

Possible University Labour Disruptions: Background and impact on students



Presentation to UASU Council and COFA Joint Board+ISA+ASC

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Background and Key Information

- Basics of collective bargaining
- Current state of negotiations
- Provincial interference
- State of university finances



Background: Labour Law in Alberta

- Before 2015, university staff in Alberta did not have the right to strike
- Supreme Court ruled that all public employees have the right to strike
- Much longer history of university strikes in the rest of Canada



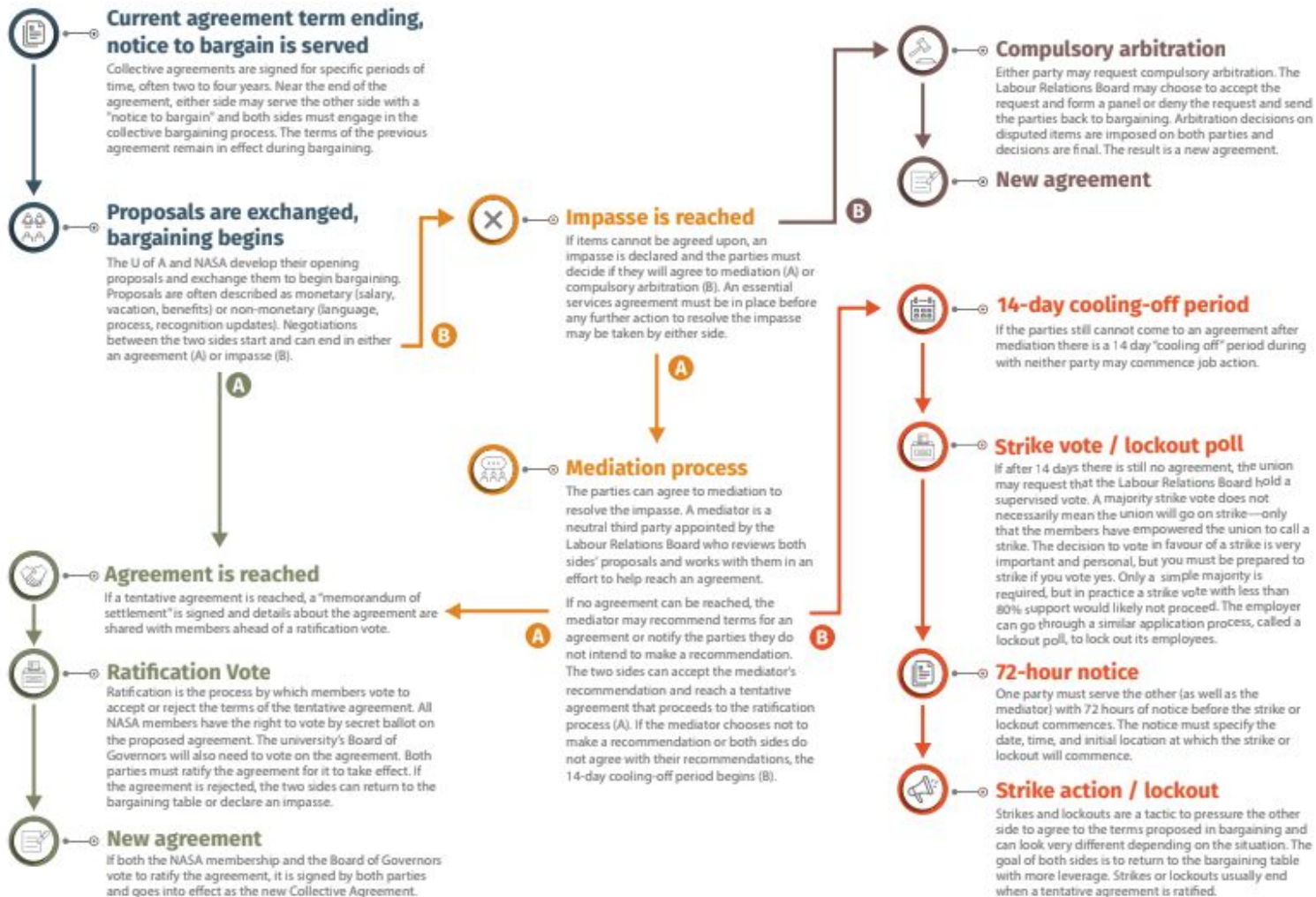
Background: Unionization at U of A

- There are four labour unions on campus: The GSA (graduate students), NASA (non-academic staff), PDFA (post-doctoral fellows), and AASUA (Academic and some administrative staff)
 - The GSA's [collective agreement](#) expires in August
 - The [AASUA agreement](#) expired in June 2020
 - The [NASA agreement](#) expired in March 2019
 - The PDFA is currently negotiating their first agreement.

Background: How Bargaining Works

Graphic Credit: NASA

Note: Binding arbitration is not available for AASUA





Background: State of Bargaining

- AASUA has [filed for formal mediation](#). This is the last step before a strike vote. Key issues:
 - 2-tier salary scale for sessionals
 - No Cost of Living increase for two years
 - Removing benefit plan surplus
 - Misc. others
- NASA is at least two months further behind in the process
- Little imminent strike risk from PDFFA or GSA.



Background: Next Steps with AASUA

- AASUA and the University are starting mediation on February 18th
 - [The University's message](#) about their proposal focuses on concessions they have made
 - Mediation should last at least a week
- With the 2-week cooling-off period before a strike vote, the soonest a strike could begin is the second week of March



Background: Public Sector Employers Act

- Law changed by the UCP in 2019
- Allows the Minister to issue secret bargaining orders to universities, AHS, etc.
 - *“A directive issued by the Minister under this Act is confidential and may not be disclosed by the employer to any third party without prior consent of the Minister.”*
- Frequently accused of being unconstitutional
- Likely being used at U of A



Background: Provincial context

- Concordia University recently had 1st faculty strike in Alberta history
 - Resolved in 10 days
- University of Lethbridge faculty have just overwhelmingly passed a strike vote
- Mount Royal University is on the verge of a strike as well



Background: Provincial finances

- The government's cuts have made the situation much worse. Minister's message:
 - "Alberta's government has worked hard to bring our post-secondary institutions in line with other provinces. As we work through a challenging financial time Albertans expect us to find ways to deliver services more efficiently"
- This is **misleading**
 - Economists are [projecting up to a \\$4 billion surplus](#) due to high global oil prices. The budget will be tabled Feb. 24th
 - There is no short-term need to cut post-secondary spending
 - Very large cuts have already been absorbed by U of A



Background: University Finances

- The U of A has been cut by \$170 million since 2019, likely reaching \$230 million by 2023.
 - Largest cuts to a public university in Canadian history
 - Much larger than U of C/Lethbridge/others
 - While U of A has a consolidated surplus, it is mostly sequestered funds that cannot be used for staff pay.
- The University claims it cannot afford AASUA's bargaining offer
- Increases in compensation will have to result in spending reductions elsewhere, at least for 2022-23

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Possible Strike/Lockout Impacts on Students

- What would stop?
- What would continue?
- How would this affect students?



Possible Strike/Lockout Impacts on Students (1/3):

- All teaching and assessment activities, many administrative activities would stop until a deal is reached
 - NASA, GSA signing solidarity agreement to not cover AASUA work
- Essential services continue (life and safety)
- Hard to predict length
 - 1-3 weeks is normal in Canada
 - Semester may need to be extended, affecting co-ops, spring classes, jobs, travel/housing



Possible Strike/Lockout Impacts on Students (2/3):

- Non-academic services would still run
 - Student aid disbursement
 - Academic records
 - Facilities and operations work
- UASU services would still run
 - Our staff is unionized separately
- Access and function of non-academic and UASU services may be impeded by picket lines



Possible Strike/Lockout Impacts on Students (3/3):

- Unlikely that graduations will be jeopardized, but possible if strike is longer than 3 weeks
 - Accredited programs require certain hours, content to be covered
 - Never in Canada has a strike resulted in a fully cancelled semester
- Picket lines on campus to block access
 - Status of SUB is TBD
 - Most serious risk for escalation



Possible Strike/Lockout Impacts on Students: Tl;dr

- High likelihood of severe mental health impacts on students
 - Weeks of fear, uncertainty, confusion
- High likelihood of serious financial losses for some students
 - Loss of employment due to extended semester affecting jobs and co-ops
 - Forced to rebook flights
 - Forced to find new accommodations
- Small likelihood of permanent academic losses
 - Delayed graduations, missed opportunities



Possible Strike/Lockout Impacts on Students: Long Run

- AASUA argues that even though a strike will impact students in the short term, it is necessary for long-term teaching quality
 - Recruitment/retention of good professors
- The University argues that meeting AASUA's demands would require taking needed resources out of other areas, harming the student experience and University's mission
- Both are debatable

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What should we consider?

- What should the UASU's stance on the strike?
- What action should we take, if any?

Remember that any strike is at least a month away. No final decision is needed today.



Closing considerations:

- If a strike or lockout happens, there is no scenario in which students do not suffer.
 - The severity and tradeoffs associated with that are what Council has to consider.
- Any decision we make will be very controversial.
 - Be prepared to consult, inform, and engage your constituents.
- A strike is not certain to happen. Let's not spread panic — keep calm and carry on.

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Discussion

While a strike is not imminent, we should think about how we would respond to one.

What do you think?