

UVic teaching assistants launch unionization drive

BY MARY VALLIS

VICTORIA (CUP) — Teaching assistants at another Canadian university have launched a unionization drive in the wake of painful cutbacks.

Earlier this month, signing cards were distributed to teaching assistants at the University of Victoria — the first step towards unionizing an estimated 900 academic workers on the campus with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

Under the B.C. Labour Code, organizers have to collect signatures from 55 per cent of the university's TAs before they can be considered for certification by the province's Labour Relations Board. An application can then be made to CUPE.

"So far, we've had a fairly positive

response from people," said drive organizer, Jodi Jensen.

Teaching assistants at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario recently launched a unionization drive of their own, fearing the impact of budget cuts in their province.

And TAs and part-time instructors at Dalhousie are unionized, but are calling for a strike vote to protest low wages.

Jensen says the union drive at UVic is the result of recent cutbacks in jobs and wages, which have intensified long-standing dissatisfaction among TAs.

UVic teaching assistants have seen teaching hours, office hours and lab sections evaporate in the wake of campus-wide cuts, and as a result have seen their wages drop by as much as 20 per cent.

In the chemistry department, for example, the TA work-term has been cut to 14 weeks from 17. And the number of TA positions in the biology department has dropped from 43 to 33.

Because of cuts like these, Peter Lane, a member of CUPE who is also involved in the drive, says the organizing effort is getting support from non-traditional areas.

"When TA unions have organized on other campuses, they've tended to be really successful in arts and met with apprehension in sciences," Lane said. But at UVic, science students have been among the most vocal in favour of organizing.

There is no minimum pay level for TAs at UVic. The average wage is \$16 per hour (though wages are calculated at a salary amount for the semester).

Jensen says the average wage at the University of British Columbia, where teaching assistants are unionized, is \$25 an hour.

Simon Holgate, vice president of the graduate student union, says teaching assistants across campus are concerned with arbitrary decisions being made about their jobs without formal input from the TAs themselves.

A survey commissioned by the student union last fall found that more than 85 per cent of respondents were in favor of a collective bargaining structure.

"It's time to negotiate a real contract," said Laurel Clouston, a chemistry graduate student and TA.

"There's a long history of

dissatisfaction on campus," Jensen said.

"[Teaching assistants] haven't been able to resolve problems and they keep recurring."

It has been difficult to organize the TAs on campus, she adds, because they have such short job terms and high turnover rates.

UVic vice president of academics Penny Coddling would not comment on the unionization drive.

The Canadian Union of Public Employees represents TAs on 20 campuses across Canada. Jensen says UVic, with the exception of Alberta schools, is one of the only large universities in Canada where TAs aren't unionized.

Memorial investigation finds prof abused student

BY DAVID COCHRANE

ST. JOHN'S (CUP) — A Memorial University professor has been suspended for one month without pay after a university investigation found that he harassed and slandered one of his students.

But Aziz Rahman of the engineering department has appealed the decision and the matter will be heard by an arbitrator before the suspension can be carried out.

A formal complaint was filed against Rahman in August 1996 by Rokonzaman, an engineering graduate student. Rokonzaman, or Rokon as he is known, accused Rahman of "exploiting his academic, personal and professional life" since 1995 while serving as the student's graduate advisor.

"I was humiliated and I suffered tremendous psychological damage over that," Rokon said.

Rokon came to Canada from Bangladesh in 1993 with the help of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). He was also on paid leave from the Bangladesh Institute of Technology, where he works as a lecturer.

Shortly after Rokon submitted his master's thesis in the spring of 1995, he says Rahman asked him to paint his house. Rokon refused, citing a medical condition and saying it was improper for a professor to ask students to do domestic work. Rokon says Rahman wouldn't take no for an answer and pressured the graduate student to do chores.

"I realized that as long as I was his graduate student, I would be plagued with a perpetual fear of having to perform domestic chores for him," Rokon wrote in his notice of complaint.

Rokon also accused Rahman of arbitrarily changing the thesis topic he had prepared for his PhD program, as well as providing inaccurate and defamatory information in progress reports to the development agency.

He also said Rahman gave false information to local police when Rokon was being investigated for allegations of spousal abuse during 1996 and 1997.

Rokon was later acquitted of all

"I [was] plagued with a perpetual fear of having to perform domestic chores for him,"

charges.

Rokon's initial request for a full investigation of his complaint was initially denied by Greg Kealey, the dean of graduate studies.

In a letter to Rokon, Kealey said some of Rahman's actions "left themselves open to interpretation" but that he could not find enough confirmation of the complaints to warrant a formal investigation.

Not satisfied with Kealey's response, Rokon wrote to Jaap Tuinman, Memorial's vice-president academic, and asked him to pursue the matter. Last summer Tuinman asked Christine Fagan, a local lawyer, to do an independent investigation of Rokon's complaints.

In November Tuinman wrote to Rokon to tell him Rahman had been suspended for mistreating the student. Tuinman specifically pointed to Rahman's asking Rokon to paint his house, tampering with the student's PhD program, providing incorrect information about Rokon's immigration status, making inaccurate

and inflammatory statements to the police and making gratuitous, incorrect and damaging statements about Rokon in reports to the development agency.

"I concluded that Dr. Rahman's attempts to discredit and harm you were a serious abuse of his position as a professor and constituted totally unacceptable conduct," Tuinman wrote in the Nov. 27 letter.

Rahman is refusing to comment on the allegations until after the matter goes to arbitration. He is, however, maintaining his innocence and says he will be cleared of any wrong-doing.

"I have never experienced in my lifetime this sort of a story," Rahman said in an interview. "But it is a part of life working in a university such as Memorial."

"I have done nothing wrong. Nothing."

Rokon, of course, disagrees. He says the professor got off easy and should have been suspended for at least a year or even lost his job. He adds that if Rahman doesn't receive a harsher punishment he may take the issue to court. The grad student says he is also considering a civil case against Rahman to get compensation for the damage he says has been done to his reputation.

"I'm not happy with that outcome," Rokon said. "I have gone through this process and I have suffered humiliation and embarrassment."

Rahman has appealed his suspension and the case will go to two separate arbitration hearings. At the first hearing, scheduled for mid-February, Rahman will challenge Tuinman's right to appoint Fagan, a person from outside the university, to do a fact-finding study of an internal complaint. The second hearing, scheduled for March, will challenge the suspension itself.

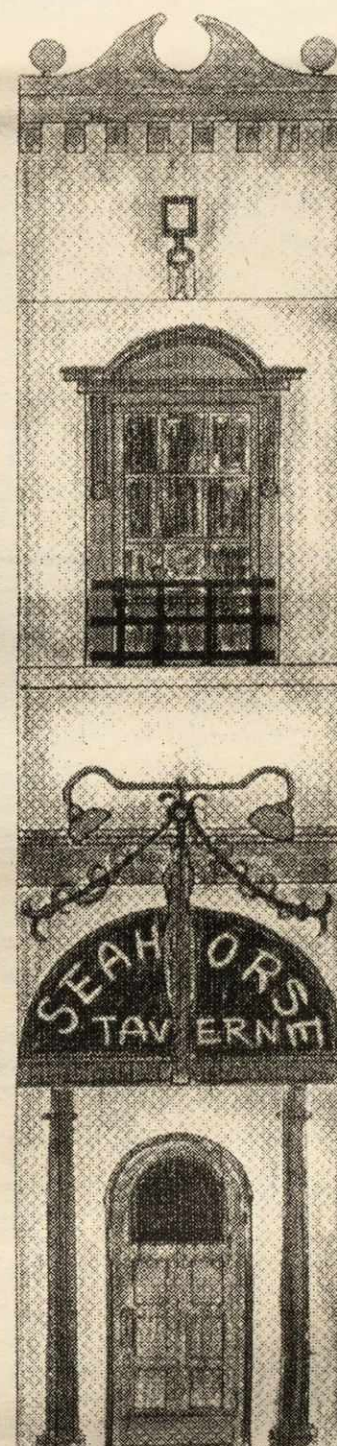
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