

Never a strike

Labour history at Dalhousie

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The current labour-management problem between the International Union of Operating Engineers and the University is not an isolated case in the history of labour relations at Dalhousie. The Dalhousie Staff Association was founded in 1971, and reorganized in 1974-75 as a collective bargaining unit. The maintenance workers Canadian Union of Public Employees local was formed in the same period. The IOUE is the only union, a trade union, that has been active at Dalhousie for an extended length of time.

The two new unions were formed for a variety of reasons. The DSA formed in 1971 for the avowed purpose of improving communications with the University Administration. Others have suggested that the struggles the DSA went through to establish itself as a bargaining unit in 1974 were responses to the paternalism of the University Administration and to the low wage scales offered by the University. The CUPE local formed because wages are below the poverty line as established by Statistics Canada and there is no job security. Since that period of union-forming in 1974 the value of collective bargaining has become increasingly apparent to the DSA and the CUPE local.

Throughout the past five years, the worker, as a part of the Dalhousie "community", has come under increasing pressure from the Administration. The maintenance staff, physical plant employees, support staff and even the faculty, have felt the reins being tightened financially. Yet all problems are not financial. Increasingly, the Administration has reduced staff, hired outsiders, cut benefits, and has "rationalized" their operations in complete disregard of the human costs involved.

Dalhousie purports to be committed to protecting the quality of higher education and maintaining equal accessibility of all classes of our society. But this democratic image is contradicted by its flat disregard for the reasonable needs of its employees.

The University says the standards of education will decrease if more of the pie goes to workers. Therefore it openly admits that workers, and their welfare, means little to them. In the words of one worker, "They say they don't have enough money to pay us a living wage, but they usually find the money to buy houses and pay administrators \$25,000 a year. We'd be better off on welfare than working for Dal." Is it any wonder then that the employees of this

University organized unions?

Since 1970 the University has been confronted by its employees resulting in the formation of associations (Dalhousie Faculty Association) and collective bargaining units (CUPE and DSA). Dalhousie paternalism and the concept of the "Dalhousie family" led to worker disillusionment, frustration, and dissatisfaction.

For years the Administration, feared unionism because they did not understand the concept.

A union is a group of people coming together for purposes of

event that the University becomes subject to the guidelines (AIB guidelines-ed.), the University will use its best efforts to support the Collective Agreement in its totality." (Dal. Gaz., 7 Oct., 1976).

It is doubtful the University Administration lived up to this agreement and could only have profited by the roll back that occurred in the fall of 1976. The AIB was the agent used by the Administration to collect excess wages from the CUPE workers. The University applied the funds collected (approximately \$100,000) to

seem to have been extravagant. The pay of outside workers in comparable jobs continues to outpace the employees of Dalhousie by substantial amounts. Parity with the outside workers has been the most extreme demand by any of the unions. The DSA, CUPE, and IOUE, all have conciliators looking into their claims. This is not a good reflection on the behavior of the Administration in the ongoing negotiations.

In the administering of money given the University by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission for operating expenses, the University reigns supreme. All the talk about Dalhousie being able to only pay a 5.5 percent increase to its employees is a red herring. The university cuts the monetary pie, with the smallest slice going to its workers. If Dalhousie refuses to offer a higher percentage because of the MPHEC grant, it is not the fault of the MPHEC, it is the administration's inequitable distribution of funds and misdirected priorities which should be blamed. When asked at the Student Council meeting of November 22, 1977 about the pie and the workers slice, Vice-President Vagianos refused to answer. His reply begs the question of cover-up and negligence.

The student council recently washed its hands of the IOUE strike, courageously calling on both sides to return to the negotiating table. It rationalized its fence-straddling with the argument that its main concern was the well being of Dalhousie students, a concern not ostensibly shared by either university or union.

If recent history has shown us anything, it is that students—for reasons of simple self-interest—can no longer think of themselves as a discrete, social group in transition from schoolroom to automatic affluence. Canada's rates of inflation and unemployment are among the highest in the industrialized democracies and many students—especially in underdeveloped Atlantic Canada—can look forward to sharing the preoccupations of the striking engineers.

The Dalhousie Student Council simply deceives the student body by its "plague on both your houses" approach. At the very least it has a responsibility to permit the fullest opportunities for open discussion and debate, of the implications of this strike. At the same time, students have a responsibility to themselves to support such debate in order to maintain democratic practices in the student union and perhaps, learn how to cope with employer intransigence when they cease being students.



collective strength; in obtaining decent wages, working conditions, benefits, and input into things which affect their livelihood. The means by which they achieve these goals is through collective bargaining with an employer and the ultimate power is the strike, the legal withdrawal of ones labour. In the case of the present strike, the union only wants the University to resume bargaining, which Dalhousie has refused to do. The strike as a weapon is not a senseless one, nor is it manipulated by union leadership. Democracy and votes make strikes. Workers vote to go on strike, knowing full well the economic consequences upon themselves and their families. But the choice is made by the workers; its a legal choice, a principled choice, and a powerful choice.

On this campus, CUPE local 1392, has come close to striking on two previous occasions. On January 28, 1976, CUPE voted in favour of a strike because of a threat from the Anti-Inflation Board to roll back the agreed upon contract between CUPE and the Administration. The strike was averted when the Dalhousie Administration signed the contract and promised "... in the

the University's debt. After the roll-back by the government, the majority of maintenance workers at Dalhousie remained with an income below the Statistic Canada poverty line. As one worker said, "As far as I'm concerned, the AIB is doing Dal's dirty work for them. They're going to save thousands of dollars on the backs of the poor." (Labour Supplement, 24 March, 1977)

The second incident in the past few years occurred last March. The CUPE local voted 81% in favour of strike action after the Administration reversed its position on sick leave. The Administration; namely Vagianos, MacNeill, and McKay; decided that sick leave should be tightened up, removing some of the job security that was formerly University policy (by previous contracts). The strike was stopped through a compromise. Another issue that arose at the time was the use of outside contractors. But this issue collapsed when the Administration agreed that the practice would end in areas where on-campus staff had competence.

There has been some serious trouble in the relations between the Dalhousie Administration and the unions. None of the union demands

several areas, it is not likely the government will find these needs more important than several hundred people who, though relatively poorly paid, do nonetheless have jobs?

And last year, when the administration did request more money than they were allotted, and when 1700 people including your 'sit on the fence' council members marched on Province House to back this demand, the students of Dalhousie were still faced with a sizeable tuition increase.

So in practicality, though we would like to see everyone in the world receive the wages he/she would like, it is felt by the student council that in this case the money would not be forthcoming from the government. In fact, the university would have to turn, at least in part,

to its other main source of income - tuition.

According to the **Gazette**, Dalhousie students were likely to receive a tuition increase even before the strike issue arose. So could the student council support a demand which would price many students out of an education? I must, it seems, remind the **Gazette** that the council is elected by the students to represent the students - not the university employees, nor the university administration. And as representatives of the students, we felt the best thing for the students was to remain neutral.

Further, for the information of the **Gazette**, our move was not without precedent. In an in-depth study of strikes on campus the Association of College Unions International published a report recom-

mending that the best thing for students was to remove themselves completely from any such dispute.

Finally two points about the concluding paragraph of your editorial.

Though the council did deliberate behind closed doors (to remove open dispute between union and administration representatives who had previously been present) our votes were recorded person by person so that anyone who is interested may look in the record to see how each councillor voted. Each of us would be more than happy to explain our reasons for our decision. And lastly, I am insulted by the **Gazette's** alignment of the student council with a particular political party. Members of both major Nova Scotian political parties sit on the

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Gazette impractical

To the Gazette:

I was amazed - shall I say disgusted? - with the editorial published in the **Dalhousie Gazette** on Nov. 24. While your treatment of the strike issue at Dalhousie seems ideologically sound, and would be nice, it appears to lack practicality.

The **Gazette** tells us that while they cannot afford the money for suitable raises, "the administration should be demanding that the provincial government immediately provide that money."

This is all well and good, but in a province with hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, and with a gross unemployment problem in