

University of Winnipeg students face looming strike

BY NICOLE C. ROSEVERE

WINNIPEG (CUP) — Will they or won't they? That's the question being asked by University of Winnipeg students as the threat of a faculty walk-out looms over their campus.

The faculty's last contract expired Mar. 31, 1997, and the faculty association and the administration have spent the last year negotiating a new deal.

During this time the terms of the old contract have still been in effect. But come Mar. 31, the old terms are no longer valid and U of W faculty will effectively be without any sort of agreement.

Members of the faculty association voted to authorize their executive to call a strike if a settlement is not reached soon. Just over 87 per cent of those participating in the vote cast ballots in favour of the strike mandate.

As the end of the month approaches, students are growing more concerned about their future.

"[Because it is] close to finals and graduation, I am somewhat concerned that this will disrupt my future plans and job prospects. A

delay at this time would be really aggravating," said Richard Roberts, a business studies student.

According to Allen Mills, president of the faculty association, one of the main issues at stake is pay parity with professors at the University of Manitoba.

"Our salaries are significantly lower than faculty and instructors at the U of M and our typical course load is higher," he said.

Mills adds that the situation is exacerbated by the fact that many U of W faculty and instructors teach in programs offered jointly by the two universities.

Other faculty concerns include instructors losing salary through days off without pay and a plan for the university to shorten the time it takes to declare programs redundant and lay off faculty.

But Mills says he is optimistic that an agreement will be reached soon.

"My hope is that it would be resolved before it goes to strike," he said.

The administration shares this outlook.

"[A strike vote] is not an uncommon occurrence during negotiations," said Joan Anderson, a

spokesperson for the university.

"There are a number of things that might happen but we hope to have a contract in place before the end of the month."

"Students, while they recognize that their professors have valid concerns, are frustrated with the situation.

"Students are in the position of being between a rock and a hard place and that's totally unfair," said Sherri Parent, a conflict resolutions student. "It's difficult to support the faculty — but I do."

The two sides were in conciliation talks Mar. 18 and 19. Elizabeth Carlyle, president of the U of W

student union, says they should have students on their minds as they negotiate.

"We haven't taken a stand on issues, but we support the faculty's right to take job action. We hope both parties will negotiate in good faith and keep students' interests in mind."

Tax man comes a knocking

BY SARAH SCHMIDT

OTTAWA (CUP) — Debt-ridden slackers who skip out on their provincial student loans will soon get hit up by Revenue Canada.

New legislation before the House of Commons would allow provinces to tap into the federal income tax return system to collect on defaulted provincial student loans.

Currently, only the federal government can skim off the top of income tax returns as a last-ditch effort to collect on delinquent student loans.

"It's not a regular measure of collection," said Jean Wright of the Canada Student Loans program about the five-year-old federal collection law.

"It's a last resort. It was a fiscal measure brought in to enhance recovery of debts to the Crown."

But provincial collectors are welcoming the news that they too will be able to use this tough-love measure in an era of rising default rates.

"Even if they get an extra nickel, it's a nickel," said Leslie Nanos, head of the collections branch of the Ontario government's Management

Board.

The board is currently chasing down 45,000 defaulters (18,640 in 1997 alone). This represents a \$150-million bill to the province if the money goes uncollected.

But the province says they're hoping the privatization of the collection of defaulted provincial student loans, to be in place by the fall, will bring the default numbers down.

"As a last ditch attempt, we're going to the federal set-off program. That's the last recourse," Nanos said.

Ontario will, however, hand over 5,000 cases when the tax bill becomes law to test it out.

According to Canada Student Loans statistics, approximately seven per cent of all student borrowers between 1960 and 1995 didn't pay back their loans.

Elizabeth Carlyle, national chair-elect of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), says this isn't what the federation had in mind when it lobbied the federal government for harmonious loans packages across the country.

"It's a dishonest way of presenting what harmonization is supposed to be. All this means is having greater

access to limited student funds," she said. "But it's in line with the government's current record of dealing with debt management rather than dealing with the root issues."

Carlyle pointed to the new student bankruptcy legislation currently working its way through Parliament as evidence of governments implementing punitive measures rather than debt-reduction steps in an era of rising tuition fees and student debt levels.

Under the new law, students will have to wait 10 years after they leave the education system before they can declare bankruptcy to clear their student debt. The waiting period is currently two years.

But Kristian Martel, spokesperson for Ontario's Management Board, says measures being taken by the federal government such as the tax return and bankruptcy legislation is just what the province is looking for.

"We are in it together. We said we wanted improvements and that's one we could agree to go with," she said.

It has not been worked out how the feds and the provinces will split the income tax return if the student has defaulted at both levels.

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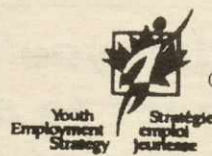
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