
A strike on the edge: Lessons from the Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association's labour action of 2023

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Abstract

In 2023 the Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association (MUNFA) engaged in a two-week strike that resulted in substantial gains and no concessions for our union. This commentary situates the strike within broader national and provincial conditions and describes key mobilizing and organizing tactics used by MUNFA for success. In particular, I detail our use of 'on-ramps' and the 'ladder of engagement' as useful metaphors for structuring practical mobilizing and organizing activities for success.

Keywords organizing model, service model, strike

Une grève décisive : les enseignements tirés de la grève menée en 2023 par la Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association

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Résumé

En 2023, la Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association (MUNFA) a mené une grève de deux semaines qui s'est soldée par des avancées substantielles et aucune concession pour notre syndicat. Cet article replace cette grève dans le contexte national et provincial plus large et décrit les principales stratégies de mobilisation et d'organisation mises en œuvre par la MUNFA pour garantir son succès. Je détaille en particulier notre utilisation des « rampes d'accès » et de « l'échelle de participation » comme métaphores utiles pour structurer des activités pratiques de mobilisation et d'organisation dans le but d'obtenir des résultats positifs.

Mots-clés modèle d'organisation, modèle de service, grève

Introduction

On January 30, 2023, under light snow and low clouds, members of the Memorial University of Newfoundland Faculty Association (MUNFA) went on strike. After two weeks on the line, we reached a tentative agreement having made substantive gains in all areas of importance to our union while making no concessions (MUNFA, 2023b).

I was a member of the MUNFA executive from 2019 to 2025, during which time I spent two years in the role of President (2021-2022 and 2024-2025). My commentary focuses on key organizing and mobilizing work undertaken in the lead-up to our strike. This is very much a personal and retrospective take. While I endeavour to highlight events that seem significant to our union's success in the strike, I am mindful that other people involved might have quite different assessments of events. I also try not to shy away from ongoing challenges that we must organize to overcome as a union.

My key message is this: academic unions must organize and mobilize for real political power beyond the bargaining table. This is work we must do across our campuses, across our sector, and across the communities of which we are part.

The article is organized into five sections. First, I offer some background and context for the 2023 strike. Next, I describe the concepts we used to frame our mobilizing and organizing efforts: on-ramps and the ladder of engagement. The third section describes one of our most successful collective actions, an open letter to the administration to be sent to the employer only after a majority of members had signed, delivered to the university president via a "march on the boss." The fourth section discusses our coalition-building efforts in the lead-up to the strike. In the final section I describe what we won, followed by a brief conclusion that reflects on where we might need to go next.

Situating the MUNFA strike of 2023

Federal funding for post-secondary education has declined more than 60 per cent over the past 40 years. Like a gravity-fed roller coaster, there have been peaks and valleys, but no matter what party has been in power the decades-long trajectory is one way: down (Figure 1; data source CAUT, 2022). Paul Martin's 1995 budget delivered a decisive change by instituting radical cuts and also transferring responsibility for public post-secondary to the provinces (CAUT, 1996; Loreto, 2024, Chapter 4). This was both a financial hit but also a dramatic re-ordering of

power. Unlike Canada’s federal government, which, as the monetary sovereign, is also the source of its own spending money, provinces rely mostly on taxes to fund public education.

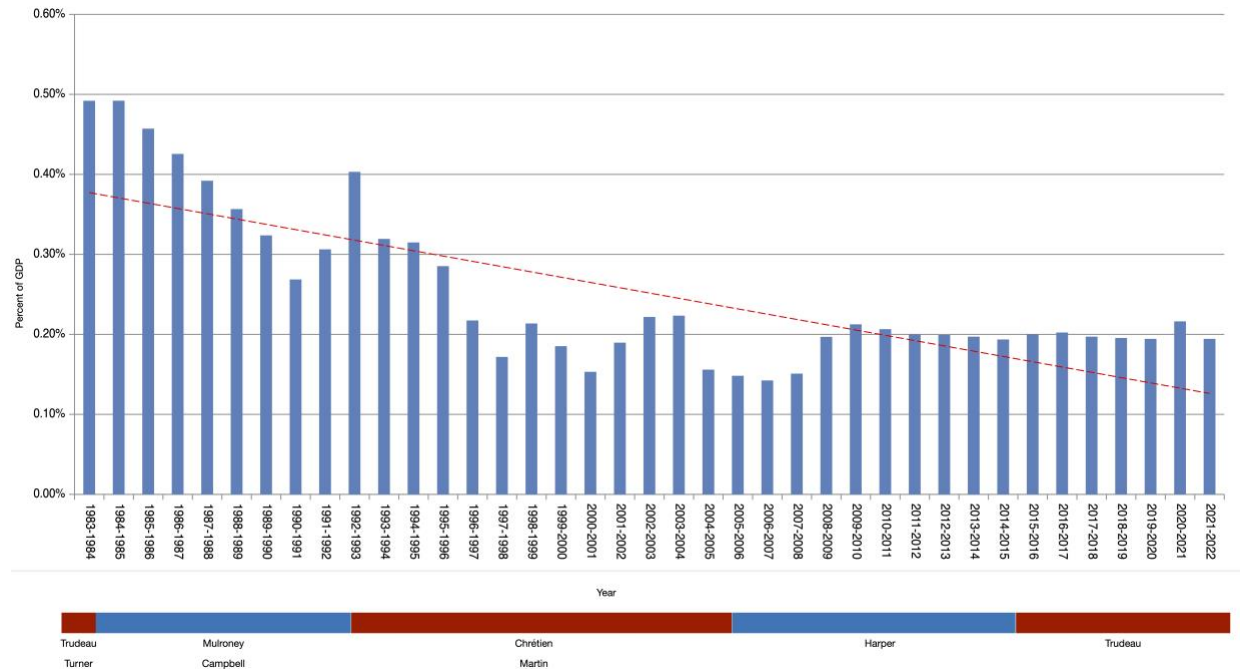


Figure 1: No one is coming to save us. Federal cash transfers for post-secondary education (% of GDP). Data source: CAUT (2022).

In Newfoundland and Labrador, government transfers to Memorial University are at historic lows. Measured in constant dollars, the budget for the province’s only university has been reduced by more than 46 per cent over the last decade. These budget cuts continue despite repeated economic assessments of the university showing it to be a \$1-2 billion net positive economic contribution to the broader economy (KPMG, 2021; Locke & Lynch, 2014). Meanwhile, the university’s Board of Regents — from which faculty were legally barred until after our strike of 2023 — approved expansions of the university’s building footprint even as the institution accumulated ever-growing deferred maintenance costs. By 2024 those costs had reached an estimated \$515 million, equivalent to almost double the university’s total operating budget in the same year. A crumbling physical campus environment at Memorial University is the stuff of substantial media reportage (Callahan, 2024; Haire, 2015, 2017).

Our existing contract expired August 31, 2020. Negotiations that had begun prior to its expiry were called off by mutual agreement between our union and our

employer as the COVID pandemic began unfolding. To the existing climate of austerity was added the storm of the pandemic and the long tail of its aftermath that upended taken-for-granted work routines at our university. These ambient conditions weighed heavily on the lead-up to the negotiations of our 2023–2026 collective agreement.

On June 1, 2021, the MUNFA executive received an offer from our university to renew our collective agreement for two years with amendments, two of which immediately raised concerns. The offer was presented as a take-it-or-leave-it package with no opportunity for bargaining. In exchange for small salary increases well below inflation, our union would have to accept a number of provisions that would risk fracturing union solidarity. A particularly problematic proposal offered by the administration was a change to post-retirement benefits. The proposed change would see academic staff members (ASMs) hired before August 31, 2021, continue in a 50-50 cost sharing arrangement with our employer for those benefits. Any tenure-track ASM hired after that date would be required to pay 60 per cent and our employer 40 per cent for those benefits. The employer was also proposing significant changes to how contractual ASMs would qualify for those same post-retirement benefits. The MUNFA executive recognized our employer's proposal as an example of two-tiered bargaining tactics and communicated to members the risks of fracturing solidarity among members and, thus, the potential for weakening our power as a union over time (MUNFA, 2021a).

Following the June 2021 receipt of the package offer from our employer, MUNFA organized town halls so members could discuss our employer's offer and the risks seen in it (MUNFA, 2021b). Ultimately, those town halls and associated feedback made over the next two months made it clear that members saw the value of engaging in collective bargaining and that guarding against increased precarity, especially for contractual members, should be a priority. Unsurprisingly, some members did express a willingness to accept our employer's take-it-or-leave-it proposal. However, the majority did not. On August 18, 2021, the MUNFA executive voted unanimously to reject the package deal offered by the administration and informed our employer that we wished to commence collective bargaining.

Our union's top issues were equity, diversity, and inclusion; Indigenization of the collective agreement; climate action; improved governance, openness, and transparency; improved language on due process; and salary increases in-line with those at comparable institutions and inflation. Those bargaining priorities were arrived at through a combination of town halls and surveys, each followed up with

report-backs to membership until the bargaining committee felt a sufficiently large majority of members supported the issues identified as bargaining priorities.

Taking a principled stand against our employer's two-tiered, take-it-or-leave-it proposal was both the right thing to do and, later, would prove to be tactically useful to MUNFA in communicating to media and a broader non-university public why the faculty union had voted to strike. For example, in public communications MUNFA highlighted that the employer refused to budge on their proposed two-tiered system of post-retirement benefits even when MUNFA countered with a proposal to increase the premiums paid by all union members equally so as to avoid a two-tiered system. When the employer refused to budge on that proposal, it became obvious that the two-tiered negotiating tactic had little to do with actual monetary savings and was actually about a longer-term view to weakening union power. Yet, building solidarity, and, thus, union power is critical for academic unions in Canada because no amount of collective bargaining will be sufficient to reverse the conditions of austerity that have been implemented over decades and that we continue to experience today. Changing these conditions will require genuine political power beyond the bargaining table, and generating that power will only come from building solidarity with workers within and beyond our campuses.

Jane McAlevey forcefully argues that there are substantial differences between mobilizing and organizing (McAlevey, 2016). Mobilizing is what most unions and movements do: they use good messaging, social media, and rallies to activate the people who already agree with them, but they don't expand the base. A slick communications plan can get more people to show up to a protest or sign a petition, but it doesn't change who is in the room or whether those people are prepared to take real risks, like going on strike or confronting management directly. In her view, this approach leaves power in the hands of a small, self-selected activist core, not the whole workforce or community. When the campaign hits a real fight — a lockout, a major concession demand, or a boss who refuses to bargain — that small base usually can't sustain the pressure, and the campaign collapses. An honest assessment of MUNFA's activities in the lead-up to our strike would likely place them somewhere between mobilizing and organizing. An enlarged number of members came to understand their power as workers during the strike. Yet, both before and after our strike, it remains all too common in everyday conversations with colleagues to hear references to 'the union' or 'MUNFA' as if it is an external entity, rather than a source of collective power composed of us.

Mobilizing and organizing for power: On-ramps and the ladder of engagement

Previous collective agreements at Memorial University had been negotiated under much more of a service model approach to unionism. Under the leadership of Dr. Robin Whitaker (MUNFA President 2018-2019), a shift toward an organizing model began in earnest. In 2021, the MUNFA executive created a new staff position, designating the role as Organizing, Membership Engagement and Communications Coordinator (OMECC). There has been some turnover in this position as people move on to pursue similar work in organizations with more resources and a larger profile than MUNFA (e.g., the Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour and CAUT). However, the people in this staff role have all come from the MUN Students' Union (MUNSU) and its connection to the broader student movement — a major advantage to MUNFA before, during, and after the strike.

Given MUNFA's shift to an organizing model remains ongoing, it was felt that it would be helpful to offer members relatively low-barrier ways to become more active participants in the contract negotiation process. Two metaphors began to structure our discussions of strategies and tactics: on-ramps and ladders of engagement (David & Abujbara, n.d.). Both metaphors gave us models to think about practical actions we could offer members to channel what we already knew to be widely shared feelings of anger and frustration resulting from deteriorating working conditions. Ladders of engagement describe the process by which members climb successive rungs of actions that increase in levels of effort and risk with each rung. Our sense was that because MUNFA had not engaged in strike action since the 1990s, we would need practice with mobilizing and organizing even as paths toward the possibilities of either successful contract negotiations or job action were being forged as we travelled them. Thus, before climbing a ladder, we thought we might need ways to walk or roll up to it — hence the metaphor of on-ramps.

As Spronk (this volume) clearly shows, assessing union members' participation in mobilizing and organizing activities is a crucial undertaking. MUNFA engaged in such assessment and workplace mapping, though not always as systematically or formally as we might have. As I discuss below, participation in some of these on-ramps was easier to measure than others. The OMECC used paper-based flip charts listing department/units and their members and used those to record which and how many activities those members engaged in. We also used spreadsheets to assess participation. These charts and spreadsheets made for quick and dirty

assessments of where the most and least participation across MUNFA's membership was happening. This workplace mapping helped coordinate where more effort might be needed to increase member participation, e.g., prioritizing units with lower participation rates for subsequent engagement activities such as door knocking and one-on-one conversations.

One of the first on-ramps for members was to "encourage MUNFA members to *send a message to the employer* urging them to uphold their commitment to Indigenization and Truth and Reconciliation" (MUNFA, 2022 emphasis in the original). We provided the work email addresses of the university president, the director of faculty relations, and the vice president academic along with a short suggested script that MUNFA members could include if they chose to send an email. This tactic had two effects. First, it would make more concrete to the university president and members of the employer's bargaining team that behind the MUNFA bargaining team was a larger group of people in support of them. Second, it was hoped that members might begin to see themselves as active participants in the bargaining process and, ideally, increasingly come to see themselves as having agency as union members. As tactics were discussed by the MUNFA executive, we hoped that such low-barrier on-ramps to mobilization might also have the effect of encouraging members to ascend the ladder of engagement as negotiations unfolded. If that came to pass, we reasoned, MUNFA would be in a stronger position to take job action at some later date, should that become necessary.

Another low-barrier on-ramp MUNFA engaged in was postering. We printed colourful, medium-format posters stating "I support my bargaining team. We are MUNFA" that members could attach to their office doors. This on-ramp had a number of benefits. Delivering posters to members offered a way into one-on-one conversations. It could provide a clear visual signal to anyone walking the halls about the level of support for the MUNFA bargaining team (with the clear risk that low participation in this activity could signal the opposite, but ultimately uptake by members was very high). Postering was also an easy way for the OMECC staff member to assess participation. Meanwhile the wording of the posters offered a perhaps more implicit message encouraging MUNFA members to understand themselves as part of the collective 'we' that is MUNFA.

Although it is difficult to know for sure whether any or all of the various tactics described so far made a difference, by June of 2022 the employer began to make concessions where it had not been willing to do so before. Among those concessions were agreeing to MUNFA's proposed language on the inclusion of Indigenous

knowledge and elders in promotion and tenure as well as improved contract language on equity, diversity, and anti-racism. However, the employer remained unwilling to adopt language on climate action, remained intransigent on issues of governance and collegiality, and would not commit to improved job security language that was especially important for contract faculty. The employer also refused to offer anything but an effective pay cut. Under these conditions, on June 9, 2022, the MUNFA bargaining committee served notice to the Labour Minister requesting conciliation.

With conciliation now in play, we used the summer months to strategize and plan out various short- to medium-term scenarios including accepting an agreement, a lockout, or a strike. The logistics of a variety of member mobilizing activities were worked out in advance of the 2022–2023 academic year so that they could be rolled out as necessary depending on how the state of play might change.

During conciliation the employer merely recapitulated earlier demands that MUNFA had already rejected, such as post-tenure review and the two-tiered post-retirement benefit regime, meanwhile rejecting key MUNFA demands on collegial governance and salary increases.

In the meantime, MUNFA continued the work of organizing and mobilizing members in this context of a deteriorating collective bargaining process. Workplace mapping was ongoing and additional low-barrier on-ramps for member mobilization were developed.

The next low-barrier on-ramp we tried was to invite MUNFA members to demonstrate their solidarity by appending an email signature to all correspondence from their university email address (“I support my union’s efforts to achieve a fair deal. We are MUNFA!” (MUNFA, n.d.-a). Member participation in this on-ramp was challenging to measure since the capacities of executive and staff were already overstretched. In retrospect, it would have been possible to create some sort of clickable link-based template for MUNFA members that would have also permitted assessment of participation, but we did not think of it at the time. We learned from this experience and our next on-ramp was more successful.

Majority organizing for power via an open letter and march on the boss

One of the most successful tactics we tried was to encourage MUNFA members to sign an open letter addressed to administration demanding a fair deal, known more broadly in the union movement as a 'majority petition.' When asking MUNFA members to sign the letter, we told them that it would only be forwarded to administration once at least 50 per cent of all MUNFA members had signed it. As a tactic this letter had several benefits. It offered MUNFA a fine-grained understanding of the degree to which members were feeling activated both on an individual level, but also by department or unit. The list of signatories became another important source of data for our workplace mapping activities. It helped chart the variable terrain of member support (or lack thereof). Departments where fewer signatures originated from, or none at all, represented pockets of membership who might respond to other forms of membership mobilization or, alternatively, pockets of resistance to job action should it become necessary. Such pockets did become apparent, but ultimately well over 50 per cent of MUNFA members signed the letter. It was also an important structure test for our union since members would be attaching their name to a document that would be delivered to our employer and making a demand. Furthermore, the letter was a relative escalation of tactics on MUNFA's part. MUNFA members who signed the letter could be interpreted to have graduated past earlier low-barrier on-ramps and taken at least a first step on the ladder of engagement.

Reaching the 50 per cent threshold took only a few days and was coordinated mostly by the OMECC staff member in conjunction with members of the executive and other volunteers. Having met the 50 per cent threshold of signatures on the open letter, the executive organized another higher-risk action that members could participate in: publicly delivering a printout of the letter with all signatures to the then-acting president of the university and demanding that the administration reach a fair deal with the MUNFA bargaining team. In other words, MUNFA organized a "march on the boss" (Eshghi, 2024).

The MUNFA executive made an appointment to deliver the letter in person to the acting university president without letting on that they would be accompanied by any and all MUNFA members who wished to demonstrate their support. We arrived at the president's office at the appointed time with a large enough group that the president's office was unable to accommodate all of us. As a consequence, the acting president was obliged to meet us at the main entrance of the office, which

opened onto a main hallway, now lined with members along its length and spilling around a corner. All eyes were on the acting president as he opened the door to receive the letter. The surprise of seeing all of the people lining the hallway was obvious on his face.

Now, whether delivering the open letter had a material effect on negotiations is unclear. What was undeniable, however, was that a growing number of MUNFA members were being mobilized and showing a willingness to be more public in putting pressure on the administration. Each member who took part in the action had a genuine sense of doing something — not to mention a good story to tell to their friends and colleagues who weren't there.

Heading towards a strike: Coalition building

By now it was November of 2022, and it seemed increasingly likely that job action would become necessary. Both MUNFA members and students were beginning to contact the executive with questions about the state of negotiations, the likelihood of a strike, and what a strike might mean if it were to happen. Receiving these questions offered an opportunity both to inform members and students, as well as to shape the environment in our favour.

MUNFA produced two sets of frequently asked questions (FAQs), one for our members and one for students. Both FAQs covered broadly the same material but with slightly different messaging to each of these audiences. Arguably, the FAQ document for students did some important work in terms of making MUNFA demands for fair working conditions of direct relevance to students' own educational experiences. Specifically, in a section of the FAQ to students called, "Why should I care about these issues?" MUNFA made the case that the working conditions of university instructors are the learning conditions that students experience in class. As working conditions degrade for instructors — through, for example, overwork in enlarged class sizes, declining pay, diminished diversity, and greater precarity — learning conditions for students are also harmed. In the face of recently substantially increased tuition at Memorial University, we tried to make the case to students that they were getting less and less, even as students paid more and more. The FAQs for both faculty and students also offered a set of substantive talking points that could be brought into the classroom itself where MUNFA members could facilitate discussions of what a potential strike might mean, why it might happen, and also address students' concerns directly with them on an ongoing basis in the lead-up to the strike.

MUNFA had developed and deployed the FAQs largely in reaction to questions and concerns received by MUNFA staff and executive. Those of us who used those FAQs in the classroom did so largely on our own initiative, rather than as a consequence of a systematic organizing practice. It is difficult to say to what extent such communications convinced students one way or another, but when the strike did eventually occur, students demonstrated an outpouring of support for us while we were on the picket lines (MUNFA, n.d.-b). It is also possible, although speculative, that the ability of MUNFA members to speak directly with students in the classroom may also have contributed to the broader public's support we experienced during the strike as students who participated in those discussions brought the issues home to friends and family. In this respect, MUNFA may have been luckier than we were organized. In the future it would behoove us to find ways to generate the kinds of discussions between faculty and students built up from the FAQs more systematically, perhaps as part of a broader strategy of tactics linked in the acronym AEIOU (agitate, educate, inoculate, organize, union; see Cat, 2020).

Other forms of coalition building between MUNFA and students included 'wear your colours' days to show support for the MUNFA bargaining team and to demand the university administration to reach a fair deal with us. This tactic had the benefit of potential for broad participation as well as being a structure test for MUNFA members and for the degree of solidarity between students and ASMs. Large numbers of students and faculty wearing the school's distinctive maroon was an unmistakable visual message to the university administration. Students organized their own 'wear your colours' initiative with a yellow scarf day — again sending a significant visual symbol of solidarity between students and ASMs to university administrators.

The strike vote and strike

Ultimately, conciliation failed and on January 18, 2023, MUNFA membership voted to authorize a strike with a 93 per cent turnout and a 90 per cent strike mandate (MUNFA, 2023a). Obtaining such a strong mandate for a strike was, of course, critical to demonstrate to the employer our willingness to take job action to achieve a fair deal — and we were ultimately successful. Our two-week strike resulted in important gains for the union and unionism at our university. MUNFA was successful at fighting off demands by the employer for post-tenure review and the two-tiered post-retirement benefit system. We managed to gain important concessions from the employer on key demands, including salary increases. Important examples of those gains include:

- Improved provisions for equity, diversity, inclusion, and anti-racism in the form of commitments by the employer to collect and share better data on workplace inequality.
- Doubling the number of weeks of supplemental parental leave from 15 to 35 weeks.
- New language toward the Indigenization of the collective agreement such as provisions for faculty members to request Indigenous elders and/or traditional knowledge carriers/keepers to serve as external referees on promotion and tenure files; new language, expanding the definition of scholarship to “explicitly include Indigenous knowledges [as] commensurate with academic knowledge” (MUNFA, 2023b).
- Improvements for contract academic staff, such as aligning contract start dates to include one month of teaching preparation time; improved language for converting contract positions into regular term or tenure-track appointments.
- Interim appointment of MUNFA members to the Board of Regents and a signed commitment for a collegial governance review committee comprised of MUNFA members, students, and representatives of the Board of Regents and Senate.
- A 12 per cent salary increase with 6 per cent retroactive to September 1, 2022 (a major improvement over the original take-it-or-leave-it offer, but still an effective pay cut when inflation is taken into account since the last salary increase for MUNFA members).

Conclusion

The above highlights are important concrete gains made as a consequence of our job action, but the strike had broader positive consequences for unionism at our university. Spending time on the lines with colleagues from any number of different fields and physical locations of our campuses was an incredibly important reminder of the value of being face-to-face with each other and having real conversations about how to improve our working conditions. No one seriously engaged with labour organizing will be surprised by such an observation. But in a period of time then, and even now, where the acute and now more chronic effects of the COVID pandemic had so disrupted what had been typical work routines, being out on the lines and just being in solidarity with each other felt close to magical. Although the strike is more than two years old as I write this, that sense of solidarity built up over the negotiation process and subsequent labour action remains with many of us.

Events on the ground here and across the country make it clear that no one is coming to save us. Here in Newfoundland and Labrador, provincial government

funding cuts to the university have continued since the strike. The atrocious acute examples of poor management at public post-secondary institutions, such as the Laurentian debacle (Lysyk, 2022), demonstrate that no individual or field is safe. More recent events in the United States make this point only more acute, while it might be easy for those of us in the sector here in Canada to look to the U.S. and think — or hope — that we might be immune to such forces here in Canada. Yet, the decades long cuts to post-secondary education since the 1980s in Canada are in many cases leading to the same kinds of consequences for the sector here in Canada, just over longer time horizons. It is obvious that the only viable route to improved working conditions at our university and across the sector is through collective action.

Inside the Arts and Administration building on Memorial's St. John's campus is a plaque of dedication to the university's founding as a living memorial to the people of this province killed in the First and Second World Wars. It reads in part, "that in freedom of learning, their cause and sacrifice might not be forgotten." Freedom of learning is something unfettered and unrestricted. In my view, it would be a mistake not to reclaim words like 'freedom' to bolster the organizing we must do in the face of chronic and acute attacks on that freedom. What the defunders and the dismantlers of public post-secondary education are doing destroys the freedom to learn, converting it from a universal public good into an increasingly fettered and privatized entity that only exists to the extent that it can be shaped into commoditized widgets. It is obvious that appeals to reason and principle are insufficient since the dismantling continues. Bolstering the freedom to learn and rebuilding our sector means building real political power through collective action and solidarity beyond the bargaining table on our campuses and with the communities we are situated in. We must organize accordingly.

Onward...

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