



OPSEU declares victory in three-week college strike

by David Cox

Community college faculty in Ontario had simply had enough.

The 9,000 OPSEU members were tired of watching the long, slow decline of the quality of education they have been able to deliver. So, in March, 2006, they made their stand to defend the quality of education in our colleges.

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Since the mid-1990s, faculty in Ontario's 24 community colleges have struggled mightily to teach while class sizes have mushroomed, and the quality time faculty can spend with individual students has decreased.

Meantime, their employers, the colleges, have stacked the deck by using more and more underpaid, contingent part-time workers.

When it came time to negotiate, quality issues were

again at the top of the list of OPSEU demands.

Clearly, the management group representing the 24 colleges had its own agenda. That was to smash the credibility of the experienced union team, to wrest total control over the colleges.

From the beginning, the colleges maintained that the dispute in the colleges was simply over money. They said they could not afford the union's demands. The union, for its part, said salaries were an issue, as they almost always are in any labour dispute, but management had to address the true deficit in the colleges which was one of quality.

A last-moment deal might have been possible, but instead of moving towards the union position as negotiating parties must do, the colleges put further union concessions on the table. In moving away from the union's position, the colleges signaled they had no intention to bargain in good faith at all. The strike was on as of 12:01,

March 7th.

Ted Montgomery, lead union negotiator for the colleges, said the administration's absolute refusal to bargain was what caused the strike. “They knew that this offer could not produce a settlement. They wanted to provoke a strike.”

With all of this happening, the Liberal government appeared to be asleep at the wheel, unaware of the possibility that the lives of 150,000 college students could be disrupted.

There was no bargaining until March 16. That's when the largest-ever gathering of college faculty in Ontario's history was held in Toronto. More than 5,000 college teachers, librarians and counsellors held a mass rally in Dundas Square, followed by a march to Bay and Wellesley Streets.

At the rally, Montgomery was able to announce the news that this huge outpouring of support for their bargaining team's position forced Colleges Minister Chris Bentley to act. Bentley called separate meetings



where he asked both parties to get back to the table. Bargaining recommenced the following week.

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Management, meanwhile, committed a massive gaffe, “guaranteeing” the school year for each student. The question was — how would 24 different colleges accomplish this? Some colleges claimed they would do it

with replacement workers, scabs, or managers. Others said it could not be done. But, as one college president told the media, what the management was really trying to do was “buy time.”

“I think (management) did us a great favour,” said Paddy Musson, chair of the CAAT Academic Division Executive and co-chair of the strike committee. “I think that coming out with such a clearly untenable plan, such a screwball plan, helped to get the minister to call the parties together,” she said.

Bargaining got underway, but went nowhere. So, on March 22, the union called for binding arbitration so the issues could be decided by an independent third

party, and so students could get back to class.

In the end, the union gained what it wanted — an independent third party to look into the question of workload — truly the key quality issue in the colleges. And, perhaps more importantly, it brought the whole college system, and management’s follies, under the public spotlight for the first time in a generation.

While members now have a four-year collective agreement, the fight for quality education continues.

For more information on the CAAT:
<http://www.opseu.org/caat/colleges.htm>

Photos: Jay Jackson



Tragedy strikes picket line

On March 20, 2006, John Stammers, a professor at Centennial College, was struck by a car on the Local 558 picket line at Centennial College, and died five days later.

John was a professor of accounting, and was very popular among the students for the energy he put into his classes. John was also a solid supporter of his union, and was always looking for ways to make the college work better for students. He will be missed.