

LABOUR

Needless disruption to students' learning

Why is UPEI intent on having interest arbitration, rather than participating in direct negotiation?

PAMELA COURTENAY-HALL
COMMENTARY

The week before the UPEI faculty strike began, I entered a washroom at our great small university and saw a student standing in front of the sink looking lost and distraught.

Not lost in the geographic sense. Lost in the life direction sense.

"Are you OK?" I asked her. "Are you looking for a professor – can I help you?"

"No," she replied, shaking her head. Tears were coming to her eyes.

Half an hour earlier, I had seen her walking anxiously up then down the hallway.

We talked only briefly, because it was clear she wanted time to herself to recollect her courage to face the day.

But she quickly asked me, "Do you think a strike is certain to happen?"

"I'm afraid so," I replied. "But I never give up hope entirely, even though we are close to the strike deadline."

"So what will happen to us?" she asked. "Will we be able to finish the semester or is this it? Is this our last chance to do work in our courses?"

DEDICATED TO STUDENTS

This is a question that most faculty carefully addressed with their classes as the strike deadline drew closer. Our students have had to face a gauntlet of pressures in their university years. First the pandemic. Then a hurricane. Climate change events around the world. A rental housing shortage. A new cold war looming in the Russian war against Ukraine and growing tensions between China and the U.S. The last thing they needed is a strike just as they are approaching the end of their semester.

We have tried to reassure our students that if there is a strike, however long the



Striking faculty at the University of Prince Edward Island picket along University Avenue in Charlottetown Monday, March 20. **CODY MCEACHERN** • THE GUARDIAN

strike might last, once it is over, we will do everything we reasonably can to make sure there are opportunities for them to complete their courses.

I explained this to her, noting that faculty are very dedicated to our students and to teaching. And that for their part, the administration would never leave students in a situation of not being able to pass a course because of a strike.

She looked reassured, but that very reassurance brought more tears.

CONTRADICTORY REPORTS

Seeing her distress was a tipping point for me. I understand that administering a university is a complex task. It is loaded with financial challenges. But as the strike deadline grew nearer, the administration's apparent

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determination to settle our negotiations through interest arbitration was bringing needless disruption to our students' learning ... and needless pressures on their mental health.

The contradictory reports between faculty association memos to professors and UPEI administration public relations emails to students might seem to record a disheartening problem of "he said, she said." But it is clear from eyewitness accounts that

FA negotiators have strived for 11 months to get the administration to take their proposals seriously enough to make counter-proposals ... while in reply, have been met with intimidation, stonewalling and stalling from the administration through their chief negotiator.

Why is the administration so intent on having interest arbitration, rather than settling matters through direct negotiation?

A recent FA memo explained that "... interest arbitrators will often decline to rule on complex issues such as student/faculty ratios and instead focus on less complicated issues such as compensation. This means that interest arbitration is not a viable mechanism for addressing the serious systemic issues that are having an impact on the educational quality of our institution.

"Make no mistake, interest arbitration cannot fix the problems that have led to larger classes, fewer courses, and a range of workplace issues that threaten the future of our only Island university."

WORKPLACE ISSUES

So aiming for interest arbitration is a way to avoid having to deal with these more complex demands, demands such as replacement of faculty to maintain the integrity of our existing programs, an end to exploitation of contract academic faculty, accountable commitment to the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion, and adequate research supports and facilities.

Keeping these issues out of any settlement reached is also a way for a university administration to hold onto decision-making power over them ... even if these decisions about academic matters would be made in wiser, fairer and more informed ways if the people who do the work of teaching are allowed to participate in them.

The distraught face of that young woman will be in my thoughts — along with the faces of all the wonderful students I have had the privilege to teach this semester — as I spend time this week walking on a picket line ... knowing that with more commitment to negotiating from the administration, I and my colleagues could instead be in our classrooms, helping our students maintain — in this time finally free of pandemic restrictions — the wonderful recovery of their learning spirit that this semester started off giving them.

Pamela Courtenay-Hall, Ph.D., is an associate professor and chair of the philosophy department and a teaching associate in the environmental studies program at the University of Prince Edward Island in Charlottetown.