Unionization of Kitchener Public Library (KPL) Workers Podcast

TRANSCRIPT

[*parts of this transcript have been edited for clarity with permission from Hannah White and Joseph Brannan, KPL staff*]

Lindsay Adoranti

LIS 9170: Critical Librarianship

Instructor Alex Mayhew

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Intro and outro music: “Fight the Power” by Public Enemy (1990)

[Lindsay Adoranti](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[From small towns to big cities, libraries aren't just quite spaces for books and study anymore. Today, they're dynamic resilient hubs for information, services, technology, programs, and education. But what does it take to keep them running? And what is the importance of library workers standing up and speaking out for better wages, improved working conditions and the recognition they deserve as vital community advocates. My name is Lindsay Adoranti, and the purpose of this interview is to discuss the stories and successes of those on the front lines of public library unionization at Kitchener Public Library (KPL), unionized under CUPE Local 331 in southern Ontario. This interview is with Hannah White, Senior Library Assistant for children's programming, who also serves as the CUPE local 331 secretary and treasurer. Also, Joseph Brannan, Senior Library Assistant at KPL and Vice President of Local 331. To start, I want to ask what is your role at KPL and what made you want to work in the library sector?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Joseph Brannan](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[I'm a Senior Library Assistant in the Information Services department at the Central Library at KPL. I moved into working in the library due to just a passion for what the library offers the community, and I've always enjoyed books. I've learned a lot about how the library is a lot more than about books since then. I decided that working in the library sounded like an interesting place and since I started, it has given me a diverse perspective of what everybody who works in the library does.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Hannah White](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[In my position I work with children and families a lot. I organize and run a lot of story times and activities. I fell into libraries because my first job which was as a shelver in high school at Kitchener Public Library, and from that moment on I just knew I was going to work in libraries. And here I am still working in libraries.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[The library values are so important to a lot of people who work in the sector. Regarding the unionization at Kitchener Public Library, who recently unionized in January of 2024, what prompted the movement for unionization and how did you become involved in library union organizing?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[To start off, this is not the first unionization effort that's happened at KPL. At least one person I know of has noted that this was the fourth effort during their tenure at the library, which spans a number of decades. During 2020 and the way that the pandemic was changing things, I was part of an effort to unionize. At that point, we lost a lot of momentum when a lot of folks who had the flexibility to leave for other jobs elsewhere did so. But then in late summer of 2023, there were some colleagues talking about sort of renewing the effort and seeing what it would take, and because I had been involved with the previous effort, I was able to reconnect with a organizer at CUPE whose job it is to connect with workers who are looking to unionize and educate them on what they can do and point them in the right direction to speaking to their coworkers about signing union cards. That's kind of how I fell into it by way of just being knowledgeable from the first time when we tried it in 2020. I reached out to CUPE and learned about what it takes to unionize and what the steps are in that process.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[Hannah, were you also involved in the 2020 organizing or did you come in afterwards? What was your experience organizing?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[I wasn't involved with the earlier drives, but I had signed a [union] card and I was interested. For this renewed effort, I was really upset with some of the way things were changing at the library and I felt like I could leverage my position as a full time permanent member of staff who had been there for a long time and had really good standing in the community. I made silly little signs to post around the library that seemed to help motivate other people to get behind the unionization movement. Really, it was just kind of out of spite but it worked.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[That's interesting that during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when the first efforts were made, it fell through. What were the things that changed from 2020 during the pandemic to 2023 leading up to unionizing? What do you think some of the differences between what worked now and why it didn't work in the past.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[I think the actual physical distance and disconnect that all the staff had because of restrictions in place to help keep everyone healthy. It meant that we had less chances to gather, less chances to be together in large enough numbers to really communicate and everyone was more isolated, not just physically, but it meant that as a workplace we had less connection with each other. Besides that, we had a lot of people on board but also had a lot of people sitting on the fence, not really sure if it was the right time for them to support unionization. Then I think last year we saw a lot more support as folks saw the value in speaking up and standing together.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[What were some of the demands for the union drive this time around? What were some of the struggles you saw?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[A big demand for us was worker safety. We care about our community, we want everyone to feel welcome, but within that we also wanted to feel safe. That was one of our big demands that we were asking for. Of course, wages are definitely one of them too. With inflation and everything it's hard to afford things and we want to make sure that we're paid fairly. Those were two of the really big ones.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[Additionally, job security especially for contract workers or part time workers who are working multiple jobs, perhaps in addition to their library job makes up a large percentage of the workers at KPL. There are also other components as well such as racism and other things in the workplace that were key demands for workers to do better for themselves and their colleagues.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[In terms of library safety do you mean library safety in terms of caring for vulnerable patrons?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[It's certainly more about the vulnerable communities who come to use the library. As I said, everyone is welcome at the library and want everyone to feel welcome at the library. At KPL, we have a really good team called Community Connections who work one-on-one with all kinds of individuals using the library, setting them up with the right services and the right community centres that can help them. That team is really tiny and overworked, and our “Person in Charge” team, is also really small and really overworked. No one feels fully safe at work because of that, because people from all kinds of vulnerabilities are coming into the library and experiencing all kinds of things, and sometimes those can get really hairy. That was just definitely one of the things we were thinking about [when unionizing].](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[Especially now, public libraries are often described as like the last public space that people can go to and ask for help and may seek out the library for space, a roof over their heads, or for something warm in the winter or something cool in the summer. Libraries are those welcoming spaces that they should strive to be there for everyone in the community. But it is very important for the library to support the staff as well. After speaking about some of the demands for the union drive, what were some of the first steps you took in organizing your campaign?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Joseph Brannan](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[The first step for us was reaching out to CUPE and getting in contact with an organizer a whose job it is to help rally a campaign they. They can't influence workers to make a decision aside from providing literature on what unions can offer and explaining how that process can work. Looking in comparison to other library workplaces, a lot of public libraries across Ontario are unionized. I think nonunionized ones are very much in the minority. The organizer who we worked with, who's a fantastic person, helped us put together meetings to figure out who else would be interested in helping to organize and looking at strategies we could use to talk to our colleagues and just get the information out there about what we were trying to do.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[When you were engaging with your co-workers on unionizing in those early stages, did you encounter any pushbacks about unionization, either from the employer, the library management, or other colleagues? What were some of their concerns if they did not support the union and how did you overcome that challenge?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[Our executive branch of the library was less than favorable to the idea of us unionizing. However, we did feel that we had the support of our more immediate managers who work with us even though they aren't included in the union. That was pretty cool.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[At the end of the day, it's a very democratic process. Everyone who is staff that would be included in the bargaining unit, gets a chance to vote. Additionally, staff are free to sign union cards if they want. As union organizers you don't know who's going to vote in what way. Also, you only know if a staff member has signed a union card if they tell you, but other than that they can be sent in anonymously and so that process is very confidential as well. We did have colleagues who said they weren't in favor of unionizing because they like the status quo or because they had family members or know folks who have had experiences with unions that they didn't see favorably. But again, at the end of the day, when it came down to calling a vote on the process, we won and with quite a large margin as well.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[How about the perspectives of patrons or community groups or other unions? Do you have any insights of patrons you spoke to during the unionization drive?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[We didn't have a lot of conversation with patrons about [unionizing]. It was very much an internal process that we didn't publicize we were working on unionizing in any way other than directly to library staff. Discussing unionizing with patrons wasn't meaningful to do so. KPL has approximately 150 to 180 employees which is a small group, so it was very much an internal process. Only once the vote was called do I remember hearing one customer who was connected with other labour movements say, ‘I hear that you've got a union vote and good luck with that’. But other than that, I've never really heard any feedback from other community members.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[We didn't really speak about it much before the actual vote took place, but afterwards I remember wearing my CUPE button on my shirt after we unionized to one of my programs and a couple of the families that I work with said that they heard we unionized, and that was awesome. Actually, the first day of OLA was also the day that we found out that our drive was successful. Then the next day when I attended OLA, it was a great celebration with the KPL staff who were there, but also there were other library folk around and they seemed pretty excited for us too.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[It's really great to have that support of your patrons and of the broader library community as well. This is something that is really special and gives you that like motivation to go into the next step which would be collective bargaining. Regarding collective barganing, where are you in that process? What do you hope are some of the things that are going to be met in your first collective bargaining agreement?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[We are in the midst of bargaining; bargaining dates are ongoing and we're working on it. It's not a quick process, but that's to be understood. Certainly, wages are obviously on everyone's radar these days, so that's something that we are looking to see improvements for everyone, but specifically for the lowest paid library workers. I think that's specifically important to me seeing how important that demand was to those folks. Also, there's a lot of processes and policies which will be good to have codified in an agreement that can't be changed just on a whim by library executives, which has often happened in the past but is something that library workers can count on and know that it's going to be there to back them up. Regarding the specifics of that, we're drawing a lot from other unionized libraries and other similar libraries throughout Ontario to look at what's typical for a [library] collective agreement.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[It's great that you have CUPE who represents other library workers in Ontario because they would have that experience in the library sector specifically. How did you get CUPE involved in the unionization process?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[CUPE is the union that most public libraries in Ontario are unionized with. So aside from helping file for the vote, once we got certified we have a national representative with KPL that's helped us put together our executive and run us through the basics of what it is like to run a union. For the bargaining process, we have support from CUPE legal staff and specialists on other topics throughout the bargaining process as needed as well.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[Shifting gears a little bit, talking about critical librarianship. The ALA defines critical librarianship as, “seeking to be transformative, empowering in a direct challenge to power and privilege”. For you personally, how do you see the unionization of public libraries fitting into the broader conversation around critical librarianship?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Hannah White](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[When I was looking at this quote, I really latched onto the word empowering. Unionization has empowered the staff at the library in a big way, in a way to help challenge the power and privilege that comes from the people who are ultimately running the library. We feel we have a little bit more security and say about what's going on at the library, at least from where we can affect that kind of change.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[A union at its core is workers uniting and I really see it as not to try to build an antagonistic relationship with library leadership, but it is really about workers standing shoulder to shoulder and supporting each other. That can be in so many little ways, but it can also be in big ways. I think unionization is a key thing, not just in libraries, but in any workplace.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[Has your perspective on the workplace changed now that you are part of the union executive committee?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[It's kind of hard for me to answer this one because while we're still working towards the collective agreement it's been hard to figure out where we go next with this. We're kind of in stasis at the moment, we're definitely united, but waiting to see what for.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[A lot of our job right now has been to keep folks informed as much as we can. Both of us were elected to these positions, it's not something that we just sort of elbowed our way to the front. We put our names forward or others put our names forward to hold positions in the union and I think I would say for myself, I feel a lot of responsibility to speak up on behalf of my colleagues. Also, it's a lot of work to inform oneself and to learn about the background of what can we and can't do within the union and what protections exist just by way of us certifying and what protections will come with a collective agreement. We are trying to work with folks that have concerns and making sure they know we hear them and that we are waiting to see what this is going to look like moving forward.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[Organizing isn't just signing your union card or voting and that is the end. Organizing extends so much far beyond voting and being ratified as a union. It's an ongoing process to maintain that solidarity and that that empowerment, like you said, Hannah, and it can be a lot of work which is often behind the scenes. You both deserve a lot of recognition for that and to take on that responsibility to be educated and informed and to advocate for your coworkers. Moving on to the impacts and outcomes, I know you're still in the process of bargaining for your first collective agreement, but is there any tangible improvements that have been achieved through unionization up into this point?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Hannah White](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[We don't have a lot in place at the moment but because we are now ratified, there is a freeze in place. That means things are generally supposed to stay the same, resulting in a certain level of job security for folks so they aren't going to feel worried that they're going to get fired for no good reason anymore, which is a big improvement.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[I think folks have had more confidence in their ability to give honest feedback and speak up when the opportunities exist for that feedback internally. Whereas previously, there would have been a lot more hesitancy to do that. There is a huge morale shift that we saw as well, which is not insignificant; it is an intangible thing, but it's there. We've seen a lot more confidence in folks, regarding their outlook and positivity in the longevity of their careers at KPL since certifying and that's a really encouraging thing to see as someone who intends to work there for the long term.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Lindsay Adoranti](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Through all those improvements and the support for the workers, have you seen that affect any of the working relationships between patrons and library services?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Joseph Brannan](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Apart from perhaps individuals and their own outlook on their job and their satisfaction with their job (which I can't speak for everyone on that), I would say it's very internal to the way the library works and not a customer service facing issue.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Hannah White](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[I very much agree with that. A big thing about our unionization drive was that we really like our job and our community. We want to keep working for them and providing the best services possible. Us unionizing has given us some support and empowerment within our workplace, but it really doesn't change how we get to serve our community and that's really important for us.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Lindsay Adoranti](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[I love all the support and the unchanging library service. Looking to broader implications, what advice would you give to library workers in other public libraries who are considering unionizing?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Hannah White](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Do it! It is so important. It's completely true, libraries are inherently anti-establishment and should be inherently pro-worker and that means our own workers too. Unionizing should be embraced by all public libraries.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Joseph Brannan](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[My advice would be to go on the CUPE website, there's instructions there on how to contact an organizer. It's simple. Also, don't tell your employer you're trying to unionize and don't talk about it when you're on the job, but the rest of the time, go for it.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[Yes, number one organizing advice: don't let management know until there's a plan put in place! In closing, what kind of impact has union organizing had on you personally and what do you hope for the future of library organizing?](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Joseph Brannan](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[For me, I think about the big picture of organized labour and see the solidarity of other unions that are fighting for better working conditions. An example that comes to mind today is Canada Post workers who are on strike who help our country. We see workers support workers in the B.C. port strike as well. It's workers that make our whole society run, it's not management. I'm not saying that management aren't necessary, but workers deserve fair compensation, better working conditions, and recognition of the work that they do that that makes our society work.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[Hannah White](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

[I feel more in tune with a lot of my colleagues now because I have a role on our union executive. This means that people are coming to me more with concerns and I feel able to answer some of those questions better, which is nice for my own morale. Managers are absolutely important for a business or an employer, you have to have good management to help keep things organized. But if you don't have workers, there's nothing to manage. We're the ones doing a lot of the frontline work.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[It is totally true that workers are the core of labour and how we deliver all those library services day in and day out. Unionization and critical librarianship are so important and it's inspiring to hear from both of you about how these movements are shaping the future of the library field. Thank you so much!](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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[Being able to discuss unionization is not an easy topic, but it is critical for fighting the power and earning the recognition that workers deserve in every library today. Thus, I would like to extend my deepest thank you to Joseph Brannan and Hannah White for giving their time, knowledge, and experience in workplace organizing for this interview.](https://onedrive.live.com?cid=0D6D53D3CFF9CB91&id=D6D53D3CFF9CB91!s40eef002345e432dade3ebbc04e47b11)

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