

Prof questions funding

Editors Note:

The following article appeared in a recent edition of the Association of University of New Brunswick Teachers Newsletter. Prof. A.R. Sharp, former chairperson of the professors negotiating committee, presents a slightly different view about the financial position of our university than that expressed by UNB's administration in recent days.

Reprinted from AUNBT
Newsletter
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Because it is much in fashion lately for the editors of every motly rag within ranting distance to carry an article on UNB salaries and the impact of the conciliation board report on our collective financial welfare, I was not greatly surprised to get a call from our local editor. "It doesn't have to be long," he said, "Just tell the real story." With instructions like that, I'd have thought I was being set up if I hadn't known the editor very well. The "competition" has carried over a page of newsprint so far, and merely to correct a chain of misinformation and innuendo contained therein would be a monumental task. And that would still leave me the main task of telling the real story, since the local press has certainly been telling a story, but the reality of their view is quite another matter. I will therefore ignore what has been written elsewhere and set out the real story as I see it.

My high school English teacher used to insist that we begin a story at the beginning so I spent considerable time searching for the beginning. The historical events which led to salaries at UNB becoming so out of line with those paid elsewhere in Canada are difficult to precisely determine. However, it is clear that less than a decade ago, fair and competitive salaries were being paid by UNB, whereas by the time we began to negotiate, salaries were no longer either fair or competitive. I therefore decided to begin with the ending - the report of the Conciliation Board.

The administration response to this report (with one or two notable exceptions) was tinged with gloom and doom. The local newspapers and their source within the UNB administration painted the report in the manner of the Last Supper. Financial ruin was predicted to be looming in the near future and all because the UNB faculty were not awarded a fair and competitive wage,

but one which was marginally less unfair and uncompetitive than that paid previously. It is sad to see how out of touch that source is with the commonly held view in the bargaining unit that the recent settlement was only the beginning of the fight to stave off academic decay which will surely result if salaries remain unfair and uncompetitive. The Conciliation Board award can only be a brief respite in that ongoing battle to preserve the academic viability of UNB.

The response of our fellow association members was in no sense jubilant or even approaching satisfied. There was no sense of having won. There was a general feeling of relief that the long process was over, a welcoming of the increases, a recognition that the association had delivered what it had promised from conciliation, and a surprisingly strong belief that further similar settlements must be attained in order to regain a competitive position for UNB. The process of salary erosion may have been temporarily halted, but no one I spoke to had any illusions that the force driving the downward trend had been removed. That must happen if we are to remain academically viable.

A look at a few facts from the association brief to the Conciliation Board show the reasons for this conclusion. In 1979-80, the mean salary for all full time teachers at Canadian universities (including deans) was \$31,370 according to Statistics Canada making the UNB average of \$24,202 which prevailed before the award nearly 30 per cent behind. The Conciliation Board award brought the UNB average for 1979-80 to \$26,565 which was still 18 per cent behind the Canadian average. The preliminary Canadian average reported by Statistics Canada for 1980-81 is \$34,608 whereas the Conciliation Board award took the UNB average for 1980-81 to \$30,575 more than \$4,000 or approximately 13 per cent below the Canadian average. Two things are very clear from this. One is that the 5 per cent "catch-up" awarded was exactly that, with the remainder of the award being essentially the same as the average wage settlement in other Canadian universities. The second point is that we are still a very long way behind and will remain so unless we fight hard for and achieve the "catch-up" provisions in addition to a normal increase in future negotiations. No wonder there was little cause for jubilation or any more than transient satisfaction with the awarded in-

crease. We clearly have a long way to go! Ask yourself, for example, what another \$4,000 would do for you.

Another view of salaries is to compare the effect of the Conciliation Board award on the time evolution of salaries at UNB. Over the decade between July 1971 and July 1980, salary scales at UNB have risen by 6 per cent per year on average, whereas the average yearly change in the Consumer Price Index over the same period was 8.7 per cent. This represents a substantial erosion in purchasing power. New Brunswick school teachers who were bargaining collectively throughout that period achieved scale increases of 9.4 per cent on average, which represents a substantial increase in purchasing power.

The effect of this erosion can most closely be seen by considering floor salaries in constant 1971 dollars for the UNB ranks. For example, the associate professor floor salary was \$14,700 in 1971. By 1977 it had eroded to \$12,049 in 1971 dollars, then to \$11,410 in 1978 prior to negotiations. The Conciliation Board award brought the floor to \$11,399 in 1979 dollars, then to \$11,700 in 1980. It is clear that the 1979-80 award was not quite sufficient to prevent further erosion, whereas the 1980-81 award reversed the downward trend but did not even return to the 1977 levels, and was a striking 26 per cent below the 1971 rate. In other words, the Conciliation Board award left the floor salary for associate professors a full 26 per cent in real terms below the floor that prevailed nine years previously. During the same period, New Brunswick teachers at the CVI level (holding advanced degrees and hence most comparable to UNB faculty) went from a floor salary of \$7517 in 1971 to \$8001 in 1971 dollars by 1980. The ratio of the associate professor floor to that of the CVI teachers went from 1.96 in 1971 to 1.46 in 1981 in terms of 1971 dollars, representing a very substantial erosion of the economic position of the associate professor with respect to the teacher.

I believe that there can be little doubt from these figures that our case for further increases comparable to those recently awarded is very pressing. We must continue to insist that a fair and competitive wage for our members is essential to the academic health of UNB.

We must also realize that we will continue to be subjected to stories of the sort that have been carried by the press recently, claiming poor financial conditions at the university

and hinting at catastrophic events possibly involving layoffs at some unspecified time in the near future. We must never lose sight of the fact that such claims by the administration are aimed at public consumption, particularly by politicians and bureaucrats, with the goal of increasing funding for the university. These stories serve a useful purpose which we should all support, but we should be careful not to take them at face value. Like a good fairy tale, their message will be --and must continue to be --very different for the different audiences.

Clearly, we all want the administration to make the best possible case for more money. We all know that much more money is necessary for many varied reasons, and if scare tactics can be useful in making the case, then we should be prepared to listen quietly to the story without becoming embroiled in public debate with the administration which would only undermine their case and ultimately hurt us all. That does not mean that we should believe the story, and it means even less that we should be scared by it even if we did believe it.

An example of this has already occurred. The administration has claimed that there is a \$2 million surplus which is being rapidly eroded by the salary ruling of the Conciliation Board. The figure I have heard being tossed around is that the university is "losing" about \$150,000 per month, placing Armageddon at approximately June of 1981. There have been hushed suggestions that by that time we will be facing layoffs because of a state of financial emergency -- which by definition means that the "continued existence of the University of New Brunswick is placed in serious jeopardy." That makes a very good scare story for public consumption.

However, should we be scared, or should we even believe the story in the first place? The answer in both cases is no. As we shall see below, this is a set of part truths strung together to create a particular impression, but is by no means a complete picture. For the moment, however, what if it were true? We would then be entitled to ask why UNB of all the other Canadian universities is unable to pay even wages which are well below competitive rates. We could ask where the priorities have been wrong, where they must be adjusted, how we can return our university - and it is definitely

"ours" as much as "theirs" - to an academically viable path instead of allowing the continuation of the slow sapping of academic vigour that occurs when salaries are uncompetitive. We could ask why the provincial government is not even putting into post-secondary education as much as they receive from the federal government in transfer payments for that purpose. We could ask if the people of New Brunswick expect us to provide an education comparable to that available to children of other Canadians, and if so, why our members should be expected to subsidise that education by accepting substandard wages. These are not questions to fear. Continuing to meekly accept substandard wages will only delay the answers which inevitably must be made.

Now that we can see that the story is not frightening, no matter what its validity, we should explore whether it is a true picture of our present situation. In 1977-78 the university spent \$1.004 million less than it received. In 1978-79 the excess of revenue over expenditure was \$3.124 million and in 1979-80 it amounted to \$2.005 million. The total excess of revenue over expenditure for the three years prior to the present fiscal year amounts to \$6.133 million. The \$2 million figure we have all heard is the unallocated surplus. Put rather crudely, the \$2 million figure is the money for which no useful purpose had been found. Much of the rest of the accumulated excess had been reserved for a particular purpose such as "appropriation for salary adjustments." Such appropri-

tions in the financial statements do not mean that the money has been spent, leaving only \$2 million to be spent. They are merely accounting camouflage used to hide the embarrassingly large excesses of revenue over expenditure which has occurred in recent years. Of course, we should be pleased that the administration is striving hard to cover up the real surplus, and we should continue to support them in public denials that UNB is fat or bursting with money. What we should not do, however, is to lose sight of the true excess of revenue over expenditure picture.

It is interesting to note that the average excess of revenue over expenditure was about \$2 million in those three years. An increase of \$2 million over the present salary expenditures in 1980-81 would bring us nearly to the Canadian parity we are entitled to. Need I say more?