

## Open Letter regarding striking Carleton University Safety Officers and Rape Culture

March 21, 2014

Rape culture has reared its ugly head again. This time from the most shocking source – striking Carleton University Safety Officers. In a [Charlatan editorial written on March 19<sup>th</sup>, two university women](#) describe their encounter with rape culture, when crossing the picket line. They were told:

“I wouldn’t go into campus if I were you,” they bellowed. “If you do there’s a large chance you will probably be sexually assaulted.” and “Do you feel safe on campus? The school doesn’t care for your safety. Don’t go on to campus. You might get sexually assaulted.”

The Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW) stands in solidarity with the women who wrote this editorial and with all students, faculty and staff at Carleton University who are actively confronting, challenging and trying to dismantle rape culture. This culture trivializes and normalizes sexual violence, and creates feelings of extensive lack of emotional safety for students on campus.

We are deeply concerned about the messages coming from striking workers about sexual violence. They are suggesting that women need to change their behaviour, a myth which continues to perpetuate sexual violence. Their words heighten fear and misinform students about the prevalence of sexual assaults that occur at the hands of strangers, as opposed to the truth, that the perpetrator is usually someone they know. How do we, as advocates, tell young women to protect themselves from their lab partners, their boyfriends, their prom dates, their classmates and their friends? How do we tell young women to protect themselves in their residence rooms and other private spaces? We don’t. We tell men that sexual assault is wrong.

We are deeply concerned that we live in a culture that silences those who speak out about sexual assault, shames women and others from marginalized genders who have been assaulted; blames an individual for their assault; and a justice system that consistently fails women. By telling young women they are more at risk of assault, and making them feel even more unsafe, and participating in rape culture, the ability to come forward and trust Safety Officers in future is being actively undermined. These Safety Officers are ignoring their duty to protect students.

OCTEVAW has worked with the Carleton University Sexual Assault Support Centre in providing information and training to the Department of University Safety, and do not believe these comments reflect the perspective of all members of the Department.

OCTEVAW does not question the right of union members to advocate for better working conditions and use picket lines to this end. However, the strike should not be used to promote rape culture.

Violence against women is not a women’s issue. It is everyone’s responsibility to prevent and end. In this case, we would ask what the OPSEU plans on doing to address the behaviour of its members. To the other unions on campus and more broadly – how will you challenge this behaviour while supporting the rights of workers to strike?

And to the Carleton community and Ottawa more broadly – we need to take time to learn about bystander intervention. Bystanders have a role to play in addressing comments or behaviours that they

witness that promote rape culture.

The OCTEVAW R.I.S.E. app has a list of both campus and community based resources available to students who have experienced violence or know someone who has. The app is available at <http://www.octevaw-cocvff.ca/rise-social-media-app>

OCTEVAW is also prepared to provide further training in partnership with other groups to the Department of University Safety.

In Solidarity,

Ottawa Coalition to End Violence Against Women (OCTEVAW)

Sexual Assault Network (SAN)

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