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Collective bargaining and strike innovations in Canada's university sector

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Abstract

While academic staff associations have historically operated within a service-model framework characterized by professionalism and relative insularity, many have begun experimenting with strategies and tactics associated with the organizing model of unionism. This article analyzes how workplace mapping, structure tests, transparent and member-driven bargaining, and supermajority strike mandates are reshaping collective bargaining practices in the sector. Drawing on recent cases from universities across the country, the article shows how these innovations, loosely inspired by the work and methods of Jane McAlevey, can strengthen member engagement, enhance strike readiness, and increase academic staff association leverage in negotiations. The article argues that embracing the organizing model is a strategic imperative for academic staff associations seeking not only to defend working conditions and collegial governance, but also to build durable collective power capable of achieving transformative gains for academic staff and the broader university community.

Keywords organizing, academic staff associations, strikes, collective bargaining, Jane McAlevey

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Innovations en matière de négociation collective et de grève dans le secteur universitaire canadien

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Résumé

Alors que les associations de personnel académique ont toujours fonctionné selon un modèle de service caractérisé par le professionnalisme et un certain degré d'isolement, nombre d'entre elles ont commencé à expérimenter des stratégies et des tactiques inspirées du modèle d'organisation du mouvement syndical. Cet article analyse comment la cartographie des lieux de travail, les tests de structure, les négociations transparentes et menées par les membres, ainsi que les mandats de grève à la super majorité sont en train de redéfinir les pratiques de négociation collective dans ce secteur. S'appuyant sur des exemples récents issus d'universités de tout le pays, cet article montre comment ces innovations, librement inspirées des travaux et des méthodes de Jane McAlevey, peuvent renforcer la participation des membres, améliorer la préparation à la grève et accroître le pouvoir de négociation des associations de personnel académique. L'article soutient que l'adoption de ce modèle d'organisation est un impératif stratégique pour les associations de personnel académique qui cherchent non seulement à défendre les conditions de travail et la gouvernance collégiale, mais aussi à bâtir une force collective durable, capable d'obtenir des avancées transformatrices pour le personnel académique et la communauté universitaire au sens large.

Mots-clés organisation, associations de personnel académique, grèves, négociation collective, Jane McAlevey

Introduction

The landscape of academic labour relations in Canada has undergone significant transformation in recent years, driven by the intersecting pressures of neoliberalization, austerity, government interference in bargaining, and the COVID-19 pandemic. These pressures have compelled many academic staff associations to reconsider traditional approaches to collective bargaining and member engagement. While academic staff associations have historically operated within a service-model framework characterized by professionalism and relative insularity, many have begun experimenting with strategies and tactics associated with the organizing model of unionism. This shift has been influenced by the work of the late U.S. labour organizer Jane McAlevey (2016), whose approach to organizing emphasized deep worker engagement, majority participation, and the development of strike-ready union power through transparent and participatory processes (McAlevey & Ostertag, 2014).

Embracing the organizing model is a strategic imperative for academic staff associations. While collective bargaining outcomes continue to be heavily influenced by broad structural and institutional dynamics, including the economic climate and the relative power of individual employers (Kallas, 2025), a growing body of research suggests that strike preparation, internal organizing, and tactical innovation are key mediating factors shaping whether workers can translate discontent into effective collective action (McAlevey, 2016; Velásquez Orellana et al., 2022; Blanc, 2022; Devinatz, 2026). The term organizing model refers to a set of approaches and tactics for building union power (Gindin, 2017). The organizing model philosophy is rooted in the belief that effective and lasting union strength is built from the grassroots up and anchored in principles of member democracy, collective empowerment, and solidarity. Central to this philosophy is the idea that unions are most powerful when members themselves are engaged as leaders, organizers, and active participants. The organizing model is designed to foster a culture of inclusivity and ongoing mobilization, where members' direct involvement and shared responsibility for the union's work is not only leveraged to advance their immediate workplace interests, but also used to build union resilience and political and strategic capacity beyond the bargaining table. In contrast, the service model of unionism is an approach in which the union primarily functions as a provider of services to members, rather than as a vehicle for member-driven collective action. In this model, staff and officers handle most activities while members are largely treated as clients who receive services in exchange for union dues. It is important to acknowledge that academic staff associations rarely conform to "pure" types.

As Ross (2007) argues, unions are "complicated hybrids" that constantly negotiate tensions between servicing, mobilizing, and organizing logics, adapting their mix of tactics to changing internal capacities and external constraints.

In this article, I examine both the perceived pitfalls and possibilities of the organizing model in the context of the university sector in Canada. I begin with a brief overview of organizing in the sector to provide historical context before describing a number of McAlevey's key methods for building worker power and how they have been applied by academic staff associations. Drawing on examples from across the country, I consider how workplace mapping, structure tests, member-driven negotiations, and supermajority strike mandates are helping academic staff associations wield greater strategic leverage to defend working conditions and achieve bargaining breakthroughs. Finally, I consider future directions and implications, exploring barriers to adopting organizing methods and how they may be overcome.

Organizing in the university sector: History and context

During the 1970s, Canadian universities experienced significant changes as economic pressures and increasingly bureaucratic administrative structures led to the widespread unionization of faculty. The trend began in Quebec, where by 1975 over 60% of professors were unionized, and gradually spread to other provinces where less established and financially strained institutions proved low-hanging fruit for unionization efforts (Axelrod, 1982, p. 204). Inflationary pressures and threats of layoffs created fertile ground for collective bargaining. Academic staff associations, once informal and largely powerless, transformed into certified bargaining agents as university teachers sought greater job security and influence in university governance. By 1980, unionization had become a defining feature of the Canadian university landscape, with over 50% of all full-time faculty and professional librarians covered by collective agreements (Axelrod, 1982, p. 204). A later wave of unionization in the mid 1990s, driven by a combination of mounting financial constraints and administrative overreach, pushed that number even higher, and a strategic decision by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) in the early 2000s to compete with CUPE by organizing sessional faculty into academic staff associations meant that by the end of the decade, the university sector was among the most densely unionized in the country (Ross & Savage, 2020).

While the university sector is highly unionized, collective bargaining in Canadian universities is incredibly decentralized relative to other sectors of the Canadian economy. For the most part, each individual academic staff association bargains with its own university employer. Varied bargaining unit structures for sessional faculty and professional librarians mean that in some cases university employers bargain multiple agreements covering different employee groups (Ross et al., 2020). The lack of formal coordinated or sectoral bargaining has meant wide variations in terms of union approaches to bargaining with university boards.

In general, however, traditional approaches to collective bargaining in the university sector have often been characterized by an overreliance on the technical expertise of negotiating teams, relative secrecy around bargaining processes, and limited member engagement outside of strike and ratification votes (Savage, 2022). This approach, however, has proven increasingly inadequate in the face of mounting austerity, government interference in bargaining, and the adoption of corporate-style approaches to managing universities.

The neoliberalization of universities has been a significant driver of innovation in collective bargaining strategies. As university boards and administrations have adopted more corporate-oriented management styles, academic staff associations have been compelled to develop new tactics to resist the erosion of collegial governance and deterioration of working conditions (Gray & House, 2025; Rhoades, 2025; Savage & Ross, 2024).

In response to this shifting bargaining landscape, CAUT moved to strategically push its affiliates to embrace an organizing model of collective bargaining around 2019 (Ross & Savage, 2020). While uptake by member associations has been uneven, this strategic shift has produced a number of different innovations across the sector, many of which have been inspired by McAlevey's methods for building worker power. In fact, McAlevey herself delivered a keynote address to the March 2021 CAUT Chief Negotiator forum, which has since been renamed the collective bargaining and organizing forum to better capture the organization's mandate (CAUT, 2021). While McAlevey did not invent the organizing model, her approach appears to have revitalized and refined its application, drawing from a rich tradition of worker-led strategies and collective action championed by earlier union organizers. Her emphasis on deep organizing, transparent negotiations, and broad-based member engagement has helped adapt classic organizing principles to contemporary challenges, arguably making them more effective and inclusive for a broader range of workplaces (Gindin, 2017; House & Gray, this volume).

McAlevey's methods reject both the top-down model of unionism and shallow mobilizing approaches in favour of building worker power through high participation (McAlevey, 2016). Instead, these methods focus on developing the leadership capacities of workers themselves rather than relying primarily on "expert" chief negotiators, professional union staff, lawyers, or self-selected activists. In McAlevey's view, "organic leaders," who have credibility among their co-workers regardless of their ideological orientation, are key to the organizing model because their existing influence within informal workplace networks allows them to effectively mobilize and convince skeptical or disengaged co-workers to participate in collective bargaining activities (McAlevey & Ostertag, 2014). According to McAlevey, this type of leadership is essential for scaling up collective action and achieving the kind of supermajority support (80%+) necessary for winning significant bargaining demands (see House & Gray, this volume).

Many academic staff associations across Canada have begun implementing aspects of McAlevey's methods, albeit with varying degrees of consistency and success. These innovations reflect a strategic shift toward more transparent, participatory, and member-driven approaches to collective bargaining.

Organizing for power: Workplace mapping and structure tests

Academic staff associations experimenting with the organizing model have increasingly invested in mapping their workplaces in advance of collective bargaining to uncover power dynamics, reveal areas of strength and weakness, and identify natural leaders among their respective memberships. Learning where members stand on the issues and how to move them up the ladder of engagement requires the use of carefully planned structure tests. Structure tests are small-scale campaigns designed to assess the level of member solidarity and commitment to the union's bargaining priorities. Ideally, every member should have the opportunity to participate, and the participation is easily measured. Organic workplace leaders, often organized though contract action teams, play a key role in mobilizing members to take part in the collective bargaining process (see Spronk, this volume).

Examples of successful and effective structure tests in the university sector abound. The 2023 poster campaign at Brock University that measured support for bargaining priorities by asking members to affix a pro-union poster to their office door, the majority petition at the University of Ottawa that asked members to

support their bargaining team, and the rallies organized in support of librarians and archivists at Western University in 2023 to demand a fair contract are all examples of structure tests that relied on organic leaders and demonstrated strong backing for the union's bargaining priorities (Savage et al., 2023; Spronk, this volume; UWOFA, 2023). The preceding examples were conceived not simply as one-off mobilizations, but as actions that formed part of escalating structure tests that allowed organizers to track participation, refine their mapping, and adjust their strategies in real time.

High-participation strike votes are the penultimate structure test. If successful, they not only strengthen the union's bargaining position, but also build internal solidarity and establish public legitimacy. Increased levels of engagement, deeper organizing, and escalating mobilization tactics can help strengthen the resolve of the membership to have its key priorities addressed and embolden a negotiating team to reject concessionary demands. As elaborated by Susan Spronk in her contribution to this volume, a good structure test not only builds the base of the bargaining effort and members' confidence, but sends a clear signal to the employer that the union is strong and united.

Under a traditional service-model orientation, union meetings or strike votes are often treated as straightforward procedural requirements rather than as consciously designed structure tests that build capacity, identify leaders, and generate data about member commitment. By contrast, in an organizing model these activities are deliberately sequenced, escalated, and evaluated as part of a longer-term plan for building majority participation. As a result, academic staff associations sometimes face resistance from members to workplace mapping and structure tests as organizing building blocks towards effective mobilization tactics. In particular, the idea that members' commitment and participation is being "assessed" rubs some academic workers the wrong way. The irony, of course, is that peer-assessment is a core feature of university life, but putting that aside, concerns about why participation is measured and how it is assessed can effectively be addressed by demystifying the organizing model as a strategy for building union power. When members have a fuller picture of bargaining strategy, hangups about individual components are easier to overcome. And when members see concrete progress as a result of having participated in structure tests, reservations tend to fade away. In other words, the results speak for themselves.

Transparent, member-driven negotiations

Academic staff associations have traditionally conducted collective bargaining in a closed-door confidential manner, with great deference to chief negotiators. Unless called upon to authorize a strike or ratify a tentative agreement, members are generally not involved (Savage, 2022). This dynamic, however, is changing as a growing number of academic staff associations have adopted more transparent and participatory approaches to the bargaining process.

Some academic unions have increased transparency about what is being discussed and tentatively agreed to at the bargaining table through dashboards or bulletins that are updated after each bargaining session. Others have gone a step further and opened up bargaining sessions to all members. "Big open bargaining," as described by McAlevey and Ostertag (2014), refers to an approach centred on maximum transparency, broad participation, and rank-and-file empowerment. Rather than keeping negotiations behind closed doors with only a small bargaining committee, open bargaining invites all union members to attend bargaining sessions as observers. The intent is not just to pressure the employer by showing mass support, but to educate, mobilize, and unify the membership around key demands, making the bargaining process itself an organizing tool.

Open bargaining is highly contentious in the university sector. The strategy has not been widely adopted and experimentation thus far has yielded mixed results. Employers in the sector have been resistant to open bargaining and attempts to introduce it have generally been stalled by disagreement over protocols. At Brock University, the administration initially rejected a demand to pursue big open bargaining in 2022 by CUPE Local 4207 — the union representing part-time instructors, teaching assistants, and marker-graders — thus stalling the initial exchange of bargaining proposals. After several bargaining sessions dedicated solely to resolving the issue of open bargaining, the parties finally agreed that a limited number of members could attend bargaining sessions. However, very few CUPE members took up the offer, thus casting doubt on the strategic utility of drawing a line in the sand on the issue. The union did not pursue open bargaining in the subsequent round.

At the University of Manitoba, the administration also strongly resisted the faculty association's attempt to introduce open bargaining in 2024, delaying the exchange of initial proposals by six weeks. In the end, the parties crafted a compromise that allowed for a few dozen members to observe bargaining sessions. Members were required to follow a strict set of rules when observing, including no recording, no

talking, and a 24-hour embargo on conveying what was discussed (Dingwall & Thomson, this volume). However, the vast majority of reserved spaces for observers were never filled. How do we make sense of this dynamic? Understanding why members do or do not attend open bargaining sessions is itself an important question for future research. Do members not attend because of overwork or lack of interest? Is it because they have great confidence in their bargaining team, or are members intimidated at the prospect of attending a bargaining session? Were they not organized to attend? And what message does low member attendance send the university's administration?

While open bargaining is about transparency, it is also about demonstrating the power, solidarity, and legitimacy needed to win meaningful gains in negotiations. Thus, for open bargaining to have its full intended effect, it requires high participation. If an employer interprets low member attendance as disengagement, open bargaining may actually work against the union's interests. If academic staff associations are going to prioritize open bargaining, they also need to prioritize high member participation. That means not only creating spaces for members to observe, but organizing to ensure those spaces are filled. Otherwise, open bargaining risks becoming a performative gesture rather than a transformative practice.

There are lots of things academic staff associations could be doing short of open bargaining to increase transparency with a view to building the base of the bargaining effort. Associations could, for example, host regular membership townhalls or webinars to provide updates, answer questions, and solicit feedback. They could also publish bargaining bulletins or blog posts after each bargaining session and launch flash polls to gather immediate feedback on unexpected issues that pop up at the bargaining table (Brickner et al., 2024). Broadening the base of the bargaining effort in ways that draw more people in and get members more invested in a positive outcome helps to build legitimacy and trust.

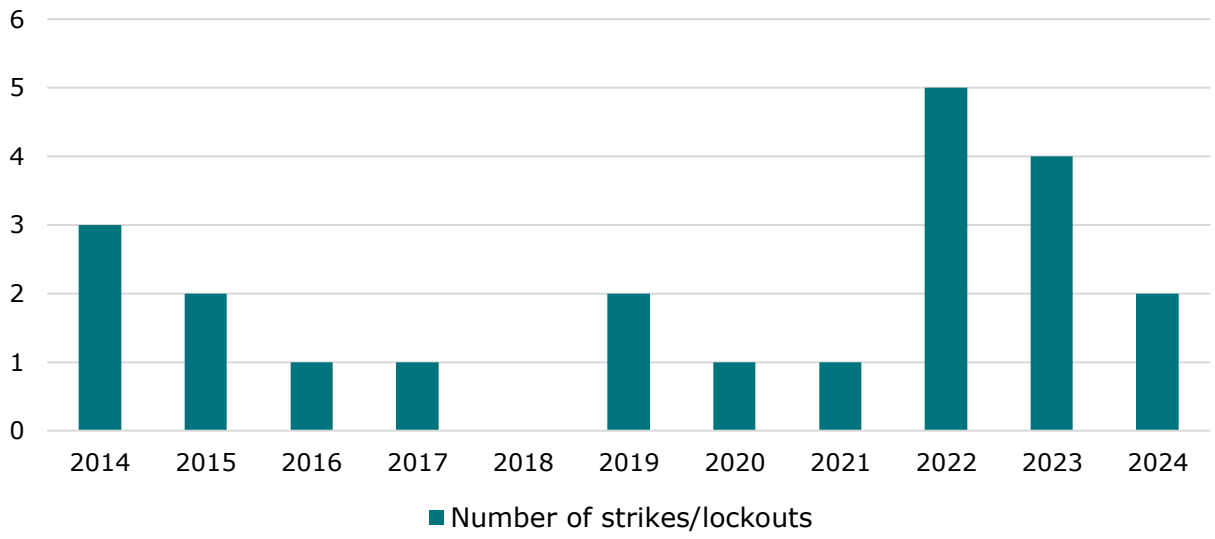
In short, academic staff associations should tread carefully when it comes to open bargaining. Where associations have the capacity to organize high participation and to negotiate ground rules that preserve members' ability to engage, open bargaining can deepen transparency, increase member commitment, and leverage greater power at the table. Where those conditions are absent, however, investing first in other transparency-enhancing practices and base-building efforts may yield greater returns than staking a round of bargaining on a tactic that risks backfiring.

Supermajority strike mandates

A general culture of austerity has forced academic staff associations to develop new strategies for building power, especially as inflationary pressures have eroded salaries and pushed university administrators to impose hiring freezes or close programs.

These factors combined to foster an uptick in militancy in the wake of the global health emergency precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Figure 1). Academic staff associations were not just more likely to strike, they also showed an increased propensity to conduct strike authorization votes to put pressure on universities to reach negotiated settlements.

Figure 1: Number of academic staff association strikes/lockouts in Canada, 2014-2024



Source: CAUT Bulletin (September-October 2025). Academic staff association strikes and lockouts over the last decade. https://www.caut.ca/bulletin/academic-staff-association-strikes-and-lockouts-over-the-last-decade.

In keeping with McAlevey's emphasis on building supermajority support before authorization of job actions, several academic staff associations have focused on achieving higher levels of participation and support in strike votes. Securing supermajority support for authorizing strike action puts greater pressure on employers because it signals greater internal union solidarity and legitimacy.

Between 2020 and 2022, 30.6% of associations actively engaged in collective bargaining conducted strikes votes. That number rose to 43.2% between 2023 and 2025 (CAUT, n.d.). The spike in inflation coming out of the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic no doubt contributed to the general increase in labour militancy, but a range of issues helped to shape the context at individual universities (MacDonald, 2022).

In January 2023, in response to a push for the introduction of two-tier post-retirement benefits, members of the Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association (MUNFA) voted to authorize a strike with an impressive 93% turnout and a 90% strike mandate. The result was in no small part due to the union's strategic decision to implement elements of the organizing model in the years leading up to bargaining (see Lepawsky, this volume).

Similarly, in June 2023, 97% of Brock University Faculty Association (BUFA) members voted to deliver a strike mandate with a voter turnout of 87% after the university's administration failed to move on any of the association's key priorities. It was a significant improvement over the association's only previous strike vote from 2006, which yielded an 88% strike mandate based on a participation rate of just 69% (Savage et al., 2023). Like MUNFA, BUFA had strategically implemented McAlevey-inspired methods and organizing tactics over several rounds of bargaining, culminating in the 2023 strike vote. Recent research on strike votes demonstrates that participation rates and vote outcomes reflect not only the general level of discontent related to working conditions, but also unions' capacity to engage members, reduce information barriers, and channel discontent through structured campaigns (Bessa et al., 2025). In this context, BUFA's shift towards an organizing model clearly contributed to deeper member engagement and stronger support for a strike mandate.

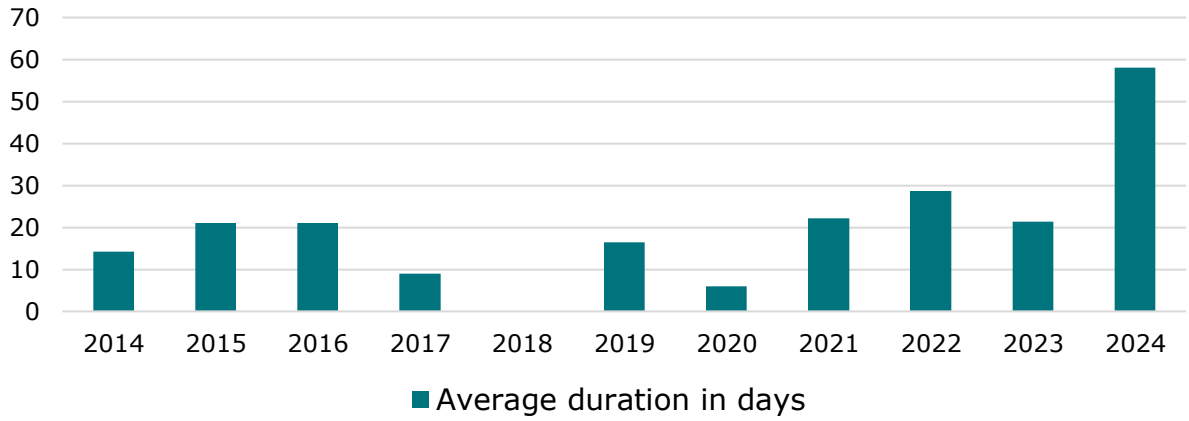
A similar dynamic was also in evidence at the University of Ottawa. In November 2024, 80% of the membership of the Association of Professors of the University of Ottawa (APUO) turned out to deliver an 81% strike mandate during a tough round of bargaining. Compare these figures to the association's only previous strike vote in July 2013, wherein just 59% of APUO members turned out to vote (Spronk, this volume). What accounts for the difference? APUO had strategically begun to pivot toward the organizing model beginning in 2017, laying the groundwork for a different approach to collective bargaining (Spronk, this volume). Taken together, these examples are consistent with research arguing that systematic strike preparation, internal organizing, and escalating structure tests can significantly

bolster union power and improve bargaining outcomes (Blanc, 2022; Bessa et al., 2025; McAlevey, 2016; Velásquez Orellana et al., 2022).

Paradoxically, supermajority strike mandates can serve two different purposes. On one hand, as was the case at Brock and the University of Ottawa, strike votes helped to avert strikes by demonstrating to the administrations that the unions were well organized and that members were mobilized, thus putting greater pressure on university boards to reach settlements. However, even the best-organized unions cannot avoid strikes if employers remain completely intransigent at the bargaining table. Academic staff at Memorial University were forced to confront that reality when they were ultimately forced to strike for two weeks in January 2023 in order to beat back concessionary demands (Lepawsky, this volume).

Strikes in the university sector are becoming longer (see Figure 2). Therefore, it is more important than ever to have strong member support for strike action since members may need to endure the reality of a picket line for an extended period. In general, a well-organized union is much better positioned to maintain the resolve of members because it can more effectively foster a strong sense of trust and solidarity and quickly address concerns or misinformation, all of which help sustain morale and commitment throughout a potentially lengthy and challenging job action.

Figure 2: Average duration of academic staff association strikes/lockouts, 2014-2024



Source: CAUT Bulletin (September-October 2025). Academic staff association strikes and lockouts over the last decade. https://www.caut.ca/bulletin/academic-staff-association-strikes-and-lockouts-over-the-last-decade.

Admittedly, even the best-organized unions are not guaranteed success at the bargaining table or on the picket line. As Kallas (2025) usefully reminds us, robust associational power and carefully sequenced structure tests can still be blunted where employers possess significant structural and institutional power resources, including the capacity to withstand prolonged work stoppages or to reconfigure work in ways that undermine strike effectiveness. In this sense, supermajority strike mandates should be understood not as a magic bullet, but rather as a key component of a broader power-building strategy that must also consider the relative power of the employer, the broader political environment, and any legal constraints. For academic staff associations, the challenge is therefore to pair deep internal organizing with a sharp analysis of employer power and other external factors, so that impressive strike mandates translate into the greatest possible leverage in an increasingly adversarial bargaining environment.

Future directions and implications

While the university sector is densely unionized, it is not as well-organized as it could be for the purpose of building union power. In recent years, however, the sector has witnessed important innovations in collective bargaining and organizing among academic staff, spurred by the dual pressures of neoliberal austerity and the reorganization of academic work. These forces have prompted a growing shift away from traditional, insular, service-based models toward approaches grounded in inclusion, high participation, and transparency.

The transition to the organizing model remains uneven across the sector. As previously noted, academic staff associations, like all unions, do not strictly adhere to ideal types (Ross, 2007). For example, many unions periodically engage in shallow forms of mobilization wherein a self-selected activist layer participate in signing petitions, rallies, or strike votes without systematically mapping the workplace, developing organic leaders, or building majority participation as advocated by McAlevey (2016). While these kinds of activities are evidence of moving beyond a pure service model, they certainly fall short of constituting an organizing model. Tensions will always remain between a union's organizing and servicing orientations, with most merging both to suit their immediate circumstances. Indeed, the various accompanying contributions in this volume demonstrate how different aspects of the organizing model have been adapted to the specific contexts of individual academic staff associations. However, we should be careful to not treat academic staff associations as exceptional in this regard. The basic building blocks of the organizing model are the same for all unions. Workplace

mapping, structure tests, more transparent approaches to bargaining, and supermajority strike votes all represent important organizing advances that build power.

At the same time, significant internal and structural barriers remain. The entrenched culture of professionalism within some academic staff associations — long shaped by ideals of collegiality, autonomy, and occupational prestige — can undermine commitment to key organizing tactics, especially disruptive job action or anything viewed as overly adversarial. Elsewhere, Michelle Webber and I have explored the "paradox of professionalism" faced by academic staff associations and their members, a concept we use to describe how professionalism can both constrain and mobilize academic workers, often simultaneously (Savage & Webber, 2013). As professional rights and privileges come under increasing attack in the context of the neoliberal university, academic staff associations have found ways to successfully mobilize members around their professional occupational identities, thus turning a perceived weakness into a strength.

Of course, the stratified structure of academic work itself poses significant challenges to organizing solely on the basis of professional identity. The relative autonomy and status of faculty members, especially those with tenure, can create difficulties in building collective identity and solidarity with precariously employed contract faculty or other university workers (Ross et al., 2019). As McAlevey noted in an interview with CAUT, the ratio of sessional to full-time tenured faculty has shifted dramatically in recent decades and the effects of the pandemic have been unevenly felt by university workers, creating even more pronounced divisions within the university workforce (CAUT, 2021). Solidarity is not fashioned out of thin air. It takes a great deal of effort to construct and sustain. Organizing plays an important role in identifying common interests and key priorities that unite workers behind an ambitious bargaining agenda that includes advances for all.

The risk of insufficient organizing capacity has become more pronounced in recent years. Cases such as the 2025 faculty lockout at Dalhousie University, the 2018 lockout at Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, and the imposed contract at the University of Windsor in 2014 all point to the need to organize members deeply and proactively (Cuthbertson, 2025; Drimonis, 2018; Windsor Star, 2014). These episodes underscore the dangers associations may face if they are not sufficiently prepared and organized to effectively counter hardball tactics. Gone are the days when bargaining teams could consider themselves insulated from heavy-handed bargaining tactics by virtue of their own campus culture or personal relationships.

The sector is changing. Boards and senior administrations are also changing (Ross & Savage, 2021). Academic staff associations cannot bank on calm and collegial negotiations. Agreeing to conciliation without a strike vote in hand or only actively organizing members once things go sideways at the bargaining table are simply untenable given the shifting landscape of collective bargaining in the sector.

Looking ahead, the long-term effectiveness of academic staff associations hinges on their willingness and ability to effectively confront these challenges and adapt. Building collective power capable of achieving genuine breakthroughs — rather than simply holding the line — requires deliberate investment in member organizing, transparent strategies, and a conscious effort to build the base of the bargaining effort. By embracing the organizing model, staff associations can better position themselves to resist the neoliberalization of universities, defend dignified academic work and collegial governance, and help shape the future of Canadian universities in ways that benefit not only academic staff, but also students and society more broadly.

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