

**THE ROLE AND STATUS OF PROFESSIONAL
LIBRARIANS AND ARCHIVISTS AT WESTERN: WHY
ALL UWOFA MEMBERS SHOULD BE CONCERNED**

First Contract Negotiations: Where Did This All Start?

In the spring of 2004, librarians and archivists at UWO were certified by the Ontario Labour Board as a bargaining unit represented by UWOFA. On October 3, 2004, the University received an external report on the Western Libraries. All three reviewers were Chief Librarians at major Canadian universities; this position is usually considered to correspond to that of Dean of a Faculty. The reviewers stated that “The recent discussions within the Western Libraries regarding a ‘professional practice’ model and the decision by the librarians to certify ... are important and positive developments. Both initiatives highlight the critical relationships between faculty and librarians and underscore the value of academic status”; and later recommended that “librarians be recognized as academic partners with the faculty with appropriately defined career paths and compensation, and that they be extended the rights and obligations consistent with the notion of academic status that is now the norm throughout universities in Canada.”

Proposals and Counter-Proposals for a First Contract

On June 15, 2005, UWOFA tabled all but the monetary articles of a first collective agreement. In keeping with the external review, they were based on the ‘professional practice’ model, examination of collective agreements across Canada and advice from CAUT and member surveys. The gulf separating the two sides was immediately apparent upon receipt of the UWO administration’s counter-proposals, and still remains. This gap is far wider and deeper than the differences one expects in normal bargaining, in which the parties share, to varying degrees, some conception of the work of the affected members. Negotiations are more likely to succeed when there is some mutual understanding of matters on which competing positions are staked out. But not at Western, not this time, not with the librarians and archivists. The administration’s position is so deviant from the Canadian norm regarding the work of academic librarians and archivists as to seem other-worldly, at times even phantasmagoric, to a degree that places in doubt the prospects of progress toward that mutual understanding upon which successful outcomes depend.

Some examples: criteria for emergency suspension against members far beyond anything normally contemplated in an academic workplace, such as insubordination; a minimum of ten years service by an entry-level appointee before eligibility for a tenure-like appointment; thirteen years to be eligible for a research leave of two months’ duration and sixteen years for one of four months (while unionized librarians normally get research leave, the administration team refuses to recognize “research” with respect to this leave, and to much else pertaining to this bargaining unit); the rigorous deletion, throughout the administration’s counter-proposals, of “academic” to describe the work of academic librarians and archivists, while at the same time celebrating the direct link between the work of members of this bargaining unit and the University’s academic mission, as evidenced by Western Libraries’ publicly stated position that an outcome of the work of librarians is the research produced by Western’s faculty.

The list goes on, driven by a resolute refusal to recognize the indivisible academic freedom that must underlie the independent, professional judgments of librarians and archivists in fulfilling all of their responsibilities in the service of the University's teaching and research mission. This refusal is most egregiously demonstrated in the denial of academic freedom to all but one part of what the administration proposes as the responsibilities of members, and even then, a part which the administration admits is not likely to be pursued by all or even most members. No other unionized university library system in Canada denies academic status to its librarians and archivists—a status recognized by the American Library Association since 1946. Yet the administration disingenuously insists that these are “new concepts” that the proper place of Western's collective agreement for librarians and archivists is on a “spectrum” of agreements, and that Western's “comparator” is Waterloo. There is no spectrum—there is a norm—and as for Waterloo's “comparator” status, the librarians there are not unionized.

Negotiating Under Advisement

Why are these negotiations going so badly? One problem may be structural: the administration's chief negotiator seems to lack full authority to bargain. In normal bargaining, it is possible to discuss positions. One asks questions, receives answers, builds upon answers with further questions, and so on. Not here, not at Western, not in these negotiations. A common response to even the simplest questions about implications of the employer's positions is “we'll take that under advisement”, or “we'll have to take that back to the drafting team”. Someone else, someone behind the scenes, seems to have the knowledge typically brought to the table in normal negotiations. Does Western's exceptionalism, its “leadership”, also consist in hiring chief negotiators who bargain without the institutional knowledge required to engage in meaningful dialogue? The result has been that negotiations slow to a glacial pace, with days passing between important questions and answers.

What's At Stake?

The administration's denigration of the professional work of librarians and archivists, sufficiently repellent even without regard for its broader implications, evidences an assault on principles and agreements found in the current faculty collective agreement, upon which most of the articles tabled by UWOFA in these negotiations are modeled. It is ludicrous for UWOFA negotiators to be obliged to explain the meaning of academic freedom to university administrators, but it is prudent to read the signs of what's in store for the forthcoming faculty negotiations.

The typical faculty member knows little about the work of academic librarians and archivists, and few have a clear picture of the full scope of their responsibilities and centrality to the University's academic mission (*Bargaining Bulletins* on this issue are in the works). But the principle underlying the ferocity of the administration's current attack on professionalism is clear. Proposals that diminish the professional status of bargaining units of this University, whether through attacks on academic freedom, weakening protections from arbitrary and unreasonable suspensions and other disciplinary actions, or through other means, create weakened, denigrated, and fungible employees compliant to administrative “flexibility”. UWOFA opposes such proposals, whether they be directed at librarians and archivists, or at faculty members.

The librarians and archivists need the full and vigorous support of Western faculty members in these negotiations. And our Employer needs to act soon to get negotiations back on course towards a settlement which recognises that our librarian and archivist colleagues deserve no less than the conditions and status which are the norm for their profession at universities across this country.