

The Agitator

A Bulletin for the Student Left

November 11, 2008

SOLIDARITY WITH THE STRIKE AT YORK

CUPE 3903 at York University is on strike. The union represents 3400 workers on campus, including teaching assistants, contract faculty, and research and graduate assistants. Everyone who supports lower tuition fees, better working conditions and better funding of education has something to gain from a 3903 victory.

The issues are wages, tuition fees, and job security. Like all other graduate students who work for a university, grads in CUPE 3903 are paid well below the poverty line. TAs earn less than \$17,000 a year while graduate assistants earn under \$10,000 a year. They still have to pay \$5484 a year in tuition while living in one of the most expensive cities in Canada. That is why the union is demanding an eleven percent raise over two years. The employer wants to pay 3, 3.25 and 3 over three years even though this is below inflation. Contract faculty are paid \$14,000 per course, teaching 2.5 courses or less a year. Full-time contract faculty make less than half of a tenured-track prof - about 35,000 a year. Some contract faculty have been working for over twenty years on four or eight month contracts, reapplying for jobs every time their contract is up. Yet, over half of all courses at York are taught by members of CUPE 3903.

It is true that York TAs and GAs have the best wages in Canada for their positions, but this isn't a reason not to demand wage increases. The wages are still below the poverty line and as student workers, they are barred from being employed anywhere else while they are full-time York students. If they do work elsewhere, York removes their full-time student status, their work

and any other funding. Furthermore, increasing wages and other benefits at York sets a precedent that other unions can use to pressure their employers to increase wages.

How the union keeps tuition down

Grad students employed by the university pay tuition fees like all other students. CUPE 3903 wants the reinstatement of "post-residency fees" which were eliminated in the mid-1990s amidst the deepest cuts to social spending in Canadian history under the federal Liberals. Post-residency fees lower tuition for grad students who are done their coursework and not using many university resources. Grads not taking courses are paying thousands of dollars for what amounts to a library card. Winning post-residency fees will produce downward pressure on tuition fees, just like CUPE 3903 was able to do in 2001 when it won tuition indexation. Tuition indexation ensures that rising tuition doesn't result in pay cuts. This keeps fees down because universities who raise their fees too high above York's will have lower student enrollments as a consequence.

A two year contract

The union is also fighting for a two year contract to expire in 2010. Campus-based CUPE-Ontario locals, both white and blue collar, are working towards coordinated bargaining in 2010 by getting contracts to expire that year. This is a first step towards province-wide bargaining like teachers and staff in OPSEU have achieved in Ontario's colleges. This strategy will help unions put massive pressure on the universities and

government to introduce sector-wide bargaining so there are standards across Ontario for wages, benefits and so on. This province-wide strategy is necessary because unions are not up against individual universities. Ontario university administrations already work together in the Council of Ontario Universities, and strategize ways of defeating unions and the student movement.

What is the administration's agenda?

The boards of governors that control the finances of Canada's universities could work with student and labour unions to increase post-secondary education funding. But they have not. That's because these boards consist of a majority of unelected members who are mainly executives and elites from the business world. They are committed - ideologically and financially - to the project of turning the university into a privately-funded institution free from any government (and democratic) control. That's why they are happy to see government funding decrease and tuition fees increase. That's why they have pushed unions into strikes at York, Carleton, Saskatchewan, Windsor at Brandon in the past year, all the while contracting out to anti-union companies like Aramark, Sodexo and Coke.

They have shown time and again that they will only respond to the demands and concerns of students, faculty and campus workers when we organize in unions and around campaigns like the recent CFS-Ontario mobilization to Drop Fees. That's why students have an interest in seeing CUPE 3903 win a fair and just contract.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- send a message of solidarity to 3903hq@gmail.com
- come out to the picket lines and show support
- encourage your student/labour union to back the strike, and...
- organize transport from your campus to the picket line
- poster this flyer on your campus (get it at socialist.ca/agitator)



**subscribe to
The Agitator**
socialist.ca/agitator

The Agitator is an initiative
of the International Socialists