

Striking trends: A closer look

Considering how St. Thomas faculty was the most recent university to go on strike this year, does this “strike trend” seem to be more common than students think?

by Lauren Kennedy

What do the University of Prince Edward Island, Dalhousie University, Acadia University, and St. Thomas have in common? Besides being well known institutions of higher learning, they have all (within the past eight years) have had members of their establishments go on strike.

With two of these universities alone having gone on strike this academic year, it raises the question if there is a growing university strike trend in Atlantic Canada.

However, Director of Publication and Communications from the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), Lyse Huot, disagrees with the idea of a strike trend.

“There is no trend in faculty strikes. The fact that two universities had a faculty strike is a coincidence. Each strike is different – the issues, the players, etc,” she says.

Each strike is different and not one seems to be the same, but with each university group that does go on strike, it makes students question what is really going on. In some cases, there are issues left unresolved by the first strike and it leaves room for another possible strike to follow.

Strikes are only settled when both parties reach an agreement on a contract or whatever the main issue of the dispute is about. Sometimes it is solved through negotiating between parties, other times a mediator needs to be brought in, and in some situations binding arbitration is sought to solve the dispute.

Acadia University has had two previous labour disputes in the past between faculty and administration. The first being in February/March of 2004 and lasted 13 days, according to Scott Roberts, the Senior Director of Communication and Public Affairs, and the second was in October of 2007.

The major issues in the most recent strike of the Acadia faculty was the issue of equity in hiring practices, salary, and benefits as they were the only faculty not to have a dental plan in Canada.

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“The difficulty that we were having was that everyone was on a different salary scale. Historically, our contracts have favoured one group over another. We were having a real hard time convincing our employer to get each group to have the same thing,” said Peter Williams, current President of the Acadia University Faculty Association (AUFA).

The AUFA represents a number of people including all academic staff, teaching professors, academic librarians, and instructors.

By the end of the 18-day long strike, both sides reached a negotiated settlement and agreed the best way to move forward with their issues was with the assistance of a provincially-appointed mediator. The result for students was that four additional teaching days were added to the end of the term.

According to Williams, he feels the best way to resolve any conflict is through the powers of negotiating.

“It’s so important, in my mind, to avoid things like binding arbitration or what not. You always get a much better situation if all

parties can agree on something as opposed to giving up on some kind of agreement and getting someone else to decide for you,” he explained. “Inevitably, what happens then is that one party is happy, the other is not, and that’s not a good go-forward basis.”

St. Thomas University was the most recent faculty to go on strike this academic year with their work stoppage lasting from the time the faculty was locked out on December 27 of 2007 to the time when students finally got back to class on February 5 of this year. The semester for St. Thomas students was extended by 11 days.

The faculty’s main issues of conflict were workload and salary and the fact that they were the first faculty in Canada to have been locked out before a strike actually happened.

They went through two mediators and finally arbitration. The arbitration idea was suggested before but it was long before the faculty took the advice of the mediator. It ended with a joint application to seek binding arbitration. With the advice from a mediator, the parties sought binding arbitration with their collective agreements and together, they negotiated a back-to-work protocol.

The decision to go to arbitration eventually ended the strike so that students would be able to get back to the classroom, but it did not fully solve the issues between the faculty and administration. Having been in a similar situation with his university, Williams believes this was not the ideal solution for both parties.

“The difficulty that I see is that it’s quite pragmatic in that for a long time, students were out of classes and everyone seemed anxious to get the situation resolved. The concern now is what is going to happen next time because there will inevitably be some serious challenges created as a result of them failing to come to an agreement this time, which can lead to perpetual finger pointing.”

Simply put, when members of the university community decide to go on strike, it is because they are unhappy with something, whether it be with a clause in their contract or something else. But while parties are deciding and choosing to strike, where does that leave students? For the most part, they are kept in relative

darkness about what is going on between negotiating parties, only becoming informed when an e-mail appears in their inbox.

The administration at St. Thomas kept students informed through this manner. It seemed to some that every day, there were e-mails being sent out from the administration or the students’ union members attempting to keep students informed as best as they could. Because the Faculty Association of the University of St. Thomas (FAUST) members were unable to log in to their e-mail accounts, information was posted on their union website explaining their side of the story.

“Our website is a vehicle for delivering information to our members but also to our students and interested members of the community. Students deserve to hear both sides of the issue in order to understand it. Since the lockout began, students have been getting the administration’s side of the story,” explained Jeanette Gaudet, who spoke on behalf of FAUST. “Students are technologically savvy, so the most efficient way of presenting the faculty’s concerns was through the webpage.”

Students are stuck in the middle when a strike happens and it seems they are the ones who are either benefiting or losing from what the parties negotiate. Williams feels that it is up to the students to decide how to deal with the idea of a strike.

“To a large extent, it depends on how they [the students] both collectively and individually respond to the situation. In my mind it’s a rather interesting learning experience that could be taken advantage of. At Acadia, we had students who made movies about it, walking around and interviewing people, making projects and turning the strike into an educational experience,” Williams described. “However, it is true that some students will be caught in the middle. Students that happen to be there when that process occurred do experience some of the negative consequences but ultimately the process maintains the overall quality of the institution.”

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Is STU really back to normal?

Three weeks after the month-long STU strike has ended, students share what they have learned from the experience.

by Naomi Osborne

It’s been three weeks since STU students have been back in class, and even though everything may seem “back to normal”, the reality is that the general feeling on campus has changed.

It’s not just students’ attitudes towards the professors that have changed, but towards the administration as well. Some students feel as though they will never get back the month of education they lost and feel they are still paying for it.

Second year student and proctor in Harrington Hall, David Turner says that there are better things he could have been doing for that month rather than waiting around for the strike to end.

“I was here for a month proctoring while I could have been back at home in Woodstock working,” said Turner.

The main concern of students seems to be how much money they lost in tuition and how much extra they have spent just on living expenses.

Jeff Cyr, a fourth year student, shared his thoughts on how the strike has affected him.

“The biggest effect the strike had on me was that I had to spend a lot more money on extra food during the month when I could have been home,” said Cyr.

The university is now telling students they will receive compensation for what they have been through. The Committee on Student Compensation said in an e-mail to all STU students that there will be two different types of compensation for students.

The first type of compensation requires students to fill out an application form stating what they need compensation for and to provide receipts. Each application will be considered on an individual basis determined by “out-of-pocket expenses.”

Examples of things students could submit could be flight cancellations, medical reasons, or even expired visas. Complaints of spending money on food, rent, or bills were not accepted because that is a normal expense that would have been there even if the strike had not happened.

more of a general one, where every full-time student will receive adequate financial compensation.

“The general compensation for full-time students will be determined pending the completion of the arbitration hearing with the Faculty Association and the decision of the arbitrator... Until the ramifications of the collective agreements are known, it is impossible for the university to set a general compensation amount for students,” was the explanation given by the Committee on Student Compensation in their e-mail to students.

Unfortunately, this means full-time students will not know when or even how much money they will be receiving from the university, perhaps until the end of the term. For those students who sent in applications, the deadline was February 22.

Students like Brad Baker are looking forward to the compensation because he says he has really felt the financial blow.

“It burned a hole in my pocket; I definitely lost a lot of money,” said Baker.

Some students have different perspectives

on the strike. Andrew Kelly is a fourth year journalism student and his feeling is that professors failed to consider the students in the negotiations.

“I realized from what I read about the strike that the professors were only doing it for themselves and not for the students,” said Kelly. “We were put on the backburner and that’s unfortunate.”

Kelly is also a graduating this year and says that it was frustrating not knowing if he would be able to graduate when he planned.

“It’s good to know where people’s priorities lie,” said Kelly.

Some students even say that this experience made them realize the truth about the professors.

“The teachers are cheap and they don’t care about the students. They are just there for a paycheck,” said Turner.

It has been a difficult transition for STU students to get back into the groove, but for the most part, people are beginning to realize they will have to work on getting through the rest of the term.

