

Boycotts and Democracy:

The Eden Foods product boycott as an opportunity to renew co-op participation and democracy

BY TODD WALLACE

In the summer of 2014, a Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Burwell vs. Hobby Lobby* led the CEO of Eden Foods, a prominent organic foods producer, to revive an earlier 2013 court case arguing that the company be exempted from paying for its employees to receive birth-control, as required by the Affordable Care Act. The company's lawyers cited the owner's deeply held Catholic beliefs as grounds for a religious exemption. Over the next few months, a news cycle was dominated by partisan noise, and blogs and social-media feeds erupted with volleys and counter-attacks. Just as quickly, there were calls to boycott the company, including multiple online petitions and a reinvigorated Facebook page first launched in 2013.

The retail food co-ops, ever the haven for principles-based consumption, were portrayed by the likes of mainstream media outlets such as *Huffington Post* and *Forbes* as ground zero for the action. One online article from *Forbes*, dated Aug. 29, 2014, proclaims in the headline, "Two Months on from Hobby Lobby Ruling, Grocery Co-ops Dump Eden Foods Products from Shelves." The author opines, "Eden Foods did not, however, escape without a boycott effort by some of the country's best-known regional grocery co-ops."

No fewer than seven retail food co-ops are mentioned in the next few paragraphs (including Willy Street, Weaver Street Market, Central Co-op, and others), and although the headline suggests a monolithic, arguably simplistic response, what little detail the article provides belies this—actually suggesting some differences in terms of specific co-ops' responses to the action. Central Co-op, as one example, actually decided not to join the boycott, but took a more nuanced approach—information that can only barely be gleaned from the piece. Indeed, the *Forbes* article is wide more than it is deep, falling back on well-worn clichés of co-ops as mere extensions of an irate, elitist consumer base. It essentially uses them as props to get at the "real" story of Eden Foods and its role in the American culture wars.

I would suggest a less myopic narrative, however. In the midst of this

swirl of passion and loud voices, some co-ops took the calls for a boycott of Eden Foods products as an opportunity to seriously rethink and reenergize their approach to owner participation and democracy. In the scope of this article, I will focus mainly on one example of this, the Common Ground Food Cooperative in Urbana, Ill.—although other co-ops will also be mentioned, and the work at Common Ground on this issue was influenced and inspired by similar approaches at other co-ops.

My sense is that by dealing thoughtfully and productively with calls for product boycotts and reflecting on the lessons learned from such exercises, there is the potential for taking on the challenge that Art Sherwood and I identified in an earlier article ("Reinventing Our Cooperative Democracy," *CG* #175, Nov–Dec. 2014). In that conversation, Sherwood noted, "I am calling for all key co-op stakeholders—members, boards, management, and staff—to reexamine how meaningful opportunities for participation may be created and utilized for the benefit of all. Basically a call to get back in democratic shape, but knowing the landscape has changed, so being 'in shape' will look different than in the past."

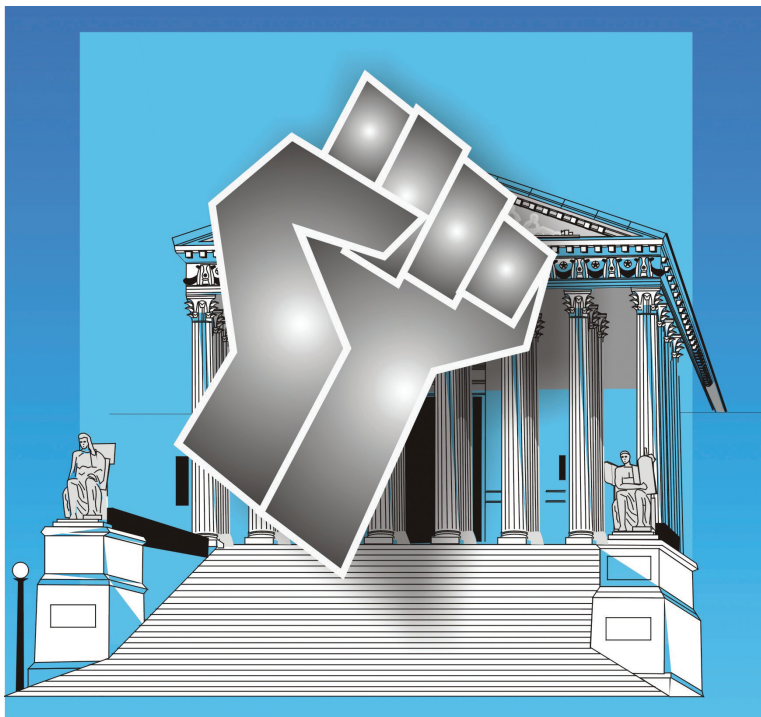


Illustration by Donald Walker

A history of consumer activism

Before getting to the present, however, it is useful to bring in a historical and cultural perspective on the topic of boycotts and consumer activism. In his book, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America*, Cornell historian Lawrence B. Glickman writes, "From the American Revolution, to the antebellum era, to the sectional crises that culminated in the Civil War, to the rise of the labor movement in the Gilded Age, to the Progressive period, to the Great Depression, to the struggle for African-American freedom, to the social movements of the 1960s, through our own time, in which nearly two-thirds of Americans take part in at least one boycott on an annual basis, consumer activism has been an important, although generally under-acknowledged tactic of every political generation."

The term "boycott" itself dates as far back as the late 19th century. In addition, no less a consumer advocate than Ralph Nader in 1971 ►

explicitly linked the larger tradition of consumer activism with the formation and rise of cooperatively owned and consumer-focused institutions. It should be no surprise, then, that a common impulse among mainstream media and the larger public is to associate retail food co-ops with a call to boycott controversial products. To write boycotts off as a mere annoyance or to ignore them is to ignore an important tradition in our cultural landscape—perhaps even more so today, with the rise of organizing through the use of the internet and social media.

Notwithstanding that legacy, dealing productively and effectively with product boycotts can present a challenge for the retail co-op enterprise. A boycott is a complicated and problematic technique, used by an extremely wide array of movements and causes; it promotes a varying set of practices and understandings (for example, focusing on specific products, businesses, nations, institutional policies, etc.); and it sometimes surfaces divergent, divisive, and deeply held beliefs among the member-owners of a co-op.

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In addition, the overall efficacy of boycotts as tools for social change is questionable. Glickman mentions soberly that, despite some notable exceptions, “consumer activists have rarely achieved their immediate objectives.” On top of all this is perhaps the greatest challenge—the cooperative business is still a business. Though the co-op may be democratically owned and have social change as a desired goal, current market pressures demand that food co-ops be more agile, productive, and focused than ever before.

The Common Ground experience

It is within this context that we highlight the approach taken by Common Ground. In summer 2015, passions rose as many co-ops found themselves having to respond to calls from community members to boycott Eden Foods. The Common Ground general manager at that time, Jaqueline Hannah, described the feeling that the co-op needed to rise to the occasion—and realized quite quickly what it did not have. The co-op did not have a clear policy on how to deal with boycotts, nor did it have a clear process on how owners could participate productively in the conversation.

Hannah and the leadership team also realized a couple of things that they did have: an opportunity and an obligation. After some consideration of the Ends policies that the board had put into place to create organizational direction and accountability, Hannah decided that it was the *obligation* of management—of her and her management team—to make a decision on how to respond, not just to this particular situation but through a store policy related to boycotts and a process for owner participation. “This was our charge. It was our job to do this.” However, the management team did not want to make this decision in isolation—the issue was complex enough to need owner input in the process. They also recognized that they had an *opportunity* in front of them, “for us to better understand our democratic processes.”

While taking care to keep the board well aware of the situation and informed of management’s thinking, the management team (marketing,

finance, IT, and HR) began the work of formulating a plan. They started by examining Outpost Natural Foods’ policy on petitions and boycotts (outpost.coop/resources/issues/petitions_boycotts_.php). The Outpost policy is very clear—although it states up front that the co-op does not join in boycotts, it also describes a commitment to transparency and consumer education and outlines a process by which relevant information can be shared.

Although the team at Common Ground appreciated that approach, and while elements of the Outpost policy informed their own thinking, they decided that it didn’t feel right in the midst of the controversy to simply adopt the same policy without first having a larger community conversation. Ideally, this community conversation would shape a policy that would work in the context of their co-op. Still, the borrowed policy was a start.

In “Back to Eden,” in the March 1, 2015, issue of Common Ground’s e-newsletter, Hannah, inspired by a similar communication created by the Willy Street Co-op, describes the whole of their approach from start to finish (found at commonground.coop/get-the-scoop/blog/back-eden.). After introducing the topic, Hannah argues that:

“Community is built through conversation, especially through having conversations that are not easy. We put the article about Eden Foods out there to encourage community conversation, to offer information you could base your purchasing decisions on, and to ask for your voices. CGFC’s 2nd End, is that CGFC exists to be an educational resource on food issues, and we believe offering this information to our owners and shoppers is part of CGFC’s Ends.

We got the word out through social media and our newsletter, then we listened.”

Hannah then describes the vast diversity of opinion on the topic that the co-op received and the actions, after a month of listening, that the co-op undertook: 1) an open letter from Hannah to the CEO of Eden Foods, expressing serious concerns with Eden’s position (an action taken by several co-op general managers); 2) an offer to share relevant Eden Foods’ customer comment forms/letters; 3) the creation of a new store policy to facilitate co-op owners sharing information with the co-op about products involved in boycotts; and 4) a review and tracking of the sales of all Eden Foods products over six months. Finally, Hannah’s report provides an overview of the results from that six-month tracking period. (Note: some Eden Foods products sold poorly and were removed; others actually increased in sales.)

Transparency, performance, reflection

Several important themes stand out in this summary from Common Ground. First, there is a commitment to strong, ongoing communication in multiple directions from management—upstream to the board, downstream to the staff, and outward to the owners, with transparency as an intended outcome. Included in this is the need to listen and provide multiple opportunities for participation in the process.

Second, there is a commitment by the co-op leadership to perform their respective roles. For the management, that role was to build a sound process for dialogue and then to make a demonstrably wise decision. For the board, that role was to be supportive of and hold management accountable within the context of their stated expectations.

Third, there was an overall commitment to reflection and ongoing improvement.

The approach was by no means perfect. When I asked Hannah to reflect on the experience, she identified two key areas needing improvement. One was the use of social media as a forum for conversation—there was a sense from owners that this was flawed. Hannah also felt that she could have done a better job with her staff: “We could have listened better and

addressed their concerns better. If I had to do it again, I would rethink the process to include staff more and improve their experience.” Finally, she noted that there is still a lot of work yet to do to make owners feel engaged in a more meaningful way, without harming the co-op’s ability to be agile. “Acknowledge that the owner experience is key—let them decide what forms of participation and democracy are meaningful to them.”

Nevertheless, Hannah also named the experience as one of the most pleasant and inspiring during her time at Common Ground. She described the work as immensely satisfying, embodying the cooperative spirit and the cooperative difference and encompassing the creation of a meaningful connection with staff and owners and board.

Todd Sweet, the former board president of Common Ground, had this to say about it: "From a board perspective, the Eden Foods controversy provided an opportunity for us to learn more about the co-op’s product policy and also to hear from co-op staff about changes and planned enhancements to the product policy in response to customer and owner input. As an issue that stirred interest from our owners, it allowed us to educate them about the different means of participating in the democracy of the co-op. It can be an intimidating prospect for a board to respond to criticism like this, but we took it as an opportunity to invite people in and see how the board does its work, for better or worse.”

Participation possibilities

The experience at Common Ground during the Eden Foods controversy is instructive, not so much because it can be held up as a model or even because it was particularly effective, but because within that co-op’s experience can be observed a desire to identify opportunities for learning

and improvement, as well as an exploration of the deeper possibilities of participation. By crafting more inclusive solutions, we work to better understand the ways that co-ops can most effectively create change. These include cooperation and communication, as well as the empowering of

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consumers and creation of a meaningful participatory experience.

One final note: While calls for product boycotts can provide an opportunity for a food co-op to rethink and refine how democratic practices are understood and practiced within the organization, it is important to remember that such actions are still mostly reactive in nature. In order to thrive now and in the future, co-ops must be proactive with regard their goals and understand participation as a multifaceted, complex set of options and choices, experienced through various levels and areas of the organization. A serious approach must be broad and all-encompassing and especially must be understood within the context of the co-op’s future and its plans and aspirations. □



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