

# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT



## FEBRUARY/MARCH 2017

None of us need reminding that the last bargaining round was a tough one. First and foremost, my thanks go out to every single one of you who stood in solidarity with your colleagues on the picket lines, in the strike headquarters, driving vans, and at rallies during November, and to all of those who helped in the weeks and months prior. I was amazed at and humbled by the energy and commitment of so many of you who collectively carried the load of the strike.

We've had a few months now to sort through the experience of the strike and the last round of bargaining (just in time to head into our next round). We've had a number of meetings and committee reports reflecting on what we did well, and what we think we need to do better in the future. We also have your responses to the post-bargaining survey we recently sent out. I want to share with you some of those reflections.

Through all of your efforts, and the extraordinary contributions of people like Jim Hare, Mike Shaw, Tom Booth, and Caterina Reitano, the strike itself ran incredibly smoothly. From organizing picket lines, shuttling people to where they need to be, getting supplies out, feeding hungry and cold picketers, getting the checks out, and training picket captains, to keeping discipline and safety on the lines, organizing rallies, and playing music at our Friday night solidarity events, we were a pretty well-oiled machine. There were some hitches, of course, and the Job Action Committee has made recommendations that we believe will further improve our effectiveness and efficiency in any future strike. On the whole, however, the coordination of the strike was an amazing and successful collective effort.

We also did a better job than ever before communicating—both with our members, and with the public through the media. This was also an impressive group effort. Improved communications and dialogue with Members helped us ensure that the issues we were fighting for at the table were important to many of you. During the strike, Members stepped in to help shoot, edit, and produce videos about our bargaining issues. Other members finished their 7-9 AM picket duty and came directly into strike headquarters to work with UMFA staff and Communications Committee to help plan the day's media and messages for the membership. Still others formed the core of a powerful social media campaign, using Twitter and Facebook to convey what was at stake in negotiations, and to increase public pressure on the administration for a fair settlement. Hours and hours of hard groundwork done developing campaign materials and messages prior to the strike became the basis for our communications with the public and with media. The Communications Committee has made a number of recommendations with

an eye to continuing development of strategic communications, and putting dialogue with UMFA members at its core.

We have also concluded a full post-mortem of the bargaining process and structures, evaluating the roles and relations of the bargaining team, the Executive, and the Collective Agreement Committee. Bargaining is a high pressure environment, and we need to be attentive to the stresses it puts on those involved. I owe thanks, as do we all, to those who put themselves through the wringer on our behalf at the bargaining table and by serving on the Collective Agreement Committee. We also owe it to them to try to create supportive structures so that they can focus on the task at hand. Recommendations to this end that we believe clarify the roles of these bodies in negotiations have been made by Executive.

The big question, of course, is whether or not these efforts bore fruit. In making this assessment, we need to look both at what we accomplished in the Collective Agreement, and what we accomplished in terms of building our union, long-term, as an institution that protects and advances the quality of our work lives and the quality of public, post-secondary education. The priorities you identified through the pre-bargaining survey, through constituency meetings, and at special general membership meetings were the priorities we carried forward to the end, with the exception of salary. Given the province's heavy hand and the administration's subsequent withdrawal of their salary offer, we were forced to pursue that item through the Manitoba Labour Board—with hearings on the matter slated through March and into May.

On the matter of extending equal job protections to all UMFA members, we were also unsuccessful. Our goal had been to bring Instructors and Librarians under the protections afforded to professors of all ranks, and as negotiations proceeded, the University administration proved unyielding, even with the full force of a strike behind the bargaining team. This is an issue not only of basic fairness and recognition of the indispensable role played by every UMFA member in making the UM happen, but also of academic freedom, and it is an issue that, in my opinion, we must continue to press.

We did not, then, succeed on every front. We did, however, make some very significant advances in the new C.A. The new agreement represents a step forward in enshrining the idea that those who actually do the teaching, the research, and the service should have a strong voice in determining how the university is run. We have new, faculty-based processes for determining tenure and promotion criteria. We have a new process for determining teaching loads. Deans must now work with UMFA members to establish workload guidelines, and seek the members' final approval on those guidelines before they are implemented.

Where we had nothing in place to prevent the administration from perpetually downloading administrative and teaching work onto your shoulders, we now have a shield against it, though it will require organization by and cooperation among UMFA members in their faculties. UMFA's staff and Executive are here to support that.

We also won some ground in the struggle to protect members from the misuse and inappropriate application of performance indicators. We have new language that ensures that performance metrics won't substitute for comprehensive assessment of scholarship. We also have established a joint committee with the administration to assess whether there ought to be further limitations on the use of metrics in tenure, promotion, and evaluation.

We also won commitments for new administrative supports (including support for Concur claims), a joint committee inquiring into the existence and extent of gender-based salary differentials at UM, new "whistleblower" protections, improved privacy provisions, and some modest increases in travel and expenses funds. The administration also agreed to recommend with UMFA, through the staff

benefits committee, improvements to some of our dental, orthodontic, and drug benefits.

I also believe that despite the storm of bargaining, and the strains of the strike, that we emerged at the end a stronger union—with the potential to become still more effective. It's a pat phrase, but I've come to believe in it more than ever: the strength of the union is its membership. Yes, we still need to work to build more avenues for members to participate actively in the union, and to support them in organizing for a better workplace in their departments and faculties. We need to continue building our capacity to talk with you and listen to you. If I ever had doubts about your commitment to defending the mission of the University and the foundations of its realization, they are gone. If ever I needed a demonstration of your ability to come together, to support one another, and to rise under adversity, I have had it. This is a strong membership, and as a result, a strong union. We can be stronger still, if we can build on the amazing resolve, solidarity, and mutual support I was lucky enough to witness from so many of you during the strike.