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Stocking the Coop Shelves Pandemic Style

By Leah Koenig

From extended entrance lines and plexiglass checkout stations, to paid staff temporarily replacing member work shifts, the Coop has seen its share of pandemic-induced changes. But one change that flies under the radar for some members is the herculean effort it takes to keep the shelves adequately stocked during these unprecedented times.

Back in March, when the coronavirus's impact first hit, stores around the country battled mobs of panicked shoppers, in an effort to keep toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and disinfectant wipes in stock. The stores typically lost. And in April and May, as social distancing boredom led to a baking frenzy, flour and yeast were routinely difficult to source. But in addition to dealing with momentary rushes on some specific items, keeping well-stocked shelves at the Coop is not the same routine task it once was.

"The Coop these days seems much like it used to after a bustling weekend—a little picked over but still quite full," said member Esther Gottesman. "Last week I grabbed the very last vanilla extract, and felt like I had won a prize!"

Member Lorin Sklamberg added, "Paper goods have been a crap shoot...the pasta section is still a little hit-or-miss. I got what appeared to be the last couple of bags of pappardelle, which I haven't seen there in months."

Part of the challenge has to do with changing shopper habits. Sklamberg, who lives in Park Slope and stopped by the Coop regularly before the pandemic, said he now limits his visits to once every ten days. He is not alone. In an effort to social distance (and avoid the waiting in line to enter), members are typically shopping less frequently. The limit of 35 shoppers allowed in the store at one time means fewer members are shopping overall. When they do go, they are typically buying more during that trip, and stocking up on their favorite items.

The rush on flour, yeast, and baking powder has waned in recent weeks. ("It is probably dying down because it is getting so hot outside," said the Coop's bulk buyer, Cody Dodo.) But shoppers are reaching for an entire box of their favorite Cliff Bar, a full 25-pound bag of lentils or bulgur, or a dozen cans of oil-packed tuna, instead of the two or three they would buy when they were shopping more frequently. "I would never buy two boxes of veggie sausages in one trip," said member Sarah

Chandler of her previous shopping patterns.

Staffing poses another challenge. Shifting from a member labor model to part-time paid labor means there are fewer hands available for receiving and stocking. "In some ways it is more efficient, because the staff are there to do a paid job, so there is less socializing than when members were doing their shifts. The rhythm is different," said Dodo. Still, he said, "The U-boats are waiting longer than usual to be tended to."

As the Coop settles into this new normal, the staff is finding ways to adjust. In pre-pandemic times, turnover in the Coop's produce section was incredibly swift. These days it is more modest. "I would say we are buying 30–35 percent less produce than before," said produce buyer, John Horsman. "Before the virus, you didn't have to fine tune orders as much because everything just went. Now we do." As a result of this fine tuning and constant adjustment of orders, Horsman said they are able to avoid excess food waste while keeping the produce bins consistently stocked.

In the bulk section, members have probably noticed that staples like rice and beans are now available pre-bagged. This shift avoids the cross-contamination that happens when multiple hands touch the scoops, and makes shopping for bulk items faster. The Coop purchased a stainless steel bagging machine to help keep up with demand for things like lentils and basmati rice on the shopping floor. "We took over the childcare room and made it the bagging room," said Dodo. "Now two dedicated staff people bag all day long."

Slowly, as the rest of New York City enters into phases of reopening, shoppers seem to be cautiously returning to more typical habits. "For me, broccoli sales are one of those bellwethers that tell you what is going on," said Horsman. "There is no way we will get to the sales levels we were at before the pandemic soon, but they are ticking up each week."

And while the shelves can sometimes look a little patchy, members have noticed that the Coop remains a solid place to find specialty items. "There are new types of almond milk and coconut yogurt," said Chandler. "I even got a box of stinging nettles!"

It is impossible to predict what the future will hold for the country, New York City, or the Park Slope Food Coop. But as we collectively navigate through these unprecedented times, the Coop staff is working behind the scenes to keep members well-fed. ■

What a Time to Start a Job: The Pandemic and the New Receiving Coordinator



PHOTO BY CAROLINE MARDOK

Moussa Thiam, Coop Receiving Coordinator.

By Frank Habere

In the relatively worry-free days of last September, longtime Brooklyn resident and Coop member Moussa Thiam struggled with a worrisome decision: should he abandon a successful but frenetic 25-year career as a chef, or set aside his lifelong dream of building a successful film production company that created and promoted new films from Africa?

Moussa, father of three, decided to get out of the restaurant business and try to secure a job as a Receiving Coordinator at the Park Slope Food Coop. While the Receiving Coordinator position is a complex, mentally and physically demanding job—which entails facilitating the storage and stocking of items for the shelves of the Coop, guiding and supervising work squad members, and maintaining the physical plant—it is also a job with a set schedule and benefits, offering more time for his family.

Another priority for Moussa was the completion of a film project he has been developing for years with his production company: a documentary about the life of Aline Siteo Diatta, a remarkable woman with healing and visionary powers, who led a people's movement in Moussa's native Senegal in the 1940s.

Moussa applied for the open Receiving Coordinator job in September, but did not hear back until January. When he accepted the job, it was agreed that he would not start until March. At that moment, Moussa felt that he would realize his dream—he would be able to leave the restaurant business, have a rewarding and meaningful job at the Coop, and re-apply himself to his production company. "I was so excited to start my job at the Coop," Moussa said recently, "and to get out of the restaurant business. Things were really looking up. What could possibly go wrong?"

On-the-Job Training: the Coop in March 2020

Moussa's first day on the job at the Coop coincided with the early-March panic-buying that swept through Brooklyn just before the quarantine. "On my first day we were already in crisis mode, with huge demand on the shopping floor, and truck after truck unloading into the basement," Moussa remembers. "It was all hands on deck, from day one." Moussa remembers the remarkable calm and competency of the seasoned Coop staff members, even while he struggled to find direction in the frenetic atmosphere.

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Update: Coop Finances Post-Pandemic

By Christopher Cox

The radical changes to the Coop during the pandemic have protected member-owners and workers alike, but they have been costly. According to General Coordinator Joe Holtz, in late March, when the member labor requirement was suspended and shopping hours were restricted, the Coop was losing as much as \$120,000 a week, compared to the year before. That figure is now approximately \$95,000 per week. In previous years, the Coop has run a modest weekly profit.

The biggest source of that decline is the reduction in sales. With fewer hours to shop and fewer people allowed in the store, overall sales have dropped by \$400,000 weekly. After accounting for food costs, that translates into \$68,000 in missing net revenue. The rest of the shortfall comes from the wages paid to 80 new temporary workers: about \$27,000 weekly spent on labor that was once done by members.

Holtz crunched the numbers and figured that, with the Coop's cash on hand, it wasn't out of the question that the Coop would be seriously compromised in 46 weeks. "But of course," he hastened to add, "we're not going to let ourselves go out of business, are we? Because number one, we're not brain dead."

Paycheck Protection Program and Equity Investments

By some measures, the Coop is better positioned financially than most grocery stores. The organization owns the building, so it doesn't need to pay rent. It began the year with a substantial amount of cash reserves—more than \$3 million. And it has a devoted group of member-owners who are committed to ensuring the Coop's survival.

After appeals went out this spring for members to increase their member-owner equity investments (MOEI), about a thousand members did so, eventually raising more than \$600,000. The \$100 initial equity investment that all Coop members must pay is eventually returned when a member leaves the Coop. Extra MOEI payments above the initial \$100 can be returned anytime a member asks.

After the federal government passed the CARES act in March, the Coop applied for and received a \$1.45 million loan under the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). That money has been used to pay for wages, health insurance, pensions, and utilities—all expenses that qualify for loan forgiveness under the act. The Coop is completing the paperwork now to ask the

federal government to cancel that debt.

Holtz felt confident that the PPP loan would not need to be repaid, with the caveat that this was a new program and, ultimately, "We just don't know what the government will do." Even if the debt remains on the Coop's books, the interest rate is low and repaying the loan should be possible—provided the organization can survive.

Four Levers

In the meantime, Holtz and the other General Coordinators are discussing how to improve the Coop's cash flow problem. The General Coordinators already have permission to raise the prices by 1 percent, to 22 percent, but Holtz called that a "small tweak" that would only buy the Coop another three weeks of existence. Plus, he said, "I don't want to raise prices when a percentage of our membership is hurting economically."

Holtz instead favors what he calls "four levers" to change the financial prospects of the Coop. The first, he said, would be to bring back member labor on a voluntary basis, perhaps working longer shifts. "I think we would find members enthusiastically stepping up," he said. "And I think some members would say, 'I don't even want cred-

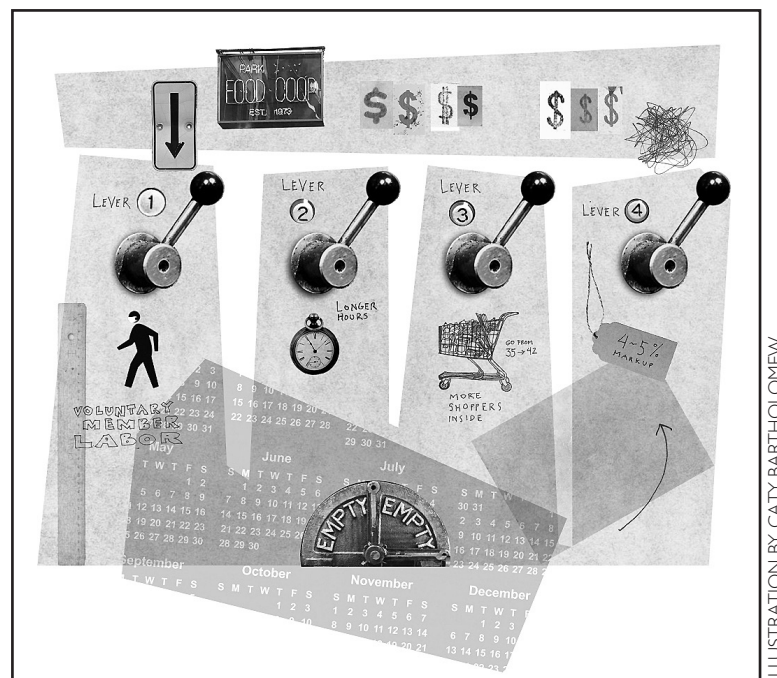


ILLUSTRATION BY CATY BARTHOLOMEW

it." If member labor could successfully replace the temporary workers currently working at the Coop for minimum wage, the weekly deficit would shrink by \$27,000.

The second lever he suggested was to return to something closer to the original Coop opening hours: closing at 10:00 p.m. at night, six days a week. That, he said, could increase revenue by as much as 20 percent, as could the third lever: increasing the number of shoppers allowed inside from 35 to 42. The original assessment for social distancing, he noted, allowed for four shoppers per aisle, but the produce aisle in particular could support more shoppers without requiring close contact between members.

The final lever was one he didn't want to use—at least not until the first three were put in place and their effects analyzed. That would be to push for a bigger price increase than the 1 percent currently allowed. With a 4 or 5 percent increase in the markup, the revenue gain becomes significant.

However, Holtz thinks that applying the first three levers alone would cut the Coop's losses to a manageable level. "For us to get down to only losing five or ten thousand dollars a week would be extremely healthy," he said. At that rate, the Coop could operate for 550 weeks before running out of money. Long enough, one hopes, for the pandemic to finally end. ■

STATEMENT ON THE COOPERATIVE IDENTITY

DEFINITION

A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

VALUES

Cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of their founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

PRINCIPLES

The cooperative principles are guidelines by which cooperatives put their values into practice. The International Cooperative Alliance adopted the revised Statement on the Cooperative Identity in 1995.

They are as follows:

1. Voluntary and Open Membership
2. Democratic Member Control
3. Member Economic Participation
4. Autonomy and Independence
5. Education, Training and Information
6. Cooperation Among Cooperatives
7. Concern for Community

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STAFF AT THE COOP

TO THE EDITORS,

Like so many, I appreciate the Coop's staff, who, along with essential workers across the city, keep coming to work. Unfortunately, members are not working now, but this does not mean we are any less a coop based on member labor. I think we should return to the model of member labor (adjusted as needed for safety) that has served us so well for 47 years. Two pages I heard over the intercom as I was shopping this week led me to think that some of the staff at the Coop have forgotten about that model, as it has been solely staff running the Coop for almost three months.

I heard several pages referring to members as "shoppers." This may seem like an innocuous phrase, but it indicates a shift that I hope is unintentional and short-lived; namely, the shift to a bifur-

cated staff/customers model. The Coop has never referred to members as shoppers or customers, because those phrases suggest competing interests between store owners (or staff) and those who shop. Our Coop is practically unique in rejecting that division, which is why members can trust the Coop to provide the groceries we want without advertising or deceptive practices, and why the staff can trust the Coop to provide employment conditions that adhere to their values. I hope both temporary and permanent staff will remember to address members as "members" and not further erode the culture of cooperation that thrived pre-Covid.

Similarly, I heard a lengthy page asking members to contribute to a collection by staff for the Bail Project. As it happens, I used to work in criminal justice reform—for the same organization that the Bail Project's founder got her start in—indeed, worked with

her. I agree that bail reform is important work. But I am not sure why the staff is collecting for that particular project (there are several other projects, and many more established organizations, doing vital justice reform work). I wonder whether the collection effort represents some broad consensus among the entire staff, or if some of the staff can now raise money for whomever they want. It all seems opaque to me, in terms of who decided which organizations to support, and who decided who could decide. Again, I am left feeling like staff are not working as part of a cooperative, certainly not a member-labor cooperative.

Perhaps some staff would prefer that the Coop be a workers' cooperative, like the Rainbow Grocery Coop in San Francisco. Rainbow is great, but we are not that kind of a coop. Even in the age of Covid-19 anxiety, I hope our Coop will maintain its uniquely wonderful reliance on the

cooperation of all 17,000 of us working together. We have done a great job of this so far.

*In Cooperation,
Rachel Porter*

RESPONSE FROM MEMBERSHIP COORDINATOR

IN COOPERATION, RACHEL PORTER,

I am sorry to hear about your trepidations, and I hope this personal letter will provide some insight to you and others who may share the same questions.

For as long as I have been a working member and staff, I have used "shoppers" and "members" interchangeably without the intent to bifurcate. I can also say with certainty and trust that regardless of the terms used during this time, the spirit and culture of cooperation has and will continue to grow as we show up to serve each other and strive towards equity.

As one of the staff who initi-

ated the Bail Project donation bucket, I would also assure you and all members that this action emerged purely from a place of acknowledgment and recognition of the crisis, pain, and trauma that many of our community members have unduly suffered for over generations. We felt compelled to act with urgency as we bore witness to the cries and the silence within our walls. We needed to act in support of and in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement in order to bring us all one step closer to unity and equity.

In regards to our process of selection, I believe we can find ways to inform and be transparent with the membership as we continue to move forward with supporting other organizations. If the membership feels that this should be a Coop initiative and would like to propose it at the General Meeting, I would be thrilled to support it.

*Phi Lee Lam,
Membership Coordinator*

New Receiving Coordinator

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"There was a strong sense of purpose, even when it seemed so chaotic," he says. "But I never had the time to train properly about where everything comes from, and where everything goes, and how things are done." Moussa remembers one particular experience, in his early days when people on the shopping floor still had fear in their eyes. "I was going upstairs with a box of yeast, and one member, and then another, asking, 'Is that the yeast? Do you mind if I take some?'" and the first person took half the box, and the other took the other half—and the yeast never made it to the shelves."

In his first weeks on the job, the Coop went through its remarkable transformation—first, in dealing with lines wrapping up Union Street, down Seventh Avenue and around the corner; next, Covid-19 protocols and safety measures; then part-time staff replacing member labor; and finally, shopping restrictions on the floor.

20 Years of Training in the Restaurant Business

The crisis-mode Coop proved to operate at a much faster pace than Moussa had originally anticipated, but he credits his background in restaurant management as a strong credential that prepared him for this new work environment. "In the restaurant business, I was the first one in, in the morning, and the last one out at night. I opened up, planned the day's specials, purchased all of the food, made sure the staff were on track, and managed the business end of the operation," Moussa remembers. "So, I brought a strong understanding of the food business to my new job.

Managing restaurants was a 14- to 16-hours-a-day commitment, seven days a week, with a day off here and there, only for special occasions. When I wasn't at the restaurant, I was worried about the restaurant. But my wife and I were also raising three children in the city. I wanted to go to their soccer games and their school events. And, at the same time, I wanted to commit myself to my film production work."

Remembering Another Crisis

Moussa remembered another crisis-management experience, 20 years ago, in lower Manhattan. "On 9/11, our café was located between St. Vincent's Hospital, and a building at the New School that served, in the first few weeks, as a makeshift community center for people seeking information about missing loved ones," Moussa says. "It was below 14th Street, but we were allowed to stay open, serving and providing a space for the hospital medical staff and family members waiting for news about loved ones. We kept the restaurant open around the clock. We sent baked goods and coffee to the first responders at Ground Zero."

"That was one of my early impressions of New York. Back then, everybody did what they had to do to take care of each other," Moussa says. "I see a lot of that same spirit at the Coop today."

A New Chance to Produce and Promote African Film

When things settle down at the Coop, Moussa looks forward to re-committing himself to his film production work, with a focus on producing independent films from his native Senegal. The Aline Siteo documentary mentioned above is his current project. The young Senegalese woman who led a

people's movement during World War II eventually surrendered to the French colonial army to prevent the massacre of her people. She later died in jail at the age of 24. "Aline's story keeps developing; the more we learn of her, the more there is to learn," says Moussa. She was widely recognized as a healer. She was believed to have the power of making the rain come and go. And she became the center of a grassroots movement to resist the French colonial army's efforts to conscript all the men of Senegal. She is a legend and a folk hero in Senegal today. The documentary Moussa is producing tries to separate the myths from the realities, but also tells a strong story of resistance in a colonized nation, he explains.

In the months ahead, Moussa's work with the film will include fundraising, completing the final scenes onsite and post-production work. At the same time, Moussa is committed to contributing as much as he can to his position of Receiving Coordinator at the Coop. "I've learned a lot in my three months on the job, and things have definitely calmed down. I am starting to learn how the Coop operates," Moussa adds. "But yesterday, somebody asked me to bring up some cookies and I couldn't remember where to find them! I've been here three months and I still don't know where they store the cookies." ■