

Postdoctoral fellows vote “yes” to ensure high-quality research jobs on campus

November 25, 2022

In a historic first, unionized postdoctoral fellows (PDFs) at McMaster University participated in a strike vote and sent a clear message to the university’s administration by voting 71% in favour of strike action if needed. PDFs have been at the bargaining table since May and are seeking a contract that provides wage increases in line with inflation, access to retirement security, and protections against overwork.

“Postdoctoral fellows perform cutting edge research that is vital to the university’s academic mission, but the employer’s current offer fails to recognize the value and importance of their work,” said Chris Fairweather, president of CUPE Local 3906, adding that the employer’s so-called best offer is “simply unacceptable.” After meeting with a provincially appointed conciliator, the employer tabled a proposed four-year agreement that failed to contain a yearly wage increases to PDFs, refused to address issues of workload, and continued to exclude PDFs from any form of retirement security.

“We are full-time, professional researchers with completed doctoral degrees,” stated Aly Bailey, a member of the union’s bargaining team and a Postdoctoral Fellow in Health, Aging & Society. “We are critical to McMaster’s research engine,” she added. “The university’s most recent offer is disappointing given our research output and ongoing scholarship that helps make this institution internationally recognized. It is terrible that some Postdocs make less than \$40,000 a year. Many of us have families, or are starting families, and are struggling to makes ends meet.”

The union’s proposals – including wage increases – are reasonable and well within McMaster’s means, considering that the university reported \$232 million in “excess revenues” in 2020-2021, and over \$700 million in profit since 2016. Postdocs at other comparable universities have pension access and enjoy yearly wage increases, McMaster Postdocs deserve the same.

“With this strike vote, Postdocs are making a clear statement: our work matters, we matter, and we will not accept a contract that fails to recognize the growing challenges and realities we face in simply getting by. We have come from across the world to live and work in Hamilton, and we demand better of McMaster,” added Muhammad Nabeel, a Postdoctoral Fellow in Materials Science and Engineering and a member of the union’s bargaining team.

A positive strike vote does not mean that Postdocs are on strike, nor does it set a date for a strike, but it authorizes the bargaining team to call a strike in the event that talks break down at the bargaining table and after a provincial “no board” report has been issued.

No further bargaining dates have been scheduled with the employer, but we hope to return to the bargaining table soon. Further updates will be sent to your McMaster email accounts.

Quick Facts:

- Since 2016, McMaster University’s yearly consolidated surpluses have totalled over \$730 million
- The average yearly rent in Hamilton has gone up \$4,572 since 2019, the average postdoc salary has not kept up with these increases
- Doug Ford’s *Bill 124* capped wage increases for Postdocs to 1% per year for 3 years starting in 2019. The university is not proposing ANY annual increases now, despite no legal prohibitions on doing so
- CUPE 3906, Unit 3 represents about 182 PDFs from the Faculties of Business, Engineering, Humanities, Science, Social Science, and other areas on campus

For more information, please contact:

Chris Fairweather, President, CUPE 3906 – president@cupe3906.org

Brad Walchuk, Chief Negotiator, CUPE 3906 – brad@cupe3906.org