

York under strike threat; Teaching assistants vote to walk out early next month

The Toronto Sun

Saturday, October 18, 2008

Page: 8

Section: News

Byline: BY AMY CHUNG, SUN MEDIA

York University's teaching assistants have overwhelmingly voted to strike if labour negotiations fail to yield them a new contract by Nov. 2.

Negotiators for the university and **CUPE** 3903 -- which represents York's 3,200 teaching assistants, contract faculty and graduate assistants -- have been in talks since July.

Union members yesterday voted 86% in favour of a strike if the two sides cannot reach an agreement by Nov. 2. Their three-year collective agreement expired Aug. 31.

"This is an exceptionally strong mandate from our members that they're willing to undertake job action if the university doesn't come to the table," **CUPE** chief negotiator Graham Potts said.

The unionized staff staged a 78-day strike in 2000 that cost the university about \$5 million and frustrated thousands of students who had to make up lost time in the classroom.

A conciliator has been named by the labour ministry to mediate the dispute.

Unlike bargaining in 2005, the two sides are "very far apart," said Bob Drummond, York's dean of arts.

The union is asking for a two-year contract that would deliver a 30% wage hike, plus annual cost-of-living adjustments. The university is offering annual increases of 2% in a three-year contract.

"I understand this is a big number, but we are in a bargaining position," said Potts, suggesting the two parties will meet somewhere down the middle.

Ryan Toews, a TA and contract faculty member at York, said the wage demands are fair since class sizes and membership in the **CUPE** local have increased by 30%.

"It's been difficult to make ends meet. I have to travel across Southern Ontario for extra money," said Toews, 30, who added he has deferred work on a dissertation to focus on the eight tutorials and 200 students he oversees.

Toews said TA's at York make roughly \$16,000 a year -- below the \$22,000 poverty line.

© 2008 Sun Media Corporation. All rights reserved.