



THE INSTRUCTOR

FALL 2020

A Distanced Greeting from the Communications Officer

Welcome back CUPE 3912 members,

It is hard to write much of a general statement these days without slipping into clichés about our new normal during these unprecedented times. Yet, as those of us fortunate enough to be working this fall understand, the demands of adapting to a new online environment as contract workers has been anything but ‘normal.’ Between delayed postings and confirmation of contracts, childcare challenges, health stresses, and expectations of mastering new technologies in very short order (largely without compensation!), CUPE 3912 members have had to adjust to conditions that are anything but ‘normal’ or reasonable.

Like most epidemiological crises, this pandemic has been most punishing to vulnerable populations; also like most epidemiological crises, COVID-19 has, above all, exposed inequities that were always present, even if they had, over time, normalized to the point of being seemingly unremarkable. In our case, conditions that were barely sustainable just months ago, have in a matter of months become lightning rods for extraordinary stress and uncertainty.

We saw that our contingent status at our various institutions makes us far more vulnerable to job cuts than other university employees, that our lack of paid sick days and health coverage leaves us especial-

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ly vulnerable to illness, that we lack job security or benefits that would allow us to take a step back for a year to care for children or family members. We saw that ALL of us face job insecurity no matter our level of precedence, and that those of us who are just starting out were especially vulnerability to position costs, while most of us with contracts are working more hours for even more meagre compensation.

This fall our bargaining teams begin the important work of negotiating on behalf of each of the bargaining units. As we do so, you can trust that your frustrations and needs will be at the forefronts of our minds. As this newsletter is being written, bargaining team members are working hard to finalize a set of proposals that take the concerns you expressed by survey this winter into account, as well as those challenges that have presented since then, as universities have publicly announced their responses to the pandemic.

As we focus our energy on bargaining, we will be less active socially than you have come to expect. Dave and I are working together to put together a workshop on racial justice for our members, this fall – so stay tuned

for more updates on that. If there is appetite, we are happy to organize an informal pub night either outdoors or online for members to have a chance to meet and connect. In the meantime, please continue to reach out to me, Karen, or your VPs with any concerns you might have.

Take care of yourselves and one-another. Together, we CAN Make It Fair in Halifax and Truro in 2020!

In solidarity,

Larissa Atkison, communicationsofficer.cupe3912@gmail.com

The “S” Word

by Karen Harper

Although we have been careful to avoid the ‘S’ word while preparing for bargaining, as we get closer to negotiations, it may be time to start spelling it out:

S - T - R - I - K - E

Why the silence? Some people are not comfortable with the idea of the ‘S’ word and want to avoid it at all costs. Until we had put together our bargaining proposals, we wanted input from our members. We thought it was better to avoid using the ‘S’ word in case it would scare some people away, who might therefore have not completed the survey or voted on the bargaining proposals. Note this was done to focus on the stage of developing proposals.

Why talk about it now? We need to be prepared.

Although we do NOT go into bargaining thinking that we are going to strike, we may face a situation where things escalate quickly and we are considering a strike vote in a short amount of time. We are preparing for the possibility of a strike.

Why would we want to go on strike? I think I can safely say that NO ONE wants to go on strike, especially in jobs where the public (students) are the most affected rather than the employer (administration). Unfortunately, a strike may be the only way to draw attention to an issue and make progress at the bargaining table. Asking the employer to please increase our salary because we are the lowest paid in Canada sometimes

does not work. However, sometimes a strike mandate (favourable vote for a strike) and a threat of a strike can also lead to gains in bargaining. For example, a last-minute deal helped avoid an imminent strike for full-time faculty at the Mount a few years ago. We also plan to explore other options as well.

What is the process? Although we can set our own guidelines for surveys that contain questions about a strike, an official strike vote is regulated by provincial legislation. A legal strike is only possible with a ‘yes’ vote to strike from 50% + 1 of employees, NOT those who vote. That means that anyone who does not vote is effectively voting ‘no’. Employees are those who are employed within 30 days of the strike vote. We have yet to figure out what happens if we have a strike vote near Jan. 1 or if we have a strike vote in the fall semester but actually go on strike in winter term. It is a challenge for precarious short-term workers. (Incidentally, if we have a strike vote this fall semester at any of the three universities, I will not be able to vote at all because I am not teaching.) The other important steps are that we have to go into conciliation (have a conciliator help both sides come to an agreement) before going on strike and there also has to be a cooling off period. The path to going on strike has many steps. What would it be like during the pandemic? To be honest, we don’t know. There could be well-spaced picket lines, virtual pickets (not sure what these will look like) and of course not teaching. These days,

health and safety will be a top priority. I will take notes if I hear of any faculty going on strike in the coming months.

Even if we are still hesitant to use the 'S' word, we need to be prepared. Part of this preparation is educating you – CUPE 3912 members. We hope that we will not be in the situation where a strike seems like the only way to get the employer to consider our proposals. A well-informed and engaged membership provides support to the bargaining teams during negotiations either with or without a strike.

“The more members that rally behind a strike, the less likely they are to go on strike”

– Geneviève Boulet, chief negotiator for MSVUFA

“The longer the picket line, the shorter the strike”

– Cassidy Bernard, president of SUNSCAD

“A credible strike threat can be used as leverage; it is a deterrent no one wants to use”

– David Westwood, president of DFA

Online Teaching is Weird

But I Think I Like it...

by Dave Baboub

Like many of us, when the pandemic hit and classes moved online, I was mostly concerned about getting through my courses. I didn't want to learn any new technologies and I rationalized that I did not want the students to have to adopt new platforms. Given the stress everyone was under, I was very comfortable just recording audio into my PowerPoints and emailing with students as necessary. Getting by felt great. I was lucky enough, though, to have a teaching assignment in the spring (May-June) and in the summer (July-Aug) terms. With time to prep and the realization that online delivery was likely to be an ongoing need, I thought about how to deliver a history course online.

In a lot of ways history is well suited for online delivery: there isn't lab work; classes are generally lecture-based; the hands-on parts are generally about reading or writing; if we're being honest, first- and second-year students seem to hate seminars (the seminars are my favourite part, I tell them and myself...). In conversation with many of my colleagues, I realized that part-time instructors are pretty well-positioned

to adapt delivery methods. We are used to developing new lectures, often and quickly. We are also accustomed to stress and uncertainty.

In reflecting back on these classes, and as I prepared for the new term, I tried to take stock of what worked and what didn't. This is a noncomprehensive list. It is heavily weighted towards things that work – students who hated the delivery methods (or me) likely just disengaged rather than telling me what didn't work. This definitely happens with in-person courses too, we're just more used to it, I think. These courses were all asynchronous; some of this will be less relevant to classes with defined times.

Here's my list of five things that worked:

One

I started every term with a discussion thread where we introduced ourselves. I posted pictures of my pets, and explained which ones they would hear on the recordings during the term. I took the time to respond to every post. Lots of students explained why they

were taking the course, what they were interested in, and their work and academic backgrounds. This is a lot more information than I normally get in the first week of classes. They also posted lots of pictures of good cats and good dogs.

Two

I gave a very low-effort introductory assignment (i.e. how do you define 'good history'). Most people responded to this, and I was able to work their definitions into my introductory lectures. I wanted to stress back-and-forth, and that participation was going to shape the course.

These two introductory assignments also made them post to the discussion forums. Without seminars, I wanted to stress that this was an important way to participate. Predictably, the number of posts fell off as the term progressed, but this often happens with in-person classes too. I welcome suggestions for how to keep up engagement.

Three

I organized the online class space (Brightspace in this instance) as a series of weekly modules, where everything the students needed for the week was uploaded (videos, PowerPoints with audio, seminar readings, activities, relevant links). This was recommended by curriculum developers at SMU and Dal, and seemed to work well. Each week it was clear what the students needed to go through.

Four

I filmed introductory videos at the start of each week, outlining the key themes and learning objectives. At the end of the week I would record another video summarizing the discussion forums. This ended up being a lot of work, because I wanted to incorporate material from the discussions. The upside is that students seemed to respond well to these videos.

Something I learned was to give a deadline for when students were expected to complete a module. It was

a little frustrating getting responses to week one in week six. I think the students would benefit from this too. Some students definitely got stuck trying to comment on every week after the fact, rather than engaging with the current one. When recording videos I also found it helpful to place my laptop on some books, so I could stare at it straight on, rather than looking down at it.

Five

Probably the biggest take-away was organizing each PowerPoint and video to stress a single dominant idea. I was insistent that I did not want to just lecture to my computer for three hours twice a week. Everything I read said to keep online delivery to 10-20 minutes per item. This is really hard. It turns out, I can be long winded. All my PowerPoints were probably more like 25-40 minutes (or 4-6 pages or notes), and I would post several per week. But I really liked trying to think of the most essential parts of the story to include. Stressing key ideas, events, and terms helped in focusing the delivery. The students seemed to respond well to this. I got positive feedback. The assignments were mostly good (some were extremely good). The discussions were interesting. I think it worked.

The downsides were this was all a lot of work. Typing out every response is time-consuming (but I'm certain it led to more thoughtful responses from the students). Someone asked me in the spring if there is a way to make students keep up with class material outside of writing things – I don't know, that's a good question. I would love suggestions (maybe they could record videos or audio responses?).

I miss meeting with students. I miss chatting with colleagues in the hallway or in our shared offices. I miss having immediate feedback. My phone keeps reminding me that on average, I'm taking fewer steps each day than I did last year. But should things ever go back to the old ways, there is a lot I'm going to keep from this.

Before the Leaky Pipeline

Postdoctoral and Emerging Grad Experiences: Our Response to “Gender Equity Considerations for Tenure and Promotion During Covid-19” (Oleschuk, 2020)

by Shiva Nourpanah & Chantelle Falconer

Oleschuk’s discussion of increased gender disparity among academic laborers during Covid-19 prompted our own conversation about the gender inequity we, as precarious academic workers, women, and mothers of young children are also facing. Oleschuk focuses on pre-tenure and academic advancement, using the metaphor of a “leaky pipeline” to highlight the structural forces, exacerbated by the imposed restrictions to control the pandemic, which hinder women from advancing in academia, with the result that many leave. We want to talk about the reality of our labor as academics who have not yet entered the pipeline.

We have both been engaged in precarious academic labor for a long time- about fifteen years - counting from when we each started sessional teaching, RAing and TAing. We met as part-time/contract instructors in the Department of Anthropology at Saint Mary’s University, in January 2016. At the time we were both PhD candidates at other universities. Since then, we have taught many more courses and conducted post-doc research both for our own research and with other senior academics. Contract academic work has been our primary livelihood. We have both traveled (inter) nationally for short-term, precarious academic jobs with our young families in tow, all while going through marital breakups and divorces, new relationships and family ties, transnational grief, and domestic joys. It’s striking that none of this academic, intellectual, or reproductive labour is mentioned in Oleschuk’s review- everything we do before entering the pipeline is simply invisible!

Oleschuk’s analysis provides evidence that recent

pandemic-related changes in how we work have more adversely impacted pre-tenure women academics than men. We assume the same structural conditions that are causing regress and marginalization of full-time women academics are operating before we have entered the professional pipeline of tenure-track employment. As we toil on the margins of academia on short-term contracts, the precarity of these positions is further highlighted by health considerations and reproductive care obligations brought forward by Covid-19: post doc and short-term contracts often do not afford us any sick time or vacation time. The pandemic has shown us that sick time can no longer be classified as a “benefit” afforded only to those in permanent positions, but rather a basic human right and a critical component of public health. The horizon of our contracts is so short -often as brief as 15 weeks, though sometimes as long as 1-2 years -taking a break from our academic work as necessitated by reproductive labour such as homeschooling and childcare during school closures means we may never have the opportunity to make up this time and ‘produce’ the recognizable and valued outputs of academic labor (publications, winning grants, etc). As all academics look for ways to carry-out research during a pandemic, those employed on short-term teaching contracts and those in postdoctoral positions do not have the luxury of time to rethink methods or reconfigure research agendas. Our academic jobs rarely provide us with the tools we require to do our work -laptops, computers, office space etc. The material burden of working from home during the pandemic requires further out of pocket expenses, including accessing quality equipment for online course delivery, reliable internet service, and not to mention a quiet, private space at home.

Covid-19 has brought to the forefront how our precarious positions -namely how we lack basic employment allocations for the realities of life such as sick time, the temporal limits of short-term work, and the material burden of contract employment. These things all compound the already existing barriers to entering the academic pipeline. Rather than beginning the conversation with the leaky pipeline, our lived experiences shows that more than ever, the pathway towards sta-

ble careers are stalled or even indefinitely blocked. As people across sectors look at ways to refashion work, we see this as an apt time to consider how to create liveable academic careers for all. In our future pieces planned for this newsletter 2020-2021 academic year, we will unpack further the reality of precarious academic work, including mobility and networking, and the material costs, and offer best practices and recommendations in going forward.

CAUT During the Pandemic

by Karen Harper

On the morning of Friday March 13, I finally decided to cancel my trip to Ottawa for the CAUT (Canadian Association of University Teachers) Forum for Chief Negotiators the following week. A half hour later, the Forum was cancelled. Throughout that day our world changed as universities across the country announced that all courses would be moved online.

CAUT's mission is to provide support for its member faculty organizations. It normally does this through its in-person Council, Forums, conferences, workshops and other meetings. Whereas some activities can transition easily to a remote format such as seeking assistance from individual staff at CAUT, other activities cannot. Council was only a few hours long compared to a few days. The Forum I was supposed to attend and others have not yet been rescheduled.

Instead, CAUT is using the new Zoom format of providing support for its member organizations specifically for dealing with the response of universities to the pandemic. Some of you might have attended some of their Covid-19 and the Academic Job Town Hall series, which included a session specifically on contract academic staff. I have also attended a training course on analyzing university financial statements and webinars such as Labour Under Attack. Our Outreach Coordina-

tor and I participate in CAUT's Fall Organizing School. CAUT has also provided member associations with a template for a letter of understanding with the employer during the pandemic, actions to advance equity and institutional plans for delivery of courses this fall (e.g., mostly online, blended or in-person), and notified us of events such as the Scholars Strike. They have conducted and reported results of surveys of students and academic staff in the aftermath of moving to remote teaching. CAUT continues to actively lobby the government on our behalf and has circulated petitions on the affordability of post-secondary education, funding for universities and climate change action. If you would like more information on any of these activities, please contact me.

CUPE 3912

General Meeting

**Friday November 13
@ 2 pm, Online**



To RSVP for the meeting, contact our Membership Officer, Fallen Matthews (kittiefallen@gmail.com), by Nov. 11. A link will be sent to those who have RSVP'd prior to the meeting.

The meeting will include updates on bargaining and the elections for:

- VP, Dalhousie Truro Campus
- VP, Teaching Assistants at Dal (Studley Campus)
- VP, Part-time Instructors at MSVU
- Trustee
- Additional members of the bargaining committees

Ideas and nominations for CUPE 3912 committees are welcome!

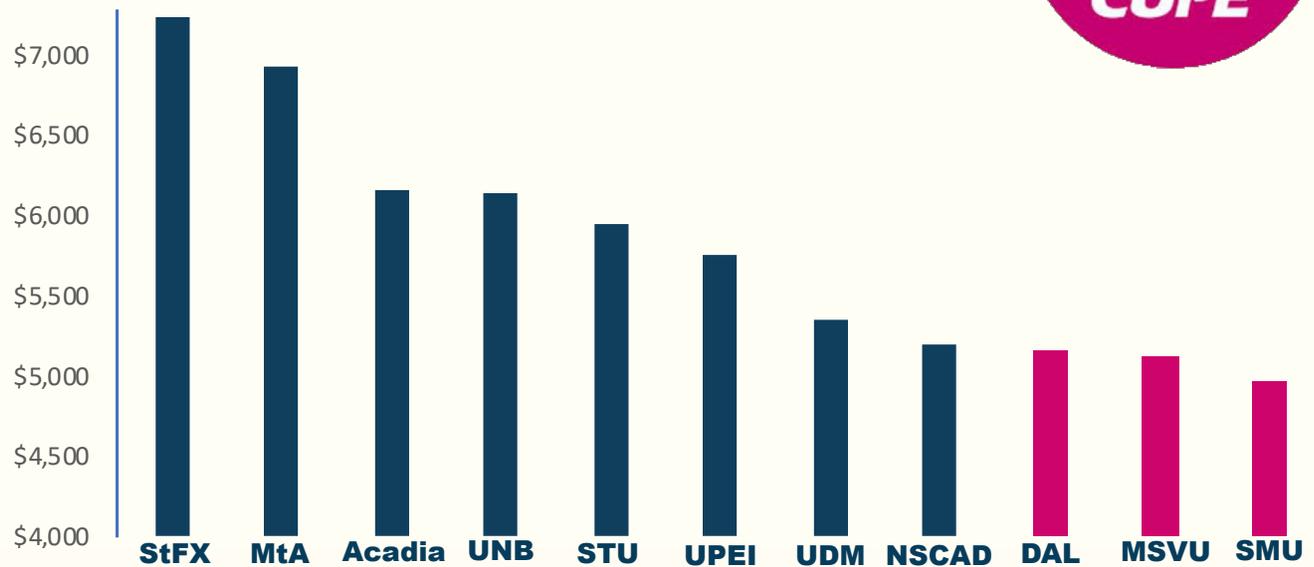
If you are interested in standing for election for any of these positions please contact us. To be nominated, you must attend the meeting or submit your nomination beforehand to president.cupe3912@gmail.com

Nominations of members of marginalized groups are encouraged.

All members are welcome.

Together, We Can Make It Fair

In Halifax and Truro



Base Salary for 3-Credit Course in Maritime Universities in 2018-19

Source: CAUT Facts & Figures CAS stipends table

Part-Time Instructors: We Deserve Better

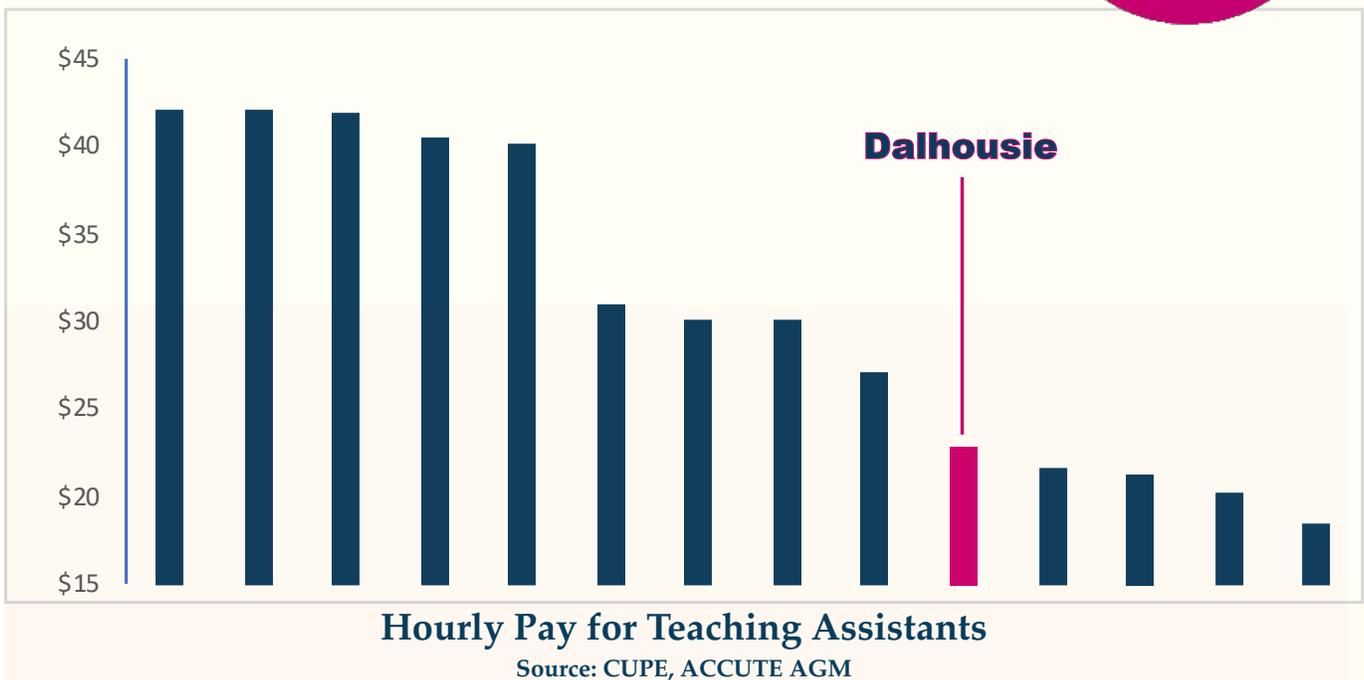
Get Involved:

Contact: part.time.liason.3912@gmail.com

Send Ideas to: president.cupe3912@gmail.com

Together, We Can Make It Fair

In Halifax and Truro



Teaching Assistants: We Deserve Better

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