

## **“What's this about a strike vote?”**

Members will have heard by now that at the last UWOFA General Meeting a motion made from the floor, and passed unanimously, stated the following:

*“THAT, unless the Negotiating Team and the UWOFA Board advise to the contrary prior to the next General Meeting, a motion to hold a strike vote will be presented at the next General Meeting.”*

Why a strike vote? And why now? Given that many of our colleagues have been hired since the last round of negotiations, it may be helpful to explain the meaning of a strike vote and review some of the factors leading to this motion.

### **What is a strike vote?**

A strike vote is NOT a vote on whether or not to actually call a strike. Rather, it is a vote by the membership on whether to give the UWOFA Board the authority to call a strike if and when the Board concludes that such a step is necessary to reach an acceptable agreement. A well-endorsed strike vote gives the negotiating team a mandate that it can take to the negotiating table and use to press for a better contract. A majority vote is sufficient to pass a strike vote. The stronger the vote, the less likely a strike may be, as this signals to the employer the widespread and committed support of the membership.

### **Why the motion for a strike vote?**

UWOFA is now in the third round of faculty contract negotiations since unionization. Each of the first two rounds went to Conciliation. Conciliation occurs when one party in negotiations declares an impasse and applies to the Labour Board for Conciliation. The Labour Board then assigns a conciliator, who meets with both parties and attempts to facilitate an agreement; a conciliator cannot impose an agreement. During the first round of negotiations, the Administration team declared impasse and called for Conciliation. Following Conciliation, and after two full years of bargaining, the first contract was signed. During the second round, the UWOFA team called for Conciliation. An agreement was reached after one year of negotiations.

During the second round and prior to Conciliation, the UWOFA membership had already held a successful strike vote. That strike vote arguably contributed to a stronger second contract, particularly with respect to salary and compensation. While effective, the strike vote was held relatively late in the academic year, in mid-January. Now into our third round of bargaining, members recognize the tactical importance of a strike vote, and of the timing of that vote.

### **The importance of timing in the quest for a good Collective Agreement**

UWOFA's objective in negotiations is to get a good Collective Agreement, one that contains significant improvements in our rights, working conditions, and compensation and benefits. Attaining this objective involves, among other things, maximizing our leverage at the negotiating table. The greater our leverage, the more we will get from negotiations. Here timing plays an important role.

The two parties in negotiations have different imperatives with respect to timing. The Administration has little incentive to move ahead quickly. As long as negotiations continue, it does not pay out any salary increases. Moreover, if negotiations continue through March and April, then the Administration will have made it past the “danger” zone, that is, the period when a strike or threat of a strike would have most effect.

A union’s bargaining power ultimately rests on the right of members to withhold their services from the employer. In universities the key “service” that can be withheld is teaching. Once the academic year is over, the bulk of teaching work ceases and thus our leverage is reduced. The Administration thus has an incentive to delay serious discussion of key issues until well after the New Year.

It is in the membership’s interest to move forward in negotiations. Our members are waiting for salary increases. Furthermore, our leverage is greatest while we are teaching, and so the months from now through March are critical.

### **How can UWOFA move negotiations forward?**

A necessary (but not sufficient) condition is to spend time at the negotiating table. The intensive schedule of negotiations in October makes substantial progress possible, but it cannot guarantee that the Administration will not drag its feet.

A second way to move negotiations forward is to be prepared to apply pressure if progress is slow. When negotiations get bogged down, unions have few levers at their disposal. One is to call for, and pass, a strike vote. This signals that the union is serious and has strong support from its members. Another is to declare an impasse and apply to the Labour Board for Conciliation. If Conciliation does not succeed in bringing about an agreement, then a lockout or strike (the latter only if there has been a successful strike vote) is possible. The threat of a lockout or strike places strong pressure on both sides to come to an agreement. The amount of pressure felt by the two sides, however, depends critically on timing.

### **What timing will work?**

Once application is made for Conciliation, the parties must wait for the province to assign a conciliator and then for meetings to be scheduled. During our last round of negotiations, more than six weeks passed between the application and the first meeting with the conciliator. Conciliation itself can then take another several weeks. If Conciliation fails, provincial regulations require a 17-day waiting period before a lockout or strike. Realistically, then, more than two months may be required between application for Conciliation and being in a strike position.

These considerations imply that the UWOFA Board and membership must be prepared to consider options such as declaring an impasse and calling for Conciliation before January. In view of the December vacation period, this really means November.

The next General Meeting will be held early in November. Our negotiating team will be able to report on the progress in negotiations to date, including a month of intensive bargaining in October. At that time we will need to make strategic decisions that will determine the future of these negotiations. One such decision is whether or not to call a strike vote. Please plan to attend the next General Meeting to have your say in this discussion.