



**2 Dec 08 – Open Letter to President Shoukri from Janice Newson, long time faculty member who retired 1 December 2008**

*Walter Whiteley, Former Chief Steward, YUFA; Stewards' Council Representative to the YUFA Executive*

The Ad Hoc CUPE Support & Communications Committee is circulating this open letter to President Shoukri to YUFA members because its key points echo the experiences of many of us involved in labour relations at York University. What is happening in bargaining is symptomatic of deeper systemic problems with labour relations at York. These bad practices are embedded in how grievances are addressed and how the Collective Agreements at York are handled. The painful reality is that complaint stages of grievances drag on for months and years, with unmet 'promises' of responses and resolutions, and with faculty members stranded while problems fester. There is every indication similar problems exist for the other unions at York.

In the words often used by the Employer, the Administration has 'no appetite' to make collective agreements or labour relations work effectively at York University.

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**OPEN LETTER TO PRESIDENT SHOUKRI FROM JANICE NEWSON**

27 November 2008

Dear President Shoukri:

I am a faculty member in the Arts Sociology department and I will be retired in 3 days. I have been at York since 1971 and from 1975 through until 1997 when the 8 week YUFA strike took place, I have been close to and often deeply involved in the negotiating process at York.

Based on all of my experience and insider knowledge of how this process works, I have to say that it is time for a RADICAL change in the way the York Administration manages its side of the process. Please understand that I am not putting all of the trouble at the feet of the York Administration side. I know about two sides and how either side and both sides can get stuck in their principles and positions. I want you to know that when I have thought it necessary in the past, I have confronted the union side, including my own union YUFA, about its responsibility for working toward, through the give and take of negotiations, the settlement of disputes.

However, during one of my deep involvements in the process in the mid 1980s, a senior administrator who shared responsibility for negotiating collective agreements boldly told my side that the only way to bring about a resolution to our dispute at the time was for us, the union, to see if we could pull off a strike and that only with the pressure of the strike would there be any movement in the positions of his side. This approach to bargaining has become deeply ingrained in the Administration culture at York. It predates your Presidency and although it has been shaped from time to time by characteristics of particular Presidents, every President at York since the early 1990s has had their term of office negatively marked by the way York handles labour negotiations. Whatever may be the internal reasons for the long life of this approach, York University and especially its educational mission and its students have been harmed by it.

I was present during the last long CUPE strike and now my formal career is ending in the midst of this one. I can tell you as a front line teacher that no one benefits from this. I worked hard on organising the two courses I began to teach in September because I knew that they would be my last as a full-time faculty member. Their pedagogical integrity is now seriously threatened and if the strike continues into January as it will surely do if an agreement is not reached now, they will lie in ruins - along with the courses of my colleagues. We can't calculate the negative effects on students from experiencing one of their precious years in university this way. Imposing these effects on them is a profoundly serious matter and for my part, nothing in these negotiations is worth it.

Some body has to take leadership in bringing this to an end. I know that you, as President, cannot in good conscience authorise the giving away of York's financial stability to settle a strike (shaky as financial stability can be at this time). But in reality, it cannot be argued with any credibility that CUPE 3903 is going to persist with demands that contain such a potential. I am appealing here to your Administration's moral responsibility to take the kind of leadership that will lead to productive discussion and resolution of the outstanding issues. Among other things, that means being willing to show one's hand first, so to speak, rather than waiting for the other side to weaken its resolve. This is what I was referring to earlier about the York Administration needing to radically change its deep rooted habits of negotiating collective agreements.

As a new President at York, you have a chance to make this shift in approach and we - by which I mean not only the faculty and staff but also our students - are calling on you to do it. In the past, Presidents have tried to stand back from the negotiating process. Having been involved, I understand how that can be a necessary thing to do - to not interfere with or undermine your own negotiators. But your negotiators are acting in a context. I am talking about the need to change that context and to take the lead in breaking away from negotiating through defensive lenses.

Sincerely,

Janice Newson, Department of Sociology / Arts

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YUFA Ad Hoc CUPE Support & Communications Committee

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