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Report of the Vice-President, University and External Affairs, 2022–2023

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by Jeff Bale

Faculty associations and campus-based unions on the move

As I prepare this report, contract faculty and teaching assistants at Carleton University represented by CUPE 4600 have just reached tentative agreements after a two-week strike. The fact that both groups of academic workers were on strike at the same time indicates the seriousness of the issues, which included living wages, workload, benefits, academic freedom, and intellectual property.

If these issues sound familiar to you, it's because **multiple faculty associations and graduate-student unions have taken job action at campuses across Canada since 2021**: Acadia, Cape Breton, Concordia University Edmonton, Laval, Lethbridge, MacMaster, Manitoba, Memorial, and UOIT. At UPEI, the UPEIFA framed their recent strike with a slogan of solidarity and shared interests: "our working conditions are students' learning conditions." Note this slogan first emerged in strikes by school teachers in Wisconsin and then Chicago over a decade ago.

The above list does not include faculty associations and campus unions that successfully leveraged strike votes to secure a better collective agreement without going on strike. Nor does it include strike action taken in the United States. The most prominent example is at Rutgers University in New Jersey. Unions representing post-doctoral researchers, graduate teaching assistants, and faculty and librarians recently struck in unison, with the understanding that coordinated efforts can achieve the greatest gains for all academic workers. **Their actions paid off. Over the 4-year contract: full-time faculty stand to receive a 14% pay raise; the minimum pay for post-docs will increase by 28%; sessional lecturers will see a 44% increase in the per-credit salary rate; and TAs will see $40,000/year in salary**, in addition to gains in health-care coverage and tuition and fee waivers.

Putting these actions in context

In part, the trend toward greater academic labour activism in Canada is tied to the pandemic. A number of faculty associations negotiated short-term agreements just as the pandemic hit; these are now nearing the end of their term, and academics are trying to make up for lost ground. But the larger context for these labour actions is (1) ever-declining provincial funding for higher education, and (2) sector-wide efforts to restructure academic work, with ever-growing proportions of academic workers on one kind of fixed-term contract or the other. Importantly, Indigenous, racialized, and women academic workers hold these precarious appointments at disproportionate rates.

Compounding these declines in Ontario is Bill 124, which capped annual salary increases for broader public sector employees to 1%. Although this bill was ultimately declared unconstitutional, the Ford government recently passed a budget that fails to increase funding for the higher-education sector. Moreover, on March 2, 2023, the Ford government announced a blue-ribbon panel to study financial stability and student experience in the higher-ed sector. Yet, this task force excludes any student or faculty representation. **The Ford government's aggressive stance continues despite, or perhaps because of, the defeats it has experienced in the courts**, namely, their efforts to force striking education workers back to work last fall, and the overturning of Bill 124.

In this context, university administrations often argue that their hands are tied, thus academic staff simply have to accept more concessions. These claims are rarely supported by the facts. At Carleton, a recent audit demonstrated that it has averaged an 11% budget surplus over the last five years, and has over $450 million in "expendable reserves." As a CUPE 4600 representative noted, this financial situation would allow the university to meet all of the union's wage-increase requests and still have enough money to pay 167% of its debts. Administrators at Memorial University conceded a similar point prior to the successful strike by MUNFA contract faculty in early 2023. Under oath, senior administrators stated they have enough money to create 100 new tenure-track positions, but in negotiations had refused to. Finally, the UPEI Faculty Association documented that the university's operating budget has increased by 36% (due almost entirely to tuition hikes and enrollment increases over 25%), while the complement of full-time faculty has declined by 1%.

Across Canada – indeed in the US and the UK as well – academic workers have begun organizing to challenge this situation. **The power of collective action is undeniable**. Besides the historic gains at Rutgers listed above, academic staff at Laval recently ended their 4-week strike with a collective agreement that includes a 15% raise over three years and 80 new faculty positions. Unsurprisingly, 93% of Syndicat des professeurs et professeures de l'université Laval members voted in favour of the agreement.

What this means for UTFA

UTFA is not a certified union, and we don't have the right to strike. This does not mean that we can't learn from these extraordinary examples of collective action and draw lessons from them to support our own goals.

Just as important, it is vital that UTFA demonstrates its support for job actions like these through solidarity in word and deed. This is not only a matter of principle; **when other faculty associations and campus unions win stronger collective agreements, UTFA is then in a stronger position to negotiate better working conditions for its members**. Last fall, UTFA proudly endorsed the Good Jobs at UofT campaign led by caretakers represented by CUPE 3261. These campus workers, most of whom are racialized women, built a strong campaign that included pledges for contributions to their

strike fund from UTFA and many other faculty associations across the country. This broad support helped pressure the Administration to offer a better deal. Similarly, sessional lecturers and TAs at UofT represented by CUPE 3902 leveraged a strike vote and a strong campaign of solidarity to reach an agreement with the University that includes wage increases of 11% over three years for sessional lecturers. UTFA supported this campaign by inviting Amy Conwell, then President of CUPE 3902, to present at Council, and by supporting their letter-writing action. Finally, UTFA Council voted on January 17, 2023, to update its donation policies relative to strike-fund donations. In 2008, Council passed a resolution stipulating that UTFA would donate to the strike fund of any faculty association affiliated with the Canadian Association of University Teachers; the exact amounts are set each fall by the Executive. This year, Council updated its policy to include sibling unions at UofT. These are small but important examples of the kind of solidarity that benefits all academic and campus workers.

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