



# On Strike!

## Frequently Asked Questions

November 2008

### **WHY ARE YOU ON STRIKE?**

The university is effectively refusing to bargain with us and has pushed us into this strike. We feel we were railroaded into a strike and left with no choice but to strike to force them back to the bargaining table. But now that we're out, our members have shown overwhelming support for the action. The University has picked this fight and now have a fight on their hands.

CUPE 3903 members as students and teachers have no interest in disrupting classes. Education is what we do everyday – it's our main concern – it's our jobs and for many of our members, their graduate degrees have been stopped. The strike is our legal right and, now, the only option we have to put pressure on the administration to deal fairly with our membership.

### **WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE ADMINISTRATION'S MOST RECENT OFFER OF 9.25%?**

The latest offer from the administration is not what it appears – it only refers to proposed wage levels. But when you take wages AND BENEFITS together and set them against inflation it adds up to a 1.4% reduction.

The University is using a lot of numbers to confuse and mislead the public. While the wage increase offered is 9.25% over 3 years, collective agreements have more than just wages such as benefits and professional development funds. When calculating the actual offer in terms of total compensation, the offer is just 2.3%. The inflation rate when comparing August 2008 to the previous year was at 3.7%.

### **WHY NOT AGREE TO THE UNIVERSITY'S OFFER OF BINDING ARBITRATION?**

This offer is the University's way of avoiding negotiating with us. Binding arbitration is appropriate when there are one or two sticky issues holding up a settlement NOT when one party has hardly been negotiating at all. The fact that the University brought up binding arbitration at the very same time as they brought forward their first monetary proposal makes us wonder if they are bargaining in good faith.

Binding arbitration is often settled by taking the median average of similar unions' collective agreements. This would be tantamount to giving a student's paper a C+ because that's the class average. Considering that we're doing A-level work, the median average is of no benefit to us which is why we will NOT agree to binding arbitration. The only way to end this strike is for the administration to stop their public relations tactics and come back to the bargaining table.

### **DON'T YOU HAVE THE BEST WAGES & CONTRACT IN THE SECTOR?**

Most people don't understand that neither TAs or GAs are allowed to work other jobs outside of York. If they do, the York administration could take away their full-time student status and any work or funding they get. Also, there's tremendous pressure on graduate students to finish their degrees on time so even if a graduate student took another job against the rules, they would have a really hard time keeping up.

The combined pressures of below poverty wages, accumulated debt plus an incredibly demanding academic timetable has meant York's attrition rate for PhD Students is more than 50%. That means less than half of all the people who enter a Ph D program finish.

Actually a number of graduate students exceed "Poverty Line" wages, the Union is only asking for the additional funding for those students whose funding package does not meet the low income cut off.

We have fought hard as a union local for the rights, protections and compensation our members have right now. But the best contract in a very low wage sector still adds up to less than we need to survive.

A contract Faculty member teaching 2.5 courses makes \$35,000 a year. That's less than half the \$80,000+ salary of tenure track faculty teaching the same number of courses. Teaching Assistants (TAs) make \$17,000 a year but still have to pay tuition fees. Also, if we get any extra scholarships or awards, the University drops this amount by clawing back our hours. Graduate Assistants make less than \$10,000 a year and most have finished their undergraduate degrees with an enormous student debt despite working many part-time jobs. We feel investing more money for Graduate Students would make Masters programs accessible to all.

### **HOW CAN YOU EXPECT INCREASES IN AN ECONOMIC DOWNTURN?**

The University is in a unique position during tough economic times because this is exactly when Governments and Industry put a premium on the

knowledge sector as the way forward. Also when unemployment goes up people go back to school to upgrade their skills so university enrolments actually increase. And tuition fees have been going up for many programs. These are three increasing revenue streams of for the University but they are not being reinvested into the classroom.

Also, York is getting excellent value from its contract faculty. A course with 60 students, yields about \$100,000 in revenue between tuition and government grants and yet contract faculty are paid only \$14,000 – where is the rest going? We're saying the university needs to make academic teaching a priority. We strongly believe that fair recognition of our contract faculty through job security and promotions, investing in professional development and good health benefits and pensions will enhance the learning environment.

### **OUR QUESTION TO YORK...**

is the "belt-tightening" due to hard economic times going to affect administration salaries? Most of the people we are negotiating with took salary increases two to four times what has been offered to CUPE. We conservatively estimate that the law firm that York retains for negotiations charges about \$400/hour. York hires Human Resource managers at well over \$100 000 who are trained to negotiate collective agreements. The tens of thousands of dollars spent on legal fees in this round of bargaining would have gone a long way to settle many monetary issues with us and for all the workers on campus.

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