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THE INSTRUCTOR

How Our Strike Vote Helped with Mobilization

Karen Harper, CUPE 3912 President



It is usually the other way around. Mobilization usually helps bring out employees to vote for a strike. My experience is that our strike vote helped mobilize our members. First as communications officer and then as president I have been trying to increase engagement and mobilization for years. I and others have tried workshops, panel discussions, family picnics, pub nights, weekly emails, newsletters, mobilization committees, t-shirts, zoom information sessions, etc. It has worked

somewhat. The number of members at meetings or completing surveys has increased and I have received many emails from members responding to my updates (thank you!). But a general meeting with 40 members, although more than we've had in the past, is still less than 1% of our membership.

My feeling has always been that our membership is interested but quiet. The strike vote showed that this is true; that our members have been waiting for

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the right issue. A vote for a strike mandate to demand fair wages for our members at Dal was serious, important and urgent enough to mobilize our members to get out the vote. It was still a challenge. We used emails, webpages, social media, texting (for the first time), phoning, posters, info sessions and an outdoor session giving away granola bars with stickers. We also discovered additional barriers such as the employer only providing phone numbers (for phoning and texting) for about 40% of our members with many of those numbers lacking the area code or out of service. Also our list of voters from the employer was incomplete because employees hired late were excluded. On the positive side, many of our members and DFA members took on the

initiative to pass on our message and formulate their own emails to reach our members. I heard from TAs and markers that found out about our strike vote from their instructor, and from grad students who received information and encouragement to vote from their departmental graduate student society.

Despite the challenges and thanks to those who helped, **we got a strike mandate!**

Not only did the strike vote mobilize well over half of our members currently employed at Dal to vote, but also it mobilized our members to volunteer! Soon after the strike vote, I had to fill out a form listing members of a committee we had not yet formed. When I emailed to ask

for volunteers, I was overwhelmed by the number of interested members. I could only choose four, but if or when we do plan a strike we will need a lot more volunteers to help with four pillars of strike planning: administration, finance, communications and picketing. You will probably hear more from me soon, but you can always contact [Dave](#) anytime you want to volunteer for CUPE 3912.

I sincerely hope and expect that this level of engagement and mobilization continues as we plan for a possible strike at Dal. As for SMU and the Mount members – stay tuned, you will likely get your turn soon.

Thank you so much to everyone who helped and voted!

Defending Academic Freedom

Rima Azar, Associate Professor of Health Psychology, Mount Allison University

Are our universities at large still what they are supposed to be: places of free thinking, academic freedom/expression, and enriching debates? This article is a brief reflection on academic freedom using one case study—my own.

First and foremost, as a scientist, as a human being, and as a “deer” on my personal blog, I see myself as a classical liberal who strongly believes in free thinking, free expression for **all**, and in enriching exchange and debates of ideas. In my opinion, this is what universities are all about. Indeed, if at our institutions of higher education, we can no



Rima Azar (centre) with her students and lab staff

longer openly express our thoughts, raise questions, and explore the boundaries of

knowledge, even when the latter may be uncomfortable, then where?

Bearing the above in mind, in July 2019, I started my blog, called [Bambi's Akfar](#). "Bambi", or a little deer, is the meaning of my first name in Arabic, my mother tongue. "Akfar" means thoughts in Arabic. My blog's intent is to share my thoughts on current social, local, national, or even international issues.

Like any other scholar writing a personal blog, my writing is most likely influenced by who I am as a person, by my scholarly training, and work related to stress and resilience when facing adversity. There is a reason why I may have chosen my career in the field of health psychology, precisely developmental psychoneuroimmunology. My lab is called the *Psychobiology of Stress & Health Lab*.

Some of the topics that I touch, or any other academic will touch, may upset those who don't share these opinions. Nevertheless, disagreement should not turn into intolerance, mobbing, and even online threats, especially in universities supposedly protected by academic freedom and in a democratic society where freedom of expression is a constitutional right. We must all refuse discrimination and abuses to anyone, regardless of the expressed opinion.

It is still hard to precisely know which of my blog's posts upset the mob. For instance, it could have been one where I described New Brunswick and Canada as being welcoming instead of systemically racist. For instance, in the latter post entitled *"Even when fighting the noble anti-racism cause, it is sad*

to see NB youth being radicalized", I wrote: *"We are 37 million Canadians. Isn't it normal to have a few who would be truly racist or truly unwelcoming? We are about 745,000 New Brunswickers. Isn't it normal to meet a few who may be unwelcoming? However, this does not mean that our country is racist. NB is NOT racist. Canada is NOT racist"*. Alternatively, it could have been another post where I described *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) as being radical or having a radical approach to social issues. Regardless, on February 22, 2021, because I had the audacity to express some unpopular views, cause célèbre of the time, went against the most radical voices in the elite circles (the so-called "woke culture" in both English and French), I became a victim of a defamatory and even threatening social media lynch mob by individuals as well as campus student organizations.

On that same day, in a social media and email text with a trigger warning about my blog, and without ever consulting me, my employer invited students to submit complaints against me under Mount Allison University's anti-racism policy. This was followed by media articles about me/my blog. Following an independent report, my employer suspended me from work without pay and banned me from campus for seven months, from May to November 2021.

Isn't it sad and absurd to see some forgetting that everyone has the right to express a different opinion, including myself and/or yourself reading

this text right now? There is a reason why this right is protected under our laws and agreements.

Ironically, the mob came after me in Canada, and not my birth country where I may be at times critical about certain powerful groups and where freedom of speech is known to be under attack.

When immigrants, newer or older ones including myself, flee their troubled countries of origin and arrive in their adoptive countries, they are grateful to the latter for safety, values, and opportunities. Indeed, when coming from fragmented and unstable birth countries, torn by civil war or other crises, where innocent people can be killed because of aspects of their identities, including religion, sexual orientation, or political opinion, it is natural to: (1) be lucid about the dangers of divisive identity-based politics, or modern forms of sectarianism, that are on the rise in countries like Canada; and (2) appreciate all what their adoptive countries offer them.

Of note, among Canada's beautiful values, it is precisely freedom that attracts immigrants and newcomers the most and that makes them proud to call our country their home. This is why attacks on academic freedom shock them, as they wonder, along with their fellow Canadians, about the following: Is intellectual intolerance the climate of universities and societies we want for our children and children of our children?

We talk about diversity a lot nowadays in our workplaces, in society, and media. Diversity is supposed to be enriching in life. To genuinely be so, it is vital to remember to respect intellectual diversity. Isn't respect the best antidote to discrimination, racism, or any potential abuse in life? Isn't respect of different academic opinions what enriches the search for the truth, equips university graduates with intellectual curiosity, critical sense, and tools to acquire knowledge?

Beyond any specific case, we must avoid falling into the trap of taking academic freedom

and/or freedom of expression for granted—regardless of the expressed views. In other terms, it is vital to constantly protect freedom for all. If we stop venerating the latter, as a cherished value or principle, especially in so-called “controversial” cases with which we disagree, it is only a matter of time until each one of us will lose freedom.

Thankfully for me, the silver lining is that my Mount Allison University's union (MAFA) as well as the Canadian Union of University Teachers (CAUT) are supportive of my case. The arbitration between MAFA, which is representing me as a

faculty member, and my employer is set to take place in April and May, 2022. CAUT is supporting MAFA and I am grateful.

No one deserves such treatment, regardless of the point of view. Tragically, many will now stop expressing themselves freely out of fear because of my story. Again, is this healthy in our universities, and by extension, society?

Today, it is my turn to be attacked for my views. Who will be next?

Full-Time Precarity

Larissa Atkison, CUPE 3912 VP MSVU

In early April 2022, a few of us participated in supplemental interviews for the next President of Mount Saint Vincent University. In response to a question on part-time precarity, one of the candidates exclaimed, “no one could expect to make a living stringing together part-time teaching contracts, it's impossible!”

This statement was not meant to be cruel or ironic. The candidate was quick to admit that part-time per course compensation is terrible. This had just not struck them as particularly problematic, because they believed (coming from a business background) that most contract academics have full-time careers and therefore accept low stipends as a “way of giving back to the community.”

This episode warrants unpacking.

Doctoral programs across North America accept far more students than could ever be employed on the academic job market. Between 2002 and 2017, the number of students admitted to PhD programs in Canada more than [doubled](#), yet the number of academic jobs has remained constant. Moreover, only [one third](#) of those who complete their PhDs typically find full-time academic positions. As is often the case, these numbers are even worse for women, who earn 19 percent less than their male counterparts, and are more likely to end up in precarious academia. This is no accident. University administrators have come to rely on an overabundance of unplaced (in

tenure-track positions) academics to deliver undergraduate instruction at discount rates.^[1] This cost-saving measure has allowed universities to continue to invest in new buildings, infrastructure, and administrative raises, even at a time of decreasing [provincial funding](#).

The term “part-time instructor,” used at all three institutions in the HRM to describe precarious teaching, is designed to belie this undignified reality. Part-time terminology signals an arms-length relationship between universities and precarious faculty, where the latter are categorized as occasional and dispensable workers. It allows university administrators to shirk their responsibility to provide precarious academics full-time supports, including

benefits, pensions, office space, paid leave, access to meaningful professional development, and a voice in university governance.

Sure, some CUPE 3912 members do fit the Mount candidate's description. Those who teach in professional faculties such as business, nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, medicine, law, and so on, often do teach as a side gig to supplement full careers. Some also teach part-time at the end of their careers, whether they be retired faculty or other professionals.

But the [reality](#) is that most contract faculty in our union and across the country do strive to string together enough contract teaching to equal a full-time job.

In this sense, the Mount candidate was insightful. Making a [living wage](#) as precarious faculty is incredibly difficult. In the HRM, an entry-level instructor would have to string together at least nine CUPE 3912 teaching contracts (4.5 full credits) each year to achieve a living wage. So much for research! Senior CUPE 3912 instructors would likewise need to teach seven courses a year to earn the same. The bar here is low. We are talking about the amount of work that is required to make ends meet month to month – we are not talking about compensation that adequately reflects years of professional training and expertise or that corresponds to the hours of (research-supported) work that university level teaching involves.

The situation is particularly bad in our local.

True, CUPE 3912 members have access to three universities in the HRM, all of which heavily rely on cheap part-time teaching. But the market is bloated and there is simply not enough contract teaching work to go around. In this context, the old tenet that achieving precedence is a matter of waiting one's turn no longer holds true. It is not uncommon for new members to land only one contract a year at each institution – if they are lucky. At this rate it would (and often does) take years to gain precedence and the accompanying pay increases and minimal security that go with it. In most cases, it is simply not possible for a junior CUPE 3912 member to earn a living wage as a university instructor..

Moreover, because our compensation is so incredibly low, those who are at the top end of the seniority scale are incentivized to take on excessive teaching loads to establish a basic degree of financial security (in the absence of pensions, benefits, paid leave, and so on). Members who have precedence at multiple institutions could, theoretically, teach as many as 24 courses a year to offset terrible per course compensation. Of course, the prospect of teaching 24 courses a year sounds absurd – it is! But it is not unheard of for CUPE 3912 members to teach 15-18 courses a year. Who can blame them, when bulk teaching is the only mechanism available to increase their meagre income year over year?

Both situations are untenable and mutually compounding. The excessive teaching burden that some members are driven to accept to secure basic financial stability means that there are fewer jobs to go around. This makes it very difficult for new members to make ends meet, let alone earn anything close to a living wage. Excessive teaching also sets a bad precedent with our employers. It conveys to administrators that teaching 5-6 courses a term is doable. This, in turn, allows employers to rest satisfied that we are fairly compensated for our work. Ultimately, it undermines our capacity to advocate for fair compensation based on realistic assessments of the time it takes to teach a university-level course well.

The standard [rule of thumb](#) for undergraduate teaching is that each hour of teaching should involve approximately three hours of prep time. This does not include time spent with students in office hours, it does not include grading, or emailing, or any of the other increasingly time-consuming technological aspects of our job. If these numbers are reliable, which personal experience and [anecdotal reporting](#) support, then a 3-credit course with three hours of class time per week, would require anywhere from 12 to 20 hours per/week, depending on whether teaching it is a new or established prep.

In other words, if we assume a standard 40-hour work-week for our “full-time” teaching members, then an ideal teaching load should be no more than three courses a term, give or

take, based on experience, subject matter, enrollment numbers, and assignment structure.

As we've already established, it's not only difficult for junior CUPE 3912 members to secure work, they will also work more hours for each new contract – this is especially true for [women and minorities](#). If teaching nine courses is impossible due to limited availability of work and unadvisable given the time each required for each new prep, a more feasible full-time workload of 6-8 courses a year for junior faculty would be only marginally easier to secure and result in an annual income that is significantly less than a living wage.

Likewise, if senior members were to limit themselves to a realistic full-time teaching load of 9-10 courses a year including the semester break for professional development, restoration, research etc., that is available to full-time teachers in all education sectors (elementary, secondary, and post-secondary), they would max out their earning potential at just over a living wage.

In no way is the above scenario acceptable, yet somehow this is the reality that many of us have accepted.

One response to these disturbing facts, implied by the Mount presidential candidate, is that junior faculty should cut

their losses and move on. This does seem like the only option when the alternative is to wait years for sufficient teaching credits to get by. But leaving academia is not as easy as it sounds – for most of us. Recent studies from [CAUT](#) and [CAS](#) report that contract faculty hang on, despite terrible work conditions, because they love teaching and feel a commitment to their students; others see themselves as biding time as they wait for the [rare](#) golden egg (even as this tenure-track employment becomes increasingly unlikely the longer one remains in precarious employment). There are also extraneous factors, such as family and geography that require academics to stay put in a given location. Sunk costs play a role too: academics typically spend more than a decade training to work in universities. Why should they give up the work they're highly trained to do and love just because academic administrators are greedy? This may be an impossible bind but it's one many precarious academics choose to endure for reasons that run deeper than their financial interests.

What about senior part-timers? Why should those who have spent their time rising through a system which rewards endurance choose to give up their course loads, even if the work is exhausting? After all, those who have been around long enough, know that we've made very little progress in

pushing our base stipend above \$5,000/course, despite advocating for pay increases on par with the rest of Atlantic Canada and other comparable institutions [since the mid 1990s](#). A realistic assessment of our limited progress in increasing per course compensation over the past 25 years, would almost certainly support a strategy of accumulating as much available work as possible.

I would like to suggest, however, that we do not have to choose between protecting seniority and advancing employment equity and living wages. As I see it, the end game is clear: we need full-time positions (including stability and benefits) for full-time work, and reasonable per course compensation for those who do not desire to teach full-time. We also require a clear and defensible account of the amount of work that goes into a single course from which we can advocate for reasonable part and full-time teaching course-loads and supporting benefits.

We do not need to accept the double bind that has been imposed on us by institutional actors who stand to benefit from our division and inequity. We are at an important moment in the struggle for labour equity across the nation and within our local. How we organize to establish and achieve our demands is up to our members; let's just not let this moment go to waste.