

Workers Rights and the Economic Crisis: Striking in a Time of Austerity

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The 150 members of Unit 2 of Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) [Local 677](#) have been on strike since August 16. The office, technical, and administrative workers at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine (NOSM) went on strike after almost a year of negotiations to try and achieve a first collective agreement. NOSM is affiliated with both Laurentian University in Sudbury and Lakehead University in Thunder Bay and has campuses as part of both universities; other members of the striking local are located in Timmins and Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

At the forefront of the struggle are basic quality-of-work and quality-of-life issues. But lurking in the background are larger questions of how workers in the broader public sector and their employers will position themselves with respect to the austerity agenda declared with such fanfare by world leaders at the G20 summit in Toronto in June, and affirmed in this year's federal and provincial budgets by the Harper and McGuinty governments.

The solidarity activism that this strike has sparked on the Laurentian University campus may be a nucleus of the kind of coalition politics that will be required to win both the bread-and-butter struggles and the broader political challenges that the labour movement faces at this moment.

Contesting Arbitrary Management

Tyler England, President of Unit 2 of Local 677 and chair of its bargaining committee, says that all the workers want is a "fair and respectful first collective agreement." Wages are one of the issues that remain outstanding. But of greater concern to the workers throughout the strike has been enshrining some fairly standard protections in a binding contract rather than leaving them subject to arbitrary management decisions.

For instance, management is seeking the right to transfer workers between sites. Unit 1 of Local 677, which represents faculty, library, and professional employees at NOSM, already has a collective agreement which protects members from such transfers. The staff in Unit 2 want to be similarly assured, says England, that management will not be "forcing them to move their lives or no longer have a position with the organization."

Workers are also seeking language protecting them from being shifted from their usual 9-to-5 schedule to evening and weekend work with little notice and no overtime pay. This would be particularly onerous for members with childcare responsibilities, which remains disproportionately women in 21st century Canada.

Contracting out is another hot issue. In the past, when workers have left, management has

sometimes refused to fill vacant positions and instead used workers from temp agencies. England said: “We want to keep these as good paying, full-time jobs with good benefits” rather than allow them to be shifted piecemeal to part-time or casual positions with few or no benefits.

Workers are also seeking general language around management rights that requires that they be exerted in “reasonable and respectful” ways, according to England. He said this is standard language in many collective agreements, and it allows members greater flexibility to grieve unreasonable requests from management. Additionally, it was only in the last session of bargaining (several weeks into the strike) that management gave up its attempt to exclude the existing benefit plan from the collective agreement, which would have left it vulnerable to arbitrary changes.

Framing the Strike

There can be no doubt that this strike about bread-and-butter issues and workplace dignity is also a strike that is about neoliberalism. Yet, in this dispute and in the many other struggles sure to erupt as the austerity agenda is implemented, it is important for those of us acting in support to be careful how we draw such connections. A rich understanding of neoliberalism that foregrounds the everyday experiences of the ordinary people struggling against it can be an important tool for building a broader movement; a sparse, simplistic pointer to some abstract common enemy can actually undermine our efforts.

Early in the NOSM strike, management was quite active in drawing links to what those of us on the left would see as manifestations of neoliberalism and austerity. In particular, they [situated](#) the strike in the context of the wage restraint policies being forced onto the broader public sector by Dalton McGuinty’s Liberal government in Ontario. Wage restraint and other forms of public sector cutbacks are sources of growing concern and focuses of organizing for unions and communities in the province. So it is understandable that, early on in the strike, this way of linking it to broader issues had significant purchase for many pro-labour people in Sudbury. After all, it seemed to connect this local struggle with many other struggles across Ontario and around the globe.

However, there are a number of serious problems with this rhetorical move by management, and with its partial adoption by some people wishing to support the strikers. For one thing, it paints a misleading picture of what the strike is about. An emphasis on wage restraint in talking about the context centres the issue of wages in public attention, even though wages are not the central concern for most of those on the line. Moreover, it invites the standard anti-union lie that public sector workers are “greedy” and “spoiled,” rather than making it clear that they are trying to protect themselves from the prospect of very real hardships. It creates space for patronizing narratives like those that have appeared occasionally in the local media about evil union bosses who have deluded workers and made them pawns in some larger battle, a story which depends on and reinforces the erasure of the local and specific issues that brought the members of Local 677 out. And, finally, one of the biggest advantages of this frame for management is that it makes it seem like an unwinnable struggle – it paints management as making the best of a bad situation, as powerless before the provincial government, and the union as unreasonable. That is, it invokes Margaret Thatcher’s ghost by repeating one of the foundational deceptions of neoliberalism: “There is no alternative.”

There are plenty of reasons, therefore, to seek a way to connect this strike to larger issues

that refuses to erase all of the ways that it is about ordinary people resisting impositions on their everyday lives. At the most basic level, doing so is more representative and respectful of the realities of those walking the line. It shows they are not greedy, they are not dupes, they are simply standing up for some basic elements of security and dignity. It is also more likely to evoke public sympathy. It makes it clear that many of the key questions are not centrally about wages, so management does in fact have space to accept solutions that are fair for the workers. And it provides a concrete approach to understanding connections to larger struggles and building solidarity that is grounded in the shared experiences of different groups of workers on campus, students, and many, many people in the broader community.

University Responses

Key actions by the Laurentian University[1] administration in response to the strike seem to be designed to keep those kinds of connections from being made.

For instance, the Laurentian administration has made statements to the effect that the strike has nothing to do with the university and that NOSM is a completely separate entity. While it is correct that the medical school has a separate governing board from either of the universities with which it is affiliated, the implication that they are substantially separate is misleading, even deceptive. Academic matters at NOSM are officially governed by the academic senates of Laurentian and Lakehead (and a joint committee between the two), and it is considered the Faculty of Medicine of those institutions. The only text on [NOSM's logo](#) is the words "Lakehead," "Laurentian," and "Medicine." The presidents of Laurentian and Lakehead are chair and vice-chair of NOSM's board, and the respective universities have a heavy influence over decisions made by that body, including a right to override NOSM board decisions in some circumstances. As well, the universities derive significant prestige from having the medical school, and frequently use its accomplishments in promoting the broader university.

Laurentian University also told returning students that Local 677 had guaranteed a free flow of traffic into the university. While negotiations around a picket line protocol are ongoing, the union is quite clear that no guarantees have been made. The lines have generally been oriented around the distribution of information but traffic has been significantly delayed on some days.

Supporters of the union on campus interpret these moves by the administration as attempts to cultivate a mindset among campus users, perhaps especially among younger students who may be less aware of the realities of the situation, that the strike has nothing to do with them and that it is somehow illegitimate for the strikers to be acting in ways that cause some inconvenience for people trying to get onto campus. There are concerns that this may foster hostility directed toward the strikers, something that can be particularly dangerous when cars are facing pedestrian picketers. Thankfully, though there have been a few incidents of cars attempting to rush the line or push their way through, these have been minimal. Of longer term concern, such actions by the administration may present barriers for attempts to build connections among students, faculty, and staff and solidarity for resisting the broader agenda of which the demands by NOSM management are one expression.

Understanding the Connections

Protection from having to move your family a thousand miles to keep a decent job. Protection from other unreasonable and excessive demands by management. Protection from having your full-time, permanent job with good pay and benefits turned into the same work done part-time, insecurely, with poor pay and few or no benefits. Protection from having to scramble to find Saturday care for your three year-old and your one year-old on two days notice without the prospect of overtime pay. Protection from your benefit plan being arbitrarily changed by management, just when you need it.

It is these issues and others like them that are the specific, concrete reasons why the NOSM strikers are striking. Yet they also sound incredibly familiar to anyone who has paid attention to the kinds of changes that lots of people have faced in recent decades and continue to face, both in general and in the context of post-secondary educational institutions in North America.

In the broader society, these changes show up as growing numbers of people forced into precarious and part-time work, as lower welfare payments, as higher user fees, as reduced services. In post-secondary education, it is people who do teaching work finding it harder and harder to make a secure living because that work is increasingly casualized, and those who do have secure positions facing higher and higher workloads. It is core staff jobs at universities, from cafeterias to finance, being privatized and contracted out, which means the same work but for much less money and fewer benefits, often without a union. It is accessibility for students limited by ever-increasing tuition fees and the threat of life-crushing debt. It is policy frameworks that make it harder for those struggling against institutionalized sexism and racism in universities to push administrations into actually responding usefully to those oppressions. It is decreasing space and institutional support for scholarly work that prioritizes the public good, especially but not only in some sciences, and increasing pressure to be responsive only to the needs of private profit. It is the loss of spaces that, however imperfect they have always been, have provided some limited but important opportunities for critical discussion of the important issues of the day – critical discussion that is not just about ivory tower debate, but that has sometimes been a place to name oppression as a step in struggling against it.

In all of these examples, and the thousands of others that could be described, for them it is about money; for us it is about our lives.

Building Solidarity

It is recognition of this forced reorganization of lives that is the best starting point for building solidarity. And people from a broad cross section of the Laurentian campus have been acting to do exactly that. Not long after the workers walked out, an informal grouping began to coalesce, spurred particularly by people conscious of the slow response in the broader Sudbury community to the need to mobilize in support of the year-long [miners' strike](#) that ended in defeat earlier in 2010. Referring to itself so far only as “the campus coalition,” it includes individual faculty from Laurentian, including from NOSM, as well as staff and students. It has been consulting closely with the striking workers and its actions have received informal support from other unions and some student associations from the broader Laurentian campus as well as more formal support from organizations representing graduate students and mature and part-time students.

In explaining why the governing council of the Graduate Students Association (GSA) “unanimously supported working in support of the [NOSM] workers as a major campaign for

us until the strike is settled,” GSA president Rafiq Rahemtulla pointed toward the impacts that neoliberal changes in post-secondary education have had and continue to have on his members. The GSA has been using its office as a hub for the on-campus organizing.

Rahemtulla said that many of his members also work as graduate teaching assistants, and so are concerned about “the casualization of labour on campus,” and he says there is a broad recognition that “the working conditions of our faculty and support staff are our learning conditions.” He added: “A lot of students see this as a basic issue of fundamental rights and respect” and are committed to working toward the sort of “high quality, accessible post-secondary education institutions” that are responsive to the needs of both workers and students.

The coalition has focused its energies on pressuring the administration of Laurentian University to use its influence to push for a fair settlement for workers. They organized a day of solidarity shortly after classes started. This included members of the Laurentian staff union walking the picket lines with NOSM strikers, several faculty members holding classes at the lines, and assorted faculty and students walking with the picketers. After a brief rally, coalition members marched to the building that contains the office of the president of Laurentian University, Dominic Giroux, where they presented their concerns to senior members of the administration and arranged a meeting with Giroux for the following week. At that point, 15 to 20 members of the coalition met with him and pressured him to use his influence to seek a fair settlement and to correct some of the misleading information that Laurentian has distributed. Supporters have also been walking with the picketers on an informal basis, speaking about the issue in classes, and working to get other campus organizations to show support for the workers. A subsequent solidarity rally on the occasion of a NOSM board meeting attracted a broad crowd of supporters both from campus and from the broader labour movement, including activists from United Steel Workers Local 6500. The labour movement beyond Sudbury has also been generous with donations and declarations of support, and the Canadian Association of University Teachers has been especially active.

The most recent initiative involves organizing specifically among Laurentian faculty. An open letter signed by around two dozen faculty in just the first few days says in part:

“The stakes in this labour struggle are high. Basically we see NOSM management attempting to enforce a contract allowing for the creation of a very ‘flexible’ workforce with workers having a lack of control over their own work assignments, allowing them to be assigned work wherever and whenever management wishes. This is a major increase in management rights over and against workers. If the NOSM and LU administrations are successful in enforcing this on the NOSM support workers, they will be in a much better position to try to enforce a similar contract on [the Laurentian University Staff Union] and other workers on campus. OPSEU 677 is therefore struggling in the interests of all workers on our campus.”

If a settlement is not reached, signatories have committed to a range of escalating actions, from regular participation in the picket lines, to devoting class time to teach-ins on the strike, to a last resort of cancelling their classes for the duration of the strike.

Rahemtulla hopes that the connections that have developed in an organic and informal way between campus groups during the strike can be maintained and strengthened once it is over. “Moving beyond this strike, I’d like to see this committee continue to meet even in the

absence of any clear and present struggle,” Rahemtulla said. That way, when the next issue comes up, “all the icebreaking is done and we can hit the ground running.” This is particularly key for graduate teaching assistants, who recently organized as Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 5011, and have just entered first contract talks with Laurentian.

As this piece is being written, a new round of talks has begun between Local 677 and NOSM management. While all participants are hopeful that a fair contract can be reached, Rahemtulla said that the campus coalition “is still very strong and very motivated...we will continue to work on it (the strike).” As for the strikers, a visit to the line just past the seven week mark of the walkout showed a scene that was quiet and perhaps a bit weary but very determined. England is encouraged by the actions of the campus coalition, saying it “really helps the lines,” and says that he and other strikers remain firm in their commitment to reaching a fair deal. His simple summary: “The lines are strong.” •

Scott Neigh is a parent, activist, and writer based in Sudbury, Ontario. For more of his writing, visit his [personal blog](#). For the sake of full disclosure, he would like to add that his partner is a member of the unit of OPSEU Local 677 that is not currently on strike.

Notes

1. This account is being written in Sudbury and focuses largely on the shape the struggle has taken at Laurentian University. Related but distinct dynamics are playing out at Lakehead University.

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