



# **Contract Worker Justice @SFU**

## **Labour Conditions Among Contract Cleaning and Food Services Staff at Simon Fraser University**

**A Preliminary Report by Contract Worker Justice @SFU**

**January 2022**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Contract Worker Justice @SFU (CWJ) campaign was launched in March 2021, on the first anniversary of Simon Fraser University shutting down its campuses due to COVID-19. For frontline cleaning and food service workers at SFU, the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated the profound inequities generated by the university's practice of contracting out those services. These workers are disproportionately racialized and women; those identities compound the inequities they face in the workplace, and have contributed to the climate of fear that forms the backdrop to this research project.

Motivated by a concern for social justice on campus, the CWJ campaign has brought together faculty, staff, students, and members of the wider SFU community. The goal of the campaign is to have SFU provide cleaning and food services "in-house," employing the workers who perform these important jobs on campus directly so that they can receive the same rights and benefits as others in the SFU community. Currently, cleaning work is contracted out to BEST Service Pros, and food service to Compass-Chartwell. The CWJ campaign has been endorsed by every major constituency on campus, as well as by community organizations and local politicians. As part of the campaign, our team has undertaken a research project investigating working conditions among SFU's contracted-out workforce. A first phase of this project, launched in March 2021, involved comparing the collective agreements of contract cleaners and food service workers at SFU with those of equivalent, in-house positions at the University of Victoria and the University of British Columbia. We found that in-house workers at those universities fared better than SFU's contracted workforce in *every single category*, including wages, benefits, and access to campus services. Those findings are summarized on the CWJ website (<https://contractworkerjusticesfu.ca/workingconditions/>).

A second phase of the research project involves documenting working conditions among cleaning and food services workers at SFU: asking what their experience of contract work is, what their lives outside of work are like, and how they see their relationship to the university community. The goal of this phase is not only to expand our knowledge of low-wage work at Simon Fraser University, but to strengthen the connection between contract service workers and other workers in the university community who are involved in the campaign, including research assistants, undergraduate students, teaching assistants, faculty, sessionals, and administrative staff. The research team began to conduct interviews with cleaning and food service workers in October 2021.

This report summarizes the preliminary findings of this study. In what follows, we utilize quotes drawn from transcripts of interviews with 21 workers (eight cleaning and 13 food service) conducted on campus. Interviews were conducted both with individual workers and with groups of up to six workers at a time, and some workers were interviewed on multiple occasions. We would like to thank UNITE HERE Local 40, CUPE Local 3338, and the SFU Labour Studies Program for supporting our research project, as well as all the workers who shared their experiences with us.



***“We all want our situation to change, but we are all scared to come forward and talk about it. If we can all come together, then we can do something about it.”***

## **SILENT AND SEPARATE**

One of the most strikingly consistent concerns expressed by cleaning and food service workers at Simon Fraser University was a fear of retaliation for speaking out, or even for simply participating in the research project. Workers repeatedly expressed worries about the possibility of being denied shifts, disciplined, or even fired if their employers were to find out they had spoken to CWJ researchers. This feeling—that a low-wage worker’s place at SFU is to remain separate and silent—extends beyond engagement with our researchers. For example, cleaning services workers explained that their employer had recently instructed them to ignore questions from members of the university community who may try to speak with them about their work. Workers were told to claim they were new employees who didn’t know how things worked at the company and the university.

“The company people have told us not to talk to anyone. Just a polite ‘Hi’ or a ‘Hello.’ Nothing more. Don’t talk to anyone about your work or anything related to work. They don’t want the company treating their workers this way to get out.”

Our interviews allowed us to see how contracted food service and cleaning workers are subject to a workplace regime which enforces their separation from the rest of the university community. At the same time, many workers felt so strongly about their situation that they were willing to take the risk of speaking to our research team. In interviews with the researchers, workers expressed a wide range of grievances around issues such as low wages, poor health and safety practices, inadequate or non-existent benefits, overbearing and arbitrary management practices, and generally disrespectful working conditions.

## INADEQUATE PAY AND EXCESSIVE WORKLOADS

***“With the low pay, we have to make life choices that may not be the best for ourselves, and [this] also affects our children and their education opportunities.”***



Our researchers heard both cleaning and food service workers express extreme dissatisfaction, and often anger, in regard to their wages. There is widespread agreement among the workforce that the wages paid by their employers are both insulting and utterly inadequate to meet basic living expenses. Almost all cleaning and food service workers on campus make less than the living wage in Burnaby, BC. Workers told us about being unable to afford important medication, as well as being forced to depend on relatives to make ends meet. Food services workers who have been laid off because of COVID-19, or during breaks between semesters, related that the Employment Insurance payments they have been forced to survive on are as low as \$600 per month. Some workers related being forced to dip into whatever savings they had to sustain themselves during the pandemic.

Cleaning workers have also been forced to take on increased workloads with the implementation of new COVID-19 sanitation practices. Workers described how this can involve cleaning two or three times as many areas as they normally would have, without a commensurate increase in pay.

Inadequate pay is not the only issue related to wages: workers have also highlighted the fact that their pay is inconsistent, exacerbating the economic insecurity caused by low wages. Because weekly hours are variable, workers see their pay fluctuate depending on how many shifts their bosses give them. While other essential workers have been given raises in light of the extra risks they bear as frontline workers in a pandemic, workers at SFU have seen only miniscule wage increases.

Cleaning workers reported having their wages withheld by the company for holidays they have worked, and for days on which they began a shift on campus and were sent home by the company due to bad weather. Workers have also had overtime wages withheld. This failure to pay wages is a direct violation of employment law.

Cleaning and food service workers have faced issues of work intensification, as well as inadequate working hours and scheduling. During the initial lockdown of 2020, most food service workers were laid off. The few who retained their jobs were those who worked in the student residence dining hall, where workers faced unacceptable workload intensification due to understaffing by the contractor. Food service workers also noted that the intensity of work threatened their ability to comply with COVID-19 safety guidelines.

Cleaning workers reported understaffing which results in overwork and missed breaks. As one worker stated, “When there is a shortage of people working, or if there is extra work, they rush us and we don’t get to take any breaks. They don’t care if we get breaks or not. When the workers rush and try to get all the work done before leaving, it leads to accidents.” It should be mentioned that because they are directly employed by UVic and UBC, food service workers on those campuses were assigned to other forms of work around the university rather than being laid off.

Food service workers in the catering area have experienced highly inconsistent scheduling and workloads. As these workers depend on hourly wages, unpredictable scheduling has led to inconsistent income and financial anxiety. More than one catering worker we spoke to described how their livelihood has been impacted by erratic scheduling, and told us they would very much like to have more stability in their employment and income. There is a clear sense one gets in talking to contract workers at SFU that the general precarity of their work situations is harmful to their health and wellbeing, and that this harm radiates outward to affect their families as well. As a major employer in the lower mainland, Simon Fraser University must ensure that people who work on its campuses are able to lead a comfortable and dignified life in the community.





## HEALTH AND SAFETY CONCERNS

***“They would daily tell us about the COVID safety regulations and make us sign documents saying we understood the protocols, and then ask us to go work in places where it was impossible to maintain these protocols.”***

***“It’s very difficult to keep up with COVID safety rules when we are so understaffed and overworked.”***

Food service and cleaning workers at Simon Fraser University have consistently faced health and safety risks at work, both before and during the pandemic. Our interviewees reported a wide range of conditions that together contribute to a worryingly unhealthy and unsafe environment for contract workers. Cleaning services workers are sometimes denied regularly scheduled breaks, or even shorter water breaks. They also lack a dedicated space to eat their meals, and have been told they are not allowed to eat around students. Such conditions are clearly stressful and demoralizing. Yet the workers reported that in meetings with management they have been told not to use the word “stress” when explaining how they are being affected by their work.

Cleaning workers also face specific hazards on the job which management has repeatedly failed to rectify. Workers sometimes lack adequate supplies to do their job safely, such as garbage bags, cleaning equipment, and cleaning products. In some cases, they have been told to use rags and vinegar (rather than a stronger disinfectant) to clean surfaces. Workers have been told to lie on the ground in bathrooms to clean the area around toilets, and to use the flashlights on their cell phones for illumination as they do so. Cleaning service workers were forced to sign waivers indicating that they understood the precautionary measures they were supposed to take as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, such as physical distancing, and yet in practice they have been routinely asked by management to violate those same measures.

Food service workers reported concerning health and safety violations as well. Managers have refused to wear masks themselves, even after threatening workers with termination if they don't follow mask mandates in the workplace. Workers also related concerns around the daily cleaning of the facilities being allowed to slide by management, and they suggested that management has openly admitted cleaning levels are inadequate.

***“This is our safety, why aren't you taking it seriously?”***



Cleaning services workers have experienced violations of their rights when it comes to sick leave and accommodation for on-the-job injuries. They reported management intimidation in response to their calling in sick, as well as accusations of lying from management when superiors are notified of illnesses. Workers have been informed that they cannot take leaves on Mondays or Fridays—another clear violation of labour rights. In terms of injuries, workers reported that because of increased workloads and deadline pressure to finish all assigned tasks, accidents are common. Workers injured on the job have faced management challenges to the validity of their accident claims, as well as general pressure not to report. Moreover, although they often work alone, workers have been told they must have witnesses in the event of an injury. When workers have needed to go to the hospital, managers have not contacted their families and, further, have prevented fellow workers from contacting families on behalf of injured workers. In some instances, when a worker has had to be taken away in an ambulance, they have been forced to pay for it themselves. Finally, workers reported that when they contact Worksafe BC to report an incident, they sometimes face intimidation by management. As one worker stated, “They make us do extra work, which leads to accidents and injuries, and then ask us why we are taking time off work, or why we went to report to Worksafe BC.”

Even absent employer pressure not to claim sick days, the benefits offered by SFU contractors are woefully inadequate. Contract food service workers at SFU get five paid sick days a year, and cleaners only get four—a situation which is even more concerning in the context of the pandemic. The health and safety complaints we have heard in our interviews point to clear violations of workers' rights, and they illuminate a toxic working environment in which management pressures workers to take unacceptable risks. Poor workplace health and safety practices also pose risks to the university community as a whole. If workers are not able to stay home when they are ill, or are not put in a condition to perform their job effectively, the rest of the university community is put at risk. This concern is especially relevant in the context of COVID-19, as inadequate health and hygiene on campus undermines SFU's ability to offer a safe learning and working environment

## INADEQUATE BENEFITS

***“We get four sick leaves in a year. Sometimes when we do get sick, we call the office to tell them, and they are rude about it and ask us why we are calling in sick. They said that we can’t take leaves on Mondays or Fridays either.”***

Contracted-out cleaning and food service workers at SFU have extremely limited benefits. As stated, this situation stands in sharp contrast to that of workers in comparable job categories who are directly employed by other research universities such as UBC and UVic. At best contract service workers have extremely modest pensions, and at worst they have no pension at all. This, combined with their low wages, almost guarantees that they will not be able to retire with dignity. Some SFU contract workers expressed disappointment and anger at the limited amount of vacation time they get every year. Furthermore, cleaning workers reported that they are often unable to take their vacations when they want, having to check with management beforehand for approval. These workers also lack paid time off in the event of a death in the family. In some cases, managers have demanded original death certificates before granting workers leave; this is an extremely difficult requirement for workers to satisfy given that many of them are immigrants to Canada and living far from their families. Three-day bereavement leaves are sometimes inadequate to even cover travel time to the worker’s country of origin and back, resulting in some workers simply giving up on the idea of returning home for family members’ funerals.

Finally, cleaning and food service workers also lack access to a range of on-campus resources that faculty, students, and staff at SFU take for granted, heightening the workers’ feeling of exclusion from the community. If workers park on campus, they have to pay the full rate—a cost which effectively brings their earnings for a shift to below minimum wage. Workers are unable to use the internet or the library on campus, and so are effectively excluded from the knowledge produced at our university.



***“If we’re part of the SFU community, then why aren’t we treated like it?”***

## LACK OF DIGNITY IN THE WORKPLACE

***“What is probably more important to me is to be treated with some respect, and not be talked to rudely or be disrespected at my place of work. People in the university—students or faculty—can sit at their computers and work only because we do the dirty work and clean up things. Their workspace is safe and clean because we do all the physical labour in cleaning up.”***

Food and cleaning service workers, most of whom are women, cannot access childcare services through campus daycares or receive a tuition waiver if their children would like to attend the university. The feeling of structural exclusion as a result of these denied services and benefits is a constant theme emerging from the interviews. When the university denies resources and social infrastructure to its contract workers, it loses an opportunity to raise up the mostly female, racialized, and immigrant low-wage workers on its campus.

Contract workers at SFU have been subject to a range of demeaning experiences on the job. Workers reported ongoing harassment and discriminatory behaviour from management. While working, cleaning services managers have snuck up behind workers to supposedly check their work, scaring them in the process. Workers claimed managers have also taken photos of workers without consent. Many workers reported feeling demeaned by managers who believed they were lying about being ill, accused them of being lazy, or were outright racist. Workers described not being allowed to help one another complete tasks, which appears to be a rule that management has put in place in order to discourage solidarity among their employees. Workers accused management of exercising favouritism in the allocation of work, allocating easier cleaning areas to workers who are more compliant. Workers stated that they are also not given replacement uniforms when theirs are worn out or torn accidentally on the job. As many workers are understandably self-conscious about having clothes that fit properly and are in good condition, this contributes to an environment of discomfort and is read by workers as managerial disrespect.

Similarly, food service workers have faced various kinds of discrimination, including racism and sexism. One worker revealed that they were aggressively questioned by a manager as to whether they could speak English, and that they have been made fun of because of their accent. Many workers in food service at SFU have been employed for a decade or more, but feel entirely unappreciated by the university where they work. Food and cleaning service workers who have worked on campus for well over a decade—some for two, or even three, decades—still make only a few dollars an hour above minimum wage. During the Christmas break, food service workers are laid off, and have to rely on Employment Insurance to sustain themselves. They are forced to apply for EI over and over, and to wait for weeks before they receive their payments. The workers we spoke to do not feel like valued members of the SFU community, even though their work is essential to its basic functioning.

***“The thing is, they are taking everything from SFU but they are finding ways to cut costs and save money to make profits.”***

## IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS



The conditions experienced by contract cleaning and food service workers on campus are troubling. As the first quote above this section illustrates, workers on campus understand how the outsourcing system works with great clarity, and they describe it with deep resentment. Contracting out has created an environment in which the university evades meaningful accountability to the workers upon which our community relies for two essential things: nutrition and cleanliness. Third-party contractors, which are incentivized to cut labour costs wherever possible, have created an unhealthy and exploitative work environment that fails to provide the dignity to which all workers are entitled.

Contracting out also ensures that these workers are structurally excluded from the university community and deprived of the resources that many others on campus take for granted, even as they perform work that is essential to keeping our communities alive and well. A sense of exclusion and devalorization looms large in the lived experience of the contract workers we have spoken to in recent months.

Not surprisingly, workers would like to see fundamental changes in their employment conditions. Despite fear of retaliation, they have shared their stories with our research team in the hope that their voices will encourage SFU to create a better working environment for them. In discussions we have had around the option of direct employment by the university, as occurs at UVic and UBC, workers have been clear in their preference for this option, and extremely outspoken about not wanting to continue working as contracted-out labour for third-party employers. In our conversations, workers have immediately seen the potential benefits of being employed directly by the university. When this transition happens, they want to ensure that they will retain their jobs and their union representation. Finally, they are demanding more, and higher-quality, benefits—including an adequate extended healthcare plan to keep them well, and access to the university services which can improve their life chances and those of their families.

***“We’re a part of the community at SFU, and we deserve the same rights and privileges and respect as everyone else. It’s time to bring us back into the family.”***

All this is important even beyond the fundamental issue of workers, their rights, and their dignity. At stake is the wellbeing of SFU's students and faculty, as well as the reputation of SFU as a progressive university guided by its oft-stated goals of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. When the university contracts work out, it cedes control over how that work is conducted, as well as its responsibility toward those workers. Because SFU has abrogated its responsibility for the wellbeing of workers on its campuses, it does not have the ability to intervene in circumstances where intervention is warranted.

If cleaning and food service workers were to be brought in-house, SFU would be able to set clear standards for working conditions, ensure the wellbeing of workers, and maintain adequate levels of staffing in order to decrease overwork and workplace accidents. Workers employed directly by the university could develop meaningful skills, produce healthy and environmentally sustainable food, and enjoy a dignified quality of life.

Finally, bringing cleaning and food services workers back in-house would signal to other post-secondary institutions across Canada that SFU is an ethical leader among research institutions, that it is genuinely committed to engaging all of the constituencies in its community, and that it is prepared to back up its stated concern for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion with action and results. SFU's success should not be achieved on the backs of workers—of real people who contribute greatly to campus life, and ask only for equity, dignity, and decent wages in return.

