

Update from Strike HQ: Clarification on Bargaining Proposals

November 10, 2016

Dear Colleagues,

I am pleased to report that, as of this afternoon, we are back in bargaining directly with the Administration, with the support of our provincially appointed conciliator. I will let you know immediately as soon as there is something to report from that process. Our focus remains getting a fair deal as soon as possible. As you will see below, the Administration has begun to respond to pressure from the strike by, for example, acknowledging that UMFA's workload concerns are real.

You may have seen yesterday's statement from the Administration about two key strike issues. They misrepresented UMFA's position on a number of key points, and I would like to offer a few clarifications about our bargaining proposals.

Workload

Many, many members have expressed the need to re-establish some controls over workload increases. I have heard this from Nursing, where workload has skyrocketed, resulting in the loss of experienced professors in the faculty. In the faculties of Arts and Science, UMFA instructors face increases in teaching load from 17 to 30%, and professors face ballooning class sizes and the constant creep of extra administrative duties.

Workload is also the issue on which we have received such strong support from students. Students want their professors and instructors to have adequate time to prepare fully for class, to be able to meet with students, and to keep on top of research in their field. They understand this intuitively and their public statements to this effect have been clear: our working conditions are students' learning conditions. We have already received formal endorsements from the Arts, Sciences, Medical, Dental and many other student associations.

The Truth About UMFA's Proposals on Workload

Well into the bargaining process, the Administration continued to express scepticism that UMFA members had experienced any workload increases. One evening we sent out a call for UMFA members to share their experiences with workload increases. Within a day or so, we had compiled 120 pages of single-spaced text containing many detailed and compelling descriptions of what has happened to our members' working lives.

In response to this powerful evidence, the Administration began to acknowledge, "UMFA examples of workload increases are real, and include more papers to mark, more labs and clinics to supervise, more administrative paperwork to complete."

The issue now is how to address the problem. VP (Academic) Janice Ristock claims that UMFA wants to have "a veto" on teaching responsibilities. Her claim is factually incorrect.

Originally, UMFA proposed a freeze on teaching workloads. When this proposal was rejected by Administration, we moved to a compromise position. Our current proposal is similar to a collegial model that works successfully at Queens University, with the addition of a dispute resolution mechanism as a final step to avoid potential deadlock.

Dr. Ristock characterized our proposed process as “lengthy, cumbersome,” and “not viable.” We are disappointed that the Administration would dismiss collegial governance in such terms. Collegial governance is not an inconvenience to be tossed overboard in order to maximize bureaucratic efficiencies: it is fundamental to academic life.

As for Administration’s concerns that independent arbitrators are unacceptable because they come from “outside our community,” I would point out that the current Administration has had no hesitation in bringing in outside consultants (in fact, that spending line has increased by 160% throughout Dr. Barnard’s Presidency) to restructure our working lives in fundamental ways. It remains a mystery why the current Administration would be so welcoming of “outsiders” who have left us with schemes such as ROSE and OARS and Concur -- and yet so resistant to the possibility of a trained, independent, third-party arbitrator to resolve disputes in the rare event that the collegial process proves unsuccessful.

The most important point I wish to make is this: UMFA has always been, and remains, open to considering reasonable alternatives to the Queens-based model, as long as they establish meaningful collegial processes in the Collective Agreement to protect UMFA members from further arbitrary workload increases.

Administration’s most recent proposal clearly would not meet these goals. Their offer to spend \$1.5 million over the next 18 months to hire more TAs, markers and sessionals would not protect anyone from arbitrary workload increases. It seems Admin’s real goal may be to use this fund simply to increase the proportion of courses taught by sessional teachers instead of UMFA members.

Performance Metrics

UMFA’s proposed language on performance metrics begins with a simple statement:

“Any evaluation and/or assessment of a Member shall be based on a full review of the quality of their contribution to teaching, service, research, scholarly work, and creative activity.” UMFA recognizes that “quantitative factors have been and will continue to be an element in the evaluation and/or assessment” of our work.

The key difference between UMFA’s proposal and the Admin’s position is this: UMFA wants our members to be able to choose whether they compile and submit performance metrics for evaluation and assessment purposes. Our proposal will prevent Administration from compelling members to submit such metrics. Further, UMFA’s proposed language ensures members will face no penalty for non-submission of metrics.

The Administration has agreed that “research metrics shall not be used as a substitute for more comprehensive assessment,” but their proposal leaves the door open to mandatory inclusion of performance metrics as part of tenure, promotion and performance evaluation.

UMFA's concern around metrics is that they can be gamed and potentially pose a threat to collegial peer review. Our opposition to the forced use of metrics is also based on equity concerns. For many kinds of scholars, performance metrics have been shown to be inappropriate, unfair and inaccurate.

Job Security for Instructors and Librarians

UMFA's collective agreement currently provides job security protection for professors requiring the Administration to meet specific criteria around financial exigency before laying off professorial staff. This language was won during the 1995 strike.

We are now negotiating to extend equivalent protection to academic librarians and instructors, who are also UMFA members. This is a basic fairness and equity issue to protect our most vulnerable members. The Administration has so far refused to consider making this improvement to our Collective Agreement.

Conclusion

This is the point at which negotiations become intense. I know many of us feel uncertainty and we all want to get back into our classrooms, libraries, and labs as soon as we can.

But this is also the moment when we are poised to make real gains that have the potential to improve our working lives for years to come. The best way for us to get a fair deal soon is to keep our picket lines strong and stay focused on our goal.

In solidarity,

Mark Hudson
UMFA President