

850 faculty and staff begin strike at Memorial University of Newfoundland

E.P. Milligan
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Some 850 faculty and staff at Memorial University of Newfoundland walked off the job Monday, January 30. Contract negotiations between the Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association (MUNFA) and university administration officials broke down late last year, shortly after the previous contract expired in November.

Small picket lines were seen Monday and Tuesday at eight entry points on the university's main campus in St. John's, Newfoundland's capital and principal city.

While there are multiple issues involved in the strike, the principal issue in dispute is wages. The faculty and staff are demanding a 14 percent salary increase over the next four-year period. The university administration initially demanded a six-year contract, ending in 2028, with miserly annual pay "increases" of between 1 to 2 percent (depending on the year). With inflation running at well over 6 percent over the past year, this would represent a huge real-terms pay cut.

In addition, the university's contract proposal contains measures to offload healthcare costs onto retired faculty and staff through the imposition of a two-tier payment scheme. It would also raise the time required to access benefits from two to 15 years, a move which would effectively deny them to contract instructors.

University administration officials offered faculty and staff a \$2000 signing bonus upon approval of its real wage-cutting contract offer. This was rightly seen by faculty and staff as a cheap ploy to distract them from the tens of thousands of dollars they would lose over the six-year period due to dwindling benefits and skyrocketing inflation. The demand for a six-year instead of a four-year contract was designed to bind faculty and staff to a sub-

par contract, which would set the stage for further attacks on their living standards and working conditions as well as those of other university employees.

On Sunday, administration officials issued a last-minute offer that included a proposed 12 percent salary increase by 2026—still shy of the 14 percent demand. The offer contained the very same cuts to healthcare outlined in the university's earlier proposal. The administration also continues to contemptuously reject demands for improved job security for contract faculty, who must reapply for their jobs every four or eight months.

This offer was rejected by the MUNFA membership, who chose to proceed with strike action as planned.

The university administration has repeatedly claimed that it cannot afford the proposed salary increase because its own treasury is strained, and it is dependent upon the provincial government for funds. The claim that the university has "no money" for faculty and staff is a lie. Memorial University is currently in the process of imposing sharp tuition hikes, with a scheduled 4 percent annual tuition increase each year from 2023-2026. The university currently has an endowment at a market value of \$145.9 million. University administration also came under fire last week when it was revealed that the institution chaired an Arctic Forum conference at a high-end resort on Fogo Island which racked up a bill to the tune of \$110,000, of which the university paid at least half.

While the strike action has caused certain courses and facilities to temporarily be put on hold, large numbers of instructors and staff are represented by a plethora of other unions which have given no indication they will undertake job actions of their own. As a result, the campus is largely still open and running as normal. The unions' deliberate division of the workers along professional lines with staggered contracts that expire at

different times, only serves, as at other universities, to weaken them. MUNFA President Ash Hossain expressed the hostility of the local trade union leadership to any notion of expanding the struggle beyond its current limits. When asked about faculty and staff who are members of other unions crossing the MUNFA picket line, Hossain said, “That is totally fine.” He added that MUNFA will not urge anyone to not cross the strikers’ picket lines, saying, “We are not hooligans.”

According to MUNFA’s official website, “MUNFA is a member of the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) and the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour (NLFL), and is affiliated with the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) through its membership in the National Union of CAUT.” The CLC is Canada’s largest trade union federation, representing some 3.3 million workers across many sections of industry. Its leadership consists of well-heeled bureaucrats that openly voice support for Canadian big business and the federal Liberal Trudeau government. Its ex-president, Hassan Yussuff, was appointed by Trudeau to the Senate in June 2021 just days after his retirement. Its current president, Bea Bruske, published an op-ed in the *Globe and Mail* last Saturday, in which she appealed for closer collaboration between the unions, big business and the state. “The last thing, Canadians want now,” declared Bruske, “is labor unrest across the country, but the strikes we’re seeing across the Atlantic could be a harbinger for Canada.”

It should thus come as no surprise that the CLC bureaucrats have not lifted a finger in support of the MUNFA strike, as they have a concrete material interest in keeping the faculty and staff isolated from their brothers and sisters at other universities and other economic sectors. Breaking out of this isolation is possible only if strikers take the conduct of their fight into their own hands by establishing a rank-and-file strike committee to broaden the struggle to other workers on campus, throughout Newfoundland, and across Canada.

The Teaching Assistants’ Union of Memorial University of Newfoundland (TAUMUN), representing teaching assistants (TAs) and graduate research assistants (GAs) at the university, has also reached an impasse in contract negotiations. Negotiations broke down late last year over the university administration’s heavy-handed demands to make discretionary appointments and lift current limits on class sizes, though TAUMUN agreed to “table” discussion on monetary demands.

Negotiations briefly resumed on January 26 and 27. On

January 28, TAUMUN and the university administration “agreed to suspend bargaining pending the results of MUNFA negotiations.” In other words, the TAUMUN leadership is giving university management a free hand to ram a concessions-filled contract down the throats of faculty while its members wait their turn to be subjected to similar attacks on their wages and conditions.

The parties have since made no public statements concerning how they will proceed, despite TAUMUN now being in an apparent legal position to call for a strike vote. Current conditions for TAs and GAs are abysmal, with a per semester payment of just \$1,333. TAs are often given onerous numbers of students, with some undergraduate courses numbering as many as 150.

Newfoundland and Labrador, a historically impoverished part of Canada, has been particularly hard hit since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The provincial Liberal government has enforced vicious austerity since 2015. The latest budget presented in April 2022 froze spending for health, education, and social services, meaning real-terms budget cuts in the face of rampant inflation.

Conditions for the vast majority of workers and youth have continued to worsen to the point that the local food bank on Memorial’s campus had to close late last year just before the holiday season because it ran out of supplies. Matt Pike, the food bank’s volunteer coordinator, told CBC News that in addition to students, the food bank has increasingly been used by university staff and even some professors. “The cost of living is tough for everybody,” he said. “It’s not just the students.”



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