

Tuition Indexation

At a General Membership Meeting on February 13, Unit 1 (Teaching Assistants) and Unit 3 (Graduate and Research Assistants) members unanimously passed a motion that the union would not settle without a tuition indexation provision that protects both current and future members.

This FAQ sheet is intended to help educate ourselves, our colleagues, our students and the wider community on the importance of this provision to our members.

WHAT IS TUITION INDEXATION AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Tuition indexation ensures that, for every dollar York adds to graduate tuition fees, it also adds a dollar to graduate student compensation for CUPE 3903 members. This provision ensures that our compensation cannot be eroded by increases in tuition. It applies both to current members and incoming members. As a result, York stopped increasing graduate tuition fees in the early 2000s and provided a tuition rebate called the “Graduate Financial Assistance” (GFA), worth about \$1,800 in Unit 1 and \$1,200 in Unit 3 (and more for international students). These amounts reflected tuition fee increases between the late 1990s and the early 2000s.

When you consider the difference in fees between York and other Ontario universities (where fees continue to increase substantially), along with the tuition rebate, York graduate students save approximately \$4,500 a year because of this provision in our collective agreements.

WHY DID THE UNION NEGOTIATE TUITION INDEXATION?

In the 1990s, the right-wing government of Mike Harris deregulated tuition fee increases. York and other universities significantly increased tuition fees each semester, introduced summer term tuition fees, and eliminated post-residency fees (a reduced rate for graduate students who had completed coursework). Recognizing that rising fees would undermine any wage or funding increases negotiated for graduate students, our members made the fight against tuition increases a priority.

HOW DID WE WIN TUITION INDEXATION AT YORK?

Threatening to strike if necessary, the union negotiated tuition indexation in the 1998 collective agreement, on a one-time only basis. That meant that, in each subsequent round of negotiations, the provision would have to be renegotiated. In 2000, York refused to negotiate the provision for Unit 1 or for the newly organized Unit 3. This unwillingness forced CUPE 3903 members to strike. The university then offered to “grandfather” tuition indexation, so that it would be maintained for current members, but not incoming members. To their credit, CUPE 3903 members refused this offer and continued to strike to ensure future graduate students would be protected.

Let’s be clear about what this meant: striking CUPE 3903 members were not on strike for themselves, but to protect tuition indexation and (somewhat) accessible graduate tuition for future members. After 78 days on strike, CUPE 3903 successfully maintained tuition indexation for Unit 1 and extended it to Unit 3 members. If you entered our local as a Unit 1 or Unit 3 member after 2001, you have benefitted directly from the strike of 2000–01. This was also a breakthrough provision that made the Unit 1 and 3 collective agreements the best in the sector and the standard that other unions would bargain for.

HOW IS TUITION INDEXATION CURRENTLY UNDER THREAT?

Last year, York circumvented this provision and increased fees for international graduate students by a whopping \$7,000. In doing so, York now claims that the provision only applies once graduate students have a contract at York, but that fees can increase before they arrive. While this only currently affects international students, if it is not challenged, York will try to circumvent indexation for domestic students. This is a serious threat to the union's ability to maintain and improve working conditions for graduate student members. Without indexation, any increase in wages, benefits, funds or the tuition rebate can simply be reversed by tuition fee increases.

CAN YORK AFFORD TO MAINTAIN TUITION INDEXATION?

Yes. The approximately 2,700 CUPE 3903 members who pay graduate tuition fees provide, after the current rebate, only \$10 million or 1% of York's billion-dollar budget. It would take several years of significant fee increases for the loss of tuition indexation to become a significant revenue stream for York.

But graduate students in our union represent a significant revenue stream, just not through tuition fees. Graduate students are publicly funded at a substantially higher rate than undergraduates: they generate, and make possible, substantial research monies, and contribute significantly to the teaching, administrative and research work at the university. In addition, the revenue that graduate students generate is substantially higher than the compensation York offers them. Graduate students do not owe York University more money. While the impact of tuition fee increases is minimal for York, its impact for graduate students is huge, eroding their quality of life and reducing the union's ability to bargain for meaningful improvements in the future.

HOW CAN WE PROTECT TUITION INDEXATION?

This is an egregious violation of the principle that members fought for in 2000-01. Our best chance to keep this provision is to insist, in bargaining, that both current and incoming members are entitled to tuition indexation – and that we are prepared to strike for this, if necessary.

WHAT CAN MEMBERS DO?

Hopefully, the Employer is prepared to negotiate this before March 3, the strike deadline. In the meantime, members can:

**Share this
FAQ with other
members**

**Participate in
Strike Preparation
Week**

**Follow
3903.cupe.ca
for bargaining
updates**

**Attend the 'final
offer' SGMM
Monday, March 2
5:30pm to 8:30pm
Location TBA**



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