepting any new members (although they will begin to do so soon). More members are needed both to provide people-power—and

to shop to bring in revenue.



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The lack of child care has had an effect on shopping habits as well. Stephanie, a parent to a two and six year old, praised how the Coop has handled safety and resiliency over the last year and a half, and also loves the flexibility and ease of the new shift sign-up system. She says that her family has been “able to deal” with completing their shifts, but adds, “the combination of an earlier closing time and no child care means that we go less.”

For her, these factors greatly limit when she can schedule solo shopping since she can’t go after her childrens’ bedtime, nor does she bring them over the weekend as the Coop had initially requested that children not accompany parents while shopping. She suspects other parents have limited their shopping for similar reasons, which frustrates her, because, she says, “I love the Coop and I want it to survive!”

Childcare challenges have affected my family as well. My new work shift on the Gazette is virtual, which fulfills my work requirement. But my husband Steve is the primary caregiver to our two year old, who is only in daycare part-time, and he must also pick up her brother from school by early afternoon. He has yet to schedule a shift

because he would be forced to give up some of the few hours he has to meet colleagues during normal work hours.

I work outside of the house and don't return until after the last shift starts. Most weekends are spent visiting extended family in upstate, leaving few options. "I would literally be paying daycare and losing money from lost work so that I can work at the Coop," Steve says. Luckily he had banked a number of FTOP shifts from years ago, so we have some time to figure out a workable solution.

Annette Laskaris, PSFC Membership Coordinator, has responded to these concerns noting that the decrease in members has made the work requirement more urgent. But she has some hopeful news as well, adding that she expects shopping hours to be lengthened again "within six months or less."

Annette also commented on the request to not bring children shopping, saying that it was done in the beginning of the pandemic when the lines were long and capacity limits were first introduced, with an aim to allow more shopping members into the Coop. The Coop has decided to continue these capacity limits but, she said, bringing children shopping is becoming less of an issue as there have been few, if no lines lately. "We want people to come shop," she said. "We need people to shop!"

Annette also noted that she has heard only a few complaints about the work requirement from parents with childcare challenges, and doesn't see the child care room opening in the foreseeable future.

Rather, she said that parents need to get creative about finding ways to schedule their work shifts. "You already have to manage your life outside of the Coop without anybody watching your kids," she says. "You can schedule whenever you have time, or can get a friend to watch your child... I think you can manage, even as a single parent."



PHOTO BY NANCY ROSENBERG

The Coop still serves children.

Once the COVID exemption expires in a few weeks, time will tell if parents of young children can fulfill their work requirement, or if it becomes a reason they might have to leave the Coop as some have indicated. The grace period for suspension has been extended to 35 days, so that might give some caregivers time to find needed child-care. But perhaps the Coop can use this time to come up with a more tenable solution, possibly inspired by approaches that came up during the research of this article.

Often parents of young kids would use working in the childcare room as their work requirement, allowing them to contribute while still being with their children. Can we reframe the care of young children as a shift in and of itself: that one partner of a family with young kids might receive an earned work credit automatically to show we value the work done in the home to keep our young members healthy and safe? This would allow the Coop to be seen as a leader among institutions on prioritizing family care over traditional productivity, as they have shown themselves through their leadership keeping shoppers and workers safe and healthy during the last 18 months.

Or at the very least perhaps the Coop administration can model a program based on the long history of mutual aid in progressive communities, creating a formal system where members can contribute FTOP shifts for those who most need it. Certainly many families can “make it work”—as more than one interviewee told me—but why push already taxed families to the limit? Why create one more barrier to being a part of our community for access to affordable and healthy food?

Long-time member Carl, who is also the dad of two elementary-aged kids, supported finding easy avenues for Coop members to help out caregivers in need. He and his wife have some scheduling flexibility and will be able to manage their work shifts, but he acknowledges their privilege. “It’s people like me who should be stepping up to support the Coop for those who aren’t so lucky,” Carl said. “That’s the part of being in the Coop community that is meaningful to me.”

STORE CREDITS AND RECEIPTS

January 28, 2025

On August 25, I received a \$10 store credit at the office and forgot to give it to the cashier when I checked out. I wrapped the little credit receipt paper around my Coop card, so I wouldn’t forget the next time I shopped. When I returned, on September 28th, I was informed that 30 days had passed and my store credit had expired. So I’m writing to ask: why do store credits expire? I’m sure it has to do with tracking revenue. But the Coop is capable of accepting and tracking member investments over decades. Why should members lose money because the Coop won’t track member credits for more than 30 days? And why are store credits paper receipts? The Coop should track store credits electronically. That way losing the receipt wouldn’t also mean losing the money.

Thanks,

David Rood-Ojalvo

NEW HIRES SINCE COVID

January 28, 2025

From top: Kamila Nuritova, Gustavo Lopez, Tim Mahoney, Zili Wang and Moussa Thiam. They're all Receiving Coordinators, except Kamila, who works on membership, and Tim, who in addition to receiving, has maintenance and repair responsibilities.

Photos by Zachary Schulman.



• Kamila Nuritova



• Kamila Nuritova



Gustavo Lopez



• Gustavo Lopez



• Tim Mahoney



Tim Mahoney



• Zili Wang



Zili Wang



• Moussa Thiam



Moussa Thiam

TEMP WORKERS WERE MEMBERS

January 28, 2025

LET'S JUST START HERE:

All Temp workers were members. Not everyone knew this information. A lot of Coop members would come in to shop during the height of the pandemic and complain about "us." As if we were outsiders, who somehow infiltrated the Coop, and changed

it into something else, something different. In actuality, we were the members who lost our jobs, lost our source of income, lost our benefits (if we had any); who reached out in an uncertain time during the bleakest time in our immediate history—a worldwide pandemic—and helped the Coop to survive. We came in and worked eight-hour shifts, killing our bodies, but also happy to have the work so we could pay some bills and put food on our tables. We bonded with each other, laughed, shared our struggles, and shared our love for food, music, art—whatever we were interested in—with each other. The Coop was quieter than before the pandemic, the world was quieter. That meant that we could see each other in a new and different way. We met people that we didn't meet when the world was busy with its business. I will always look back at this time, and think about the people I met and worked with, with the utmost respect and fondness, as we all move into the future. I know some I will see again and some I probably won't. It's just the way the world works. I think some of my lasting thoughts are these: Is a community built on great food at cheap prices enough? Or do we need and want something more than that? The Coop brings us together. I guess it's up to each one of us as members to decide what we value in a "community."

*Lisa Martin
(former Temp worker)*

TIME FOR A VACCINE MANDATE AT THE COOP

January 28, 2025

DEAR *LINEWAITERS' GAZETTE* EDITORS,

It is time for the Coop to implement a vaccine mandate for its members. I understand that not everyone is able to get a vaccine, including those with autoimmune disorders, those receiving chemotherapy, etc. However, the vast majority of people, including the vast majority of Coop members, do not fall into these categories. For those of

us who are able, the time to hesitate is through.

It was heartening to see, during the pandemic, how Coop members eagerly adopted public health best practices: social distancing, masking, limiting the number of members in the Coop at a time, etc. The Coop did a much better job than most other institutions at keeping its members safe and healthy.

Now the Coop must take the next step: require members, who are able to receive a vaccine, to be vaccinated if they intend to remain members.

While I understand indoor masking will be the norm for some time, if we are ever to return to a world without masks, we must be vaccinated. It is not fair that the majority of members must continue wearing masks on their shifts indefinitely because a few holdouts refuse to get vaccinated. Life must eventually return to normal. The best way to accelerate that process is to require all Coop members who are able to get vaccinated to do so.

Sincerely,

Taylor Wofford