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LEO PARASCONDOLA (ED.)

ARC OF AN ACTION: EMAIL ABOUT THE TORONTO TA STRIKE

On 18 January 2000, Victoria Smallman of the GSC Steering Committee posted a call to the GSC listserv requesting support for the striking TAs at the University of Toronto. It brought a flurry of electronic communication among several email lists, among them GSC's E-grad, the GSC steering committee listserv, and the discussion lists of the MLA's Radical Caucus and Marxist Literary Group. The lists circulated comments from Richard Ohmann and Margaret Atwood, amongst many others. What follows is a selection from those conversations and is in no way intended to be a complete summary of the events it attempts to depict.

On 18 January, Victoria Smallman wrote:

TAs at the University of Toronto are on strike and are looking for support. I don't have a ton of details, but there is some info in the following message. Their email address is also below and there is a website at www.cupe3902.org but last I checked it did not have much in the way of details on it. At the very least, I would urge you to send letters of support to any of the addresses below. Try and get your organizations and unions to send one as well.

Solidarity, Vicky Vicky Smallman

E-grad: On 25 January, Daniel Kim (Cornell) posted a letter from University of Toronto faculty member, Professor Richard Lee (Anthropology) to Robert Prichard, president of that university.

Dear Dr. Prichard:

I have watched with increasing dismay as the Administration's strategy for dealing with the Teaching Assistant's strike has unfolded. I can see no logical or defensible reason for the administration to take the draconian stance contained in this week's "restructuring" directive and deadline.

Forcing the faculty to restructure all courses by Feb. 4, so that they will run to the end of term without TA support means that even if the strike is settled, TAs will be locked out for the rest of the term. This is not only mean-spirited, but also seriously misguided and short-sighted. In your zeal to act tough you have lost sight of why we are all here: to offer decent education and exercise moral leadership. You may win this battle and lose the war.

1. You cannot restructure by eliminating essays, tutorials, labs, and non-quantitative testing, without seriously lowering the quality of education. Bankrupt governments solve their financial difficulties by printing more money. Your solution seems to be to simply print course credits not backed by educational

substance.

2. Your plan assumes that such radical restructuring is even feasible. And that hundreds of already overworked professors will rally to your dubious cause and enthusiastically shoulder dozens of hours of extra work, in the process becoming both exploited and scab labour. Your model seems to be the Winnipeg General Strike where the gents of country club manned the streetcars, and the ladies the hospital wards. Many of us were working sixty or more hours a week to meet teaching, research and services demands even before the strike.

3. You have exposed the hollowness of the rhetoric of collegiality. So much for the TAs being our future colleagues, when it comes to the bottom line collegiality be damned. Even David Cook expressed reservations on this score, in interviews ducking the issue of whether the Administration restructuring strategy was "ethical," but insisting that it was "legal."

In the War Room at Simcoe Hall this might seem like a clever ploy to put the TAs in their "place" so they won't be so uppity. But here are some facts from the front-lines that you down in your bunker may have lost sight of. Teaching Assistants provide extremely good value, already providing collectively thousands of hours of unpaid labour to the University each year. Here's how. Back in the days when the TA-to-student ratio was about one to forty, a 280 hour contract did provide an hour or two a week for preparation. Now that the ratio is one per eighty, prep time is long gone, with almost every available hour devoted to tutorials, other contact hours, and grading. Preparation of tutorial materials is done, but on the TA's own time. Further, the demands of grading are so great that many of our contracts no longer pay TAs to attend the course's lectures. Since holding tutorials without attending lectures can be pedagogically disastrous, TAs now attend on their own time, another source of unpaid value for the University.

I have been a member of this University for more than forty years, as a student, alumnus, Professor, and now University Professor. Throughout I have always believed that the senior administration had the capacity to do the right thing even if it took them a while to get it. I am afraid that this last arbitrary action of your administration has shaken my conviction to the core. In the process of negotiating I thought there was the carrot and the stick. Thus far it is all the latter and no carrot in sight. Surely an administration that gets 40 % of its teaching done for an expenditure of 1.5 % of budget can reopen serious negotiations with an employee group that has shown remarkable forbearance in rendering unpaid labour because it had to be done. Until you reopen serious negotiations involving real give and take, I will be fighting the restructuring plan with all my energy and will be encouraging others to do the same.

Respectfully yours,

Richard Lee Professor of Anthropology

In response to Professor Lee's letter, GSC-er Leo Parascondola (CUNY Graduate School) posted this critique of some assumptions within Lee's letter about the nature of higher education in North America:

Hi all,

Many thanks to Daniel Kim for forwarding Richard Lee's letter of support for UT TA strikers. I have already forwarded this letter to the listserv of the Radical Caucus of MLA as an example of faculty resistance, noncompliance, and solidarity with the struggles of grad students and part-timers (other campus workers, of course, have always been victimized by systemic dependence upon cheap labor). The importance of his action cannot be overestimated.

One thing I question, however, is Lee's assumptions when he claims that the UofT administration violates its own responsibility to provide a "decent education and exercise moral leadership." Inside the domains of late capitalism and liberal pluralism, these concepts require interrogation. In my view (of necessity, briefly and reductively expressed), the responsibility of the UofT university administration... is to answer to their own Board of Trustees about the reliability of the product (educated, credentialed, skilled white-collar workers) they provide. How are they (or we) exercising "moral leadership" when we uncritically reproduce the professional and managerial leadership that creates the vast social inequality we see around us everywhere?

An educational institution dedicated to "moral leadership" would need to help students understand that 1) the economic/political systems are constructed so as to reproduce inequality, and 2) that capitalism is unreformable and requires radical change. Few of us at CUNY are waiting for "moral leadership" from the likes of new CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein or Board of Trustees Chair Herman Badillo who are minions of the current Mayor and Governor, but who, in any case, merely represent one side of "Tweedledum and Tweedle-dee" politics in New York City. Sadly, debt service to financial giants (not to Mom & Pop stockholders), a racket guaranteed by law and very profitable, strangles the city budget, and corporations and financial institutions exercise a wildly disproportionate influence in the formation of public policy. One wonders not if the public sector has been abandoned, but if there is a "public" sector at all.

Best,

Leo Parascondola, Graduate Center, CUNY Lehman College, CUNY

Responding to a version of this note posted by Parascondola to the email discussion list of the MLA's Radical Caucus, Richard Ohmann (Professor Emeritus of English, Wesleyan) made the following observations about Richard Lee's letter to Toronto administrators:

Leo--thanks for the letter and the question. I suppose Lee wanted to lay the kind of trip on the president that he thought the president might respond to; maybe Lee also believes the moral leadership bit. I agree with you that it's naive or worse (though of course a few university presidents, now and then, have taken courageous stands in public). Certainly we can't depend much on the conscience of individual administrators, who are structurally located so that they mainly have to do what they have to do. Our challenge is to be one of the forces that make them have to do something different. I don't know if this responds to your query; we could talk more. Solidarity. Dick

Gregory Meyerson (North Carolina St.), co-editor of the electronic journal, Cultural Logic, Radical Caucus activist, and member of the Workplace Editorial Collective, sent the following comment to the Radical Caucus list after reading Parascondola's and Ohmann's responses to Richard Lee's letter:

This letter once again... raises the issue of how best to support people battling the university. Assuming for a moment that universities do not serve the people but the accumulation process, is it a good idea tactically to construct an ideal university, which presumably existed either in some golden age or up until now (now, being in this case the moment where ta's strike) in order to butter up the president, or appeal to his/her better nature? in order to "turn" the admittedly ideological values against the institution itself?

Does anyone think this works? And doesn't this disable us in other ways, leading to rank opportunism? and doesn't opportunism gradually colonize all our public activity until we get to the point that "what we

really think" plays no role at all in what we do beyond private conversations with each other, drink in hand, bemoaning the rightward drift?

On 26 January, Patty Suppes (University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill) posted this message in partial response to an E-grad query about the potential role of current MLA President Linda Hutcheon (U of Toronto):

Would it be a good idea to ask Linda Hutcheon (in her capacity as Pres. of MLA) to issue some public statement of support for the U of Toronto strikers? Clearly, she must have some strong feelings about the issue.

I have been quiet for a while on this list, but I think I'll speak up. If the information we have so far about the strike is accurate, I can't seem how the MLA can avoid speaking up. It is so obviously unfair, and detrimental to the education of the students there. I think you should ask her to do so, and let her know that the GSC feels very strongly on this issue (although I'm sure she knows that already).

Patty Suppes

GSC President gregory Bezkorovainy quickly answered:

i already sent a letter to the president & provost at U of T identifying myself as the president of the GSC & urging them to resolve the strike amicably. if anyone (or everyone) else would do so, too, it could only help. i'll drop Linda a note to see if she'll do so on behalf of the MLA.

Late on 26 January, U of Toronto CUPE organizer and Strike Coordinator Stephan Dobson posted a direct call for support to the listserv of the GSC Steering Committee:

Greetings -

The University of Toronto administration tonight declared war on our union by once again bargaining in bad faith. The admin bargaining team returned to the table and offered us less than they had done before Christmas - including removing dental benefits, signing bonuses and so on from the table, but adding the threat that we have until Feb 1 to sign. On Feb 4, we are fired.

As if it wasn't clear enough, it is now more than obvious that the corporate right-wing U of T admin is attempting to destroy our union. We ask for any support you can provide; this includes contacting everyone, absolutely everyone, that you know with progressive leanings, including your former university graduate associations, labour groups, professors and so on. They are trying to take us down

Solidarity,

Stephan Dobson Strike Co-ordinator CUPE Local 3902, University of Toronto

On the morning of 27 January, gregory Bezkorovainy sent the following letter of support on behalf of the Graduate Student Caucus of MLA to the U of T administration:

Dear President Prichard, Provost Sedra, & Governor Rae:

As president of the Graduate Student Caucus of the Modern Language Association, I write to urge you, in the strongest possible terms, to negotiate in good faith with CUPE 3902 & its 2,500 members to reach an agreement satisfactory to all. Clearly, the exploitation of graduate student labor isn't the kind of thing you want the University of Toronto to be known for, & just as clearly, you should be able to see that graduate students who must pay more in tuition than they can earn as teaching assistants are indeed being exploited. Tuition remission is a staple of most relationships between graduate students & the colleges & universities that reap the benefits of their labor, & the University of Toronto ought not to be so regressive as to deny graduate students even this little relief, especially in light of the drastic increases in graduate student tuition at the University.

By locking out your graduate student TAs, by paying nonliving wages while charging full tuition, you send an unmistakable message to graduate students, the undergraduates they teach, & the parents of those undergraduates that the bottom line is more important than the education you provide, for given the burden of the increased tuition, many graduate students will have to seek supplementary employment just to make ends meet, thus prolonging their time to degree & decreasing their available time on campus for attending to their students.

No one--except, perhaps, comptrollers--wins when graduate students are exploited, & in the interest of fair treatment for all workers at the University of Toronto, in the interest of better education for graduate students & undergraduates, I hope you will make the ethically sound decision of negotiating with CUPE 3902 to reach an amicable, fair compromise to your labor dispute.

Peace,
 gregory Bezkorovainy
 president
 Graduate Student Caucus of the MLA

Victoria Smallman quickly posted back her approval of Bezkorovainy's letter with news of MLA President Linda Hutcheon's prospective role in the strike:

That's great, Greg! A fantastic letter!

....I should add that I've also been in touch with Linda, who tells me she has been putting pressure on the president and provost. I just wrote her back and suggested that a letter (something we could post on eGrad) would be well received by the grad student membership of the MLA.

V

Douglas Ivison (SSHRC Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Western Ontario) responding to Bezkorovainy, pointed out the importance of the Toronto strikers' demand for tuition remission:

I'm glad to see that the MLA GSC is taking an active interest in the U of T situation, and I think the letter is great. One observation, at some point greg writes something to the effect that tuition remission is the norm and that U of T is being regressive to deny this. I think it's important to note that, at least until very recently, tuition remission was virtually unheard of in Canada, as far as I know. Of course, tuition has been much less than in the USA, but I'm not sure why exactly this has been the case. My point is, that while tuition remission may seem perfectly normal and an exceptionable request to Americans, it is a

more 'radical' request in Canada. It's about time we started asking for it, but we shouldn't expect Canadian universities to grant it as easily as the American context might suggest, particularly considering the atrocious situation RE university funding in Ontario, and Canada in general.

Doug Ivison

Victoria Smallman, currently working full-time as a union organizer, posted the following news:

Here are two letters of support from the Canadian Association of University Teachers (my employer)--one sent to CUPE 3902 and the other to U of T President Prichard.

Keep those cards and letters coming!
In Solidarity, Vicky

To striking TAs at the University of Toronto:

January 27, 2000

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

On behalf of the 30,000 members of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, I want to express our solidarity with you in your strike against the University of Toronto.

We strongly support the stand you have taken for a fair and just settlement. The work provided by teaching assistants is absolutely essential but is terribly undervalued by the university administration. We note with alarm that the soaring cost of tuition means that most of your members now pay more in tuition than they receive in wages. Surely Canada's wealthiest university could afford to put a realistic offer on the table to address this pressing issue.

CAUT has also expressed its outrage over the university administration's plan to press professors, if the strike continues beyond February 4, to change the number and type of assignments and tests so that TA support would not be required. This means that even if the strike is settled, many TAs will be locked out for the rest of the term. We are absolutely appalled by this mean-spirited attack on your members. The members of CAUT stand solidly behind you. Your strength and determination are an inspiration.

In solidarity,

James L. Turk
Executive Director

And to the President of the University of Toronto:

Dear Professor Prichard:

On behalf of the 30,000 members of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, I want to register our support for the striking teaching assistants and student instructors at the University of Toronto. I also want to urge you, in the strongest possible terms, to return to negotiations, bargain in good faith, and address the legitimate demands of the union.

To date, the administration's response to the union's demand has been shameful. CAUT is particularly concerned about the administration's directive to "restructure" courses that would shift the work done by the striking teaching assistants onto faculty. This is a mean-spirited attempt to break the strike and the union, as well as a violation of the academic freedom of faculty. I call on you immediately to withdraw these plans.

We believe the union's demand for some relief from skyrocketing tuition fees is legitimate. Such relief is provided to other campus workers, and is not unprecedented in other institutions. As graduate students at Canada's wealthiest university, your teaching assistants, at the very least, deserve parity with other universities in Canada, including York University.

We urge the administration to return to the bargaining table, address the real issues, and show some good faith on the issue of tuition relief for student teaching assistants and instructors.

Yours sincerely,

James L. Turk Executive Director

Later on 27 January, Kyla Wazana Tompkins (Stanford, Ph.D. candidate, Modern Thought and Literature) sent to the discussion list a compelling letter of support for the striking TAs. The letter reflects a deeply held and very personal sense of betrayal by the Toronto administration. Here it is in part:

Dear Sirs,

...As an alumni of the University of Toronto (MA ' 98) and a graduate student and teacher myself at Stanford University, I am shocked and saddened that the administration of the University of Toronto has failed to come to the bargaining table in the spirit of generosity that these workers deserve.

The day-to-day teaching operations of the University of Toronto, like other major research institutions, is predicated on the sincere efforts of dedicated teaching assistants. To fail to offer them decent wages and benefits, not to mention tuition waivers, is an insult to their work and certainly besmirches the name of an otherwise fine institution.... As a member of the Modern Languages Association... I would like to express my unwavering support and solidarity for the striking teaching assistants at the University of Toronto. I hope that you will reconsider your bargaining position and recognize the fine work of these students and teachers by acceding to their demands....

Sincerely yours,

Kyla Wazana Tompkins

A member of the MLA's Radical Caucus received this personal message from his brother-in-law in Toronto:

This is quite an interesting one here. It's pretty clear from what I've read in the local papers that U of T is paying their teaching assistants significantly less than York Univ. (the other big school in Toronto). All the post-secondary institutions in Canada are horribly underfunded, but U of T is the richest of them all.

The U of T recently settled relatively easily with faculty and support staff. But in this instance U of T is really playing hardball, lots of very aggressive attacks on the TAs in the press, etc.. Why? My guess is that their agenda is to get rid of TAs entirely, revamp all their courses so there are no more TAs in the system. Interesting. I wonder what faculty will say when they discover they actually have to do all the work the TAs did? Anyway, I pass their picket line every day on my way to work. This is no weather to be picketing!

The Canadian novelist, Margaret Atwood, a Toronto alumna, joined the fray when she sent this letter to the U of T administration. It was posted to E-grad by Victoria Smallman.

27 January 2000

Dear Dr. Rob Pritchard:

I am writing to you on a painful subject: the University of Toronto's treatment of its Teaching Assistants. As information has accumulated on my doorstep over the past few days, I have become more and more concerned.

I attended the U. of T. in the late 50s. I got a dandy education there. I have since allowed my voice and image to be used, extolling its virtues. I have coughed up repeatedly, with money, time, and my physical presence, for various sectors in it. Until now I have always been pleased to do these things.

But as I see it, the treatment of the Teaching Assistants is unconscionable. These young people... are being starved and bullied. Their tuition is roughly a thousand dollars more than they can earn through their teaching jobs, and they can hardly get lots of other jobs because they need to study. I have been a graduate student. It's not easy, and it's a lot harder when you don't have money. The cost of living has gone up, the wages have gone down in relation to it, and who is profiting?

Now the university is refusing to negotiate with these bright, ambitious young people -- the future leaders of our society -- and is threatening to fire them unless they cave in before February 1. Not only that, it is loading the work done by them onto faculty members who are working flat-out as it is. Many fear this is just a prelude to some new form of thuggish, exploitative wage-slavery.

This is a terrible advertisement for the University of Toronto. It's terrible public relations. If I feel this way, so will a lot of other alumni and alumnae when the hat gets passed to us again, as it so inevitably does. It's a terrible advertisement to high-quality professors the U. of T. might wish to attract. And it is a terrible advertisement also to any who are considering attending the University of Toronto as graduate students. Surely we want to attract the best and the brightest, not just the richest! But if you're smart but poor, and need to teach to get through, the U. of T. is certainly not going to be your choice at present.

I have a suggestion. Disregard those on your Board who may have advocated grinding these intelligent young people underfoot like plague rats because they belong to a union - after all, the university has negotiated with unions in the past - and go back to the bargaining table. If you can't offer cash down, offer tuition cuts, as York and McMaster have done. Recognize the fact that the human body requires nourishment. Reach a fair settlement.

Then, if you are really that strapped for cash, go to your faithful alumni and alumnae. Do a special Teaching Assistant Drive. A lot of us would much rather see our contributions going towards quality education, fairness and equity, and the provision of a moral and just model of civic behaviour, than

towards some chunk of rock with our name on it. Such a funding appeal letter would be one I and many more like me would be happy to sign.

Until then, I remain,

Yours in shock, horror and dismay,

Margaret Atwood

Also on 27 January: from Toronto striker Joseph Zebrowski came the following disturbing news. (February 4 was the deadline used by the Toronto administration to threaten all TA strikers who had not accepted the university's bargaining package with dismissal.) In response to increased militancy from strikers and their supporters on campus, Toronto administration calls local police onto the campus to break up student rallies.

Here is the latest shocking development in the U of T bargaining strategy - after 300 TAs occupied Hart House while the president, Rob Prichard was giving a teaching award to a course taught by scab labour, he appears to have launched a police crackdown on student activists at U of T... your letters are more important than ever - please hurry, Feb. 4th is close at hand!

In Solidarity,
Joseph E. Zebrowski

----- Forwarded message -----

Multiple Choice U turns heavy-handed: U of T Police launch crackdown on undergraduate students rallying in support of fired teaching assistants. Students told to leave university property.

Shortly after 12 noon today, campus police broke up a rally of undergraduate students... demonstrating to show their opposition to the University of Toronto's plans to fire the teaching assistants who were locked out on January 7th. They also called on the UofT to refund their tuition....Speakers at the rally said the firing of teaching assistants and the elimination of the work TAs do, including written assignments, labs, and tutorials groups, will render students' education valueless when they graduate. They called on the university to refund their tuition with the slogan "we paid for quality education, not multiple choice education."

Shortly after the event was underway, a team of campus police... demanded to know if the students were against "restructuring", the U of T's term for eliminating teaching assistants. When the students responded that they were opposed, they were told, "then you are with the TAs - get out". Those present say that they were ordered by campus security to leave U of T property. Campus security videotaped the students present at the rally. Student leaders contacted after the event declined to speak on the record citing an increase in harassment by campus police. One leader said that this intervention by campus police was "an unprecedented violation of the free speech that is the tradition of universities."

Within minutes of each other (Sunday, 30 Jan 2000 19:18 and 19:32), Toronto strikers and CUPE 3902 activists Paul Tsang and Holly Baines contact E-grad via Victoria Smallman with news that a settlement has been reached. So far, so good.

It seems a tentative agreement has been reached with the TA's Union (CUPE 3902). There will be a general membership mtg Tuesday night, where details will be discussed and a ratification vote proposed; if the vote goes ahead, it will be held immediately following the mtg and into Wednesday, where the membership will decide whether or not the deal is acceptable.

Paul

As of 6pm this evening CUPE 3902 reached a tentative agreement with the employer....Thanx to all those who supported the striking TAs!! Until the union has reached a decision about the tentative agreement all Campus Strike Support Committee actions will be suspended ... this means no 8am picket tomorrow.

Holly Baines -- Campus Strike Support Committee Info Group

An E-grad post from Douglas Ivison sounds the first critical notes about the settlement:

I've just heard that the TAs at the University of Toronto have voted 62% in favour of accepting the administration's latest offer. From what I gather it wasn't much of an offer, basically the administration's original offer, and the issues the union wanted to discuss were not dealt with at all. I gather that people voted in favour out of a sense of resignation and despair, not to mention fear of losing their TA positions for this term, if not forever.

On 3 February 2000, Dan Vukovich sends this negative appraisal, authored by Toronto striker Ken Mackendrick, to the listserv of the Marxist Literary Group of MLA. [Mackendrick later substantially revised his estimate of the final resolution of the strike. Look below for those revisions taken from a private email exchange with the editor. -- LP]

I am forwarding a recent update about the strike/resolution at U of Toronto. I have talked to Ken, author of the post and U of T union member, and he says that they could still use letters of support, phone calls, and the like. I would think letters, if not a group MLG one, asking the admin to re-hire the 50+ fired strikers would be appropriate.

From CUPE 3902 activist, Ken M, more details from Toronto:

"Here's the deal..."

After 4 days of closed-door discussions a tentative agreement was reached...The contents of the "deal" were not disclosed until the general meeting last Tuesday. Part of the "agreement" held that the matter be resolved before Thursday - putting severe time constraints on possible discussion. The administration had shacked us in a hall that seats 600, knowing full well that the union has 2400 members. So the meeting wasn't off to a good start from the beginning.

After an hour so of struggle and confusion, the meeting was moved to convocation hall, which seats about 1800. There were probably around 1000 people present. Lacking microphones, the deal was disclosed. Basically, it is the same deal offered in Jan (about 2% increase in wage, dental, 4 appointments instead of 3...), with a few extras thrown in - a lump sum signing bonus (\$400+ / person) a position on a few funding committees and some back-to-work protocol.

The losers: the 50+ people who got canned one week into the strike; they have to apply for a bursary based on financial need and everyone who wanted some sort of tuition relief (i.e. 90% of the union). There was a ratification vote, which passed after a 4 hour screaming match (most of the people expressed outrage - directed at the negotiating committee). The vote on the agreement then took place Tuesday evening and Wednesday. It passed, with 60% or so for the deal and 40% against the deal. HALF of the membership did not vote.

My thoughts...

We were played by the administration right from the beginning. Not once did we ever move out what could reasonably be predicted by the administration. The admin called us "thugs," and we locked Prichard in a room for 3 hours. The admin set a deadline, and we jumped to get a deal before it came up. They acted as though they were going to break the union, and we acted as though we could be broken.

Ultimately (in my mind), the administration wanted to test the political atmosphere of the university (they did); depoliticize the campus by siphoning off energy from general interests (tuition, programming, classroom conditions) to particular interests (those of the TAs); drain the resources and energy of the union; split the political alignments of the student body, faculty and union membership by taking up a polemical position (for or against tuition relief); and weaken the confidence of the union in its own leadership by offering something that 51%+ of the membership would go for. They managed to succeed in every single one of these goals.

In mourning and retrospect

The Union lacked undergraduate and faculty support - largely because the demands of the union were for wage increases or tuition waivers for TAs. Although the union supports the interests and demands of the undergrad and grad union, we were not effective or powerful enough to pursue these interests through out withdrawal of labour. Perhaps we should have demanded that tuition waivers be put in place not just for TAs, but undergraduates and graduates as well.

The union leadership (and membership) was unprepared - politically and administratively - to secure crucial support right from the start. The membership desired a better contract, but did not have the resolve to demand it....The most tragic of the consequences is the internal infighting now present in the union. A majority of the membership voted "yes" out of fear (my assumption) - fear of decertification (a present threat from the provincial government) and a fear of making conditions worse for everyone involved (except the admin). Large portions of the membership hold the bargaining committee responsible for the "weak" agreement. In effect, almost the entire membership has been demoralized - the bargaining team are left feeling guilty and the membership betrayed.

I wish I had better news.

"disaster triumphant"

ken

*Vukovich sends to the MLG listserv a less pessimistic appeal for additional support from CUPE 3902
Strike Coordinator Stephan Dobson:*

As you are probably by now aware, after our call for assistance went out the province called both parties back to the bargaining table and as a result of negotiations, a tentative agreement was ratified by our membership on Wednesday last (62.4% in favour; 37.6% against; 1233 voting out of approx. 2300). The turnout for this ratification was the largest in our Local's 25-year history.

While the agreement does address some of our Local's concerns, the main issues of wage parity with other area universities as well as tuition relief were not adequately addressed. The university admin here has appointed a task force on graduate funding, so we will see, I suppose. Nonetheless, many of our members, myself included, are distrustful of both the administration and their task forces (there have been about 3 this decade, with no implementation of findings). Myself and others on the Strike Committee also feel that a fundamental issue of the strike was not addressed, namely, that U of T insists on treating TA appointments as a supplement to funding rather than as work.

A letter of support sent to the administration, perhaps censuring them for their recent behaviour (lock-out; "restructuring"/firing our members; threatened expulsions for an occupation) as well as calling upon them to deal fairly with grad students... would be greatly appreciated.

Many of our members are now feeling demoralized; your support in this matter helps. The strike has been a bitter one, and support like yours prevented a hostile administration from breaking our Local. On behalf of the Strike Committee, we thank you.

Yours in solidarity,

Stephan Dobson
Strike Co-ordinator
Canadian Union of Public Employees
Local 3902, University of Toronto

Dated 15 March 2000, here are Mackendrick's revised comments from a private email exchange with the editor of this feature. Rather than "disaster triumphant," the spirit of his remarks seems to be "the struggle continues."

Well, this is where I've changed my mind. I do not count the strike organizers and strike participants responsible for what I perceive to be the failure to get a good deal. Given the severity of the crackdown by the administration, they performed extraordinarily well under quite difficult circumstances - holding together an entire series of contradictory interests (TAs with unique and divergent circumstances).

The other part, I don't hold the bargaining committee responsible for the final deal, which was by no means a good one. First, the administration had no reason to offer a better deal. Second, they had set up a funding task force (to address the question of tuition) right in the middle of the strike, which alleviated some pressure on the administration to give into our demands for tuition relief. Third, the union was (is?) facing the real possibility of decertification by the provincial government - such an "outside" threat constituted a real danger to union members concerned about the overall survival of the union. And finally, the bargaining committee probably did underestimate the strength of the union and the memberships determination to get a good deal. However, if the first of this list is true, then it doesn't matter whether at all whether they underestimated our strength and determination. Together, these elements proved to be decisive in the hesitancy of the union to persist, and strengthened the resolve the administration not to waiver on tuition relief.