

A Response to the Accusation of Paranoia

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posted 12-18-18 on FB page Members Caring for Seward Co-op

I'm not really surprised that the co-op staff who read our piece about the lack of transparency we see at Seward Co-op would use the word "paranoid." I somewhat regret suggesting that the changes we've seen at our own beloved co-op may be part of a larger effort to remake co-ops in the capitalist for-profit image, an effort some would label a "conspiracy." So I want to leave that aside for now and say a little more about why I am so concerned at the direction being taken by Seward co-op board and management.

1. **Lack of transparency and accountability.** The secrecy of board meetings, where members are not allowed to speak, agendas contain little information about decisions being made, and the board frequently retires into "executive session," does not fit with my notion of a democratically run organization.

And when I see that the newly-elected board chair, Joe Reiman, has proposed that board members sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement to keep them from speaking to anyone, including co-op members, about anything in the board packets makes me worried and angry. I feel as if Reiman and any board members who favor this NDA view me as an enemy.

I am not an enemy! I am a co-op member since 1993 who wants my co-op to operate in the sunlight of open governance, who wants a voice in governance other than voting for board members who then do not listen to me, who wants to be informed about decisions being made in my name and wants to feel respected rather than dismissed.

2. **Lack of good-faith in dealing with the workers.** I was delighted to see the vast majority of Seward workers voted to join a union in June of 2017. But a

contract was not finalized until August 2018, 14 months after the initial vote. Why did that process take so long?

Then I heard that Seward management had brought in an anti-union negotiator. How could this be? How could anyone who manages a co-operatively organized business take this antagonistic approach to its workers? And how could the board of the co-op, elected by members who certainly in large numbers applaud the workers' decision to unionize, say and do nothing to rectify this mistake?

Workers now have a contract, but things are still not fine for workers. Understaffing is causing empty shelves and bins and long lines at the checkout. At times the air of stress is almost palpable! I feel as a member somewhat responsible for this—workers are being treated this way in my name, and it is not okay!

3. **Competition in the capitalist market.** Food co-ops arose as an alternative to for-profit grocery stores where people could not find organic or bulk food. The people who started co-ops in the 1960s and 1970s also wanted to support and extend the community of people concerned about the quality of food—people who were also concerned about social and economic justice, environmental integrity, nurturing relationship bonds among people working to make the world a better place.

There are plenty of us, and not only us old hippies, who see the potential for the food co-ops of today to continue and expand that mission. There are plenty of us who see that Seward Co-op could be a center for people to connect with each other around interests in social, economic and environmental justice, a home base for multi-cultural participation, a place that works actively toward neighborhood and community food security and resilience in the face of a corporate capitalist system that undermines all of that with its sole focus on profit and market domination.

Instead of trying to compete in the same market with these rapacious, giant enterprises, it seems to me the co-ops could be presenting themselves as a very different kind of food store, one that doesn't just have quality food but that enables deeper connection into a network of local producers. One that nourishes not just individual bodies but hearts and souls by facilitating members' joint action on critical food-related issues like climate change and plastic pollution. One that engages members in member-driven activities like skill-sharing around anything from food and cooking to small appliance and bike repair. A place where people can find resources in each other for a wide variety of needs, and thus build and deepen relationships and interdependence.

I would like to be able to have a conversation with other Seward members about these ideas and about my concerns around lack of transparency and unacceptable treatment of workers. I am involved in the Seward Rooster because I see it as a vehicle for these kinds of discussions, a vehicle that currently does not exist. I know lots of Seward members, but if there really are 20,000, that means there is huge potential for members who don't know each other to meet via the Rooster and share thoughts and ideas that could help our co-op become more democratic, more community-centered, more nourishing and nurturing to the kinds of capacities we need to develop for a vibrant future in Minneapolis and the world.