

Loyalist faculty rejects employer's final offer, strikes

By Sarah Sobanski

Loyalist College's Ontario Public Service Employees Union representative says he'd 'put money' on the strike between the union and the College Employer Council lasting to the end of the week or longer.

Classes were suspended at Loyalist's Bancroft and Belleville campuses Oct. 16 after faculty and OPSEU members at Loyalist and 23 other Ontario colleges took to picket lines. The union and the council, which negotiates with the union on behalf of Ontario colleges, couldn't come to an agreement Oct. 15.

'I wish that I had heard last night at 11 o'clock that there was an agreement that was palatable to both sides,' Eric Bauer said Monday. 'I can tell you right now that I haven't heard anything from the bargaining team.'

According to Bauer, the union is looking for faculty to have 'an equal voice in academic decision-making, a stable complement of full-time faculty and fairness to contract faculty with regard to equal pay for equal work.' He said the council was 'stonewalling' the union.

The council called the strike 'unnecessary' in a release Oct. 15. It said the union rejected its 'final offer.'

'The colleges cannot accept the union's demands that would ultimately add more than \$250 million to annual costs, eliminate thousands of contract faculty jobs and jeopardize the quality of college programs,' stated the release.

The final offer included 7.75 per cent pay increase over four years which would raise new full-time faculty salary maximums to \$115,378. The council stated the union demanded 'nine per cent over three years for a new full-time faculty maximum of more than \$116,000, which is out of line with comparable public-sector settlements.'

'They continually come back and say, 'Well, we're offering you plenty of money, you know, agreements that are comparable with other public service agreements that have taken place in the last six months,' said Bauer. 'We keep saying, 'You don't understand our issue is around the collegiality of decision-making so that management doesn't have unilateral control of decisions that impact the classroom.''

In its release, the council argued, 'Faculty are critical to academic decision-making, but they are not the exclusive voice [and] our programs require consistent delivery to meet provincially mandated standards and the requirements of accreditation bodies and industry partners.'

Bauer said, 'Academic freedom or the opportunity for teachers to have equal voice with managers is a zero-cost issue.'

He added that because the council kept returning to the money as the union's biggest issue, the two parties had been engaged in 'a three-month lack of having wholesome dialogue about what are the issues that are plaguing the vocational system right now.'

A release by the college said 'student success services, student success mentors, peer tutoring, athletics and campus life, student life, career centre and facilities like labs and study areas' would continue as well as 'some online courses and continuing education classes.' However, 'no regular daytime classes will be held for post-secondary or apprenticeship programs.'

The college offered the following advice to students: 'During this time, we encourage you to catch up on work, complete homework assignments, review difficult material as well as continue with your textbook readings and research projects. Please be assured that contingency plans are in place for you to complete your studies. No Ontario college student has ever lost a year because of a strike.'