

# Graduate union opposes large class sizes

By **ROBIN ENDRES**  
(for the GAA executive)

The Graduate Assistants' Association (the union of teaching assistants and part time teachers at York) is conducting a campaign against large class sizes. Why has the GAA chosen this issue as a priority, and what is its relevance to students?

There are two reasons why class size is a crucial issue for the union. The first concerns job security. For the past several years, as cutbacks have meant very little hiring of new full time faculty, part timers have been hired to replace those resigning or on leave of absence. This practice was followed because from the administration's point of view, TAs and part timers are very cheap — about half the cost per course of a full time person. Recently, however, even this saving has been considered too extravagant, and when full time faculty leave, in many cases no new TAs or part timers are hired. Their students are distributed over the existing seminars.

Thus the size of classes has been steadily increasing. The union is conducting a survey or just what the exact figures are; meanwhile we can really on our own experiences to indicate that it is not at all unusual to have between 25 and 35 students in one seminar. There is every likelihood that the hiring of part timers and TAs could be frozen, and even, in the not too distant future, that there will be layoffs. Limiting class size is one of the few possible guarantees we could have of holding on to our jobs.

## CLASS SIZE

Of course, the administration is just as aware of this, and when we negotiated our first contract would not budge on any question related to job security.

Our second reason for raising the question of class size is consistent with our claim that unionization of teachers can help to raise, not lower, academic standards. Unionization has not meant, as some would claim, that we are only concerned with getting a better deal for ourselves. On the contrary our concern for the quality of education has not diminished, and

we are able now, through the existence of our organization, to give voice to this concern and take relevant action.

The high school teachers' slogan of a few years ago should be revived: "Crowded classrooms crowd the mind." There can be no question that the impossibility of giving each student some measure of individual attention in over-sized classes decreases our effectiveness as teachers. It is simply a very frustrating experience to know that from five to ten students in a class are "invisible". Many part-timers who teach two or more sections still did not know all their students by name by the end of the first term. Often those students most needing help are least aggressive in seeking it, and the besieged teacher often too harried to notice.

## SEMINARS IDEAL

Seminars ideally are informal discussions of lectures and assigned readings. Large classes mean that the teacher gives another lecture, or conducts a discussion with the talkative few. Teaching in these conditions becomes increasingly futile and alienating.

The situation engenders hostility on both sides — students and teachers both resent each other. We feel, however, that it is of the utmost importance to stress that there is a basis for unity here. Both students and teachers want the quality of education improved, and both face a common threat: cutbacks.

It's significant that students are not raising the question of alienation, of the multiversity, of "feeling like a number". These concerns of the late sixties and early seventies seem to have dissipated. From our observation, students do seem to be concerned about marks more than anything else. Is this an indication that student radicalism has ended?

The class composition of students at York appears to have changed somewhat in the last few years. Formerly known as one of the richer, "playground" campuses in Ontario, York now has an

increasing number of second generation immigrants in its student body. For the majority of these students, a university education involves a great deal of hard work and sacrifice on the part of their parents. Indeed, with inflation and wage controls, the same can be said for all students except the children of the very rich.

Students' concerns have become economic — finding the money for increased tuition, finding a summer job, and above all, getting good enough grades to return so that they and their parents' investment won't be in vain. These concerns are more truly radical, since they involve questions about the attack on working people by the federal government's wage controls and unemployment policies, and about the accessibility of post-secondary education, increasingly undermined by the education policies of the provincial government.

## ILLITERACY?

The question of alleged "illiteracy" of first year students has been kept alive in the press throughout the fall, and contains some complex and not all positive features. On the one hand, it is true that the standard of writing has dropped considerably since English was no longer a compulsory subject in the high schools. On the other hand, the excessive wailing in articles and letters to editors in the daily press is

questionable. The issue is, in fact, being raised in some quarters as a justification for cutbacks. Some faculty members, for example, has been known to shake their heads sadly, saying, "They really shouldn't be here, you know." or "They're not really university material." Recommendations for tests to "weed out" students who need remedial help should be carefully monitored to make sure they don't "weed out" students from university altogether.

While there have been no explicit moves to limit enrolment on the grounds of inadequate preparation for university, the climate created by the fuss about "illiteracy" tends to make limited enrolment palatable, and to mask the fact that accessibility is limited by lack of economic ability, not lack of academic merit.

Presumably some teachers, full and part time, see more stringent entrance requirements as the solution to overly large classes. This is naive in the extreme. Even though the funds to the university are no longer tied to enrolment (the basic income unit), fewer students will not mean more money to hire faculty, but will be used as a justification for continuing freezes and possible layoffs.

## NEED HELP

Meanwhile, students at York, particularly first year students who are mostly taught by TAs and part

timers, are in fact receiving low and failing grades on their essays. More, not less faculty, and smaller classes are essential to help solve this problem. Far from being cynical about their work, most students are working very hard to try and improve their grades. Without individual help from teachers, however, they understandably become frustrated and confused.

We have said nothing so far about science courses, but the issue of class size is important here as well. While the writing of essays is not a concern, overall ability to learn in the most important setting — the lab — is impaired by large classes. Furthermore, in physics and chemistry there is a very real consideration of safety in the lab when two demonstrators are attempting to supervise sixty or more students. It is to be hoped that we won't have to wait until someone is injured before this situation is ameliorated.

We are not merely asking for students to support us in our class size campaign. We are saying that it is to our mutual interest to have smaller classes, and that this campaign should be seen as part of a larger strategy to fight the cutbacks which are squeezing teachers and students alike out of the university and undermining the quality of education which is our common concern.

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