

A look at the Ontario college strike numbers

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You know, I'm a numbers guy. Yes, I'm a math guy, but no, that doesn't automatically make me a numbers guy. In fact, being a pure mathematician at the University of Waterloo, the running joke was none of us could do mental math because we hadn't seen numbers since high school.

But that never really applied to me, because I also love numbers. The Pythagoreans said that "all is number"; Plato believed that numbers were the "gateway to the divine"; Erdos and Ramanujan found "extraordinary beauty" in numbers; and a colleague recently said in a talk that "numbers transcend us, yet bind us together."

I've always found that numbers told stories.

How sad for me, then, to see the stories the numbers are telling in this labour dispute between Ontario college instructors and their employers. Let's start off with a few about the college system itself (taken from the [2017 Colleges Ontario environmental scan](#)):

- Number of full-time faculty in 2015/16: 7,667
- Number of part-time faculty in 2015/16: 15,423
- Percentage FT to percentage PT Ratio = 33 per cent : 67 per cent

It's not entirely clear which "part-timers" are included here, but this would be the best-case ratio — if CE part-timers aren't included, this ratio goes down even further:

- Number of full-time administrators in 2015/16: 2,915

(Note: there are no PT admin roles at all)

- FT Faculty to FT Admin ratios = 2.63 : 1

(Yes, that's fewer than three FT faculty members per administrator)

And for reference, from the [2005 Colleges Ontario environmental scan](#):

- Number of FT Faculty in 2004/05: 6,576
- Number of PT Faculty in 2004/05: 10,774
- Number of FT Admin in 2004/05: 1,705

So that gives us the following numbers:

- Increase in FT Faculty over past 11 years: 1,091 or 16.59 per cent
- Increase in PT Faculty over past 11 years: 4,649 or 43.15 per cent
- Increase in FT Admin over past 11 years: 1,210 or 70.97 per cent

Yes, you're reading that correctly — there have been more full-time administrative jobs created in the past 11 years than full-time faculty, which is more than a four-fold increase by percentage. In that same time,

- FT student enrollment has increased roughly 30-35 per cent (harder to get exact numbers for this, but most sources tend to be in/near this range).

So that tells us in the past 11 years, FT faculty have been growing at half the speed as FT students, and FT administrators have been growing at over double the speed of FT students.

Budget numbers

- 2015/16 College Revenue: \$4.11 billion
- 2015/16 College Expenses: \$3.97 billion
- 2015/16 College Surplus: \$140 million

This is despite being told there was "no money in the budget to implement higher FT staffing ratios". The 50 per cent/50 per cent proposal put forward by OPSEU was costed, by the CEC, at \$250 million.

Now, I don't trust their costing for a moment, but it does provide an upper bound. Compare that to the \$140 million surplus last year, and we're able to make some progress and still maintain a balanced budget. But the CEC shut down any talks on FT ratios.

Are you starting to get a picture of the priorities of the colleges? More administrators hired than FT faculty (both as a percentage and as a hard number) and an 8-figure surplus not enough to warrant an increased full-time faculty complement?

Unfortunately, it gets worse. Much. Worse.

The colleges kept reiterating that they were offering 7.75 per cent over four years, for a top FT salary of \$115,000 and a top PL (partial-load) faculty wage of \$154 per hour. Sounds great, doesn't it?

The problem is, it takes 17 years on the grid to get to \$115,000, and with the recent boom of retirees, most current FT faculty are on the bottom half of the grid, making under \$90,000.

I'm in year seven of full-time service and haven't even cracked \$80,000.

It gets worse for partial load faculty (those who teach 7 to 12 hours per week). Since you only get 50 per cent credit for service on the grid, it takes 34 full years of partial-load service to get to \$154 as a part-timer.

And a year is defined as 10 months, so if you only teach September to April, you don't have enough service to count. And September, December, January, and April won't count anyways, because they aren't full months.

So each year you could expect to get maximum 4 to 6 months credit towards your 34-year journey to the top of the grid, making it more likely a 65+ year journey to the top. So, while the grid may exist that high, but no one is earning it.

For PL faculty, most are earning the very bottom step of \$82.35 per hour. But that still sounds great, right? I mean, who else is paid \$82 per hour? Well, consider that for every hour in class, there is typically around two hours of out-of-class work (including prep, evaluations, and meeting with and emailing students) — this is based off of the fact that most FT faculty teach around 15 hours per week, which ends up working out to between 42 to 44 hours of attributed time, according the standard workload formula (SWF).

That means we should actually divide the wage by three (the hour in class, plus the two hours outside of class): \$27.45/hour. It's not a terrible wage, but given that you may only get 7 to 12 hours per week, and maybe only for 4 months of the year, it doesn't look so nice anymore. And if you get less than 7 teaching contact hours per week, well, you're out of the union now and the hourly teaching wage drops down to around \$40 to \$50 per hour, which when we divide by three is not much more than minimum wage (or even possibly less than the new \$15 minimum wage coming into effect soon!).

On the flipside, most administrators make well over \$100,000. As a matter of fact, I looked up every single administrator I knew — a list of about 30 to 35 names — on the sunshine list, and every single one came up on the list, ranging from \$115,000 to \$495,000 per year, with most hovering in the \$120K to \$200K per year range. Not bad!

But with the number of FT administrators having increased by 70 per cent over the past 11 years, and the number of new administrators outnumbering the new FT faculty, with salaries that are two to three times as much as new faculty salaries, it's no wonder why the colleges are only scraping by with surpluses of \$140 million per year!

Beyond the money

Here's a more pressing question for me: why did the colleges continue to bring up our top salaries when we had so long ago agreed to their monetary proposals and wanted to discuss items like academic freedom, staffing ratios, and precarious work?

Here's a possible CEC narrative for you that might explain why they keep bringing it up (This is pure speculation on my part):

"Let's get everyone who is scraping by trying to send their kid to college right now to compare their salaries to the top of the professor grid. Given that the median income in Canada right now is under \$50K, it's reasonable to assume that most parents of college students will be making much less than \$115K and will have no sympathy for the college profs.

"As a matter of fact, we can probably pull a sleight of hand and get them to think that it's because of greedy professors that the strike is happening if we keep talking about their top salary long enough, and that will get the public on our side, without knowing what the real issues are, or where our money is actually going."

I'll leave you with a few more numbers from this round of collective bargaining, including those in their current offer which faculty voted on.

- Five — the number of weeks we have been on strike (the longest college strike in Ontario history);
- Two — the number of weeks of classes that have been lost because the Colleges abruptly decided on Monday morning last week that instead of returning to the table to finish up the negotiation and get a deal that day and get students back in class by the middle of the week last week, they were going to force an offer vote

- that would delay classes starting for at least another two weeks. \$8,000 — the average salary lost so far;
- \$100,000,000 — the approximate amount of money saved by the colleges so far;
- \$0 — the amount of money the colleges are freely offering in tuition refunds to students who have paid for instruction they haven't received (not including what they may be forced to pay by the government into the student hardship fund).

And here's why they don't feel the need to issue any refunds:

- Three to five — the number of extra weeks professors are expected to make up when we get back to work;
- Two — the number of weeks' salary we requested we be paid to make up the three to five weeks of work that we weren't paid for and are now being asked to work, and since we could have (and should have) been back in class two weeks sooner if the CEC hadn't forced the offer vote;
- Zero — the number of weeks of lost salary the colleges are offering to compensate us with to make up those three to four lost weeks;
- Zero — the limit on the number of hours of overtime we can be coerced to work to make up the time lost.

And what did the colleges offer with respect to the real issues that we were bargaining over?

- Zero — the number of real improvements to academic freedom or any of the other issues we were fighting for (except staffing ratios, which we have gotten agreement with the colleges to have a gov't task-force struck to establish proper ratios — though I'm not convinced this will do anything, at least it's a step);
- >10 — the number of new concessions in their offer that weren't in our previous collective agreement, that will make working conditions worse for faculty and learning conditions worse for students.

Now it's back to work

So guess what this all added up to for me during last week's ballot? A "No" vote on their offer.

And what of my colleagues?

- 12,140 — the number of faculty who voted on the offer (95 per cent of those eligible)
- 10,477 — the number of faculty who rejected the offer (86 per cent of those who voted)

A democratic outcome! A strong majority voice that made clear what the real issues were. A united group of professors standing up for something worth fighting for.

Then, it was over and back-to-work legislation was tabled and passed. Want a few numbers around that?

- Three — the number of weeks the government did nothing about the strike while the CEC refused to negotiate at the bargaining table;
- Eight — the number of days the government did nothing about the strike while the CEC and OLRB planned and executed a forced offer vote;
- Five — the number of hours before the government stepped in and shut down the bargaining process after faculty had rejected the offer.

The interesting thing about those numbers is that during the first two bullet points, the CEC was in a relative position of power. By the third bullet point, the faculty finally had some leverage that we could use to accomplish the goals we started out with: increased academic freedom and more full-time faculty in classrooms.

But the government shut that down.

And, in fairness, they had to. The very fact that back-to-work legislation and binding arbitration exists is why, when the bargaining team went back to the table, the CEC refused to budge on any of the issues.

After 10,477 professors said no to their offer, they still refused to negotiate. Why? What could they possibly expect to happen? Had they resigned themselves to the fact that the semester was lost and they would cancel all the remaining classes and issue tuition refunds?

No. They knew legislation and binding arbitration was coming... within five hours. You see, there was nothing for them to gain by bargaining. This seems to imply it was the plan all along.

All through the summer months, all through the fall, all through the weeks on strike, there was always legislation and arbitration at the end — no need to bargain, no need to work to get students back in class. Just bide your time and wait on the government to act.

Some good came out of it

But you know, there is some good that came from this: as a faculty member, I feel more connected to my colleagues than I ever was before. I got a chance to picket at different colleges and different campuses and meet faculty I've never met before and really talk to faculty I already knew, but hadn't ever had the chance to get to know personally. And we connected. And we organized. And we rallied. And we taught each other and learned from each other, about the real issues we face in classrooms every day.

And we are more vigilant of those issues, and more mobilized to effect change than ever before. And that's got to be good for the 500,000 of our future leaders and labour force who we will be back in the classrooms with tomorrow.

And while I'm glad to be back with my students, but even just the speed at which the government rushed through legislation and the speed at which the colleges are bringing students back to the classroom, despite the amount of work that needs to be done by faculty and department chairs before then, and the two business days' notice they promised, demonstrates how out of touch with the issues the government and CEC truly are and emphasizes their true motivation in all of this.

Because here's an important number everyone is well aware of:

- 2018 — the year Kathleen Wynne is up for re-election.

I'm curious to see what story those numbers will tell... and which stories they will generate. But in the meantime, here's one more important number you've probably heard already:

- \$5,000 — the amount of money the colleges claim that OPSEU asked for per member.

That one's just made up, plain and simple. I've looked at that every way I can and can't figure it out. The two weeks' salary I mentioned above would amount to far less than that for every professor on the grid, and less than half for those at the bottom — somewhere between \$2,300 and \$4,100. And again, remember that requested number already represents about half of the pay for the work they want us to make up, which we haven't (and likely won't) be paid for. But \$5,000? Even I can't make the math work on that one.

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