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## LESSONS OF A JOB ACTION:

### *A Strike Coordinator's View*

I was one of two strike coordinators for the strike waged by 2,400 Teaching Assistants and Student Instructors at the University of Toronto this past January. It was my first experience in organizing a strike, and running our picket lines, mass solidarity pickets and rallies was one of the most inspiring experiences of my life. I was elected as an Organizer in the fall of 1998 to build up our stewards' network and begin the process of mobilizing our membership in preparation for negotiations, and from that time to the present it was truly impressive to see our members gain a sense of confidence and unprecedented militancy - to see our union come to life.

Now that we have settled for an agreement which falls far short of what our members struck for, it may seem difficult to keep the importance of that struggle in perspective. There were no doubt many who voted for the deal with heavy hearts because of the impending threat to fire us all. But the strike cannot be considered an outright defeat, since the administration's goal was clearly to bust our union, and they were unable to do so. And we have learned many lessons as a union that I hope will place us in a better position to win gains on tuition waivers in the near future.

There were a number of missed opportunities in the course of our strike. The most important was the fact that U of T was bargaining with 14 bargaining units this year, but very little truly coordinated bargaining took place. Although it might not have been possible to coordinate the bargaining and strike efforts of all campus locals, the lack of a common strategy between CUPE locals was a major weakness of the strike. The U of T has a long-standing strategy of picking off campus locals one by one, and although there was far more communication between our unions this time, in the end the administration was able to pursue this strategy nonetheless.

There was no overall strategy from the National or provincial leadership of CUPE to take advantage of the common timelines of locals this year. Although in the middle of our strike members of our local went to the ratification meeting of the service workers, also members of CUPE, to try to convince those members to reject their deal and strike with us for a better one, the links between our unions were not strong enough to win this argument. To force U of T, the foremost advocate of tuition deregulation in Ontario, to grant tuition waivers to our members would have required effectively shutting the university down. Despite the militancy of our strike, we were unable to accomplish this alone.

The timing of our strike was also a crucial factor in the employer's ability to cancel and restructure courses, leaving 62 of our members without a job and holding the same threat over the rest. We need to be able to mobilize more quickly for a strike vote, to be in a position to strike earlier in the academic year.

We also need to build more solid links with the undergraduate struggle to lower tuition. Our support from

undergraduates was beginning to grow in the last week of the strike, but a significant number of undergraduates did not see our strike as the opportunity it could have been to address the tuition issue for all students. Although our strike was one factor among others in the provincial government's recent decision to increase tuition by a lower percentage than in recent years, we were not able to mobilize undergraduates in a way that might have made a difference to the outcome of our strike.

In the future, we also need a clearer strategy with faculty. We did not call for an all-out boycott of the campus at the beginning of the strike, but neither did we have a strategy of escalation in which faculty could have tried to organize things like a one-day cancellation of classes. Although we perform 40% of the teaching at U of T, contract faculty are not unionized and were restricted in what they could do to support us. We need to escalate our efforts to bring contract faculty into our local before the next round of bargaining.

The worst aspect of our settlement is the situation of the Course Instructors and Teaching Assistants who lost their jobs due to the cancellation of courses - essentially the firing of members for going on strike. The bargaining committee unfortunately withdrew our grievances with the Ontario Labour Board over this as a condition of the settlement. However, due to the persistence of rank-and file members, there is a new union committee to pursue what compensation is possible for those who lost their jobs.

We are monitoring the administration's promise to guarantee an extra term of employment for those members in the summer or fall, and we will grieve any failure to provide grants for those members who apply. We will very likely be launching a group grievance to get the administration to pay those members for the course prep time they put in before the cancellation of their courses. Hopefully, this committee will become a standing committee for Course Instructors, who have many issues quite apart from those that concern Teaching Assistants.

Despite the frustration of members with the settlement, the union has seen increased activism since the strike. Seven new people have come forward to serve as departmental stewards, most importantly at the satellite campuses, as well as a number of members who want to get involved in other ways to build the union before the next strike. We are forming a new visa students' committee, and we are developing a much more militant culture of filing grievances, including among sections of the bargaining unit which have not traditionally been in the forefront of this, such as organic chemists at one of the satellite campuses.

There is now tentative talk of mergers between four of the CUPE locals on campus, coming from not only executives but rank-and-file members. Although this may not be immediate, it puts us far ahead of where we were before.

This strike was the first battle in a longer war, and the next round will most likely be upon us with the expiry of the contract in August 2001. Our challenge will be to turn members' dissatisfaction with the current Collective Agreement into a more active union, ready to give U of T another and even more serious run for its money.

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