Bargaining Bulletin

The purpose of this Bargaining Bulletin is to provide some insight into the series of events at the negotiating table since we commenced job action on January 28th.

Between Thursday, January 31st, and Thursday, February 7th, there were eight, often lengthy, meetings between the StFXAUT and the Administration. The configuration of these meetings varied; with Robert van den Hoogen, Sean Riley, Mary McGillivray, and the remainder of their negotiating team, in discussions with Brad Long, who was joined by Mary Oxner, Peter McInnis, or the remainder of our negotiating team, depending on the members of their team and the topic of discussion. The meetings were, in the beginning, entirely focused on the financial context of the University, both current and projected. We provided strong evidence to counter the plausibility of their narrative. Their presentation consistently lacked both a clear accounting of the extent of the current deficit, and any accountability for its apparent rapid increase. Future projections equally lacked vision and a recognition of possible future improvements in both revenues and expenses that are based on better resource allocation and management. Consequently, we were dismayed by the University's public misstatement on February 5th that “over the weekend, the Union reviewed and acknowledged the latest financial forecasts.” A future Bargaining Bulletin will explore these themes further.

Despite the impasse, the StFXAUT Executive Committee met on the evening of February 5th to review and discuss the latest University proposals and to provide some instruction to the negotiating team. Some hard decisions were made, guided by the overriding and sometimes incompatible goals of both seeking a quick end to job action, and being committed to the mandate given to us by our members. These decisions were incorporated into our latest offer to the Administration, made on the morning of February 6th.

Our position regarding economic adjustment is that we **must hold firm on nothing less than a 2% per year cost of living increment,** or a mere 8% over four years (back-ended as per their preference). This brings the compensation gap between our two positions down to **less than 1%** (roughly $200,000 spread over four years, or much less than the cost of two years of bonuses paid to the top five Administrators, as reported in the Saturday Chronicle Herald). We simply cannot be locked into a four-year agreement in which we continue to slip further behind inflation estimates, and fail to keep pace with most settlements reached elsewhere. This is a relatively small amount in a University budget of around $68 million, but it makes a big difference to the purchasing power of each member in the face of rising costs of living. Moreover, at this rate, the notion of wage parity with other universities will become more and more unreachable. The response we received on February 7th (first via public email, and then in face-to-face meetings): “No”.

To further enable the Administration to sign this agreement, **we had very reluctantly removed every other outstanding proposal with a financial impact**. With respect to Group Benefits, we removed our requirement for more funding, but continue to insist upon a mechanism for the self-determination of how our existing meager premiums are spent. The response we received on February 7th: “No”. Their unwillingness to grant us a meaningful role in the governance of our benefits plans flies in the face of all professed desires for enhanced levels of collaboration and transparency. Remember that the actual value of our single member premiums is 67% less than the value they communicated to us and advertised to the public. Remember too that the Administration unilaterally withdrew $500,000 of accumulated surplus premiums to balance their operating deficit last year. The need for transparency is obvious. Given that we will not be receiving any adjustment to the value of our premiums, the very least we can obtain is the ability to determine how these premiums are spent.

With respect to Professional Development (PD), we offered a way to improve upon their offer of only $200 per full-time member (only to begin in the third year of this collective agreement) without any additional cost to the University. Instead, by simply shifting benefits, we proposed a more creative way to increase the amount of PD for all full-time members to $600 per year. The rather paternalistic response we received on February 7th: “No”. Again, we were told we cannot have any role in determining the benefits we receive.

Despite the above, we were willing to say “Yes” to three of their demands. First, we won't get a nickel in increased contributions to our pension plan for the duration of this collective agreement. Second, we indicated our willingness to sign off on their retirement allowance language (after we helped them fix some of the obvious deficiencies in their plan), but we cannot entertain such substantial cost-savings measures for the University without a favourable response to our minimum economic adjustment. Third, we were reminded by the Administration that they have indeed withdrawn the Travel Grant article, to which we had earlier agreed, as punishment for commencing job action. Nevertheless, we overlooked the antagonism and indicated our willingness to accept an LOU indicating the existing travel grant value and processes would remain unchanged.

So that brings us up to this point. We remain deeply troubled by the intransigence of our Administration, not to mention anything about bad faith bargaining. We were truly shocked that the degree to which we once again modified our position was not favourably received. The Administration had the chance to end this job action by accepting the final items on the table, and join us in the “sweet spot” of compromise. They had the chance to stand behind their entreatment to rebuild trust, mutual respect, and collaboration. They had the chance to deny that keeping us on strike is a purposeful strategy for saving salary dollars they already have. They had the chance to minimize the possible long-term negative consequences of keeping academic staff on the picket line for at least another week. They chose instead to walk away.