



Representing, Organizing, & Activating the Contract Faculty, Teaching Assistants,
Graduate Assistants & Research Assistants @ York University, Toronto, Canada

Canadian Union of Public Employees / Syndicat Canadien de la Fonction Publique Local / Section Locale 3903

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Position: Chief Steward Unit 1

2015-2015 Yearly Term Report

My term on the CUPE 3903 Executive has been very challenging, but also quite rewarding. It has been an excellent opportunity for me to properly learn our union's procedures, familiarize myself with all of our collective agreements and bylaws, and also better identify what works and what does not work. I have given my best efforts to fulfill my role as a chief steward unit 1 and also go beyond, and I would like to think that I was successful. Below is my yearly report that outlines broadly what I have worked on as part of this executive, my points of criticism, and suggestions for the new chief steward. Since there have been several central projects and items I have focused on, I would like to talk about them in sections.

TASKS AND PROJECTS:

The Stewards' Council:

The council had a hard time maintaining the mobilization we had gathered through the strike. This unfortunately seems to be a rather common pattern in CUPE 3903, especially immediately following a strike. Nonetheless, many members participated in the work of the union and mobilizing, especially with respect to the events and actions we organized regarding the ongoing tuition offset arbitration. We had at least one meeting every month, scheduled with proper notice. Throughout the year, there was increased participation especially from international members, a sub-group of the membership that has felt rather excluded for some time. I am also really happy that I was able to recruit stewards from a couple of departments that have not traditionally been active in the union such as nursing, linguistics, theater, dance, mathematics, and biology. They were really successful in maintaining active communication between their departments and me, and I hope that the same dynamic will stay intact and get stronger with the new chief steward.

As expected, I acted as a regular contact person between the Unit 1 members and the Executive as part of my role as the chief steward. I helped organize and actively participated in events such as the Stewards' Council Solidarity BBQ, the January 20 Rally for Tuition Indexation, the Pancake Brunch (as a long time proud TFAC member), and crashing the Board of Governors meeting and singing carols in December. The strength of our union and the success of our organizing comes from actions like this that put pressure on the employer and make our members' voices heard, hence I am hoping that similar events will be organized even more frequently next year.

Grievance Committee:

As a chief steward, I automatically became a member of the grievance committee that is composed of the chief stewards, the chair, grievance officer, the posting officers, a member from the employment equity committee and our staff. It has been my unfortunate experience that the committee lacked structure and had a hard time scheduling timely and inclusive meetings with well-kept records. Part of this also springs from a lack in our bylaws: the specific rules governing the grievance committee spaces (like quorum, minutes and structural necessities) are not explicitly stated like they are with other bodies (like the Stewards' Council and the Executive). I felt like the committee did not have a focus in terms of the political projects that could have been pursued through the grievances our members have been filing (or the problems they have had that have not resulted in grievances yet) across units and departments. I wanted to see a clear plan for political organizing appear out of these grievances, in addition to actively pursuing them by better communicating with our members, but this did not happen. I personally take responsibility for this, however it was clearly a giant task for one person, and impossible to undertake without proper organizing and a dedicated group of people working on it, especially the grievance officer. Hopefully our grievance officer next year will be more inclined to go into departments and start that kind of organizing, of course with the help of the chief stewards.

The Tuition Offset Arbitration:

In addition to my work as chief steward, I was one of the four executive members working on the tuition offset arbitration. I was instrumental in reaching out to international members, collecting information, going over the production materials provided by the employer, having regular meetings with our lawyer, and crafting the alternative settlement language. This required a lot of time and energy, and I have done my best to help our arbitration lead Sonja Killoran-McKibbin, alongside of Jen Cypher (our chair) and Maija Duncan (our CO). The involvement and help of our active rank and file members also supported our work, and I constantly worked to ensure the communication between the Stewards' Council and the developments in the arbitration as the point person chief steward. To this end, I also played a central role in organizing events and actions to put pressure on the employer.

Social Media:

Throughout the year, I helped our CO Maija Duncan maintain the twitter account of our union. The importance of our twitter presence was clear to me after seeing how effective it was during our strike, so I regularly updated the account with news and announcement from our union, from other unions, and news of organizing and events from other organizations.

CUPE Ontario and National Conventions:

I was one of our union's delegates for both CUPE Ontario (May 2015) and CUPE National Conventions (November 2015). In both conventions, I did advocacy around sexual violence by putting forward motions and starting conversations in caucus meetings and the convention floor. While we had some success in getting basic recognition for the problems of sexual violence in the workplace and union spaces, CUPE National was quite unresponsive, despite a lot of lip service. I was also a part of the organizing that happened in both conventions with delegates of sibling locals to introduce changes around strike pay, 8th line work and its recognition, and support for precarious workers. CUPE Ontario was a lot more open in that regard, but despite effective organizing, we failed to pass resolutions regarding strike pay from day 1. However our local continues to advocate for these issues and maintains communications with other locals and National. Hopefully delegates in those conventions in the upcoming years will continue this dynamic and achieve results through organizing, as these are issues very dear to our members. I personally would like to continue the mobilizing I have participated in during previous conventions.

DIFFICULTIES AND SUGGESTIONS:

Workload issues:

One of my two biggest problems on the Executive this past year was the workload issue. I had a really hard time maintaining the balance of my academic work and my union work, and not being burnt out while I still maintained my chief steward responsibilities and the additional projects I have been involved in, like the tuition offset arbitration. Certain members of the Executive were taking on a lot of extra duties on top of the requirements of their positions, whereas others were comfortable doing the bare minimum (sometimes even less than that) as the Union was going through a really busy and difficult time. The problems we have had with the employer about the summer pay, late GFA payments, tuition arbitration, and Unit 4 bargaining generally fell on the shoulders of the same people, and this situation turned into a pattern where the same people were constantly assuming additional duties, and the workload of the Executive that should be shared by everyone on the committee fell heavily on these people. As exemplified above, some of these duties were the most crucial items that the Executive has had to deal with, and heavy workload issues created an environment of discomfort and uneasiness, which did not contribute to a healthy work climate.

Racism:

I came to Canada about 4 years ago as an immigrant woman from the Middle East. In my life, I have experienced multiple forms of discrimination, due to my womanness, my sexuality, my ethnicity and my invisible disability. However, I have never felt more attacked than I did on the CUPE 3903 Executive. There were constant attempts to ignore my experience and find the answer to the question "*what is she?*" I have been called brown, light brown, beige, white, off-white, olive, mix raced, person of

indeterminate race, race traitor. This was mostly by other Executive members who are also people of colour. I have had to endure the insult of people trying to figure out and then telling me what I am, what I am worth, and what I can speak for or not. I have been told that I was not dark enough to identify as a person of colour, so I could not have experienced racialization, hence I should not be participating in conversations about equity in that vein. I was told that I could not understand the context of racism in Canada because I was not born here. I particularly felt like this was directed at me because of my ethnic background, because it was constantly brought up, and the way I identified was constantly opened up for discussion: "*she thinks she is racialized, but is she?*" I felt completely erased as I was over and over told that what I felt and how I identified was wrong. It was a clear example of silencing, othering, and erasing.

I acknowledge that there are problems with anti-black racism and various forms of racism directed at brown folk, within our union and in our society in general. What I recounted above is not to say that there is not a problem of racism in the local in general: we should all be aware of the fact that we live in a white supremacist society with institutions geared towards inscribing this on every aspect of our lives. However, we should also acknowledge that there are different forms of racialization that people experience, and we should be mindful of how violent all of them are, and that they are not located in a hierarchy. I should not have to fight to get my experience of racialization validated. If our local is going to work on issues of race and discrimination, as we must, I would like this work to be done in a way that includes everyone that feels excluded and discriminated against, without feeling judged and brought down regardless of their skin colour, ethnicity or citizenship status.