

I work for CWA Canada, a large media union with over 6,000 members at media outlets across the country, on a partnership it has formed with the Canadian University Press, which is an organization of by student newspapers across Canada. This partnership is meant to help students with the often difficult transition from school to work, and to mobilize students into taking action on labour issues that affect them.

I want to use this time to talk about:

- 1) Why unpaid internships and other unpaid work is a concern specifically in the field of journalism.
- 2) What role unions should playing in addressing these issues and in advocating for youth.
- 3) And finally, what initiatives CUP and CWA Canada are working on.

## **Section 1**

### **Unpaid work is one reason the entry price to launch a career in journalism is on the rise**

- Journalism used to be a field you could enter right out of high school: you could start in the mailroom and work your way up to reporter or even editor.
  - Now it's uncommon to find a young journalist without an undergrad if not a masters in journalism.
- On top of that, students increasingly feel that they have to take on unpaid work to even get a foot in the door .
- One way that students end up working for free is through unpaid internships.
  - While the majority of newspapers in Canada do actually pay their interns, many magazines or small newspapers (Exclaim, Toronto life) take on unpaid interns for months at a time:
    - Elle: pays \$1.67 an hour for a 4 month internships, 3-4 days a week (\$750 in total, only upon completion).
  - There are also a subset of unpaid internships that are tied to j-schools, only open to students on a coop term.
    - An example is CBC, where the vast majority of their internships are unpaid, but where students get school credit.
    - While seemingly legal in many provinces, there are 3 problems with this type of unpaid internship:
      - 1) These interns are not supposed to do any real work. But this is something which is difficult to monitor and is often abused.
      - 2) These positions are only open to j-school students, so they are exclusive.
      - 3) Unpaid mandatory work terms are incredibly hard on students, as one student told Memorial University's student paper, The Muse, "I have to work two or three other jobs along with working 40 hours down there every week. Just to make ends meet I'm looking at working 65 or 70 hours. That's just to pay the bills."

**Unpaid internships are tied in with a growing trend of underpaying or not paying journalists for their labour**

- Freelancers too frequently either don't get paid or are offered an insultingly low rate for their work. Many young journalists feel that they have little choice but to start off working under these conditions in hopes that they will earn real money in the future.
- CWA Canada worked on a campaign against Transcontinental this past spring. It generates a revenue of over \$2.1 billion a year, and publishes prominent Canadian magazines, such as Canadian Living, Elle, the Hockey News and Style at Home.
  - They tried to enforce a contract on their freelancers which demanded all rights to writers' work without any pay increase. This would give TC Media the ability to republish the work, on any platform, in any country, forever, without ever giving the writer another cent.
  - This contract would make it very difficult for freelance writers to make a decent living.

**Beyond the obvious injustice, these unpaid internships and freelancing gigs have broader social impacts**

- It devalues the work of all journalists and makes it more difficult for everyone to get a fair pay.
- Interns are more vulnerable to harassment. When you're working for the prospect of a job, it's hard to stand up for your rights.
  - Through these internships, youth are being conditioned to accept their own exploitation as normal. Less than a generation ago, people would have laughed at the idea of working for free, but now youth enter the labour market not expecting to get paid, not seeing it as their right to be treated fairly and compensated for their labour. This makes it more likely that they will accept this exploitation throughout their working life and will not organize against it.
- And then there's the impact on the integrity of journalism.
  - If we allow unpaid internships to proliferate, journalism will continue to become a profession only accessible to people from wealthy backgrounds.
  - As Cord Jefferson wrote on GAWKER, "it's incumbent upon all of us to recognize that this is the culture we breed when we offer to pay writers nothing or next to nothing, thereby immediately eliminating anyone who needs a paycheck in order to feed themselves and keep a roof over their heads. One obvious way to reverse media's glut of wealthy white people would be to stop making it so few others but wealthy white people can afford to get into media"
  - Media is already not representative of marginalized groups in Canada
    - At CBC, which you'd expect to be better than for-profit news outlets, only 2.1% of the workers identify as having a disability, and 94.3% of the staff are white.
  - This increasing exclusivity of the profession has an impact on the diversity of not only the people but the ideas that shape the stories told by the media. If only the very privileged can become journalists, only stories from their perspective will be included in the media.

## **Section 2: Turning to the role unions should be playing in advocating for youth**

**Youth are being placed in an increasingly desperate economic situation: record high unemployment, high levels of debt, and prospect of earning less than our parents' generation**

- Unemployment
  - As of December youth unemployment at 14.1% Canada, and even higher for aboriginal youth, young people of colour, and young women.
- Debt
  - As tuition fees continue to increase, so too does debt. Youth are approximately 15 billion in debt, and it takes an average of 14 years to pay back loans.
- Pay
  - We will be the first generation to actually earn less and have a lower standard of living than their parents

**This dire economic situation is coupled with declining rates of unionization among youth**

- Employees under the age of 25 are much less likely to belong to a union (only 15.9%).
- In the past, each new generation of workers would be incorporated into labour movement as they found jobs and started careers.
- Youth more commonly enter the labour market through contract, temporary or part-time work, which are precarious and not often unionized jobs.
- This decline in unionization rates leads to a declining popularity of unions among youth
  - In a survey done in Canada last August, only 53% of respondents 18 -29 said that they would join a union given the opportunity.
  - Youth no longer see unions as relevant or see unions as actively working against them by negotiating agreements that protect the older workers while throwing the next generation under the bus.

**This strained relationship between youth and unions needs to change**

- It's absolutely necessary for unions to play a role in addressing labour issues affecting youth, including unpaid work.
  - For unions to be able to effectively advocate for workers, they need to find ways to organize workers in precarious jobs and to welcome young people in.
- To do this, unions need to build relationships with young workers and to support their fight against their exploitation.
- Rather than telling young people to just accept less, they need to be reaching out, working together, building intergenerational solidarity.

### **Part 3: What CWA Canada is doing**

- As I mentioned, we have entered into a partnership with the Canadian University Press, an organization of student journalists.
- We are working to accomplish 3 goals:
  - Build good will between union members and students.
  - Support young people in finding fair employment in the media.
  - Advocate and organize around young worker rights.
- We've begun working towards these goals by organizing student journalists as associate members of CWA Canada.
  - We have over 200 members signed up, and through this program they get access to services that aim to create other ways into professional journalism, based not on exploitation, but on intergenerational solidarity.
    - We worked with The Canadian Press to create internships that are available for all CUP journalists and not just journalism school students.
    - We have created a mentorship program: we have set up over 100 young journalists across the country with mentors: for students to get feedback, advice and make connections.
      - This program encourages older generation of workers to welcome the next generation into the workplace. Through this, we can start building ties of solidarity between generations.
    - We have set up dozens of educational initiatives to politicize students and to share knowledge about worker rights. In the form of:
      - Paid freelancing gigs where students cover labour events
      - Training courses and workshops on freelancing, internships, finding work - all within a labour perspective.
      - Meet and greets where our associate members make connections with professional journalists and learn about labour issues.
  - We try to address intern rights through these initiatives.
    - It's a complicated labour issue for student journalists in CUP. Many journalists are never offered or can't even get access unpaid internships, so if they are offered one, many would take it (if they can afford it), feeling like they have no other choice. Advocating for and with student journalists means taking this into consideration.
    - So as one CUPpie and former intern suggested to us, we're taking a 'harm reduction' rather than an 'abstinence' approach, and we are focusing not on individual choices, but on collective solutions to this problem.
    - We are doing this through a 3-pillar approach:
      1. We will offer students information about internships and their rights.
        - Through our workshops and providing resources.
        - Empowering students to make an informed decision.

2. Creating other ways into the industry: mentorships, internships, etc.
3. Pressuring, not students, but employers to stop exploiting youth.
  - Drafted fair internship guidelines.
  - Increasing awareness among our own members.
    - Creating posters about intern rights for our workplaces.
  - Create template language for collective agreements for staff to take into next rounds of bargaining.
  - We have fought for backpay for interns, and we're encouraging staff reps to keep doing this.
  - Associate members take part social media campaigns and other actions.
- The challenge now with the program is to mobilize our members and integrate them meaningfully into the structure of the union.
  - We should be directing union leadership on issues that affect young journalists.
  - We are putting together a steering committee this year and plan to bring up issues at the next CWA Canada presidents council in the spring.
- Overall with this program, we're trying to encourage is solidarity among young journalists. As Sarah Kendzior wrote on al Jazeera, addressing young workers:
  - *'If you grew up in the prestige economy, you have been trained to see life as a competition. But if you are young, you are losing no matter what. You will have better luck in the long run by rearranging the social order, rebuilding broken institutions, and broadening opportunity for all.'*
- This is the approach we're trying to take, and through these initiatives we can play a small role in shifting the consciousness of student journalists, union members and employers against unpaid and exploitative internships, and in improving the conditions on the ground for young workers.