

SETTING A HIGHER BAR FOR ONTARIO COLLEGES



BY JP HORNICK

Throughout the fall, Ontario college faculty, represented by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), were on strike for five weeks over issues of equal pay for work of equal value, the move from full time to part time, temporary and contract work by college management as part of their business model, and academic freedom for faculty. On November 16, the results of a forced vote by management (represented by the College Employer Council) of faculty were announced: of the 95% of membership who voted, 86% rejected management's offer (incidentally, this was significantly higher than the 68% strike mandate members gave to the bargaining committee).

Comments from the November 16 press conference made by JP Hornick, head of the faculty negotiating committee, have been excerpted, lightly edited, and reproduced below. Less than 12 hours after this press conference, the Ontario provincial government announced it would introduce back-to-work legislation. College classes resumed Tuesday November 21.

Our goal throughout this round, our mandate from our 12,000 members was to improve conditions for contract faculty and improve the decision-making processes in the colleges so that there was a balance between faculty and administration. And the administration has been resoundingly opposed to these fairly straightforward concepts. I think [our work action] challenges the notion that the so-called gig economy is a done deal. What we are doing now is drawing a line in the sand around that and trying to set a higher bar for all workers, not just college workers. We have an immense amount of privilege within our system to be able to make this stand and to pay it forward in a sense. And just for context, there are other colleges in Alberta, in BC that have full-time to non- full-time ratios as high as 90% full-time to 10% non full-time embedded in their collective agreements.

So this isn't some pie-in-the-sky idea that kills systems. It's actually about what kind of college system do you want to have your students

enrolled in for the next 50 years, and then extending that to other facets of the economy. We are the economic engine of Ontario and we should be treated with the respect and fairness that we deserve in those roles.

[Academic freedom] is inherently linked to precarious work as well, because academic freedom in the college system is about making those decisions in your classroom that you know are good for students and that can't be overturned by your Chair — or your Dean — who may or may not have any expertise in your area of study, right. [W]ith your nursing faculty, do you want a nurse who's actually designing the course, setting the evaluation, telling you if the student has met the learning outcomes? Or do you want a Dean who may or may not even have had experiences as a nurse or in the health sciences...[S]imilarly, who do you want: the paramedic professor making those decisions, or do you want somebody who has never set foot in the sector? Those are the key issues.

We have thousands of examples of grades being overturned; of the

resources that you use being dictated and those not being appropriate for the field or being outdated; being directed to use canned content that's supplied by publishers rather than — that relies on the expertise of the faculty. So really, when you boil it down, academic freedom is about who should make decisions in a classroom: the professor or the administrator? We're not telling them that we need to make all the financial decisions at the college; what we're telling them is we need to make those academic decisions. It's honestly, logically the only thing that makes sense and it's a no-cost issue. So for them to be holding out on this last little peg is reprehensible in a system that is trying to grow to meet the modern needs of our students.

To the students that are still out; one, thank you for your support; two, you have shown amazing ability to advocate for yourselves and your faculty stand with you on all of those struggles; and [three], call your college president and tell them to tell Council to get back to the table now and we will settle this thing and have you back in classes next week. ●