

UMFA Votes to Authorize Potential Strike

UMFA Calls for Arbitration; Protest organized at Legislature

Winnipeg, November 2, 2020 – 80% of voting UMFA Members have approved potential strike action over the University of Manitoba Administration's refusal to agree to binding arbitration, with a turnout of 85% of the UMFA membership. The Union has called for a protest on Thursday to demonstrate its resolve.

"It's time for President Benarroch to do what is best for the University community and agree to neutral, third party interest arbitration, or return to the bargaining table with a reasonable counter-offer" said UMFA President Michael Shaw.

The Association is bargaining for a more equitable salary grid, a modest increase to wages for the 2020-2021 contract year, and extra supports during the pandemic for those with dependent care responsibilities. The University has responded that it wants the *status quo*, in line with a government mandated 0% salary increase.

The Association is also asking that the wage offer that was taken off the table in 2016 be restored, and the wages that were denied be paid to UMFA workers. The wage offer was revoked in 2016 after the intervention of the Pallister government. It was never restored because the government then passed austerity legislation that capped wage increases for all public sector workers. This June, the Court of Queen's Bench called that legislation "draconian" and declared it unconstitutional.

UMFA workers are educating more students than ever during the pandemic. Class enrolments were up over 10% this summer, and over 3% this fall. The University's financial reports show it to be in a healthy financial position. Tuition rates are up, with a net increase in tuition revenue. On Friday the University announced the first phase of its development of the former Southwood Golf and Country Club will bring in \$20 million¹.

And still, salaries at the U of M are almost at the very bottom of the chart when compared to other research-intensive universities in the country. This translates into a recruitment and retention problem for the university, as it is hard to keep talented and skilled faculty members in Manitoba for substandard wages. A revolving door of professors and researchers that move on to more lucrative positions hurts both students and the Manitoban community at large.

In the past the University has welcomed binding arbitration as a way to avoid labour unrest. In 2013 then-President Barnard wrote that "We have suggested moving to binding arbitration to take the threat of a strike off the table. Arbitration would ensure the uninterrupted continuation of the academic year."² That attitude appears to have changed. At their last bargaining meeting this October the University said it would not leave the University's finances in the hands of a third party.

¹ <https://globalnews.ca/news/7433694/mixed-use-development-southwood-golf-country-club-u-of-m/>

² <http://umanitoba.ca/admin/latestupdates.html>

This past week the Graduate Student Association (GSA) voted to support the Association's demand for binding arbitration. Tonight, the undergraduate student union (UMSU) will be entertaining a similar vote.

On November 5 at 2 PM UMFA will be holding a car and bike horn-honking demonstration against the Conservative government's 0% mandate, looping around the provincial legislature grounds. Participants from other unions and public supporters are encouraged to join.

Bargaining between UMFA and the Administration is at an impasse, with the Administration refusing to move from its initial position. In August the parties began negotiations over salaries for the 12 months spanning April 2020 to March 2021. In 2017, both agreed to account for the status of the Public Sector Sustainability Act (PSSA) in this year's negotiations. UMFA does not feel that a status quo offer of 0% accounts for the unconstitutional impact of the PSSA.

"The effects of the PSSA have damaged the entire University community," said Shaw. "Arbitration by a neutral third party is the most secure way forward. We are asking for a fair deal."

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