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# BUSINESS OWNER WRITES A HEARTBREAKING LETTER

## ***Laura Wheeler runs a small business here in Renfrew, I don't know which one.***

Laura is one of a group of generous people with local businesses that open their doors to developmentally compromised adults in terms of “hiring” them to “work” at their place of business. The work is mostly of the voluntary variety, but in the case of Laura’s operation, there was one day a week that was a “paid” day where the client actually earned legitimate wages for legitimate work.

Opportunities such as these are absolutely huge to both the client and the client’s family. It gives the client some experience out of the home, allows them to learn routines and structures, gives them a feeling of belonging and gratification, and sometimes even presents a chance to make some cold hard cash of their own. And just as important, it gets the client out of the house and into the community. That’s something that benefits both the client and the family.

## ***Sadly, Laura has had to step back from offering this opportunity.***

The labour dispute between *Community Living Renfrew County South* and *OPSEU Local 472* has turned plenty enough people into victims, but none more so than clients and client families. And the situation at Laura Wheeler’s business is just another example of the tragic collateral damage that comes about when misguided people start playing politics with people’s lives.

This strike has lasted beyond three months, and there’s no real indication yet of a finish line coming into view. That’s three months without the familiar staff who usually work with the clients. It’s many weeks of being tended to by replacement workers whom I’m sure are all good people but are still woefully inexperienced with such difficult and challenging work. Laura’s letter speaks for itself, and I’ve attached it for your perusal.

But it’s heartbreaking, even more heartbreaking because I happen to know the client that Laura is referring to. I don’t mean know from a position of friendship or familiarity, but rather “know” from meeting and speaking with her and her mom at an event I attended. On it’s own, it’s a sad story of the degradation of a developmentally challenged adult directly as a result of critical routines being changed, overlooked, or possibly even outright ignored. It’s doubly sad when you can put a face to the story.

Prior to the labour disruption, CLRCS clients had routine and anticipated access time to regular workers who are just as much family to them as anyone else it seems, and these workers suddenly not being there is a horrible challenge for them. Many simply don’t understand why things have changed so dramatically for them, and they often blame themselves by asking ***“What did I do wrong?”*** Or ***“Why is my worker not here any more? Are they mad at me?”***

Before the strike, many clients flourished as best they could, dependant upon their personal challenges. But victories were secured across the board as clients thrived under the support and guidance of the now-striking workers. But now, as the strike wears on, degradation of those victories is taking place as clients begin to show real signs of regression in their personality, their situation, and the way in which they go about their day.

The disruption has been brutal, something I've heard from more than one family. Depression is now a common thing among this population as clients seem to retreat deeper into themselves, often-times remaining in their rooms, or even their beds, for the entire day. They give the impression that all hope is lost and that they're shutting down, retreating to a darker and lonelier place within themselves.

The fear is that, no matter what may happen now and moving forward, those hard-fought-for gains may be irretrievably lost, perhaps never to be recovered again.

***Upon whose social conscience do we place this?***

This is a travesty beyond appropriate description, and it's hard to point the finger of blame on striking employees. Those people are fighting against attempts to impose regressive conditions upon them by management, facing deteriorating wage prospects, re-drawn working conditions that slant in a negative direction, compromised quality of care, and a stripping of seniority rights.

In short, they're in the fight of their professional lives.

Can we really and realistically expect people thrust in a situation like this to simply throw down their signs and surrender? To acquiesce to the demands of the employer, no matter how draconian? All in an effort to ride to the rescue of their clients?

If the workers were to do this, who, then, would ride to their rescue?

Not a chance.

***There's only one place to look, and it doesn't require an awful lot of thinking to figure that out. And if there's still any doubt, I'll go ahead and identify them:***

Community Living Renfrew County South. And the people who are running point on their strategic direction for this strike.

I'm sorry, but there's just no other way to look at it. CLRCS started this whole mess, although they'll bleat that it's the "funder" that's at the heart of it. In my mind, even if I were to give them credit for their funder argument, CLRCS has dutifully complied with the government's strategy of essentially locking these workers out by refusing to talk to them and then running around in circles to obfuscate any plans for talks. They want their employees on those picket

lines seemingly in perpetuity, and are prepared to waste all kinds of taxpayer dollars in an effort to diminish the working conditions and wage expectations of their unionized workforce. And all of this on top of the Ford government's visceral hatred of public sector unions.

They, as in management and Board, are the only ones who can put an end to this fiasco playing out in front of the rest of us in the community. And it will be them sporting the political black eye that comes when the community decidedly turns against them and the manner in which they treat their employees, and by extension, the manner in which they treat their very own clients.

If there is shame to be assigned in any of this, it will be worn by the Executive-Director and her cheerleading squad that refer to themselves as members of the agency's Board of Directors.

They are, all of them, already getting trounced in the sphere of public opinion. But sadly, I don't think they have the wherewithal to escape their plight, likely so entrenched in the belief that they're doing a smash-up job of things.

No.

*All they've done is smash everything up.*

And it has the appearance that they're prepared to merrily and stubbornly cling to their odious strategy.

Yes, the Ford government has done this to all of us. But the ED and the Board are agents of that very same government which puts them legitimately on the firing line. They, through their actions and inactions, enable terrible government policy to have life instead of joining the fight against it.

Too bad for them.

Nobody made anybody take the positions they currently occupy, they chose to be there. And if the going starts to get a little bit rough, then I'm sorry, but they're the ones who are going to have to wear the stains. There's nobody else to blame for this.

The clients in Laura Wheeler's letter and elsewhere are suffering because of the decisions made by local people, and there's little tolerance for their pathetic attempts to stickhandle around that.

People unaffected by this strike have long since taken notice, and they're getting mad.

And they're mad at the folks most responsible for keeping this thing going.

There will be consequences as a result of this, and these people will feel them, mark my words. None of these people are going to walk away from this unscathed, and it's naive on their part to think otherwise.

Now the general public is agitated. And it's not just the strike they're looking at more closely, but also items around how CLRCS manages itself, and how its operations are run. That's a level of unwanted interest that may quite likely continue to exist and cause problems even after a resolution is reached.

CLRCS has beautifully managed themselves into a hole of their own making. Not long ago, a lot of us here on the outside had no idea what CLRCS even was. Now we do, and no surprise, we hear plenty of things that we don't like.

### ***Well played.***

So yeah, even an agreement at this point won't remove the lens, the spotlight that has settled over the agency. Because even if they do come to an agreement, there will still be plenty of folks out there interested in how management runs their ship and how they care for the vulnerable community they're responsible for.

The campaign of anonymity and cloak and dagger has only succeeded in scrutiny far more intense than before.

They know the options in front of them. Tough decisions are in front of them. Will those questions be addressed with institutional and personal integrity?

Nine people who can make a positive difference if they could allow themselves to do so. Nine people clinging to their chairs at all costs, even if they seem willing to compromise their own sense of the common good.

Give people a little bit of what they think is power and it changes them in ways that aren't pretty, unless they were heartless participants to begin with and all along. Blinded by their own magnificence, they appear content to sleepwalk their way to their own personal public relations disaster.

It's to the point where personal resignation may be the only way to mitigate the crisis they've allowed themselves to fall into.