Possible University Labour Disruptions: Background and impact on students

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

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

What do you think?