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JEFF SHANTZ AND CHRIS VANCE

FIGHTING THE NEOLIBERAL AGENDA IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

At 7:00 a.m. on the morning of Thursday, October 26 picket lines went up at each entrance to Canada's third largest university. The strike by members of Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3903, including over 2100 teaching assistants, contract faculty and research assistants at York University had been a long time in the making, originating not only in the intransigence of York administration but in the administrative wishes of other Canadian universities and in the neoliberal policies of the Ontario provincial government. While still uncertain, the outcome of the York strike will have much to say about the future directions of postsecondary education in Canada especially with regards to accessibility and class composition on campuses. As the York Federation of Students (YFS) put it in an information bulletin: "Students and teachers all over Canada are looking to York in the struggle against cutbacks and for high-quality public education [emphasis theirs]."

Why is this strike so important and why would other university administrations and the Ontario government care about its outcome?

The short-term answer is that, despite its many shortcomings, the contract held by 3903 members is far and away the best of any teaching (TA) or graduate/research assistant (GA/RA) and contract faculty agreements in Canada (though not as strong as many in the US). It is the model which other TA locals turn to in their negotiations with their home schools. This alone makes the outcome of this strike pivotal. It will have a major impact on post-secondary education workers across Canadian campuses.

The longer term answer is that in order for the neoliberal agenda of privatization and marketization of post-secondary education to be fully implemented defenders of accessible quality education, of which 3903 has been in the forefront in Canada, must be brought to heel or, even better from the view of bureaucrats with an eye on for-profit education, eliminated entirely.

The proposals made by York administration are hallmarks of the corporatization drive in other public service sectors: privatization, reduced job security, and reductions in wages and benefits. Indeed, the political character of the strike and its importance in the battle against neoliberal marketization of post-secondary education are reflected in the two major issues being fought over in the strike: tuition indexation and job security and promotion.

A commitment to principles of universality and accessibility drives the union's efforts to negotiate tuition

relief for future as well as current TAs and GA/RAs. Tuition indexation, a fee rebate which increases dollar-for-dollar with tuition, or some form of tuition waver would offer protection against the tuition increases which would further erode the accessibility of post-secondary education. As TA locals at other universities in Canada begin to seek similar protections for members, 3903's contract takes on great significance.

Over the last ten years the real wages of some members have dropped by 12%. At the same time TAs and RA/GAs have suffered as management has increased tuition by 350%. Since full-time registration is a requirement for holding a TAship or GA/RAship, tuition works as a ready-made mechanism for management to clawback any gains workers might win. In this way the university works much like a company store where no matter how much wages are increased workers always find themselves owing something back to their bosses.

This tuition requirement also represents a discriminatory employment arrangement which distinguishes TAs and RA/GAs from all other York employees. Other university workers, whether professors, secretaries or maintenance staff enjoy free tuition at York, for themselves and their families, by virtue of being university employees. The same tuition waiver holds for TAs at most universities in the US. After tuition, and even with the protection offered by indexation, TAs at York are left with an income of \$9749.28 per year. This is substantially below the Toronto poverty line of \$17132 per year. The situation for RA/GAs is even worse. York is offering them a minimum of \$4500 per year, not even enough to pay the \$5184.72 tuition costs. In addition, all graduate students since 1996/97 have been required to pay tuition in the summer even if they are finished with course work. This requirement amounts to the world's most expensive library card.

By seeking to eliminate tuition indexation for incoming graduate students, while keeping it for those currently enrolled, York administration is insisting upon extending both two-tier tuition and income disparities for union members. By contrast the union maintains the position that all students face equal tuition.

The enormous tuition increases of recent years have been permitted, indeed encouraged, by federal government cuts to education funding and at the provincial level through deregulation of tuition fees for graduate and professional programs. At the same time the budgets of research funding bodies have suffered reductions and freezes.

Most schools, including York, have eliminated graduate post-residence fees which previously protected graduate students from paying full fees once their coursework was finished. This has had a disastrous impact on students as it represents a doubling of previous fees for each year except the first in programs which can take over six years to complete. And more, it has played nicely into the hands of university administrators as the pressures on students to find off-campus work to make up the tuition increases has lengthened completion times for many students.

Another major plank in the corporatization agenda in post-secondary education has been movement away from secure tenure-track positions towards increased reliance on contract faculty. Reliance upon contract faculty has been a major part of attempts by university administrators to contain costs. Efforts by university administrations to keep contract faculty working without even minimal job security provisions is key part of the requirement to "flexibilize" labour as campuses are made to fit the lean production models of other sectors.

Contract faculty at York currently have to apply for their jobs every four to eight months regardless of seniority. Even those who have taught a course for 20 or so years have to re-apply to teach it, with no

guarantee that they will get it. To protect against this 3903 has sought an increase in the number of conversions of contract faculty to tenure stream. The local has also insisted upon multi-year contracts for senior contract faculty.

With respect to wages and benefits, the union has asked for minimal wage increases of 3.75% while the university has countered with a 2% increase (which is below the inflation level of 2.7%) contingent upon a cut to benefits. Where 3903 has sought some parity between TAs and RA/GAs, York has offered a GA/RA minimum wage of less than tuition.

As it stands now GA/RAs do not make enough in wages even to cover tuition let alone to live on. In addition, because this is their first contract, GA/RAs are not yet covered by tuition indexation protection. The administration's refusal to offer livable wages suggests, in fact, a commitment to student poverty, debt and, inevitably, decreased enrollment by students from low-income backgrounds.

CUPE 3903's last contract accounted for a mere 6% of overall expenditures at York. The union's current demands would, over the next two years, only add up to 10% of the university's budget surplus of \$18 million, and only .3% of the overall budget. Meanwhile, York's top five bureaucrats took away \$850 000 combined in salaries between 1998-1999 (CUPE Picket Bulletin #3). Administration allowed itself spending increases of \$4.6 million between 1993-1997 while spending on academic areas was cut by \$26.7 million over the same period (CUPE Picket Bulletin #3).

After two weeks on the lines the union offered proposals which reduced several key demands. These reductions included: withdrawing the proposal to raise the value of summer funding for TAs; lowering wage demands for GAs; and decreasing the number of positions covered by the job security protections for contract faculty. These were in addition to reductions made in the period just prior to the strike. The administration maintained its counter-offer of nothing but major rollbacks. Management has maintained a hardline stance, making no new monetary proposals since a week before the strike.

The university's intransigence speaks to the political character of the negotiations and suggests that the administration believes it has some powerful support for its actions. The administration hired a Chief Negotiator from an infamous union-busting section of the Heenan Blakie law firm known for defending the Liberal government (unsuccessfully) against women workers' lawsuit for pay equity. The same negotiator worked for administrations during faculty strikes against York and Trent Universities.

By an interesting coincidence, York President Lorna Marsden sits on the Boards of Directors for corporations which donated over \$28 000 to the same Conservative Ontario government which deregulated graduate fees and is constructing a bill to allow private universities in the province. Her political connections run even deeper however since she is the former Vice-President of the Liberal Party of Canada, the very party which set the stage for tuition deregulation by cutting education transfers to the provinces. The York Board of Governors consists primarily of corporate Directors and CEOs. For example one Governor authored a 1996 report recommending the Provincial government deregulate tuition fees, a proposal which has been given life in a Bill currently going through readings in the Ontario legislature. Another is CEO and Chair of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce which administers student loans and profits from the increased student debts related to costly tuition.

Several weeks into the strike the administration has steadfastly refused to put forward any serious offers. In week five management walked away from the table altogether and has, as of December 5th, refused to return until the union lowers its demands substantially. The union remains firm in fighting the university's concessions agenda and members have stated strongly that there can be no further reductions.

Recognizing the implications of 3903's strike for the further extension of the neoliberal agenda, both on campus and off, a number of unions and community groups, including the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, have worked to support the strike, reinforcing picket lines and taking part in solidarity actions. The morale of 3903 members remains high and their commitment to fight against the corporate onslaught is unshaken.

RELATED LINKS

CUPE 3903: <http://strike.cupe3903.tao.ca>

CUPE National Postsecondary Education Sector: <http://www.cupe.ca/sectors/postsecondary/default.asp>

CUPE National [Anti-]Privatization: <http://www.cupe.ca/issues/privatization/default.asp> *Ontario*

Coalition Against Poverty: <http://www.tao.ca/~ocap>

Student Activist Network: <http://san.tao.ca>

Jeff Shantz and Chris Vance, York University