



December 18, 2020

An open letter to the small press community:

In early December, a former employee shared a disturbing account of their painful experience with SPD—setting off a broad and critical public discourse about our organization, our workplace, our role in publishing and our values. It's clear that we haven't properly expressed our sincere apologies to this former employee and to other aggrieved employees, nor have we expressed how sincerely we regret that *our* mistakes impacted those who work every day to make SPD's mission into a reality for underrepresented literary voices.

We're sorry.

As a person of words writing to you under the watchful eye of thousands of authors, I've always believed that words mean everything. But I ask you to look beyond our words of apology, because it is the restorative actions we choose now that will ensure the future of SPD aligns with the intentions and promises that have driven SPD for more than four decades. On behalf of my fellow board members, I want to offer an update about what we're doing in response to what we're learning.

First, we are closing in on finding an independent party to conduct a comprehensive assessment of workplace practices, followed by a formal process for conflict resolution and mediation. Five candidates have been identified to conduct a thorough, professional, unbiased examination of our leadership, policies and practices. Staff members won't merely be solicited for input and complaints. They will be an integral part of the process, which will also include consideration of the two thoughtful and detailed proposals for restructuring that we've received to date from staff. This proactive effort will help identify what organizational changes are needed to heal our workplace and restore the ethos of SPD to what we know and need. At the conclusion of the process, the third-party will publicly share a report.

As a non-profit board, we have a responsibility to do our due diligence by reviewing credentials, contacting references, requesting proposals and negotiating a reasonable fee. Given the continuing difficulties related to COVID-19, the upcoming holiday interruptions and the complexity of such a major expenditure, I expect to have more information on the selection and timeline by mid-January. We regret it's not sooner. I promise to share those details with concerned communities once they are finalized.

Second, in recognition that a professional human resources function is crucial to SPD's excellence, and that a volunteer board full of writers, teachers and publishers lacks this expertise, we are committed to bringing in an industry-leading professional organization to run HR. HR departments weren't commonplace when SPD was founded in 1969, and certainly not in small non-profits. It's inexcusable that we failed to grow with the times and that SPD employees suffered as a result. We believe a holistic HR approach, run by specialized experts, will preclude recurrences, as well as foster a healthy workplace with interactional and procedural justice for all.

Third, we see value in expanding and deepening the outlook of this board, and will seek to add a new member with particular passion and a strong voice in the areas of social justice and the evolving global workers movement. I am making an open request for submissions and nominations to fill a new seat on our board of directors.

Fourth, SPD is a non-profit licensed by the state of California, and is audited annually by an independent, accredited auditor. In the interest of transparency and restoring trust, we will make these audits public.

For more than 50 years, SPD has been a non-profit dedicated to enabling literary small presses to reach their audiences, whether it be through bookstores and libraries, direct to individuals or more recently via giants like Amazon. Profit is not our goal. It never was and never will be. There is no compensation for serving as a board member. There are no six-figure earners on staff. There are no performance bonuses for staff leadership.

But SPD has to make ends meet or it vanishes—a prospect certainly raised earlier this year by the ongoing pandemic. As always, the generosity of many funders and donors, along with the unstinting work of staff, kept the books moving.

SPD is much more than a name to me. It is the vital link between writers, their publishers and their readers, without which only the implacable rules of marketplace commerce determine which voices are heard and whose words are read.

I know that trust is a hard ask in 2020. And we have a long road to go before we reach a place where SPD's current problems are definitively in the past and restorative efforts have borne fruit. But we aim to earn your trust back one day at a time.

Please expect another update from me in mid- to late- January when we have the results of our searches and have details on the content and timeline of our efforts. Thank you for your continued support, especially during the ongoing pandemic, of contemporary literature.

Sincerely,

Alan Bernheimer
On behalf of SPD's Board of Directors
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