

College strike is over, but key issues remain

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An Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) Local 352 member speaks to a man crossing the union's picket line at Fleming's Sutherland Campus during a faculty strike on Monday, October 16, 2017. Union members, including college professors, instructors, counsellors and librarians, hit the picket line Monday after negotiations between it and the College Employer Council fell flat. JESSICA NYZNIK/Peterborough Examiner/Postmedia Network

While the balancing power of collective bargaining is a positive force, Ontario's provincial government was right to order striking community college teachers back to work.

After five weeks the strike was entering the drop-dead zone for 500,000 students to complete their fall semester.

The College Employers Council claimed all major issues except greater faculty control of academic issues were settled and an agreement was close.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union, representing 12,000 faculty, disagreed. It said the council had snuck into its final offer "serious concessions" the teachers could not accept.

The council countered that OPSEU had its own new demand: \$5,000 to each faculty member to be funded by the colleges.

With no end to the strike in sight the government passed back-to-work legislation that includes a binding mediation/arbitration process.

But the resumption of classes doesn't end a serious problem in the college system: heavy reliance on part-time and part-load contract teachers.

About one-third of college instructors are full-time employees whose jobs are guaranteed year-to-year. They earn an

average of \$90,000 a year and are doing quite well.

The rest are a mix of sessional, part-time and part-load workers. Most are paid hourly at a substantially lower rate, are restricted to teaching as little as six hours a week and don't get paid for time spent grading papers or exams or meeting with students outside class.

Many have to reapply for their jobs every four months.

For some courses a part-time framework works. Colleges produce skilled trades workers and it makes sense to have tradespeople who are working in their fields also teaching part-time.

But over the past three decades colleges have dramatically increased their reliance on part-time teachers.

That change has not been driven by evidence that it produces a better education for students. It is all about cutting costs. And regardless of how the colleges might try to frame it, any organization that has so much of its staff working restricted hours for second-tier wages risks providing a second-rate product.

Provincial Advanced Education Minister Deb Matthews has blamed both sides for failing to reach agreement and failing their students.

Matthews's government also bears part of the blame. Colleges rely heavily on part-time teachers partly because that's what they can afford on the funding they get.

The colleges estimate that meeting all the teachers demands would cost \$400 million annually. A give-and-take settlement would be less than that.

By comparison, the province's new pharmacare program for those age 24 and under will cost \$475 million annually. That's just part of \$6 billion in new program spending in this year's budget.

It's a matter of spending priorities, and quality college education needs to move up the list.