

Precarious Employment in Ontario's University Sector: Reflections on Collective Bargaining at Carleton University

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ABSTRACT: In this article, the qualitative experiences of the authors as union leaders at Carleton University are drawn upon, along with the public testimonials of union members, during the 2013-14 round of collective bargaining between Carleton University and the Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 4600. We contend that the trend towards rising precariousness must be seen as the further “proletarianization” of an increasingly insecure segment of the labour force in Ontario, which includes workers employed in Ontario’s university sector. First, precarious employment in Ontario is examined broadly. Second, we explore precarious work in the university sector more specifically. Third, a case study analysis examining the most recent contract negotiations between CUPE 4600 and Carleton University in Ottawa is examined. This includes: (1) the challenges of mobilization within the union bureaucracy; (2) challenges between the local and National office; and; (3) the role of solidarity in combating precariousness. To conclude, the conditions in which unionized precarious workers can achieve improvements in their workplaces are discussed. It is hoped that other postsecondary union activists can gain from this experience, and in doing so, expand the fight against the negative effects of precarious employment in Ontario and elsewhere.

KEYWORDS: Precarious Work, Carleton University, Austerity, Unions

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 2008 global economic crisis, political power has overwhelmingly come to favour business and corporate interests at the expense of Canadian workers, while neoliberal processes such as privatization, outsourcing, and the spread of precarious employment have accelerated (Peters, 2012). For public sector workers, precarious work provides less pay with few or no benefits, acting as a cheap labour supply for employers purportedly facing cost pressures due to government austerity measures. This restructuring and reorganization of work is regularly carried out through attacks on the historical gains of unions and organized labour. The impact of rising precariousness or "precarity" (Lewchuck et al., 2013) in Ontario is particularly prominent in the area of post-secondary academic employment.

In this article, we draw upon our own qualitative experiences, along with the public testimonials of fellow union members, during the 2013-14 round of collective bargaining between Carleton University and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 4600, which represents nearly 2,400 teaching assistants (TA's) and contract instructors (CI's).³ These first-person accounts, we argue, lend support to Bryan Palmer's (2013) materialist, class-analysis, which notes the trend towards rising precariousness or "precarity." In our view, workplace precarity can be understood as the further "proletarianization" of an increasingly insecure segment of the labour force in Ontario, which includes workers employed in Ontario's university sector.

We contend that the growing core of precarious academic labourers in Ontario can be understood as a constitutive part of the working class based on their socioeconomic position in relation to broader processes of capital accumulation. It thereby follows that, from a class struggle perspective, the theoretical construction of the notion of an entire new social class or "precarariat" (Standing, 2011; Scott, 2012), in contrast to a declining "professoriat" (Burns, 2014, 30), is both theoretically and politically erroneous; this misdiagnosis is class divisive in our view. In the postsecondary sector, the conception of a novel precariat accentuates worker alienation by impeding the development of revolutionary class consciousness amongst workers and students, including adjunct faculty, both inside and outside the university.

³ As local executives involved in strike mobilization activities, Lydia Dobson served as Recording Secretary for CUPE 4600, while Mathew Nelson acted as Vice-President Internal (Unit 1). We participated extensively in the bargaining processes at Carleton over several years, but during this round our contribution was largely directed at devoting our activities to the Local's Strike Mobilization Committee.

In what follows, we examine precarious employment in Ontario. Second, we focus our analysis in the university sector. Third, our case study examines the 2013-14 round of contract negotiations between CUPE 4600 and Carleton University. We explore three features inherent to precarious employment: (1) the challenges of mobilization within the union bureaucracy; (2) challenges between the local and National office; and third, the role of solidarity in combating precariousness. To conclude, we highlight the conditions in which unionized precarious workers can achieve improvements in their workplaces. While the summary that follows is brief, it is our hope that other postsecondary union activists can gain from this experience, and in doing so expand the fight against the negative effects of precarious employment in Ontario and elsewhere.

EMPLOYMENT PRECARIETY IN ONTARIO

Workplace precarity is not a new phenomenon, but its qualitative and quantitative dimensions are. From the 1980s onwards, and especially since the 2008 global economic crisis, the use of part-time workers and other forms of precarious labour (CLC, 2014), including shift work, temp jobs and contract positions, has increased markedly (Grant, 2014). “Temporary and part-time work grew faster than full-time and permanent work. The squeeze on the middle class had begun, and employment precarity had become a typical feature of employment for many individuals” (Tiessen, 2014, 6). This suggests both a weakness of organized labour to challenge these workplace conditions, as well as disproportionate capitalist class power over the interests of the working class as a whole (Barkawi, 2013).

The 2008 crisis provided an opportunity for businesses and governments to capitalize on the gradual erosion of job security and life-long employment that has been occurring over the last four decades. As workforces are eroded, different forms of contingent and precarious labour are introduced⁴ “Precarious employment tends to involve greater exposure to hazardous work environments, increased workload, stress, and more time spent travelling between multiple jobs” (McCaffrey, 2013). In both the public and private sectors, these workers are taking on more and more of the tasks and responsibilities previously performed

⁴ One such example is the temporary foreign workers program (TFWP), which has been highly controversial largely due to its association with the exploitation of low-skilled, service sector workers. A moratorium was recently placed on some aspects of TFWP expansion due to rising evidence that the misuse of the program has increased employment rates in certain areas and has contributed to downward pressures on wages (Strauss, 2014).

by full-time workers.⁵ The impact spills over into “family, health and community involvement” (Grant, 2014).

According to the Law Commission of Ontario (2012), around 22 percent of jobs fit the “precarious” definition in the province. In many cases, those adversely affected are women, youth, racialized communities, persons with disabilities, and recent immigrants. According to a McMaster-United Way (2013) study based in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area this phenomenon is increasingly affecting all income and education levels. A 2012 report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) documents the growth in precarious work in OECD countries over the last decade and attributes the increase to a “worldwide corporate attack on the right to organize and bargain collectively, by shifting to subcontracting and individual contracts, [and] attacking sectoral and national bargaining” (ILO, 2011, 1).

Women workers in particular are disproportionately paid lower wages. A recent report by the Pay Equity Coalition found that the gap has grown from 28 percent in 2010 to 31.5 percent in 2014, which is further amplified for racialized and aboriginal women, as well as women with disabilities (Drennan, 2014). In a similar vein, “Young workers are facing low wages, precarious work, poor work/life balance, and a high cost of living coupled with exorbitant student debt. The problems are even more significant for young workers marginalized by structural racism, classism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia and sexism” (CUPE National, 2013, 3). Younger workers also tend to struggle with unemployment and under-employment, exploitative work conditions, a high cost of living and significant student debt (Yalnizyan, 2014).

The uniting factor in all of these struggles is the fight against precarious employment. From a Marxist perspective, as Fanelli (2014, 39) has argued, the renewal of working class politics, and the struggle for public services in Canada, requires a class-oriented labour movement that is not based in the reformism and sectionalism of business unionism and labour aristocracy. The fight for class-based unionism must involve “the freedom of association to collectively bargain on behalf of and in accordance with other workers...” This fight is a *potentiality*, that under specific historic conditions, embodies “an emancipatory force capable of transcending social relations of servitude.” Organized labour has

⁵ It is important to note that precarity also differs between the public and private sectors. In the public sector, precarity relates mainly to the use of short-term, full-time employment, while in the private sector, part-time, long-term employment is most frequent (See Fanelli, 2014a, 123).

transformational capacity; and however small, it can be a venue for a radical working class unionism.

THE PRECARIOUS UNIVERSITY IN ONTARIO

In Ontario's postsecondary education (PSE) sector, austerity measures have long been directed at colleges and universities across the province (Fanelli, 2013, Ch. 5). Budget changes and chronic underfunding have shifted funding away from direct public provisioning towards user-fee models (i.e. tuition) based on competition and profit (Nelson and Meades, 2013). At the same time, colleges and universities have experienced significant spending cuts over the past decade, and while the recession is usually blamed, right-wing governments continue to cut taxes on the wealthy and corporations. The use of precarious workers, in large corporations and universities alike, is quite often a cost-cutting strategy that allows employers to shed legally mandated obligations to their employees in the name of greater workplace "flexibility," less job security, and lower wages and benefits (Crow, 2008; Sears, 2012). "This labour-cost reduction strategy...has had the effect of increasing the number of precariously employed workers in the university sector" (Lafrance, 2010, 2).

The neoliberalization of the university entails new forms of privatization, deregulation and corporatization that are connected to reductions in public funding and oversight (Giroux, 2002). While the adoption of such austerity measures does not necessarily mark the beginning of a new era, the global economic crisis has intensified this funding crisis. Different forms of privatization in the neoliberal university include securing private funding for research, increasing the number of private corporations on campuses, and user fees in the form of higher tuition (Crow, 2008). Moreover, since the 1970s, an attack on the humanities – and their "so-called promotion of anti-establishment sentiment" – has accompanied these changes (Scott, 2012). A concerted effort has also been made to transform the role of academia and the university into little more than something resembling a "technical training facility" or a "corporate research institute" (Eagleton, 2010).

For student-workers such as teaching-assistants (TA's), as well as contract-instructors (CI's) and other "contingent faculty" (Turk, 2008), increased competitiveness creates the insecurity of "being permanently on the edge of unemployment, having to make do with casual, temporary, perhaps part-time work, or combining several jobs" (Callinicos, 2006, 24). As part of an ongoing research project, CUPE's national body

has undertaken the creation of profiles that show demographic and precarity patterns of occupations within sectors. With respect to temporary jobs, "the post-secondary sector stands out; one-third of low-paid jobs in post-secondary education are temporary." (Jansen, 2014, 4). Many of the lower-paid employment sectors also have higher rates of part-time and temporary work.

THE RISE OF A "PRECARIAT"?

In the US context, Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich (2014, 22) argue that the continued downward mobility of the "professional-managerial class" captures the new economic reality of a system increasingly structured around precarious employment where part-time, contract and temporary workers who are in an unstable position have limited control over working conditions and wages, and may lack union protection or regulations governing their workplace. This trend has led some to proclaim "the rise of a 'precariat,' a new, distinct class characterized by insecurity and atomization, and therefore, impervious to traditional labor organizing" (Burns, 2014, 31; see also Chomsky, 2012).

Undoubtedly, there are parallels between the US and Canada, yet there remains vast differences between the two countries, their post-secondary education, as well as the availability of public health, factors that make a huge difference in the quality of life of workers across the continent. Canadian sociologists have begun to call attention to the rise of such a precariat, or "social class," whose working conditions are void of consistent "predictability" and financial security. With respect to wages, compared to a full-time professor teaching four courses a year whose salary may range anywhere between \$80,000 to \$150,000 per year, contract faculty teaching the same course load earn on average around \$28,000 per annum (Basen, 2014).

In *Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011), economist Guy Standing concludes that it is unlikely that "trade unions could be reformed to represent precariat interests" (cited in Burns, 2014, 22). However, labour historian Bryan Palmer (2013, 42) challenges claims that the contemporary significance of precariousness indicates a separate and distinct class formation in the present context. Palmer critiques Standing for viewing precarious workers as somehow part of a distinctive, "new class force," within "a hierarchy of differentiated class formations," as part of "a new neoliberal global economy" (Palmer, 2013, 42-43).

Palmer counters the view that, “Stable working-class identities have been swept aside; a sense of proletarian power as a transformative agent of social relations of exploitation and oppression is now ended.” (ibid). Standing (2011), on the other hand, argues that in light of this new, youth-led precarious class -- the so-called dangerous *precariat* – the traditional labour movement finds itself antiquated and dying. For Palmer (2013, 45), however, precariousness has always been “the fundamental feature of class formation rather than the material basis of a new, contemporary class, with an agenda silent on the necessity of socialism.” While the experience of dispossession is highly heterogeneous “...dispossession, in general, nonetheless defines proletarianization” (Palmer, 2013, 49).

Rebecca Burns (2014, 33) argues that “precarity is not a new phenomenon...[but a] state of affairs that occurs when the balance of power tips in the favour of employers.” Similarly, Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster (2014, 2) note that Marx himself characterized the general condition of workers as one of precariousness: “The higher the productivity of labour, the greater is the pressure of the workers on the means of employment, the more precarious therefore becomes the condition for their existence, namely sale of their own labour-power for the increase of alien wealth, or in other words the self-valorization of capital.” In the present context, however, the Great Recession and the deep stagnation that followed, has made the situation of Canadian workers ever more precarious. As Unifor economist Jim Stanford (2013) has recently noted, there is “a myth of Canadian exceptionalism” when federal leaders consistently espouse the virtues of Canada’s recovery following the Great Recession. In reality, overall prosperity, as well as economic and employment performance, has largely stagnated since that time.

In examining the impact of precarious employment on PSE, we focus on Carleton University, which in many respects has reproduced/reinforced? the growing ranks of low-wage, precarious workers within institutions that once anchored the so-called white-collar “*professoriat*” across the sector. We focus on the most recent round of collective bargaining between the administration and CUPE 4600, which represents TA’s and CI’s. But rather than juxtapose a *precariat*, with the stable working class identity of the *proletariat*, what is needed in the university sector is a unified politics of class struggle that highlights the reality of differentiation within the dispossessed, but does not accentuate divisions that can minimize collective responses or incapacitate the working class in its entirety.

BARGAINING AUSTERITY AT CARLETON UNIVERSITY

CUPE 4600 was founded in 1979 as CUPE 2323 in response to widespread workplace inequality across campus. TA's received different rates of pay for the same work, had no guarantee of reappointment in successive terms, job security or benefits of any kind. Employees could be fired with little or no warning CUPE 4600s predecessor, then as now, fought for improved wages, working conditions, job security, and benefits for its members. TA's merged with contract instructors of Carleton University in 1994 forming CUPE 4600, which then represented nearly 1800 TAs (Unit 1) and over 600 contract instructors (Unit 2). CUPE 4600 has a long history of challenging unilateral administrative prerogatives (see Nelson and Meades, 2013). More recently, the union has had to contend with budgets that have called for increased enrollment without a corollary increase in paid working time or wages. In effect, this translates into both a wage cut and workload increase.

The most recent rounds of bargaining, which spanned from June 2013 to March 2014, offer an avenue for exploring the structural and relational problems that union activists face in the PSE sector when bargaining against precarity. During this round of bargaining, the primary concern for CI's was receiving health benefits, while TA's were focused primarily on attaining fair wage increases and fixed tuition indexation.⁶ Other key concerns for both units included caps on class sizes, Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA), and improved sick leave and seniority provisions around leaves of absence. Teaching assistants and contract instructors operate under separate collective agreements, and despite coordinated bargaining efforts, many of their interests are quite different. Despite these differences, non-tenured and non-permanent teaching staff share a common experiences of precarity, along with a desire for enhanced pay, improved treatment and working conditions.

In a January 29, 2014, edition of the undergraduate student newspaper, *The Charlatan* (Armstrong, 2010), Unit-1 member Tabatha Armstrong noted the extent to which the amount of work carried out by

⁶ During the 2008-09 round of collective bargaining, TAs failed to achieve a strong strike mandate, with 49 percent of the membership opposing the possibility of job action. The vote took place in the midst of an ongoing Ottawa transit strike and a prolonged TA strike at York University. The low vote resulted in the loss of fixed tuition indexation, where the tuition rate for TAs was fixed to either 2000 or 2005 levels depending on the commencement of a student's program of study. Fixed indexation was instead replaced with a rolling index, which stabilizes tuition rates to the year that a student begins their program. The effect is multi-tiered student tuitions; for instance, a student who began their studies in 2011-12 pays approximately 6 percent more than a student who began in 2010-11.

TA's is taken for granted, even though "We learn and teach the material, make lesson plans, schedule meetings with students, answer hundreds of emails, and we mark, mark, and mark some more." In the context of ongoing negotiations, CUPE 4600 framed its message to Carleton students the following way: "The working conditions of the people teaching and marking are also your learning conditions, and the way your administration chooses to treat TA's and contract instructors is an example of how they are willing to treat you" (Armstrong, 2014). Teaching and research assistants, as well as some contract instructors, are the only employees at Carleton who have to pay to go to work through user-fees or tuition. As tuition and other compulsory fees continue to steadily rise,⁷ "the quality of education seems to be ever-decreasing because the people who get the most face time with students are overworked and underpaid" (cited in Letson, 2014).

Contract instructors are responsible for teaching nearly one-quarter of the classes taught at Carleton University. While CI's typically have higher educational qualifications compared to TA's, they face equivalent precarity. Lacking health and dental benefits, they earn only around \$6,500 per course, and are "disproportionately responsible for the massive 450 person lectures" in "stadium-style classrooms," aided by "a small army of TAs" (Hurl, 2014). The following is how one Unit 2 member described his experience: "Even though I have three years of teaching under my belt, there are no guarantees I will get another job. If a tenured professor decides they want the course, then I'll be booted. It's especially bad in the summer. The limited number of courses means that you are lucky if you can land a job." (Hurl, 2014). His letter concludes, "In the end, after all this time and investment I have put into something I love, I feel that I deserve a little respect, recognition, and some semblance of security. I'm tired of living a double-life" (ibid).

In an attempt to alleviate some of the negative effects of precariousness on Carleton academic workers, CUPE 4600's negotiating team devised a series of bargaining proposals that for both units proposed improved benefits and a 5 percent pay increase to keep up with rising tuition and costs of

⁷ According to a recent report produced by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), Shaker and Macdonald (2014, 5) note that tuition and other compulsory fees in Canada have almost tripled between 1993-94 and 2014-15, with tuition increasing in Ontario by 239 percent. While a tuition fee increase cap on graduate programs remains stagnant at 5 percent, the authors report that "Ontario's tuition fees have been consistently among the highest in the country since the mid-90s" (17). From a broader perspective, whereas in 1988, 12 percent of university revenue was generated via tuition fees, by 2012 41 percent of revenue was generated through tuition (Fejzic, 2014).

living fees.⁸ However, as a result of having a highly transient workforce, the executive board of the local is constantly struggling in its efforts to mobilize and engage with the rank-and-file membership.

While often guaranteed employment for the duration of their studies, TAs and CIs operate only on four-month contracts. In various ways, the precarity of such working conditions can inhibit the organizing and mobilization efforts ordinarily carried out within the traditional union models. In the following section, we look at several examples of the challenges that were encountered during the 2013-14 year of collective bargaining at Carleton University.

ENGAGING PRECARIOUS WORKERS WITHIN BIG UNION STRUCTURES

A significant challenge facing union locals at present is the need to involve and engage their respective membership in more creative and effective ways (Camfield, 2011). However, precarious workers such as TA's primarily operate on two to four year contracts, the majority of which are two years in duration. These contracts are also dependent on the worker being a tuition-paying student. Because collective bargaining takes place every second year at Carleton University, many of Carleton's TA's rarely see the benefits of the collective agreement that was negotiated during their own employment period. Many CI's work multiple jobs both within and outside of academia. The effect is an overall disconnect between workers and their peers, their physical workplaces, their union representatives, and most importantly, the benefits they will accrue from collective bargaining.

In our experience, it is extremely difficult to build solidarity amongst contract instructors who have likely never met the majority of their colleagues, or TA's who are being asked to fight for a collective agreement that will not impact them directly. Furthermore, because many CI's work for more than one employer, they may benefit from preferable salaries and health agreements outside of their contract with the university. Thus, attempts to engage these individuals in struggles for higher wages and benefits, which may be far less relevant to their needs, introduces yet another set of challenges.

As a result of a bargaining impasse, both the administration and CUPE 4600 filed for conciliation in December 2013. Despite the appointment of

⁸ To contextualize this demand, the average wage increase over three years amongst CUPE locals in the Ontario University Workers Coordinating Committee (OUWCC), a voluntary organization consisting of locals in the university sector, was 1.5 percent for 2010, 1.4 percent for 2011, and 2.1 percent for 2012 (Nelson and Meades, 2013, 115).

a Conciliation Officer by the Ministry of Labour, University administration was unwilling to meet the demands of the membership. In particular, the employer's salary proposals remained well below even projected cost of living increases, especially when taking into consideration the rise in tuition costs over the next few years. In the case of Unit 2, the administration regularly refused to substantively discuss the issue of health benefits even though during the last round of bargaining they agreed to enter into discussions on the implementation of health and dental benefits for CI's (CUPE, 4600d). This unwillingness to respond adequately to CI concerns must be contextualized within an environment where Canadian institutions are increasingly using non-tenured teaching faculty as cost-cutting measures, a phenomenon directly related to declining public funding and increases in overall student enrolments (MacDonald, 2013).

PRECARITY AND SOLIDARITY

After bargaining had reached an impasse, we acted as participant-observers in the organizing for a strike vote, which included developing and distributing literature across campus, organizing info sessions for both units and the broader university community and providing updates on bargaining that were disseminated to the membership. From February 11-13, 2014, tables were set out at several locations across campus to inform members and to serve as polling stations. These organizing efforts were met with a strong 82.5 percent in favour of strike action for TAs, and 87.5 percent in favour for contract instructors (News Editors, 2014).⁹ While this result indicated a strong 85 percent in favour of strike action between both units, the low turnout rate of only 44 percent for TA's and 32 percent for CI's reflected the overall disengagement of the membership from the bargaining process. Moreover, under CUPE National's instruction, members who were physically unable to be on campus for the voting process could not be accommodated in time.¹⁰ While voter participation was less than 50 percent, the outcome did constitute an above-average turnout. As bargaining continued throughout February and March, the administration suddenly offered contract

⁹ On February 25, 2014, the union issued a communiqué discussing the outcome of the "strong" strike vote: "At issue for Carleton's academic workers are the links between their working conditions, the value of their contribution to the students' success and the quality of the teaching they provide to students. (CUPE 4600e). .

¹⁰ Our request to CUPE National for a legal opinion around proxy voting came days prior to the scheduled vote. Outside of concerns about potential legal issues, the timing of our request was a factor considered against advanced polling and proxy voting.

instructors much of what they were asking for, including a substantial health benefits package.

The move had the potential of seriously dividing the local. For CI's, the proposed collective agreement accommodated the expressed interests of the Unit 2 membership. But while the TA unit had proposed zero percent wage increase for three years in order to achieve fixed indexation, the bargaining team was told that the administration would not consider indexation, and that no amount of time spent on strike would change their minds. Faced with a satisfied Unit 2 bargaining team, the TA unit had to accept that tuition indexation would not likely impact many outgoing members, making it difficult to justify strike action to a large portion of the membership. The bargaining team was forced to accept a collective agreement that did include a small wage increase and no concessions.

With the support of the majority of CI's, a strike would have proven far less effective, as many lectures and tutorials would continue to operate in spite of the work stoppage. Neither unit went on strike, although the university administration was ultimately able to leverage a minimalist agreement for TA's by providing substantial gains for contract instructors. When the details of the collective agreements were presented to the membership, they were met with little resistance from CI's. However a vocal group of TA's criticized the agreement for dropping the issue of tuition indexation wherein a TAs tuition level is linked to the first year that they commence work (CUPE 4600b, 2014). In the lead up to the ratification vote, several teaching assistants even circulated emails advocating against the ratification of the TA collective agreement. However, both collective agreements were eventually ratified with 76.4 Percent of Unit 1 TAs and 86.2 percent of contract instructors in favour.

These organizational problems are reflective of the broader structural barriers that unions may face when representing precarious workers. As will be discussed in the section that follows, the policies of CUPE National are based on traditional employment relationships that are often stable and full-time, and which can also run counter to the interests of the precariously employed.

(UN)ORGANIZING RESIDENCE FELLOWS

The Executive Board of CUPE 4600 was contacted by a group of non-unionized Residence Fellows in the months leading up to the local's strike vote and preparations. As the first point of contact for all disturbances in residence, these workers are constantly on-call, and are

amongst “the most overworked and precariously employed on a university campus” expected to perform multiple roles as “leaders, administrator, facilitator, and educator” (Lefebvre, 2013a). Citing a rise in health and safety concerns – including active intimidation, harassment, verbal threats, and cyberbullying (Lefebvre, 2013b) - the group was frustrated that they were consistently being ignored when voicing their complaints to the university administration. While residence fellows, much like TA’s, have their pay directly allocated to student-associated costs, ever-rising residence fees has meant that fellows do not receive, as do the majority of TAs, a traditional employer-employee paycheque.

It was proposed in November 2013 that Residence Fellows would enter CUPE 4600 as a third bargaining unit. After discussions with CUPE National, this process began. Residence Fellow organizers were provided membership cards for the 36 workers on staff and quickly had more than 50 percent of them signed. After submitting the cards to CUPE National on November 25, a week later they were informed by CUPE that it would not support the union drive. Three primary reasons for retracting the initial decision were provided. First, residence fellow contracts were too short to meaningfully organize members; second, their capacity to pay dues was insufficient (despite a pre-approved structure with CUPE 4600), and third; as Canada’s largest union, CUPE national would “not be able to make a big difference” for them (RML, 2013a).

The fellows had taken on significant risks, and the decision led ultimately to the resignation of the primary organizers for fear of continued health and safety concerns, as well as employer pressure to resign, face isolating working conditions and other forms of potential retaliation (Lefebvre, 2013ab; Hendry, 2014). Nearly two weeks later, however, national representatives met with residence fellow organizers and CUPE 4600 board members to explain the decision. At the time, CUPE 4600 member, Priscillia Lefebvre (2013b), explained:

“The needs of young workers are becoming increasingly important if the current labour movement is going to be effective in protecting the right to organize in the workplace. However, the perception of unions as untrustworthy and ineffectual bureaucratized institutions serves as a barrier to many young workers who are hesitant to get involved. Unfortunately, the recent actions of CUPE National only serves to further reinforce this cynicism.”

Likewise, in an interview given with *Rabble.ca*, the President of CUPE 4600, James Meades, argued that the move was contrary to the values of “a union that is committing more resources and support to organizing unorganized workers, there was supposed to be a focus on workers that are in precarious positions and there was supposed to be a focus on young workers” (cited in Watson, 2013b). In other words, a successful organizing drive would have provided an important opportunity to engage in new or ongoing attempts to organize not only traditional, more stable workplaces, but contemporary new and precarious ones as well.

After a public backlash inclusive of several media articles and a public online petition condoning CUPE Nationals revoked support (Lefebvre, 2013ab; RML, 2013a; Dehaas, 2014), on January 16, 2014, CUPE National President, Paul Moist, met with residence organizers and CUPE 4600 board members to personally apologize, and assign responsibility for the mix-up to a breakdown in communication that led union officials to believe that membership cards had not yet been signed at the point that support was revoked. CUPE National also formally supported a unionization drive, led by the now-unemployed organizers (Watson, 2014).

Despite CUPE National's renewed support, however, efforts to unionize the Carleton residence fellows were ultimately unsuccessful. Falling just short of 50 percent in favour, the remaining Residence Fellows chose not to unionize with CUPE 4600. The ordeal had pulled away the attention of some members of the Executive Board and the bargaining team. Although the objective was to add a third unit to our local during the bargaining process, thereby increasing our capacity for collective action and leverage at the table, the organizing drive had the opposite effect of portraying to the university administration the picture of a weakened and dysfunctional union.

The actions of CUPE National resonated more broadly with disapproving labour activists across the province, who called into question the ability of contemporary unions to represent precarious workers (RML, 2013a). On December 30, 2013, Rebuilding Militant Labour (RML) issued an open letter addressed to Moist, which points specifically to increasing precarity as a major grievance among young CUPE workers. It reads,

“This action not only dismantled the diligent and extremely effective organizing efforts of these young workers, but has also resulted in

the loss of jobs and housing for those involved in the union drive. The blatant disregard for the vulnerability of these precarious workers has had a massive and devastating impact on the organizers involved. Rather than “standing up for fairness,” this decision serves to effectively disenfranchise all those who occupy vulnerable positions across Canada.”

RML describes itself as “an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonial network, which seeks to ally with all the just struggles of the working-class and peoples in Canada against our common enemy, the enemy of capitalism” (RMLa, 2013). RML emerged out of the 50th CUPE National Convention in October 2013 by rank-and-file delegates frustrated with the electoral politics of the union, and its perceived inability to strategically defend workers by defeating the neoliberal austerity agenda (da Silva, 2013).¹¹

REBUILDING MILITANT LABOUR IN THE UNIVERSITY SECTOR

Rebuilding Militant Labour (RML), with its heightened emphasis on the plight of precarious workers, provides an important opportunity for academic workers and their union activists to help orient their political activities towards “a comprehensive fight against colonialism and racism, patriarchy and the exploitation of women,” in addition to a renewed struggle against class-based forms of oppression (RML, 2013b). We have argued throughout that while TA’s, CI’s and Residence Fellows may operate under separate (or nonexistent) collective agreements, possess different educational qualifications and occupy different financial situations or institutional positions, they nonetheless share working conditions that lack “the security or benefits enjoyed in more traditional relationships,” and are thereby becoming more and more part of the precarious “new normal” in our postsecondary workplaces (Lewchuk et al., 2013).

But if rising precarity is part and parcel of contemporary forms of proletarianization this is because the logic induced by an unequal class system implies that the appropriation of surplus value is the means by which capital is accumulated. Precarious faculty are undeniably

¹¹ Lydia Dobson challenged CUPE National President Paul Moist from the floor during the election portion of the Convention receiving a substantial 21 percent of the overall vote, despite lacking the support of the CUPE Young Workers Caucus (da Silva, 2013; Watson, 2013a).

constitutive of the broader working class to the extent they are the mere owners of their labour power; and at Carleton, TA's, CI's and Residence Fellows consistently perform a litany of activities in which they are not compensated for their time and effort. While it is certainly the case that public sector workers do not create exchange value for the capitalist system by producing marketable products, they nonetheless are exploited to the extent that their work can be characterized by the extraction of unpaid surplus labour. They are enumerated, in other words, for their socially determined reproduction costs, not for the entire expenditure of their labour time (Finger, 2011, 53-54).

It is therefore necessary for a unified class resistance on the part of workers and students to provide the potential for labour activists working in solidarity in the PSE sector to move beyond those union models and structures that are less and less capable of addressing the emerging needs of precarious, temporary and casualized workers. Their resistance may involve participation in something like RML, student-worker alliances,¹² coalitions and solidarity pacts with non-CUPE academic locals.¹³ Trade unions, in this regard, can draw on some of the organizing models that led to the 2012 general strike by students in Quebec. For workers, students and activists, our collective struggle against austerity must involve not only organizing to strike, but fighting to win (see Savard and Charaoui, 2012). Other potential avenues include campus-specific coalitions (such as Campus United at Carleton University) or General Assemblies, comprised of like-minded individuals, union members and representatives of progressive associations that mobilize together in areas of common interest.

Effective resistance may also necessitate, to some extent, bypassing large bureaucratic union structures in order for academic locals to work with CUPE District Councils to develop rapid responses to mobilize immediate support for locals with precarious members facing difficult bargaining situations or much-needed public service cuts – community

¹² An interesting development in this regard is the involvement of the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS) in partnering with Unifor to organize a Good Jobs Summit at Ryerson University from October 3-5. Like many workers, students are impacted by “high unemployment rates, unpaid internships, and a precarious job market.” Student-worker solidarity, in this sense, means recognizing that these local forms of solidarity on university campuses are based in “the knowledge that firstly, students *are* workers, and secondly, we are stronger united” (Ponting, 2014).

¹³ At the provincial level, an interesting example of this sort of network is the Ontario University and College Coalition, formed in early 2010 to unite different unions (including CUPE), as well as student, staff and faculty associations, in the fight to preserve high-quality, accessible and affordable postsecondary education. See <http://ontariouniversitycoalition.ca/section/1>.

unionism. Recognizing that precarity affects both public and private sector workers alike, Councils could undertake grassroots organizing initiatives in support of other precarious workers in the services, hospitality and retail sectors. Such proposals fall neatly in line with CUPE's commitment to work with labour allies, coalitions, students, and community partners to engage the public on the need to preserve public services and jobs against privatization and precarity.

In the struggle against precarity, the stakes are high. Public institutions such as universities are increasingly under siege: "The verdant campuses of many of our universities bespeak peace and stability. Don't be fooled! You are actually looking at a battlefield. The universities are under deadly siege, in a crusade led by neoliberal financial and corporate leaders (backed by their hired think tanks), and with the willing connivance of our governments" (Valleau and Hamel, 2013). The way in which postsecondary education is predominantly viewed must be challenged: the university is a public good, not simply an individual privilege or a commodity to be purchased for someone else's profit.

CONCLUSION

In large union structures there exists any number of cleavages that interfere with organizing efforts directed at precarious workers. Nonetheless, the institutional structures and memories that CUPE 4600 had in place, along with the resources provided by CUPE National, did in many ways prove effective in connecting these divisions during the mobilization and negotiation periods of the bargaining process. For instance, in the week preceding a possible strike, a solidarity rally and march throughout campus was organized, which was well-attended by campus unionists, other members of CUPE locals and leaders in the broader labour movement.

In the post-settlement period, in the months leading up to the 2014 CUPE Ontario Convention, CUPE 4600 submitted three resolutions that addressed rising precarious employment in the university sector, and which called for the funding of a research project examining the impact of precarious employment on post-secondary education in Ontario; the launch of a public awareness campaign that links precarious employment in universities to rising tuition rates, student debt levels and growing class sizes; and a significant expansion of CUPE Ontario's organizing activities in order to "grow the base of our Union and enable precarious

and non-unionized workers to benefit from Union membership.”¹⁴ It is hoped that the incoming CUPE Ontario executive board members seriously consider the extent to which these resolutions may provide a potential first step in bridging the expanding disconnect between the discourse to advance the struggles of precarious workers, and the resources, political commitment and organizational restructuring necessary for achieving concrete gains in workplaces and within local communities.

While traditional union structures provide a foundation from which to build labour activism and engagement, in many ways they have proven incapable of accommodating the growing precarity of organized labour in employment sectors such as PSE. In future mobilizing efforts, it is essential that alternative models be considered in order to mitigate the negative effects of precarious work. This means seeking out innovative organizing strategies that nonetheless remain situated in a broader politics of resistance that emphasizes the reality of class struggle.

In the context of this ongoing neoliberal assault on PSE, students and workers across campuses must recapture and revitalize a militant commitment to class-based forms of struggle, if they hope to capture and secure tangible gains on a university battlefield that already favours the interests of corporate leaders and corporate-minded administrators. While class has always embodied different manifestations of insecurity and precarity in different historical contexts, the strategic necessity of uniting the dispossessed in struggles that can realize a more equitable social order, remains highly relevant to contemporary struggles against precarious working conditions on university campuses.

¹⁴ The resolutions are in the possession of the authors, along with various other members of CUPE 4600's executive board.

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