



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Source: the Association of Graduate Students Employed at McGill
agsem@web.net or (514) 398-2582

McGill TAs: Citing Our Sources

Montreal, 7 April 2008 -- At the end of the term, many McGill teaching assistants find themselves marking essays, grading assignments and exams, and providing students with feedback on their work as the semester draws to a close. Part of the job of a TA is to distinguish between rhetorical flourish and reality; sadly, the university administration's recent statements are in need of the same reality check.

FICTION: "McGill TAs are the best paid in Quebec." (McGill FAQ)
(<http://www.mcgill.ca/bulletins/?ItemID=29880>)

FACT: AGSEM does not deny that McGill TAs earn more than some other TAs in Quebec. Consider, however, that McGill TAs—and all McGill graduate students—pay 2.9 times more in fees than the next closest competitor, the University of Montreal (La Presse, 5 March 2008). That means that much of this pay differential goes right back into the university's bank accounts. The argument is even less convincing when you consider the simple reality that most TAs in Quebec are **underpaid**: citing the existence of a widespread injustice does not make it right.

For the record, McGill TAs **are not** the best paid in Quebec—this is a fabrication. Some TAs at Concordia University earn more than \$27/hour—almost \$5/hour more than McGill TAs. Don't believe it? Check it out for yourself (see "Grade 1, Teaching Assistant or Salary Demonstrator" at (http://artsandscience1.concordia.ca/faculty/admin_services/teaching_assistants/)).

FICTION: "McGill's offer reflects the Quebec market and is consistent with salary increases offered to all other employees of the University." (McGill FAQ)
(<http://www.mcgill.ca/bulletins/?ItemID=29880>)

FACT: McGill's offer can only be viewed as consistent if you exclude upper management and faculty. The administration's own documents make it very clear that there is a double-standard: academic staff and administrators are to earn salaries comparable to Canada's G13 research-intensive universities. Provost Anthony Masi said as much last year in his presentation to the McGill Management Forum (<http://www.mcgill.ca/files/mforum/Masi-Mgt-Forum2007.pps>). In fact, McGill's official policy dictates that the principal's earnings should fall in the top four of the G13 universities; apparently, the chronic underfunding of Quebec's universities only matters when refusing pay increases to those at McGill who could most benefit from a modest pay increase.

Should McGill's TAs be considered academic staff? We mark assignments, give lectures, lead discussion groups, and provide the one-on-one contact that students often cite as integral to their education. In larger lecture classes, we are the face of the average student's academic experience. We think our role speaks for itself.

FICTION: "Professors can, and will, grade papers and assignments."
(McGill FAQ) (<http://www.mcgill.ca/bulletins/?ItemID=29880>)

FACT: There's no question that part of the job of a professor is to grade papers and assignments. But the university administration seems to forget that teaching assistants have specific contracts, both verbal and written, that

specify the particular kinds of work they are to accomplish during their tenure. In many cases, teaching assistants have written and electronic confirmation of the work they are and were expected to complete as part of their contract.

When a teaching assistant's duties have been clearly laid out by the course supervisor, that work can reasonably be understood as the work of the teaching assistant. Quebec labour law is very clear: besides the Management of the institution, other university employees **may not** complete the work of an employee who is on strike. Despite McGill's assurances to the contrary, there are serious legal questions that arise from the issue of professors and other course supervisors completing the work that has been contractually assigned to their teaching assistants. Unfortunately, McGill's own statements seem to indicate that they have directed the professorate to engage in what might be construed as "scabbing" under the Labour Code.

As a labour union, AGSEM is prepared to file the requisite complaints with the Minister of Labour should it become evident that other university employees are completing the work of our members while on strike. AGSEM would prefer, however, that not a single member of our community is faced with the consequences of contravening the Labour Code. The law is clear (http://www2.publicationsduquebec.gouv.qc.ca/dynamicSearch/telecharge.php?type=2&file=/C_27/C27_A.html) and the consequences are significant. In fact, the Labour Code prescribes a fine of up to \$1,000 per day for both the employer and the employee who is deemed to have scabbed. All members of the university community should consider these factors for themselves and follow the course of action they judge to be best for their own situation.

Indeed, professors are able to grade papers and assignments. But the administration's insistence that there is no legal grey-area around this question is not based in legal fact or precedence: it is, in fact, wishful thinking. We think instead that members of the university community are intelligent enough to read the code for themselves and determine the most appropriate course of action given the circumstances.

"As graduate students and future scholars and professionals, AGSEM members place the highest value on academic integrity," said Salim Ali, President of AGSEM. "Our communications with the public and university community have done justice to that commitment. We hope the university administration will follow suit as we attempt to negotiate a reasonable settlement to our negotiations."

AGSEM was certified as the legal labour union of teaching assistants and demonstrators at McGill in 1993. The current collective agreement expired on June 30, 2007; McGill's teaching assistants have been working without a contract for almost 300 days. After months of negotiations, the best-attended General Assembly in AGSEM's history voted overwhelmingly to give a strike mandate to the Executive Committee on March 31st, 2008. At the General Assembly, seventy-nine percent of members authorized a strike at "the most opportune moment" in negotiations.