



STAR BULLETIN

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Radio Room Redux

Guild proposal should save
famed student program

*Evidence that common sense
still has vital role to play
in helping our paper thrive*

Journalists across Canada were stunned earlier this month to learn that the Star planned to kill its famed radio room program. The other layoff news — in advertising, the library, the editorial assistants, the page desk, the designers — was terrible enough. But for many in the industry, management's plan to kill the newsroom's radio room in particular made no economic or journalistic sense.

Your union has a special fondness for the radio room, because it was entirely the Guild's idea to staff it with cheaper students, back in the late '90s. Your union said let's give journalism students in town the chance to work as part-time temps in our radio room — the 24-hour, 7-day task of listening in to police, ambulance and fire department dispatchers, plus monitoring radio and TV newcasts. Experienced full-time journalists, meanwhile, would be freed to get out there and chase the bigger news — including the epic car crashes, murders and other big-city events flagged by the students in the radio room. It was win-win — efficiency for the paper, a first toe in the industry for the students.

We nicknamed it "Kids in the Box," after the comedy troupe, Kids in the Hall. We created in bargaining a special editorial trainee wage category and pay rate. This was also used to launch our other big Guild student idea, the much larger editorial intern program, which allows the paper to hire a dozen rookie journalists for one year. Both radio room and intern programs were industry firsts and remain industry leaders. They are a critical element of our newsroom today. They also credit a creative, non-traditional union that thinks way outside the normal, if we say so ourselves.

This month's company plan is to save money by killing the student radio room. It would contract out the work to its partly owned subsidiary at Canadian Press, PageMasters, to monitor all those news radios, etc. For the first time in Star history, nobody would be in the newsroom overnight. We'd be relying on some outside agency to perform the critical service of identifying and even covering breaking local news — our proverbial bread 'n' butter, the core of our Toronto Star brand. All to save some portion of the radio room's annual \$250,000 cost.

We have a better idea, and have today formally proposed it to the company. We propose to create, in bargaining, a new student radio room rate, much cheaper than the existing trainee rate used to pay both radio roomers and interns. It would see the radio roomers, who are all full-time journalism students, continue to earn roughly \$20 an hour to work temp shifts. The company will get significant savings but the newsroom's critical needs will be protected.

We are encouraged at the company's early positive response to this proposal. We're confident the radio room will be saved. We think this is a very good thing for the paper, our newsroom, and the ability of the Star to maintain its critical brand in Toronto.

And we hope the company's most senior officials will see similar bottom-line benefits in our other emerging ideas to save other critical jobs at our paper, including continued ownership of its own page production.

— *Stuart Laidlaw, Star unit chair, and your Guild stewards and bargaining committee*