

June 11, 2024

From: Seven former Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) staff fired between 2009 and 2024

To: The global constituency of MCC

Subject: Concerns about abuse within MCC and call for answers

Dear friends,

We write this letter with deep grief, longing for what we say not to be true. Through this public statement, we are confronting the very organization that has taught us so much about what peacebuilding at its best can look like. We are engaging in this very difficult journey, not to ruin MCC, but because we care so deeply about this organization and the churches that support it. We long to see many join us in this pursuit of truth, accountability, and restoration.

We are **seven** former MCC staff members who have worked with MCC in Africa and Asia over a period of 24 years. All of us lost our employment after we spoke out about workplace harassment or psychological or emotional abuse. Several of us were also terminated while we were in the midst of health crises related to MCC's abusive practices, with MCC staff showing a seemingly total lack of concern for our wellbeing or safety.

Between us, we are also aware of **seventeen** individuals or couples in addition to ourselves, working on four continents, whose time with MCC ended in deeply painful ways. In **seven** of these cases, we believe MCC workers were unjustly fired. In **three** others, workers resigned in protest when required to act in ways they believed were harmful or unethical. In **seven** more cases, workers signed non-disclosure and/or non-disparagement agreements at the time of their termination or resignation, which prevent them from sharing their experiences. Many of these people do not currently feel able to speak publicly about their experiences with MCC. Some are afraid of retaliation from MCC and of being shunned and discredited by the Mennonite public. Others continue to be deeply affected by ongoing health problems related to MCC's abuse. We are sharing our own experiences in this letter because we believe that public accountability will benefit all who have experienced, or continue to experience, workplace abuse.

These are not isolated incidents. Our stories point to a long-standing pattern involving MCC leaders at the highest levels, from both MCC US and MCC Canada, including Human Resources (HR), International Program, and Financial Services staff as well as Executive Directors and Board members.

Based on our personal experiences as well as our awareness of the experiences of others, it seems to us that top leaders within MCC are covering up workplace abuse through psychologically violent and financially unethical firing practices that disregard workers' and partners' health and wellbeing.

We can identify at least six different aspects of this pattern, based on our personal experiences as described below:

1. MCC shows a callous lack of regard for workers' health or wellbeing (including terminating the employment of workers who have become ill or traumatized as a result of exposure to dangers in their work).

One worker couple writes: *The International Program (IP) Director and Human Resources (HR) staff did not show concern for our family's wellbeing and for our health in the middle of prolonged and increasing political insecurity that threatened our safety, a very sudden and unexpected need to relocate away from Burkina Faso on the eve of a new school year for our children, and a mental health crisis. While we were out of the country for MCC-approved stress leave combined with vacation, I experienced significant psychological distress and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that had developed during my service with MCC. My husband was later diagnosed as well. At the same time, the political situation in Burkina Faso became even more unsafe, and we determined in consultation with our supervisors that our family would need to relocate. My psychologist recommended that MCC allow our family to relocate to a place that I perceived as safe for six months in order to allow me to work through the trauma in therapy and wrote letters to MCC to this effect. We were concerned that MCC's medical insurance plan for international workers did not include any information about medical leave, sick days, or guidelines about where workers can go to seek needed medical treatment, and that no MCC policy on these matters appeared to exist for International Program workers. HR did not answer our urgent and repeated requests for guidance about medical leave or sick leave policies. During a call scheduled by the IP Director, ostensibly to discuss our request to relocate temporarily to the Netherlands for the sake of my health, she and an HR Worker Care Specialist immediately terminated our employment without ever asking how I was doing. They did not offer any response to the detailed rationale we had written to support our relocation request. They did not discuss with us the psychologist's letters that recommended relocation of our family. They immediately shut down our access to all MCC documents and asked us not to contact any MCC colleagues. They stalled in sending us funds for housing and maintenance for our immediate needs, so that we had to withdraw from our personal savings and incur heavy tax penalties. Representatives of the organization on which we had always thought we could depend for safety seemed indifferent to whether we would be on the street next week, even though we had told them clearly in the firing call that we were in a crisis situation with temporary housing only for a few more days. This betrayal substantially exacerbated our trauma.*

Another worker writes: *We experienced significant health concerns while serving in Uganda between 2000 and 2003, and later learned we would have been terminated if not for the intervention of the Africa Director, who stopped HR from sending us home early. In our second assignment in Chad, we received no meaningful support from our supervisors (MCC reps) during political and health crises. Even though the Africa directors had emphasized that we were on a "hardship" assignment and that we should be proactive about asking for help with our needs and be sure to take regular retreats outside the country, our supervisors refused to care for our needs or our security. They gave us a woefully inadequate in-country orientation, cancelled annual retreats, refused to bring essential items to our assignment location after having initially agreed to do so, refused to help us open a necessary bank account so that we had to borrow funds from others to make basic payments, refused to reimburse cash that had been stolen from us despite MCC's clear policy about this*

confirmed by staff in Akron, excluded us from important partner meetings, failed to inform us about any emergency security procedures despite a politically unstable context with frequent armed uprisings, and then referred to us as “needy.” During an outbreak of violence, when other expatriates were evacuated from the country and even local partners had fled the scene, we were stuck in our assignment location with insufficient funds to evacuate ourselves, and neither our supervisors nor Akron staff reached out to us at all until six days later. This felt like gross negligence and was part of a pattern of non-support and conflict with our supervisor.

Another worker writes: The person who told my husband and me that our position had been eliminated said that perhaps we could have worked it out if I hadn’t been pregnant. They delayed and resisted taking care of our basic needs, from mosquito nets in our home to safe transportation during my pregnancy. They terminated our employment by e-mail on the first day of our vacation. We think we lost our employment because we spoke up for our health needs while one of us was pregnant and because we resisted the abusive and unsupportive behaviour of our supervisors (MCC representatives). Area Directors at the time scolded us for not respecting authority, and someone from HR heard our concern but said he could do nothing except pray for us. We had no recourse, no one in MCC who would take our needs and wellbeing seriously.

2. MCC bullies, harasses, gaslights and/or ignores workers who report about abuse or stand up for their rights, and then harshly and summarily terminates their employment.

One couple writes: Our MCC Representative was located two days travel by air away from our remote location. When we asked questions or needed assistance, his behaviour toward us turned defensive, negligent, and then obstructive, until finally in our second year he chose to abdicate all responsibility for us. We repeatedly requested assistance from Akron as the quality of worker care continued to plummet. Finally, the Africa Director planned a mediation. Once it became clear that the MCC Representative would be required to participate, he visited our assignment location and planted a falsehood with our partner that destroyed our relationship with them and led to our termination, apparently all in an effort to avoid having to confront us in mediation. MCC failed to investigate the truth of the partner’s allegations against us in any meaningful way and did not examine the evidence we provided that proved the allegations to be false. Instead, they terminated our employment by phone, with no warning, and gave us only six days to leave our assignment location. This included packing up and moving our two young children only a month before the end of their school year. The termination letter contained multiple claims that were inaccurate and indefensible. No one in MCC attempted to verify the truth of the partner’s sudden complaints against us. Our ex-supervisor’s “evidence” was simply believed, and we were given no opportunity to contest the allegations. Leadership and HR were willing to sacrifice our career with MCC, our wellbeing, and our reputation, rather than address the abusiveness and dysfunctional behaviour of our supervisor. The wrenchingly devastating surprise of being terminated in this way, with no reasons given other than false and distorted accusations, ripped us to the core. For years, despite substantial progress toward healing and moving on, we have continued to feel pain and shock about MCC’s irresponsible, cruel, and callous acts against us, and are dismayed to learn that MCC is continuing to harm others with even worse processes.

Another worker writes: About two weeks before my termination, I had expressed concerns about the way that changes were made by MCC reps to the National Staff handbook. Even when staff had

questions, no clarification was provided, and it was evident that the director of the local organization who implements MCC programs was unable to answer staff questions about the handbook, even though he was responsible to explain its contents to staff. I pointed out that staff had no recourse when directors acted to implement the new measures. I was fired a few weeks later, supposedly because there was no more funding for my position, and had to immediately hand over my laptop even though I was going to be paid until the end of the month. I was immediately cut off from access to all the documents that provided evidence to support my complaints.

Another couple writes: We had been told at orientation whom to contact in HR if ever there was trouble communicating with a supervisor. When things became difficult, we contacted her immediately. She forwarded us a devotional. In general, whenever we reached out to HR staff or the Africa Director for help in our conflict with our supervisors, they would claim to recognize the validity of our concerns but then fail to take any corrective actions. In this way, they continued to enable the destructive behaviour of our supervisors. Often we waited weeks or months for answers to our urgent questions, and then received only vague and unsubstantial responses. This apparent lack of interest in spending any time on our situation and concerns made us feel that isolated workers are very low on MCC's priority list.

Another couple writes: In the middle of an extremely challenging political situation, a confidential HR process was initiated against one of us. During this process, we began to experience psychological harassment from MCC. We were isolated from our colleagues and supervisors and given insufficient information about our legal rights and recourses. We were not allowed any advocate during the process. We believe at least one member of the Case Management Team had a clear conflict of interest and should not have been on the team. Critical ongoing recruitment processes were unnecessarily blocked by HR, no support was provided to relieve our exceptionally heavy workload, and our expressed health concerns were not acknowledged or dealt with appropriately. Our repeated pleas for help and reports that we felt unsafe were ignored. We feel that this process was handled callously and that it was characterized by multiple abuses of power, unfairness, and bias. Until these events, we had felt reassured that even in a situation of increasing political insecurity, and with a workload that was increasingly unmanageable, we could trust that MCC had our backs. Suddenly, MCC was no longer a safe support. We felt afraid and vulnerable. We initiated a conflict resolution process with MCC regarding this process, believing that it would be possible to work things out. However, HR directors continually deflected or refused to answer our questions, and warned our supervisors to stop trying to advocate for us in this situation. We eventually reported our concerns about workplace harassment and abuse of power to Executive Directors. They refused to meet with us but met with the HR Directors about whom we had complained and told us that they had full confidence in them. We then reported our concerns to the MCC Canada board chair. He refused to intervene and copied, without permission, our confidential e-mail to one of the two Executive Directors about whom we had just complained. The next day, we were fired.

Another couple writes: A family member who observed the circumstances of our termination, described what had happened to us as "the most humiliating, demeaning, demoralizing and dehumanizing experience I have ever witnessed within our Mennonite circle. I would not have believed it could happen if I hadn't witnessed it." An MCC-employed mediator who served as a counselor for us during this crisis stated, "There was no determination of true value of the reasons for

termination, only tacit acceptance. [These workers] were tried, judged, condemned and sentenced, ordered and executed, in absentia.”

3. In response to reports of abuse, MCC covers up allegations and evidence with pseudo-investigations.

One worker writes: *I used MCC’s Speak Up Service to report a difficult situation regarding micromanagement, disrespect, and abuse of power by my supervisors. My complaint was investigated by two MCC HR staff and judged to be at least partially founded, but I received no further responses to my questions about next steps. One of the same HR staff was present when I was fired. This process makes a mockery of MCC’s much-vaunted Speak Up Service, which is supposed to be a confidential reporting mechanism that protects the reporter from retaliation.*

Another worker couple writes: *After we were fired, we submitted a formal grievance to MCC US and MCC Canada boards in November 2023. They responded to indicate that MCC would be initiating a “third party investigation” into our complaints. Three months later, we heard from MCC’s lawyer, informing us that MCC had hired an investigative firm. Our initial communication with the investigator immediately raised concerns for us about the scope, safety, and transparency of the investigation. The firm’s own stated expertise (as per its website) is to “provide timely and legally defensible solutions to mitigate corporate risk and legal exposure.” It appeared to us that MCC had chosen a process and an investigative firm that would help them avoid liability. We were particularly concerned about the fact that the investigators’ final report would be submitted to MCC Human Resources (despite our allegations against HR Directors) and that we and the Boards might not receive the report at all. We also found it unacceptable that MCC leaders, and not the Boards, would be making decisions about how to respond to the findings of the investigators, even though our grievance was submitted to the Boards against MCC leaders under MCC’s whistleblowing policy. We wrote to the Boards to express our concerns about the investigation but received no response to our substantive concerns. Since the organization that we allege is abusing us continues to undermine the possibility of our participation in a timely, fair and unbiased investigation without the fear of retaliation against us or others, we have regretfully declined to participate unless and until these serious problems are resolved.*

Another couple writes: *We submitted a formal grievance to MCC for wrongful termination based on falsehoods that were sponsored and embraced by MCC leaders. During the year-long grievance process, neither our allegations, nor MCC leaders’ claim that we had “performance issues” that justified termination, were ever seriously investigated.*

4. After firing workers who report about abuse and misconduct, MCC intimidates them into silence through threats and/or offers of hush money combined with non-disparagement agreements

One couple writes: *Our termination letter from MCC stated that we would receive support from MCC to the end of our term (over 158,000 CAD) on the condition that we “waive all recourses of any nature whatsoever ... against the Employer... including all forms of internal complaints or grievances under any Employer policy or otherwise, for any purposes and intents whatsoever.” A far lesser settlement option was offered if we did not sign the agreement. The letter also included a non-disparagement clause that, if we had signed, would prohibit us from making any negative comments, in any form,*

about MCC, its mission, staff, or services. If we breached this non-disparagement agreement, we would need to repay MCC the funds we had received. MCC leaders were essentially offering us hush money in return for our silence about the abuse we had experienced, preferring to protect MCC's image rather than intervene in response to alleged abuse – which they knew about. When we asked specifically about the possibility of continuing the conflict resolution procedure that we had initiated before our termination, and about meeting with MCC to discuss, among other things, our concerns about abuses of power by Executive Directors and the MCC Canada board chair, they quoted this clause. When we refused to sign the agreement, foregoing the offer of financial support to the end of our term, and again asked to meet with MCC leaders to discuss ongoing conflicts, our requests were ignored.

Another couple writes: At the conclusion of a grievance process, an MCC Executive Director left a check on the coffee table together with a letter – which we did not sign – in which she proposed that we and MCC agree to engage in “no further public communication regarding this matter” while recommending that we not serve with MCC again “in the near future.”

From a worker: We know of a person who was fired by MCC and signed an NDA. When a friend of theirs reached out to express concern to an MCC Executive Director about the firing, the person who had been fired immediately received a letter from MCC's lawyer threatening to sue them if they spoke out (even through a friend) ever again.

Another couple writes: MCC agreed to meet with us only in the context of a mediation offered by the Labor Standards Board of our home jurisdiction, who had received our complaints against MCC of unjust termination, firing while sick, and firing after making a complaint about abuse. When we learned that the mediation is structured in a way that requires all parties to sign an NDA, we declined to participate on the grounds that it would prevent public accountability for MCC. Our complaints have now been transferred to court. MCC's lawyer claimed that our requests to MCC to participate in a facilitated discussion outside the purview of the legal system were “not coherent” with our choice to make a complaint about MCC's illegal labor practices, but our Labor Standards Board told us we were free to seek agreement with MCC anytime, even outside their mediation process.

5. MCC's actions cause further deep pain, grief, and even fear among vulnerable staff and partners around the world.

A worker couple writes: A national staff member tried to speak up for us (international service workers) after we were told that our position was terminated and that we had to return home. Then this person, who was still on probation, was fired as well.

Another couple writes: A national staff member said to us (international service workers), “If MCC can do this to you – as white people and as reps – what will they do to me?” This person chose to resign after hearing about our termination in order to protect their own health, because they could not trust that MCC would take their concerns seriously.

Another worker couple writes: An MCC partner of 40 years, with experience successfully mediating between armed rebel and government groups, offered to mediate between us and our MCC reps after they suddenly terminated our assignment. They asked if MCC was really going to leave a pregnant

woman without a job. When the MCC reps refused to cooperate, the partner chose to end their relationship with MCC, concluding that “MCC is no longer a peace organization.”

Another worker couple writes: *When a long-time MCC partner heard about our termination, he said, “This is culturally unacceptable. By firing you in a way that undermines your dignity, MCC insults us too.”*

Another worker writes: *My dismissal has created an oppressive and fearful environment among remaining MCC staff. My former colleagues told me that due to my dismissal, they were now afraid of losing their jobs too.*

6. MCC board members and Executive Directors refuse to meet with terminated workers to hear their concerns, responding with prevarication, minimization, and avoidance.

A worker couple writes: *When we or our friends contacted board members to express concern about MCC’s abusiveness, they kept using the excuse that they cannot intervene in operational affairs to justify failure to act, even when the employee over whom they have direct authority – the Executive Director – is not only failing to end abuse but is actively participating in it. They are appealing to the governance concept to support a complete lack of transparency and accountability for senior management.*

Another worker couple writes: *The MCC US Board chair informed our friend that the board members’ emails are not “provided to the community.” Later he provided us with these e-mails, but when we wrote to the boards to express serious concerns about the process that MCC was using to investigate our complaints, MCC’s lawyer responded to tell us that all the board members had asked that we “cease all communication and correspondence with them directly about this case going forward” and correspond only with the lawyer as their representative. Recently, the Executive Directors e-mailed us to propose a meeting. We welcome this initiative, but remain confused about why it took almost 11 months and at least nine separate invitations from our friends and allies before they would agree to meet.*

Another worker couple writes: *At the conclusion of an unsatisfying grievance process, an MCC Executive Director met with us and apologized for some parts of MCC’s behaviour including the abrupt and insensitive method of our termination and the role of “dysfunctional team dynamics” in causing our termination. However, she continued to assert unproven allegations about our supposed “performance issues,” claiming that these would have been sufficient grounds for termination if HR processes had been properly followed. Since information about these issues would remain in our personnel file visible to EDs and HR directors, she effectively barred the door for us to any future service with MCC and permanently damaged our reputations. In our conversation, she used meaningless phrases such as “MCC could have done better” or “The stars were misaligned,” while expressing the assumption that this was a one-off and wouldn’t happen to others.*

Another worker couple writes: *MCC Boards receive our concerns and propose no action in response, but when others – such as major donors – write to MCC on our behalf, board members or Executive Directors meet with them, issue statements saying that worker health is their first concern, or promise to consider mediation, even when they have shown no willingness to do so in their (basically non-existent) correspondence with us.*

Another worker couple writes: *Following our termination, we spent a year and a half talking to MCC-related people as honestly and pleadingly as possible, hoping someone with some power would also see the craziness. No one took our concerns seriously. It felt surreal.*

We have made dozens of attempts to get the attention of MCC leaders and to resolve our grievances confidentially through discussion or mediation. MCC has consistently responded with minimization, prevarication, or pseudo-investigations.

We need you, MCC constituents, to support us in holding MCC accountable to its peacebuilding values.

We invite all who read this letter to take action:

- Report additional experiences of abuse by MCC to stopmccabuse@proton.me, which is monitored by a group of survivors and their supporters. (Be aware that MCC's Speak Up Service simply transfers complaints to MCC HR.)
- Sign this petition (<https://tinyurl.com/stopmccabuse-petition>) insisting that MCC answer specific questions about its employment practices. Sign anonymously if you need to. Consider sharing your own thoughts publicly in the comments.
- Share this letter and the petition widely in your social networks (see links in box at end).
- Reach out to survivors of MCC's abuse and listen to them, believe them, support them, and advocate for them.
- Contact MCC leaders to insist that they transparently answer the questions outlined in our petition, including the following:
 1. Do you condone paying money to current or former workers in return for their agreement to waive grievances or to be silent about abuse?
 2. Will you provide your constituency with a transparent report that shows, since 2010, how many MCC workers had their employment terminated early, how much money MCC spent on legal fees related to employment terminations, and how much was spent on settlements for terminated employees (beyond the amounts of transitional living support or resettlement allowance required by policy)?
 3. Will you commit to a transparent, external, independent third-party investigation – with a full public report – into these complaints as well as the complaints of others who may come forward?
 4. Will you make your policies available so your constituency can read them?

Friends, the only thing that would grieve us more than what we have already been through is if the community who owns MCC – its constituency – is not willing to take action to hold MCC to the standards that it so proudly claims. MCC constituents, will you take our report seriously? Will you use your power – a power you may not have realized you had – to hold MCC accountable?

If you have questions, you can reach us at stopmccabuse@proton.me.

Sincerely,

Anicka Fast and John Clarke, International Service Workers (MCC Representatives) in Burkina Faso, 2020-2023. Fired following a clinical diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, shortly after escalating our concerns about workplace abuse to Executive Directors and Board chair.

Kathryn and Dan Smith Derksen, International Service Workers in Chad, 2006-2009. Fired by phone, planned mediation cancelled, and given six days to leave the country.

Anonymous couple, International Service Workers in Africa. Lost employment in 201X after speaking out for health needs while pregnant.

Anonymous individual, National Staff in Asia. Fired in 202X after using MCC's confidential reporting service, in the presence of one of the individuals who investigated my report of abuse.

To report a case of abuse by MCC or to contact the group of survivors:

stopmccabuse@proton.me

To sign the petition: <https://tinyurl.com/stopmccabuse-petition>

Link to this open letter: <https://tinyurl.com/stopmccabuse-full-letter>

To express concerns to MCC, write to:

MCC Canada Board Chair, Ron Ratzlaff canada@mcccanada.ca

MCC US Board Chair, Gilberto Perez mailbox@mcc.org

MCC Canada Executive Director, Rick Cober Bauman canada@mcccanada.ca

MCC US Executive Director, Ann Graber Hershberger mailbox@mcc.org



Petition



Open letter (this document)