

May 16, 2022

To the Board Members and Leadership of the Gender Health Center, as well as Community:

We, the direct service staff members, and those who stand in solidarity with them, are writing to notify you of our strike due to unfair labor practices perpetuated by those in power at GHC. We are exercising this right under Section 8 of the National Labor Relations Act. Any termination or other retaliatory action against any striking employee will be in violation of our protected legal rights as employees. **Staff will be striking on Monday, May 16, and Tuesday, May 17.** We have chosen to send you this letter at 2:30 PM on May 16 to remind you, in our absence, of how important we are to the organization and community.

In this letter, we will be discussing abuses towards our staff and community, which includes racism (and especially anti-Black racism), harassment, ableism, misgendering, elitism, anti-neurodivergence discrimination, anti-autistic discrimination, retaliation in the workplace, and mention of George Floyd.

The most recent actions prompting this strike was the sudden firing of five of our employees - four of whom are people of color, three of whom are Black, and all of whom are transgender. These employees were Ayotunde Ikuku, Akello Sladen, Zaunama'at Bates, Harvey Marquez, and Asher Martini. **The reason given for this action was budget constraints. However, when questioned about the current status of the grants funding these employees, the board members admitted that we still had the grants, and therefore, still had the finances for these staff members.** In the time leading up to this contradictory action, our staff members were assured explicitly multiple times that there was funding for their positions. This was especially true for the three staff members who had been hired less than three months ago. It became apparent that this was a complete lie, made up by our former Co-Executive Director of GHC and Co-Director of Advocacy Lauren Pulido, when it was revealed just weeks ago that one of our staff members, Zaunama'at, did not have sufficient funding to maintain their position. Since learning of this and other budget deficits that had been hidden from us by our leadership, our staff members had been working with our Director of Finance and Administration, Jennifer Williams, to address the deficit after finally being given any transparent information.

All staff members fired were vocal proponents of moving forward with our collective model of leadership. However, Lauren Pulido, who was largely responsible for our current budget deficit due to fraudulent practices (which included hiring staff

members for whom funding was not available and against the recommendation of the board while assuring each program they were able to hire new team members), was given the courtesy of being allowed to resign and was originally going to be allowed a three-week paid transition period, including a one-week vacation. As of this writing, Lauren Pulido was even still on our staff Slack channels (a text-based communication platform) this morning, despite their last day being Friday, May 13, and despite our recently fired co-workers being removed from all work-related accounts the night before being fired with absolutely ZERO notice or context. **Even the locks were changed to the building, which is a notably expensive decision that is not supported by logic, since our co-workers were forced to immediately hand in their keys and then made a peaceful exit from the building.** Our co-workers were not even allowed the time needed to close out their projects and hand off their community partnerships, which further serves to harm our organization and community members.

During the events leading up to and during the firing process of our five staff members, our leadership team and board of directors took multiple steps to make the conversation as secretive and harmful as possible. In the days before the staff members were fired, the board of directors reached out over Slack messages to ask each employee from our communications and advocacy departments if they were available to meet on Friday, May 13, at 10 AM. **Despite multiple valid requests by our staff members for more information about what the meeting was for, no one would answer their questions.** Ayotunde, who normally does not work on Fridays, reasonably said they would not be available until their next working day without more context. **On Thursday night - the night before being fired, although staff still was not given this context - our staff members noticed their paid time off was suddenly being cashed out and their paychecks were going to be paid out immediately.** As mentioned previously, they were also locked out of all of their work accounts. One staff member who was very sick was forced to come into the building on Friday morning because they could not access the Zoom link due to this action. The board of directors attempted to divide staff into separate meetings. They met first with Harvey, an employee of two years at GHC and our former Communications and Marketing Manager. **It was only after Harvey's meeting ended that we first received confirmation, directly from Harvey, that five of our staff members were being fired without notice.**

The next meeting occurred with the staff from our advocacy team. Ayotunde, our former Co-Director of Advocacy and an employee of four years at GHC, joined the meeting part way through after just hearing that this was actually a termination meeting. **When Ayotunde entered, Lily Weaver, a relatively new board member we as staff have never met, is a white person, works for the Department of Justice, and had**

announced that same day that she would be the new chair of the board, tried to prevent Ayotunde from being in the meeting. Even after Ayotunde was introduced as the Co-Director of Advocacy, Ayotunde was not greeted and was instead immediately met with Lily stating, “you don't work for us, please wait outside” in an authoritative & dismissive tone, the moment they opened the door. **Lily’s treatment, in particular, of Ayotunde and our other staff members - in the condescending words she chose, the repetitive dodging of valid questions, the insistence that Ayotunde could not be allowed to join the meeting that they were originally invited to because “you don’t work for us,” and, most telling, the decision to fire mostly staff of color, which included half of our Black staff, while keeping on multiple white and cisgender staff members - gave all direct services staff members a clear and notable perception of underlying racism, especially anti-Black racism.** Ayotunde responded to the anti-Black racism and trauma that was immediately triggered upon walking into the room for that meeting and felt the need to protect themselves and their team, who was subjected to this kind of verbiage before they arrived. **Lily even pulled out her phone when Ayotunde refused to leave - for a meeting they were originally invited to - and there were fears that she would call the police.**

During this meeting, the advocacy staff questioned the board’s decision and discovered that we still had all of the grants funding all staff members’ positions except for Zaunama’at, who was only partially covered. It did not make sense why all five staff members had to be terminated immediately and without notice or opportunity for a warm handoff of their projects and community connections. At the end of the meeting, instead of respecting the staff’s requests for accountability, transparency, and rationality, **another board member, Liza Thantranon, came in at the end of the meeting and requested dismissively that staff “wrap it up” and turn in their work-related items because “this is not a venting session.” They also attempted to deny our staff members termination letters that accurately reflected language that would allow them to access unemployment benefits and protect them from anti-transgender discrimination from health insurance companies.** Furthermore, **two staff members were even misgendered by a cisgender board member while trying to leave the building, causing further hurt to an already harmful situation.**

As our co-workers left the building, remaining staff members were shocked and deeply saddened to learn about the termination of so many of our vital staff and fellow community members. These are community members that have worked extremely hard at our organization to offer life-saving services. **Without our Advocacy and Communications departments, some vital components of what we have lost as an organization include**

- Our lead fundraising programs
- Our support groups
- Half of our Black staff
- Vital services to transgender youth
- Most of our outreach and communications efforts
- All of our online presence
- Our primary website editing and upkeep resource
- Upcoming online accessibility improvements to our website
- Our leaders in our Black Trans Power Fund program
- Advocacy Strategic Plan that was intentionally crafted by Ayotunde, their executive coach for their position, and the Advocacy Team without acknowledgement.

In particular, our new youth advocacy services were built up passionately, with hundreds of hours of work poured in by our new advocacy staff members to meet an urgent need for an extremely vulnerable population. **Overall, this is a huge and devastating loss to an organization that, in a time of crisis created by yet another set of leaders not chosen by staff or community, may be unrecoverable without immediate intervention.**

This is not the first time this year GHC has wrongfully terminated employees. Last month, Raye Redlo, a Respite Peer Advocate, was suddenly and wrongfully terminated for “insubordination and harassment of employees.” Raye’s direct supervisor, Jacob Cepollina, the Director of Mental Health, was given no prior information about this decision. Raye, an openly disabled and neurodivergent person, has been a vocal critic of ableist and racist practices perpetuated by GHC leadership. Discriminatory practices included disregard for approved medical accommodations of multiple employees, unequal and inequitable treatment of disabled employees, consistent mispronunciation of the names of employees of color (with polite and consensual correction of the name pronunciations being treated as harassment), unfair wages given to bilingual employees, and leadership defense and support of anti-autistic practices, just to name a few common problems. Raye’s termination was quickly changed to a two-week suspension after Raye noted that they would file a complaint for retaliation and discrimination. This suspension gave more time for an investigation, in which it was found that all claims against Raye had no evidence, and the termination decision was reversed.

Other abuses our non-executive staff members have been forced to endure, even in just the past year, are numerous. Two of the staff members who were fired

most recently and were also some of our longest held employees, Ayotunde and Harvey, even tried to quit their positions last fall after being burned out by the abuses they faced in the workplace. The board of directors at the time asked them to stay and assured all staff that GHC would finally move to a collective leadership model, which was built into our vision but had not been implemented. Harvey was put in their new position as Communications and Marketing Manager in December 2021 after working in Respite and training in Advocacy. Ayotunde, in particular, had been working for GHC since 2018 and was appointed Co-Director of Advocacy in January 2021. As part of their agreement to stay, they were assured that they would receive support and transparency after enduring the trauma of being underfunded, understaffed, and overworked for years. **The board appointed Lauren Pulido and Jasmine Bright as Interim Co-Executive Directors of GHC, which was only supposed to be until GHC began a collective structure. Instead, these executive directors kept their positions and actively inhibited any work that would move us towards a collective model. Lauren Pulido also took on the role of Co-Director of Advocacy alongside Ayotunde, but did not provide meaningful support and instead lied to Ayotunde while harassing the entire advocacy team and staff members in other programs. This behavior from Lauren Pulido, which was called out explicitly on multiple occasions and by multiple staff members, caused many staff members to fear having to come to work each day. Lauren Pulido also discouraged Spanish-speaking staff members, even those hired because they were bilingual, from being able to provide translation and cultural connection assistance. Bilingual staff were also not given their promised additional hourly pay that is supposed to be provided for being able to provide bilingual services. The board also played a role in harming staff by gaslighting non-executive staff for months with lies, claiming that they no longer recalled the interim executive directors being a temporary placement while blaming the staff with false claims of poor work ethic and inaccurate program statistics.**

In a follow-up meeting with remaining staff, the board of directors finally sat with us and revealed more about themselves as people, since we had barely been given any chances to meet them, and about their goals for GHC as board members. They discussed a reluctance to help fundraise on principle, despite this being an expectation of our board members, stating that we should “self-sustaining.” Lily Weaver also described how she, as a white trans woman, received her role at the Department of Justice (a position on its own at odds with GHC’s anti-police values) because she “stood up at a George Floyd protest and said we should [address these issues, so she got to].” Statements like these from our board members further demonstrate the biases our board members have that do not reflect our community’s or our organization’s best interests.

With the lack of evidence given by the board for firing five staff members and history of unfair labor practices, the staff of GHC believe that the recent firing of our employees - all of whom are also our community members - was retaliatory against our collectivization of GHC and, therefore, both illegal and unfair. We also believe that the targeting of vocal proponents of our collectivization, in combination with the lack of evidence justifying the immediate and without-notice reason for termination, is a violation of the National Labor Relations Act, which protects our right to concerted activity. We stand in solidarity with these staff members, whose labor rights, livelihood, and safety were violated all at once. We also strike in defense of our own labor rights - because any leadership who would fire half of our direct services staff in a single day, without notice and without just cause, would surely fire the rest of us in a similar way.

GHC's mission is that "we work to end systematic oppression and pathologization of Transgender people and racism while centering the wellness of Queer and Transgender People of Color (QTPOC). We acknowledge that we function and have only functioned within oppressive systems. We will interrogate these systems in order to build a community centered ideology to provide prosperity in every way for our community members." Our board members and executive leaders have largely not upheld this mission. Considering the recently fired staff consisted of multiple transgender people of color, including half of our Black staff, the board has not acknowledged oppressive systems, interrogated these systems, or upheld the principle of building a community centered on prosperity for our community members. Therefore, they are at-odds with the core values of our organization and, by extension, our community that we serve. Moreover, GHC's vision states that we are "peer-led-everything and a collective organizational structure is a part of this plan of action." By suddenly firing five of our peers who were important figures in our collectivization process, without any staff input or notice, our board of directors and remaining executive director of GHC are also not upholding the vision of this organization. This is the board's and executive leadership's answers to our months of harassment, discrimination, and retaliation complaints. Instead of direct and transparent communication, they chose to fire huge numbers of our community from the white, rich, cisgender, and binary lens that they represent. In all ways, for generations of appointed executive leaders and board members, our leaders have repeatedly failed our community. Rather than being here to build up GHC's dream of supporting and serving the QTPOC community, they appear to be willfully trying to harm it.

In the aftermath of these traumatic and completely preventable actions leading up to today, GHC's striking staff members bring these demands to our leadership:

1. We demand to see the record of minutes from all board meetings from September 2021, a month before Lauren Pulido was hired as a Co-Executive Director, until the most recent board meeting.
2. We demand, in writing, a commitment from all current board members to resign within one month from their positions, pending any necessary transfer of duties. These board members have not upheld our organization's mission or vision, have harmed our community members directly and indirectly, and have violated our labor rights multiple times over in a show of gross power abuse and illegal practice. In a follow-up meeting with remaining staff, they explicitly expressed disinterest in helping us with fundraising efforts and long-term visions, despite those being required components of being board members. We have not had a strong or fully representative board since GHC's founding, and this needs to change if we are to survive as a radical, collective organization.
3. We demand, in writing, an immediate commitment from our current director of GHC, Jasmine Bright, to support the collectivization of GHC, which is part of our organization's formally stated vision. If this commitment cannot be made, we demand that Jasmine resign from her position as director of GHC.
4. We demand an emergency all-staff meeting with Jasmine Bright and Jennifer Williams to discuss the full financial status of GHC and to make a plan that is mindful of staff and community harm reduction. This meeting must be scheduled within one week of this letter (by May 23) and the meeting must be accessible to both in-person and remote staff.
 - a. To address financial concerns, we can and should evaluate fully where we can mitigate costs.
 - b. However, firing our own community members due to budget constraints, suddenly and without warning, should be the very last resort and should never need to happen without a conversation with those staff members, as it did on Friday, May 13.
5. We demand a re-evaluation of the recent firing of our staff members. Should there be any way for those staff members to keep their positions, we demand these staff members are offered their positions again with explicit written terms outlining the conditions of their re-hiring (such as any time constrictions or changes to their position), for any who would want their positions again. This re-evaluation can occur at the emergency staff meeting outlined in our fourth demand.

6. We demand the immediate removal of all staff pictures and other likeness from our website, social media, merchandise, other advertising, and other paraphernalia for those staff who were fired. We also demand the removal of any staff artwork, including Ayotunde's mural, from any similar platforms, merchandise, and other objects connected to GHC. It is highly unethical to earn financial and social gain from former staff without their consent who were wronged so deeply. It would also be false advertisement for our organization to pretend to center those like our staff members under our current leadership's decisions.

Failure to meet these demands will lead to future collective actions from staff and a group petition filed with the National Labor Relations Board. Furthermore, **we as staff and community members sincerely believe that without these changes, GHC will be forced to shut down** because it has been increasingly difficult to sustain the cumulative damage done by leaders who continue to harm us. This dire situation can only be addressed by immediate, encompassing actions.

We also want to directly address our community members, who we appreciate are in dire need of our services every day. We want to give you the services you need and deserve, which should include staff that reflect our radical, grassroots values. **It is time for trans people, especially BIPOC trans people who are from the communities we center and serve, to be given space and power to lead our community. The years of current and past board members and other leaders have shown that those outside of our community - white people, cisgender people, and rich people in particular - will not prioritize our wellness, safety, or mission.** Our leadership has not always reflected our mission, but we as staff do, and we want to ensure that you are being given the care and services that you deserve. Please stand with us in solidarity in any way you are able, whether that includes sharing this letter with others in our community, holding our current leaders accountable through social media, calls, emails, or other forms of communication, or even holding space for our protest of unjust actions. **Please see the end of this letter for the contact information of our current leaders involved in violating our rights and harming our community. We are also including a link to a GoFundMe to support our fired staff members so that they can survive the next month while they navigate the endlessly difficult and and discriminatory benefits system.**

In community and solidarity,

The Gender Health Center Non-Leadership Staff and Allies

GoFundMe link for our recently fired staff members: <https://gofund.me/66e20acb>

Contact information for key GHC leadership:

Jasmine Bright (she/her/hers), Executive Director of GHC and Director of Health Care Services

jasmine@ghcmail.org

Jennifer Williams (she/her/hers), Director of Finance and Administration

jenn@ghcmail.org

Charlie Tornaci (he/him/his), Board President

~~charlie@ghcmail.org~~

charlie.t.ghc@gmail.com

Lily Weaver (she/her/hers), Board Member and Future Board President

lily@ghcmail.org

Liza Thantranon (she/her/hers), Board Secretary

~~lizathantranon@lsnc.net~~

(reportedly this public e-mail provided is not working at this time)