

“Plus ça change, plus c’est la meme chose”; or, how to ideologically re-structure your student society: a beginner’s guide: the SFSS CUPE Lockout

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By Joel Blok, originally published [here](#).

This summer five years ago, the [Board of Directors](#) of the [SFSS](#) suspended its [office staff](#), barring them from entering their offices and sending them home. [This past Thursday, a different board issued a lockout notice to its office staff, preventing them from work.](#)

In 2006, the rhetorical justification was fiduciary responsibility to the society. This summer, it’s financial responsibility to the student members.

The arguments will be different, and the current board will undoubtedly do its utmost to disassociate itself from 2006. The outcome has yet to be seen. But the goal, invariably, is the same. The board of directors of the SFSS have unilaterally decided to re-structure the student society, and will exhaustively work to rhetorically cloak their own ideological efforts as being in your best interests.

Here’s the structural reality: the SFSS cannot exist without its staff. None of the many services it offers could be accomplished, none of the important campaigns it mounts could be undertaken, none of the advocacy that it does could occur without the honest and sincere labour of the staff of the student society. So how do you radically alter the direction and orientation of your society, with no transparency, accountability or consultation? You replace your staff.

The important lesson that this board apparently learned from 2006 is to undertake this project under a more “legitimate” (though no less antagonistic) means. As there is no contract in force between the SFSS and its employees, the board can, legally under the labour code, lock its workers out. The last time draconian staff re-structuring was afoot, the board was much less sophisticated, and much clumsier, in its approach. This time, you will hear arguments about how student unions and clubs will not be funded, how the membership is being taken advantage of by the “shamefully” high cost of providing fair employment to SFSS staff. You will of course be told of the “intransigence” and “unreasonableness” of the union, who, as of course you all know, are simply unrealistically greedy individuals exploiting the system, and through it, you. You will be told that, in spite of the board’s best intentions, this is the only way the society can fulfill its “constitutional” duties to its membership, and that the “fiscal reality” of the situation is that either you will lose resources and service, or staff will have to be cut.

All of which carefully distracts from the real imperative of the board in a clever sleight of hand. The question really has nothing to do with the fallacious and reductive “staff vs. students” antagonism that is being presented, but rather with the ability of the board to exercise unchecked executive power over the

society. Again, there's a clear manipulation of the market discourse. While employing the staff causes "financial problems", the real "market value" of their labour is never honestly discussed or disclosed when the management goes after the union.

Anyone who has worked in, for, or with the student society knows categorically the importance of the staff to the organization. Not only does their labour ensure its continued functions, but their expertise and experience, their institutional memory, guarantees that it continues to exist beyond the whims of a one-year-term board. The staff at the SFSS not only actually provides the services that this board will argue they are threatening, but ensures that those services exist in a meaningful way, that students can depend upon them as they undertake their studies, from year to year. Without the SFSS staff none of the services their continued employment is purportedly threatening would exist in the first place. Without the serious responsibility and care they feel towards the students they work for, there'd be no student society to speak of.

The ultimate goal here is not to ensure the “financial viability” of the SFSS; there were plenty of options open to the board both on and off the table before they decided to lockout their employees. The goal is to remove staff from the equation as much as possible so that decisions of the board are increasingly unchecked, to consolidate executive power, and to allow the unfettered re-construction, or more ominously de-construction, of the society as a whole. Like those directors of 2006, this current board is undertaking a project of “staff-restructuring” to re-organize the society as they themselves see fit, without membership input. But don't worry, this is in your best interest, just trust us.

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Online activists can join a [solidarity group on Facebook, supporting SFSS staff here](#), or can tweet using #SFUlockout as a hashtag.