

Kali's Cries, part 2

Labor, feminism issues erupt in local bookstore.

Last week, we reported on the labor disputes occurring at Mother Kali's. This is the final part of that story, but the dispute continues.

When Mother Kali's most recently unemployed staff started working at the store and decided to unionize, they contacted former manager Tova Stabin and her staff.

But Stabin and her staff had begged the new staff not to take their jobs. "We thought it would send a message to the board that we were replaceable," says Stabin. "We told them we were pursuing the board still to negotiate with us and that if they did that, it would be in direct conflict with getting our issues addressed."

Yet Teri Ciacchi, who came down from Seattle to manage the store, Cheryl RiversHailey, who stayed during the transition and Sandra Pasman, who'd come on just as Stabin and her staff were leaving, say they hoped unionizing would help that staff, too.

But Stabin says that's impossible. "Unionizing protected their jobs, not ours," she says.

Ciacchi had lived in Eugene before moving to Seattle. She had run Baba Yaga's women's coffeeshop and was highly active in the local community. When she found out Mother Kali's was hiring a new manager, she was excited.

Ciacchi knew the situation "was a little odd" and received information about disputes after she accepted the manager position and before she physically moved.

"But I had given my word to the board I would take the job. And because I was arrogant and thought maybe the past staff didn't know enough, I thought I had enough skill to turn the retail situation around, enough managerial, conflict resolution and mediation skills to see the perspective of both sides and help reach some peaceful situation. I thought, 'I can take it on' and my friends were telling me 'you don't want to.'"

Ciacchi left Mother Kali's in September '03, wanting to turn her salary back to the store as it was struggling financially and because she wasn't happy. "I wish I had known Tova and the others well enough to trust them," she says. "I feel like I owe them the biggest fucking apology. I had taken their jobs."

As for Mother Kali's struggles, Ciacchi saw the board and staff as a microcosm where the "old school dykes, very separatist, very '70s," were at odds with younger progressive women who embraced issues of transgenderism — Why did you have to be a biologically born woman with a womb to serve on the board?; cultural appropriation — why were a bunch of middle class, white women operating a business under the name of a Hindu goddess, anyway?; and labor.

"Those issues just kept getting overlooked as if they were not important but they were important enough to keep younger people from getting involved and being a part of Mother Kali's," says Ciacchi.

Could the store survive financially without young women's support? Ironplow says many of the loyal customers are middle-aged women who are more established and some have money.

But the fallout from the Stabin debacle was beyond the generation gap. Because two former staffers had close ties with the UO's Women's Studies Department, some professors felt they could no longer support the store until its labor issues were resolved. They quit ordering textbooks. So did many others in different departments.

Textbook sales are two-thirds of Mother Kali's business.

Over the past year, the store has had to have fund-raisers to stay afloat. Fall and winter coursebook orders were down, and it would have closed if not for the landlord forgiving two month's rent.

By the end of last year, the newest incarnation of the board, under president Kathleen Kendrick, needed to make some quick decisions to keep the store open. The board began researching how other bookstores like

Mother Kali's operated. According to Kendrick, the model of one full-time manager and one part-time employee seemed to work successfully.

That's what the board decided would work for Mother Kali's. Then in January, to save money fast, three weeks before staff received letters of termination, the board froze health benefits.

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—Teri Ciacchi

Health benefits at Mother Kali's accrue at the rate of \$1 per each hour worked. The money can be used at the employee's discretion, to pay a dentist's bill or for an hour's massage, and is given to an employee only when she asks for it.

The board says "it's understood" that benefits are only available if the store can afford to pay them, but no one has yet revealed a written document regarding this policy.

Kendrick says, "We acted compassionately."

When asked if she thought the board acted compassionately in freezing benefits, she hesitates slightly then says, "Yes."

Ironplow says, "I don't think the board

understood how the health benefits worked."

As of last week, the board told the most recently terminated employees it will pay their accrued benefits, when the store can afford to.

Tiffany Haggmark, who stood on stage protesting Mother Kali's labor actions at Sam Bond's Feb. 4 union concert, is now out of the union and volunteering in the store.

"The board told us we will get our benefits in the future and I trust that we will," she says. "If money is an issue, I'll help the store get money and maybe that's a way to get our benefits."

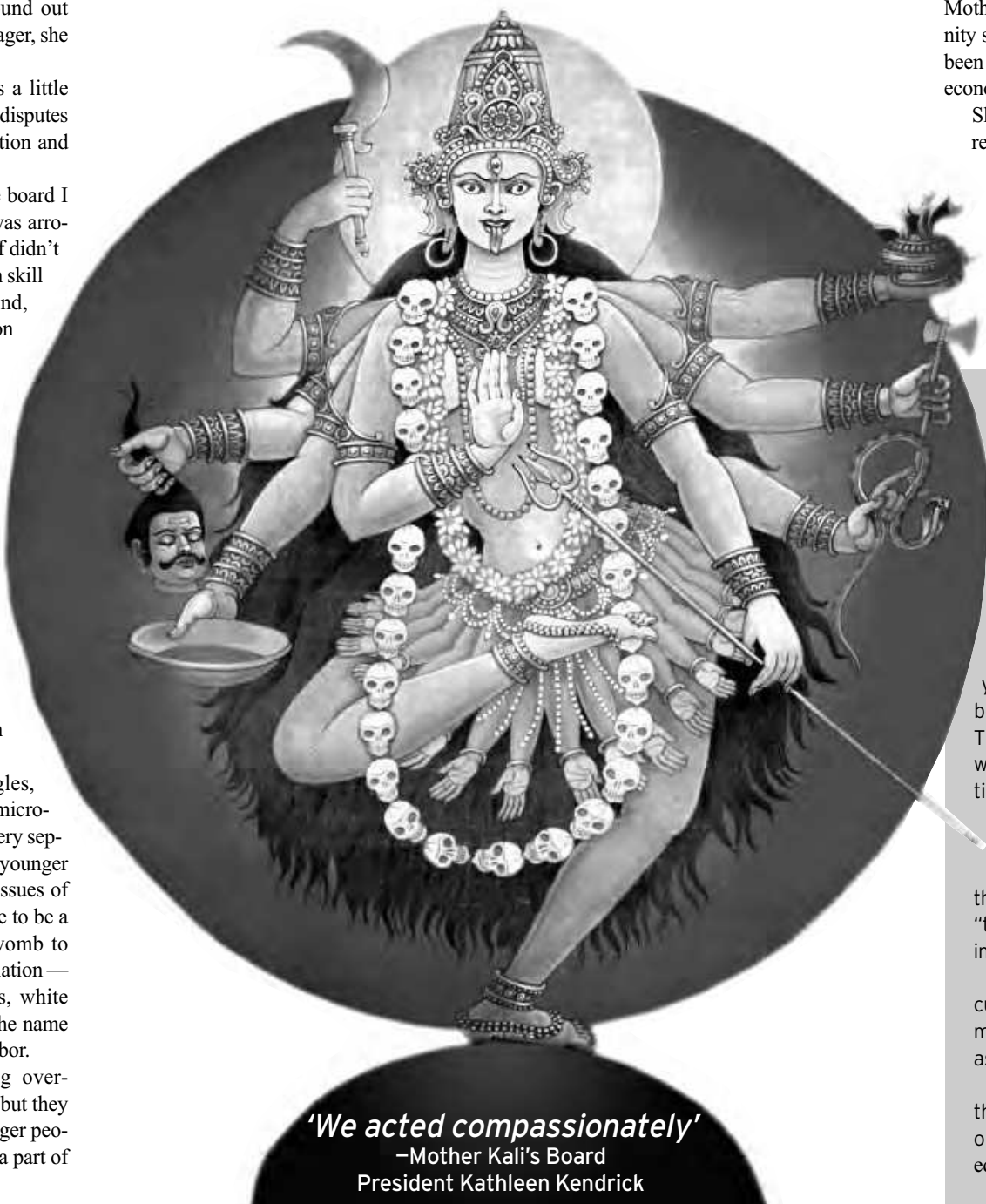
Besides, she adds, nobody else at the store knows how to do what she's doing.

Still, many are looking to the board to resolve the dispute with the former staff, even though none of the current board members were involved then.

Former board member Ellen Rifkin says the community participated in creating the current situation at Mother Kali's. "We preferred to speak of personality conflicts and not of rights, responsibilities, power and procedures. No one even entertained the possibility that in letting go of a manager and three out of four staff members, the board might have made a major personnel decision that was actually contrary to the best interests of Mother Kali's, both as an inclusive community space and as a business whose sales had been improving until that point in a difficult economic environment."

She adds, "the staff has never received restitution for their losses or even a fair hearing by any of the subsequent boards, though such a review has been requested countless times in the past 16 months." **EW**

Why were a bunch of middle class, white women operating a business under the name of a Hindu goddess, anyway?



'We acted compassionately'
—Mother Kali's Board
President Kathleen Kendrick

CORRECTIONS/ CLARIFICATIONS from part 1

Lorraine Ironplow and Barb Ryan say the former staff was "never fired," but sent a letter stating: So please understand that if you walk off the job again, we will fill your position(s) immediately. If you decide that you do not wish to work for Mother Kali's any longer, then please drop off your keys and anything else that belongs to the store that same day. That being said, we hope that you will stay and work with us in a positive and productive manner.

Ironplow says she never "called her own meeting" to coincide with the staff community meeting, but that a community member asked "that we listen to some staff proposals instead of their having their meeting."

The current board did not give current past staff final letters of termination on Jan. 29, but merely asked for their keys.

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