

Union unfavourable word

Staff association attempting to establish union

By WARREN CLEMENTS

While the connotation of "union" is unfavourable in the eyes of many members, the York University Staff Association is working toward the establishment of a legitimate bargaining unit.

The object of such a unit would be to avoid what the association considers unfair treatment of the support staff, in the area of cutbacks and salary increases, during the past two years.

The support staff generally includes secretarial, technical and clerical workers in the "evaluated" class, and professional and managerial senior administrators — like vice-presidents and budget officers — in the "non-evaluated" class.

The evaluated staff must submit to an interview and study by the personnel department, and a subsequent pigeon-holing into a certain category of occupation. The worker is placed on one of eight grades, each with six steps, and the higher the grade or step, the higher the worker's salary climbs.

"The university has operated for the last couple of years with a guarantee that staff would advance one step on their anniversary date at the university," said Keith Oleksuik, chairman of the staff association's negotiating committee. "This means an approximate increase in salary of four per cent."

"In addition, the university adjusts the entire range upward on July 1. Two years ago this was a two per cent increase; this year it was 1 1/4 per cent."

The staff's complaint is that this comprises a 3/4 per cent increase over the past two years, while the cost of living has risen 10 per cent.

"York isn't competitive with the outside," Oleksuik argued. "The average wage of the evaluated staff by next July will be \$6,900. In Toronto, you don't get very far on that."

DIFFERENCE OF OPINION

One bone of contention is the staff's view of the four per cent anniversary increase as a system of seniority or reward for merit. The university, on the other hand, sees the situation differently.

"The four per cent isn't really a merit increase," said Don Mitchell, director of personnel. "The number of people who don't get it can be counted on the fingers of one hand."

"I think the problem is mathematical. The staff sees the 1 1/4 per cent as a cost-of-living factor, separate from the four per cent anniversary increase. But the management group considers the increases as a whole, a 5 1/4 per cent increase which includes the cost-of-living as one of its factors."

Whatever the arithmetic, the staff members feel they are being underpaid, and are weighing the possibility of an organized reaction, including working to rule.

The staff association was formed in 1970 by a group of secretarial workers who wanted to protect their interests. The membership floated between 150 and 250 until the great "budget crisis" scare last fall. Other staff members thought their jobs were in jeopardy, and showed interest in any organization which might lend them some insurance.

A recruitment drive in March brought the membership from 260 to over 600, majority of the 1,000 evaluated support staff. The non-evaluated sector makes up approximately 371 persons.

"The association is the only group bargaining on behalf of the support staff, but it has never had legitimate bargaining status," said Oleksuik. "Our subcommittee has spent the summer exploring avenues toward achieving accredited status under the Labour Relations Unit."

Since this would probably mean forming a union, the association organizers are wary of the staff's reaction.

SPLIT ON UNION QUESTION

"There are pro-union and anti-union groups," Aleksuik commented, "and some are leery of the word 'union' but recognize the need for a strong organization. They identify the word with blue-collar, strikes, garbage men, and that's not them."

"If it's their own York group that achieves legal bargaining status, there's a fair chance we may succeed in convincing the majority."

"There is a sincere motivation behind our move. It isn't an attempt to break down the lines by going to the type of organization that has to bargain for a contract, but a self-defense mechanism. It's the only way to be heard."

Frank Harrison, assistant director of personnel, felt the bargaining unit might benefit both the university and individual staff members if it were intelligently handled, though he warned that sloppy handling might damage the current rapport between the sides.

"There might be less confusion with a negotiated contract," he said. "At the moment, we consider each case individually to ensure equitable treatment across the board. But with a union, we could just read the contract and see the answer spelled out in black and white."

Speaking of the staff's salary increases, he termed the 1 1/4 per cent raise "light". "There's no secret about the fact that the recommendation from the senior administration was in excess of 5 1/4 per cent all told," he said, "but it was rejected by the Board. Bill Small (vice-president of administration, in charge of personnel) really fought for that recommendation."

FRUSTRATED WITH TREATMENT

The point that wounds the staff's pride is their situation in relation to the faculty. According to Oleksuik, there are 100 less support staff on the payroll than last year at this time, all handled through the "redundancy" technique. Some jobs were cut off, and the individuals were placed in other posts on campus. Other jobs simply weren't filled when a previous worker left.

The trouble is that the faculty has escaped with only minor scratches from the budget cuts. A number of part-time persons were not re-employed, and some sessional appointments were not renewed, but of the probationary and tenured faculty, no individual was released because of budgetary reasons, according to Michiel Horn, past chairman of the York Faculty Association.

"While there's no real denying that there were some staff jobs that weren't necessary," complained Oleksuik, "at the same time, absolutely nothing was done to the faculty, which has a ridiculous situation."

"The faculty hired enough people last year to teach the number of students expected to enrol, and when enrolment fell far short of predictions, no faculty members were cut. This may have something to do with the fact that the major decision-making body is the Senate, which is mainly composed of faculty."

Harrison sympathized to an extent with the problem. "There's an old saying that when GM loses sales, they cut back on the production staff," he said. "So you'd think that if York loses students, they might cut back on faculty."

"But that's short-term thinking, which isn't good. You can't lay them off one year and expect them to come back the next. They'd be snapped up by another university."

UNUSUALLY LARGE TURNOVER

Unfortunately, a similar situation has arisen in the staff area. Sixty-three jobs are currently vacant, and the annual turnover of staff personnel is an alarming 25 per cent.

"It's incredibly inefficient for the



university," said Oleksuik. "They're having difficulties in re-hiring, and good, experienced people are leaving. If a secretary leaves here, she can get \$1,000 more a year."

"The attrition is partly seasonal, but salary is a definite factor," agreed Harrison. "An experience gap develops in the turnover rate, and the attrition is counter-productive and costly."

"Mind you, it can be used as a management tool. Parkinson's Law holds that half-jobs soon become full jobs, and this is the first time in 10 years that the university has been able to halt in its tracks and take a good look at the number of redundant jobs."

Morale across the board is waning. The staff feels neglected, and worse, unappreciated. Members believe they are being used as scapegoats for the university's financial ills, which include an order to cut costs next year by \$1 million. Where, they wonder, will the axe fall?

FEELING OF ALIENATION

"We have no access to information, no word in the process," explained Oleksuik. "Somewhere along the line we are told this is how much money we will get."

"But despite this, people do care about the way the university turns out, and the sense of community York stands for. We're looking for

a positive response from the senior administrative staff."

The road is hard. They point to the fact that the University of Toronto has received 5 to 15 per cent increases over the past year, but they are told that this is the product of a \$2 million slush fund at U. of T. established to equalize historic differentials between men and women. Besides which, U. of T. receives large grants, and draws from the Varsity fund, supplied by alumni.

"All sorts of things which we, as a new university, can't have," Harrison remarked. "There is a mood of cautious optimism from the registrar's office, but unless significant change in the government's attitude toward funding or a substantial increase in enrolment occurs, it will be four or five years before we get out of this problem."

In the meantime, the York Staff Association is attempting to secure as much for the support staff as it can, and the bargaining, unionized or otherwise, will begin in three weeks for next year's budget.

"Eighteen months ago, the staff association was considered a coffee klatch for women, and they've got to overcome that image," Harrison commented. "But there are no marks for neatness in what the university has done over the last 10 years of rapid growth, and perhaps the staff association can help to eliminate some of the anomalies."

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For further information, please contact either Professor M. Westcott (Psychology Department—Rm. 402 B.S.B.) or Professor A. Henshel (Sociology Department—Rm. S548 Ross) before Friday, 28 September.

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