

Canadian university locks out faculty

Our reporter
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St. Thomas University, a liberal arts college in Fredericton, New Brunswick, has locked out its 160 unionized full- and part-time faculty and announced its intention to make use of the province's reactionary labor laws to force a vote on its "final" contract offer.

The vote, which is to be organized by the New Brunswick Labour Relations Board, will likely be held Friday, January 11.

Never before has a Canadian university imposed such a lockout. Bishop's University, of Lennoxville, Quebec, did briefly lock out its faculty last summer, but only after the university's administrative staff, also members of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), had been on strike for several weeks.

St. Thomas' Board of Governors and management have assumed a provocative, antiunion stance throughout the eleven month-long negotiations. First they tabled a raft of proposals aimed at strengthening management control over hiring and promotion and gravely compromising academic freedom. Then the Board insisted that its modified contract proposal be accepted as the framework for any new agreement and, when this ultimatum was rejected, locked out the faculty, who had yet even to authorize their union to call a strike.

In mid-December, the university announced that the start of the second semester would be delayed by a week and told the CAUT-affiliated Faculty Association of the University of St. Thomas (FAUST) it would force a vote on its "final offer" on January 3rd. This was coupled with the threat that if the offer was rejected the university would immediately impose a lockout.

The university was forced to abandon this plan, because there was insufficient time for the labour relations board to organize the vote for January 3. The Board of Governors then chose to lock out the faculty

on December 27, in the middle of the two-week period during which the university is habitually closed for Christmas vacation.

At issue in the dispute are wages, teaching workload and the balance between teaching and research, management's attempt to increase its power over hiring, the requirements for tenure, and, last but not least, the remuneration and working conditions of part-time instructors.

The faculty at St. Thomas is amongst the most poorly paid in all Canada. This is especially true of part-time instructors. Most are paid less than \$5,000 per course, receive no health benefits, and have little seniority protection. The university has rejected the union's demand that the enrolment cap of 60 students per course for courses taught by full-timers be extended to courses taught by part-time instructors.

The dispute at St. Thomas is rooted in socio-economic trends to be seen across Canada and far beyond the higher-education sector—the increase in hierarchical divisions of the workforce, the proliferation of insecure, part-time, jobs, and ever-increasing management demands.

36 percent of all courses offered at St. Thomas this year are being taught by part-timer instructors. While the public impression may be that these instructors are supplementing their incomes, the vast majority of part-time courses at St. Thomas, as at universities across Canada, are taught by persons—graduate students and Ph.D.'s unable to find full-time jobs—who depend on their teaching-income for their livelihood. 42 percent of the members of FAUST's part-time bargaining unit are teaching 4 or more courses at St. Thomas in the current academic year.

While full-time faculty are far better paid than their part-time colleagues, they too are facing increasing management demands in regards to teaching, service, and research publication-output.

The dispute at St. Thomas is also ideologically driven. The Board of Governors and administration want to revive the university's "Catholic identity" and make support for its "Catholic mission" a criterion in hiring and promotion.

St. Thomas was founded, at the beginning of the last century, by a Catholic order at the behest of the Bishop of Chatham, based in northeastern New Brunswick. In the early 1960s, as part of a provincial government reform aimed at improving higher education and broadening access to post-secondary education, St. Thomas was moved to the provincial capital, Fredericton, made a public institution, and effectively secularized.

As older faculty have retired, St. Thomas' secular character has become more pronounced and for several decades the university has been for all intents and purposes a public, secular institution. The Board, supported by a small cabal of neo-conservatives in the faculty, wants to redefine the university as a Catholic institution.

This too exemplifies a cross-Canada trend. As universities have sought to compensate for declining state support, they have become more dependent on big business in the form of corporate partnerships, commercialized research, and donations. Because of business pressure and more generally the shift to right in the most privileged sections of society, university administrations have become more conservative and have started to redefine the acceptable parameters of academic debate.

While the current Liberal provincial government has said nothing publicly of substance about the contract dispute at St. Thomas, it is currently deliberating on a report it commissioned on the future of the province's post-secondary education system. That report proposed tailoring the education system even more to the needs of big business, transforming three university campuses into polytechnics, reducing the role of faculty in university governance, and deregulating university tuition fees.

Predictably, the corporate media has echoed and amplified the university administration's claims that the faculty's demands will automatically translate into higher tuition fees. The press has also sought to incite the population against the locked out St. Thomas faculty by charging them with selfishly seeking higher

pay at a time when the province is being roiled by the crisis in the forest industry.

The reality is that New Brunswick's economy is dominated by a handful of giant corporations and conglomerates that have no compunction about closing factories and mills that are the mainstay of small communities. For decades these corporations have pressed pro-business Liberal and Conservative governments to lower taxes and starve the province's education system and other public services of adequate funding

Virtually all the province's English-language newspapers are owned by the Irving conglomerate, which has diverse holdings, including in oil refining and marketing and in the forest industry. The net worth of the Irvings was recently estimated at more than \$10 billion, making them one of the world's richest families.

The Irving-owned press churns out right-wing, pro-big business propaganda on a daily basis. A comment in the *St. John Telegraph Journal* last Wednesday advocated that New Brunswick aspire to become "Alabama north." The comment claimed that the notorious anti-worker, southern US state has become a magnet for investment.

On Friday the *Telegraph Journal* published a rapidly pro-employer editorial on the St. Thomas University dispute titled "Walk out for what?" Predictably, the Irving-owned paper cast itself as speaking for New Brunswick's underpaid workers, although it routinely editorializes in favour of the economic agenda—tax and budget cuts, deregulation, privatization and anti-union laws—that has resulted in a massive transfer of wealth from working people to the rich and super-rich. The Irving mouthpiece declared, "The majority of New Brunswickers do not understand what faculty members are holding out for, and community feeling is likely to turn against the union if the dispute results in cancelled classes."



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