

Notes on a Strike.

By Gita Hashemi

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On Jan. 29, the Ontario legislature passed back-to-work legislation pushed by the Liberal Government to end the strike by CUPE 3903, the union representing contract faculty, teaching, graduate and research assistants – the academy’s underclass – at York University in Toronto. Commenced in November, the strike followed four months of stonewalling by the university’s negotiators, who, counseled by a reputable union-busting legal firm, pressed for binding arbitration instead of negotiating with the union, a wish that was finally granted by the legislation. Over the 85 days of the strike, there were no real negotiations (only 11 days of talks), the administration was laying off support staff and classes were shut down by the university senate’s decision that effectively locked out both students and workers. Meanwhile, other than the Art Gallery of York University, which encouraged its audiences to cross the picket lines, the most active department at York was Media Relations.

With 22 full-time employees, Media Relations regularly churned out non-news; skewed and false information for external consumption. Much of this was reprinted verbatim by mainstream media news. Media Relations also continued producing the YFile — York’s main bulletin distributed centrally to all York email accounts. Except for a brief period in November when ample space was given to a nascent undergrad anti-union group, YFile contained little to no reference to “labour disruption” and cancelled classes, nor to other student groups calling for the Administration’s accountability in the strike. Instead it peddled cliché PR material on one or another research project, foundation or endowment, or promoted York-sponsored shopping and entertainment bonanzas, parties and ceremonies geared to undergraduate students. Thus, the task of communicating about the strike with the students was transferred to the media who, predictably, showed more interest in sensationalizing narratives of “students as victims” and “the union as greedy” than asking pertinent questions about fiscal management and labour relations at York. A popular radio host took the union-bashing as far as broadcasting live as he drove his SUV through a picket line in order to stage a verbal confrontation.

Meanwhile, York’s President disappeared from public view, refusing to show up at a town hall meeting organized by the Undergraduate Student Federation or to meet with a group of students who staged a 25 day sit-in outside his office to demand that he answer their questions about the strike and York’s budgetary priorities. Instead, he appeared through official sound bites warning “CUPE to step back from the brink” after the union voted no to the university’s offer in a forced ratification process that cost York more than the entirety of the union’s extended health benefits fund for its 3400 members. The thrust of York’s intransigence rested on the “economic crisis” argument emphasized by academic deans in a letter urging CUPE members to accept the university’s offer as a “responsible effort ... in an extremely difficult economic climate.” Obviously, the deans’ own salary increases of 4-16% on \$120-400K and guaranteed benefits and bonuses (President Shoukri’s bonus was \$81K last year) were deemed responsible expenditures. The union proposals that received the least sympathy were related to job security for long-term contract faculty, pointing to problems that are endemic to all corporate universities. In Canada,

40-60% of all undergraduate teaching is carried by non-permanent faculty (54% at York) at low exploitative wages and benefits (1/4-1/2 of the cost of permanent full-time faculty), under poor working conditions without job security.

As I commit these words, CUPE 3903 members have been forced back to work by a legislation whose inherent violence against their right to collective bargaining was foreshadowed by Toronto police attacking their rally to Queen's Park two days before the passing of the legislation. The fate of their collective agreement now rests with an arbitrator who is mandated to consider "the employer's ability to pay in light of its fiscal situation," "the economic situation in Ontario" and "the employer's ability to attract and retain qualified employees." The mood is bitter, and it is clear that at York "the scars will remain even if the healing begins." It is also clear that the fight against casualization of academic labour needs broader organizing and building coalitions beyond the sector itself.

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