

November 2023 Public Statement from the SMEA Union, and SMEA President Ed Halloran

Dear Somerville community members,

My name is Ed Halloran, and I've had the high honor of representing the Somerville Municipal Employees Association (the SMEA) as President for the past 16 years.

I am writing to you about the SMEA's efforts to receive fair wages and a fair contract from the City of Somerville administration—something we've been trying to do since June 2022, when our most recent contract expired.

But first, who is the SMEA?

Some of you may not know where SMEA workers are employed in your City, so I want to quickly explain who we are.

There are more than 200 SMEA staff, who work in 32 divisions across the City. We are a vital part of the system that keeps the City open for business. You will see us at the Library when you check out books or attend programs. You will see us at Traffic and Parking when you get a permit or pay a ticket, and at City Hall when you need a business or marriage license. We inspect your buildings, clean and maintain your parks, fill the potholes in your roads, pour your sidewalks, flush your hydrants, and plow the snow. We are your school nurses, and we are the payroll officers for Police and Fire. And I'm excited to say that we now represent the 311 operators, who are the gateway to City services.

All these things sound vital, right? And yet this barely captures a third of the City departments that the SMEA staffs and supports.

The SMEA's low wages

In spite of the vital role our workers fulfill, the City is paying SMEA staff wages that are not in sync with living costs, and that fall far short of what surrounding municipalities offer.

For instance:

- Special Heavy Equipment Motor Operators in DPW/Parks are paid about 25% less than Cambridge DPW workers. The top step of pay here is \$54,205 a year, compared to \$68,229 in Cambridge.
- A mid-level Librarian is paid about 20-25% less than librarians with similar positions in Arlington, Belmont, Watertown, and Waltham; the highest step here is \$64,460, while in those communities, it is about \$20,000 more.
- At the DPW, the average worker must work about 10 extra weeks per year in order to earn what a higher paid municipal worker earns in 52 weeks.

Our low pay is something that the City itself has acknowledged. If you look at the June 22, 2023 City Council meeting minutes, you will see that the City stated that they must outsource DPW Water and Sewer work because the SMEA pay is so low that the positions are “difficult to fill.” Besides cheating SMEA workers, the failure to negotiate fair wages passes the cost on to taxpayers, as Councilor Scott noted during that session.

As a result of this low pay, we routinely and regularly lose SMEA workers that we struggle to replace. For example, over the last 4 years we have seen many of our union members leave for better paying jobs in the utility sector. Another example: the library has lost 10 staff members in the last year, all to pursue more lucrative positions in Cambridge, Malden, Concord, and Bedford public libraries.

All told, since January of this year, 90 SMEA employees have left their jobs, and there are currently about 40 vacancies. (Keep in mind, there are only about 200 of us.)

SMEA workers who remain here often have to hold additional part time jobs, or work additional hours of voluntary overtime, in order to make ends meet.

All of this is in spite of the fact that the City has been paying living wages to its non-union workers. If you compare the union and non-union wage scales for jobs that require similar levels of education and experience, you will find that non-union City workers are paid 20-25% higher on average than unionized SMEA City workers.

Adding insult to injury, the City frequently contracts union work to private companies at a prevailing wage premium, required by state law – which is up to twice as much as the City pays our SMEA workers.

The City administration's delays in negotiation

Our contract expired on July 1, 2022. Instead of sitting down with us in good faith, the current administration has repeatedly delayed the negotiations process.

The City did not begin negotiating with us until December 2022—five full months after our contract expired. The administration then slowed the process even further in order to conduct a pay study in Spring 2023. That study remains incomplete as of today, in November 2023, despite members of the City Council urging the administration to wrap it up. Meanwhile, rent and the cost of living continues to rise.

These delays represent the latest insult in a long history of anti-union actions by the City toward its unionized employees. Although the current administration talks progressive policies and values, its actions reflect the legacy of the systemic anti-union attitude that was enthusiastically cultivated by the previous administration for its nearly 20-year tenure.

Let's move forward together

On behalf of the SMEA workers, I strongly urge the Mayor and her administration to move forward with contract negotiations.

As Councilor Clingan commented in the June 22, 2023 City Council Meeting, "the City isn't bargaining in good faith, and people will suffer as a result."

Let's get together in good faith, and work to bring the same quality of life to union workers that our non-union counterparts enjoy.

Thank you.

Ed Halloran
SMEA President