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CYNTHIA REASON | Feb 09, 2012 - 2:36 PM | Report a Typo or Correction

### Pay cut forces fitness instructor to quit

#### Wage harmonization across amalgamated Toronto cuts deep into pocket

Suzette Risto is livid. On Monday morning Suzette Risto - along with her fellow part-time city recreation workers - received news that a long-awaited wage harmonization ruling in the works since amalgamation had finally come down.

For Risto, who's taught fitness and line dancing for 28 years with the then-city of Etobicoke and now city of Toronto, the ruling meant a major pay drop - a 31 per cent cut in her hourly line dancing class wage and a 19 per cent cut to her fitness class wages.

"That was my bread and butter. I could always count on getting that pay cheque," said the Fairfield Seniors' Centre instructor, who promptly quit her unionized gig after hearing the news. "That's what fed me every week...so when that paper was handed to me, I saw red. I was livid. I lost my temper and said 'I quit.'"



Pay cut forces fitness instructor to quit. Suzette Risto, a 28-year instructor of line dancing and fitness with the City of Toronto at Fairfield Seniors Centre, quit after receiving news her salary would be cut. Staff photo/IAN KELSO

Tim Maguire, president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees' (CUPE) Local 79 that represents Risto and her colleagues, said the union argued hard for the 'red circling' of current employees - which essentially means those, like Risto, in the affected job classifications would continue to receive their current wage - but their request was rejected.

"This stems back to amalgamation. As a result of amalgamation we have a situation where people in the same job classifications and performing the same work are paid different rates of pay," he explained. "So, this ruling has been 14 years in the making and there's now an arbitrator's decision...and unfortunately, some people will see their wages reduced."

Standing by her decision to quit, Risto, 68, said Wednesday that the \$5.66 cut to her hourly fitness wage and \$9.26 line dancing wage makes it hardly worth her twice-weekly drive in to Etobicoke from her home in Brampton. She teaches only four hour-long classes a week.

While the decision to quit was the only choice she felt she had, she said it was nevertheless a painful one made only more difficult by her affection for her students.

That feeling, said Mara Glebovs, a longtime line dancing student of Risto's, is mutual.

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"Everybody loves her. Because she's our age, because she's a senior herself, she understands our needs...and tailored the classes to us," she said, describing Risto as a 'patient' instructor who engaged both her senior students' minds and bodies. "We're going to miss her a lot."

Risto was far from the only CUPE Local 79 part-timer to be impacted by the decision of the arbitrator, who was assigned to harmonize recreation wages across the now-amalgamated city using a points system.

Effective Feb. 13, part-time city recreation workers across the city will also be impacted by the new, uniform wages - whether for good or for bad.

Concerned that such drastic pay cuts could lead some recreation staff, like Risto, to leave their jobs with the city, Maguire said Local 79 is hoping to work with management to come to some sort of resolution - bearing in mind, of course, that the arbitrator's decision is a binding one.

"What we'd like to do is work with the city to find a solution to ensure that there is experienced, skilled staff continuing to deliver recreation services," he said. "We're concerned about the potential impact of having that significant loss of wage mean that some of our staff will no longer be able to afford to work for the city and deliver those services."

"We don't know what the solution would be at this point," he added, "but we've made the city aware that we're concerned."

Meanwhile, students of Local 79's affected workers have banded together with their instructors to raise awareness to what many are calling the injustice of the wage ruling.

"The cost of living has increased, but the pay these instructors receive has decreased...where is the justice in that?" asked Glebovs, speaking in defence of the affordable classes offered at Fairfield Seniors' Centre and the instructors who teach them. "By staying active, we seniors keep healthy and save taxpayers health-care costs. Indeed, we have been taxpayers all our lives and deserve better. The staff of Fairfield Seniors' Centre are dedicated, work hard, and deserve better, too."

While some impacted workers, like Risto, have decided to throw in the towel, still others simply can't afford to quit, no matter how poorly they feel they're being treated.

One Etobicoke aqua fit instructor, who also saw her wages cut by nearly \$6, said the new rate of pay of the city's part-time recreation staff is well below what their peers in the private sector are making in similar positions.

"(The arbitrator) reviewed fitness instructors' pay, because they said they have to keep (our wages) competitive with market value," she said, declining to give her name for fear of losing her job. "After that review, they came back with \$24.12 an hour? Well, trainers in private gyms and studios are getting paid \$45 to \$50 an hour. It's baffling, but I can't afford to leave."

Neither, strictly speaking, could Risto.

"I'm 68, I can't afford to retire," said the Canadian Dance Teachers' Association certified instructor, noting that she's thinking of renting a dance and fitness studio of her own so she can continue teaching.

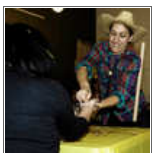
"That's why I was still there, because I couldn't afford to quit. And then they did this and I had to."

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