Dear York University teaching assistants, graduate assistants and contract faculty:

Over the next few days there is an opportunity for each of you to cast your vote on whether to give CUPE 3903 a strike mandate for your collective agreement.

If more than 50 per cent of union members who actually cast a ballot vote in favour, the union will have the authority to set or call a strike without consulting the membership again.

As you make this crucial decision, I ask you to consider the following:

1. We respect and value the contribution that you make to the success of York University students.

That’s why the total current compensation package for York TAs, GAs and contract faculty is the best of any Ontario university.

Now we are offering to make this package even better, with a comprehensive compensation package that includes an increased salary, increased academic support funding, plus improved job security and certainty for contract faculty.

Major highlights include:
- Salary increases of 1.55 per cent in each of the next three years to teaching assistants, graduate assistants and contract faculty.
- The increase is higher than that agreed to in the last contract with CUPE 3903 and, in keeping with York University’s commitment, is in line with settlements at other Ontario universities.
- Increases between 10 and 30 per cent in childcare, health care and other benefits, which, as of this writing, CUPE 3903 has rejected.

2. We have made eight non-monetary proposals. CUPE’s bargaining team has rejected them all without any real discussion or counter offers.

Among our proposals that have been rejected by CUPE 3903, we would like to:
- allow students to use email to communicate with teaching assistants and contract faculty;
- set a time period within which job offers must be accepted or refused to be fair to all CUPE 3903 members; and
- make course evaluations available to students so they can make an informed choice.

CUPE 3903 has tabled 111 proposals to date. Of those, we have been able to agree on fewer than 10.

You can see our proposals in full at yorku.ca/labour

3. We are willing to go to arbitration on any issue, eliminating the need for a strike.

On Day 1 of bargaining last September, and at every bargaining session since, we have offered to send any issues on which we cannot agree to arbitration to avoid a strike. An independent arbitrator would make a final, binding decision that is fair to both sides.

Arbitration is the chosen method of solving problems for many other university unions. It is also used by employees in hospitals, police and fire services, and other groups to avoid the disruption of a strike.

Legislation ending the recent five-week strike at Ontario’s colleges ordered an independent arbitrator to make a binding decision on the issues. In 2009, CUPE 3903 went on strike. After 11 weeks, legislation was introduced to end the strike and send all outstanding issues to an independent arbitrator.

York University’s offer to go to arbitration at any time to resolve outstanding issues achieves the same result without a strike; York and CUPE 3903 get a fair deal, and our students’ academic year is protected.

It would be most unfortunate to disrupt the lives of every member of the York University community and damage the academic year when there is a readily available solution to avoid a strike.

4. We are willing to continue bargaining to get a resolution.

Arbitration is a fail-safe that is used only if we cannot reach an agreement. Just as occurs with hospitals, police, and those universities and school boards that use arbitration, it is intended and designed to replace a strike as a dispute resolution system and not to replace negotiation.

Even if we proceed to arbitration, if the parties reach a negotiated agreement on one or more items before the arbitrator makes a decision, that agreement is what would be included in the collective agreement.

We are committed to the collective bargaining process. We have been and will continue negotiating in good faith to get a successful resolution.

We ask CUPE 3903 to do the same.

5. Students are our top priority.

Going forward, if CUPE 3903 is not willing to withdraw, amend or negotiate on its proposals, we believe the union should either agree to take them to arbitration or set a strike deadline.

It is in the best interests of all York University students, faculty and staff that these negotiations be addressed sooner rather than later so that they do not negatively impact the academic term and student progress.

I ask that you consider the above as you cast your vote.

Sincerely,

Lisa Philipps
Interim Vice-President Academic & Provost
Professor, Osgoode Hall Law School, York University