

Union demonstrates after Algonquin College suspends staff member over letter to editor

BY TOM SPEARS, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN FEBRUARY 27, 2012 6:09 PM



A supporter of suspended Algonquin College worker Sandra Anderson stands outside the Woodroffe Avenue campus on Monday to show support for her. Anderson was suspended for writing a letter to the editor of the Citizen complaining of poor labour relations at Algonquin.

Photograph by: Wayne Cuddington, Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — A financial-aid officer at Algonquin College is serving a 30-day suspension for writing a letter to the Citizen criticizing the college administration for wasting money.

Sandra Green-Anderson's 112-word letter, published Jan. 27, also called labour relations at the college "toxic." Her letter was reacting to news coverage describing a "spectacular level" of grievances at Algonquin — more than 450 outstanding, compared with a few dozen at most Ontario colleges.

The college now says she was suspended because her accusations were untrue and hurt Algonquin's reputation, and therefore went beyond the protection normally given to free speech.

And on Monday, the situation escalated. The president of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union came to Ottawa to support Green-Anderson, a union steward, and to say labour relations at Algonquin are "horrible.

"How many grievances do we have? Four hundred and 50 grievances," Warren Thomas said. "That

says something about management, because no union can generate that kind of activity. It would keep you busy 24/7.”

OPSEU represents both the support staff (Green-Anderson’s local) and teaching staff.

Most Ontario community colleges have “not good” labour relations, but Algonquin stands out for being worse than average, Thomas said.

“Management thinks they can trample all over people ... What they’ve done to her is just outrageous and I won’t stand for it.

“We’ve had grievances in on her. I guess we’ll find a couple of sharp lawyers and have at them until she gets satisfaction.”

That means reinstatement and back pay for the time she was suspended, “and an apology.”

“They’re going to pay. I guarantee you, they’re going to pay,” he said of the college. “They believe they can do whatever you like and how dare you, if you speak the truth?”

“She’s not the first person to be suspended by a bad boss for speaking the truth.”

The union set up a gas barbecue on the sidewalk in front of Algonquin’s main entrance and gave out hotdogs during a snow squall. Green-Anderson wasn’t there; the union says she is still under suspension and has been ordered by the college not to speak publicly.

Algonquin’s vice-president of human resources says labour relations aren’t that bad at the college, and they’re improving.

“We’re very fortunate that, irrespective of what was happening today, I think we maintain an excellent working relationship with our support staff union,” Gerry Barker said.

The college administration and local president meet regularly, he said. And while relations with the faculty union haven’t been as good, he said the two sides are in contact by email and are working toward arranging a face-to-face meeting.

“I expect that meeting to happen within the next 10 days or so.”

Barker said the letter to the Citizen drew a suspension because “when you start to say things that are unfounded and untruthful and that damage the reputation of the college, we feel we have to answer that because that’s not freedom of speech.

“When someone crosses the line we have to take action, based on the legal advise we obtained.”

He wouldn’t specify what was untrue in the letter, saying that’s now part of the grievance process.

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