

# Consider this a weathervane for gig economy worker rights in the years ahead.

 [vice.com/amp/en\\_ca/article/8x5q8g/how-striking-ontario-college-instructors-could-set-a-precedent-in-canada](https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/8x5q8g/how-striking-ontario-college-instructors-could-set-a-precedent-in-canada)

10/26/2017



We've got some big Canadian labour news, folks, but it's a little bit sweet and sour. The sweet is that college faculty in Ontario are currently leading the charge in Canada to secure a less precarious workplace for sessional instructors. The sour is that it means they're out on the picket line at the height of the fall semester, and they look likely to be there for some time.

[More than 12,000 college professors, instructors, counsellors, and librarians walked off the job last Monday](#), and are well into their second week on strike. While the strike is localized to public colleges in Ontario, the issues behind the job action are pressures that have been building within the academy for years. How this labour struggle plays out in Canada's largest province might end up telling us a bit about where post-secondary education in this country is going.

First and foremost for striking workers is the issue of basic job security and compensation. As demand and enrollment for post-secondary credentials increased in recent decades, academic administrators both at college and university campuses discovered that it was much more cost-efficient to hire teaching staff on a part-time, per course contract basis, rather than as full professors. In other words: compensating people less for the same type and amount of work.

[Most people would call this exploitation](#), including the full professors standing in solidarity with their sessional colleagues.

Academic work at a Canadian university, in 2017, is not a career for the faint of heart. Most sessional faculty are forced to cobble together multiple course contracts, often at several different institutions, in order to make a living. [The effect is basically like a work treadmill that resembles indentured servitude more than wage labour](#). Contract

faculty often have little freedom in terms of which courses they can teach, they spend substantial amounts of time researching and writing new lectures, they endure several grueling hours of grading papers, and they regularly have to reapply for their own jobs every four to eight months. This in turn puts them behind on their own research and publishing, as well as all the other extracurricular activities necessary for career advancement—to say nothing of having a family or social life, or servicing their own student debt.



Closely related to this problem of faculty precarity is the problem of faculty powerlessness. The union is also striking for the right of college instructors to have more oversight and authority in determining what and how they teach. This is generally the norm at universities, which are largely independent and self-governing institutions. Conflicts between administrators and faculty over what gets taught and how much it costs still occur, of course. But university faculty are generally afforded more institutional recognition as experts in their field, which gives them more clout to set the student agenda.

This is less so the case in Canadian colleges, where programs tend to be more applied and technical in nature. Colleges also work in closer concert with industry and professional associations to make sure their programs remain accredited, by ensuring that students are being taught the practical skills necessary for their line of work. The union's position is that at Ontario's public colleges, decisions about program offerings, content, and delivery are made by management with little or no input from professors—that is, the experts in the field or industry in question.

Not only does this disempower faculty, but it also puts students at a tremendous disadvantage. In one particularly troubling case, [Jacquie Miller in the Ottawa Citizen reports](#) an instance where Algonquin College cut a course that involved sampling beer, wine, and other beverages (and learning to pair them with food) from their restaurant and hotel management program. Administrators, with little or no input from teachers, thought it was too expensive—so instead they replaced it with an online course on wine and food in culture that had no classroom component at all. This in turn creates a situation where students are graduating without proper training in their industry's fundamental skills.

The counterargument to all this from the College Employer Council is, as you could expect, that meeting these demands would way cost too much money. The Council's estimate is about \$250 million, or a little over \$10 million for each of the province's 24 public colleges. [The provincial Liberal government have so far taken a largely hands-off approach to the labour dispute](#). This has drawn the ire of both the PCs—who argue the province could do more to end the strike, such as force binding arbitration—and the NDP, who say the government precipitated the crisis by underfunding the colleges in the first place.

It's not clear how the Wynne government will handle the dispute moving forward, but given that it's the Ontario Liberals we're dealing with, they will inevitably arrive at a conclusion that will satisfy nobody and actually fix nothing.

Regardless of which side wins this class struggle, the real losers are the students who are forced to forego the classroom and work-placement time for which many of them—[particularly international students](#)—are paying quite dearly. [A petition demanding a refund for lost time in the event of a strike has garnered more than 100,000 signatures](#) (a full fifth of Ontario's 500,000 public college students), but it's not clear whether those demands will be honoured either.

The impact of the strike will be felt much further than two dozen college campuses. The results will set a precedent as to what academic contract workers in Ontario can (and can't) expect from their employers. And, as these things tend to go, whatever becomes the precedent in Ontario tends to become the precedent in the rest of English Canada.

But the outcome of this strike extends far beyond education. It will be a signal flare for all those of us working as an Independent Contractor in the Gig Economy, and everyone regularly chasing contract renewals.

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