

Strike Deadline Nears as Mediation Begins

UMFA demands University Put 2016 Offer Back on Table

--- For immediate release ---

Winnipeg, November 11, 2020 – the University of Manitoba Faculty Association (UMFA) enters mediation with the University of Manitoba tomorrow in an attempt to recoup the financial losses imposed on full time academics by legislation in 2017. The legislation was deemed 'draconian' and unconstitutional this July. UMFA has set a deadline for settlement at 11:59 on Saturday November 14.

"Between moving classes and labs online, teaching more students, and taking care of our kids and dependents, full time academics at the university are under a lot of stress. We just want to see this wrong righted so we can get on with our teaching and research," said UMFA President Michael Shaw.

If mediation fails the Association could be on strike the morning of Monday, November 16.

Shaw also released the following public statement, now available on the UMFA website:

-- *an open statement to the university community* --

Michael Shaw, UMFA President

Almost four years ago, the administration of the University of Manitoba snatched its modest salary increases off the bargaining table without warning. We didn't know why, and the administration didn't give much of a reason. "The law of contract", they said at the time.

But that wasn't true, nor was it lawful – after a three-week strike and a hearing at the labour board, we learned the extent to which government interference had precipitated the move. The Pallister government micromanaged the negotiations and demanded those modest increases be taken off the table.

The result: the University paid \$2.4 million in fines to UMFA members.

Almost immediately following the government's interventions at the University, Pallister introduced austerity legislation, the Public Services Sustainability Act (PSSA), which limited the salaries of all public sector workers. He also forbade the University from accepting binding arbitration to settle our negotiations in 2017. In response, we negotiated a salary-reopener for this year in order to deal with the status of that legislation. The PSSA was deemed unconstitutional this June.

Despite that ruling, the same thing that happened in 2016 is happening now, though slightly more openly. Even though his austerity legislation has been deemed unconstitutional, Pallister is using the pandemic to attack public sector workers. This time, the University of Manitoba got a letter – Profs, Instructors, and Librarians are to take a 0% increase in salary, and the budget put toward full-time academics is to be cut 2.5%.

The reasons for this are just as unclear as before. While the government and the University blame the uncertainty introduced by the pandemic, University enrollments are up, not down: class numbers rose 10.7% this summer, 3.2% this fall. We're teaching more than ever. Of course, it's not surprising that many Manitobans decided to re-train in a time of crisis.

In fact, a review of the University's own financial data shows that it's not only in good health, but has the resources to treat its workers better than it does. The administration appears to have saved the money they offered us in 2016, but they still refuse to right the wrongs of 2016 and 2017, even though academic salaries at the U of M are near the bottom of those paid at similar Canadian institutions. This means we have trouble attracting new talent, and talent that's here often leaves for more lucrative appointments elsewhere.

An open letter signed by President Benarroch and six Vice-Presidents and sent on October 30 states that "The University remains committed ultimately to bringing UMFA salaries more in line with salaries at peer universities." The Administration knows that UMFA members' low salaries are unfair and undermine the quality and reputation of the University.

As front line workers at the U of M we've asked that the modest salary increases we were unlawfully denied be put back on the table.

Even after our very successful strike vote, the administration continues to refuse to settle our dispute through binding arbitration – this too sounds a lot like 2016 and 2017, when the government told the university binding arbitration was not an option.

The administration has suggested mediation, however, and hinted that they now have some room to move at the table. We agreed to mediation, but set a deadline of November 14 at 11:59pm to ensure the process is productive. We're hopeful that room to move addresses our concerns.

It's clear that this isn't just about the administration. It's also very much about the government. The Pallister government's position has every appearance of using UMFA as an example for the rest of the public sector – if we get properly paid, everyone else will have to be properly paid, too. So, they're pressuring the administration to keep us near the bottom of the U15.

It's at post-secondary institutions that doctors are trained, and cutting-edge research is conducted. Our students will go on to be health care professionals, teachers, scientists, entrepreneurs, engineers, politicians, and artists. They'll provide essential services in both the public and private sectors, vital to all Manitobans, during the pandemic and beyond. Particularly now, what Manitoba needs is investment, not threats of funding cuts, particularly at an institution that puts \$1.5 into the Manitoba economy for every dollar it receives.

We know there's a pandemic on. We are burning the candle at both ends, working even more hours than before to provide quality remote education while homeschooling our own children, being caregivers for vulnerable dependents, trying to transform our homes into offices, and battling the same isolation and anxiety as everyone else.

Michael Shaw
UMFA President