

Greetings everyone,

Tonight, in a very large membership meeting, all three units of CUPE 3903 voted not to send the employer's final offer to a formal ratification vote. Overall, the vote was 70% against sending the offer to a ratification vote. The union executive then decided to call the strike, given that it had a strike mandate in hand from earlier in February. That means that, as of Tuesday March 3 at 12:01am, CUPE 3903 is on strike. Hopefully the employer will see the wisdom of returning quickly to the bargaining table in light of this decision to bargain a fair agreement.

Cancellation of classes: The University's Senate Executive decided on February 27, 2015 that all academic activities, including classes and assignment submissions, are cancelled until the strike is settled. There are a few exceptions so check the Senate document below. There is no way to know how long the strike might last. In the meantime, even though it is difficult, I strongly recommend that you take this opportunity to review course material covered up to now, catch up with readings if you've fallen behind, and even read ahead, and continue to work on your assignments. Although due dates are frozen, course work will be due when we return to classes. Keeping up with work will make the transition back to classes a little less shocking.

In the 2008 strike, some students reported to me that they had professors who intended to continue teaching. I have heard from some students already that some profs are suggesting that their assignments are still due. It is important for you to know that the University Senate has expressly forbidden faculty to continue with classes, whether on or off campus. You cannot be required to attend any classes or to submit work. If you have a professor that is saying they will continue with classes, you should send them the Senate policy (the link is below), and you should also inform the University Secretariat (info.univsec@yorku.ca). If you have questions or need advice about this, please feel free to contact me as well.

Making up for Class Time: Depending on the length of the strike, there may need to be adjustments to the length of the term and the assignment structure of courses, but we will cross that bridge when we come to it. It is too early to know what kinds of adjustments might be needed, but we will work to keep you informed of developments.

Picket Lines: Picket lines will go up at all the entrances to the university beginning on Wednesday, March 4, from 7:30am – 3:30pm. These picket lines will likely run Monday – Friday. These will significantly delay people from crossing into campus. Drivers for both TTC and Go Transit are unionized and will not cross picket lines, so they will drop people off at the edge of campus. If you must come to campus, expect delays and remain patient.

Sources of information: As in any strike, there are (at least) two sides to the dispute, and it is important to consider the arguments being made from each perspective. For

that, see the following:

- CUPE 3903's main website: www.3903.cupe.ca
- CUPE 3903's bargaining page: <http://3903.cupe.ca/bargaining/>
- CUPE 3903 on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/CUPE3903>
- York University's Negotiations Updates: <http://fr.info.yorku.ca/category/cupe-3903/>
- York Senate Policy on cancellation of classes during strike: <http://secretariat.info.yorku.ca/files/Declaration-of-a-Disruption-March-3-Final.pdf>
- **Twitter:** you can follow various hashtags, including #BetterYork, #YorkUStrike, and #YorkU, but be critical about the info here; lots of unfounded rumours spread here.

Some Context:

I realize that not all of us will see this strike in the same way, nor do I expect us all to agree. However, let me provide a 'Labour Studies' perspective on the dispute, and on how work is done in the University. TAs and Contract Faculty are central to the delivery of education at universities, and the University increasingly relies on their relatively lower-cost labour to deal with a growing undergraduate student body without having to pay for more expensive full-time faculty. In other words, if the university doesn't want to massively increase class size (which is already too big, in my view), and doesn't want to pay for more tenured faculty to teach smaller classes, the 'solution' is to rely on TAs and contract faculty. This is a trend throughout North America.

Both groups of workers experience real problems with their economic and job security. TAs are *both* students and workers, and their employer controls one of their major costs (tuition) and therefore can erode any wage increase with a tuition increase at will. Given the intensity of graduate study (believe me, it's intense) it is not feasible to seek other employment on top of a TAship and still be able to make progress in one's academic work. This puts many graduate students in an impossible position, having to go into debt, take on another job even though it diminishes their ability to study and teach, or live at or under the poverty line. Low wages for TAs affect current undergrad students (financial pressure on teaching staff leads them take on other work and prevents them from focusing more fully on either their teaching or their studies) and future graduate students (some of you, perhaps) by making graduate education less affordable and accessible, particularly for those who don't come from well-off families. As graduate education increasingly becomes required for a 'good job', its affordability is something that more and more undergrad students need to worry about, even if in the short term it seems like your interests are in opposition.

As for contract faculty, these are people the university relies upon to teach courses on a contract basis. This means that contract faculty must apply every semester for each course they teach, no matter how long they've worked at York. There is no guarantee

that any given contract faculty member will get work, and so they do not have much job security. They are a flexible workforce that the university relies on to fill larger and larger parts of the curriculum because they want to limit the numbers of full-time, tenured faculty (like myself) they hire, not only because they are more expensive, but also because they involve a longer term commitment (an entire working life, basically). This means that many contract faculty who are qualified to be tenured professors are stuck in temporary and unstable work, because there are not enough tenured jobs for all who want them. They often end up teaching different courses every year, and so are always having to prepare new course materials from scratch, making it difficult to improve their courses year to year. They take on many courses, often at multiple universities, doing one course at York, another at McMaster, another at Brock, etc., in order to create the equivalent of one full-time job. It is pretty difficult to build a life on this basis. Just to put some numbers on this, there are about 1450 members of YUFA (the faculty association) and 1,029 CUPE 3903 contract faculty members – and their numbers grow every year. These issues were discussed by full-time faculty (including me) in this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YESzKmOx_BY

All of this takes place in the context of declining government funding for post-secondary education, which places pressure on individual university administrations to 'do more with less' and to place a higher proportion of the cost onto you, the students, and to make those of us in the university community fight with each other over scarce resources. In other words, it's not just York that is experiencing these tensions. Teaching assistants at the University of Toronto are on strike now, the University of Windsor faculty have been on strike twice in the past six years, their admin and janitorial staff as well, Acadia University faculty were on strike twice in the last 5 years and came very close this year, and in the past ten years, TAs at McMaster, University of Toronto, York, and the admin staff at McMaster have been on strike to name just a few. Another aggravating factor in each of these strikes -- as in this one -- was the way the funding that universities *do* get is distributed amongst the different members of the university community. The argument has been in all these cases that University Administrations spend far too much money on admin salaries rather than on things that really help students, staff and faculty get on with the work of learning.

The point of all this is to encourage you to think about the broader context in which your university education is offered. As I said, I expect that many of you have very different perspectives on this, which is entirely fine and which I respect. I don't expect you to take any particular position on the strike, but I do hope you will think carefully about the broader issues at stake, and what it means about the kind of work and labour relations that are becoming increasingly typical in our economy. I welcome your questions and comments.

What you can do:

- **Write York's President:** Use the form on the Better York website (<http://betteryork.ca/help-us/>) or email the president on your own

(president@yorku.ca) to let the employer know they should get back to the bargaining table.

- **Write the Premier and other politicians:** It is the Province of Ontario that decides how much funding universities get, and their chronic underfunding of the university system has led to both your rising tuition fees and increased use of precarious workers as teachers. Tell them they should intervene to inject more funding into the system
 - Premier Wynne:
<https://correspondence.premier.gov.on.ca/en/feedback/default.aspx>
 - List of MPPs by riding:
http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/members/members_current.do?locale=en
- **Attend the March 3 Rally:** The union will be rallying at the front gate of the university (on Keele) at 11:30am, and all supporters are invited to attend. This is a good learning opportunity for Work and Labour Studies students as well.

I will continue to be in touch as events develop. Please don't hesitate to email at stephr@yorku.ca if you have questions or concerns.

Best to all,
Stephanie Ross
Program Coordinator
Work & Labour Studies Program