

VOLUNTARY ARTICLE: IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

June 24, 2025



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By Jan Clausen

As we welcome incoming General Manager Joe Szladek, a referendum on hybrid General Meetings (GM) is underway. The Coop has entered a time of dramatic transitions. New beginnings offer openings for positive change. It's worth a look back at recent developments to help us plan wisely for the future.

At the April GM, the Coop's Board took action to let members vote on the popular hybrid proposal. They did this after an expected GM vote was taken off the agenda due to the cancellation of our rental agreement with City Tech. That large facility bowed out in the wake of a scurrilous email pressure campaign by a non-Coop group (End Jew Hatred). The Board needed to address the resulting governance crisis once it be-

came apparent that the General Coordinators (GCs) would not. Otherwise, our ability to decide matters vital to the Coop would have been permanently undermined.

The Board clearly acted within the scope of our bylaws, which specify that it may issue a referendum “on any matter.” There was overwhelming support from the member-owners at the April GM. Nevertheless, two out of the five Board members present (including Joe Holtz and Imani Q’ryn, both outgoing) argued strongly against the action, claiming it violated the tradition whereby the Board limits itself to affirming the results of a formal member vote. In the wake of the Board’s split decision to issue the referendum, the GCs solicited a legal opinion. That opinion not only confirmed the propriety of the action but stated that no change to the bylaws is required for the Coop to adopt hybrid General Meetings! Yet, because the GCs had previously dug in their heels on claims that the bylaws change was needed (requiring a two-thirds majority “yes” vote, not a simple majority), the referendum will be subject to the bylaws change threshold.

JUST AS THE BOARD (OUR ELECTED LEADERSHIP BODY) IS CHARGED WITH SAFEGUARDING THE COOP’S FINANCIAL SURVIVAL, SO IT MUST ACT TO SUPPORT MEMBER-LED DEMOCRACY.

Critics warn of an “activist board,” failing to distinguish between arbitrary Board action and the Board’s support of members’ right to vote when normal channels have been blocked. We’ve heard claims that the work of PSFC Members for Palestine on behalf of the hybrid measure is sneaky or suspect. In fact, seeking a boycott of Israeli products and supporting an expansion of member democracy are both cherished goals of PSFC Members for Palestine.

Just as the Board (our elected leadership body) is charged with safeguarding the Coop’s financial survival, so it must act to support member-led democracy. If its recent move comes as a surprise, perhaps that’s because we’ve gotten used to a rela-

tively quiet role for the membership. The Board has often accepted member advice based on GM votes whose outcomes were heavily influenced by the views and interests of the GCs. One important example is the March GM vote in 2012 rejecting a proposal that would have mandated a Coop-wide vote (referendum) on a pro-Palestine boycott. Prior to that meeting, Joe Holtz weighed in to urge a “no” vote, strongly implying that to do otherwise would mark the voter as anti-Coop. Holtz also vocally supported the 2016 measure that saw the GM adopt an unprecedented 75% supermajority requirement for approving boycotts.* Recently, an extraordinary series of Coordinators’ Corner columns collectively signed by the GCs has sought to replicate this pattern of GC influence over votes. What this strategy may fail to recognize is that an energized membership is a plus for the Coop.

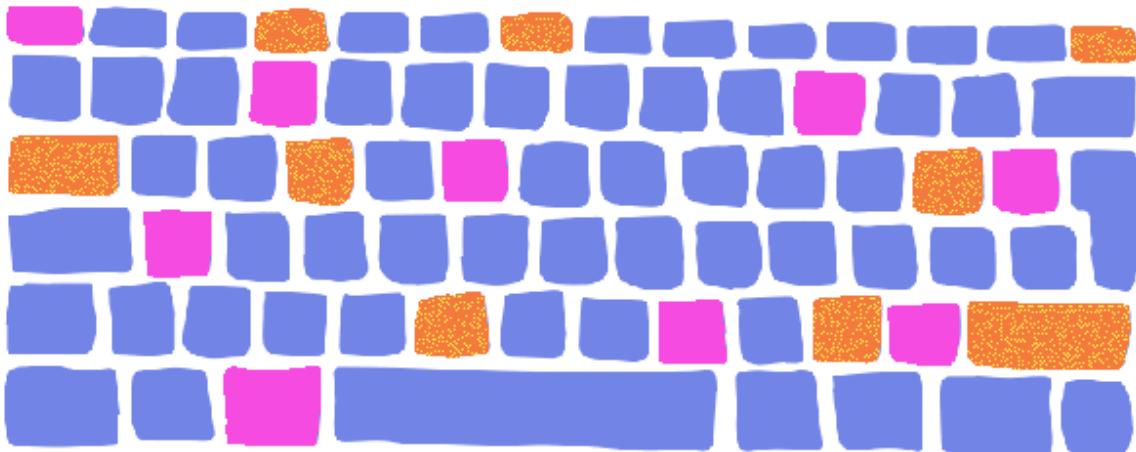
A new situation requires new thinking. At the May GM, Szladek cautioned us not to take the Coop’s success for granted and vowed to prioritize stability. Stability is important but shouldn’t be confused with a “tradition” of resistance to member input. Stability and democratic decision-making must be partners for success over the long haul.

Jan Clausen is a writer, teacher, and activist with Park Slope Food Coop Members for Palestine.

SEPTEMBER 24, 2024

June 24, 2025

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.