

Hi there, this is Dave Powell, President of the Athabasca University Faculty Association. This is the first of a series of hopefully monthly videos sent to the AUFA membership about current news and events in AUFA, as well as helpful advice in understanding how the AUFA contract works. A transcript is available on our website.

At AUFA exec we're constantly trying new ways to connect with our over 400 members, and sometimes it helps to see and hear the people who are working for you. This edition will be news updates, since there's a lot to update people on.

Meetings with the Membership

Following our special meeting on designation earlier this month, AUFA will be organizing meetings with smaller groups of AUFA members so we can speak on issues specific to those areas. The first such meeting will be with AUFA members in the current IT department, as earlier versions of the designation policy indicated that IT staff may be at particular risk. A major reorganization also promises to double the size of the IT department, although AUFA has received no information or consultation on who may be affected. Further meetings will be scheduled with other employee groups or departments around AU, but we'll see how the first one goes.

AUFA Discussions

As you may know we shut down AUFA discussions temporarily at the end of July as we hit a thorny issue an unmoderated list serv AUFA is liable for. We surveyed the members recently to see what you're interested in, and now have the results which are with an ad-hoc committee who will make final recommendations. Thank you to everyone who took the survey. Hopefully more information soon.

Orientation

There have been mass hiring's over the past while at AU, and I was personally doing orientations with several new members while I was Vice President. This has also gone to a welcoming committee who is currently crafting a new members orientation package and will have a team of volunteers to provide orientations for anyone hired over the past year.

In the meantime if you have questions about your terms of work, protections, and benefits feel free to contact the AUFA office or any AUFA representative. I'm always taking questions.

Designation

The Designation as Academic Policy passed on September 11th. How we got here is detailed in our blog. The most recent updates are that after a widespread threat to cease recommending AU for transfer credit, a revised version of the policy was quickly put together which removed the specific exclusions for managers, deans, and staff excluded under PSERA which likely meant IT staff. The core definition of academic that can be used to exclude all professionals and academic coordinators stayed in. The meeting was moved to a closed meeting to prevent angry AUFA members from attending, and instead they asked the heads of campus unions to give presentations. AUPE and CUPE showed strong solidarity and yielded most of their time to AUFA – you can see a pre-recording of my presentation on the website. I'll admit it was gratifying to explain to the Board why this is bad policy, but there was also a lesson here. The policy passed anyways. You don't win struggles with speeches.

With the policy passed, we can look to what's next. And it's hard to tell. The policy as it stands can still be used to de-designate two-thirds of the members, but any changes will likely be gradual. The time from requesting a designation change to a final labour board appeal will be many months. For now, we continue to keep up the pressure, and wait for them to make the next move.

Actions

As we have been saying since the start, the best means we have as union members to resist this is actions from members. The Membership Engagement Committee is our key body for this work, who continue to reach out to members, organize activities, and will also be doing another telephone survey soon. Most recently, actions were held at the convocation pre-taping which included a surprise picket, and requests for academics who had RSVP'd as floating heads to not attend.

It's uncomfortable to cross picket lines, which is their purpose, and with a surprise picket line we were able to engage directly with Neil. If there was advance warning, he could have just used the back door. Reduced attendance at the pre-taping is embarrassing for management as well, who are trying to put forth a flawless public face. So these actions manage to apply pressure but without any negative impact on students.

We had a lot of positive response to these actions, but there were a couple emails from members who wondered why we didn't check in with the general membership in advance. In this specific circumstance, you can't hold a surprise picket if you tell everyone about it. And more generally, AUFA is elected to do a job and we've worked very hard to check in with our members who have continued to give us a majority thumbs-up on our approach. In this case the Membership Engagement Committee only contacted members who had signed up for picket duty, or academics who had RSVP'd to attend the pre-taping. The purpose was a small but impactful action due to the timelines and nature of the event.

We're doing this because the best method any unions has to achieve a goal is to pressure the employer. The Executive Team could vanish tomorrow, and AU would stay open and be a successful university. If the staff vanished, we'd go dark. They need us and yet continue with this assault on our rights. Because they need us, we have the power to make their life very difficult. These actions have yielded positive outcomes – the designation policy remains an existential threat but is a very different one than what was first presented.

This next year will be very difficult for all public sector unions as they bargain under severe austerity measures from the Kenny government. AU is doing well financially, but it is unlikely they'll receive a different bargaining mandate, and we have seen a solid decade of concessions-only bargaining from AU. Because of that, we must be prepared to take action to protect our conditions of work and involvement in this union. That means we must be capable of a successful strike, even if the best outcome is we never have to get to that point. The threat was good enough to get us a positive outcome last bargaining, and teaches us that we must be in the same position next round.

All AUFA members should also be aware of the power of a 24-hour lockout, where the employer can lock us out from our work and then invite us back under a new, far weaker contract. Any union that cannot mount a successful strike is extremely vulnerable to this tactic.

We are in a strange situation where Athabasca University is doing exceptionally well while at the same time AU staff have never been under greater attack from its management. AU's success is because of its staff and faculty, not despite it. We are not a liability. We are essential, and we deserve respect.

Thank you.