



Outsider - The Voice of the Tutor

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Athabasca University rejects CUPE Local 3911 latest offer

The first thing I would like to say is that I apologize for not sending more timely reports over the past month or so. We kept feeling that we were on the edge of reaching an agreement and thought “just wait another week.....maybe we’ll have good news!”

Unfortunately, we have **bad news**. Mediation was unsuccessful (more later). Subsequent negotiating efforts were just turned down flat. We will be heading for arbitration – on the collective agreement and on the pension issue (2 separate arbitrations!).

Now for some of the details. Mediation was quite a frustrating experience. The employer’s committee seemed totally unwilling to actually negotiate. At one point, their committee gave us a proposal to counter a new proposal we had presented that morning. Their proposal still had the “track changes” showing that the few changes they had made were over a week old.....and did not even incorporate representations they had made some months ago! As you may be able to tell, it was very frustrating and accomplished nothing (except that both parties have to pay that mediator).

When it appeared that mediation had failed we tried again to get bargaining going and this time there were some meaningful discussions, some compromising, some back & forth (i.e. more bargaining than we had done in months!) which resulted in a final compromise position being proposed by CUPE 3911. Our committee felt good about the financial aspect of the proposal; we had proposed a minimal salary increase, a 1% reduction in the January RSP payment, a one year agreement in return for a three year phase-in of a reasonable pension plan (to a level of 5% by 2015) and agreed to one financial decrease in hardware allowance. As of today (January 31, 2013) the President and Vice – Presidents have rejected that proposal apparently because they don’t think AU can afford to pay us a 5% pension in two years from now. (Keep in mind they already pay us a 2% pension payment every year.)

Let me explain how appallingly short sighted they are.

As you may recall, recently it became clear that employees in our bargaining unit may well be eligible to participate in the Public Service Pension Plan if they work 14 or more hours a week on average (apparently averaged over a year). Not only would this be very expensive for the employer because of the contribution rate (11.7% up to \$51,100 and 16.72% on earning over \$51,100) but because employees would also be entitled to buy back past service (which many financial advisors highly recommend) which, we understand, also triggers an obligation on the employer to pay. PSPP would also be an administrative problem since many employees may be eligible in one year and not in the next. From our point of view, the biggest problem is that it would not be a universal plan since approximately 40% of our members regularly work less than 14 hours a week. As well, many of our members already participate in pension plans and would encounter some real problems which are alleviated by an RSP approach.

We thought our proposal was a “win-win”. Unfortunately the employer seems to be completely unwilling to achieve a settlement that is fair and reasonable and seems to prefer to spend endless more dollars on going to arbitration on 2 issues which will clearly result in them losing even more money.

Unfortunately, at this point we feel we have no option but to pursue the issue of participation in the Public Service Pension Plan. We believe that it is better to ensure that at least some of our members have a reasonable pension. We also believe that ALL employees have the right to a reasonable pension but the employer disagrees.

Yessy Byl
Chair, Negotiations Committee
