



Melvil's Girls: Still Struggling to Survive

Melvil Dewey and the Establishment of the Profession

Melvil Dewey, best known as the creator of the Dewey Decimal System, helped establish the American Library Association, co-founded *Library Journal*, and formed the Library Bureau to provide libraries with supplies. Most importantly, Dewey founded the world's first library school at Columbia University in 1887, and changed librarianship from a vocation to a profession.

But did he help create a modern profession? I don't think so. Librarianship has long been synonymous with low pay, and continues to struggle for recognition and to define itself as a true profession.

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, a wave of evangelism and reform swept the United States. Christian ethics, wrapped tightly in a concept of "lifelong service to humankind" aided in the establishment of librarianship as a feminized profession. From its inception as a profession, librarianship acquired an almost missionary quality. Because women were grateful for these new opportunities, they gladly entered into the workplace for less money. In fact, poor pay became an essential part of librarianship's self-sacrificial nature.¹ Seventeen women and five men were admitted as the first class in the School of Library Economy.

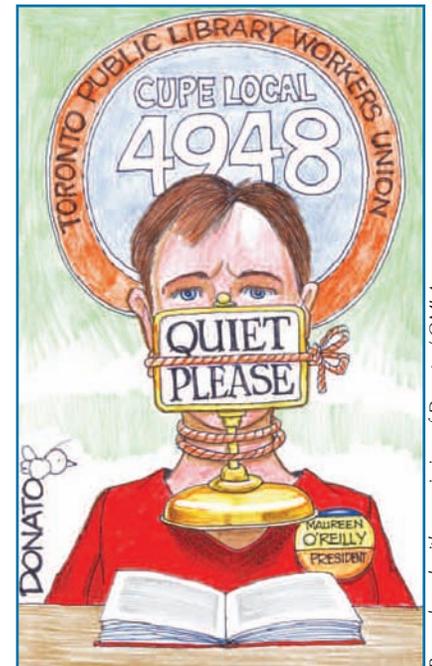
Dewey, for his part, felt that the genteel nature of library work would compensate for the lower pay that male librarians (as well as teachers) received. "Although he did not say it, Dewey was, he believed, setting an example for the rest of librarianship; he was recruiting a workforce with high character for low cost."² Librarians' salaries have been a topic of discussion ever since; the case of the Toronto Public Library (TPL), which has recently been convulsed by budget woes, is a case in point.

The TPL's 2012 Budget Fight and the Eleven-Day Strike

The TPL is the busiest public library system in North America. In 2011, the library circulated thirty-three million items and welcomed nineteen million visitors.³ Yet that same year, the newly elected mayoral administration of Rob Ford decreed an across-the-board cut of 10 percent.⁴

These cuts came after several years of budget slashing by Ontario's Harris Conservatives. Since the early 1990s, the \$10.5-million provincial spending envelope for libraries was reduced to \$4.6 million, the operating budget cut by \$800 million, the acquisitions budget reduced by \$51.6 million, and service hours slashed. Most critically, 532 library workers' jobs were cut, representing a 25 percent loss.⁵

The public responded to the latest assault on the library budget with an unprecedented display of support. The 2,400 members of CUPE Local 4948 of the Toronto Public Library Workers Union launched a citywide campaign under the banner "Our Public Library." City Hall received more emails about the library budget than any other issue since the amalgamation of the city of Toronto in 1998. Canadian luminaries like Margaret Atwood supported the workers in their campaign as well.⁶ The Ford-controlled library board retreated under public pressure and instead presented a 5.9 percent budget cut. At the final council meeting, the library budget narrowly passed by a vote of twenty-two to twenty-one,



Today's library worker quiet no more in defending libraries and library workers

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Standing up against the Ford austerity agenda

to shouts of joy. However, the victory was pyrrhic: the 2012 budget eliminated another 107 librarian and support worker positions.⁷

Surprisingly, TPL did nothing to support the “Our Public Library” campaign, and in fact openly discouraged staff from doing so: an email from the library’s Community Relations manager from the end of August asked staff not to speak to the media.

Though the Ford administration suffered its first real defeat over the city budget, it soon set its sights on the municipal unions, including the library local with a list of concessions.

Despite the fact that the city was strike-weary, the public supported the library workers’ movement. It had been thirty years since any job action by the library workers, and the public saw us as the defenders of library services. We took an eleven-day strike, fought off all concessions except a loss on job security, and emerged victorious. (We now have job security after eleven years, while the rest of the city’s workers have it after fifteen). While what we achieved was numerically a major victory, half of our bargaining unit is subject to layoff due to the high number of part-time workers.

The Unprecedented Rise of Precarious and Part-time Work

Though austerity agendas are now common at all levels of government, library administrators have been quietly undermining and devaluing our workforce for decades.

Across Ontario, library work is largely both part-time and precarious⁸. Part-time work is endemic to the field: 49 percent of Local 4948 members work part-time,⁹ and the proportion of part-time positions at other public libraries can be much higher. The notion of the “precarious job” extends far past part-time status, however: precarious work can be temporary, contracted-out, casual, or on-call work. It is work stripped of decent wages, stable hours, job security, benefits, and pensions. De-professionalization and de-skilling also contribute to the prevalence of precarious employment. Older workers work longer, young people can’t find work, and visible minority workers remain in jobs with no futures. The 8Rs Research Team reported that, in 2005, 84 percent of recent MIS graduates found employment within six months of graduation, but 57 percent of these positions were temporary.¹⁰

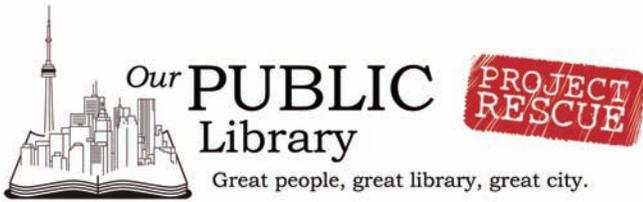
A CUPE-sponsored public opinion survey conducted during the library strike found that Torontonians were shocked to learn that library workers were treated differently than other city workers.¹¹ The public supported extending full benefits to part-time library workers and believed there would be a negative impact on the quality of service if there were fewer library workers.

Even during the darkest days of the Ford regime, there was no hue and cry from the city government to create even more precarious and part-time work as a cost-saving measure. Yet the library budget already reflects this reality.

So Why Are We Doing This to Ourselves?

We complain that librarianship is not appreciated, but as Hebert S. White has pointed out, “a more recent, and more provocative, topic is the possibility we don’t appreciate ourselves.”¹² White argues that to convince others of the pivotal role that librarians can and should play, we must believe that what we do is important.

The reality is that public libraries are still run by obedient ladies. In Dewey’s time, women’s obedience was expected. Today, administrators’ willingness to



submit to the control of bureaucracies and lay boards is evidence that this deference to authority continues.

For more than twenty-five years, we have watched library administrators give away the store. Last year, a female pundit of the ultra-right wing *Toronto Sun* named me “Mad Mo” and suggested that instead of trying to hold municipal councillors accountable to their constituents on the library vote, I should shut up.¹³ But when has being quiet ever won us any gains? History has repeatedly demonstrated that real change only comes when people come together and demand more of their politicians.

Our Saviours: Unions and Associations

Are library workers’ interests better served by unions and associations?

Most associations like the CLA and its provincial counterparts such as the Ontario Library Association (OLA) are institution- rather than worker-oriented. Anyone can join. Employers and workers are in the same associations even though their interests are often at odds. The failure of the OLA to take a stand on Ontario’s Pay Equity Act of 1987 is a perfect example. This was a lost opportunity to improve the salaries of library workers, and it is not surprising that chapters of the Progressive Librarians Guild have sprung up as alternatives.

The basic role of the union, in contrast to that of the professional association, is to defend its members’ jobs and ensure that the value of work is properly recognized and compensated. We have fought for child care, safety laws, maternity leave, improved pensions, equity legislation, employment standards, and more. As the saying goes, “unions are the people who brought us the weekend.”

Toronto library workers were members of Local 416, the Toronto Civic Employees Union, from amalgamation to 2009. Outsiders always viewed this as a strange

marriage, but it was the right place to be. By joining a local that was more immediately associated with the civic administration and more closely aligned with the city economy, we gained tremendously. Male-dominated locals traditionally concentrate on better wages. Our history with 416 allowed us to make up for the decade-long shortfall in our salaries. Today, as an independent library local, we are committed to focusing on library-specific issues such as the prevalence of precarious work, while continuing the fight for better salaries.

The Future of Libraries and Their Workers

Is it possible to have good libraries without good librarians? Is it possible to have good libraries with fewer librarians? Is it possible to have good libraries with no librarians? ¹⁴



TPLWU Local 4948 members on the picket line in front of Cederbrae Library last March

We have always done a better job at promoting our institutions than promoting ourselves. Building on the seminal work of Roma Harris, a “new librarianship” means a re-commitment to service, advocacy of the public’s right to equitable access to information, and activism with respect to employment issues in the workplace, including status and salary.¹⁵ To do this we must pressure our associations to be more employee-centred; we must embrace, not fear, unionization; we must find and support leaders who challenge us to fight back; we must participate in the political arena; and above all, we must respect our own work and improve our own status, salaries, and working conditions.

We do have the power within us to defeat the Dewey curse and set our proud profession back on its path. A good job with a good salary is nothing to be ashamed of. More critically for today's libraries, we must reverse the trend toward part-time and precarious work, which supports the proliferation of self-service technology, and the trend toward commercialization, which ultimately undermines the service culture in our libraries. We must stop this rush to oblivion and the potential eradication of the profession in twenty-five years' time. The next generation deserves to have opportunities and a future too.

Our libraries are more important than ever to our communities. Librarians and library workers are an integral part of library service.

I am willing to do my part to preserve and celebrate our profession. Are you? 

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The opinions expressed in the article are mine solely and do not necessarily reflect any organizations that I am affiliated with.

Notes

1. Linda R. Silver, "Deference to Authority in the Feminized Professions," *School Library Journal* 34, no. 5 (1988), 24.
2. Wayne A. Weigand, *Irrepressible Reformer: A Biography of Melvil Dewey* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1996), 85.
3. Toronto Public Library, "Key Facts," accessed February 6, 2013, <http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/media/key-facts/>.
4. Toronto Public Library, "2012 Operating Budget Submission," accessed February 6, 2013, <http://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/content/about-the-library/pdfs/board/meetings/2011/oct17/11.pdf>.
5. Govind C. Rao, *The Great Equalizer: The Case for Investing in the Toronto Public Library* (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2012), 7.
6. Atwood tweeted in support of the library workers campaign, took on Councillor Doug Ford in the media in support of the library, and offered herself as a prize in the "My Library Matters to Me" contest sponsored by TPLWU. Atwood attended a luncheon with the winners and took them on a literary tour of the Rosedale Ravine, a setting in many of her novels.
7. Rao, *The Great Equalizer*, 8.
8. This observation is based on anecdotal evidence gleaned from CUPE Ontario and CUPE National Library Worker Committee meetings over the last three years.
9. Toronto Public Library Union Dues Report, TPLWU Local 4948 (CUPE), January to December 2012.
10. The 8Rs Research Team, *The Future of Human Resources in Canadian Libraries* (2005), accessed January 24, 2013, http://www.cla.ca/AM/Template.cfm?Section=President_s_Council_on_8R_s&Template=/CM/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=5294, 19.
11. *CUPE Toronto Winter 2012 Public Services/Labour Relations Survey*, Environics Research Group, March 9-12, 2012, accessed March 4, 2013, <http://media.thestar.topscms.com/acrobat/77/a0/149e4aaf44179a0fdbe0e6531777.pdf>.
12. Herbert S. White, "Respect for Librarians & Librarian Self-Respect," *Library Journal* 111, no. 2 (1986), 58.
13. Sue-Ann Levy, "Library Union Brought to Book," *Toronto Sun*, February 2, 2012.
14. Ibid.
15. Roma Harris, *Librarianship: The Erosion of a Woman's Profession* (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex, 1992).

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