

CLASSroom

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A Decade of Canadian Education Workers' Struggle

This past decade has afforded us considerable insight into the various labour struggles taking place across Canadian campuses. By emphasizing the continued assault on working people within the university and highlighting the growing need to build solidarity across occupations, this brief account of university strikes in the past ten years will continuously stress the need for greater ties amongst the workers of our campus communities.

The dynamic of the 2003 Aramark food service workers strike at Trent University is a prime example of the kind of broader solidarity needed to win actual gains, but which does not always, or often, occur. Trent University students and faculty stood by striking workers up against a lack of pension or benefits, and poverty wages. Deepening austerity measures following the 2008 economic crisis have affected all posts within the university, compounding the ongoing assaults against workers and organized labour since the beginning of the neoliberal era in particular, and throughout capitalism's history. In 2008 Aramark food service workers and janitorial staff at Seneca College's Markham campus went on strike for a fair first contract to bring their wages, benefits and working conditions in line with other Aramark workers at Seneca. York University contract professors, teaching assistants, and graduate assistants in 2009 took strike action over issues such as contract faculty security, leading to the longest faculty strike at a Canadian University, at 85 days. Indeed, these workers returned only after being legislated back to work. Faculty at Vancouver Island University during the winter of 2011 also felt the effects of the financial crisis. At VIU faculty walked off the job after the university declined to include a 'no-layoff' clause in their renewed contracts. In the following year, workers at the University of British Columbia walked off their jobs after having been without a contract for two years. This 2012 strike drew out 300 workers including

campus security, food service, trades people, parking attendants and student housing employees.

Cuts to job security and subsequent wage freezes, for many public sector workers, have proved relentless. The 2013 strike at the University of Windsor—comprised of 282 skilled trades and professional workers—demonstrates the ongoing efforts by working people to push back against inadequate concessions. 2013 has brought about greater militancy from those working precarious jobs on campus; the most recent attempt to unionize female resident advisors at Carleton University and the subsequent failure on the part of mainstream labour to deliver only further elucidates the necessity of an industry wide union.

Beginning January of 2014, the Association of University of New Brunswick teachers, representing full-time faculty, librarians, instructors, and researchers, went on strike over issues including salary comparability. The University of New Brunswick sent a notice of lockout to striking workers the following day. So far support for the AUNBT has been strong, especially from undergraduate and graduate students, despite recurrent propaganda pieces against them pumped out from local news and the University's president.

What we can see from this very brief survey is that university workers in the educational industry span many occupations—food service workers, cleaners, librarians, residence advisors, teaching assistants, professors, and students—and in order for any gains to be made through worker actions and militancy, the more privileged education industry workers must stand in solidarity with the most exploited. The university cannot function without any of the services provided by these workers, even those who at first seem unrelated to the postsecondary education complex, which is why industry-wide organizing has the potential to effectively fight back against the bosses. ✍



AUNBT members at the University of New Brunswick - Fredericton walk the picket line with supporters in January 2014. Professors at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick also walked off the job on January 28th. Meanwhile, in Toronto, members of CUPE 1281, representing staff of Continuing Education Students' Association at Ryerson, have been locked out since September 30th, 2013.



Education Workers in London, England protest cuts in 2009.

Resisting Austerity in Ontario's Education Sector

Canada's post-secondary education system has, like other public services, undergone significant restructuring during the period of neoliberalism. Under their new guise, universities and colleges are being increasingly subordinated to market logic. Traditional values, such as academic freedom, are being undermined as both academic research and undergraduate programs are transformed to serve private sector needs rather than the public good.

In Ontario, the Liberal government made clear its intentions to further reform the province's post-secondary education system in a discussion paper entitled "Strengthening Ontario's Centres of Creativity, Innovation and Knowledge." If these reforms were implemented, they would have a drastic impact on both university and college campuses. All campus workers, including TAs, contract faculty students, administrative workers and professors would feel the adverse effects.

For instance, the province expects its "broader public sector partners", i.e. workers employed by the state, "to consider aspects of collective agreements that enhance productivity and facilitate transformation." In short, education workers would be forced to take a pay cut and pension freeze to make up for the lack of public funding for the province's education system, all in the name of "creativity and innovation." For education workers, particularly those in the lowest-paid and most precarious positions, this is surely intolerable.

The government is also considering to significantly alter the structure of undergraduate programs. Proposals include a shift from the current 4-year cycle to a 3-year one; a move to year-round classes, which would effectively eliminate students' ability to earn a wage during summer; and an increase in the number of courses taught online, rather than in the classroom. It is clear from these suggestions that the government is less concerned with improving the quality of public education than it is with managerial notions of "efficiency." In effect, these proposals would transform undergraduate programs into degree factories, where students would be little more than raw material to be processed as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Such proposals are certainly not new. In fact, they fit quite well within the broader neoliberal public policy paradigm.

Because of their sheer depth and scope, however, an effective resistance to their implementation calls for new and creative ways of organizing. Above all, education workers must demonstrate a renewed commitment to militancy, and make every effort to forge the broadest and most inclusive culture of solidarity, one that looks beyond mere sectional interests.

There are a number of concrete steps we can take to resist these reforms and work to both improve the quality of education our system offers, as well as to lay the groundwork for a thorough democratization of the sector. To begin, we must recognize that this is a multi-dimensional and all-encompassing struggle. Every member of the campus community will be affected. Our organizing efforts should reflect this. TAs and contract faculty cannot fight the battle against wage cuts alone, especially when students would have to bear the burden of restructured programs. Fighting solely against wage cuts when students will also feel the pinch can only serve to alienate us from our potential allies in the broader struggle against restructuring.

Effectively resisting the reforms will require the unity of all those affected. Contract faculty and TA unions, therefore, need to work to forge meaningful and solidaric relationships with students and other campus workers. This could be done by expanding the membership within our current unions to include undergraduate students, so that they can have their voice heard within our unions. Additionally, activists could work to form campus-wide labour councils, inclusive of all workers and students, where strategies could be discussed in an open and democratic environment.

Additionally, efforts should be made to link up our struggles with other education workers throughout the Toronto area, whether at the University of Toronto, York, Ryerson or McMaster. Developing a common strategy and making similar demands would reinforce our collective power and our ability to secure fair and dignified working conditions. Activist members of these unions need to work to push their executives to dedicate greater resources to fighting, and fighting together. There is little question the government is serious about getting its way. Only our firm resolve and militant solidarity can stand in its way. ✍



WHO WE ARE

The Industrial Workers of the World is a fighting union for all workers. The 620 Industrial Organizing Committee is a group of students and education workers fighting for better conditions in the classroom and across the industry.

If you're interested in organizing with us, please get in touch!
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"If you're on a college campus then that's where you are. The idea that you going into a factory is going to make a significant difference to the working class is nonsense. That you can support workers' strikes as an intellectual sure. Concretely I think one of the most important things is some kind of a press. Even if it starts out as just a little newsletter that shares ideas, that discusses ideas, that presents experiences." - Martin Glaberman