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Part-time workforce imperils universities

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The longest university strike in English Canada ends with back-to-work legislation this week. As full-time faculty at York University we are distressed at the impact of this strike on our 50,000 students, who have confronted enormous disruption to their lives, finances and future.

With such disastrous consequences, what can we learn from this debacle for the future of labour relations in Ontario universities?

The employer and much media claim that responsibility lies with a "selfish" union that advanced unrealistic wage demands during an economic recession.

Reality is more complex. The spotlight on CUPE obscures the responsibility of York's administration and board of governors. Reluctant to negotiate since June, the administration spent two hours bargaining in November, refused to meet in December, and negotiated for four days in January before forcing a vote and another two-week delay on an offer already rejected by 90 per cent at a membership meeting.

Following the "no" vote and Premier McGuinty's request that his appointed mediator "bang some heads together," CUPE substantially eased its positions, including eliminating its wage-increase proposals, but again the employer did not move.

Instead of bargaining in good faith, York engaged in public relations and brinkmanship. Tracing the process from start to end, it is evident that the employer never intended to bargain, waiting to either break the union or have it legislated back to work.

York administration cries "poor" and points to the recession. However, their managerial tactics are rooted in decade-old policies of post-secondary education underfunding, market-friendly academic restructuring, and shifting priorities for spending York's money. Most damaging is the casualization of York's faculty, which creates a "flexible" pool of expendable teaching staff.

Casualization emphasizes cost reduction but conceals negative costs of precarious employment for teachers and students. Comparing the 1997/98 and 2007/08 York University Factbook shows a 46 per cent increase in full-time undergraduate enrolment. The tenurable faculty complement increased by 28 per cent, a significant deterioration of student/full-time faculty ratios. Course assignments to CUPE 3903 members increased by 112 per cent. Dozens of current retirements are being replaced by part-timers who are arguably deserving of the tenure jobs being eliminated.

Contract faculty teach 54 per cent of York's undergraduate courses for 7 per cent of its operating budget. They work hard and often cobble together multi-campus course contracts to make a living, but they are being stripped of opportunities for quality teaching, research and academic engagement. They are fighting to preserve hard-won benefits and to join other tenured faculty, many of whom are conversions through earlier contracts.

They see tenure gradually disappearing with little consultation or prudence.

Students are hit the worst. More temporary faculty means less access to tenured faculty engaged in scholarly activity. With tuition fees and class sizes both rising, students take on part-time jobs and mounting debt loads to finance a diminished learning experience. Hiring more temporary faculty intensifies the burden on full-time colleagues through increased supervisory loads and fewer colleagues to perform administrative responsibilities. While the administration is urging faculty to enhance the university's research profile, they have less time for research activities.

Budgetary priorities aggravate the stresses. While turning students over to poorly paid teaching staff, top administrators get a 17 per cent pay raise over two years, plan a high-priced medical school, and are silent about plans for \$170 million raised by York Foundation. The "final" offer from the employer to CUPE represented a decline in real income relative to the cost of living. It reduced contractual opportunities for permanent appointments, increased the number of teaching-only appointments, reduced child-care benefits and support for graduate students, and exacerbated the bitter sense that the well-being of graduate students and temporary faculty and the academic integrity of the institution are being eroded by misplaced priorities.

York administration's tactics have won this week, but what a pyrrhic victory! Distressed students, plummeting enrolment, battered reputation, finances in havoc, an embattled president, and a bitter workforce – those are the challenges the university must now face.

Improving labour relations at York University and other Canadian universities will require a shift in administrative and budgetary priorities. They must relinquish the claim that a reputable, research-intensive academic institution can rely on a casualized teaching workforce. They must moderate executive salaries and shift more resources to teaching and research.

Finally, government needs to step up to the plate and appoint a task force to examine and offer solutions for the worrisome casualization of the teaching workforce in Ontario's universities. As the self-declared "education premier," Dalton McGuinty should courageously redress the perils of underfunding and casualization for students, teachers and research.

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