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Why Academics Strike

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Although financial considerations can occasionally precipitate a strike, it generally takes some additional matter of principle to lead faculty to walk the picket line, writes Jim Clark.

If my elderly mother ever heard I was going on strike, her immediate reply would be a shocked “what?” ... followed by an even more shocked “why?”

She suspects (correctly) that I make far more money than she ever saw as a young widow raising four kids on the modest salary of a civilian clerk at a military base. She knows I have a lot of independence in my job and enjoy it very much. She would of course mention the breaks for research, although she is probably not too sure what that is in my case, and the opportunity for travel — including trips for meetings and conferences. And she knows I like to maintain the illusion of youth by “hanging around” with entertaining and bright young people, albeit different ones every few years.

Given such perks, my mother’s surprised “why?” certainly makes a lot of sense. But it is also surprisingly easy to answer. Let’s start with the seemingly difficult money question, although so-called money issues are seldom solely about finances.

Yes I make more money than Mom ever did, but then I went far longer without making money as well. She left school after grade eight to work, which was not uncommon at the time, whereas I spent more than eight years on my university education, after graduating from grade 13. And for several years after I worked as a research associate and taught on a part-time basis, followed by more years of low salaries early in my regular career. So Mom had 15 to 20 extra years of earning.

Moreover I had the option of professions that pay far better than university professors, and with far less education. In not too many years, the budding lawyers in my undergraduate classes, not to mention the physicians-in-waiting, will make more money than I do approaching the end of my academic career.

Another reality is that universities are in competition for strong faculty. It is frustrating to lose a good candidate (perhaps even a former Manitoban) who ends up at an Alberta university willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars more every year, in addition to providing richer support for research, access to more graduate students and numerous other benefits. Successful mid-career faculty are also lured away by more attractive offers elsewhere.

Another salary consideration is fairness. Should I be paid markedly less than people at other universities doing the same job simply because I work in Manitoba? One can rely to some extent on the martyrs among us who sacrifice their own interests for the greater good, but the truth is that they will never exist in sufficient numbers to build an excellent university system. Only adequate remuneration can do that.

In addition to such considerations, money usually becomes an issue when ignited by other factors. Has management just given itself substantial pay raises or hired seemingly superfluous additional managers, while saying it cannot afford respectable

increases for faculty? Does the board and senior management somehow find money for their pet projects (often associated with their “vision” for the university)? Are there other signs that resources are being squandered on actions viewed by faculty as incidental to the primary teaching and research functions of universities? Given such circumstances, you can bet that even modest shortcomings in salary and benefits take on much greater significance.

So there are many considerations that can lead an otherwise decent salary to be inadequate to get the job done — the job being the attraction, retention and satisfaction of excellent academics at Manitoban universities.

Although such financial considerations can occasionally precipitate a strike, it generally takes some additional matter of principle to lead faculty to walk the picket line. Among the foremost in importance are those involving academic freedom, which seems under threat from numerous angles these days.

One threat to academic freedom is the privatization of university functions, already far advanced in the research domain and now under threat in teaching as well. Universities that offer public facilities for private research and other uses are often unable or unwilling to protect the academic freedom of researchers and scholars. In truly appalling cases, negative results of pharmaceutical drug testing or other commercial processes are ignored or even suppressed, violating the most basic tenets of academic freedom.

Institutional and government policies designed for laudable ends can have similarly chilling consequences for academic freedom, or freedom of speech more generally. Even Maclean’s magazine found itself forced to defend authors’ right to espouse views interpreted by some as threatening or hateful. How much more vulnerable are lowly academics whose job, properly done, requires they address controversial topics? In teaching psychology, I cannot ignore research and theories about ethnic differences in intelligence, gender differences in personality, human evolution and a host of other controversial issues.

Most disciplines have similarly taboo topics that put teachers and researchers at increasing risk from ill-advised or poorly implemented policies that lack adequate definition and controls.

And it does little good for university officials or politicians to deny that potential abuses can result from such policies. Once loosed, committees, commissions and administrators are free to interpret the policies as they choose, turning a blind eye to the hollow assurances that first accompanied the policies. And if management has already demonstrated its willingness to punish people who discuss controversial issues, dissent from the status quo, or criticize institutional management, then I become extremely worried about providing yet another club, like new policies centered around vague words like “respect,” with which to beat me over the head.

So Mom, your impression of my profession is bang on in many respects: respectable salary relative to that of many people, great job, independence and so on. But the job also has its potential faults, including lower pay than many professions or academics elsewhere and fear of reprisals for doing my job or being outspoken about controversial topics or the institution where I work. When those fault lines become too strained, something has to give — the result being either constructive negotiations or a faculty strike.

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The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily CAUT.

Comment

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