

Bard Workers Fight for Rights...

Where Are the Students?

By Lexi Parra and Natalie Schuman

Bard students have a reputation. Whether it is a positive or negative reputation, part of the Bard College identity is that students are active in their community and active politically. But it seems that in recent years, the student body may have lost some of its passion. Despite efforts by the Student Labor Dialogue, a student-led group on campus, the Bard administration's increasingly oppressive treatment of its workers has largely been met by silence from the student population. Students pay arguably excessive amounts of money to attend this institution, but do we care to notice how our money is being spent or how our values are being represented by the actions of this administration?

The Student Labor Dialogue represents some of the last remnants of student activism on campus. This group has been collaborating with workers to help fight for proper wages and benefits. For, although not well known by students, workers are constantly guarding their wages and benefits from disappearing at the hands of the administration. In 2011, Bard students marched through campus protesting the treatment of workers by ARAMark, the then contractor of Bard's environmental services workers, who were being asked to pay half a month's salary for health insurance. After campus-wide protests, Bard workers and SLD members successfully got ARAMark off of the campus. As always, the Student Labor Dialogue continues to meet with administration in an effort to pressure them for change. However, communication as of late has been less than ideal. The frustration from workers may be leading to a larger union comprised of the Hudson Valley college workers at large, such as Bard, Vassar and other collegiate workers. With a larger union, not only can workers feel supported in their efforts, but they can also provide

each group of workers from various institutions with advice, resources and support. This larger union could completely change the relations between worker and college administration.

At Bard College, avoidance seems to be the administration's strategy of choice when dealing with workers' concerns. After attending a few SLD meetings, held in the Root Cellar Wednesday evenings at 5 pm, we quickly understood that the Bard administration makes empty promises and is not interested in following through. The current topic within the SLD is Tuition Remission, a program to provide Chartwell's workers' children with discounted tuition to Bard College. This program, although somewhat altered, is already provided to numerous other types of college employees and professors. Last year, a head of the administration assured the SLD that a document had been drafted for this program. The finalization of the language needed to formally install the Tuition Remission program has been in the works, on the part of the Bard administration, since spring semester of last year. A few weeks ago, a longtime member of the SLD attempted to meet with an administrative head, whom shall remain nameless, in order to finalize the language. This meeting fell through and many phone calls to set up another meeting have not been returned by the administration. No member of the SLD has seen the draft of the document, so they are preparing to take further action to put pressure for the installation of this program. Missed calls and meetings continue to delay the finalization of Tuition Remission.

This type of strategic avoidance is not only frustrating to the SLD but to employees as well. During an interview, a security employee who will remain nameless pointed out the importance of a strong relationship between the administration

and Bard employees, as that is the only way to reach compromise regarding contract negotiations. He expressed concern that that relationship is lacking: "I really think that there is room for improvement in the communication between us and Ludlow. If we could work on that, improve day-to-day communication without a middleman being involved I think that we would definitely be able to have a better relationship."

As Bard College has grown in the past decade, so has the volume of security calls, from lockouts to EMS emergencies. Yet the administration has not hired more security staff to make up for this growth. The happiness of the guards and the safety of the students and faculty is on the line: "We understand the economic situation, but we are doing our best to try to keep our students, faculty, staff and our buildings safe with this number of security guards and I think that if they would add at least another fulltime guard, if not more, we would definitely be able to improve our job performance," said the afore mentioned member of the Bard Security team. While the ongoing nature of negotiations prevents us from divulging specifics, like several other groups on campus, the security workers are also in danger of wage and benefit cuts.

It is apparent that with a skeleton staff and Bard attempting to save money with any cuts possible, the negotiations will be a series of compromises to reach some sort of middle ground between the two parties. Health care and seniority benefits are also major topics of negotiation, although specifics cannot be divulged during negotiations.

The process of contract negotiations is an ever-present reality for college employees of any institution. This process can overwhelm workers who are not properly equipped with resources to counteract administration strategies. This is where unions come in great use. Many college employees have smaller scaled unions and union representatives, but the Hudson Valley workers are starting to organize, seeing the pros of numbers and support that a larger union could provide. A recent event at a college institute in the Hudson Valley further motivated the formation of this Hudson Valley union.

Recently, the Culinary Institute, one of the most prestigious culinary schools in the country, located in the Hudson Valley, fired half of their housekeeping staff, cut union wages and subcontracted workers that would work for lower wages

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sans benefits. Along with the firing of half of the housekeeping staff, the remaining housekeepers' wages were lowered from \$15 an hour with benefits to \$10 an hour without benefits. The administration's ability to fire their employees without warning or compensation was an unfortunate clause in their contract. Joining forces with local more established unions like Bard College's could provide support for CIA workers to fight for more fair contracts and treatment. It is unknown if the CIA will join the Hudson Valley Union but it seems likely. The mass firing, wage cuts and subcontracting executed by this institution reinforced the incentive to come together and support workers who would otherwise face a similar reality. The CIA does have a union in place, with 100 members but with few resources and an ever-changing staff due to firings..

The CIA is very conscious of their public image and many union members at Bard believe that with the right amount of pressure and public exposure, the administration may come around. The administration received little backlash for these actions, there was no media coverage and little student awareness. The CIA is a very reputable institution, with many notable alumni. In 2008 and 2013, the CIA was the site of protests against President Tim Ryan. In an effort to obtain better equipment, more self-governance and less crowded classrooms, over two thirds of the teachers union approved a vote of no confidence against Ryan. The students stood by their teachers with their complaints and protested a decrease of educational standards. During the 2008 campaign, students got involved on Facebook and around campus, organizing protests of the president. It is obvious that the student body there is capable of organizing on the behalf of their staff but they have yet to do so this time around. In these battles for better wages and health care, it seems that the students at Bard and the CIA are largely silent.

At meetings, members of the Bard union seem enthu-

static about incorporating the CIA into the Hudson Valley union. It would mean greater numbers for the union in general and would require our more established unions to help the CIA work to create a culture of direct action amongst the workers. In the words of a Bard Building and Grounds worker who will remain nameless, this means “making them feel empowered with their own rights of speech and then to provide them with techniques to effect change or to put pressure on the administration to, ideally do a contract reopener”.

This larger union is a way to not only put pressure on the administration, but also to provide tools for workers to better understand their rights, how to gain the compensation they deserve and feel supported by others in similar positions. During these union meetings, there is a very palpable camaraderie that can be felt. The members sit in a circle, discuss current issues, and then strategize how to work with – not against – the administration to get to the goals.

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In union meetings and interviews for this article, workers unanimously agreed that support from the student body would play a key role in negotiations with administration. Currently, the SLD is working to better the Chartwells worker-student relationship via lunch events and other community building functions. The SLD understands and has in the past utilized this important relationship to initiate change for workers on campus. However, in recent years, this alliance has dwindled and the workers’ perspective is easily overlooked by most of the student population.

As an institution that prides itself on social responsibility and progressive thought, an active student body can remind the administration “to live by their own gospel”, in the words of a Bard security employee. In the case of the CIA, organizing could be risky for the staff. The administration just fired half of their employees without warning. Word of large scale union

organizing could prompt another mass firing. That's where the students come in. A big part of the union's campaign at the CIA involves the students showing the administration that they will not stand for unfair treatment of CIA workers. Student organizing at the CIA is more difficult, given the nature of the school. The graduation rate is much faster, some students stay for only a few months, therefore it is harder to create a group of students committed to the needs of their school's staff.

Men and women are working together to provide lives for themselves and families...while Bard students are left somewhat unaware. A Bard union officer discusses the barrier between worker and student: “We cohabitate this space but we very rarely talk to each other.” Getting involved in these issues can be a means of “breaking down that wall, whether it's age or socio-economics or whatever, just to communicate with each other on a humanistic level.” With the attempt to better know and understand those who work in Kline, Buildings and Grounds, Security and Environmental Services we will have a better appreciation of those who make this campus function. We do not only need appreciation, but awareness of the Bard administration's actions. Students on this campus are not simply vital in putting pressure on the administration, but we also partake as financial providers. Should students not have a say in how their money is spent or what values their institution uphold? The workers are fighting for themselves and, as students who claim to be politically and socially active, is it not our responsibility to support their efforts and hold the administration accountable? Student activists have achieved success in the process of labor negotiations on campus by collaborating with works through SLD in the past – it can happen again. It seems that our power to help fair negotiation can only be influentially and strategically exerted when we remain involved with the process of contract negotiation between staff, faculty and the administration.