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FAST FACTS

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What you need to know about the Brandon University Strike

Professors, instructors, librarians and administrative staff on strike at Brandon University have been accused in the press of being selfish and irresponsible. Although it's not uncommon in a strike for one side to represent the other's position as unreasonable, in this case, the faculty have been vilified on the basis of some pretty serious distortions. Examination of the facts reveals a very different picture.

BU staff have been accused of making unreasonable demands – as much as a 37 per cent pay hike over three years. In reality, Brandon University Faculty Association (BUFA) never proposed wage increases anywhere near that figure. Both sides have proposed wage increases of under 5 percent over three years. In fact, they're within 0.2 percentage points of each other. The real obstacle to an agreement on wages is that the University insists that the profs wait two years for their pay to increase, offering only .5 percent in year one and 1 percent in year two, both of which are less than the increase in the cost of living, which is currently 3.2 percent. And although the faculty have made significant concessions over the six months of bargaining, the University has held firmly to its initial position.

The University's chief negotiator – a \$400-plus-an-hour external labour-relations lawyer who also happens to be an advisor to the Canadian Labour Watch Association, a Vancouver-based anti-union organization - insists that Brandon University can't afford to pay its teachers what similar instructors earn elsewhere in Canada, and that it's already facing budget cuts. Brandon University President Deborah Poff claims that their hands are tied by a wage ceiling imposed by the Manitoba government. Neither assertion is consistent with the evidence, which shows that the University has the resources to provide a negotiated settlement. Premier Greg Selinger recently denied that the Province imposed wage restrictions, pointing out, *"we've just given the universities 5, 5 and 5% [annual] increases in operating grants, so why would we direct them to hold salary increases?"*

The modest pay increase proposed by the union doesn't mean BU profs are well-paid. On the contrary, BU faculty, who teach more courses than those in many other universities, earn \$16,345 less than the Canadian average for university teachers.

While University negotiators refuse to increase profs' wages to keep pace with the cost of living, they have found a way to pay the BU



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President about \$266,000 (before benefits) and, it is rumoured, to increase her pay by 14 percent. But unlike the profs', university presidents' salaries and benefit packages aren't usually reported in the media.

From the start, the University has wanted an arbitrated settlement, and maintains that arbitration is the only way to resolve the impasse. They have adopted an all-or-nothing position and, in the sixth month of negotiations, introduced fifty pages of new, even harsher, proposals. By comparison, the faculty want to negotiate a fair agreement and see no reason this can't be achieved. They have tried hard to reach such an agreement, making significant concessions and engaging in conciliation and mediation, to no avail. As for arbitration, it will result – at best – in a settlement that puts off the difficult issues for another day – hardly a sustainable way to maintain staff morale and a positive teaching environment.

Rather than assuring students that the University will work with the faculty to develop a plan to make up class work delayed during the strike, Poff has urged them to cross picket lines and hinted that they will lose their term if the faculty don't agree to settle the strike soon through binding arbitration. But the faculty are not crossing picket lines and virtually no classes are being taught. BU students who pay high tuition fees are concerned about their academic term being lost, but contrary to Poff's suggestions about what might happen at BU, no Canadian university has ever lost a term due to a strike, including some much longer than the current one at BU. BU faculty are already working on plans to compress the term to enable students to make up the lost time. Moreover, the Brandon University Students' Union, the organization representing students, has taken a democratic decision to support the faculty from day one and continues to do so. BUSU's

membership, for the most part, understands that taking a position of 'neutrality' allows the University administration to play the students off the faculty to no one's benefit. Students will not gain from a working environment poisoned by frustrated faculty and major unresolved issues. BUFU also has the support of professors across the country as demonstrated by two very successful "flying pickets" that included professors from across the country who came to Brandon to walk the picket line.

Poff has also consistently refused to meet with parents and students, although the faculty have done so. In a packed public meeting at Park Community Centre in early November, they gave straight answers to tough questions, such as why they went on strike. One prof told parents and teachers, "I am in this business because I love what I do every day" and another said, "it breaks my heart that we had to go on strike." But profs also explained that they work more than professors at other universities yet get paid less. The 120 students and their parents who rallied on 7 November to demand an end to strike are correct: they deserve a well-run University that values its faculty and will let them get back to work. The instructors have tried hard to achieve those goals; the University's refusal to bargain a fair and reasonable agreement is now the only obstacle.

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