



Notes for talking to students about Unit 1 bargaining

Short Version

This script is designed to take 5 minutes to present at the start of a lecture or tutorial. More details on what Unions are and how/whether strikes are called can be found in the longer version below.

General rule: If a student asks a question that you don't know the answer to, or if you think you know the answer but you're not sure, don't try to answer. Instead, tell them you will find out and message vc1@cupe3902.org.

Opener:

Hey, everyone!

So your TAs and Course Instructors are part of a union called CUPE 3902. A union basically protects workers' rights.

The main way that we do this is with a Collective Agreement. A Collective Agreement is a contract that sets the workplace rights for everyone who does the same type of work. A Collective Agreement sets out a standard pay rate, protections against overwork, rules to ensure a safe workplace, and many other things.

Every three years or so, my union bargains with the University to improve our Collective Agreement and thus improve our working conditions. This is happening right now, with this union. They have been in bargaining since mid-December.

Whereas we fight for better working conditions for ourselves and our students, the University's position in bargaining tends to be driven by senior administrators who are most concerned with the University's financial bottom-line, not our working environment or your learning conditions.

TAs are not so different from undergrads. We also have deadlines to meet, need to submit work of a high standard, and have financial concerns, but we're also asked to teach multiple students, so it's no surprise we have little time to do it all!

[Here you can ask a question that demonstrates our working conditions: "Do you know how much time I had to grade your last paper?"]

What is the union trying to get in this round? [You don't have to mention all of these. Pick the ones you think your students will be most sympathetic to.]

In this round of bargaining, my union is focusing on things that will improve both the working conditions for people like myself and the quality of the learning experience for you, the students.

One of our big demands is for paid training. Sometimes, new TAs and Course Instructors are just thrown into the job with little real training. So, we're trying to ensure greater access to paid training for every TA and Course Instructor. This includes training in anti-oppressive and accessible teaching methods.

Another demand is that TAs be given enough time to do all of their grading. You might have had classes where the comments from your TA were briefer than you'd like. That's probably because the TA was asked to do all their grading in an unreasonable amount of time. My bargaining team is asking the University to agree to limits on the amount of assignments a TA can be expected to grade in a given week.

We also want to make it so that students who are taking notes in class to help students with accessibility needs are paid for this work. As it is, U of T asks students to work for free in order to create notes for other students who need these notes for accessibility reasons. That's really unfair, and it often means that no volunteer note-taker comes forward, creating an accessibility barrier for the students who really need this support.

We also want there to be alternatives to calling campus police when a student or worker is having a mental health crisis while on campus. Right now, the only option is to call campus police. Police aren't trained to do this sort of thing, and there have been many cases of police responding inappropriately (e.g. arresting a student who came to health and wellness saying that they need urgent help). We think that the University should have non-police first-responders available who are trained in harm-reduction methods.

Does this mean that there will be a strike?

It's true that bargaining comes with the threat of a strike. This is because the power of workers is based on our ability to go on strike if our employer doesn't work with us at the bargaining table. The University has financial power: it has money. Workers have people power: we have the ability withhold our labour, the labour that the University relies on to make its money. That's why the threat of a strike is so important to bargaining.

Where I can find out more? How can students help? [Make sure to end on this point, even if no one asks these questions.]

Thanks for asking! Your support means a lot!

Our bargaining website is <https://weareuoft.com/>. [Drop this in the chat.] That's where you'll find all the most important information about what's happening with bargaining. There

you'll see a link in the menu called "Support the Team!" That link will bring you to the e-action for allies, like yourself (<https://weareuoft.com/e-action/>). The action is sending an email to the U of T telling them how important it is to give CUPE 3902 workers like myself a fair deal. We have the email ready to go—all you have to do is enter your details and click send!

Notes for talking to students about Unit 1 bargaining

Longer Version

This script is designed to take 10-15 minutes to present at the start of a lecture or tutorial.

General rule: If a student asks a question that you don't know the answer to, or if you think you know the answer but you're not sure, don't try to answer. Instead, say: "That's a great question! I don't know the answer off the top of my head. If you like, you can send me an email and I can check in with my union about it." You can direct such questions to vc1@cupe3902.org.

Opener:

Hey, everyone! I want to start today by talking about something a little different. You might know this already, but workers like me—people who do teaching work for the University on a contract basis, typically as TAs or Course Instructors—are unionised as part of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 3902. It's also known as "CUPE 3902." My union doesn't include professors, who have permanent jobs at the University. You might be surprised to learn how many of the people who teach you throughout your time at U of T don't have permanent jobs and are instead contract workers in my union.

Right now, my union is bargaining with the University for improvements to our working conditions. This means we've elected a bargaining team and voted on a list of priorities that we're trying to get the University to agree to.

Is this the first time you're hearing that TAs and Course Instructors are in bargaining with the University? [Give students a moment to respond in the chat.]

Overview of unions, bargaining:

I want to tell you all a bit about the bargaining process. The reason that workers create unions is because, when workers are left to fend for themselves it's easy for us to be

mistreated and overworked. When workers get together and form a union, we can pressure our bosses to create fair working conditions for everyone.

The main way that we do this is with a Collective Agreement. A Collective Agreement is basically a contract that sets the workplace rights for everyone who does the same type of work. A Collective Agreement sets out a standard pay rate, protections against overwork, rules to ensure a safe workplace, and many other things. Every three years or so, my union bargains with the University to improve our Collective Agreement and thus improve our working conditions.

We elect a bargaining team to represent the union membership, and the bargaining team focuses on the most important issues that have been identified by the membership. The whole process is very democratic—at least on the union’s side of things! The University’s position in bargaining tends to be driven by senior administrators who are most concerned with the University’s financial bottom-line, not our working conditions or your learning conditions.

[Pause here to ask if the students have any questions. If no one asks anything, proceed to the next step.]

What is the union trying to get in this round? [You don’t have to mention all of these. Pick the ones you think your students will be most sympathetic to.]

In this round of bargaining, my union is focusing on things that will improve both the working conditions for people like myself and the quality of the learning experience for you, the students.

One of our big demands is for paid training. Sometimes, new TAs and Course Instructors are just thrown into the job with little real training. Other times, we have to quickly adapt to a new learning environment, as we’ve had to now that everything is online. It’s obviously better for students if your teachers have had adequate training in how to do their job. And since this training is for the job, it ought to be paid. So, we’re trying to ensure greater access to paid training for every TA and Course Instructor. This includes training in anti-oppressive and accessible teaching methods, because we know that’s important for an inclusive classroom; this is something that undergraduate students unions have also been asking for.

Another demand is that TAs be given enough time to do all of their grading. You might have had classes where the comments from your TA were briefer than you’d like. That’s probably because the TA was asked to do all their grading in an unreasonable amount of time, meaning that they simply weren’t able to take greater care with each assignment. My bargaining team is asking the University to agree to limits on the amount of assignments a TA can be expected to grade in a given week, so that we have time to give you all the feedback that you deserve.

We also want to make it so that students who are taking notes in class to help students with accessibility needs are paid for this work. As it is, U of T asks students to work for free in order to create notes for other students who need these notes for accessibility reasons. That's really unfair, and it often means that no volunteer note-taker comes forward, creating an accessibility barrier for the students who really need this support. Other universities pay students to take notes for their peers, and U of T should be doing the same. My bargaining team is arguing that note-taking for Accessibility Services should be treated as part of an already existing job category within our union—called a “peer assistant”—so that it is paid.

We also want there to be alternatives to calling campus police when a student or worker is having a mental health crisis while on campus. Right now, the only option is to call campus police. Police aren't trained to do this sort of thing, and there have been many cases of police responding inappropriately (e.g. arresting a student who came to health and wellness saying that they need urgent help). We think that the University should have non-police first-responders available who are trained in harm-reduction methods. This is a demand that student unions and mental health advocacy groups have been making to the University as well.

Does this mean that there will be a strike?

I know that bargaining can make students nervous, because you're wondering whether it means that your TAs and Course Instructors will go on strike. It's true that bargaining comes with the threat of a strike. This is because the power of workers is based on our ability to go on strike if our employer doesn't work with us at the bargaining table. The University has financial power: it has money. Workers have people power: we have the ability withhold our labour, the labour that the University relies on to make its money. That's why the threat of a strike is so important to bargaining.

Strikes only happen when employers don't bargain fairly with workers. You might remember that high school and elementary teachers went on strike last year. This is because the Ontario Government, who teachers bargain with, was trying to completely ignore the teachers' most important demands, such as rolling back the Government's plans to increase class sizes. If the University continues to bargain with my union in good faith, we'll all avoid a strike. We know that this year has been hard for students already, which is why we're getting out the message to the University that they need to work with my union's reasonable proposals.

When you say that you bargain with the “University,” who is the University?

Great question! I mean the University's Labour Relations department. These are people who are paid full-time to bargain with the various unions on campus. We're not bargaining with your professors or with department administrators. Actually, a lot of professors and

department administrators are really sympathetic towards my union, because they know how much work we all do.

Where I can find out more? How can students help? [Make sure to end on this point, even if no one asks these questions.]

Thanks for asking! Your support means a lot!

Our bargaining website is <https://weareuoft.com/>. [Drop this in the chat.] That's where you'll find all the most important information about what's happening with bargaining. There you'll see a link in the menu called "Support the Team!" That link will bring you to the e-action for allies, like yourself (<https://weareuoft.com/e-action/>). The action is sending an email to the U of T telling them how important it is to give CUPE 3902 workers like myself a fair deal. We have the email ready to go—all you have to do is enter your details and click send!