

Student councils withholding fees from CFS

by Krishna Rau

TORONTO(CUP) -- Some members of the Canadian Federation of Students say they pay the piper and they should call the tune.

Eleven student councils in B.C. and Ontario are withholding fees from the services branch of CFS as a pressure tactic. They say members have lost control of CFS-Services and they will hold their fees in trust until something gives.

But they may be running the risk of being sued by CFS if they do not pay up soon.

Student councils belonging to CFS pay \$4 per student per year. One dollar from that goes to CFS-Services, which is controlled by CFS, but operates as an autonomous wing. CFS-S runs a travel agency and operates such programs as the Student Saver Cards and the Student Work Abroad Program.

Some student councils in Ontario and British Columbia charge CFS-S is run undemocratically and that CFS members, who own the services wing, have no say in its decision-making process. Some of those councils are now putting CFS-S's dollar into trust funds instead of paying it immediately.

Lisa Berland, the executive

assistant at the Ryerson's student council in Toronto, said they've had their CFS-S fees in trust since October to protest the lack of input member councils have.

"There's a sort of lack of accessibility for members in decision-making. There's not a lot of accountability built into the bylaws of CFS-Services."

Berland pointed to CFS-S's decision, made without member approval, to take over a federal government program that brought young women into Canada as au pairs as an example of autonomy gone awry.

None of the student councils have expressed any desire to leave CFS, but tempers seem to be fraying somewhat over the issue. At a CFS national executive meeting in early January, two motions were brought forward to take legal action against the councils withholding their fees. Both were later withdrawn.

Jaime McEvoy, the president of the Douglas College student council in B.C., said legal action would be foolish.

"If they want to take legal action against us to recover their fees, they'll be hard-pressed to do it.

McEvoy also saw CFS-S as requiring more member input.

"We view the services as an organization that largely runs itself."

At the last CFS general meeting in October, the members voted to bring the constitution of CFS-S into line with that of CFS. This was enough to persuade the student council at the University of Ottawa to schedule a vote on resuming payment of fees.

"Once they (the constitutions) were made compatible, we felt that the main objectives we wanted were achieved," said U of O council executive Marc Molgat. "It raised the whole issue of what CFS-Services is and what CFS-Services should be."

Molgat said, however, that other members still have complaints, and that CFS should not even be considering addressing the questions in a courtroom.

"I think it's ridiculous. If you're not able to respond to the legitimate questions people have about your organization, then there's definitely a problem at the national executive level."

CFS deputy chair Christoph Sicking said the national executive did not want to sue any council, and the proposals came from a minority of the executive.

He agreed, however, that the constitutional changes did not seem to be enough for many councils. He said such changes would not alter the day-to-day decision-making process of CFS-S, but he held out hope for the future.

"That in itself is not enough. But now the groundwork has been laid."

But Molgat said some schools are looking for fundamental changes in the way CFS-S operates.

"I think some schools want some very important changes to the way CFS-Services are run. They want seats on the board of directors of Travel Cuts, and a greater say in the allocation of monies."

The positions of members in B.C. will be examined at a meeting later this week. The Ontario Federation of Students will also hold a meeting this week.

Tim Jackson, the chair of the Ontario Federation of Students, said OFS had stayed out of the disagreements so far.

One of the motions to sue members at the CFS national executive meeting was put forward by the Ontario representative, although she later withdrew it. Jackson, however, said he had no opinion on legal action.

"I think it's ridiculous. If you're not able to respond to the legitimate questions people have about your organization, then there's definitely a problem at the national executive level."

- Molgat

"It's irrelevant what I think. I don't have a seat on the CFS executive."

Jackson then compared the situation to the difficulties OFS had in collecting fees from the York University's student council. The OFS membership had voted to sue the council if an agreement could not be reached.

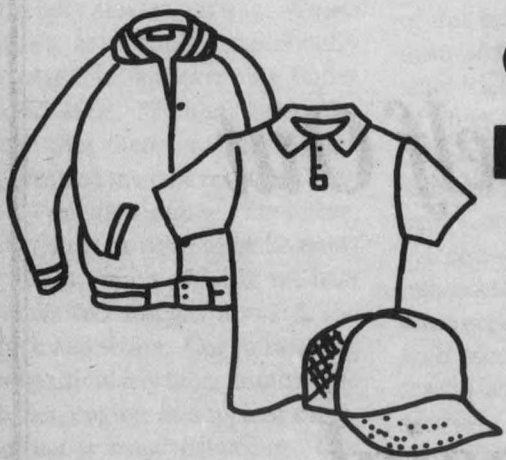
But, said Jackson, he really had no part to play in the disagreement.

"I don't really think it's appropriate that I get involved in it that much."

Lakehead University in Ontario has also put its fees in trust, as have the University of Victoria, Simon Fraser University, and Langara, Capilano, Selkirk, Malspina and Cariboo Colleges and the Emily Carr College of Arts -- all in B.C.

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