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THE GROCERY STORE WHERE PRODUCE MEETS POLITICS

The legendary Park Slope Food Co-op carries sustainable food, low prices, and New Yorkers' opinions in bulk.

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In the late eighties, the Co-op had seventeen hundred members. Today, there are more than seventeen thousand. Illustration by Ilya Milstein



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The sidewalks of north Park Slope must be among the narrowest and most uneven in Brooklyn. They crash against the stoops of landmarked brownstones and split over the roots of oak and sycamore trees, menacing the ankles of pedestrians. Baby

strollers compete for space with dogs of all sizes, shoals of high-school students, and shopping carts from the Park Slope Food Co-op. Here comes one now, rattling catastrophically, like Max Roach whaling on the high hat. It's pushed by a Co-op member, who is accompanied by another, in an orange crossing-guard vest: a walker, in Co-op parlance, who will return the cart after the shopper has unloaded her groceries at her house or her car, or hauled them into the Grand Army Plaza subway station. It is against one of the Co-op's many rules for the shopper to have the walker do the pushing; that's the shopper's responsibility. It is also against the rules to drag a walker beyond the Co-op's strict walking bounds, though some members, when they have escaped the reach of the institutional eye, will try to get away with murder. The noblest aspirations of civilized society versus the base reality of human nature is a theme that frequently comes up at the Park Slope Food Co-op.

The Co-op opened in 1973, in a room of the Mongoose Community Center, a leftist hangout on the second floor of 782 Union Street. There were no shopping carts. There were stairs, which members descended perilously, clutching boxes laden with peaches and tomatoes and other produce from Hunts Point, the wholesale market in the Bronx. For years, even after the Co-op took over the building and expanded its offerings to things like toilet paper and batteries, members kept lugging boxes around the store. But the carts, when they came, were not greeted with universal relief; one member wrote to the *Linewaiters' Gazette*, the Co-op's biweekly newspaper, to complain that they were turning the Co-op into "a suburban, John Sununu nightmare."

Terminology is important at the Co-op. Sometimes on the building's intercom system—available to everyone for paging out requests, announcements, or complaints—someone will make the mistake of using the word "customer," and invariably someone else will page right back to point out that there is no such thing as a customer here. "Shopper" and "member" are all right, and so are "shopping member," "member-worker," and "member-owner." Everyone who can afford it pays a twenty-five-dollar joining fee, plus an "investment" of a hundred bucks, returned upon leaving, and everyone works. The place runs on sweat equity: your blood for bread, your labor for lox.

In the late eighties, the Co-op had seventeen hundred members. Today, there are more than seventeen thousand, which makes it the biggest food coöperative run on member labor in the country, and, most likely, the world. Members unload delivery trucks and stock shelves. They ring up groceries, count cash, scrub toilets, and sweep the floor. They scan other members' I.D. cards to admit them into the building, and they look after other members' kids in the child-care room. In the basement, members with colorful kerchiefs tied around their heads bag nuts and spices, price cuts of meat, and chisel blocks of cheese. Bent over their walnuts and dried-apple rounds, they bear an unmistakable resemblance to Russian factory workers, one point in favor of Co-op critics who like to compare the operation to a Soviet work camp.

Upstairs, members answer the phones, speaking to other members who call to explain why they're missing a shift, or to beg for an extension to make up the shifts they have already missed. With some exceptions (the milk-and-honey land of retirement is a distant possibility), members must work a shift of two hours and forty-five minutes every four weeks—not every month, because, as Joe Holtz, a co-founder of the Co-op and a longtime general manager, says, "months are notoriously not into equality."

The place is always packed, though membership numbers are in constant flux, because, in addition to coming in, people go out. They take parental or sick leave, or fall so far behind on work shifts that they skulk away to Whole Foods and Trader Joe's. They move to faraway neighborhoods or out of state, though even this is not enough to keep some people away. A few weeks ago, a member working at a checkout counter was ringing up an array of cucumbers, separating the Kirbys from the Persians. She was Claire Oberman, a tax preparer who lived in Brooklyn until she moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut. Connecticut! She takes the train in once a month to do her shift.

"It's like coming home," a member working next to her said.

It was August, and the Co-op was in a relaxed mood. "Grazing in the Grass" was playing on the speaker system. A middle-aged guy in a "Make America Read Again" T-shirt examined containers of ice cream. A small, sunny woman wearing a baseball cap that said "Life Is Good" was working the exit, highlighting the "PAID IN FULL" line on members' receipts before sending them on their way. Like any other store, the Co-op has problems with theft. At one point, an elevated chair was installed so that a member could sit and surveil the shopping floor, like a lifeguard or a tennis referee. Members found this unfriendly. Then checkout workers were instructed to do random bag inspections. Members found this racist. The highlighter system is the best method that has been arrived at so far.

Some Co-op members stick AirPods in their ears to get through their shifts, but others have a philosophy about the work. The woman in the "Life Is Good" hat had a philosophy. She made contact with each person who came her way, putting out positive vibes. "Hi, sis, how you holding up?" she said. "Your mind is somewhere else. Come on back. Enjoy this moment! Life is a journey, and we forget sometimes about our blessings." She pointed to her cap. "People come through here all the time so stressed out. Why are you so stressed out? If you can't handle it today, let it go. Put it on the shelf, come back tomorrow. It'll be here."

A cloud of notoriety and Schadenfreude surrounds the Co-op in a way that does not seem entirely fitting for a grocery store. When non-Co-op people think of the Co-op, they picture snobs and brats, self-righteous foodies, hypocritical hippies, bougie mothers who have their nannies do their shifts, adult professionals who melt down like tetchy toddlers when kale is out of stock. The *Times*, which tends to treat the Co-op like a rogue nation-state, has covered the hummus wars, the pension controversy, the rumor that Adrian Grenier was kicked out—strenuously denied by the actor. "These are the self-important twits who are running our society today!" a commenter wrote in response to a 2012 article about a contentious Co-op meeting.

Members' own views on the place vary. "It's a user-friendly way of experiencing the pitfalls of communism," a friend and former member told me.

"I have no hard feelings," another friend, who was slowly working her way back from a suspension, said. "My hard feelings are about myself."

"Have you ever had bad blood with someone?" a third asked, before recounting, at length, a fraught episode in the produce aisle. "At the height of the whole thing, I thought, This is a lot of angst over bananas."

"I would chew off my own arm to get out of there," a colleague told me. But her family saves too much money on food to quit. The Co-op has a flat, twenty-one-per-cent markup on most things it sells, which means that members pay fifteen to fifty per cent less than they would at another grocery store. The aggressively fresh produce is less expensive than the greenmarket's. The spices go for pennies; the cheese is crazy cheap. One reason Co-op members get called snobs is that they have a habit of saying stuff like "That's what you pay for Humboldt Fog?"

Because member labor keeps costs down, the Co-op insists that, for fairness's sake, if one adult in a household is in the Co-op, all the others must be, too. The place is full of what I have come to think of as split couples: one Co-op devotee, one hater. "My fiancé loved being in the Co-op," a woman told me, but she couldn't take it. She informed the office that she was leaving New York; her fiancé, she claimed, was just some roommate she was leaving behind. "And then they called him: 'Oh, but we Googled

you guys and we found your registry.’” Back into the fold she came. “My fiancé was mortified. My reaction was: You should have told them that our engagement had ended.”

It’s this kind of thing that gives the Co-op a reputation for petty zealotry. “Did you hire a private-security detail?” a member asked, when she heard that I was writing about the place. People told me, with glee, that I should get ready to be kicked out.

In fact, I am not at all ready. I joined the Co-op in 2013, and found it to be claustrophobically crowded, illogically organized, and almost absurdly inconvenient. In other words, it was love at first sight. Suddenly, on my editorial assistant’s salary, I was eating like an editor-in-chief. I loved the communal, chatty ethos. And I loved that it looked like New York, with people of all colors and kinds: vegan Rastafarians next to paleo trustafarians, budget-conscious retirees and profligate brownstone owners, queer parents and Hasids, the very young and the very old.

I work checkout on the 10:30-to-1:15 shift on Sunday mornings: the height of the madness, when the queue to reach the registers winds intestinally through the cart-crammed aisles. (There is a reason the *Linewaiters’ Gazette* is called the *Linewaiters’ Gazette*.) I have to say that I am inordinately proud of my skills at that post. I am quick and ruthlessly efficient, which are not qualities that I tend to associate with my performance of my regular job. It is satisfying, for someone who spends so much time playing with words on a screen, to be of practical use. I have the P.L.U. codes for bananas, avocados, and lemons in my fingertips. I know how to tell mustard greens from dandelion, quinces from Asian pears. Sometimes, cruising through a shopper’s load in a blissful state of flow, I fantasize about racing other checkout workers for the title of Fastest Register, though this would surely be deemed “uncoöperative,” the worst of all Co-op sins.

You learn something about people, working Co-op checkout. You see how they handle their kids, their parents, and their partners. You see friends greeting one another and exes steering clear. You ask about beautifully named foods that you have never engaged with before—ugli fruit, Buddha’s hand, fiddlehead ferns—and then you chat with the people buying them about how they plan to prepare them. It is fascinating to observe what people eat, and almost prurient to be allowed to handle their future food, to hold their long green-meat radishes and cradle their velvety heirloom tomatoes, as fat and blackly purple as a calf’s heart.

Shoppers unload their produce in great wet heaps onto the checkout counters and do their own packing, using bags that they bring from home or the store’s cardboard boxes, recycled from the day’s deliveries; to ease congestion, members on the shift are deputized to help, though not everyone appreciates an intervention. One Sunday morning, I heard a keening wail rise from a register near mine: it came from an older woman whose meticulous organizational system, known only to her, was being cheerfully undermined by a well-intentioned assistant. And yet the Co-op’s small-scale errors and outcries and inefficiencies make the place feel organic, in the non-U.S.D.A.-regulated sense of the word: funky around the edges, humanly fermented, alive.

One morning in September, I went to see Joe Holtz, keeper of the Co-op’s institutional memory. Holtz is a wiry man with a lined face, a Brooklyn accent—he grew up in Sheepshead Bay—and a digressive speaking style that his colleagues like to josh about. He moved to Park Slope in 1972, when he was in his early twenties. Some people were starting a food coöperative in the neighborhood, he heard; he and ten or so others committed to the project.

“We had a good, robust discussion of all the different models of co-ops that we knew and what we thought we should do and what problems we were trying to address,” Holtz said. “But also, if I could jump around for a minute, the bigger picture is ‘Why do we want to start a co-op?’ For me, I felt that the whole idea of American culture being all about individual success—not that I didn’t

think that individual success was legitimate, but I thought that our society was too focussed on it, and not focussed enough on community success, and community institutions.”

That was a sentiment shared by the Co-op’s precursors. In 1844, following a failed strike, a group of desperate weavers in the rapidly industrializing English city of Rochdale created the first successful modern consumers’ coöperative. The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, as it was called, was run democratically, with one vote per member. (Women had full equality.) Its general store included a lending library, to promote education. Members invested in the Society by buying shares, and profits were divided proportionally to the amount that each had spent in purchases that year. “Buyer and seller meet as friends; there is no overreaching on one side, and no suspicion on the other,” George Jacob Holyoake, the English reformer, wrote admiringly.

Across the pond, coöperative efforts began, haltingly, to flourish. During the Gilded Age, farmers came together in an effort to break the railroad companies’ choke hold on food transportation. A late-nineteenth-century influx of Finnish immigrants brought coöperative boarding houses, restaurants, and bakeries. In the nineteen-twenties, the federal government passed a bill protecting coöperatives from antitrust laws, and during the Great Depression, when need bound people together, co-ops thrived. Upton Sinclair’s “End Poverty in California” campaign led to the formation of buying clubs across the state. One grew into the Consumers Co-op of Berkeley, a food coöperative in the Rochdale model, which, by the seventies, had become the largest in the country, with twelve stores, seventy-five thousand member households, and more than eighty million dollars a year in sales.

But when people think of co-ops in Berkeley they do not tend to picture the Berkeley Co-op, with its bright supermarkets stocking just about everything a red-blooded American might want to eat. They imagine bowls of lentils and pans of scorched tofu, stretched loaves-and-fishes style to feed a houseful of hippies, dropouts, and dreamers. They are thinking of the sixties: the time of the co-op movement’s new wave, when people raised on a postwar diet of TV dinners and Wonder bread—not to mention Cold War fears of collectivist politics—started asking where their food came from, and what it meant for the state of the world.

That, anyway, is what happened to Holtz. He had quit college after his sophomore year. “I thought I had more important things to do than go to college,” he told me. “Protest against the war in Vietnam and protest against imperialism generally, and protest against racial injustice, injustice against women, injustice against gay people, and the violation of the environment. Although the environment thing came a little later. I must say I was a little slow to that.” He stumbled onto the politics of food when he went to a rally on the first Earth Day, in 1970, to hand out leaflets about an antiwar protest. The next year, he read “Diet for a Small Planet,” Frances Moore Lappé’s best-selling tract on the environmental degradation wrought by the industrial production of meat. A stint in Berkeley exposed Holtz to coöperative living; his household banded with others to buy whatever was fresh at the local market. “I was confronted with having to cook eggplant,” he said. “I don’t think I’d ever seen an eggplant in my home when I was growing up.”

Holtz and I were sitting in a small meeting room on the Co-op’s second floor, where the staff have their offices. He had left the door open, and our conversation was punctuated by the call-and-response patter of the intercom, the building’s non-stop soundtrack.

“Do we carry gluten-free cornmeal? Can anyone tell me if we carry gluten-free cornmeal?”

“Shopping member, all cornmeal is gluten-free.”

The Co-op's founders tried to be realistic about what their little store could accomplish. "It was not a do-gooder operation! It was a *self-help* operation." Holtz thumped the table. "Because these folks, me included, didn't have enough money to afford the diets we wanted to eat. If we were going to eat chicken, we weren't going to eat factory-farmed chicken. And, if we were going to eat a diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables, that was more *expensive*." Thump. "And, if we were going to avoid the Mazola, Wesson store-brand cooking oils, then we were going to buy *expeller-pressed* cooking oils." Many thumps. "We were going to try to have a better diet. And we needed the Co-op to be able to afford that. And, of course, if we were going to do that, we were going to welcome everybody. Because we thought that it was joyful for people to work together and to have success together."

People loved shopping at the Co-op. What they didn't love was working at the Co-op. The founders had decided to run the place with volunteer labor, and put a sign-up sheet by the door so that people could arrange their own shifts. "We thought everybody would agree that this is a fantastic thing and sign up early and often," Holtz said. Alas, the system fell apart.

After various fits and starts, the Co-op decided that member labor would be mandatory. Members would be put on regular squads, to create a sense of social cohesion: if you missed your shift, you would know whom you were letting down. And—in what has proved the most infamous of Co-op policies, the reason that members are forever climbing a Sisyphean hill of "work alerts" and suspensions—you would have to compensate for missing a single shift by working two.

Holtz hates to hear the Co-op smeared as a hippie enterprise. With nasal sarcasm, he rattled off a flower child's dippy rosary: " 'Let it be. Live and let live. Everything is beautiful. We don't want *hassles*, man.' " No business, even an anticapitalist one, can be run on peace and love alone. For Holtz, the most important day in Park Slope Food Co-op history was the one on which the first derelict member was prevented from shopping. A line had been drawn. The place had grown up. "And it really hasn't changed that much."

Well, yes and no. The little do-it-yourself operation is now a comparative behemoth. Food goes fast, fast, fast. Last year, the Co-op posted \$58.3 million in sales; with the store's six thousand square feet of retail space, that works out to just under ten thousand dollars per foot, a ratio unheard of in the country's conventional supermarkets. (Trader Joe's, which leads that pack, takes in around twenty-four hundred per foot.) Even a swelling membership can't sustain such an intricate operation. The Co-op began hiring paid employees in the eighties; today, there are upward of seventy "area coördinators"—the egalitarian euphemism for staff—plus half a dozen "general coördinators," or managers, like Holtz. They roam the building checking the shelves, handling deliveries, muttering into walkie-talkies, advising squad leaders, and encouraging members, like field generals rousing their troops.

The Co-op is a principled organization, not necessarily a purist one. Yes, there's a list of Unacceptable Food Additives, but also (to the chagrin of some) non-organic produce next to organic, local fruits and veggies laid side by side with California strawberries and grapes. For all the heated talk of boycotts, only two bans have recently been in effect: on Coca-Cola Company products and on water bottles from CamelBak, which is owned by one of the country's largest manufacturers of ammunition. The buyers' mandate is at once straightforward and devilishly exacting: find the healthiest products at the lowest prices, from distributors and farmers with top sustainability and labor practices, in enough variety to please a bunch of Brooklynites who will not be shy about broadcasting their judgments.

One morning, I went to see Margie Lempert, the Co-op's lead meat buyer, in the cluttered upstairs office that she shares with colleagues. The Co-op sells ten thousand pounds of meat a week: chicken, lamb, whole pigs broken down from trotters to tail, and

beef from Slope Farms, a tiny Catskills operation run by Ken Jaffe, who used to practice family medicine on Eighth Avenue. Lempert, who has a degree in agroecology from the University of Wisconsin—and in her non-Co-op life runs an amateur women's power-lifting competition called Iron Maidens Open—is well aware that some Co-op members don't think that meat should be available at the store or anywhere else; her job requires a diplomatic balance of assertiveness and tact.

A page came over the intercom: Lempert's eleven o'clock was here, two representatives from a female-owned sausage startup ("by women for everyone") called Seemore Meats & Veggies. In the staff kitchen, Cara Nicoletti, one of the company's owners, began sizzling links as her business partner made a counterintuitive pitch: "We have to eat less meat." Seemore dilutes the chicken and pork of its links with vegetables, to create a series of proprietary flavors in eye-candy colors. Competitors were trying to close in on the concept, Nicoletti said, as she passed around samples.

After asking about production details, Lempert announced her verdict: "They're delicious. I want to buy them." She turned to Charles Parham, a meat-buying colleague. "Which ones should we take?"

"Appearances downstairs are everything," Parham said. "Give them something red, something green."

Filled with the smell of cooking, the kitchen had a cozy, common-room atmosphere. Someone had stuck a copy of "This Is Just to Say," the William Carlos Williams poem, to the fridge. Ron Zisa, a goateed, aging-roadie type with a long gray ponytail and a serene aspect—he is a sought-after yoga teacher—sat down at the communal table and unwrapped a sandwich. Zisa is in charge of bulk products: grains, beans, spices, granola, nuts, dried fruit. August had seen heavy rains in New York State, he said, which could mean problems for bean growth. Meanwhile, a favorite granola company had suddenly gone out of business, and members had been voicing concern about products from China.

"I joined with the most utopian ideas and quickly realized that this is not utopia," Zisa said. On the plus side, he had finally got the right price point on a new sushi rice, which he described with an enthusiasm that others might associate with riskier substances.

A couple of days later, I met up with Yuri Weber, the Co-op's head cheese buyer. Co-op people get fanatical about casein, but not Weber. "I have pretty pedestrian tastes," he told me. "I like Cheddar." Most things at the Co-op are cheaper than anywhere else, but the difference in cheese prices is drastic. The secret is the source: the specialty distributors Weber works with have limited warehouse space and give him a deal on whatever they need to move. He pointed out a selection of tetilla, a creamy Galician cow's-milk, at three dollars a pound. (At Mercado Little Spain, José Andrés's Spanish emporium at Hudson Yards, it's twenty-five.)

Most coordinators don't have a particular background in food. Weber, who wears a fedora and has the calm, inscrutable demeanor of an undercover agent, came on staff in 2001. Before, he had been a massage therapist and a musician with dreams of going pro; he played guitar in a band called the Dad Beats! until recently.

Having a title does not necessarily amount to having the final word. Weber described the position to me as having no bosses and seventeen thousand at the same time. Lempert, for instance, would like to try out some grain-finished beef, in order to work with more local farms. (Many farmers in the Northeast supplement grass with a bit of grain in the winter.) But the membership voted, in the early two-thousands, to allow only organic or hundred-per-cent-grass-fed red meat to be sold. Agricultural science has advanced since then, but the people have spoken.

If the Co-op's principles have held steady, the neighborhood around it hasn't. Yuppification, gentrification—whatever you want to call it, Park Slope is its poster child. Back in the Mongoose days, Union Street was the boundary between the neighborhood's rival Italian and Puerto Rican gangs: "West Side Story," outer-borough style. Then came white professionals—"pioneers," real-estate agents unironically called them—to renovate ramshackle brownstones. Good luck finding one of those today. A recent addition to the street is 800 Union, a doorman building that looms over its low-slung neighbors like a cruise ship. "Live in the lap of luxury while still enjoying a downtown neighborhood feel," its Web site touts.

Like just about every successful small business in the city, the Co-op has survived by virtue of real-estate luck. Member investment money allowed the Co-op to buy 782 Union Street early on, and, later, when the buying was still good, the two buildings on either side. Its relationship to local change is complex. On the one hand, the Co-op was started by young, white newcomers to the Slope and served many of the same. On the other hand, it is one of the rare businesses that have come to resemble the city they're part of more, not less, over time. The Co-op strives to be a good neighbor. Members can fulfill their shift requirement by hauling loads of compost to community gardens, or by preparing and serving food at CHiPS, a nearby soup kitchen.

The Co-op doesn't keep demographic information on its members, but, by one estimate, half live at least a mile away. In a sense, the Co-op is a neighborhood unto itself, a majority-middle-class island in a swelling sea of homogenizing wealth. The wealth filters in, though. Weber told me that the past ten years have seen a spike in requests for fancy cheeses—"with *truffles*."

In the age of one-click delivery, it can seem antediluvian to trudge home with brutally heavy sacks dangling from your shoulders. Still, there's a comfort to bumping up against other humans around food. That's what grocery shopping used to be, before supermarkets: a social, neighborly time, much like the meal to follow.

One day, I got to talking with the member ringing up my groceries in the express line, Peter Kim George, a playwright in his early thirties. He told me that he had joined the Co-op "for research," to observe *Homo brooklynianus* at close range. "I like the weirdness," he said. "I'm used to cultish spaces. I grew up with Korean evangelical parents." George prefers the Co-op to the plethora of other options nearby, like Union Market, a handsome grocery that's part of a small local chain. If the Co-op is the neighborhood's shaggy mutt, Union Market is its well-groomed show poodle; whenever I step inside, jazz is softly playing. "Everything there is nice," George said. "It looks pretty. I hate it."

Like houseplants, co-ops are easier to kill than to keep alive. Costs, logistics, conflict, and burnout can bring even the healthiest ones down. Perversely, the things that initially make a coöperative strong—utopian spirit, decisions made by consensus, political passion, no big bosses—can prove fatal in the long run. The mighty Berkeley Co-op went under in 1988. A hundred-plus-page study on its failure by a California body called the Center for Coöperatives is subtitled "A Collection of Opinions"; even in failure, every voice must be heard.

Opinions are something that the Co-op carries in bulk. Easygoing members show up for their shifts, shop, go home again, and don't give it another thought. Everyone else has a point of view on everything. The fact that all members have equal status is, mostly, a beautiful thing, but, without figures of authority to appeal to in times of tension, minor disagreements get out of hand. Shaming is a popular tactic. A shift-mate of mine told me that she had recently been accosted for snacking in the building, an almost universally unenforced Co-op no-no, by a member who then got on the intercom to crow to the rest of the building that she had nabbed an offender. There can be a mania for fetishistic rule-following in the name of fairness, with citizen's-arrest-style confrontations that feel more kindergarten bully than protector of the peace.

On a fresh, bright Saturday morning, I got a tip: people were standing in front of the Co-op, shouting about racism. Hurrying over, I found a dreadlocked woman in batik chanting “If you shop here, you are supporting a racist institution” at members walking through the doors. Next to her, two white women, one cradling a Chihuahua in a pink sweater, held a poster printed with text that read like a Beat poem:

DID YOU KNOW

For 45 years members were not entitled to Due Process, a basic American right?

Reginald Ferguson has been a Saturday Squad Leader for

Over 20 Years.

He was asked to step down from his position without a hearing

Because he played the music too loud.

And, at the bottom: “Free Reggie!”

In fact, Reggie Ferguson was free and standing right there: a lightly bearded black man in square-framed glasses and a Malcolm X T-shirt, to which he had pinned a red button that said “REGGIE DESERVES A HEARING.”

“I grew up in a food-co-op environment,” Ferguson told me. He and his mother lived in Greenwich Village; she would take the subway to shop at a co-op on the Upper West Side. He had been a member of the Park Slope Food Co-op ever since graduating from business school at N.Y.U., and, indeed, for two decades he led a Saturday-morning shopping squad. “I’m all about getting the call to serve,” he said. “I’m a leader of men and women.”

When it comes to setting the store’s musical mood, shopping-squad leaders hold the keys to the kingdom; whatever they play on the sound system goes. “Every four weeks, I created organically—pun intended—a new playlist,” Ferguson said. The soundtrack was eclectic—rap, African music, sixties rock, salsa, Prince, Amy Winehouse. “I’ve always said that ninety-nine per cent of people love the music. But, whoa, that one per cent.”

The one per cent did not like the music, and they did not like the volume at which it was played. But, rather than address Ferguson, they complained “upstairs”—to the office. (“Entitlement,” Ferguson said.) One day, he got a call from a man on the Co-op’s Dispute Resolution Committee, who asked Ferguson if he remembered being asked to turn down his music. “I said sure. And then he asked me if I remembered a situation involving the makeup list”—an altercation with a member who had grown incensed at the way that Ferguson ran his squad. That, too, Ferguson remembered. He was informed that he would be removed from his position as squad leader and should find a different shift.

Thus began a saga for the ages. Ferguson demanded a full disciplinary hearing; quickly he learned that none was available for members who had been removed from their posts. He brought his complaint to a Co-op meeting, where nineteen faithful members of his squad testified on his behalf. In the midst of this, Ferguson, who, in defiance of the judgment against him, had kept showing up for his shift, was informed that he had been suspended from the Co-op for eighteen months. He has been protesting ever since, during his former work slot. “They called my protest a ‘novel act.’ I found that amazingly offensive, and I’d like to explain why. My mother was a community activist. I’ve been taught to fight for what I believe in. What would they have

said about my grandparents, fighting against segregation? Was that a ‘novel act’ as well?” (A general coordinator of the Co-op says that Ferguson’s account “is incomplete and misrepresents the processes of the Co-op.”)

A woman in a leather biker jacket came over. “I was suspended for eighteen months for shopping for him,” she said, introducing herself as Deborah Murphy. “I know that is against the rules. O.K. But why eighteen months?” She thought that she had been caught on the Co-op’s security camera, handing over food.

“Big Brother,” Ferguson said.

Some Co-op employees have their own issues with the workplace culture. This past spring, a group of Co-op coordinators informed the membership that they were trying to form a union. Their goal, they said, was to “make the Coop stronger and more sustainable”; what could better reflect the institution’s own values of democracy and equality than a commitment to organized labor? Behind the scenes, though, the situation was tense. Joe Holtz announced in the *Linerwaiters’ Gazette* that a formal complaint against the Co-op had been filed with the National Labor Relations Board on the unionizers’ behalf by the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. Dogged *Gazette* reporters then filed a Freedom of Information Act request to obtain the complaint, which alleged, in part, retaliation and intimidation against the unionizers by management. Meanwhile, forty-three area coordinators wrote in to the paper to express doubts “that the traditional union model is the right fit for our very non-traditional workplace.”

Unusually, issues such as pay parity were not at stake; most coordinators make the same wage, \$28.57 an hour. But the unionizers raised concerns about safety problems, unfair disciplinary procedures, and racism in the workplace. The N.L.R.B. investigated nineteen allegations against the Co-op, and decided to move forward with four of them; the Co-op settled with the board without admitting to any violation. (The settlement agreement obliged the Co-op to distribute a notice to employees informing them of their rights.) In the way of such matters, each side has taken the results as a vindication of its position. The general coordinators have declared themselves neutral on unionization—while refusing to sign a binding statement of neutrality. Messier still is member involvement, which the unionizers welcome, and which those opposed see as interference in the Co-op’s internal affairs. “Don’t adopt me as your cause,” one union opponent wrote in an open letter, after members organized a pro-union petition.

The main democratic organ of the Co-op is the General Meeting, a monthly two-hour-and-forty-five-minute gathering during which members discuss current Co-op affairs, vote on officers, and bring proposals for new projects, committees, and policies. Holtz goes over the month’s financial statement, and other general coordinators make announcements. There is a brief board meeting at the end, effectively a pro-forma affair to officially vote aye on the things that members have voted aye on, nay on the nays.

Each meeting tends to attract a group of a few hundred people—members can get work credit twice a year for attending a G.M.—but rarely the same group. This can make for a partial, haphazard sort of decision-making. “Pure democracy can be an invitation to little dictators,” Tom Boothe, a co-founder of La Louve, a Parisian co-op based on Park Slope’s, told me. As anyone who has been to a town-hall meeting, or just watched one on “Parks and Recreation,” knows, it can also be an invitation for obscure speechifying, quixotic schemes, and ad-hominem sabre rattling. “Sound and Fury at the General Meeting,” a front-page *Linerwaiters’ Gazette* headline read, after the May session ended in a filibuster on the seemingly abstruse subject of the paper’s letter-publishing policy—a stalking horse for one of the biggest areas of Co-op contention, the proposal to participate in the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement against Israel. The issue is officially settled—membership voted down boycott at a

legendarily acrimonious G.M. in 2012—although, much as with the deadlock in the Middle East, skirmish follows skirmish, with no resolution in sight.

The September meeting was held in a fluorescent-lit high-school auditorium. Members seeking work credit for attending sat toward the back, ready to run as soon as things wrapped. First up were various points of business, civil and low-key: a statement in favor of the staff union; a request for better labelling of kosher products; an update from the Labor Committee on the Co-op's support of fair-trade tomato farmers in Florida. Members running for reelection to a disciplinary committee presented themselves: three candidates for three positions. People checked their phones. A woman graded papers. This was what democracy looked like.

After an hour came the heart of the evening's agenda: a proposal to ban single-use plastic bags. The Co-op long ago phased out plastic shopping bags, but it continues to make plastic roll bags available for produce and bulk items. There was a sense, among various coördinators, that the initiative was a purity campaign pursued by members who had little concern for the difficulty of keeping a break-even business afloat. On the other hand, using disposable plastic at the Co-op is like wearing a fur coat to a PETA convention. How could we talk a big environmental game and still look ourselves in the face?

Tracy Fitz, a slight woman with a blue head scarf trailing, Davy Crockett style, down her back, took the floor to introduce the proposal: that all fossil-fuel plastic bags be replaced by compostable ones, made from plant resin, by the end of the year. The Co-op currently spends around seven hundred dollars a week on plastic bags; Fitz, an "energy-resources and health consultant" and a licensed acupuncturist, acknowledged that, under her proposal, that number could go up to seventeen thousand dollars, but this was a small price to pay for building a more sustainable "future for the earth." She had begun to thrift and recycle everything in her private life: clothes, shoes, housewares. She wouldn't get new bicycle tires, she announced, though hers had begun to crack. The room applauded. The head of the Chair Committee reminded people not to applaud.

Next came Aron Namenwirth, solemn and bearded. For many years, he had worked a food-processing shift bagging olives. But, after he learned about plastics, he said, "it became a more and more difficult job for me to do—it just felt wrong." He called for a violation of procedure: "I propose that we have a vote *right now*." The room erupted into cheers. The head of the Chair Committee reminded people not to cheer.

Questions about pricing and practicality followed, and then comments. A woman who identified herself as a walker took the floor.

"Once plastic bags are made, they're in the ocean, they're killing the birds." She was close to tears. "Greta Thunberg took a sailboat across the ocean for this. I don't see how there's another side to this issue!"

"Unfortunately, I'm opposed to this idea," the next speaker—David Moss, a member of the Chair Committee—said, cool as a locally grown cucumber. His argument: compostable bags, which can require more energy to make than regular plastic, contribute more to global warming.

Susan Metz, a G.M. regular with an uncanny resemblance to a white-haired Bella Abzug, took the mike. At a previous meeting, Metz, a founder of an outfit called the International Trade Education Squad, had requested nearly four thousand dollars of Co-op funds to produce a "music-stand reading" of Lynn Nottage's play "Sweat," which she hoped would open members' eyes to the horrors wrought by NAFTA on American workers. The request was voted down. She had spent the start of this meeting soliciting donations for the project; around her neck she wore a large laminated placard showing a photograph from a professional

production of the play. “We have to solve this,” she said, of the bag proposal. “We know that kids are now striking over their future. And anything that gets fossil fuels out of the ground is a crime against them.”

On it went. The Chinese recycling situation was mentioned; the word “emotionalism” was lobbed, and rebutted. Ann Herpel, a general coordinator, suggested forming a committee to look into a compromise, but Namenwirth smelled a deferral tactic. “This reminds me of Nancy Pelosi in Congress,” he shouted. An anti-élitist current shot through the room. At the end of the meeting, a distressed board member stood to address the crowd, her voice shaking. “That was not in the spirit of coöperation,” she said.

September is a cornucopian time, when late-summer and early-fall harvests mingle, the first butternut squash next to the last Sugar Baby watermelons. Chayote from Costa Rica is on the shelves at ninety-one cents a pound. There are Pennsylvania pawpaws (“ripe when fragrant and soft to the touch,” a sign advises), burgundy beans, cactus pears, ground cherries, Key limes. Apples are in: Crispin; Jazz; Zestar!; Ginger Gold; Cox’s Orange Pippin; Hidden Rose, with its modest mottled skin and startled, blushing flesh.

In the produce aisle, a man with a young face and sincere glasses is peering into a crate of—something. What are these tawny fruits? Attached to thin branches, they are smooth and swollen, like olives before curing. More people come over to puzzle. “Fresh dates!” Someone knowledgeable has spoken. The crowd is astonished: a familiar thing has been seen in a secret state of being. Providentially, a laminated card is discovered hanging just above eye level: “As dates ripen they will deepen in color, wrinkle a bit, and the skin may begin to flake. Eat them as you would eat dried dates. Be patient, wait for them to ripen. Be brave and try something new.”

Could co-ops, on the decline in this country since the seventies, make a comeback? For the first time in ages, the label “socialist” is not slander; the moment is there for enterprising utopians to seize. With the help of the Park Slope Food Co-op, a small new member-run co-op called Greene Hill has sprung up on Fulton Street, a mile and a half away; the Central Brooklyn Food Co-op, which describes itself as “one of the only urban Black-led food cooperatives in the nation—and the only one in New York City,” is aiming to open its doors in the summer of 2020. The Park Slope Food Co-op itself is looking into expanding; it has formed a relationship, complete with Parisian shopping privileges, with La Louve, though after Holtz and Ann Herpel went to visit they were accused by membership of using Co-op business to enjoy a French vacation.

On a recent Sunday, I was at my register, getting into the checkout groove. The mood of the morning had the right combination of urgency and rhythm. The playlist blasted Paul Simon, Edith Piaf, “99 Luftballons.” “Turn around,” my neighbor told me. An older woman at the counter behind mine was dancing, if not exactly to the beat, then in the spirit of it. “She’s been going the whole time.” At the end of the shift, our squad leader got on the intercom to announce that one of our group was retiring from working Co-op shifts. As the store applauded, the dancer took a bow.

I decided to hang around a bit, to see if anything juicy might go down. I was chatting with another checkout worker when a member with pearl earrings and a pair of glasses on her head came over and kissed her on the cheek. She lives in Clinton Hill, and has been coming to the Co-op for thirty years, or something like that. After a while, who’s counting? “I always say my first degree comes from here,” she told me outside the building, with her groceries at her feet. “Working here showed me how to deal with people. Be open to all cultures. Be human. Look here first”—she pointed at her chest. “Everybody has their days.” Laughing, she mentioned a recent tiff with another member—standard stuff. “We said a couple of New York things, and then we let it go.” ♦

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