



This is an open letter. Please circulate widely.

Monday, 12 May 2008

Prof. Anthony C. Masi
Provost
McGill University
James Administration Building
845 Sherbrooke Street West
Montréal (Québec) H3A 2T5

Dear Prof. Masi,

At this point in the negotiations, we believe that an open, honest discussion about the issues remaining before us is in the best interest of the entire university community. The letter you submitted this morning to the AGSEM Executive and Bargaining Committees indicates that you wish to pave the way for a speedy resolution and explain the university's perspective on the substance of the issues.

Unfortunately, your explanation of these issues demonstrates a basic misunderstanding of our members' demands. Your letter accuses us of belittling academic freedom and freedom of expression. And, to make matters worse, one of your negotiators told us in front of the provincial conciliator to "grow up and take responsibility" at the table this morning. Ageism, condescension and contempt have no place in our contract negotiations and will not be tolerated.

We would like to clarify this message for the university community, particularly the faculty, since both the content and context of our on-going labour dispute have been distorted.

The Workload Form and Duties Assigned to TAs

As we explained quite clearly at the table last Wednesday, AGSEM does not contend that the duties assigned to TAs are exclusive to TAs. In fact, as we have pointed out on numerous occasions, our current collective agreement states very clearly with whom the ultimate responsibility for a course rests:

2.06 Course Supervisor: refers to an Emeritus Professor, Full Professor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor, Adjunct Professor, Professor (Post-Retirement) or Lecturer who is responsible for setting the course objectives, content and method of instruction as well as final grades and grading practices of the course.

We maintain that there is a difference between *responsibility* and *work*. In the academic context, there are a multitude of actors that share responsibility for the learning environment of our students, from graders, invigilators, maintenance workers, support staff and laboratory technicians to teaching assistants, demonstrators, course supervisors and even administrators. We do not, however, share our work. It is bodily impossible, in fact, to share one's labour. When responsibility has been translated into work using our new Workload Form, it remains our work until we have negotiated and agreed upon another arrangement with the course supervisor.

Since it is clear that our current contract protects the course supervisor's ultimate responsibility for the course, the question then becomes "What exactly are you trying to accomplish by adding this text?" The answer, to anyone paying attention, could be a thinly veiled union-busting strategy.

Our right to strike is recognized in international, federal, and provincial law. While we understand that our strike has caused problems for management, we do not find your administrative discomfort to be a compelling reason to sign away our future ability to apply pressure tactics when confronting an administration that backtracks at the table and fails to engage with our demands after months of negotiations. We cannot and will not sign a contract that attempts to take away our ownership of the labour we perform for the university.

We understand that graders, invigilators, and laboratory technicians often perform some of the same duties as TAs during their normal job functions. As you know, we even attempted to incorporate graders into our bargaining unit at the Labour Relations Commission several years ago. Our request was denied, and we have moved on. So should you.

You wrote that "this issue must be resolved either in the workload form or in the collective agreement." Since a clear statement on the course supervisor's responsibility exists in our current collective agreement, this issue *has* been resolved. And it has been since May 26, 2003.

Discussion-based conferences

As we stated at the table earlier this month, we are no longer asking for caps on the size of discussion-based conferences. We recognize that our collective agreement must address our working conditions and not the administrative planning of the university's course offerings. We are simply asking that TAs not be forced to teach discussion-based conferences of more than 30 students.

Is it too much to ask that a teaching assistant be allowed to make alternative arrangements with her supervisor in the rare case that a conference has more than 30 students? We have repeatedly suggested that in cases like these, a TA could teach 4 conferences instead of 3, for example. We don't particularly care how you manage this issue, as long as teaching assistants aren't forced into a work environment that is just as bad for undergraduates as it is for teaching assistants.

After all, you told us at the Bargaining Table that conferences of this size are a very rare exception at McGill. If that is true, how much could this improvement actually cost the university?

Fundamental Tenets of University Life

These are your words, not ours. But since you brought it up...

You claim that we “attacked the role of professors as educators.” We have never, and will never attack that role. Our professors are our advisors, teachers and course supervisors. In most cases, our professors will play the single most important role in our studies during our time at university. Your accusation that we would attack that role is nothing more than rhetorical flourish and it risks damaging the relationships that are central to our academic experience.

We agree that academic freedom ought to be one of the foremost priorities of a university administration. The pedagogical autonomy of professors is not up for discussion. We confirm our duties and work with the course supervisor according to their specifications. We are simply asking that *our* work remain *our* work once it has been contractually delegated to us. The administration’s fictional account of our demands is admirable in its creativity but lacks any correspondence to reality.

The gravest threat to academic freedom during our conflict was initiated by the administration. The decision to disregard the faculty’s autonomy over their own research funding by cutting RAships to TAs is a blatant misuse of administrative authority. You should know that we are working in tandem with the Canadian Federation of Students and PGSS to inform the Tri-Council federal funding agencies of this problem. We will also be informing the federal ministers and opposition critics related to the Tri-Council portfolio.

You have also claimed that we have contempt for Freedom of Expression. It is true that we have asked that you not attempt to interfere in union business by intimidating our members, and some of your communications have certainly served that end. There is nearly always a power imbalance between workers and management and the labour code was designed to address it.

Nevertheless, we would like to reflect upon the question of Freedom of Expression. Let us review some of the positions that your office has taken since the beginning of our conflict, particularly in the FAQs posted on your website.

- “You should not distribute notes or e-mails on behalf of TAs under any circumstances.”
- “Discussions with Teaching Assistants related to the negotiation or a possible strike are not advised.”
- “We should not facilitate the communication of the TAs’ perspective on this labour dispute.”

We find it rather disingenuous that the Provost’s Office now accuses us of trying to prevent open communication. Management has bullied and intimidated our members for weeks and we will stand up for their rights.

The university administration cannot be the sole arbiter of what is reasonable and just. Your administrative preference for a university unfettered by organized labour does not mean that

union activities are therefore contrary to university life. This kind of leap in logic won't fly in a community of intellectuals. It is shameful for you to mislead our students, faculty and staff.

If we infer from your actions how you might define the "fundamental tenets of university life," they would seem to include management bullying, contempt for democratic decision-making and control over the staff at any cost. We would be willing to bet that the majority of our community does not share this destructive, irresponsible and mean-spirited vision of university life.

They Grow Up So Fast...

This morning, a member of your bargaining team told us that we needed to "grow up and take responsibility." We left the table after this remark. We will not sit by and allow your representatives to insult the dignity of our membership.

First, allow us to address the first part of this statement, "Grow up". We are graduate students. Some of us are parents. Some are partners, spouses, husbands and wives. Some of us are in our twenties, others are seasoned professionals returning to university after decades in the workforce.

Last week at our General Assembly, one member stood up and reported that she was raising a five-year old and had lost her funding as an RA due to the strike and faced severe financial difficulties. She went on to reiterate than even under difficult circumstances, we must not give in to the administration's tactics. We would like you to explain to the university community how she should "grow up."

Or perhaps you could address your explanation to the set of parents we encounter at the strike pay table, who are raising a child and expecting another. They are both TAs and have lost all sources of employment funding, yet they soldier on. Likewise, how should these dedicated parents "grow up"?

The administration seems to view us as petulant children asking for a seat at the adults' table. In fact, we are organized, part-time teaching staff who have a legally recognized right to fight for our contract. Management's recent "offers" to recognize teaching assistants ring hollow now that we have a real insight into how we are viewed when management decisions are taken.

We are grown-ups. We will be treated as such and an apology is in order. There are more courteous ways to work through our differences; neither side of the table has license to act disrespectfully.

Let us turn to the second point. You seem to have a preoccupation with "taking responsibility," so long as it's not the administration that has to do it. AGSEM is fully willing to take responsibility for its actions and we have been willing to do so from the beginning. In fact, much of the content of our negotiations has been centred around issues of responsibility:

- Responsibility for our work: We asked to take full responsibility for the work assigned to us through a contract specified by course supervisors. *You said no.*

- Responsibility for our students: We asked for a way to encourage TAs to work in smaller discussion-based conferences. *You said no.*
- Responsibility for our members: We have indicated that we want restitution for our members who were fired from other jobs. *The jury's still out.*

The only responsibility you have indicated we should take on is the brunt of the administration's operating deficit. Frankly, the university's financial situation is *your* responsibility—not ours. Our contract negotiations were not a surprise; as is the case with other unions on campus, you have known for years that we would be bargaining this year.

As you mentioned, you are “responsible for the overall allocation of the University's budget.” Why, then, did you enter a year with several contract negotiations with no plan to actually spend money improving the working conditions of your personnel? The implication is that the university has had no long-term plan to invest significantly in the rank-and-file human talent that gives its labour to make this university what it is.

The rest of the university community should keep this in mind when listening to your reasons for low pay increases and slashed budgets. Fiscal responsibility starts at the top, not at the bottom.

We have taken responsibility for all that we are responsible for. It's time for you to do the same.

Moving Forward

We will be back at the table on Tuesday and we expect to work together to find a solution to our conflict. If you are prepared to address us as the professional working adults that we are, let's start afresh and find a contract that we can agree upon.

Eighty-six per cent of our members voted last week to refuse your contract offer. A successful ratification vote will require some open-mindedness on your part. We hope you are prepared to bring that spirit forward for the remainder of our negotiations.

Sincerely,



Richard Hink
President
AGSEM/AÉÉDEM
On behalf of the Executive Committee