



# Report of the President

## James Compton

Post-secondary education continues to face a range of stubborn problems, but this past year has also revealed its share of successes. Austerity policies remain in place across the country and some provinces, such as Ontario, are pushing differentiation plans that would see some arts and humanities programs shrink. Academic freedom continues to be tested. This forms part of the landscape in which faculty association activism has played out. However, we have taken steps together to confront these challenges.

The danger of austerity was confronted head on by the Cape Breton University Faculty Association. In the face of threatened program cuts and mass layoffs, CBUFA mobilized its membership and negotiated a tentative collective agreement that terminated the layoff process and worked to restore job security for its members. The tentative deal was ratified by faculty, but, sadly, was later rejected by Cape Breton University's Board of Governors only a few days after dismissing the university's president who had negotiated the deal. Despite the setback, CBUFA's membership mobilization demonstrated the strength of collective action, and how best to fight the austerity agenda.

Another example is found at the University of Manitoba where more than 1200 academic staff went on strike to defend academic freedom, collegial governance and job security. The 21-day strike attracted international attention and the support of the broader university community. I was lucky to be able to attend UMFA's first large rally of the job action and witnessed, first hand, the support provided by students and other Winnipeg unionists. The student support was genuine and powerful. Some serenaded the crowd, while others showed their solidarity by making creative signs. Even the weather was on side, with the pickets being favoured by sunny and unseasonably warm temperatures well into November.

This was not a strike about money. The intervention of the provincial government removed that issue from bargaining. The strike was about the principled defense of core academic values in the face of an aggressive attempt to weaken academic staff, and impose reductionist performance



metrics. The importance of the UMFA job action cannot be overstated. Their member-driven fight against the corporate university was our fight.

The same can be said for the battles being waged in defense of academic freedom at the University of Calgary, Carleton University, and Laurentian University. More recently, we have seen troubling comments by the Principal of McGill University that academic institutes should shy away from provocative discourse. Again, their fight is our fight.

These acts of solidarity are crucial because it's clear that the values of our community of scholars are not universally shared. This point was made clear to me while attending a Conference Board of Canada conference on post-secondary education (PSE) in early December. The basic question addressed by the conference was not how can we improve education; instead, it was how can the PSE sector adapt itself to labour market needs as defined by new technology, industry and business. The common-sense assumption was that education should be instrumentalized to serve the needs of the "skills development system." System needs trumped pedagogy.

Luckily, we are not alone. Our values are shared by academic and union colleagues around the world. This knowledge was confirmed for me while attending the 10<sup>th</sup> International Further & Higher Education & Research Conference, in Accra, Ghana. There are very real regional differences, but many of the same issues, such as the corporatization of the university, are shared across continents. Such events provide opportunities for solidarity work that benefits all participants. In Canada, the Confederation of University Faculty Associations of British Columbia (CUFA BC) hosted an excellent conference directed at fostering collegial governance. University Governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century achieved its goal. The two-day event was a huge success attracting academic staff association activists from coast to coast. It also brought those activists into dialogue with university administrators. This provided participants opportunities to sharpen their arguments, but also to locate chances to reach agreement with our administrative counterparts.

This was our first full-year dealing with the new Liberal government in Ottawa. The Trudeau government's first budget didn't roll back all the cuts made to the tri-council agencies over the past 10 years, but it did move in the right direction. So when the CAUT Executive met with Canada's new Minister of Science Kirsty Duncan, we underlined that room for improvement remained. Given the previous government's refusal to meet us, we were pleased to have the opportunity to make our issues and priorities known to the minister. We raised the issue of continued gender imbalance involving the selection of Canada Excellence Research Chairs, along with other equity and equality issues. We also pressed the minister on the need to strengthen evidence-based decision making by allowing government scientists to freely discuss and disseminate their research.

We also recognized the importance of the government's decision to reinstate the University and College Academic Staff System (UCASS) survey. The survey was cancelled by the Harper government in 2012 leaving the entire post-secondary system without reliable data on salaries, gender and the age of university academic staff. Thanks, in part, to the lobbying work of our Executive Director, David Robinson, this important statistical instrument has returned. It will now, for the first time, begin collecting information identifying the number of contract academic staff across the country. On that file, numerous member associations held well-received events during CAUT's annual Fair Employment week.

The shared commitment to solidarity was also a big part of the hugely successful Librarians' and Archivists' Conference on collective bargaining. The two-day event asked participants to throw themselves into the role playing of a bargaining simulation.

Finally, I will end my report by noting the collective action of academic staff across the country in denouncing the United States' travel ban directed at people in Muslim majority nations. The CAUT joined with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in strongly condemning the discriminatory ban on entry to the United States. Once again, their fight was our fight.