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## U of M labour showdown: New sheriff in town

**O**n October 28th, an unusual joint statement was released by the University of Manitoba (U of M) administration and the union representing faculty, the University of Manitoba Faculty Association (UMFA). Unusual because these two entities are in the middle of bargaining a collective agreement and one would expect each side to be posturing against the other. No, they haven't reached an agreement. Remarkably, in clear violation of the right of the parties to engage in collective bargaining, they have had the terms of a one-year agreement dictated to them by a third party.

The statement explains that the new provincial government has instructed the administration to extend the expired collective agreement for one year with no increase in salaries. This despite the fact that the administration had already offered an increase and is clearly in a budgetary position to do so. The amount of the increase and other issues were being negotiated under the direction of mediator, and progress was being made.

What is remarkable about the joint statement is that – if you read between the lines – the U of M is as put out by the directive as UMFA. Although you would think that the university would be happy not to have to increase salaries, the Province has clearly usurped the university's power to govern and administer itself.

This latest action is just one more example

of how provincial labour relations are deteriorating under the new government.

From introducing Bill 7, The Labour Relations Amendment Act (which aims to eliminate the so-called “card-check” system of union certification currently used in Manitoba), to the Premier's goal of eliminating use of Project Labour Agreements, a practice he refers to as “forced unionization,” the Premier is acting like a sheriff from an American Western, bent on imposing a new and more repressive order in the public sector.

Further proof of this attitude was seen earlier this year when, for the first time in almost 20 years, members of the Manitoba Government and General Employees Union (MGEU) had to go on strike. MGEU members at Macdonald Youth Services (Local 221), who provide crisis intervention services to youth and families in Winnipeg, walked off the job in August, 2016. The employer, Macdonald Youth Services (MYS), like the U of M, was willing and able to raise salaries, but the Province would not allow it to, and eventually members returned to the workplace without a new collective agreement.

With every intervention, the Province's intentions become clearer. Of great concern is the rationale given by

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**Oct 31, 2016**

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IN LABOUR ISSUES

**“In fact, our debt/GDP ratio is amongst the healthiest in Canada. So, why invent a crisis? ”**

the Province for not wanting collective bargaining to continue in the U of M/UMFA case. According to U of M President Barnard:

*Public bodies, including the University of Manitoba, are being asked to extend existing contracts for an additional year at zero per cent in order to stabilize public sector compensation levels.*

Why stabilize public sector compensation levels? At the same time as these anti-labour policies are unfolding, Finance Minister Friesen continues with his campaign to convince us that Manitoba's finances are in a mess. He relentlessly claims how high the deficit and debt are. Missing from his updates are how large Manitoba's GDP is, how much we are paying for debt servicing and how that compares historically. Yes, our debt is larger than it was 10 years ago, but so is our GDP and, therefore, our ability to manage that debt. In fact, our debt/GDP ratio is amongst the healthiest in Canada. So, why invent a crisis?

Ministers Friesen's fictional financial problem helps set the stage for the need (also fictional) for austerity. Austerity then becomes the rationale for freezing public sector wages and, eventually, reducing the size of the civil service. Attacking unions is an integral part of austerity. Unions cede a modicum of power to workers through their constitutionally enshrined rights to collective bargaining and right to strike, which in turn gives

them the ability to protect wages, benefits and working conditions. So Minister Friesen's version of the state of the economy feeds into Premier Pallister's attack on working Manitobans.

Despite the Premier's assurances that he has great respect for collective bargaining and unions, his government's actions indicate otherwise. Pallister's Conservatives have joined the ranks of other austerity-seeking governments - both provincial and federal- with an agenda to weaken unions. It's too early to know for sure what the end-game plan is, but there is no doubt the Premier has come out with both guns blazing.

In mid-October, UMFA's members voted 85 percent in favour of striking if a deal was not reached by November 1st. Late October 30th UMFA put a final yes-or-no offer on the table and as of noon October 31st, mediation will be officially over. A strike seems inevitable. With the provincial directive now blocking the bargaining process, what will happen next is anyone's guess. Don't be surprised if the Province legislates UMFA members back to work.

Doing so will send a strong message to public-sector unions that twenty years of labour peace is coming to an end and that a new wild west is upon us. Just how wild remains to be seen.

*Lynne Fernandez holds the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues.*

**work** *References available upon request.*  
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