

IN HER WORDS

MARCIA OZIER

The former chief negotiator for the faculty union ponders the past, present and future of her organization...

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By DAVID OLIE

Coffee cups and food litter the tables alongside jumbled stacks of paper and books. Room 1348 of the Life Science Centre still has a sort of morning after the night before atmosphere. It reminds you of your own room after you've pulled an all-nighter to get the term paper in on time. The walls are lined with posters, clipped-out cartoons and scraps of notepaper.

This room has been a headquarters, a nerve centre, but now it is deserted.

For the past few months room 1348 has been the meeting place of the negotiating team for the Dalhousie Faculty Association. After the events of the past week one would expect the smell of defeat to hang in the room. Instead, a firm hand has written on the chalkboard, "We have not yet begun to fight!"

The hand responsible is that of Dr. Marcia Ozier, professor of psychology and former head of the DFA's negotiating team. Ozier, far from defeated, says she is proud of her accomplishments and confident of the future of her union.

"Don't believe for a minute that I've resigned from an organization of which I'm extremely proud," says Ozier. "I'll be playing whatever role in that organization (the DFA) and in the wider university community my colleagues think my strengths can contribute to."

Though confident now, Ozier admits she was "completely destroyed" by the results of the Jan. 24 DFA meeting. It ended with the union calling off the strike set for Jan. 28 and accepting the contract proposal of the Board of Governors. These moves were quickly followed by Ozier's resignation as head negotiator.

"I believed (going into the meeting) that we could achieve a reasonable salary settlement for our members and the Board without a strike," says Ozier. She feels she "held four aces in my hand," trump cards to be played for the DFA before pulling out the wild card of strike action.

First was the likelihood of provincial government intervention to keep the strike short and to prevent the destruction of the academic careers of 11,000

students. Ozier says she had strong hints from the government that such intervention would be forthcoming in the event of a strike.

The second ace was the support of the students for their professors, displayed in the Jan. 16 march on Province House.

"There was nothing quite so moving in my recent life as watching those hundreds of students pour out of the Student Union that morning. It was support for their university and support for what the DFA stood for," says Ozier.

The third card was information gleaned from the Board that there was, in fact, money available to pay a reasonable salary. Ozier's past experiences told her "these kinds of matters are settled on the courthouse steps or...immediately before a strike actually goes into place."

Ozier is disappointed that she was unable to convince the DFA membership of the strength of their position. "The members told me to fold my cards," she says.

The immediate cause of the breakdown in negotiations on Jan. 23 was a proposal by the DFA team to go to binding arbitration on the issue of salaries. Ozier disagrees with those who argue the Board would not consider the proposal at all.

"The proposal was rejected with the words 'at this time'. We understood what 'at this time' meant; it meant 'before we see what your meeting is going to do tonight'," Ozier says. "We interpreted very strong signals that without a renewal of the mandate to strike the Board would not be convinced (to go to arbitration)."

Ozier says the failure of this renewal vote did not cause her resignation. Instead, her decision came after the vote to accept the Board's salary proposal.

"I sat there for a half an hour, at least, thinking about my own position," Ozier recalls. "The bargaining unit was instructing us to go into settle for what I had said all along they would not do."

"I couldn't carry out that instruction. It would be denying everything I'd said about them for all these months."

"It's a matter of credibility." Ozier says she was disturbed by certain aspects of the debate at the meeting, aside from the fact she didn't expect debate in the first place. One was the constant use of military metaphors to "blow the strike out of proportion."

"I heard talk about every war from the First World War to the Second World War to the Korean War to the overthrow of the Shah by the Ayatollah Khomeini," she says. "I was hearing people say they felt like unconsulted infantry in the trenches being sent out with pistols to face machine guns. From (the negotiating team's) perspective we had been sent out as a scouting party with water pistols against tanks. When we came back for support it wasn't there."

The second disturbing aspect was a lack of solidarity among the members. This showed itself in an unwillingness on the part of some full professors to support their less-well-paid junior colleagues.

"They said openly that money meant little (to them), without any sensitivity that one might strike so that someone else would get a benefit. To me, that was demoralizing," Ozier says. "I'm sure my younger colleagues saw that as undermining their needs."

"The third thing that was unsettling was that there was an attack on the credibility of the negotiating team," Ozier says. Some members in attendance questioned the accuracy of statistics presented by the team, with the implication that the team was misleading them. Ozier claims the negotiators have a perfect record of accuracy in their presentations to the membership.

Apart from the Jan. 24 meeting, Ozier is bothered by other aspects of the dispute, including what she calls the "relentless attack" on the DFA in the pages of the Halifax Herald papers.

"Whether the Herald believed it was assisting the negotiations (through its editorial policy), the

fact of the matter is that the Board's side was presented over and over again, and I think it was a mistake. The outcome of the attack on the DFA has been to discredit the university in the eyes of the public."

"Someone (at the Herald) has lost complete perspective on this issue," says Ozier. The DFA considered answering the attacks, but decided it would only drag the university deeper in the mud.

"I don't know what demise is, but it ain't in my vocabulary."

Despite all this, Ozier is confident of the DFA's future. "I've been saying all along that the excellence that is Dalhousie is its faculty and students. That's not changed," she says.

"We've been struck by the power that we do have. It's been a discovery process, to find you're not helpless as a group."

"When one realizes what power one does have, often the tendency is to hold back and not use it because there's a worry as to what the outcome will be. I think that's part of what was going on at our last meeting."

"My feeling is that the power is only limited to the extent to which the members are willing to use it for the good of Dalhousie," Ozier says.

"This morning I'm thinking about today being the first day of the next round of collective bargaining."

Ozier is looking forward to changes in administrative personnel in the hope this will make possible a "collegial process" in negotiations, a process that obviously broke down during this past effort.

In the meantime Ozier will move ahead in her personal career. She is slated to present a paper next week at a meeting in San Diego of the International Neuropsychological Society, a first for a member of Dalhousie faculty.

Ozier's bulldog spirit has survived the ordeal intact. She laughs off rumours of her demise. "I don't know what demise is, but it ain't in my vocabulary," she grins, as she closes the door of room 1348.