

SFSS CUPE 3338 Lockout "either ignorance or malicious denigration of their vital work": SFU student

by Guest Contributors - Wednesday, July 13, 2011

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The following open letter to the SFU community was written by SFU student Emma Noonan, originally titled "In Support of a Livable World" and originally published [here](#). It is republished on PoliticsRespun with permission.

On Sunday, July 10, 2011 at 2:13pm, the [SFSS Board of Directors](#) issued notice that they were locking out the staff members belonging to [CUPE local 3338, bargaining unit 5](#). This included the office staff of the SFSS General Office, the Copy Centre, the SFU Surrey Office staff, Out On Campus and the Women's Centre, a total of 15 permanent and 5 term employees. They took this action after almost two years of negotiations over the expired collective agreement. Without going too far into the specifics, the Board of Directors has stated that this is primarily because the SFSS currently pays unreasonably high wages to CUPE employees, who have been unwilling to negotiate wage cuts.

I would like to examine, for a minute, the idea that the SFSS pays too much in wages to its employees. On the SFSS's lockout website, they state that they were contractually obligated to pay \$748 911 in wages and benefits for 12 permanent employees. I am slightly confused by this number because it is the number they use to state how much they pay in wages, for any number of employees, in their budget infographic. Given that this particular CUPE bargaining unit consists of more than 12 people, I must conclude that either the SFSS in fact pays more than that in total wages, or that that number is divided among more people than they imply. However, I will assume that that is money is divided only among the 12 employees mentioned. That means that on average, assuming all possible benefits such as medical and dental were claimed for every employee, these employees had a before-tax income of \$62 409.25 for the year.

I know that \$30/hr sounds like a lot of money to be paying someone. I understand that \$62 409 per year per employee sounds a bit scary, especially as a student who can make maybe a third or a quarter of that and is barely scraping by. It's frustrating to think that you're paying someone that much more than you make yourself. But would you really rather we were paying SFSS staff \$10/hr? In Vancouver, for people who have families and homes, this is not a realistic living wage. You live here. You know that. With mortgages and groceries and school fees and all the other costs of just getting through the world, is \$62 409 really so much to be paying dedicated and experienced professionals?

And it's not as though your student fees are being shoveled out the door on a daily basis as hand outs or as money wasted, as the SFSS Directors "money saved" tweets would have you believe. The General Office and the Surrey Office staff does the work of actually providing a great many of the SFSS's services such as coordinating room bookings, making sure allocated funds get where they need to go and serving as a stable frame around which a new Board of Directors can form from year to year. I would even argue that many of the activities and events proposed by the SFSS Directors on Twitter over the course of the

lockout would be much more difficult and time-consuming to organize without this staff. Outside of the General Office are the Out on Campus and Women's Center staff, who provide invaluable services to SFU students. Not only are they available to answer questions and help deal with crisis situations, but on a day-to-day basis they run libraries, organize events, participate in and are responsive to their respective collective bodies, advocate for students both specifically and generally, give guest lectures in classes, organize with the Health Center as well as with off-campus groups to provide free condoms and lubricant to anyone who needs them, organize the volunteers of their respective spaces and liaise with the SFSS board as well as other CUPE bargaining units about any concerns that may arise. Any implication that these people don't do the necessary, everyday work of providing the important services they provide to students is either ignorance or malicious denigration of their vital work.

Why is it irresponsible to pay service providers who have worked or will work for the students of SFU for many years a wage they can survive on? Why is it "supporting accountability" to cross picket lines? I don't know about anyone else, but growing up, I was taught that you say "please" and "thank you", you look both ways before you cross the street and you *don't cross picket lines*. Yet this is what the SFSS Board of Directors is encouraging students to do.

I would also like to address a query I saw during this last week. Someone asked, if locking out staff is so detrimental to students, whether this CUPE bargaining unit should be allowed to strike. This is, I assume, was rhetorical question meant to show that locking out staff is not, in fact, harmful to students, but I'd like to address it anyway. A union of employees striking, whether it be for fair wages or working conditions or what have you, is a very different creature from an employer locking out these same employees. The employer (in this case the SFSS) has a responsibility to provide a certain set of services and by locking out its employees, it takes an active step away from providing these services, regardless of how financially or otherwise justified they feel in taking this step (and regardless of Board assurances, SFSS services have *not* been running as usual during the lockout for a number of reasons). Employees, on the other hand, have a responsibility to provide services as per an employment contract or collective agreement, which is currently expired for CUPE 3338 Unit 5. The purpose of this agreement is two-fold: to outline the duties the employee is expected to perform in exchange for a wage or salary and to protect the employee from abuse, exploitation and uncertain or unfair working conditions. Sometimes, the aims of the employer and the employees are in opposition to one another since often the employer wants to cut costs and the employees want to maintain a living wage and decent working conditions. I believe it is not only wrong, but mean-spirited to say that employees or unions are greedy, bloated or obsolete for wanting these basic things. I don't think it is wrong for the student society to want to use their resources as efficiently as possible, given its responsibility to its members, the students, but that does not make them automatically nobler or morally superior to their employees.

On the contrary, because of various complex factors in our society, we often expect our caretakers (whether domestic or professional) to be willing to sacrifice for the "greater good" and we are more likely to accuse them of being greedy and self-serving if they refuse to do so, or will not do so to an ever higher degree. But we do not celebrate our caretakers if they do sacrifice, because it is expected; it is due course. In fact, we are likely to continue to ask for more. Ironically, but not without reason, unionism is one of the strongest forms of collective action we, as employees of any kind, can undertake but unions are so often painted in broad strokes as greedy and working only for their own selfish interests and against collective well-being.

I know that our resources are limited and that we live in a system that pits us against one another in a zero-sum game but I believe that we have the power to make our campus and our world a kinder, better place to be, even if just by the small step of respecting the action our employees are trying to take together for themselves and for us.

Emma Noonan is an SFU student and has written this letter in support of the locked-out members of CUPE 3338, who provide the services of the Simon Fraser Student Society. The SFSS locked out its staff on July 11, 2011 at 2:13pm, demanding wage rollbacks, staff reductions, and other concessions.