

Students engage in cyber-protest

By PETE BRIEGER

(CUP)— Abbey Hoffman and the Chicago Seven they are not, but a group of students at the University of Western Ontario have broken new ground by creating a cyberspace sit in to protest against rising tuition fees.

Dave Tompkins, president of the Western's student council, has developed a web page on the Internet that allows students to engage in a 'virtual sit-in'.

Would-be protesters can join the 'sit-in' by clicking on one of an array of happy faces that appear on-screen. By completing this simple action, the student's name is added to the list of protesters 'occupying' the president's office and an e-mail is sent to UWO president Paul Davenport.

The e-mail includes the student's identity, demands and any additional comments they wish to convey to the university's president.

As of Mar. 11, there were 835 students 'occupying' Davenport's office.

Tompkins says he sees the virtual sit-in as a compromise, integrating the diplomacy a non-confrontational stance with the recognition of a need for protest.

"Western is not what it was five to 10 years ago, but it is still a very conservative university. I'm not sure my council would have endorsed a physical sit-in," said Tompkins.

Western's conservative approach, however, is not a condemnation of the physical tactics used by other student protesters, says Andrew Hui, president of the graduate students council.

"Western students are very conservative, but I take nothing away from the actions of the students at other universities. There is still something to be said for a physical confrontation," Hui said.

While Western's use of the Internet as a medium of protest is a new concept, it is not the only student occupation to rely on the benefit of modern technology to get its message across.

Students from the University of Guelph, who occupied several offices including the university president's, developed a Web page to advertise their sit-in.

"It gave students a play by play of the protest and let them know what they could do to support it," said Lance Morgan of Guelph's student council.

"Western's approach seems kind of lazy, kind of convenient, and [allows a student to say] 'Well I have a few free minutes, so I can just protest over the Internet,'" said Morgan.

Davenport's reaction to the virtual sit-in has been positive.

"The students' concerns came through as direct and presentable and he appreciates the fact that it is being done in a civil way," explains Dalin Jameson, Davenport's assistant.

Breast feeding case goes before human rights commission

By SARAH GALASHAN

(CUP) — Six years after being told not to breastfeed her daughter at work, Michelle Poirier is still fighting to make breastfeeding in the workplace a legal right.

In a hearing that began March 6, Poirier charged her former employer, B.C.'s Ministry of Municipal Affairs, with sex discrimination. Her pioneering efforts to have the case heard by the BC Human Rights Commission will determine if women have the right to breastfeed their children at work.

As a speech writer for the ministry, Poirier regularly breastfed her child at her desk over the lunch hour. And initially, she said, she felt her colleagues accepted the situation. "It hadn't been a problem. Everyone around me was really supportive and enthusiastic," Poirier said.

After breastfeeding at one of the ministry's public lunch-hour seminars, however, tension developed. Poirier was asked not to attend upcoming lectures, and told not to bring

her child to work because it made some staff feel uncomfortable.

"The beauty about having my child brought to my desk was that if I had a deadline I could delay my lunch, pick up my child and breastfeed while I was working," said Poirier.

As a result, the former ministry employee — who's job change was in no way connected to her allegations of sex discrimination — was forced to take her infant to restaurants or shopping malls over the lunch hour.

This, she said, was often an unpleasant experience. "I was in the Eaton's cafe and an elderly woman came up to me and shouted 'you should be doing that in the toilet'."

But despite people's hostility towards public breastfeeding, Poirier said, the benefits for her child made the experience "unquestionably worth it."

"As far as I'm concerned there is no comparison between breastmilk and formula. This is a health issue," Poirier said, "and for me it was choos-

ing between health and employment."

INFACT Canada, a non-profit organisation that protects, supports and promotes breastfeeding, backs Poirier. According to INFACT, breastmilk can protect infants from infection and reduce a woman's chances of developing breast cancer.

However, INFACT feels this natural form of child nutrition is still not widely accepted, despite the health benefits.

"We've sexualized breasts so much in this culture," said Jean Geary, fundraiser for INFACT Canada. "It's got to the point where to expose your breasts for sexual purposes is perfectly fine, but to expose your breasts to love and nurture your child is seen as disgusting."

Poirier anticipates the hearings will take some time to be resolved but is anxious for an outcome that will affect the rights of all Canadian women.

"I don't think women should ever have to choose between the health of their child and a paid job," she said.



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