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Academic Freedom: Ivory tower privilege or public interest?

The University of Manitoba narrowly averted its third faculty strike in eighteen years in late October, a strike that would have disrupted the lives of 29,000 students and almost 9,000 staff members. What brought the professors so reluctantly to this last-ditch effort to get a collective agreement was the University's refusal, until literally the eleventh hour, to negotiate on academic freedom. Over four months of bargaining, the president's office insisted it had no intention of limiting academic freedom but refused to agree to contract language that would protect professors' right to speak publicly, including the right to criticize the university, or limit the administration's power to impose performance-management systems that would allow administrators to dictate criteria for research and publishing. Its refusal to enshrine those rights in a collective agreement, as most Canadian universities have already done, and its efforts to actually impose performance management in at least two faculties raises serious questions about the sincerity of its assurances.

University presidents and whose chair is UM President David Barnard, defines academic freedom narrowly as only "the rights of the teacher to teach and of the student to learn" and "the right to freely communicate knowledge and the results of research and scholarship." In other words, the employers see academic freedom as a very restrictive set of rights that refer only to teaching and research, but do not include professors' right to comment on the administration of their own institutions or even to pursue their own research agendas.

University faculty, by contrast, overwhelmingly regard academic freedom more broadly, as the right to pursue research of their own choosing, to speak openly about their research and to criticize their own institution when it threatens to restrict those choices or demand that research be tailored to meet corporate or other external objectives. Faculty members consider themselves professionals like doctors or lawyers, experts in their fields who are better qualified than their employers to make certain decisions including, when necessary, to identify problems with the university.

The AUCC's restrictive definition of academic freedom would fail to protect one of the fundamental roles of the university, which is to contribute to the public good. Universities contribute to the community by giving students the tools they will need as workers and citizens by learning how to evaluate ideas critically, test common-sense beliefs against evidence and acquire the intellectual skills and self-confidence to exchange ideas in a respectful way in a democratic society.

What is academic freedom?

Academic freedom may seem to be a rare privilege of researchers isolated in ivory towers. But in fact, it's a right that has real value to the community. The impasse in bargaining at the UM is symptomatic of university administrators' and university professors' very different understandings of the contribution faculty members make to the whole society. The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), whose members are

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These essential aspects of the university are undermined when free speech within the university is restricted and faculty are prevented from engaging in critical intellectual debate or when teaching and research agendas are dictated by university administrators rather than freely chosen by faculty.

Academic Freedom and the Public Good

Universities do much more than train young workers to meet the needs of employers. University professors fulfil an important and unique function as 'public intellectuals'. Scientists and other academics contribute to the common good by addressing social issues, such as preserving the environment, protecting human rights and cultural diversity, challenging long-standing assumptions that justify inequality and discrimination and identifying threats to democracy and the public good. Independent research, unconstrained by the demands of business or other sponsors, has produced reliable, scientific evidence of the human causes of global climate change, identified dangerous and ineffective drugs and found toxins in baby bottles and other household items. Independent research has helped identify solutions for the most significant problems of our time, including global climate change and the human activities that are polluting this planet. Research that is fettered by the objectives of administrators or industry can't solve these problems. No other profession fills this function, in part because few other professionals exercise comparable autonomy, and because independent research is an important aspect of academics' work.

Academic Freedom Under Attack

Restrictions on academic freedom pose a very real threat to the public interest. Probably the best-known example of the threat to independent research is the case of Dr. Nancy Olivieri, a professor of medicine at the University of Toronto who discovered that the drug she was testing posed a serious risk to sick children. The UT refused to support her when she attempted to warn patients, prompting the pharmaceutical firm that was funding her research to threaten her with legal action. Ironically, current UT President David Naylor has rejected the AUCC's position as too restrictive of academic free-

dom. Yet there are many other examples of universities that have removed faculty from the classroom, forbidden them to pursue their research or disseminate its results, or otherwise imposed restrictions on unconventional thinkers or those who refuse to obey corporate sponsors.

When the members of the University of Manitoba Faculty Association voted to strike if necessary to push the administration to enshrine academic freedom in their collective agreement, they were well aware that the real struggle would not be won or lost on one campus. The neoliberal assault on academic freedom is being waged at universities everywhere; faculty face powerful and well-resourced opponents. But UM faculty were prepared to take a stand on this issue, even at the cost of walking out of their classrooms, because they recognize its grave importance. On the eve of a strike, the UM agreed to contract language giving faculty the right to criticize the administration and to speak freely outside of the university – including the right to produce commentaries such as this one - without fear of reprisal. It did not, however, concede its right as management to establish its own evaluative criteria for faculty members' research and publication, replacing peer evaluations that faculty members themselves have developed collectively for decades.

UMFA's ability to protect academic freedom is another example of how the six unions representing a variety of workers at the University of Manitoba are fighting not just for their members' interests, but for society's. The UMFA members who stood firm against their employer's efforts to impose management control over their research and speech have won an important battle, but the struggle to protect academic freedom continues.

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