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CUPE Strike Update #2

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Dear Colleagues,

The strike by CUPE 3902 Unit 1 is lurching into its third week and yesterday, depressingly, we heard news that negotiations over the weekend failed to lead to a tentative agreement. While it is good news to hear of active bargaining (and we hope that continues), it is extremely disappointing to learn that the parties have been unable to reach a workable compromise.

It is also now clear that the academic continuity bandwagon is in full swing. Emails are pouring in asking UTFA for advice. So far, there has been no move by the Administration to declare a University-wide academic disruption, and therefore no attempt to suspend the University Assessment and Grading Practices Policy. But the message emphasizing "academic continuity" (whatever that actually means in this context) is crystal clear.

Consider, for instance, Friday's advisory from the Dean's Office of the Faculty of Arts and Science. The memo has some laudable aspects. It includes a welcome reminder that academic freedom comes before academic continuity (hallelujah) and also, for the first time, we have yet seen, a statement that academic *integrity* does actually matter. Yes. It most certainly does. Yet, the clear bias is evident. The memo's second paragraph begins by stating "…*that instructors of courses have primary responsibility and authority to make changes to their courses*", yet the memo fails to stipulate that instructors also have the primary responsibility and authority to decide ***whether*** to make any changes.

Then, yesterday, we received this gem in a PDADC memo: "*our collective priority must now be to ensure our students complete the term*". Indeed. Hopefully "we" can also agree that the best way to do that is to settle the strike. Now.

A clear predisposition to privilege academic continuity by boot-strapping course changes and grading schemes is the thrust of everything we have received so far, directly or indirectly, from various levels of the University administration (and thanks to colleagues for forwarding those messages, it is very helpful in formulating our advice).

There is no doubt that many undergraduate students are caught in the middle. Many faculty feel they need to take action to help students, particularly those who are graduating. The impulse is understandable and no doubt well-intentioned. But it is important to understand there are no winners here. ***The blunt truth is that changing your course or taking on struck work means taking sides against the union, and the union also represents students***. And it means potentially sacrificing the quality and integrity of your teaching. No one should be put in that kind of position.

In this context, and as you make your important and stressful decisions, we need to remind you of and emphasize some simple but important points.

- As a course instructor, program administrator, or chair, ***you are under NO obligation whatsoever to take on struck work or to change your course outline or programs in any way***. You must NOT be pressured to do these things and if you are, or feel you are, you need to be in touch with UTFA immediately at strikeinfo@utfa.org. This is not your strike, it is not your union, you are not negotiating the contract, and it is not your problem to solve. It is, in fact, that simple. Crisis in your course? Tell the Provost and CUPE to settle the strike. Students complaining they cannot graduate? Tell the Provost and CUPE to settle the strike.
- ***Academic freedom does indeed come before academic continuity, by some distance***. The foundations of all we do in teaching and research rest on academic freedom. ***Only you can decide whether and what changes may be necessary in your courses***. Choosing no change is just as legitimate and principled as choosing change. If you make that choice, UTFA will support your right to do so without hesitation.
- You should make every effort to consult students in your courses if you seek to make changes to those courses, including by the means prescribed in the University Assessment and Grading Practices Policy. If you do, it is important to make sure that “no change” is one of the explicit options you present to the students.
- The quality and integrity of courses and programs are very important. The reputation of the University of Toronto depends on upholding the high standards for which we are rightly known. Twisting courses beyond recognition in the name of some ill-conceived continuity imperative carries the real risk of putting form before content and making us all look foolish. No one is served by that, including students. The sad truth is that some courses have simply been hit too hard by the strike to be overcome by slapdash adjustments to their syllabi if the courses are to retain their fundamental character.
- We are hearing that some chairs and program directors are being asked to step into struck courses taught by Unit 1 instructors. Again, that must be an individual decision. ***If you are not comfortable stepping into someone else’s course, then don’t do it***. You will have UTFA’s full support.
- Some faculty have cancelled tutorial sections in instances where most of the TAs in the course are striking. The rationale for doing so is that it may be fairer for all students in the course. If you elect to do this, UTFA will defend your right to make that determination in the context of your course.
- While all the messaging (including, it must be acknowledged, much of what you are getting here and in our earlier advice) emphasizes individual choices, you should consider discussing appropriate courses of action with colleagues. Some of your choices will have broader implications in your programs. Try to stick together and try not to let the strike create divisions in your unit(s).
- If you are fielding questions from students that you cannot answer, consider passing them on to the Provost’s Office. Remember, this is not a problem of your making. Do the best you can with student inquiries and the like, but also accept that the strike is causing chaos in at least some parts of the University and you should not feel obligated to fix that. If you are not sure what to do, of

course you can always write to us at strikeinfo@utfa.org. But keep in mind, you did not make this mess and the solution is not you. It is a new contract for CUPE.

None of us is at the negotiating table. Opinions are many. Facts are few. What we are hearing at UTFA, loud and clear, is that this has gone on long enough. Enough spin. Enough finger pointing. Enough telling us all that we should just carry on, that the University “remains open”, that somehow it is our responsibility to make the changes necessary to maintain academic continuity (i.e., break the strike) for the sake of students. It is time to end this. If we want to save the term, then the solution is not to break the strike, it is to end the strike. We call on CUPE 3902 Unit 1 and the Administration to make the difficult efforts, decisions, and sacrifices necessary to bring this episode to an end.

If you have questions or concerns about the strike, please write to strikeinfo@utfa.org.

All best in these difficult times and please do remember to look after one another, including graduate student colleagues. We are all the University of Toronto and the University of Toronto is all of us.

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