

5.5% not acceptable

Operating Engineers on strike

by Eric Lawson

The Dalhousie local, 968, of the International Union of Operating Engineers, representing many of the tradesmen and journeymen on campus, have taken legal strike action against the university. The union has been without a contract since February, and has been negotiating with the administration on issues concerning holidays, apprenticeship programmes, and wage rates.

When negotiations broke down in June, a conciliator was appointed, and he reported to the Minister of Labour on October 20. The university administration refused on the grounds that any negotiations concerning money were superfluous as the 5.5% increase was non-negotiable; both sides must agree to conciliation. Members of the union feel a strike could have been avoided if the university had agreed to conciliation.

The issues of holidays and apprenticeship have been contentious issues for the union since the contract expired. The union is asking for no reduction in the number of paid holidays and an apprenticeship programme for engineers who are only classified as "helpers" and who wish to become more skilled in their trade.

The union feels that "the money issue is being played up" so that the university can focus on it, and de-emphasize the importance of the other issues, of outside contracting, work schedules, and apprentice training.

The union claims that outside contracting cuts into their overtime, and that the administration employs outside workers paid at a construction rate substantially higher than the rate paid to Dalhousie employees doing the same work. The union finds this policy "degrading."

Several union employees have been classified as helpers for ten



Reg Fenerty, Business Agent for the Local Operating Engineers, at Tuesday night's emergency council meeting. The Dal student council decided to sit on the fence and urged both sides to return to the bargaining table.

years or more. The Department of Labour has accepted a union proposal for a five-year training programme leading to journeyman status, but management has refused to cooperate.

The principle public issue has been money. The union has asked for two dollars to be added to all wage rates, and the administration considers this to be "nothing short of ridiculous." Reg Fenerty, Business Agent for the union, said "this

may be so, but the 5.5% increase offered by the administration is equally ridiculous as it represents a decrease in actual spending power due to the rising cost of living" (projected at 8.8% for the coming year).

Vice-President Louis Vagianos, speaking for the administration, claims that money issues are simply not negotiable under the present Dalhousie budget. The university is currently labouring under a deficit of at least 4.3 million, and has not received sufficient funding from the government, endowment funds, and student tuition fees to meet even the steady rise in physical plant costs, much less increased salary demands on the part of university employees.

Under the existing budget, 5.5% is the wage increment figure across the board for all Dalhousie employees. Vagianos feels that because 6% is the maximum increase allowed under AIB guidelines, the university and the union are actually only a half a per cent apart in contract negotiations.

According to Vagianos, the only way to end the strike is "to go back to the bargaining table, which we are more than willing to do, but 5.5% remains a non-negotiable figure."

Two persons from the managerial level are currently operating the heating system boilers, so that all major buildings on campus, with the exception of the rink, are still receiving heat. No repair work involving plumbing, electrical work, or carpentry is being done.

The union feels that one person at each heating plant, both of which are usually operated by a much larger group of men (21 in one case) is unsafe. The management personnel are qualified to run the boilers, but not to repair them, and must oversee their operation twenty-four hours a day.

Vagianos feels that this is completely untrue. According to him the heating plant has been inspected by the Department of Labour since the two men took over, and will be inspected periodically throughout the duration of



The Dalhousie Operating Engineers are on strike. Pickets have been set up throughout the university.

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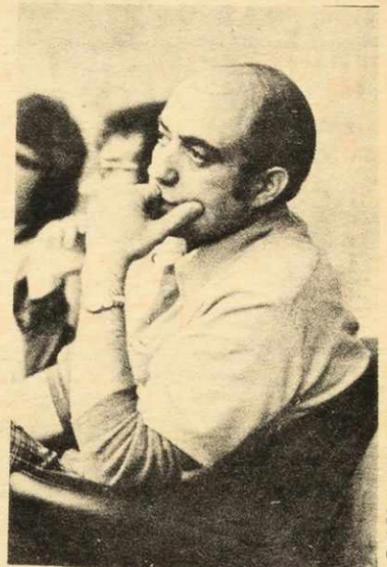
the strike. The safety inspection team has found the heating plant to be safe for the time being.

The union local, with only 70 members, has had difficulty in establishing solid picket lines around the university, although some negative effects of the strike have been felt.

The strike has stopped pick-up of mail from two mailboxes on campus near the Public Archives. Post office transportation supervisor Ted MacAdam said that the strikers prevented the mailtruck from picking up the mail on Monday and Tuesday. He said that it was a "fine line" whether the strikers were breaking the law. The two mailboxes were sealed Tuesday afternoon.

Mail from other mailboxes is still being picked up, MacAdam said.

On Monday morning, striking engineers refused to let a post office truck deliver the university's mail to the Central Services building, where the heating plant and university mailroom are located. A mailroom worker went to the post office later Monday to pick up the mail.



Louis Vagianos, Vice-President of University Services

Since Tuesday, mail has been sorted in the Killam Library mailroom, rather than the mail room in the Central Services Building. Bernice Macdonald, director of office support services for the university, whose department

continued on page 2

Inside This Week

AFS Conference Analysis
CUPE—Another Dalhousie Contract Dispute
Ecology Action Centre in Trouble
Coates Replies to "Smear Campaign"

Coming

Differential Fees in the Atlantic
Sunday Council Coverage
CBC—A Review of the Situation