

The Agitator

Bulletin for the Student Left

Carleton University, September 11 2007

THEIR FIGHT IS OUR FIGHT

At Carleton University, CUPE 2424, representing over 700 staff members, has now been on strike for over a week. According to both the union and the administration, a settlement does not seem close. How did this happen? The last contract expired in July, and bargaining began in the first week of June. The administration dragged its feet, forcing CUPE 2424 to ask for conciliation. This failed, forcing the union into a strike position.

What are the issues?

CUPE 2424 is asking for very reasonable demands on a wide range of issues. That is why the union won a ballot 94% in favour of strike action after conciliation failed in mid-August. These include fair wage increases, workload, union representation during disciplinary actions.

The administration originally offered 1.5%, 1.75% and 2% wage increases over 2007-09. Almost all other Carleton workers received wage increases above 3%. CUPE 2424 proposed 3.25%, 3.25% and 3.5% over three years, which is not far off the weighted average wage increases for unions in universities: 3.6%, 3.3% and 3.1%

Workload is an issue that affects students and workers alike. In 1987 17,393 students were served by 426 academic support staff. Last year, 24,085 students were served by 411. Since the 1990s, overall staff has not increased in proportion to student enrollment, despite many new services and departments. CUPE 2424 has not asked for more staff, but the administration refuses to consider excessive workload grievable

under the collective agreement.

The administration refuses to consider the union's right to have representation during disciplinary actions. Other important issues are also unresolved.

Precedent?

There is precedent for this mess. In the fall of 2006, the administration dragged its feet in negotiations with faculty (CUASA), TAs and contract instructors (CUPE 4600). Despite tough talk from the university, settlements were reached shortly before the strike deadlines, in the face of overwhelming strike votes and a strong show of student-worker unity. As in the case of CUPE 2424, the university deliberately allowed negotiations to continue through the summer and into the school year. No doubt, this is an employer tactic designed to turn students against faculty, contract instructors, staff and other students (TAs).

The University is guilty

Yet, how does the university justify its intransigence towards CUPE 2424 when tuition fees are also climbing? Where is all the money going? In addition, over the decades, many formerly unionized jobs have been lost at Carleton by contracting out services to profit-driven corporations like Aramark.

The Board of Governors Chair David Dunn showed the university's true intentions last week when he demanded BOG student rep and CUSA President Shelley Melanson to step down from her position on the board. Her crime: raising serious concerns over the university's handling of the dispute. Fortunately, Melanson is not stepping down for what Dunn called "anti-university" remarks.

The only anti-university people at Carleton are those running it. Faculty, staff and academic workers have faced endless and unnecessary hurdles in their quest for a fair deal. Students are being hit with increasing tuition fees at a university where services and education are suffering precisely because of the lack of respect for workers.

Student solidarity counts

Students need to show support by demanding a fair settlement and walking the picket line whenever they can. As the old union saying goes, "the longer the picket line, the shorter the strike." The more support students show for CUPE 2424, the more pressure we can place on the university. This can force the university to end the strike. They hold the purse strings and they can end this at any time.

Another University is Possible

The ill-will at the bargaining table, the increase in tuition fees, the attacks on student groups, and the contracting out of campus services and jobs to profit-driven corporations are not unique to Carleton. This is pan-Canadian trend stretching from the university to the neoliberal agendas of the provincial and federal governments. It is the workers and students - the genuine campus community - that can turn this around. CUPE 2424's fight is the frontline of a bigger battle for a well-funded, high quality and affordable post-secondary education. This can only be achieved by getting organized and fighting back.

See you on the picket line!

The Agitator is an initiative of the International Socialists on several university and college campuses. It was created to offer a forum for the student left, and act as a collective organizer to help build a stronger student movement against neo-liberalism, war and oppression. Anyone can contribute and readers are encouraged to get involved, and help distribute the paper. If you are interested in writing, editing or distributing *The Agitator*, please get in touch with us:

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We can be found at the following campuses: Carleton, UOttawa, Trent, UVic, Langara, UofT, Ryerson. Help build the network!