

November 8, 2019

RE: Incorrect or misleading claims made by McMaster University

As many members of the McMaster community know, CUPE Local 3906 (Unit 1) and the University jointly requested a ‘no-board’ report following a day of conciliation that failed to break an impasse and provide the meaningful gains that Teaching Assistants and Research Assistants (in lieu) deserve. More information about this can be found at www.bettermac.ca.

One of the key priorities identified by members in our bargaining survey was access to paid TA training. The importance of said training was reinforced when Unit 1 members returned a historic and record-breaking strike vote of 87% after McMaster University failed to agree to the Union’s proposals on this item. Let us be clear: in highlighting the lack of paid TA training, the Union is referring to university-wide training that would help TAs to become more effective at their jobs. Specifically, the Union proposed five paid hours for pedagogical training and an additional three paid hours for anti-oppression training.

The employer addressed this issue – which we had already tabled as a priority– on June 24th, in their eighth set of proposals to the Union. Specifically, they proposed using the following language in a letter of understanding: “The parties agree to establish a joint committee for the purposes of exploring the feasibility of establishing an Institution-wide or Faculty specific training program(s) for new employees.” This would certainly suggest that there is not university-wide (or even faculty-specific) training for new employees.

On November 5th, when the employer provided the union with a “comprehensive proposal,” they made no mention of university-wide paid TA training on pedagogy or anti-oppression.

For these reasons, you can imagine the Union’s surprise when we read the employer’s statement on requesting a ‘no-board’ report. In it, they assert that “McMaster also funds benefits programs and paid training for Teaching Assistants.” To be clear, the University is now claiming that they fund paid training for Teaching Assistants. Our questions is this: “Oh, really?”

We are left wondering which paid training they provide to TAs – be it pedagogical, anti-oppression, or both. If we are to take the University’s statement at face value, it is unclear why they would have refused our abovementioned proposals, let alone why they themselves proposed “establish[ing] a joint committee for the purposes of exploring the feasibility of establishing an Institution-wide or Faculty specific training program(s) for new employees.” So we ask again, to which paid TA training are they referring?

Perhaps they are referring to health and safety training. The *Occupational Health and Safety Act* mandates this type of training, so citing it when we have clearly been bargaining over anti-oppression and pedagogical training is disingenuous to say the least. Perhaps they are referring to training mandated by the *Access for Ontarians with Disabilities Act*, which the employer is required to offer to employees. We know that the Faculty of Engineering launched a pilot project to provide

training to its graduate TAs. If this is what they were referring to, it is unclear why they would not want to include such an important provision in their proposals, especially in response to our proposals for paid university-wide TA training.

There is existing language in the Collective Agreement mandating that “the Employer will provide an orientation... to all newly hired Unit 1 employees in order to provide them with information about the general operation of the University and resources available to employees that may be of assistance in the performance of their duties. Employee orientation may include information about such things as instructional courses and professional development resources that are available to employees.” This language might tell TAs and RAs in lieu about what is available, but it does not provide pedagogical or anti-oppression training. Neither party is looking to amend this language, so surely this is not something worth highlighting. At the department level, some departments carve out minimal paid training for TAs, but this simply comes out of their allocation of hours, thus leaving less time for marking and student contact. To us it seems that providing additional paid hours for training is the least the employer could do, considering that most of our members take home less than \$5,000 in wages per year once we account for the cost of full-time tuition – the payment of which is a condition of their employment.

We would urge all TAs to call or e-mail their Department Chairs, the University’s Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies (who also happens to be Chair of their bargaining team), as well as the Associate Vice-President and Dean of Students to inquire about the paid training opportunities we are supposedly afforded. Some helpful contact information can be found below. We would love to hear the responses to these inquiries!

- Doug Welch, Vice-Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies: 1-905-525-9140 x 24205 or deangrad@mcmaster.ca
- Sean Van Koughnett, Associate Vice-President and Dean of Students: 1-905-525-9140 x 27455 or avpstud@mcmaster.ca

We have always been clear about the fact that TAs and RAs in lieu both demand and deserve paid pedagogical and anti-oppression training. We also know that our students deserve TAs who have been trained in ways commensurate with the University’s emphasis on excellence in teaching. McMaster’s recent statement is either embarrassingly uninformed or deliberately misleading, and we hold that the only correct course of action would be for them to immediately offer a retraction and apology.

Sincerely,



Nathan Todd,
President of CUPE 3906