

## Students at 13 unions petition to leave CFS

### Members disenchanted with student federation's transparency and legal methods

By Erin Hale

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Members of 13 student societies across Canada – including McGill's Post Graduate Students' Society (PGSS) – have started petitions asking their peers if they wish to leave the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), Canada's largest student lobby group.

The development comes almost two years after student unions at the University of Cape Breton, Simon Fraser University, and Kwantlen Polytechnic University in British Columbia tried unsuccessfully to leave the federation because either the student unions failed to meet CFS's referendum by-laws, or students ultimately chose to stay with CFS following litigation.

Students circulating the petitions expressed strong disenchantment with CFS, and some felt that the fees their union paid – ranging from \$40,000 to \$300,000 a year – could be better spent elsewhere.

“Our problem with CFS is two-fold: on the one hand, we feel they are incompetent lobbyists. On the other, there is a sentiment among many students that CFS staff, offices, lawyers, and budgets are used to sway political consensus among students,” said James Murphy, a petition organizer at Trent University.

### Litigation

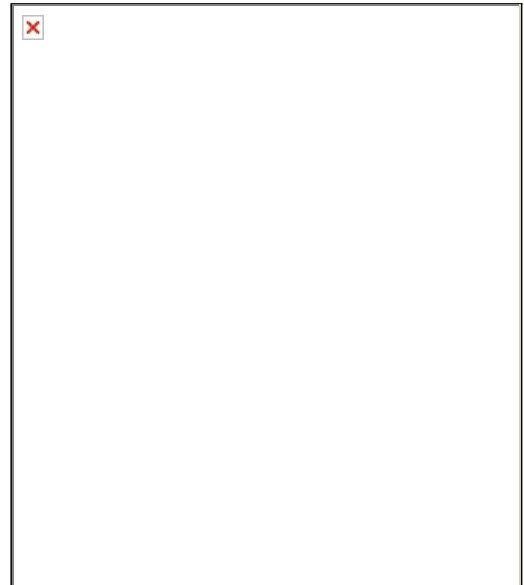
Many student petition organizers expressed frustration with what they feel is a track record of aggressive litigation by CFS. In recent years, many of the student unions that have tried to de-federate from CFS have found themselves in hot legal water when they failed to follow CFS by-laws.

Simon Fraser University's independent student paper *The Peak* reported that a case between CFS and their student union, on whether it had the right to leave the federation, went all the way to the Supreme Court of B.C.

The Kwantlen Student Association's VP External Derek Robertson confirmed that his society was taken to court for similar reasons. Similarly, the Student Union of Acadia University in Nova Scotia spent almost 10 years in litigation after they tried to leave CFS in 1996.

Former Canadian University Press (CUP) president and Maclean's OnCampus writer Erin Millar said that legal threats from CFS have extended beyond student unions to student journalists in the past.

“In my experience, working as a student journalist, and my work at CUP and Maclean's, CFS has consistently been the most aggressive organization I've ever covered just in their trying to prevent journalists from doing their job in reporting on



Sally Lin The Postgraduate Students Society of McGill recently approved its petition.

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**Campus Conservative Watch** wrote:

Dear Erin,

Recently you visited our website (<http://tiny.cc/5TURy>) and left a series of complaints that you were slighted by our discreditation of some people self-identifying as "the left" in Montreal.

To be honest with you, your protestations are misplaced. First of all, while we understand that you are probably defensive, because the quality of your story has been called into question, the fact is we were not reviewing it. We think Clark's piece (<http://tiny.cc/IKOiy>) sufficiently covered that already. Secondly, whether it was your intention to write an unbalanced story for political purposes or you just did it because you didn't know any better is irrelevant to us and to those who are using it to fulfil the campus Conservatives' attack campaign against the CFS. That is why conservatives like Dean Tester and Sam Reynolds cry "slander" in defence of your piece. And that is the yardstick we employed to judge where Lex Gill, Yves Engler and co. fall on the political spectrum when they called "ad hominem" on Clark for his entirely legitimate critique. Surely you're not so blinded by your crocodile tears that you can't see this.

Oct 22, 2009 at 09:43 AM

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them,” she said. “They’ve done that by employing legal means. They spend a lot of money using lawyers to intimidate journalists, which I think is a completely inappropriate way to spend students’ money.”

### **Revolving doors**

Other student organizers were concerned with what they saw as a revolving door policy between pro-CFS student politicians and the CFS national or regional headquarters

Robertson pointed to the example of Hamid Osman, the pro-CFS president of York University who became the CFS National Executive Representative for Ontario after his time at York, during which students tried to impeach him.

“Instead of him facing the students for reelection he became the National Executive Representative for Ontario,” said Robertson.

Another student noted that the former Concordia Student Union VP External Colin Goldfinch became a member of the board of CFS’s Quebec chapter last year.

In Quebec, eyebrows were raised when Concordia’s independent student paper The Link reported that Noah Stewart-Ornstein, CFS National Deputy Chairperson, kept his job after being caught on security tapes tearing down posters of the anti-CFS slate during the Concordia Student Union’s elections last year.

### **Transparency and reform**

Many student leaders stated that they felt CFS was not adequately transparent and accountable to its member organizations. Both Derek Robertson and Veronique Dorais, the presidents, respectively, of Kwantlen Student Association and the Graduate Students’ Association of the University of Calgary – where petitions to leave CFS are currently being held – said past executives had become frustrated with CFS for these reasons.

“One of our executives last year went to a meeting and everything he asked for was dismissed. Every motion he proposed, asking for financial audited statements or minutes from the meeting were defeated,” Dorais said.

Former SSMU VP External Devin Alfaro said that during SSMU’s time as a prospective member at CFS – from fall 2006 until fall 2007 – its executives found it very difficult to pass motions they hoped would improve CFS’s accountability.

“SSMU presented a series of motions at one [annual general meeting], that were not well received. One was accepted – that executive reports list resolutions [from previous years] and what [the executive] had done to follow up on them. One motion wasn’t well received, that gave student media full access to the [meeting] – most of it happens behind closed doors. The final motion [would have] posted meeting minutes online,” Alfaro said.

### **CFS responds**

Though the CFS National Treasurer Dave Mulenhuis said that he could not comment on some of the litigation between the CFS and its members, because it predated his tenure at the CFS, he said that as a democratic organization, any problems members had with the CFS could still be fixed internally.

“The CFS is the common democratic framework under which the student movements in Canada make decisions on campaign lobbying and services decisions. The by-laws of the federation are voted on by delegates at general meetings. Student unions vote on their common democratic framework; it’s up to them,” he said.

Mulenhuis also said that CFS is a transparent organization, and ready to provide its members with any documents they require.

“With [regard to] financial records, the audited financial statements are presented in budget committee. They are handed to absolutely every delegate who attends a federation general meeting. They’re sent to every member locale of the federation who does not send delegates to a national general meeting,” he said.

“All the financial records are available to students who wish to access them, because they are housed in the student unions of schools who are members. [It’s] the same with copies, by-laws, and constitution of the federation for every student to see and review.”

Mulenhuis added that a member of CUP is invited to CFS annual general meetings to represent the press.

### **The road to referendum**

If the petitions at the 13 student societies achieve a 10 per cent quorum, their supporters will have to wait up to five months before CFS recognizes their petition, and the date for their referendum is set.

During that time, CFS will first have to acknowledge their receipt of the petition, then within three months decide on whether to acknowledge its legitimacy. If the CFS chooses to approve it, they have 60-90 days to set the date themselves.

A student organizer at Guelph University highlighted some of the obstacles the system posed to student societies attempting to de-federate.

“You can’t campaign from April 15 to September 15, and can’t campaign over winter holidays,” he said. “In six and a half months you only have a window of half a month to initiate a referendum campaign.”

Dorais said student organizers at her society were nervous their petitions could lead to legal action by the CFS.

“We’re going to try to work with the CFS to follow the referendum and guidelines point by point, if this is what the student body wants,” she said.

Societies can expect CFS supporters to arrive on campus during their referendum. When the Graduate Students’ Society of the University of Victoria successfully left the CFS in March 2008, the university’s student paper *The Martlet* reported that pro-CFS supporters flew in from across the country to support the pro-CFS campaign.

Students at PGSS, the Concordia Student Union, the Graduate Student Association of Concordia, the Dawson Student Union, the Society of Graduate Students at Western Ontario University, University of Windsor Students’ Alliance, Carleton University Students’ Association, the Central Student Association at Guelph University, the Trent Central Student Association, the Kwantlen Student Association, the University of Victoria’s Student Society, the Graduate Students’ Association of the University of Calgary, and the University of Regina Students’ Union are all circulating petitions to leave the CFS.