Union executive orders end to strike by Newfoundland's Memorial University faculty although contract yet to be finalized

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Are you a MUNFA member? Do you work at Memorial University? Contact the WSWS by filling out the form at the end of this article and tell us what you think of the union's sabotage of the strike and how the struggle of university staff for better wages and conditions can be taken forward.

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In an extraordinarily undemocratic move, the union negotiating on behalf of 850 faculty members at Newfoundland's Memorial University voted to end a two-week strike before a tentative agreement was even finalized with university management. In a February 16 announcement, the Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association (MUNFA) said that its executive committee had voted to approve the proposed contract, before explaining in the next breath that union officials were still working to finalize its terms with the university.

The internal bulletin declared, "At the moment, your Negotiating Committee and MUNFA staff are examining your Collective Agreement to update it with the changes made during this round of bargaining. There is more information below about this process and why it is taking so long. In short, we expect to finish this process later this week.

After MUNFA's team has edited the Collective Agreement and is satisfied that the document accurately represents all the changes made during negotiations, it has to be reviewed by the administration's team for the same purposes. We expect this process to take place early next week."

Translated into plain language, MUNFA and Memorial's Board of Regents did not yet have a finalized agreement when faculty members were sent back to work by the MUNFA executive. What the union euphemistically terms "editing and review" ought by any objective standard to be considered part of the negotiating process, since the university's approval of the deal remains outstanding. The only "agreement" came from the union executive, which has committed to endorse the deal irrespective of changes that may be demanded by management in the "editing and review" process.

To top off the union leadership's scandalous decision, they announced in their release that the membership will only get a chance to discuss the deal at a two-hour membership meeting held February 23, more than a week after the strike's conclusion. The union leadership stated that they "expect to send" members the proposed 200-page agreement by Tuesday, which means they will have two days at most to review a book-length document. In the FAQ section of the release, MUNFA cynically sought to justify this farcical process by asserting that it was upholding article 13(B) of its constitution, which commits the union leadership to present the contract in full to members prior to a ratification vote.

MUNFA members should vote to reject the deal on principle, since there is no way for them to review and discuss its terms prior to the hastily organized February 24 vote. The union executive's actions underscores the need for faculty members, together with other university staff fighting for similar demands, to take the conduct of their struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy through the establishment of a rank-and-file committee.

Faculty and staff first walked off the job on 30 January following a breakdown of contract negotiations late last year. Negotiations recommenced on February 7 and the MUNFA executive voted February 10 to approve the as-yet uncompleted agreement.

Key issues in the strike involved stagnating salaries, precarious conditions for contract faculty, and preventing cuts to post-retirement health benefits. When compared with the national average in Canada, faculty at Memorial University earn 15 percent less than their brothers and sisters at other universities as of 2020. With the rampant inflation that has taken place since 2020, real wage disparities may be higher. MUNFA members' initial demands included a 14

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percent wage increase over the next four-year period to offset the rising cost of living and to put their working conditions on par with faculty at other universities.

The conditions for contract faculty at Memorial University are extremely onerous. Many must reapply for their jobs every four or eight months. Contract faculty, in certain extreme cases, have been working under such rotating short-term contracts for as long as 20 years. The criminality of this policy was made all the clearer when it was revealed that university budget lines exist for over 100 tenure-track positions that the administration has not attempted to fill.

The university administration's previous offers contained 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. It is still unclear if the university administration has backed down from this demand.

The administration, which initially proposed miserly pay "increases" of 1 to 2 percent over a six-year period, made a last-minute offer on January 29 involving a 12 percent increase over a four-year period—still shy of the initial 14 percent demand and well below inflation. It is likewise unclear if any further adjustments have been made to salary increases.

Also involved were issues surrounding Memorial University administration's anti-democratic methods of governance. Meetings of the most important university administrative bodies—the Board of Regents, the Vice-Presidents' Council, and the Complement Advisory Committee—currently take place behind closed doors with no input from faculty, staff, or students. Searches for academic administrators are likewise closed off, with faculty being forced to choose candidates from shortlists prepared by private-sector executive firms while operating under non-disclosure gag orders.

It is the greatest irony that MUNFA members are being forced back to work by their union leadership on a contract they have not yet finalized, while the very same Board of Regents they want to make more transparent debates its details behind closed doors.

Despite efforts by the CBC to cherry-pick quotes from students who opposed the strike because it supposedly adversely affected their education, it is undeniable that the strike won mass support from the student body. Students routinely visited the picket lines to express support for striking faculty and staff, bringing snacks, coffee, and hand warmers in the bitter Newfoundland winter. Trade union-led rallies held on campus, while relatively toothless in character and content, attracted droves of militant students. Anger over pay, working conditions, and precarious employment by teaching assistants (TAs) and graduate research assistants (GAs) contributed to the strong support for the strike on campus.

The university, for its part, pursued an aggressive strike-breaking policy of hiring scabs in its nursing program. The decision to hire replacement workers to cross the picket line for the university nursing program was a deliberate maneuver intended to divide public support for the strike by invoking nurses' status as "essential" workers who should have no legal right to strike.

Reports of "unsafe driving" across the picket lines were also noted. While the administration condemned these actions in a university-wide communiqué , it is clear these actions were intended to intimidate strikers.

A large number of instructors and staff are represented by a plethora of other unions which refused to undertake job actions of their own. The unions' deliberate division of the workers along profession-based lines with staggered contracts that expire at different times, only serves, as at other universities, to weaken them.

The Teaching Assistants' Union of Memorial University of Newfoundland (TAUMUN), representing (TAs) and GAs, also reached an impasse in contract negotiations late last year. Talks broke down 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 gave 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.

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