

The Steward

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CUPE 2278
Teaching Assistants at UBC

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Welcome

My name is Geraldina Polanco and I am honoured to serve as President of CUPE Local 2278, representing UBC's Teaching Assistants, Markers, and Instructors at the English Language Institute. As a teaching assistant at UBC, you are represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 2278. You are the union!

In August 2010, our collective agreement expired and we are now "in bargaining" with the university. The collective agreement is the contract that was negotiated by the local and the university's Human Resources, and which governs your working conditions as a teaching assistant at UBC. This includes but is not limited to the hours you are expected to work, rates of pay, sick leave and bereavement leave. The expiration of our collective agreement (which was in place from September 1, 2005 to August 31st, 2010) signals a new and exciting opportunity for the local to bargain with the university on issues important to employees.

Over the past 5 years, the working conditions of teaching and studying at UBC have changed – consequently, so must the contract that governs our working conditions. The process of bargaining a new contract, however, can be a long and difficult one. Until a new contract can be agreed upon, the contract that recently expired continues to govern our working conditions.

We welcome your input and support, and look forward to hearing about issues important to you. Attending general membership meetings, as well as remaining informed through reading the electronic newsletters sent out by the local are excellent ways to stay knowledgeable on what is going on. Please speak up at membership meetings and keep in touch with us!

Given our current collective bargaining, now is a particularly exciting time to get involved with the union. There are many different ways in which you can be involved. This includes serving as a department representative, emailing us with your concerns, sitting on various committees, and becoming a member of the executive committee. In order to serve you better we need to maintain consistent, reciprocal lines of communication. Be active and vocal in order to help the union assist you!

Geraldina Polanco, President

Collective bargaining

We have been in bargaining with UBC Human Resources since the beginning of September 2010. The new collective agreement that we reach at the end will detail the wages, hours, working conditions and other agreements between us, the employees, and UBC, the employer. By bargaining collectively as a union, we have more influence during negotiations.

Over the last year, we have been conducting surveys and holding membership meetings to draw ideas from all of you regarding the key issues that are important to teaching assistants at UBC. As we are still in the initial stages of the bargaining process for our new contract, we would still love to get input from all the members regarding your concerns.

This newsletter will summarize the major issues that we have brought up with the University. You can also find out more information at our upcoming membership meeting detailed at the end of this newsletter.

Wages

A wage increase for teaching assistants at UBC is not only desirable, it is absolutely essential for most graduate students to achieve the basic living conditions. The last time that the University agreed to a wage increase was over 7 years ago in 2003. Despite the ever-increasing high cost of living in British Columbia and the sky rocketing tuition fees at UBC, the teaching assistant wages remain constant, uncompetitive and insufficient. The shocking fact remains that teaching assistants across various wage categories at the **University of Toronto make on average 31% to 129% more** than the teaching assistants at UBC. Let us not forget that all teaching assistants are also students. Therefore, teaching assistants across the UBC campus are actually seeing an **income reduction every time there is a tuition increase!** There is no doubt that a resolution needs to be reached, and wages will remain one of the top priorities in this round of bargaining.

Tuition waiver

A tuition waiver is a guarantee that teaching assistants will not pay tuition while holding a teaching assistantship. This practice, quite common in universities in the United States, follows the logic that someone should not be required to pay fees in order to be eligible for employment. The Union once had **tuition protection** but was lost in later bargaining with the University. This protection, different from a tuition waiver, stated that if tuition went up, employees under the collective agreement would not pay any increases that happened after a collective agreement had been reached. Although a waiver is preferable, tuition protection is the bare minimum of a fair contract.

Health Care

As UBC students, we **pay \$223.45 annually** for a health plan through the UBC Alma Mater Society and Graduate Student Society (AMS/GSS). This includes a basic health and dental plan that does not cover any spouse, partner or children. With our last collective agreement, the University agreed to give us 1.85% of the gross income of all teaching assistants at UBC to be distributed among all our members in lieu of a proper health benefit package. In the end, each member will **receive around \$100 annually in compensation**. Simple mathematics will reveal that this “compensation” is insufficient. Are we being unreasonable with our demands? The University of Toronto does not seem to think so as their teaching assistants receive \$500 individual compensation and up to \$1000 for spousal or child support.

Academic harm

Academic harm is any threat or action that may influence an employee’s academic career or future employment potential and possibilities. There are teaching assistants at UBC who have expressed that although they have suffered situations that may warrant a grievance, they do not wish to “rock the boat” by confronting their supervisor, who may also be their research supervisor or on their thesis committee.

While we currently have language in our collective agreement to protect against harassment, not all forms of academic harm are clearly defined as harassment, such as a negative recommendation for a research fellowship. It is important that we make explicit that academic harm or retaliation is an offense that will be grieved so that teaching assistants do not feel intimidated bringing forward violations of the collective agreement or of the labour code. The bottom line is that negative working conditions at UBC should not also impact academic study at UBC.

Though the fear of academic harm right now may prevent many teaching assistants from raising their complaints about their appointment, please remember that when you come to the union office for advice or assistance, everything remains confidential and no action will be taken unless you are on board. Therefore, please do not hesitate to contact us when you have a concern with your employment.

Working conditions

Our working conditions at UBC should provide an environment free of danger to our physical, mental and social well-being and provide an environment with the appropriate tools necessary to do our work. This is a bare necessity of any healthy work environment. Teaching assistants who have been assigned to hold office hours should have a secure location where confidential conversations can be had with students that may have emotionally-charged connections to their work.

Some teaching assistant work can include activities like photocopying, in which case access to a not-for-pay photocopier should be provided. Our current collective agreement includes the provision of a work space, but it should be modernized to include access to the internet and to provide a place where possessions can be left without worry of theft. It is important that we update our collective agreement to the standards of our increasingly technological work environment.

Conference/comprehensive exam leave

In order to complete academic requirements for a graduate degree, teaching assistants are often required to write comprehensive exams or attend conferences to present research or stay involved in their area of study. Some comprehensive exams require multiple days to complete and the outcome of these tests can have a lasting impact on a student's ability to continue their studies. As a way of recognizing the time costs inherent in these activities that the University of British Columbia expects of its graduate students, we are tabling a proposal to provide paid leave for teaching assistants who require time off for these reasons. No such provisions currently exist at this time for UBC teaching assistants.

There are precedents for this action. The University of Toronto protects its employees by ensuring that they do not need to submit grades within three days of comprehensive exams; the University of Toronto also offers its employees an exemption from teaching assistant duties when chairing a conference, presenting a paper or research, and any travel time involved in reaching said conference. Providing UBC teaching assistants this support will ensure a higher degree of academic excellence and meet the standards set by other leading institutions.

International students

With an alarming **4% increase in tuition for international students**, it becomes more and more difficult for these students to survive living in Vancouver. Unlike at the University of Toronto, international students at UBC are not eligible for any spousal or child support. Furthermore, since international students are not eligible for many government scholarships and fellowships, it is more important for the university to provide greater support for these students. How can UBC claim to be a "World Class University" when the needs of students visiting UBC from other parts of the world are neglected?

Parental benefits

In the last round of bargaining, the University agreed to give us a maternity hardship fund of \$25,000 per year. We then allocate this fund to our members who are or soon will be parents that are facing financial hardship. Parents may also be eligible for employment insurance and up to 35 weeks of unpaid maternity leave. This was a good start but to put things into perspective, teaching assistants at the University of Toronto are eligible to receive 95% regular salary on maternity leave for up to 4 months. They can also receive up to 35 weeks of unpaid leave. Furthermore, their members receive a total of \$135,000 a year in their childcare cost fund! These parental benefits at the University of Toronto can really offset the financial burdens faced by some of their members. As UBC has always stated itself as a "World Class University," perhaps it is time for the University to start living up to those standards when it comes to employment benefits.

Membership meeting

This newsletter covers the main issues that we are currently focusing on in our bargaining with the University. Since the Union is representing you, we would want to hear all your opinions, questions and concerns. Therefore, please attend our next membership meeting. As if that is not enough incentive, we will be serving a pizza dinner for all our members.

Where: Thea Koerner Lounge
6371 Crescent Road

When: Wednesday, October 13, 2010
5:30 pm – 7:00 pm

What: Bargaining information session
New executive nomination



Executive elections

If you would like to get even more involved during this exciting time, then please come to our membership meeting and learn how you can become an executive member of the teaching assistants union CUPE Local 2278. We are always looking for enthusiastic and dedicated members that will stand up and help represent the over 3000 teaching assistants at UBC.

Contact us

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