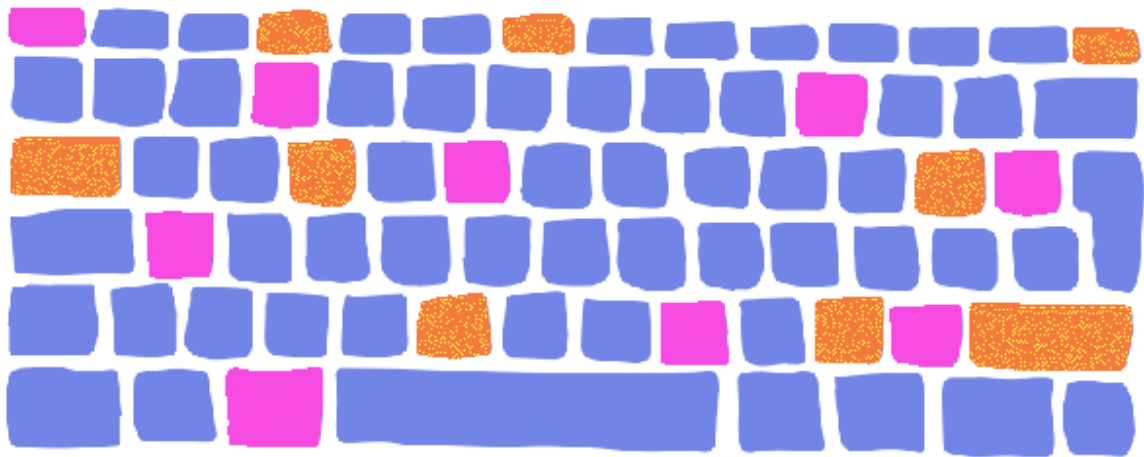


SEPTEMBER 24, 2024

September 24, 2024

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



JEEZ THE CHEESE IS TOO BIG

Hi Members,

I'm not necessarily a cheese enthusiast, but my partner and son are. They love cheese and love trying new cheeses. Years ago, this was easy to do, as the cheeses cut were of various shapes and sizes.

For the past many years, however, cheeses tend to be about the same size, which discourages trying different types. I'd love to buy a piece of parmesan, but not a \$10 block of it. I'm hoping we can add a diversity of sizes to the cheeses being displayed which would reflect our members' various needs.

Here's to bringing back small and medium sizes of cheese—let's make cheese great again.

Thanks and hope to see the new sizes soon.

Respectfully in cooperation,

Jesse Farrell

RE: CRITIQUE OF JULY 2024 PROPOSAL ITEM

To the Members:

Three Coop area coordinators brought a proposal item to the July 2024 General Meeting (GM) on behalf of a group of 52 area coordinators. It was posted in the GM agenda notice as "Urgent Resubmission of Personnel Committee Proposal," and was a reworking of a similar proposal that was brought by the General Coordinators to the April 2024 GM and voted down. Both proposals sought to set policies concerning the powers of the Coop committee known as the Personnel Committee, as well as detailing the supervisory hierarchy of Coop staff. The version of the proposal brought to the July 2024 GM was approved by the members.

Both versions of the proposal included language that disenfranchises membership, which I find unnecessary and baffling.

One is the statement:

“The personnel policies of the Park Slope Food Coop shall be the responsibility of the General Manager, GC Team, and/or the Personnel Committee. Those entities have the sole authority to bring agenda items related to personnel policies to the General Meeting.”

Why can't a non-General Coordinator or non-Personnel Committee member bring an agenda item concerning personnel policies if that member thinks it's needed? Very perplexing.

Two is the statement:

“Once approved, the above motions shall replace all other GM-approved motions on matters in the areas specified above regarding employment policies and procedures for the General Coordinators and the General Manager.”

What is objectionable to me about this is that the GM was not provided with the specific policies and procedures being replaced. These documents could and should have been made available to members so they could be fully informed on the matter. Links to these documents could have been posted online or emailed to members before the meeting.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth Tobier

RE: "THE COOP IS AT CAPACITY AND CROWDED: CAN ANYTHING BE DONE?"

Dear fellow members:

In reading this article I was struck by the mention of the Second Location Study Committee (SLSC), its rigorous investigation into the feasibility and the community benefits of a second location, and its simple rejection by a close margin of 74 votes to 64 votes. That's 138 of approximately 16,000 Coop members who participated in the vote. The article goes on to survey several other potential avenues for increasing capacity and improving efficiency within the walls of the current PSFC building, none of which sound promising or would benefit the greater Brooklyn community and sustainable vendors at large.

After reading this article, I went back to look at the PSFC's Mission Statement. There are two lines included that I believe support the ideas held within the SLSC's report. Support for that initiative had the potential to satisfy our Mission and would also ameliorate the problem of overcrowding at the PSFC.

Here are the two lines:

"We are a part of and support the cooperative movement."

"We strive to reduce the impact of our lifestyles on the world we share with other species and future generations."

I am familiar with SLSC's report and was one of the 138 voters. I am writing this letter with the hope of stimulating interest in the ideas and information gathered by the SLSC. My concern is that the participation of voting members was woefully small and a good idea was laid to rest prematurely.

A third line from our Mission statement speaks to this hope:

“We seek to maximize participation at every level, from policy making to running the store.”

Cheers!

Rebecca Stronger

REGARDING REFERENDA AND HYBRID MEETINGS

To the Editors,

With all the controversy about holding referenda and hybrid meetings, a few statistics I obtained from the office may shed some light on these subjects.

It turns out that the total number of members who participated in this year’s Board of Directors election out of more than 15,000 members was around 3,800, and this was apparently atypically high, likely due to efforts to get BDS partisans onto the Board; the number of members who vote is usually around 1,000—a tiny fraction of the total.

As for virtual meetings, during the height of the pandemic, after an initial surge in attendance in the spring of 2020, the numbers dwindled and ultimately fell to under 100 by August 2023.

Even the unprecedented and very costly 2012 General Meeting, which required security presence to consider a referendum on joining BDS, attracted fewer than 2,000 members.

It’s likely that referenda and hybrid meetings would produce similarly minimal participation since the vast majority of members simply want to do their work shifts and shop at the Coop in a congenial and welcoming atmosphere and aren’t interested in subjects outside the Coop’s fundamental mission of providing good food at low prices

for working members.

Sylvia Lowenthal

BOYCOTT NEXT STEPS: A MODEST PROPOSAL

Dear fellow members,

I'd like to propose a simple, hopefully modest proposal as we look to individually express our views on a boycott of Israeli goods—in short, let us all vote with our wallets as we see fit.

To those that support a boycott: create a list of all products that you believe should not be purchased, publicize that list in a central location (perhaps on a social media page dedicated to the effort), and encourage those that agree with you to not buy those products.

Others who do not support the boycott can continue to purchase products as they see fit.

There is rarely a one-size-fits-all solution to complex issues, especially those as nuanced and emotionally charged as this, and pushing for an entire community to adopt a set of principles is divisive and unnecessary. Let us all be informed and take individual action that aligns with our own personal outlook.

In cooperation, even when we disagree,

Paul Blachar

GENERAL COORDINATORS (GCS) ANN HERPEL AND MATT HOAGLAND RESPOND TO STEPHEN KLEIN'S LETTER, "OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES OF FINDING WORK SHIFTS":

Dear Stephen,

We offer these answers to help all Coop members understand how complex Coop operations are and the factors that must be considered before changing the labor system.

1. **Availability of Shifts**

As of Sept. 3, there were 12,037 members in the work pool. The six-week shift calendar had 2,184 shifts per week, projecting 13,104 shifts per cycle. The difference between these two figures (work pool and projected shifts over six weeks) is 1,067, leaving a weekly surplus of 177 shifts. In other words, there is at least one shift for every member to work in the six-week cycle, plus 1,067.

Members might feel that there is a dearth of shifts. But from an operational perspective, even with the surplus, the Coop often runs without optimal member-workers where work goes uncompleted or staff step in because the task has to be done.

2. **Expanded store hours are coming soon.** While the start date is TBD, the GCs have decided to expand the shopping hours to 8:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Sunday hours will remain 8:00 a.m. – 8:00 p.m. Closing the Coop one hour later, six days per week, will add approximately 30 shifts, meeting at the end of the Coop day, per week.

3. **Reducing the shift length to two hours or increasing the shift cycle length:** Neither would affect shift size, nor reduce demand for popular shifts and start times.

The benefit of reducing the shift length would be to add one more shift-time daily at

the END the day, something the expanded store hours will accomplish. However, unlike expanding hours, it would also be burdensome for the operations for many other reasons we can't explain in this brief response.

Increasing the cycle length beyond six weeks would require the Coop to grow around 2,000 members per additional week, far beyond our building's capacity to buy, receive, shelf, and sell groceries to the membership. The impact on the check-out line or queue to enter would be detrimental, to say the least.

4. **Limiting Shift Credits:** Only 3% of the members in the working-pool have 10 or more shifts in their shift bank. Many work on committees like the Gazette or Chair Committee or restricted shifts that need additional training unavailable to most members. Those that do use the shift calendar are more than balanced out by the shift surplus. In fact, the vast majority of members— over 95%—have shift credit banks ranging from -3 to +2 shifts. They are not accumulating enough shifts to crowd out other members from the shift calendar. Note there is currently a two-shift limit on scheduled shifts that helps to prevent shift hoarding.

PERSONNEL POLICIES LEAD TO COOP DIVIDE

September 24, 2024



By Sanoja Bhaumik

At the April 30 General Meeting, General Coordinators Joe Holtz and Lisa Moore introduced an agenda item to update personnel policies, which they described as outdated compared to current human resources (HR) practices. In a surprising turn, the item was rejected, in part because of organized opposition from PSFC Members for Palestine.

Prior to the meeting, PSFC Members for Palestine published a memo arguing that the proposal “concentrates even more executive power in the hands of the General Coordinators,” with “alarming” implications for labor practices and union busting.

Those opposed to the group have since responded. Ramon Maislen, candidate for Board of Directors, wrote in a recent *Linewaiters’ Gazette* letter to the editor, “[The

PSFC Members for Palestine] are encouraging members to vote against Coop interests even when they are unrelated to a boycott.”

THE QUESTION REMAINS: HOW DID AN AGENDA ITEM RELATED TO EMPLOYEE HANDBOOKS BECOME SO DIVISIVE?

In addition to the debate around the proposal’s content, the vote itself was controversial. There were not enough written ballots, and the Chair Committee was forced to initiate two hand counts, both of which resulted in the rejection of the proposal. Park Slope Food Coop staff and PSFC Members for Palestine both criticized the lack of organization. But the question remains: How did an agenda item related to employee handbooks become so divisive?

THE PERSONNEL COMMITTEE

Holtz and Moore first proposed changes to the personnel policies at the March GM. They designed the proposal to address “deficiencies” in current policies and centralize all policies in a single place.

PSFC Members for Palestine voiced several concerns, writing that the proposal did not “address the problems that led to the Personnel Committee’s current dysfunction.” In a statement to the *Gazette*, the group added, “The proposal’s language was unclear. The first and second paragraphs contradicted each other.”

The first clause states that the “GCs shall be solely responsible for all personnel-related matters,” while the second states that the “Personnel Committee, in collaboration with the General Coordinator team, shall be solely responsible for all personnel-related matters.”

The proposal consolidates Coop HR practices already in place, and therefore may not

alter the GCs' authority over HR. Jana Cunningham, Membership Coordinator, wrote to the *Gazette*, "The identical HR practices are listed in several different GM mandates. General Coordinators have the responsibility for HR and the authority to take disciplinary actions, in accordance with the Employee Handbook in regards to the Area Coordinators, this remains the same."

PSFC MEMBERS FOR PALESTINE STATED, "PEOPLE ALSO WANTED TO KNOW WHY THE PERSONNEL COMMITTEE HAS REMAINED SEVERELY UNDERSTAFFED FOR ABOUT 15 MONTHS. THE PROPOSERS DIDN'T ANSWER."

The Personnel Committee was created in 1981 to be a five-member elected council. Its mandate, as reiterated by the Committee in 2022, has been the following: "The Committee is an elected group of members that serves in an advisory capacity to the General Coordinators, supporting them with personnel matters such as performance evaluations, succession planning and developing human resources policies."

At present, the Personnel Committee only has two members. Speaking about the March GM, PSFC Members for Palestine stated, "People also wanted to know why the Personnel Committee has remained severely understaffed for about 15 months. The proposers didn't answer."

In July of 2022, the Committee faced intense criticism after suspending Holtz without pay for 30 days after he breached COVID-19 protocols. In August of 2022, in a letter published in the *Gazette*, Safe Food Committee staff member Margaret Maugenest wrote, "One has to wonder about the agenda of the Personnel Committee. Who are these people? Why is there no appeal process to challenge the Personnel Committee's decision?"

In another letter published in November of 2022, Coop member Claudia Joseph added, "It is time to rethink the structure of the Personnel Committee: Five members who

were elected by uncontested vote are clearly not qualified to wield this much power.”

DEBATING THE PROPOSAL

The Personnel Committee proposal introduced by Holtz and Moore was ostensibly designed to address structural issues that became apparent in the aftermath of Holtz’s suspension. But it remains unclear how the proposal updates policies to meet “widely accepted HR practices.”

Holtz and Moore noted that the proposal had been designed with consultation from the two-member Personnel Committee and with input from an employment lawyer recommended by the National Co+Op Grocers. On its website, the latter describes itself as “a business services cooperative for retail food co-ops located throughout the United States.”

Cunningham noted that the GC proposal would correct the Coop’s current practices, some of which she called “outdated and potentially libelous.”

At the March GM, the GCs agreed to take members’ feedback into account when reintroducing the proposal at the following meeting. The policy introduced in April returned with one addition: “The complaint policy includes the provision to employ a neutral third-party employment lawyer to thoroughly investigate these complaints and provide recommended courses of action for any offenses committed.”

THE LETTER ALSO CRITICIZED THE “POLITICIZED EFFORTS”: “THE PSFC MEMBERS FOR PALESTINE GROUP ENCOURAGED THEIR MEMBERS TO VOTE AGAINST THE BEST INTEREST OF THE COOP AND THE STAFF.”

No alternative proposals—such as contracting an outside HR service to bear responsibility for all personnel issues—were considered. PSFC Members for Palestine comment-

ed to the *Gazette*, “No proposal, including one presented by a general coordinator, is automatically entitled to a yes vote. A new proposal must address the ambiguities and contradictions that a majority of members voted down in April.”

Following the April GM vote, a group of 43 Area Coordinators—non-GC paid staff at the Coop—signed a letter to the Agenda Committee criticizing the “no” vote and the handling of the agenda item.

The letter also criticized the “politicized efforts” of the PSFC Members for Palestine: “The PSFC Members for Palestine group encouraged their members to vote against the best interest of the Coop and the staff and we believe this leaves the Coop vulnerable to any potential wrongdoing by senior staff.”

The letter supports the GC’s GM proposal, stating that it puts “the Personnel Committee and the General Coordinators in a better position to make much needed decisions on personnel issues that are currently not possible.” Despite this expressed backing, the letter also proposes significant amendments to the GC proposal—amendments yet to be introduced in the April GM.

The Area Coordinators’ amended proposal excludes the first item of the original GC--supported proposal, which places responsibility for personnel-related matters in the hands of the GC. Instead, the amended proposal suggests: “The Personnel Committee, in collaboration with the General Manager and General Coordinator team, shall be responsible for the hiring, compensation and employment policies for the General Coordinator team.”

The amended proposal also sets forth a plan for selecting the Personnel Committee—a feature absent from the original proposal—that would include the participation of two GCs, the General Manager and four Area Coordinators.

While the amended proposal diverges from the GC proposal with these two changes, the Area Coordinator staff who signed “resent this [GC] proposal having been hi-

jacked by a member group whose purpose is unrelated to the matter at hand.” The letter continues, “Nothing in the GC proposal mentions Palestine.”

This concern was echoed by individual staff. Cunningham, who signed the letter, commented to the *Gazette*:

What concerns me is that an organized group of members can make a statement like “the GC proposal had alarming implications for labor practices and union-busting,” which was inflammatory and completely inaccurate, influence others to vote against the best interest of the Coop staff and put the Coop at financial risk.

WHAT COMES NEXT?

Personnel policies will undoubtedly reemerge as a central issue in future GMs, but the discussion risks veering into debate around PSFC Members for Palestine’s tactics and right to organize.

Responding to criticism around their involvement, the PSFC Members for Palestine stated:

We believe meaningful member participation strengthens our democratic governance system and upholds our cooperative principles[...] Rather than acknowledging the weaknesses in their proposal, the GCs chose to undermine our Coop’s democratic tenets by vilifying member engagement.

For Cunningham, the most important step is to move forward with changes to the personnel policies. “My colleagues and I (more than half of the ACs) firmly support the GC proposal and want to see its implementation as soon as possible,” she added.

Amid the debate, all seem to agree that the most important goal is for the Coop to be a safe, welcoming work environment, in which issues of fairness, discrimination and labor standards can be handled in a confidential and professional manner.

APRIL GENERAL MEETING REPORT

September 24, 2024



By Anita Bushell

Personnel Policies, Childcare Woes, and Home Delivery: Highlights from the April 30 General Meeting

The April 30, 2024 General Meeting focused on personnel policies, updates to the Personnel Committee and General Coordinator roles, as well as solutions for families without childcare.

OPEN FORUM

In the open forum, members brought up several concerns surrounding the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, including opinions on boycotting Israeli products to protest the war in Gaza; the issue of whether the group Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BD-S) supports violence; and a 4/30/24 *Linewaiters' Gazette* letter titled "Coop Members Engage in Intimidation Campaign." A member who had recently traveled to Israel and Palestine spoke about the need for inclusivity at the Coop at this time. Several members advocated for hybrid (in person and video) General Meetings to accommodate those who cannot get to in-person meetings. One member spoke about how successful the Coop is and the need to bring the model to other neighborhoods. A member asked why childcare is not returning to the Coop.

TREASURER'S REPORT

Treasurer and General Manager Joe Holtz began his report by answering the question about childcare. The Coop cannot reinstate childcare because insurers will no longer provide coverage unless the Coop becomes a licensed childcare facility. Holtz shared the financial summary for the 8-week period ending March 24, 2024. Highlights included:

- Average weekly sales were \$1,122,000 (2024), compared to \$1,049,000 (2023)
- The gross margin was \$1,724,000
- There was a \$49,000 shortfall to cover current expenses of \$1,773,000
- Cash and cash equivalents were \$7.8 million, as opposed to \$7.3 million in 2023
- Employee health benefits were 3.93% of sales as compared to 2.90% in the same period of the prior year

Holtz spoke about the gross margin drop this period versus the same period last year, as a result of decreasing the 25% markup to 24%, which lowers gross margin. Another factor in lowered gross margin is "shrink" (a loss of inventory because of fac-

tors such as damages, theft or administrative errors).

Holtz discussed the Coop's financial plans for the future, which include: home delivery, which will begin in approximately one year; restoring nine regular checkout stations (as opposed to the current seven); a savings plan of \$7.5 to \$10 million for the next pandemic because of concerns that the grocery industry will not receive the same support from the government that it got during the Covid pandemic.

During the Q&A period, a member asked whether expenses will be going up; another member asked what current interest rates were (5-5.25%). The question of how many members there currently are came up (15,900), and a discussion ensued about membership size control since 2009 because of lack of space at the Coop.

GENERAL COORDINATOR REPORTS

Joe Szladek opened the report by introducing the possibility of home delivery on weekdays as opposed to weekends. He then outlined the state of the current online member labor system, which has now been in place for three years, as member labor returned in full in July 2022. Szladek elaborated on the ongoing challenge of full operation with enough member labor, while having enough shifts for members to sign up for.

General Coordinator Ann Herpel added that it was important that members schedule more shifts if necessary to stay up to date, as well as plan for the summer, in case of absence for vacations. In addition, she reminded members that the online system responds to sales decreases, and fewer slots will be available when the Coop is receiving and selling less food in the summer months. During the Q&A period, members asked about growth in membership, beer committee work and an increase in stocking shifts.

A PUBLIC JOB PERFORMANCE REVIEW IS CONTRARY TO GOOD HUMAN RESOURCES

PRACTICE AND COULD EASILY RESULT IN A LAWSUIT AGAINST THE COOP.

Previous open forum questions were addressed, including push notifications for early-morning shifts, whether member labor would be involved in the proposed home delivery system, as well as shifts for the recently created Youth Committee, whose members are between 18 and 22 years old.

AGENDA ITEM: ROLE OF PERSONNEL COMMITTEE

General Coordinators (GCs) Joe Holtz and Lisa Moore presented a proposal for new Personnel Committee (PC) practices. Holtz stated that the GCs, in reviewing General Meeting-approved personnel policies, realized that there were deficiencies that needed to be addressed. Holtz referred to a 1981 policy that states that one role of the PC is for all performance reviews of GCs to come to the GM in writing and verbally. Holtz stated that a public job performance review is contrary to good human resources (HR) practice and could easily result in a lawsuit against the Coop. HR-related discussions must take place confidentially under the guidance of qualified HR professionals. The GCs work with the PC and an attorney recommended by National Cooperative Grocers to develop comprehensive policies that comply with widely accepted HR practices and establish a system of accountability and fairness. Holtz stated that the role of the PC, as delineated in this evening's proposal, is a result of that process. Additionally, Holtz said, the Coop and the GCs need a fully functioning PC. Passing this proposal would be a vital step to rebuilding the PC, which currently has two of the seven authorized member positions filled. Approving this proposal would allow the Coop to once again look for additional members of the PC.

The GCs and the PC have explored the possibility of implementing an appeals process, however after consulting multiple HR attorneys the Coop has been counseled that such an implementation could result in legal action against the Coop. The proposal outlines a neutral outside employment lawyer to conduct an investigation of complaints.

Moore then read part one of the PC proposal, relating to the role of the GCs in personnel policies. Moore stated that the proposal asks to combine into one coherent policy the current policy which was granted to the GCs by the GM over two separate proposals, in 1995 and 2002, and has been the practice for decades. Moore stated that the turnover in Coop staff is extremely low. Additionally, Coop employee policies are regularly reviewed by employment lawyers and employee handbook changes are regularly made with the input of Coop staff.

Moore then outlined and read part two of the proposal, which addresses the role of the PC. The purpose of part two of the proposal is to establish a system of accountability for the management team. The current proposal was approved in 1981, when standards were lower on PCs and would leave the Coop open to litigation. Moore re-emphasized the importance of rebuilding the Coop in order to clarify the role of the PC and asked for the GM to support the proposal.

THE COOP NO LONGER HAS SQUADS AND SQUAD LEADERS, WHICH HAS ROBBED THE COOP OF A SENSE OF COMMUNITY, SAID A MEMBER.

During the Q&A period members asked questions including who appoints the members of the PC, and why it is currently understaffed. Another member asked about grievances and how they would be handled by the PC. Moore outlined how the current grievance process works. A member referred to a previous issue with a GC and how it was handled 15 months ago. Moore stated that personnel matters remain confidential in reference to this incident. One member asked whether members would be on the PC or only GCs. Moore answered by stating that PC applications would be from the membership pool, and then outlined how the applications process works.

After discussion, the meeting voted by hand count, because not enough ballots had been prepared. There were two attempts at counting hands. The first result was 71 yes, 86 no votes. The second result was 80 yes, 85 no votes. Thus, the proposal was

voted down.

AGENDA ITEM: CHILDCARE

Member Lauren Belski presented the agenda item, and proposed returning to a more “family friendly” Coop. She described the struggle of parents who cannot make it to GMs, or work shifts because of challenges with the current online labor system. In addition, Belski spoke about how the shift cycle is now different and that the Coop no longer has squads and squad leaders, which has robbed the Coop of a sense of community. Belski also brought up the possibility of hybrid General Meetings so that more members could attend. Holtz reminded the meeting that the Coop bylaws state that meetings must be in person (they were remote only during the pandemic) and that a change in meeting style would first mean a change in the bylaws. Members presented their views regarding childcare and hybrid meetings.

PRESENTATION OF MINUTES

Elizabeth Tobier presented the minutes of March 26, 2024; no corrections were made.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETING

Tim Hospodor chaired the meeting and all members of the board present voted in favor of accepting the advice of the members on the minutes of the March 26, 2024 GM. All members of the board present voted in favor of accepting the advice of the members on Agenda Item 1, Personnel Policies: Personnel Committee and General Coordinator Roles.

The meeting adjourned at 9:30 p.m.

Anita Bushell is a freelance writer who has been published in Friends Journal, Ford Foundation Report, and Uncensored: American Experiences with Poverty and Homelessness. She just published Object Essays.

TENSIONS RISE AT THE SEPTEMBER GENERAL MEETING

September 24, 2024



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.

REPORT ON THE 7/27 GENERAL MEETING

September 24, 2024



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 or-

ganization had started to turn a profit before a usual summer downturn while many members are out of town.

Szladdek 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."

Szladdek 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 Elinor 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.