The strike by McGill University’s non-academic workers (MUNACA) has been the subject of sharp debate within the University and in the media. In both internal and public communications about the strike, the University’s senior administrators have been at pains to insist that they welcome an open debate and reject intimidation. In the words of Principal Munroe-Blum from a recent internal email, “I urge all of us to move forward in our longstanding McGill tradition of respectful and civil discourse, where people are free to speak, to disagree and voice their views without harassment, intimidation and insult.” In my comments below, I take up this invitation and offer an opposing view.

I wish to start with the Principal’s statement above, since it joins a host of other such comments that position the administration on higher moral and rhetorical ground than the strikers. How does the administration reconcile its rejection of intimidation and harassment with its own video-recording of picket lines and rallies? It seems uncivil and disrespectful, at least, to photograph people against their will. As a researcher, I am required to get consent from anyone I audio- or video-record, explain what my purpose is, how I will use the data they have provided, and assure them of the degree of confidentiality that they request. The administration’s use of this tactic is not only intimidating and harassing, it breaks those basic rules of ethical conduct.

Another example of this duplicity is the shocked tone used to denounce picket line action and alleged acts of vandalism. The strike has been overwhelmingly peaceful, so the administration’s frequent public complaints about supposed harassment and violence create a false impression that the strikers are out of control. Because injunctions have restricted their freedom of expression near the campus, workers recently went to the Glen Yards and temporarily halted work on the MUHC hospital site. Vice-Principal Di Grappa called the action a “contemptible strategy” (Gazette, Oct. 21), and added this comment in an internal memo: “McGill is astonished by MUNACA/PSAC’s unnecessary, provocative action.” Let’s put aside his erroneous and offensive presumption that he speaks for everyone at McGill, and ask how a senior administrator could be astonished by the frustration and anger expressed by the striking workers? Where has he been? This strike and the hot feelings it engenders didn’t come from nowhere. Pressure has been building for years.

And those people on the picket lines are not exactly fire breathing radicals. As the striker who was recently roughed up and arrested put it, “I’m a 63-year-old woman and all I want is my dental plan – how revolutionary is that?” (Gazette, Oct. 19). V.P. Di Grappa’s expression of surprise is disingenuous, at least, and a blatant admission of the administration’s failure to understand and address the root causes of MUNACA dissatisfaction. If the V.P. wants to be less astonished, he might compare the low-end MUNACA annual salary of $29,594 that he quoted in this newspaper (Oct. 18) with the salaries paid to some of his senior administration colleagues, such as the former Dean of Medicine, who was paid approximately 17 times that amount.
Meanwhile, as the administration seeks to silence the striking workers, it uses the bully pulpit of McGill’s internal communication system to present its one-sided view of events. This is a free and open debate? Would senior administrators be willing to give equal time and space to MUNACA every time they present their version of the situation? Students and staff are regularly sent messages insisting that the administration is bargaining in good faith, has the institution’s best interests at heart, and represents all that is good, honourable, and noble about McGill. The implication, of course, is that the strikers do not hold such high ideals.

At every opportunity, the administration trumpets McGill’s standing as a world-class university – a university that, in the Principal’s oft-used phrase, punches above its weight. Why then is it not attempting to pay its workers a world-class salary, rather than accepting mere parity with other Montreal universities as the goal? If McGill is a great university, a large part of the credit must go to the people now striking for fairer compensation.

The spin doctors in McGill’s administration have cast the workers as the villains and themselves as the pure defenders of all that is good about the University. This is the same administration that took a decade and two task forces to address inequities between salaries for non-tenured academic staff at McGill and other Montreal universities. And even then it raised salaries to below the city average for part-time university instructors.

I have been at McGill for over 30 years – as a student, part-time instructor, faculty member, and administrator – and I have never sensed a greater rift between the administration and the rest of the McGill community. There is a pretense of consultation – town hall meetings, management forums, and other displays of collegiality – but there is a growing sense that such events are more about public relations than true dialogue. For many of us at McGill, the current administration has been considerably less than world-class in its performance, and its attempts to discredit striking workers is shameful.

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