The Swonion airs staff issues

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The third issue of a bitterly satirical anonymous newsletter criticizing the college’s treatment of its staff has made its rounds in public areas throughout campus. The Swonion, whose name is a takeoff on the popular lampoon The Onion, features several articles mocking the strict guidelines of new staff lounge, restrictions on small holiday bonus gifts, and other topics related to working conditions like sick days, wages and employment hierarchy.

Although the articles are based on real-life events, they include no actual quotations, and the reporters’ names are made up.

Because Swarthmore employees seldom voice their grievances publicly, The Swonion, published monthly since January, may represent a new outlet for staff to air grievances without fear of backlash from their supervisors.

So far the origin of The Swonion remains unknown. Sam Blair ’02, a student leader of the Living Wage and Democracy Campaign, could only guess where it might have originated, but asserted that “it’s not coming from the living wage campaign.”

Blair said he thought The Swonion was an interesting forum and believed it could not be just a student effort. “It’s relatively knowledgeable, which is one of the surprising aspects of it,” he said.

But Debbie Sloman, an administrative assistant in the political science department, thinks it is students who are putting out The Swonion. “I don’t think most of us have the time to do it,” she said.

The Swonion appears to serve a purpose greater than entertainment. “It’s gotten some people thinking about the truth beneath the satire,” Blair said. Hamza Walli, an environmental services employee, agreed. “This helps,” he said.

Walli also said that the anonymity of The Swonion is a clear example of the fear many staff have of speaking out about working conditions. “I’m somewhat puzzled in this era of time when communication is at its greatest height people are reluctant to express their feelings,” he said. “[It is] as if they are being compelled to be silent.”

The staff are not happy, Walli said, but he thinks that

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Satirical newsletter mocks inequalities

From SWONION, pg. 3

silence is the wrong tactic. “I have learned that the less you speak, the more you will have to endure,” he said.

Walli and Blair both said the financial obligations of the staff are a key reason for their fears and reluctance to speak out. In Pennsylvania, at a non-unionized institution such as Swarthmore, the college does not need determined just cause to let someone go, according to Blair.

“There are faculty, there’s staff, and then there’s staff.”

Sam Blair ’02

There may be other reasons for the staff’s fear. “Trust is a huge issue,” Blair said. For many years the staff didn’t feel comfortable going to human resources because they felt the office was untrustworthy. This turmoil no longer exists to the degree it once did, but according to Blair, the college’s grievance procedure still tends to divide and suppress problems.

Blair thought this falling is due to a divide among staff workers who have desk jobs and staff workers who perform services like housekeeping and food preparation. “At Swarthmore, there are faculty, there’s staff, and then there’s staff,” he said.

Sloman agreed that this divide made SAC less effective. “There’s a disparity between staff. Many staff don’t have the basics that other staff take for granted such as computers, desks and phones. Our problems and issues aren’t all the same, and it’s unfortunate that the staff aren’t more informed about all staff issues,” she said.

The Staff Advisory Council (SAC) can take up general complaints from the staff and make recommendations, but does not have the power to fix the problems that they do choose to address. According to Blair, SAC isn’t an official bargaining committee, only an advisory committee. Because of this, he said, “SAC takes a pretty conservative approach towards the administration and doesn’t have the power to do more than that.”

The Swonion represents an anonymous forum for the voicing of staff grievances. It is a good first step, Walli said, since staff are not utilizing more traditional forums such as SAC. But he believes staff’s grievances will continue until they decide to do something about it.

“Equality has to be exercised by the people,” he said. “Equality is not given. Freedom is not given. Nothing is given.”