

## Staff Corner

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*in collaboration with members of the staff of the College Dining Service*

Friends and comrades of ours who work for the College's dining service approached us with some important complaints about their working conditions. They asked us to publicize their plight in an effort to get something done about it.

Perhaps we should explain why they asked us. These people didn't come to us out of nowhere. They told us there was a problem because they knew we would help; we had offered our help before to make working conditions better.

The workers who asked for our help also requested that they not be named publicly. They are afraid for their jobs; some remember similar conflicts over working conditions when their co-workers at Swarthmore were summarily let go. Whatever the merits of this specific situation, we consider it unacceptable for a person — regardless of rank — to have to resort to anonymity to resolve a workplace dispute.

When Morrison's Custom Management managed Swarthmore's dining services each worker was assigned three shirts and three pairs of pants. Morrison's reasoned that the hygiene and attractiveness of the staff was an important element in running an adequate dining room. And realizing that the wages dining services workers get paid don't leave large amounts of extra money after paying for basic needs, Morrison's provided employees with uniforms.

Dining Services workers had plenty of problems with their treatment by Morrison's as well. But since Swarthmore College took over the job of dining services management the workers have been treated with even less dignity and respect than under Morrison's.

The men who work in Sharples and Tarble have received only two or three red "golf shirts" each, while the women were given pink shirts that did not fit and have since been

sent back. The college told the women workers that they would order some golf shirts for them that should arrive by the end of the month.

You may and should laugh at the notion of Swarthmore College trying to make the women workers wear pink while their male counterparts wear dark red.

Coupled with the inadequate uniforms given to the workers is the demand on the part of management that the workers wear special black pants, available through the college for \$15.00 a pair. According to one irate worker the college demanded that each worker buy at least one pair.

Workers contend that in reality they must buy at least three pairs of pants to maintain an acceptable degree of hygiene. After all, workers in Sharples and Tarble work long hours under hot conditions; expecting them to work more than a day in a pair of pants without washing is simply unsanitary. And asking them to wash their pants every day is patently unfair; it amounts to asking for an extra hour's work each day.

One of the workers said, "If you only get two pairs of shirts, you can't wash them every day. You can't just wear one pair of pants over and over...everywhere else you look, people are getting full uniforms and different color uniforms...it's a matter of hygiene...."

As another pointed out, the issue is one of how to maintain an adequately clean dining service. "If people think everyone making their sandwiches is dirty, they ain't going to want to eat."

The issues here are simple: hygiene, presentability, fair labor management and simple respect for a group of people that already feel the administration sees them as the least important.

One of the workers we spoke with makes around \$6.00 an hour before taxes. (Because he asked to remain anonymous, we are not disclosing the exact amount.) To buy the reasonable minimum, three pairs of pants, he would have to work nine hours — more than a full workday — simply to fulfill the workplace requirements.

Furthermore, although the pants are a business expense they cannot be deducted from taxes because people at this income level are all but barred from itemizing their taxes. That means besides buying the required uniform they still pay taxes on the money they effectively never see.

Associate Vice-President Lawrence Schall had a different view: "There's no obligation to provide uniforms at all," he said. "We can tell people to wear their own clothes."

But the fact is that the College asks them to wear specific uniforms - and then to pay for them out of their own pockets.

The upshot of this is that the College is asking the segment of its workforce that is already hurting the most from the economic depression Chester has suffered for over a decade to take a wage cut. And the College expects it to work because these workers have no effective voice to protest.

Many of the dining service workers have signed a petition to the administration making four basic demands as far as the uniforms are concerned. The administration should take them seriously; this issue represents the extent to which the College will take its liberal reputation to heart and treat its employees with the basic dignity due every person.

The demands are:

- ***At least 3 uniforms*** (shirt and pants) provided by the College for all workers;
- ***Identical uniforms*** for both sexes; no pink for women, and no uniforms that make working in the hot environments less tolerable than necessary;
- ***Reimbursements for money already spent*** on uniforms by workers under the current policy; workers have so far had no choice but to spend their own hard-earned money on what should be College-purchased items;
- ***Immediate action***; the College's policy is having a direct, harmful impact on the lives of these employees. The workers cannot be expected to wait for the College to make the necessary policy change.

So far, Schall has not received an official complaint. Linda McDougall, director of Dining Services, could not be reached for a comment.

The workers' petition will be presented to the administration shortly; later, a supportive letter from faculty, staff, and students will be submitted. It is imperative that the administration listen to these complaints and deal with them fairly and effectively.

Equally importantly, though, the College needs to figure out why it is that its employees feel that they risk losing their jobs if they complain about working conditions. Students may be shocked to find that, notwithstanding its "Kremlin on the Crum" reputation, none of the College's employees are represented by a union; the right to bargain as a group for better wages and working conditions does not exist.

More complaints are sure to come up. As any student who has waited in a Sharples line at rush time knows, the temperature behind the food lines is sweltering for the few minutes we spend there. For the workers, the heat and lack of ventilation is nearly unbearable in the hours they work. People who work for the College have a right to have their voices listened to and their needs addressed.

The College may wish to solve such disputes without the structure of a union. If that is the case, though, it should do so without running away from the clear and important needs its employees have. It should meet the workers' demands on the uniforms immediately. And it should set up a system through which workers can safely and comfortably address the issues that are important to them.