

A no longer radical, now reactionary campus: The SFSS CUPE Lockout and SFPIRG eviction

by kevin harding - Friday, July 08, 2011

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There's an almost mythical status to the label that [Simon Fraser University](#) used to promote itself in 2005 during its 40th anniversary celebrations: the university was a "[radical campus.](#)" The term comes from student activism that used to flood the campus, once called Berkeley North, student activism that established one of the first Womens' Studies departments in Canada, student activism and sit ins that created a coop daycare, student activism that resulted in SFU being the first university in Canada to elect students to its senate.

Each of these now-mythical points that gave SFU the 'radical campus' label came from student activism: students petitioned and demonstrated to get the right to be on the senate of the university. Students staged a sit-in in the faculty lounge to start the daycare. Students staged a strike to demand the right to have a say in how the president of the university was chosen. Student activism was the basis of the label of the radical campus, and student activism was found in the campus student union, the [Simon Fraser Student Society](#) (SFSS) and the [Simon Fraser Public Interest Research Group](#) (SFPIRG).

Sadly, today the SFSS seems to have shoved off the more than 40-year history it could have once proudly claimed as student activists: the Board of Directors of the SFSS, led in "[what can only be interpreted as an ideological move](#)" by president [Jeff McCann](#), internal relations officer [Jordan Kohn](#), treasurer [Keenan Midgley](#), and others issued a lockout notice to its unionised staff members, with staff being locked out effective 2:13pm on Sunday. Late today, a committee of the same board voted to begin the process of terminating the lease of the [Simon Fraser Public Interest Research Group](#) (SFPIRG), a student-driven and student-funded group that conducts research and organizing on student selected issues.

These moves are purely ideological, and they're incredibly disappointing. They show a mindset that opposes unions simply because they exist, and a right-wing reactionary current that seeks to kill off 'progressive' organizing no matter how they have to do it. The lockout of the union and the beginnings of the SFPIRG eviction show that the issues at play aren't purely financial, as the SFSS does not pay outright for the space that SFPIRG occupies, and many of the key players in attacking the workers of the SFSS have been central in attacking SFPIRG in the past.

The lockout of the staff union comes after two years of negotiations on a collective agreement and after the SFSS board broke off mediation with the Labour Relations Board. Right-wing reactionaries claim that the workers of the SFSS are paid too much, or have ridiculous benefits. Neither of which is overly true - staff are paid fairly for the work that they do, and their benefits are below average.

But the argument that comes from many of the right-wing reactionaries is absurd in its hysterics. Staff are paid well! They shouldn't be paid this much! I used to work for the Simon Fraser Student Society, and while I no longer work there *and do not speak for the union or its members*, I can tell you it wasn't a walk in the park. The last project I worked on was the [ill-fated K'Naan concert at SFU](#), where arts director [Kyle](#)

[Acierno](#) was actively involved in bringing K'Naan to perform at SFU, despite not knowing the costs or infrastructure requirements that would go into such an endeavour, resulting in the eventual collapse of the concert, an embarrassing no-show by the star, and an international media story that saw blame bounced around from the star to the students involved. My role, while I took up graduate studies mid-way through the planning process and had no direct input into the processes, was to try and limit the exposure of the student society as much as possible, and prevent as much of a disaster as possible. I was involved in legal discussions, insurance discussions, liaisons with university administrators and RCMP, and on and on and on. When staff have this kind of responsibility in their job requirements, they should be paid well. I, as a staff person, did my best to keep the organisation running smoothly, and I gave a lot of my time and energy to its projects.

But according to the right-wing reactionaries, this is too much. Always paid too much.

It's a strange argument that surfaces here. Jobs that students apply for and want are too much? How is that possible? I participated in the hiring of three staff over my time at the SFSS, and we had hundreds of applicants for each position. Students want jobs like what the SFSS offers when they graduate. Why are the reactionaries not calling for CEO salaries to be lower? Management salaries to be lower? Politician's salaries to be lower?

It's a strange and perverted argument that sees right-wing reactionaries spewing hate against people who work daily to see student events work. A perverted mindset that hates unions because they get better working conditions for their members. A strange view that wants to destroy unions because they help people get paid fairly. A vindictive mindset that wants the SFPIRG shut down because they enable students to work on projects that don't agree with Stephen Harper's Conservative mindset.

And it's infected the radical campus.

It's time to show solidarity with CUPE 3338, and demand that the SFSS lift its lockout and negotiate fairly with its union, and cease the eviction of SFPIRG.