



Canadian Centre for
Policy Alternatives
Manitoba Office

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That's What Unions Do

Back in February, 2013, CCPA-Mb put out a Fast Facts titled Six Unions: One Voice¹ which chronicled the many problems faced by staff at the University of Manitoba campus. We explained how an intense process of corporatization was negatively affecting all manner of University employees, from tenured professors to caretaking staff. More and more private-sector companies are being contracted to do the work University staff used to do, resulting in poorer service for students and increased stress for employees. The six unions who represent University of Manitoba employees spoke out with one voice to protest the unhealthy work environment found throughout the campus.

The unified voice of the six unions was able to get the administration to listen to the concerns of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) Local 3007. CAW 3007 represents the food service workers, caretakers, power engineers, grounds keepers and skilled trades employees at the University of Manitoba, and has around 500 members. The private company Aramark has been managing the Food Services employees for the last 20 years and was awarded a contract to manage the caretakers in June of 2011. That contract would last a mere 2 years before the administration would take back control of managing the staff, many of whom encountered problems with Aramark from the beginning. As of September 1, 2013, the University will resume managing the caretaking staff itself.

What went wrong? How could such a large corporation lose this contract? Aramark is an American corporation with

over 250,000 employees worldwide. It specializes in food services and facilities management. According to its website, it “was honored as one of the World’s Most Ethical Companies by the Ethisphere Institute.” One could not be blamed for thinking that the campus caretaking staff would be happy working under Aramark’s management team. After all, they were being managed by one of the world’s most ethical companies.

Reality turned out to be far less ideal than corporate spin.

According to CAW Local 3007, the Aramark manager humiliated and intimidated staff from the start. He insulted their intelligence and appearance and told them they were overpaid. Not only did staff feel insulted and fearful, they began to lose respect for the University for allowing such a situation to occur. Despite the union filing a group grievance with the employer to try to remedy the situation, Aramark supervisors continued to harass the staff and to break various standards of basic human resource development protocol. The behaviour of Aramark supervisors can only be described as over the top, including, according to CAW 3007, verbal abuse and even a death threat to one of the employees. The idea of a respectful workplace turned into a vague memory for many staff, resulting in an increase in stress leaves, resignations, absences, illness, injuries and a precipitous decrease in morale.

Clearly the situation was grave or the University would not have cancelled the contract with Aramark. The U of M is to

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be commended for doing the right thing and putting its staff first. But there are two important lessons to be taken from this experience: the private sector will not necessarily do a better job than the public sector; and, unions play a crucial role in protecting their members from unacceptable workplace practices.

It is unfortunate that the U of M has been seduced by the arguments of free-market, anti- public-sector proponents, but it is hardly the only Canadian university to go down the corporatization road. The negative impact, as evidenced by the experiences of CAW 3007 members, is palpable and eventually spills over, affecting students and the campus as a whole.

The pressure for the public sector to adopt corporate practices is part and parcel of a larger attack on government programs, public sector employees and unions. A tidal wave of anti-unionism, stemming from the US, is beginning to seep into Canada, with claims that unions are no longer needed - that they've served their purpose and that workers no longer need union protection. The experiences of the caretaking staff at U of M prove otherwise.

CAW 3007 was able to initiate a series of actions and resources to represent the interest of its members. The ability of a unionized employee to 'grieve' a situation means that workers do not have to endure inappropriate behaviour from an employer; the union will follow procedures laid out in the collective agreement negotiated between the union and the employer. In this particularly egregious situation, the union was able to mount a group grievance on behalf of all its members, thereby providing a vehicle for the employees to take a collective stand against the abusive managers. Without a union, these workers would not have had recourse against inappropriate behaviour; eventually many more would have quit and the University could have experienced difficulty in finding staff.

There are bad employers and there is indeed such a thing as a bad job. In fact, precarious jobs are on the rise, with fewer workers having access to the standard jobs of the past. Noack and Vosko explain that: "precarious jobs are characterized typically by high levels of uncertainty, low income, a lack of control over the labour process, and limited access to regulatory protections."

When a worker is afforded the protections offered by a union, uncertainty, lack of control over the labour process and loss of regulatory protections are all minimized. This is why unions matter today as much as they did in the past: they democratize the workplace and bring the rule of law and a level of order that benefits employees and employers alike. Unions also help keep wages at a living level so that workers can raise their families with dignity, pay taxes and participate meaningfully in the economy and society.

The University of Manitoba did right by these employees when it re-established itself as their manager and restored an environment of trust and respect. But all of us need to remember that it was the union, on behalf of its members, that rose to the occasion when the going got rough.

That's what unions do, and that's why we still need them today.

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¹The six unions are: Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) 3007; The University of Manitoba Faculty Association (UMFA); Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) 3909; CUPE 1482; The University of Manitoba Students' Union (UMSU) and the Association of Employees Supporting Education Services (AESES).