

Education for education workers: CUPE Local 3906 and the expansion of academic training

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on training for academic workers from an employment-centric lens and examines the role that trade unions, such as the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3906 Unit 1 (representing primarily teaching assistants), play in advocating for training for academic workers at McMaster University. While many other contributions in this volume approach training from a pedagogical lens and examine the role that training plays in cultivating an environment where innovative approaches are developed and teaching and learning are properly valued, this discussion examines training primarily in the context of an employer-employee relationship through a lens of collective bargaining. In recent rounds of collective bargaining, most notably for teaching assistants in 2019, CUPE tabled and secured language to implement a comprehensive, mandatory, and paid training program. This represents the most meaningful inclusion of pedagogical training in collective agreements bargained by Local 3906 since teaching assistants at McMaster first unionized in 1979. This article seeks to contextualize and explain how collective bargaining has facilitated increased awareness of, and access to, pedagogical training for thousands of academic workers.

KEYWORDS

training, unions, bargaining, mutual gains, pedagogy

While highly educated to begin with and generally either upper-year undergraduates or students enrolled in graduate studies, McMaster University's teaching assistants (TAs) have always been offered a minimal level of paid pedagogical training—until recently. Outside of legislatively mandated health and safety training, this group of workers has had minimal engagement with workplace-specific training designed to improve classroom teaching. Such training has been available to those interested in completing it through the MacPherson Institute since the launch of TA Day in 1981 (see chapter by de Bie et al., 2022, this volume), but there was never a centralized push for TAs to enroll in and complete such training as a condition of employment, nor to incentivize its completion with additional compensation. Consequently, uptake of these excellent resources was limited by the lack of requirement that TAs participate and a corresponding lack of payment for those that did (Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 3906, 2019a).

However, this did not mean that there was a lack of interest in TA training among various stakeholders, including TAs and their union. At McMaster, roughly 3,000 teaching assistants are unionized with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) Local 3906, Unit 1. Local 3906 traces its history back to 1979, when graduate assistants at McMaster University first unionized. They joined a union called the Graduate Assistants' Association (GAA) and became known as GAA Local 6. In 1980, the GAA and its six local unions re-branded themselves as the Canadian Union of Educational Workers (CUEW). Over the next 14 years, CUEW organized workers at seven additional universities and, in 1995, merged with the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the McMaster University union local became CUPE Local 3906 (CUPE Local 3906, n.d.). Among other things, CUPE Local 3906 bargains a collective agreement with McMaster that covers wages, benefits, working conditions, and other entitlements for TAs.

While bargaining goals often focus on increasing wages, securing access to improved health and dental benefits, and providing enhanced job security, unions also have the ability to help secure access to workplace training. Every so often—generally every 3 years—TAs elect a group of their coworkers to sit on a bargaining committee and negotiate a new collective agreement with McMaster University. That occurred in 2019, and securing access to paid TA training became a major part of the collective bargaining process.

In discussions with our own members, CUPE was long aware of an openness amongst TAs to undertake training, especially if it is easily accessible, relevant, and—to be sure—compensated. Through many discussions with the McMaster Students Union (MSU), CUPE Local 3906 became aware that the desire for mandatory training provided to TAs was also supported by undergraduate students. These facts, however, did not translate into a serious negotiation on training during bargaining until 2019 when TAs began to actively think about the links between their own working conditions and students' learning conditions. CUPE advocated for this linkage during face-to-face discussions with members in the lead up to bargaining. A confluence of factors and circumstances made the negotiation of wide-scale TA training a key aspect of collective bargaining negotiations in 2019.

This chapter explains how collective bargaining has facilitated increased awareness of, and eventually access to, pedagogical training through the MacPherson Institute for thousands of academic workers at McMaster. It does so by first contextualizing the role that trade unions and employers play in providing training in a liberal market economy such as Canada's. It then explores how CUPE members—in the midst of an austere bargaining climate brought about through provincial legislation—successfully secured access to paid TA training. CUPE achieved this, in part, using “mutual gains bargaining,” or an approach whereby both union members and the employer each derive a clear benefit. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the potential for future training.

The result of these efforts provided roughly 3,000 teaching assistants annually with 5 hours of paid training, focusing largely on the topics of improved pedagogy and anti-oppression. This achievement fits in well with the theme of this anthology as this represented the first time that TAs have had access to a comprehensive program of paid TA training under their collective agreement since first unionizing in 1979.

CONTEXTUALIZING THE ROLE OF EMPLOYERS AND TRADE UNIONS IN PROVIDING WORKPLACE TRAINING

In some ways, the fact that a robust system of workplace training has not been in place for TAs at McMaster should not come as a surprise. A central component of well-known political economists Peter A. Hall and David Soskice's (2001) analysis of the varieties of capitalism is the vocational training and education regime in place in various western countries. In coordinated market economies, where political elites, trade unions, and businesses share an integrated role in policy making—such as in much of continental Europe—employers and industry organizations focus on providing workers both broad skills specific to the industry and more precise skills specific to a single employer (Hall & Soskice, 2001). In liberal market economies, such as Canada—in which market mechanisms are more competitive between employers and where trade unions have a reduced role—formal educational institutions focus on the delivery of “general skills because companies are loath to invest in apprenticeship schemes imparting industry-specific skills where they have no guarantees that other firms will not simply poach their apprentices without investing in training themselves” (Hall & Soskice, 2001, p. 30).

Put more simply, in liberal market economies such as Canada's, formal education institutions become responsible for education—as opposed to specific employers—because those employers are less inclined to invest heavily in training when competitors may “poach” their trainees. By extension, formal education institutions focus on more generalized skills, rather than specific industry skills, because they are training students for a wide variety of occupations with a wide variety of potential employers. These employers may then supplement workers' postsecondary studies with company-specific training (Hall & Soskice, 2001; see also Culpepper, 2001).

McMaster University is both an employer and an educational institution in a liberal market economy. Historically, at least insofar as it pertains to student-employees, McMaster has focused on its role as an educational institution by providing general skills to help improve students' employment prospects in the post-graduation labour market. That said, however, it has taken a more hands-off approach to providing both employer and industry-specific skills as an employer of students as academic workers. The MacPherson Institute and its predecessors have long offered both training specific to working at McMaster and broader training for work in the academic sector. Conversations about the need for TA training were at least starting to happen at McMaster by 1978, around the time TAs unionized. In fact, McMaster was one of the first universities in Canada to offer centralized unpaid TA training through a teaching and learning centre (see chapter by de Bie et al., 2022, this volume) but was not the first to get mandatory paid training.

The provision of training on teaching and learning has seen uptake from permanent academic staff seeking tenure and promotion and aspiring academic workers seeking training for future employment, but limited uptake from TAs as a whole. It should also not come as a surprise that it would be union bargaining that would facilitate more universal access to and uptake of workplace training. McMaster, in its capacity as an employer, had not previously pushed pedagogical training on TAs as a form of universal workplace training in a sustained way

for all TAs, nor has enrolling in and completing the training been incentivized in a centralized manner as a matter of employment relations.

For TAs, training was previously optional and offered for course credit instead, and any incentive reflected the university's role as an educational institution, not as an employer. While voluntary training for course credit was helpful for those seeking long-term employment in the academy, it appealed only to a subset of teaching assistants, thus limiting its potential uptake. By framing TA training in 2019 as something needed by workers as a matter of basic workplace training—and getting the university to incentivize it with payment (as is legally required in an employment context)—CUPE helped to establish a wider appeal and ensure that training was delivered to those who may otherwise have not accessed it.

Unions in liberal market economies play some role in providing training to members, though it is often union-specific training designed to empower workers and provide them skills in negotiations with their employer. Many Canadian unions, CUPE included, routinely offer courses on stewarding, grievances and arbitration, collective bargaining, health and safety, and a variety of equity-based courses (CUPE, n.d.; Unifor, n.d.; United Steelworkers [USW], n.d.). Education courses such as these help empower and build the capacities of workers within their workplace and within their union.

Education unions specifically representing teachers at the elementary level offer similar union-specific courses, but also “additional qualification (AQ)” courses to provide classroom management, pedagogical, and subject-specific training as an alternative to their members taking this training through a university's Faculty of Education (Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario [ETFO], n.d.). In the trades and construction industry, job-specific training provided by the union is commonplace and a key benefit of union membership (see, for example, International Union of Painters and Allied Trades [IUPAT], n.d.; LiUNA, n.d.). At the postsecondary level, by the early 2000s, some CUPE locals representing TAs had already secured access to paid pedagogical training, most notably Local 3902 at the University of Toronto and Local 4600 at Carleton University (Carleton University, n.d.; CUPE Local 3902, n.d.; University of Toronto, n.d.). As these examples illustrate, unions commonly play a role in advocating for widespread training for workers, and there is precedent for unions at the postsecondary level to help secure access to such universal training for academic workers. This reflects the fact that better trained workers make for better-trained employees and, in the case of education workers, help to improve the student experience and learning outcomes.

MUTUAL GAINS BARGAINING FOR TA TRAINING

Mutual gains negotiations involve tabling offers that are beneficial to both parties. An approach that originated at the Harvard Law School that has since become widely known in the labour relations field across the globe, mutual gains bargaining “means thinking creatively about how you can get more of what you want by helping the other side get what [they] want” (Harvard Law School – Program on Negotiation [PON], n.d.). The desired outcome is one that is considered a “win-win” whereby both sides are satisfied with their agreement, thus helping to facilitate “a long lasting and successful . . . partnership” (Harvard Law School, n.d.). In the 2019

negotiations, CUPE framed TA training as a mutual gain whereby it tabled an offer that was good for McMaster as an employer as well one that reflected the interests of CUPE members.

Introducing a wide-scale, mandatory, and paid TA training program had always been relevant to CUPE's interests because it helps to empower TAs in the classroom and provides the training and support that TAs identified as lacking. A program established under the collective agreement also ensured that TAs were compensated for their time. In 2019, a confluence of factors combined to prioritize this issue in a unique way. Central among these factors was the fact that a growing number of TAs had expressed the need for a training regimen to better prepare them for the classroom. Another important factor included a series of fruitful discussions with elected student leaders from the McMaster Students Union on the joint benefits of better trained teaching assistants to reflect the growing recognition of the challenges and experiences of both marginalized students and marginalized TAs in the classroom and a corresponding need for a practical anti-oppression lens.

In order to maintain accountability to its membership, Local 3906's bargaining teams must reflect the key priorities of that membership. CUPE 3906 completed a bargaining survey of its Unit 1 members in February 2019. This survey included many questions on members' perceptions of, and interest in, paid training opportunities. The responses to these questions were overwhelmingly supportive of establishing a program focusing on anti-oppression and skill-based training. The caveat, of course, is that it was clear that uptake for the training would be much greater if TAs received compensation for their time. This suggests that TA training was an important goal in and of itself, regardless of the broader bargaining climate, and that members had reached a point at which they desired the ability to secure training to become more effective and prepared in the classroom. Through a series of discussions with members and the results of the bargaining survey, it became clear that a large number of TAs felt unprepared and unsupported in the classroom. While, academically, TAs were knowledgeable in the content and material they were expected to deliver, many expressed the feeling that they lacked a strong pedagogical foundation to do so and expressed a need for further training in addressing and supporting diversity in the classroom. For McMaster, a robust TA training program that was mandatory and compensated would provide roughly 3,000 front-line academic workers annually with a valuable training program focusing on topics such as anti-oppression, diversity and inclusion, professionalism, rights, and responsibilities. For CUPE and its members, the implementation of a wide-scale, mandatory, and paid TA training program would both empower and prepare teaching assistants for their role in the classroom and provide TAs with an additional 5 hours of paid work over and above their normal workload in an otherwise austere bargaining climate. For both parties, the advent of a meaningful and accessible training program ensured that folks in the classroom would be well prepared to provide high-quality and inclusive education to an increasingly diverse student body (with increasingly diverse TAs). The establishment of a mandatory paid training program required agreement at the bargaining table from both CUPE and McMaster; exploring common interests during the negotiation process would help facilitate this agreement.

Among education workers, working conditions are often framed—rightly—as learning conditions for students (Hirsch & Emerick, 2006; Rodrigue, 2007). As Worthen and Berry (2009)

have stated, linking students' learning conditions and educators' working conditions represents "both a protest against working conditions that undermine effective teaching and a declaration of intent to organize to improve those conditions" (p. 123). An awareness of the need for TA training reflects that working conditions for academic staff are learning conditions for students and that improved working conditions for TAs—access to paid training in this case—can lead to improved learning conditions for students. Access to a comprehensive program of TA training designed to help make people better TAs is not something that is self-serving for TAs but instead recognizes that well-trained TAs are better positioned to deliver higher-quality content to students with improved pedagogy and an awareness of the needs of a diverse student body.

This linkage of working conditions and learning conditions was a central component of CUPE's bargaining goals in 2019 and framed as a win for students, teaching assistants, and the university as a whole. A well-trained workforce offers benefit to all parties: for students and the university this meant more effective teaching assistants in front of the classroom, while for TAs this helped to provide the support that was identified as lacking and access to 5 additional hours of paid work. For all parties, there was no downside of having a well-trained group of TAs. The program came at some cost—primarily in term of wages paid for those who compete the training—but also one that provided McMaster with a strong return on investment.

BARGAINING IN THE CONTEXT OF BILL 124

The added earning potential offered by paid training is especially important in the 2019 bargaining climate, which was precipitated by the Ontario government's passage of Bill 124, Protecting a Sustainable Public Sector for Future Generations Act, into law in June 2019 (Government of Ontario, 2019). The legislation, which is the subject of a constitutional challenge by CUPE and several other unions, imposes a series of 3-year "moderation periods" during which increases to salaries and total compensation are capped at 1% per year, subject to certain exceptions (Koskie Minsky LLP, 2019). One of these exceptions included an employee's successful completion of a program or course of professional or technical education.

Bill 124 became law prior to CUPE 3906 and McMaster University meeting at the bargaining table for the first time, and its passage led to the union pivoting its strategy to secure the best deal possible within the confines of the contested legislation. The exception allowing for increases based on an employee's successful completion of a program or course of professional or technical education helped to prioritize paid training as a bargaining goal given the limitations on more traditional compensatory priorities imposed by Bill 124, such as increases to the hourly wage and improvements to benefits coverage. The fact that CUPE members had clearly expressed a desire and need for training, combined with the otherwise austere bargaining climate created by Bill 124, led to a bargaining team that was personally invested in training as both individuals and as elected representatives of the union's membership.

Securing access to gains under Bill 124, such as access to paid TA training, were so important that union members went so far as to authorize a strike if necessary, with 87% of the membership voting "yes" to a possible work stoppage if needed (CUPE, 2019; CUPE Local 3906, 2019c). On the strength of that vote, and under the real possibility of a work stoppage, the

union was able to secure access to 5 hours of paid TA training. Members ratified the tentative agreement with 89% support, with the press release noting that the “agreement includes the addition of 5 paid hours of pedagogical and anti-oppression training for all members, which was a key priority throughout the bargaining process” (CUPE Local 3906, 2019b).

CONCLUSION

The 2019 collective agreement ensured the creation and rollout of the TA training program by September 2021. During the spring and summer of 2021, representatives from CUPE met with various other university stakeholders and human resources to establish the parameters of the new TA training program. The training program currently requires all TAs to complete 5 hours of mandatory training at the beginning of their first appointment as a TA, including a module on anti-oppression (2 hours) and another on TA rights and responsibilities (1 hour), while the additional 2 hours of training are selected by the students’ department from a menu of centrally offered elective workshops (McMaster University, 2021). As of November 2021, over 2,300 TAs have successfully completed their 5 hours of training. This represents a total of over 11,500 hours of completed training and will surely lead to both improved learning conditions for students and working conditions for TAs.

The overwhelming success of the first iteration of TA training provides hope not only for fine-tuning to ensure that the training continues to provide TAs with the support they need to facilitate excellence in the workplace, but also for its expansion moving forward. Both McMaster and CUPE 3906 have shown an ability to approach the issue of TA training from a perspective of mutual gains negotiations, and a further expansion of paid training opportunities would offer significant benefit for TAs, the university, and—by extension—students. This has the potential to create additional win-win outcomes for TAs and the university over the next 50 years of teaching and learning at McMaster. In the process, TAs have become and will continue to become more aware of the learning opportunities offered by the MacPherson Institute and its important role on campus.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Brad Walchuk works as a staff representative with CUPE Local 3906 and was the union’s chief negotiator for the 2019 round of TA bargaining with McMaster. He holds a master’s degree in political science from Brock University, where he teaches a collective bargaining simulation course focused on experiential learning.

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