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Suffering U of M students deserve better from their Administration and the Province



University of Manitoba (U of M) students are in educational limbo during the longest legal strike in history by the University of Manitoba Faculty Association (UMFA). This year professors, instructors, and librarians are pushing back against deteriorating institutional quality, emphasizing how real wage decreases have made attracting and retaining top faculty challenging. University of Manitoba President Michael Bennaroch confirmed that UMFA members had lost approximately 8% of the value of their wages over the term of the previous contract, signifying a much-needed renewal.

This milestone represents consistent neglect from the university administration and provincial government to provide students with a stable and quality education over the past five years.

The education sector was among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbating

high anxiety and stress levels among Canadian students. The phased transition back to in-person teaching at the U of M presents additional responsibilities, requiring all parties to adapt to the ever-changing public health landscape constantly. The transition is underway, but the return to normalcy remains distant.

Yearly tuition increases due to provincial cuts to public education persist. Students have endured three consecutive years of 3.75% average increases preceded by a 6.6% increase for 2018-19. Tuition remains the second-largest source of revenue for the university, increasing to \$206.7 million in 2020-2021, yet students have seen a steady deterioration in the quality of their education.

The rise of an independent student group, Students Supporting UMFA, formed at the beginning of the strike to provide an outspoken, unified student voice outside the scope of administrative influence. The University of Manitoba Student Union (UMSU) recently brought forward a motion in support of binding arbitration without initially addressing UMFA's non-monetary concerns. All students pay a portion of their tuition to UMSU yet were not consulted on an issue impacting their future quality of education.

This strong contingent of U of M students and alumni has swapped education for advocacy to express solidarity with UMFA members and voice concerns for these issues. Activities undertaken by students include picketing, organizing information

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sessions, and staging sit-ins at constituency offices. Perhaps the most significant activity occurred this past Monday at Finance Minister Scott Fieldings Engage MB budget session. A group of students and alumni confronted the Minister with various issues concerning the strike. They received stale, repetitive, and outdated responses from the Minister.

Since the beginning of negotiations, the central issue prolonging the strike was the province interfering with the university administration's ability to pay higher wages to faculty members. UMFA President Orvie Dingwall initially called on the province to pull a mandate preventing good faith bargaining back in mid-October, one week after the strike vote. This call was left unanswered, leading to the strike commencing on November 2nd.

In mid-November, the university administration confirmed their proposals to UMFA are not exempt from government direction. Even with drained students and faculty acknowledging this, Advanced Education Minister Wayne Ewasko and Scott Fielding failed to provide firm answers on their degree of influence on negotiations. Swapping from "governments [have] set broad public sector bargaining mandates" to "no mandate has been issued to the University of Manitoba," it appeared neither had a clue.

These conflicting statements leave students

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disappointed in the Minister responsible for the prosperity of post-secondary education in the province. Ewasko claims he is "looking for students who have been impacted to get back into classes" and preaches pro-education rhetoric in abundance, yet hides from students.

Four weeks of unsuccessful negotiations ushered in a new method of resolve last week, binding arbitration. Arne Peltz's decision to support full binding arbitration has students in a vulnerable position.

UMFA said they could agree to enter binding arbitration on the precursor that outstanding non-monetary issues are resolved in negotiation; however, the administration believes this is wholly unrealistic. If UMFA accepts full binding arbitration, students should begin planning their degrees around a future strike at the expiry of the contract.

The new Premier let many students down in November. Removing provincial interference in public sector bargaining could have accelerated negotiations, putting students in a less vulnerable position. The onus is now on the administration to accept UMFA's conditions before arbitrating retention and recruitment issues.

It is remarked that the students are the most important stakeholder at the university, yet the administration and government continue to undermine their collective contribution to future Manitoba society. Henry Ford once remarked, "experience is the thing of supreme value in life." It is time for the administration, province, or both to give students back their education.

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