



Niemeijer, M. and Vance, C. (2000). Striking to win at York university. *Workplace*, 6, 88-91.

MARSHA NIEMEIJER AND CHRIS VANCE

STRIKING TO WIN AT YORK UNIVERSITY

strike@york.edu!

Chris Vance

Approximately 2,400 workers at York University in Toronto, Canada, have been on strike since Oct. 2. The administration is demanding we accept pay 'increases' well below the rate of inflation, reductions of our promotion programs for adjunct faculty, and cutbacks in tuition rebates for student-workers.

We Contract Faculty and Teaching/Research/Graduate Assistants--organized as Local 3903 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees--do 40% of all teaching at York yet receive only 6% of the campus budget. Most members earn approximately \$13,000 a year, and must pay nearly \$6,000 in tuition out of that.

After a month of administrators refusing to return phone calls, an occupation of the president's office in September brought the employer back to the table. A solidarity action successfully blocked the same administration from evicting a student from her residence for arrears in rent. Since the first day of our strike on October 26, the vast majority of classes at York have been virtually cancelled due to support from students and tenured faculty and incredibly strong picket lines. Despite repeated threats of eviction from our own campus, we intensified picketing to cover several mud roads created by trailblazing scabs in SUVs.

Flying squads of members and supporters amplify our strike through weekly actions. From a counter-convocation of teary-eyed graduating student-workers November 3 to loud marches through campus, we surprise the employer, startle supervisors, and remind students of their academic protections for respecting our picket lines. A \$280-per-plate luncheon by the administration for its corporate puppetmasters was ruined by one such flying squad at an exclusive country club. More recently, as the employer literally hid from the entire York community, a 'Where's President Lorna Marsden?' campaign has already replaced a speech by the president at a public library with our own popular education session (the president was later found in a corner behind bookstacks). Our next target is York's Board of Governors that is full of corporate CEOs.

Meanwhile, the administration deepens its twin excuses that the provincial government that funds them will not allow anything less than gutting our current contract and that York's surplus of \$18 million is not really a surplus. Settling on our strike demands would 'cost' only 10% of the surplus but this would challenge the recent trend of corporatization. York's president is the highest-paid in Canada at \$240,000 per year, and from 1993-97 administrative spending rose \$6 million while the academic side of the

university was cut back \$27 million.

The current strike priority is forcing the employer back to negotiations (they walked away November 27) so the academic year may be saved with a fair and just settlement. Please send solidarity messages to cupe3903@tao.ca and protests to presidnt@yorku.ca (yes, that's president with no second 'e' and please cc protests to cupe3903@tao.ca). For more details on the strike visit <http://390cupe.ca>

Open Letter to the York Community

FROM: CUPE 3903 Executive Board

RE: York Administration Walks Away from Negotiations

DATE: November 28th, 2000

Dear Member of the York Community,

As you well know, we are into the fifth week of the strike, and sadly the York Administration has walked away from bargaining. We at CUPE have expressed our interest in continuing negotiations, and continuing to talk about accessible public education in Ontario. York Administration has not. Now instead of bargaining and showing their support for affordable university education, the Administration has closed its ears and gone into hiding. Now instead of openly talking with the union, and demonstrating its concern for all in the York community, the Administration has resorted to childish misrepresenting what has happened in bargaining over the past week, and more seriously begun to engage in strike-breaking activities that threaten the safety of everyone at York. We urge the Administration to begin to act responsibly, and to return to bargaining in good faith.

The explanation on the York Administration's web-site states that the Union told the Administration "via the mediator, that it was not prepared to continue the mediated talks over the weekend and might be prepared to resume mediated talks late Monday afternoon." It is true that on Saturday the CUPE bargaining team once again expressed their disappointment about the employer's intransigence, and informed them that the team needed a day to reconsider our bargaining strategy. But our communication on Saturday about the meeting on Monday was unequivocal: we were fully expecting negotiations to continue on Monday. It is now clear York was not, and when we arrived on Monday, the Administration's team was no where to be found. We are puzzled by this, and by how York has misrepresented this breakdown of negotiations. We can only conclude that the Administration was trying to deflect attention away from their move to unilaterally walk away from the table on Monday.

This latest move does, however, make the actions of the Administration during the last two weeks less puzzling. The Union has been suspicious of why the Administration has engaged in various strike-breaking activities while negotiations are going on. On November 7th, one day after negotiations resumed, the Administration threatened to remove us from "their" property. After a short bargaining recess, the latest round of antics by the Administration began.

Their actions over the last two weeks should be of concern to all of us who work and/or study at York. While no significant offer has been presented at the table as a basis for serious negotiations, the employer has decided to spend its energy trying to weaken our picket lines. They have not succeeded but their actions may have made it much more difficult to settle the labour dispute. Many of our members see their actions as reckless and callous. What is needed now five weeks into a strike is an attempt to foster a context for give and take, rather than calculated tactics that attempt to demoralize our members. These tactics have not and will not work.

There are many examples of the Administration's tactics and only the most serious will be mentioned. On Monday, November 20th, the York Administration, without notice, impounded all of the pylons and blue safety gates along with the fire barrels in the middle of the night. The equipment was returned but after

two days the police was asked to intervene by the Administration on a number of matters including the use of the blue safety gates. It was made very clear to us that if York does not want this equipment on its private property, the Police would take action.

The safety equipment has not only provided security to our picket lines but also has made it travel safer for both drivers and pedestrians. The safety equipment has been deployed to reduce the number of cars that have been driving the wrong way through the exit lanes of the University and on pedestrian pathways. The Union has had to deploy this equipment because the Administration has not enforced its own traffic regulations.

Countless incidents have not been acted upon. Many of the incidents have been well documented with license plate numbers and descriptions of the car and drivers. Most of these drivers have York parking decals and could easily be tracked and at the very least sent a warning that their parking privileges will be revoked. It is apparent to us that the Administration has not followed up on even the most reckless drivers. In fact, many of the security staff who have witnessed incidents of dangerous driving have incredulously denied seeing incidents that have occurred right before their eyes.

We are particularly outraged at another incident that occurred on Wednesday, November 22nd when the lights at and around the Founders Parking Lots were not turned on. The picket line and the parking lots were pitch dark. Security was immediately informed of the problem but we were told that it would take at least an hour for the lights to be turned on. The lights were not turned on until 7:05 p.m., a few minutes after the picket lines had been shut down for the day. We later found out from a campus maintenance worker that the problem could have been immediately dealt with and that he was not needed. The Union has also been told that parking lot security cameras are apparently directed at the picket lines rather than serving their regular security function. Given the grave security concerns that the community encountered earlier this Fall, we find this type of action, if intentional, absolutely repulsive.

Now in the fifth week of the strike, it is clear that York's Administration and its Board of Governors care little about the academic mission of the University and the intellectual and social well-being of its members. It has shown nothing but callous disregard for the safety of the community and shown nothing but contempt for its students and faculty. We need this to stop! We are asking members of the York community to join us in our call for accessible public education throughout Ontario and Canada. We urge everyone to join us in our condemnation of the Administrations tactics and call upon the Administration to immediately return to the bargaining table.

SIX WEEK STRIKE AT YORK UNIVERSITY, TORONTO, CANADA: WE ARE STRIKING TO WIN!!!!

Marsha Niemeijer

2000 Teaching Assistants, Contract Faculty and Graduate/Research Assistants have shut down York University, an institution that serves 40 000 students, for SIX weeks now!!!

We, members of CUPE local 3903 (Canadian Union of Public Employees), have been on strike at York University for tuition indexation, job security and a fair first contract for the newly unionized Graduate/Research Assistants. The employer--at this seemingly public institution with an increasing corporate attitude (their bargaining team is run by an outside lawyer from a notorious union-busting firm)--refuses to consider our proposals.

We have amended our demands twice in bargaining, and yet, this past week, talks broke down when the employer told us they would only bargain if we 'move significantly on the outstanding issues.' This means bargaining with conditions. Our only condition is that the employer explore a broader vocabulary that

expands significantly beyond their intransigent 'no.'

More activity has certainly taken place outside of bargaining--the employer has been aggressively using every tactic in the book to bust our strike. They have threatened us with eviction off their private property, served us with a trespassing notice, faxed criminal allegations to the police and media that have yet to be substantiated, turned off campus lights at a university entrance during a night picket shift, and confiscated our fire barrels and safety equipment. We have called their bluff on each occasion. Our union will not be divided, our union will not be broken and our members cannot be demoralized.

Why are our demands important? Why will we not give up? Although it comes at a huge personal cost for our members, we believe we are engaged in a political strike. We believe our struggle could serve to mobilize graduate student workers and contract faculty elsewhere in Canada, and beyond. We are opposed to the corporatization of public education. We are struggling for accessible and quality public education. We have already struggled hard in the past and have the best contracts in the country in this sector. Last year other graduate student workers went out on strike and demanded 'parity with York'. We now risk losing what makes our contract unique, but WE WILL NOT BACK DOWN.

What do we want? Some of our members have taught on contracts at York University for many years. They have been, and continue to be, the backbone of what makes York University a popular university (in social sciences--which admittedly is not a prestigious scholarly pursuit in the upcoming corporatized academic world of information technology). And yet they have to apply for their job every single year. They accept incredible workloads, just to be able to carve out a living. They are frustrated and overworked. They want a measure of JOB SECURITY, so that they can focus on their work--teaching.

Our teaching assistants and graduate/research assistants want tuition indexation. Some of our current members already have it, and yet they strike--as our union demands that tuition indexation be guaranteed to those student workers coming into the university in future years. Our newest members are demanding it for the first time. What we are doing is opposing the deregulation of tuition, by demanding that it be re-regulated in our contract. We are the only graduate student workers in Canada that have regulated tuition through our contract. AND WE WILL NOT GIVE UP THE FIGHT FOR IT!!!

For a more detailed summary of our issues, facts and figures, please visit our website at <http://390cupe.ca>.

You can help us in our struggle by e-mailing, faxing or phoning the President of York University, Lorna Marsden, and demand that our employer, York University, SETTLE NOW, with a just contract for CUPE 390 Lorna Marsden can be contacted at:

- e-mail: presidnt@yorku.ca (please cc cupe3903@tao.ca)
- fax: 416 - 736 5641
- phone: 416 - 736 5200

Please forward to others who demand and struggle for the quality and accessibility of public education.

OPPOSE THE CORPORATIZATION AND PRIVATIZATION OF PUBLIC EDUCATION!!!

Marsha Niemeijer and Chris Vance, York University