Bargaining Bulletin

Here is a summary list of our remaining concerns that the AUT Chief Negotiator presented at the general membership meeting on Friday, January 25, 2013.

A professional development fund for all members. We have been advised by CAUT that we are the only university union without such a benefit; we can at least be sure that we are in rare company in such matters. The need for continued professional development (to maintain professional certifications, acquire resources, develop teaching skills, etc.) for all groups within our membership is ongoing.

Modest health care benefits for part-time academic instructors. The part time academic instructors who work for us, often dedicating many years of service, still have no health and dental benefits. None. Our proposal would correct for this injustice. Furthermore, we significantly reduced our original ask from a maximum of $1200 by suggesting a cap of $500 (and for part-time academic instructors teaching only one 3-credit course, the benefit is smaller still).

A university-funded increment to our benefits in the form of flexible benefits for eligible members. We proposed that the university fund a new Health Care Spending Account in the amount of $500 as a top-up to the benefits our members currently receive. The value of the benefits we receive from the University is inadequate both in the narrow range of services covered and in the restrictive amount of coverage provided. This is the product of our benefits being underfunded, as the single-member rate is only about 1.2% of the salary of a faculty member at the top of the Assistant Professor scale. The result is that our members individually are left to pay too much for the various health and dental services they require.

A collaborative governance mechanism that empowers the StFXAUT in the oversight of our benefits plan. Part of our historical concern with our group benefits plans is that we are excluded from all the negotiations that establish these plans in the first place, despite being the recipients of the benefit. This makes us an important stakeholder, yet we have no say in the provider, nor can we give voice to our preference regarding the benefits we should receive from the premiums paid. We also have little insights into the actual value of the university contributions and the range of plans to which we are eligible; the issue here is a lack of transparency. Given that this University has historically seen value in collaborative decision making, we simply wish to make this style of governance in vogue once again and introduce it into the realm of health and dental benefits.

A fair salary scale for Writing Centre Instructors. Writing Centre Instructors are the newest group of members to join our union. A key driver behind their recent certification was so that they would finally realize improvements to their terms of employment.

Nevertheless, the Administration proposed a starting salary on par with their existing salaries with very limited room for progression; in their final offer, they only agreed to a negligible increase to tie their grid to the bottom five steps of lab instructors. Given the responsibilities and qualifications of this small group, we feel that the University can do better for their first collective agreement.

Modest contract length extensions for both Lab Instructors and Writing Centre Instructors. Part of the concern the StFXAUT has for these two groups is their short duration contracts. A study of their annual salaries is misleading as they, with very few exceptions, do not have full year contracts. Lab Instructor contracts average 8.5 months, and even less in the Writing Centre. This is neither sustainable employment for the member, nor adequate to perform their various responsibilities and develop their service they provide to our students. It is in the University's interest then too to accept our very modest proposal to implement minimum contract lengths of 9 months for these members, a substantial reduction from our original ask of 10 month minimums.

An effective retirement incentive plan that produces real cost savings. The Administration has bemoaned the loss of mandatory retirement as a 'game-changer' with respect to managing the university finances, for it can no longer count on certain members, typically near or at the top of the salary scale, to retire. This particular problem is often cited as a barrier to their ability to find money to pay for the very modest items remaining to be negotiated. So, we proposed two ways of solving this problem - first, through a phased-in retirement option at half-salary, and second, by offering a monetary incentive to retire that would be paid out over 5 years. This latter retirement incentive already exists in our collective agreement, but the eligibility provisions make it ineffective. We have a model that we feel is compelling for both the University and our members. We have offered to review this financial model in detail with the Administration but have yet been invited to do so.

Acceptable improvements to the salary grids for all groups. The Administration's proposed economic adjustment to the salary grids for all members fails to take into consideration the value of recent settlements realized at other universities, the increasing cost of living in Nova Scotia, and the fact that our salaries remain behind those of our comparator institutions. The Administration's offer adjusts our salary scales upward by only an average of 1.688% in each year of the proposed four year agreement. Our proposal would realize an across-the-board adjustment with an average value of 2.625% each year. In our final offer, we suggested moving a small portion of the total increase we seek into our pension fund as a way of retaining the total compensation proposed, while offering a creative alternative for the Administration to consider. Our principle is that a top undergraduate university should not have academic staff whose salaries are amongst the lowest; our top-paid Administration has only applied this principle to themselves.