

Mixing labour relations and education

Students grapple with the possibility of a strike

BY SHELLEY ROBINSON
AND ANDREW SIMPSON

Anthony Robinson has to be a little concerned about his luck. He's gone through two strikes, witnessed another and now, after five years and three schools, just when he's trying to graduate, he's facing the possibility of a fourth.

"I moved out here to Halifax totally with the plan of graduating at the end of the summer," Anthony said. "I don't really have room to fool around and not graduate."

"Have you ever had a long period where you're looking for work? [A strike] is a little bit like that. You're just waiting for something, constantly just waiting and you have nothing to do at the moment."

At this moment, Anthony is waiting again. Waiting and more than a little bit anxious that he moved to Halifax to go through the same thing he already went through in Vancouver, twice.

"[Contract] talks and union breakdowns: they're like people breaking up in a relationship. You get to see perfectly mature adults just act like children," he says laughing. "Y'know what I mean? It's crazy. I just don't understand why it can't get resolved at the table."

While Professor Ismet Ugursal hasn't met Anthony and doesn't teach at Langara, he knows a fair amount about how tough it is to settle talks at the table. Here. At Dalhousie.

Ugursal is the president of the Dalhousie Faculty Association and he has been involved in contract talks with the university administration since last September, and going nowhere fast since the end of January.

And with the end of scheduled negotiations, and a vote to reject the university's latest offer under their belts, Ugursal says it's now or never. If nothing happens during a mandatory two week waiting period, there is only one alternative.

"Absolutely strike, no question about it," he said. "What else is there to do?"

But Ugursal remains concerned for students.

"There have been studies done on the affect of strikes on students... and there are a significant number of students who are devastated by it, who actually go through some trauma as a result."

Across the country, just about this time last year, the same discussions were happening on a different campus, with less than great results.

Students at York University in Toronto were subjected to a strike which began in mid-March, officially ended 55 days later, and is still affecting students today.

"Students ended up losing money without any retribution," said Matthew Clancy a vice-president of the York's student federation.

"Students, including myself, got failing grades on courses due to miscommunication...I never knew I had to write a final exam and when I got my report card — big old fat F. And that happened to a lot of students."

Clancy said he is aware of the situation at Dalhousie, and has some advice in the case of a strike.

"Basically students are held

hostage and student leaders have got to make sure that they're not.

"I would advise [the Dalhousie Student Union (DSU)] to find out all the information they can from the administration and all the information they can from the union...everything that directly affects students' lives," he said. "Just pump that information out to students because they're the ones that need to know."

And while DSU president Chris Adams agrees, he says he's been a little weak in his delivery.

"There is a lot of worry about what's going on, a lot of people don't understand what's happening because everything has changed so quickly in the last couple of weeks," he said.

"We haven't been keeping up with keeping people informed, and we just have to get the message out there a

little more clearly, a little louder.

"To tell you the truth I'm worried about my classes being disrupted, I don't want to miss any school either."

Hilary McGown, a Dalhousie student, says that she hasn't really been informed. But there seems to be more than enough speculation to make up for it.

"Students don't know," she said. "I heard [in the case of a strike] we'd have to come back in July to write our exams, and a lot of kids have to work during the summer to make money for tuition and to pay for their residence, and I've heard that if we don't come back then the whole year is cancelled and your money is refunded, which basically means you've lost this year and it's just been a complete waste of time. So I think that even though the teachers are being treated unfairly, Dal has to take it upon themselves to compensate

[professors] so that students don't suffer."

Dalhousie's vice-president student services, Eric McKee, says the administration would like to be able to pay the professors more, but that it isn't that easy. He says they are doing their best with a bad situation.

"I can well understand why students find the uncertainty of their position very troubling, and we're going to do our best to remove as much of that uncertainty as we can. But this is a labour relations conflict. In these situations, users of services — whether they're customers at a store, users of public transit, or students at an university — tend to get caught in the middle."

But not all students are so serious about the prospect of a strike.

Like Anthony, Josh Plaw says he is worried about a strike interfering

with his graduation, but he could still use a couple weeks off.

"I think a lot of students will be happy they can get out of school, you know?" he said. "Do some revelry, have some fun, go on Phish tour maybe. That's my plan if they strike — I'm going on tour."

But having been through his share of strikes, Anthony isn't quite as excited.

"It sucks to be on strike. It's terrible. It's so frustrating, so frustrating," he said. "You don't know if you have school the next day and then when you get back you don't know if 'Oh, is he going to expect this to be done?' 'Is she going to expect that to be done?' You just don't know."

"That's why I say I'm probably just going to try and keep up as best I can."

Martin and MacLellan meet with universities

BY GINA STACK

The unique characteristics of post-secondary education in Nova Scotia must be addressed at both provincial and federal levels, say student and university leaders.

University and student representatives from five of metro's post-secondary institutions met with federal finance minister Paul Martin and provincial premier Russell MacLellan at Province House on Feb. 27.

More core funding at the provincial level and special consideration for the large number of non-traditional and out-of-province students in Nova Scotia were among the issues raised.

"No issues were unique to Dal...all the universities brought the same issue to the table, core funding [from the province]," said Eric McKee, Dalhousie's vice-president student services.

"We are all negotiating agreements with employees that will lead to salary increases, so the options are to increase government funding, increase tuition fees, or

make cuts in programs that no one will appreciate."

Premier Russell MacLellan made no definitive statement about initiatives for post-secondary



LOOKING STUNNED: Liberal deer caught in the spotlight. (Photo by Matt Barrie)

education his government will take if re-elected later this month.

"We're going to have more in depth meetings after the election. We're just touching subject matters,"

MacLellan said.

While the premier was making no promise of better days for universities if he is re-elected, all present agreed that last month's

federal and provincial governments.

"The meeting was informative and I think that we managed to re-enforce a few of the key points," said Ted Chiasson, Dalhousie Student Union treasurer.

"I think that it's important to let people know that although in many aspects it was a good budget, it's not finished and there's still a long way to go."

While the budget has been praised for its emphasis on post-secondary education, much criticism has been focused against the rich Millennium Scholarship Fund which will not help cash-strapped students in immediate need.

"Nova Scotia still is quite short of funding for education, our tuition's still going berserk, the Millennium Fund will help some people, but it won't help all of us, funding is still short," Chiasson said.

The meetings in Halifax were the first of many the finance minister will have with university and student leaders across the country. Martin says he is looking for comments and criticisms of his government's initiatives.

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TAs charge Dal

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list early in the process and have provided another list since all of this has happened," Gallant said.

The strike vote for the part-time instructors/TAs at all three metro universities — Mount Saint Vincent, St. Mary's and Dalhousie — was held on Feb. 18 & 19. Union representatives at Mount Saint Vincent University also say they have had trouble obtaining accurate and complete lists. Saint Mary's, on the other hand, received a complete list from their administration. They voted in favour of a strike.

The union was not able to give any results for Dalhousie on the night of the 19th, because of the inaccurate lists they say they had been given. At a meeting the following day, the union described the problems they were facing.

"We have a number of votes in question, and all kinds of other problems," Moore said.

Moore also described the union's

frustration with the current situation.

"The universities expect us to play by the rules. However, when it comes to procedure, they throw roadblocks in our way," she said.

The union has filed complaints with the Nova Scotia Labour Relations Board protesting Dalhousie's lack of cooperation over the lists and what they say is the university's bad-faith bargaining.

Since Saint Mary's vote, the school's administration and the TAs/part-time instructors have worked out an agreement that will include giving union members a substantial pay increase, more job security, and proper grievance procedures.

At Dalhousie, both Barbara Moore and Michelle Gallant say they will have to wait until the Labour Board makes their decision before either side can make their next move.

Kelly Mackenzie VP Student Advocacy

Experience

- ✓ Experience working at all levels of government
- ✓ Worked closely with University administration
- ✓ Involved with DSU & former President of residence house

Search '98

- ✓ Search for stronger ties & communication between the students, the DSU & faculty
- ✓ Search for creative, viable alternatives to combat student indebtedness
- ✓ Search for innovative new programs to ensure a Dal graduate's marketability

If you have any questions, comments or concerns, please contact me at mackenzk@is2.dal.ca

