
Virtual reality: Bargaining and union organizing in an online environment

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Abstract

As Canada's only fully online university, Athabasca University (AU) offers a unique case study in post-secondary bargaining and union organizing. In the past few years, growing neoliberalization of the institution combined with a dramatic shift in the legal and political climate posed a significant existential threat for AU's faculty association (AUFA). The association responded by turning to internal organizing strategies informed by solidarity unionism and Organizing for Power. The dispersed and online nature of the workplace necessitated adapting methods and tactics to fit AU's specific dynamics. Organizing in an online environment offers opportunities for innovation but also presents unique challenges. Through its organizing efforts, AUFA learned that while tactics and methods need to be tailored to AU's environment, overall strategy reflected that of bricks-and-mortar universities.

Keywords faculty associations, union organizing, online workplace

Réalité virtuelle : négociation et organisation syndicale dans un environnement en ligne

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Résumé

En tant que seule université entièrement en ligne du Canada, l'Université d'Athabasca constitue un cas d'étude unique en matière de négociation collective et d'organisation dans le secteur de l'enseignement postsecondaire. Au cours des dernières années, la néolibéralisation croissante de l'établissement, conjuguée à un changement radical du contexte juridique et politique, a fait peser une menace existentielle importante sur l'Athabasca University Faculty Association (AUFA). L'association a réagi en se tournant vers des stratégies d'organisation internes inspirées du syndicalisme de solidarité et de l'approche de Organizing for Power. Les caractéristiques dispersées et en ligne du milieu de travail ont nécessité l'adaptation des méthodes et des tactiques à la dynamique spécifique de l'Université d'Athabasca. L'organisation dans un environnement en ligne offre des possibilités d'innovation, mais présente également des défis uniques. Grâce à ses efforts d'organisation, l'AUFA a appris que si les tactiques et les méthodes devaient être adaptées à l'environnement de l'Université d'Athabasca, la stratégie globale reflétait celle des universités traditionnelles.

Mots-clés associations de personnel académique, organisation syndicale, milieu de travail en ligne

Introduction

The context in which faculty associations are organizing has been shaped by three decades of the neoliberalization of universities. Characterized by austerity, constant restructuring, administrative bloat, and overwork and research intensification pressures alongside the erosion of collegial self-governance, the explosion of precarious work, and a reorientation of student as consumer, the growing dominance of the needs and logic of the market have led to a “crisis of both purpose and form” (Ross et al., 2019, p. 227).

Athabasca University (AU) is both a clear example of these general trends and an outlier in some respects. Established in the 1970s as an open distance university offering mail- and telephone-based correspondence courses, AU’s trajectory through the neoliberal era echoes the core trends of market dominance, constant crisis, and the erosion of both collegial governance and working conditions. In addition, AU’s path has been shaped by the shift toward online course delivery beginning in the mid-1990s and more recently by a shift toward a mostly online working environment for nearly all faculty and staff.

The structure of teaching work at AU is still grounded in the original correspondence teaching model, where core faculty generally lead the development of courses, supported by various professionals, and the bulk of student contact is handled by contract teaching staff. This also led to an unusual union composition: the faculty association (AUFA) includes the traditional tenured and tenure-track professoriate alongside some permanent teaching-only faculty and a large portion of professional staff, while contract teaching staff are mostly represented by a separate union altogether (CUPE), and still another union (AUPE) represents support staff. The explosion of precarious teaching faculty seen across the university sector, and the contradictions and challenges inherent in faculty associations’ responses and resistance, has therefore been more of a story of inter-union dynamics at AU than an internal tension to navigate within the faculty association that is common elsewhere (Ross & Savage, 2020). In contrast, at Athabasca University, the more significant tension within AUFA, which AU administrators have sought to exploit and deepen, is between the professoriate and the professionals — each comprise roughly half of the union’s membership.

The experience at AU has broadly followed the sector-wide trend of increasingly adopting militant, industrial unionism-style approaches to defend contractual entitlements and resist deteriorating working conditions. Like many other faculty associations, AUFA has engaged in member-driven organizing and mobilizing to

defend specific contractual entitlements, confront more existential threats, and resist day-to-day managerial overreach. But the resistance to the neoliberal dictates has also been shaped by the unique features of AU's delivery model, union composition, and dispersed work locations. As online course delivery and remote work continue to expand within traditional universities and the sector overall, the experience of organizing to build solidarity in an online environment offers insight into how faculty associations might continue to evolve their strategies and tactics of resistance to deepening neoliberalization.

From binding arbitration to strike/lockout

Alberta has long had an unusual post-secondary labour relations system. First, the system is anchored by the power of post-secondary Boards of Governors to "designate" academic staff. Each Board determines who among its employees performs academic work. The consequence of being designated academic is that the employee automatically becomes a member of the faculty association and the association is afforded exclusive bargaining rights for academic staff. Non-academic staff would be required to certify a union under the traditional labour relations regime. Second, until recently, most public sector workers, including academic staff, did not have the right to strike. All disputes were referred to binding interest arbitration.

These features had two deleterious impacts on labour relations. First, it created the odd dynamic where the employer determined the scope and size of its faculty association. At AU this led to professional staff, including IT, course production, and editing staff, being designated as academic while contract teaching staff were not. Second, the combination of guaranteed representational rights and no right to strike led to a collective bargaining process that was largely empty and performative. The university administration would seek concessions, the faculty association would refuse to concede, all monetary settlements would be determined by an arbitrator, and all contractual entitlements were protected by a stonewall clause. Further, faculty associations had no incentive to internally organize to build bargaining power, prepare for labour disruption, or defend against raiding.

The longstanding stalemate was altered in 2017 when the NDP government passed legislation extending the right to strike to all public sector workers, including post-secondary academic staff. However, the legislation entrenched the designation system and legislated faculty associations as bargaining agents for academic staff (Kully, 2017). In short order, Alberta faculty associations were confronted with a

new dynamic. Stonewall and the relative stability of binding arbitration had disappeared, with employers now in a position to take advantage of the instability to press their interests. In contrast, faculty associations had built no credible strike threat.

It was clear to AUFA that the administration would take the opportunity to push for similar concessions they had pursued for years, and that a credible strike threat was essential for waging the necessary defensive fight. Building solidarity and militancy within a largely complacent (and often quarrelsome) membership would be no easy task.

Core to AUFA's initial strategy was open deliberation and democratic decision-making surrounding the establishment of a defence fund to supplement CAUT Defence Fund strike pay. This process allowed members to engage with both the minutiae of mill rates and with the broader paradigm shift of possibly needing to go on strike at some point. Additional early interventions included offering introductory organizer training to the AUFA executive, negotiation training for members on the bargaining team, and increased and transparent discussions about what the legislative change would mean for AUFA and its members.

AUFA did not have much time to prepare for the new strike/lockout regime as it entered bargaining in 2018. During this initial round of bargaining, the AUFA executive focused on educating members about the realities of the new regime and beginning the process of building organizational capacity. That round of bargaining resolved without resorting to a strike, affording the association more runway to prepare for the subsequent, and more difficult, round expected in 2020. AUFA sought to develop and deepen a member-driven organizing and mobilizing approach. This approach was influenced primarily by the "solidarity unionism" organizing model of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW; Garneau, 2020) but also took inspiration from Jane McAlevey's Organizing for Power model (McAlevey, 2016) and the Labor Notes Secrets of a Successful Organizer training (Brooks et al., 2019). As well, the approach was shaped by the experiences of some members who had participated in social movements, community organizing, and other unions (including shop floor mobilizing within the Canadian Union of Postal Workers). Generally, the AUFA leadership had minimal qualms about learning from and adopting the tools and tactics of the more militant corners of the labour movement.

Nonetheless, the membership overall was certainly influenced by the "paradox of professionalism" — "discourses that help to advance the workplace-based professional interests of their members, and also internalize ideological traits, like

occupational prestige and status, that primarily serve the interests of employers in the name of professionalism” (Ross et al., 2019, p. 243). In other words, getting the membership (especially the professoriate) to acknowledge that their interests are not always aligned with the employer’s — building even limited “occupational consciousness,” let alone broader class consciousness — would be a challenging task. Further, AUFA would need to more actively confront common member perceptions regarding tensions between collegial governance and union advocacy (Webber & Butovsky, 2018).

Methods and tactics

The initial efforts aimed at shifting members’ attitudes and attention to bargaining were aimed at normalizing the idea of strikes and associated actions. The decision to engage in an extensive member consultation process regarding strike pay proved to be effective. It allowed AUFA to anchor conversations in a pragmatic question while addressing the bigger issue of how to prepare for what, at the time, seemed a far-away possibility. Sign-making parties with lunch provided were held in preparation for two information pickets held at different AU locations, which further shifted the sense of picketing as being an activity that faculty associations can engage in. Generally, these efforts were effective at mobilizing existing supporters within the membership; however, there were still many members who were disengaged or vocally opposed to the AUFA acting in more visibly confrontational ways. There was clearly a solid base of support within the membership, but there was also more work to be done to move more members along the ladder of engagement.

The next significant organizing initiative was to develop a telephone-based survey to gather input on bargaining priorities from the membership. The goals of this survey were threefold: to involve members in the bargaining process by collecting input, to activate supportive members by giving them a clear task, and to normalize one-on-one conversations between members about union and workplace issues. The first survey instance was conducted at a time when most professional members worked on site at one of four university office locations while most academic members worked from home. Over time, the approach to the survey was adapted when nearly all members switched to working remotely during the COVID pandemic. Between the fall of 2019 and the conclusion of bargaining in the spring of 2022, six such surveys were conducted by about 30 member volunteers, reaching nearly all members.

The importance of one-on-one conversations is a truism in union organizing, emphasized in nearly all training programs. No other format allows for the same level of trust and honesty to emerge: it is essential that members are offered a safe space to share their fears, work through their worries, and build confidence to take calculated risks. Different organizing models offer various mnemonics or guides for approaching these conversations (Garneau, 2020; Brooks et al., 2019; McAlevey, 2016), and AUFA drew liberally from these sources.

The survey scripts were structured to mimic some aspects of these approaches while keeping the bar for participating as a volunteer relatively low. For example, the surveys all began with gently agitational questions about the overall climate within the workplace. Additionally, conducting the survey as a volunteer was an important “ask” that gave a concrete task to passively supportive members. The surveys therefore also served as a form of “structure test” in terms of the number of volunteers assisting, the ease of reaching members to survey, and the survey results themselves.

This initial foray into an organizing and mobilizing approach for AUFA demonstrates a key dynamic: in general, the work of organizing is similar enough in remote working environments at the level of overall strategy. Existing models are necessarily adaptable and flexible, as no two workplaces are the same, and similar methods have proven effective in labour camps, factories, schools, hospitals, and so on. The primary strategic orientation for organizing-focused faculty associations, like any union wishing to effectively mobilize members, is that the formal leadership must be willing to give up a certain amount of control. Members who are deeply engaged in the union are less predictable and less governable, which is precisely part of the long-term goal: that members become better informed, less compliant employees who feel a sense of their own collective power.

At the level of details and tactics, however, there certainly are differences in an online workplace. The biggest benefit is that conversations happen within a safe environment. Conducting survey calls from an office with shared walls and unpredictable acoustics is a challenge; making the same calls from home means that no one will overhear. In terms of organizing conversations, however, one significant limitation is that it is quite easy for members to avoid contact with the union. While the survey guidance instructed callers to attempt contact via multiple means (e.g., phone, email, or Teams chat), some members simply ignored requests to participate in the surveys; without an office door to knock on or a classroom to wait outside, there are limits on how hard we can try to simply reach a member for a conversation. This limitation reinforces the need for the one-on-

ones to be a part of a broader plan that includes transparent communication and an engagement strategy that connects the “what” and “how” with the “why.”

Another key aspect of the surveys was that the results were shared as transparently as possible with the membership, holding back only the most sensitive bargaining-related results. Through blog posts, we reported the results of any quantifiable data, summarized themes within the comments, and, after a shift to conducting the surveys online rather than via phone calls, included representative and anonymized quotes from members’ submissions. This reporting back helps to close the loop of communication, emphasize that individual members are part of a collective, and further agitation as members are exposed to others’ perspectives. In the case of AU, the transparent reporting back by the union to its members also stood in stark contrast to the much more tightly controlled “employee engagement” types of surveys conducted by the employer.

Another truism in organizing is that, often, the employer is the best organizer. In the case of AU, just as AUFA was beginning to prepare for bargaining under strike/lockout, the administration created an existential threat in the form of a new designation policy that could have decimated the AUFA membership by removing professionals and teaching-focused faculty. The move was a blatant attempt at union busting that quickly galvanized the membership: overall, professionals and academic coordinators wanted to remain in the union and keep their contractual protections and entitlements, and professors recognized alone they would have very limited leverage to protect themselves in bargaining.

The urgency and necessity of confronting this threat catapulted AUFA’s organizing efforts forward. Mobilized members participated in town hall meetings, signed open letters and petitions, participated in a social media campaign, put up posters in their offices, swapped profile pictures for union slogans, participated in a “march on the boss” action to deliver demands and testimonials, consistently challenged the university president in meetings, and spread the word about a potential boycott of AU. The shift to online-only work arrangement happened during this organizing effort, so actions were a blend of in-person, hybrid, and online interventions. The designation fight ended as more or less a draw: members were not removed from the union en masse, but the employer began a death-by-1000-cuts strategy of posting most new professional positions as excluded.

These organizing efforts fed into the 2020 bargaining round, which was particularly acrimonious. The provincial government had recently legislated so-called “secret mandates” that bound all public sector employers to provincially determined

bargaining directives, which made dynamics at bargaining tables across the sector tense and unproductive (Foster, Barnettson & Cake, 2024). Further, AU came to the table with demands for aggressive concessions, a strategy aimed at dividing academics and professionals, and the threat of de-designation still loomed. An additional challenge was that bargaining shifted to an online environment due to COVID-19 restrictions. While AU staff were familiar with online interactions, the changes to dynamics at the table added to the tension (Foster, 2025).

Throughout bargaining the AUFA executive was committed to a high degree of transparency and participation of members in key decisions. Bargaining updates were published after every bargaining session. A decision was made to present a mediator's report to the membership for a vote even though the bargaining committee did not recommend its adoption and the executive opposed ratification. A strike vote was conducted with the explicit promise that an additional vote would be held before notice was provided. Eventually a mediated settlement was reached days before an internal union deadline to proceed with the promised second strike vote.

In preparation for a possible strike, AUFA established a preparation committee and built the necessary structures to ensure an effective strike. This included groups of members ready to administer strike pay and adjudicate related issues, proactive and repeated member surveys to inform priorities as the context shifted, groups of members participating in writing and disseminating student- and public-facing messaging, and over 40 volunteer members conducting one-on-one calls to ensure all members were informed and ready to participate should a strike be called.

Reflections on online organizing

These experiences led to some generalizable reflections about the differences between organizing in person and online. Again, it is important to emphasize that these differences are at the level of tactics, not strategy. The inherent conflict of class interests between workers and employers is no different (nor does working remotely fundamentally shift the particular dynamics of the professional managerial class), and the challenges of "occupational consciousness" (Ross et al., 2019) persist across the post-secondary sector.

The foundation of any organizing is an understanding of the workplace and how it is currently organized. This includes gathering contacts, social mapping, and identifying leaders. In online workplaces, gathering employer-provided contact information and mapping based on organizational charts can be simpler with enterprise and collaboration software used by the employer. Understanding the

employer's privacy practices and whether any surveillance software is used and adopting appropriate communication practices is also important. Within AUFA, because most professional IT staff are in the union, confidence that members are not being surveilled supports AUFA's insistence that "union work is work" that can and should be done using employer systems on paid time, which further normalizes and lowers barriers to active participation in the union. Still, gathering personal contact information for members so they can be reached during a work stoppage is essential and ongoing work.

One significant challenge online is in recognizing existing relationships within the context of social mapping: it is much more difficult to discretely observe interpersonal dynamics such as body language, who goes for coffee together, who arrives at or leaves meetings together, who might be sincerely sycophantic towards administration versus merely playing along, and so on. Similarly for identifying leaders: the most vocal members do not necessarily hold the most sway, and it's much more difficult to observe subtle social cues that suggest who might have more or less influence on others' opinions. Chat participation, including noticing who tends to "thumbs up" or otherwise react to whose posts, can be helpful. Surveys that segment responses between departments, by seniority, and by member type are useful but carry limitations as well. In general, as with in-person organizing, it is important to layer multiple methods and involve as many organizers with different perspectives and social positions as possible to build a solid foundation.

That workplace culture and cohesion is generally more fragmented in online workplaces is both a challenge and an opportunity — isolated members are less likely to be swayed by overall group opinions, but they are often very grateful and receptive when it feels like the union is making a more sincere effort to connect with them than the employer. This dynamic emphasizes the importance of one-on-one organizing conversations. Unless employer surveillance is rather extreme, the basic logistics of one-on-ones is typically easier in online environments. Scripts and templates can help with the often extremely awkward and surprisingly difficult first step of approaching a member for a conversation. Meetings are private and can be more easily fit into smaller openings in members' schedules. Volunteers can less awkwardly have notes available to support them, and it is easier to verify or share information in real time, such as looking up collective agreement language or sharing a link to a recent blog post. More experienced member organizers can be available to mentor and support in the background in real time, such as via chats,

to ask questions or verify information. Online forms can be used to track who has talked with whom and to collect feedback and questions.

As with in-person organizing, approaching one-on-one organizing conversations systematically is essential, as relying on more informal methods leads to silos, echo chambers, and unengaged pockets of members. This coordination can be time-consuming, as volunteer capacity ebbs and flows along with workplace issues and the level of agitation within the membership. For example, within AUFA the number of member callers conducting one-on-one meetings has fluctuated between only a few and over 40 (about 10% of the total membership). Conducting calls is a very effective first step for members to participate directly in union work as it is generally low stakes and low effort while still requiring volunteer members to engage more actively with union structures and current issues. Coordination of one-on-ones should also consider how to further engage existing volunteers and support “levelling up” their commitment into other union roles.

Even where there is a robust system of one-on-ones and volunteer coordination, in an online workplace most general union communications to members are mediated, either through text-based means like emails or video-based meetings. For AUFA, leaning into transparency has been essential. Organizers understand that emails can easily be forwarded, meeting recordings shared, or even confidential meetings surreptitiously recorded, so AUFA generally operates on the assumption that nearly all general communications to members will be seen by the employer. Operating in this way has contributed to a union culture of having very little to hide and has generally been positive in building trust. Regular surveying and reporting results in as much detail as possible help to reflect members’ views and allow individuals to better understand where they stand within a usually diffuse collective. Online general meetings are accessible and, for AUFA, tend to see high participation (often seeing 25–50% of members attend). Still, in person gatherings, such as full-day strategy sessions for the executive, are still essential to build relationships and cohesion within the union core, even while making it possible for some to participate remotely.

As for tactics of collective action, many standard pressure campaigns even for in-person workplaces already have an online component, such as letter-writing tools supported by CAUT. Open letters, testimonials, and email zaps can also function similarly in online workplaces. AUFA’s public blog posts often elicit an amusingly strong reaction from the employer. Many common tactics, however, have mixed results online. Phone zaps can be more difficult as executives are often on the move, and their cell phone numbers can be difficult to track down. Social media can

sometimes help to amplify core messages, but it can also backfire if the messaging doesn't land well with most members. Overreaction to members' personal social media engagement by the employer has presented both risks and opportunities for agitation. In-person pickets and rallies are still important when possible but can be complicated when the primary reasons employees gather is to celebrate (e.g., convocation), which members are often extremely reluctant to disrupt. Cheeky tactics like mailing holiday cards or even coal to bosses' houses were controversial, which the employer exploited to create division among some members.

The reception by members of controversial tactics highlights the importance of inoculation in organizing conversations and union communications. On multiple occasions, the employer attempted to use union members' sincere concerns over equity to drive wedges between union leadership and membership. Much like other post-secondary institutions in Canada, AU's incorporation of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) principles resides mostly at the level of performative symbolism. Despite this shallow institutional adoption, AU showed no qualms about mobilizing EDI language — in particular invoking notions of "safety," inclusion, and respect for gender equity — to frame and attempt to discredit some union tactics. Leaning on the gender or racial identities of senior university administrators, AU has characterized various union interventions as "sexist," "degrading," or "disrespectful" while implicitly invoking stereotypes of "violent" or "threatening" union tactics associated with primarily white, male, and blue-collar workplaces or otherwise stretching the language of "safety" to decry tactics or word choices. Without widespread inoculation about this type of common divide-and-conquer tactic from employers, and aided by both weak "occupational consciousness" among some members and the relative isolation of the online workplace, AU was able to create new or exacerbate existing tensions between some members, committees, and formal leadership within AUFA. While this dynamic was not ultimately decisive in the outcome of bargaining, some tension and contradictory understandings of equity, solidarity, and accountability have persisted within the union. Unions of all types need to engage in ongoing organizing work to build common ground across differences, deepen class consciousness, and inoculate against employers' attempts to cynically deploy progressive language and undermine solidarity.

Considering the dynamics of striking, a dispersed workplace posed significant challenges. For members outside the primary geographic clusters, in-person picketing is not realistic and finding meaningful online work to count as strike duty was a necessity. AUFA's plans included having members contribute to committees, attend or organize meetings or workshops, spend time posting or re-posting on

social media, participate in email or phone zaps, or conduct one-on-one calls to connect with less engaged members. Still, a strike in an online workplace would provide more time and opportunity for in-person gatherings that build relationships and solidarity, even if only a handful of members live in some locations.

Workshops, pickets, and social and discussion spaces during strikes — whether in person or online — can help to open conversations about questions such as meaningful equity interventions, occupational versus class consciousness, and the broader social role of unions within the post-secondary sector. That is, formal strikes can provide opportunities to build and deepen cultures of solidarity (Fantasia, 1989). While AUFA has yet to engage in formal strike action, the goal for a future strike (beyond specific collective agreement language) would be to emerge with deeper solidarity and shared understanding of members' collective power.

Conclusion

The intensification of neoliberalization of post-secondary combined with a changing legal landscape in Alberta led to the breakdown of a decades-long stalemate at Athabasca University. In the ensuing years, AUFA has had to embark on a conscious process of education and mobilization to protect not just the interests of its members but the existential viability of the association. Without a transformation, there is a strong likelihood that the university administration would have taken advantage of the shifting context to undermine the association's bargaining power permanently.

Introducing union organizing principles to a largely comfortable membership meant confronting professional and academic identities, fostered by university employers, that discourage confrontational tactics and suppress class or occupational consciousness. In this respect, AUFA's experience is like other faculty associations in this era of entrenched neoliberalism and academic corporatization.

Working with a mostly dispersed membership in an online environment does have its unique dynamics. AUFA's recent experience speaks to the fact that this uniqueness lies in the realm of tactics and methods rather than goals and strategies. Certain aspects of AU's online existence facilitated organizing, especially around issues of security and safety. However, building cultures of solidarity among a dispersed membership must overcome the ease of isolation and lack of shared communal spaces and actions.

The final lesson is that the work of organizing never ends. As of the time of writing, the latest round of bargaining remains underway, and the awareness of the vigilance required to maintain member engagement and willingness to take action is significant.

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