

# Student Responses to Post-Secondary Strikes

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## Background:

Strikes in universities, colleges, and schools have become a prevailing feature in public education systems across Canada, with Ontario as the epicenter for two major strikes between 2017 and 2018, both of which led to the government issuing back-to-work orders. Despite the alleged injustices against academic staff brought to the forefront by the organizers of such labour stoppages, little to no comprehensive analyses of the adverse implications of strikes on students has been completed.

With post-secondary education being founded on the fundamental understanding that education is a kind of public good that generates positive opportunities for stakeholders and the general public, consideration of student perspectives is key to navigating tensions between labour unions and post-secondary employers. In other words, the significance of education as an essential human right and public good is founded on the fact that education benefits go beyond the person receiving the education, hence the compulsory primary and secondary schooling in Canada and existing subsidies for post-secondary education. In other words, whether considering post-secondary education as an economic or social interaction, students are automatically implicated during labour stoppages as the value of their paid education and valid learnings is interrupted.

This research finds that strikes in Canadian universities and colleges have implications in the form of psychological, financial, and educational burdens to students, who are often caught in the middle of valid academic staff battles and the need for valuable classroom instruction. Overall, resolution of impasses in bargaining negotiations between unions and post-secondary employers must involve consideration of the overwhelming interests of paying students, families, and the broader community.

## Case Studies:

### **1. Ontario College Strike (2017):**

**Union:** Ontario Public Sector Employees' Union (OPSEU), Local 635

**Employer:** College Employer Council (CEC)

**Cause:** Low faculty and staff wages, as well as little-to-no academic staff input into college governance were the main points of contention during this strike.

**Summary:** This five-week-long college teachers' and academic staff strike ended in back-to-work legislation passed by the Ontario government, bringing over 500,000 full- and part-time students across 24 colleges back to campus after the long labour stoppage. Collective bargaining occurred, and the CEC tried to put a stop to the picketing and strike by offering to extend contracts and raise wages for academic staff. However, the CEC's refusal to give faculty the ability to form college senates to give input on college governance led to the OPSEU's rejection of these allowances.

**Perspectives:** Students on the college campuses across Ontario reported being immensely dissatisfied with the strike. Many said they were "supportive of the cause" yet upset about the lack of classroom instruction, academic and mental health support on campus, and general tension on the college grounds. This escalated into the launch of a class-action suit against the colleges, with 14 students from various colleges standing as representative plaintiffs. The notice alleged that the colleges breached contracts with students by failing to provide vocational training and a full term of students. It also sought full refunds for students who chose not to continue their programs and those who lost instruction. The lawyers and plaintiffs said "students may lose an entire semester without being refunded their tuition and fees, or students may be required to repeat courses or take extended programs into the new year."

**Result:** The lawsuit was dismissed in court, and the government issued a back-to-work order. For many students, the academic term was extended to December 22nd to compensate for missed time. However, students expressed discontent with the decision, as it interfered with their final exams, holiday plans, and still felt like an "incomplete term." There was talk from the CEC of extending the winter academic term into the summertime, but students fought this, claiming that it would "damage [their] plans for valuable summer work."

**Social media quotes from students:**

- "And they say they put the students first... what a load of bull."
- "Using students as a bargaining tool is a very shameful way to solve the problem!"
- "The inconvenience of those who depend on institutional learning can be so stressful and a painful process. We are all connected therefore all are affected."
- "They should give us refunds. Schools rob us blind."

## **York University Strike (2018)**

**Union:** Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Local 3903

**Employer:** York University (YU)

**Cause:** Both rallies and picketing initiatives were held in response to over five months of disagreement and unresolved collective bargaining between YU and CUPE. The key issues were temporary contracts for academic staff, lack of job security, and the unstable structure of work and funding for graduate students and assistants.

**Summary:** This was the longest strike in history at a Canadian University, taking place over five months. For the second time in three years, thousands of faculty went on strike, with exam preparation and final marks left unfinished for 46,000 undergraduate students. Classes were not cancelled by YU, but students found empty classrooms and unfinished instruction regardless. Eventually, back-to-work legislation forced staff back to campus, but many staff were reliant on food banks and faced verbal attacks, and no reform to the educational structure was reached.

**Perspectives:** Graduate students were primarily in support of the strike because they qualified as academic staff, claiming that colleges are overly reliant on temporary staff and fail to compensate graduate staff and faculty accordingly. Many of these students rallied in support of the staff, often missing out on research projects and even graduation deadlines. However, undergraduate students were frustrated, forced with the choice to cross the picket line and deal with the tense environment on campus or to exercise the right to not engage and miss courses. 75% of students reported experiencing anxiety, stress, and worry about their grades and quality of education. 80% of students indicated that they learned less than they should have in a course as a result of the strike. Minor incidents of violence occurred as students were stopped at picket lines. A video was released by picketers showing a student dismantling barricades at the Northwest Gate picket line in an attempt to attend his Midterm exam. The student was placed in a chokehold by a picketer, upon breaking free the student kicked the picketer in retaliation. A picketer was injured after a vehicle forced its way past a picket line. Protesters demonstrated outside a university senate meeting and attempted to prevent senators from entering.

**Result:** Back-to-work legislation was issued by the Ontario government after five months of strikes, picketing, and lack of collective bargaining. The legislation gave the government the power to fine members of CUPE \$2,000 each day and fined the Union \$25,000 for each day it continued to strike. The summer academic term was completely cancelled by YU. Several faculties and student groups at York University passed votes

of non-confidence in Rhonda Lenton, President of YU, and the Board of Governors for creating a crisis of governance and for their poor handling of the strike. 3,000 academic staff walked out of their jobs, leaving many services and classes unfinished for good.

#### **Social media quotes from students:**

- “Doug Ford and the slugs got one thing right. Mark it on yer calendar folks, it may well be the last one too!”
- “I’m paying \$8000 a year for my program and coming into campus and working my butt off, and this is like a brick wall dropping in front of all my plans.”
- “It’s very confusing. I worry that if the strike continues for much longer, students will be evaluated on only the first couple of assignments and it’s not an accurate reflection of our work.”
- “It’s a harsh reality, but sometimes when people cannot make it better for themselves, their motive could possibly be to take everyone else down with them.”
- “I’m a grade 12 student and I am planning to go to YU for September but the thought of strikes is holding me back.”

#### **Key Considerations in Alberta:**

Alberta does not have a demonstrated history of strikes in post-secondary institutions. However, there are some key considerations when understanding the potential of union-institution conflicts and labour stoppages in the province.

**Alberta government and the right to strike:** The Alberta government introduced legislation in April 2017 that gave academic staff at universities and colleges the right to strike, specifically faculty associations, graduate students, and post-doctoral fellows. This change meant that academic staff had to negotiate an essential services agreement with the government to determine which workers provide vital services and must stay at work in the event of a work stoppage. Effectively, Alberta was the first province in Canada to recognize post-doctoral fellows as employees. As Advanced Education Minister Marlin Schmidt said, “one of the unique characteristics of the post-secondary sector is the power of the boards of governors of universities and colleges to designate who qualifies as academic staff and who doesn’t.” This movement gave clear guidelines as to who falls into the category of academic staff, institution staff, and students, making the union and institution boundaries very clear.

### **Scholar Strike Canada (Calgary, 2020):**

**Cause:** This two-day strike was collective between students and staff at various Calgary universities and colleges, and aimed at protesting anti-Black policies, racism, and police brutality in the US, Canada, and elsewhere.

**Summary:** Universities in Calgary publically supported professors, academic staff, and students in pausing their teaching, administrative, and educational duties on September 9th and 10th as part of the push for racial justice. Professors were allowed to cancel their classes, so long as they connected students to digital on-demand resources on systemic racism. The Scholar Strike began in the US and spread across the world, with many students and staff at academic institutions participating in class walk-outs.

### **Perspectives:**

- “One of the key roles of a university is to have difficult conversations and fearlessly tackle big issues for the betterment of all. The University of Calgary strongly condemns anti-Black racism, anti-Indigenous racism, and racism in all forms.” Ed McCauley, U of C President
- “History has proven academia has a key role in advocating for a just society. Supporting this strike is just one thing we can do to help bring about necessary and overdue change.” Elizabeth Evans, Mount Royal University Vice-President
- “The point of a picket line isn’t just to stop people from getting somewhere to work and learn, but to also advertise the issues and spread those.” Student, University of Calgary
- “I think it’s the right thing to do. If they have a voice and can use it to benefit oppressed people, they should do that.” Student, Mount Royal University

### **Conclusion:**

Students who are not part of labour disputes will be necessarily subject to heavy financial, psychological, and educational barriers upon the occurrence of a strike, often resulting in inaccurate tuition due to lost instruction, huge stressors caused by lack of educational accessibility, and delays in degree and diploma procurement. This is a direct challenge to the responsibility of institutions and their staff to provide the essential service of education for which the students are paying.

It is important to recognize that universities and colleges are required to provide remediation after a strike, often in the form of rescheduling lectures and assignments and leniency in regard to course requirements. However, a prolonged strike has negative impacts on students despite the form of remediation, be it through financial implications, student mental health, or “half-baked” degrees (i.e. learning less that

should be required in a situation without a strike). Often, remediations are not in financial forms, meaning that regular life for students is affected by cancelled or extended terms.

In regards to the situation in Alberta, there are clear guidelines establishing the categories of academic staff and academic students. Without a demonstrated history of staff-led strikes, it is hard to determine student responses to such initiatives. However, the cooperative approach to the 2020 Scholar Strike (i.e. the coordination and transparent communication between the institutions, their staff, and their students) led to an effective, peaceful, and participatory strike on campuses in Calgary. Perhaps this open communication has proven vital in the collective bargaining process between unions and institutions in Alberta. However, with recent tuition spikes, retroactive wage decreases, and general discontent with the COVID-19 experience in post-secondary schools, many members of Alberta's general public have mentioned that we might need to be "ready for potential strikes due to layoffs and funding cuts" - this has yet to be resolved.

### Resources:

Baker, M. (2013). Industrial Actions in Schools: Strikes and Student Achievement. *Canadian Journal of Economics*, 46(3), 1014-1036.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/caje.12035>

Wickens, M.C, Labrish, C, Masoumi, A. Fiksenbaum, L.M, & Greenglass, E.R. (2016). *Understanding the Student Experience of a University Labour Strike: Identifying Strategies to Counter Negative Impact*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

<https://guides.library.utoronto.ca/c.php?g=250906&p=1680318>

<https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/university-professors-in-calgary-invited-to-participate-in-two-day-strike-protesting-systemic-racism-1.5097441>

<https://edmontonjournal.com/news/politics/alberta-government-aims-to-give-academic-staff-at-universities-the-right-to-strike>

[https://www.thestar.com/news/crime/2010/09/09/judge\\_dismisses\\_classaction\\_suit\\_against\\_york\\_university.html](https://www.thestar.com/news/crime/2010/09/09/judge_dismisses_classaction_suit_against_york_university.html)