

Progressive Librarians Guild Chapter responds to attack on Academic Librarians

Wednesday, 29 June 2011

The Edmonton Chapter of the Progressive Librarians' Guild (PLG) has issued a response to McMaster University Librarian Jeff Trzeciak, who had set off somewhat of a firestorm in the Canadian academic library community by suggesting that future hires at the McMaster Library are unlikely to be librarians in a talk at Penn State University in April.

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The full statement is included below. . .

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A Response to McMaster University Librarian Jeff Trzeciak from the Edmonton Chapter of the Progressive Librarians Guild

On April 8 of this year, McMaster University Librarian Jeff Trzeciak addressed a conference at Pennsylvania State University. His presentation was entitled "Transforming Traditional Organizations: McMaster 2006-present" and in it, Trzeciak stated that new hires at McMaster Library would "unlikely to be librarians, unlikely to be traditional paraprofessionals...likely to be PhDs...[and] likely to be shared with other units." In other words, Trzeciak was claiming that McMaster University Library was at its maximum level of librarians and that no new librarians would be hired as others retire or leave the institution, but rather be replaced by subject specialist PhDs and IT specialists.

This came as a surprise to the members of the McMaster University Academic Librarians' Association (MUALA), the recently-formed union that represents librarians at the institution, as did Trzeciak's announcement in the presentation (which was streamed live on the internet) that four McMaster librarians were about to retire. None of these announcements had been made at McMaster and as MUALA states (see here), none of the four librarians who were being publicly pushed out the door by Trzeciak had actually signed their retirement papers.

There has been a large amount of commentary on this issue from librarians and library associations across North America. Most of this commentary justifiably condemns Trzeciak for the indiscretion of his remarks as well as his attack on the library profession, with the latter concern forming the bulk of the criticism of Trzeciak (for a summary of this commentary, see here). However, while the Edmonton chapter of the Progressive Librarians Guild (PLG) adds our voice to the chorus of condemnation focusing on Trzeciak's assault on the library profession, there is another issue at stake that is equally important to address: Jeff Trzeciak is a union-buster.

Step back and look at this situation from a worker's perspective but do not specify to the degree of "librarian." After all, workers are first and only then defined by the actual work we undertake. From a worker's perspective, we see a new boss taking over an established institution. This new boss has a knack for self-promotion and some new ideas about modernization, but these ideas bring massive upheaval to the workplace and in particular, his methods for implementing change are not at all well-received by the workers. In response to the demoralization brought about by top-down management, the workers organize and form a union. In reaction to that, the boss goes outside of the institution and announces at a conference in a foreign country that he will no longer hire any workers who would be eligible to join this new union. Instead, he will attempt to out-flank the union, undermine the union, outlast the union, bust the union. Then he can proceed with his "innovation" unimpeded by a united opposition to his single-minded, authoritarian visions.

It is useful to take this step back and clarify the issue as a worker's struggle, not as a debate over the future of librarianship. In this manner, we see what is at the heart of Trzeciak's manoeuvrings and can stand in solidarity with the men and women of MUALA, worker-to-worker and secondly librarian-to-librarian.

Ironically, McMaster University is located in Hamilton, Ontario, a city at the heart of Canada's labour traditions. The Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, an institution mandated to preserve and promote the history and culture of workers, is located in Hamilton and is one of the only institutions of its kind in all of Canada. The Canadian auto industry is also situated in Hamilton and the Canadian Auto Workers union has a long history there. Most ironic of all is the fact that McMaster University itself is home to a renowned School of Labour Studies. On a larger scale, this attack on MUALA comes at a time of wide-spread attacks on organized labour across the United States and increasingly in Canada.

This should come as no surprise, though. Jeff Trzeciak is a 2005 graduate of the US-based Frye Leadership Institute, a management-dominated institute that instills top-down methodology in mid-career librarians and other professionals in the information field. Ushering in the language of business to administer change in the library field, Trzeciak has also brought union-busting tactics so favoured by the private sector, pro-management think tanks, and "leadership institutes" to McMaster University.

The leadership of McMaster University is apparently in favour of Trzeciak's tactics, as Trzeciak was re-appointed to another five-year term as University Librarian without consulting the membership of MUALA. The union even submitted

a report on Trzeciak's performance that was based on an opinion survey completed by the union membership, to no avail (see here).

The Edmonton chapter of the PLG stands in solidarity with the men and women of MUALA and strongly condemns the union-busting actions of Jeff Trzeciak and the role of McMaster University administration in re-appointing Mr. Trzeciak and thereby condoning his methods. Through collective action, workers in the library field must rebuke such blatant attacks on our profession and our unions to ensure that social justice remains a key component of not only our work, but also our workplaces.

The Edmonton Chapter of the Progressive Librarians Guild

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