
Openness, organizing, and job action at the University of Manitoba Faculty Association

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Abstract

For over a decade, the University of Manitoba Faculty Association (UMFA) has integrated organizing approaches into multiple rounds of collective bargaining negotiations to build power amongst its members and make significant gains during collective bargaining. We describe and analyze our practical and lived experiences of integrating organizing tools including charting, structure tests, union openness and transparency, and “big open bargaining.” In sharing these experiences, we encourage other academic faculty associations to similarly embrace organizing approaches and seek to demonstrate how organizing approaches can be integrated into existing union cultures and across multiple rounds of bargaining.

Keywords union organizing, strikes

Ouverture, organisation et action syndicale au sein de l'University of Manitoba Faculty Association

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Résumé

Depuis plus d'une décennie, l'University of Manitoba Faculty Association (UMFA) a intégré des approches organisationnelles dans de nombreux cycles de négociations collectives afin de renforcer le pouvoir de ses membres et d'obtenir des avancées significatives lors des négociations. Nous décrivons et analysons nos expériences concrètes et vécues en matière d'intégration d'outils d'organisation, notamment la cartographie, les tests de structure, l'ouverture et la transparence du syndicat, ainsi que la « grande négociation ouverte ». En partageant ces expériences, nous encourageons d'autres associations de professeures et professeurs à adopter elles aussi des approches organisationnelles. Nous cherchons également à démontrer comment ces approches peuvent être intégrées dans les cultures syndicales existantes et tout au long de nombreux cycles de négociation.

Mots-clés organisation syndicale, grèves

Introduction

Faculty associations in Canada, including the University of Manitoba Faculty Association (UMFA), have been embracing organizing approaches to collective bargaining. Union organizing models are strategic, worker-driven methods, focused on building power to improve working conditions. For over a decade, UMFA members have implemented tools and strategies from organizing practices in attempts to combat neoliberal government policies and university administrators who focus on bureaucratic goals with little relevance to the university's academic mission. Unlike case studies shared by organizer Jane McAlevey that describe single bargaining rounds and/or strikes, this article describes UMFA's experiences implementing organizing approaches across multiple rounds of collective bargaining. In sharing these experiences, we hope to provide encouragement and concrete examples to other academic faculty associations to similarly embrace organizing approaches. Finally, we critique aspects of organizing approaches that we have found to be convincing as theories, but unsuccessful in practice.

UMFA represents over 1,300 full-time professors, instructors, and librarians at the University of Manitoba. UMFA is managed by an Executive Council, and ultimately by a Board of Representatives, with one representative for approximately every 15 members of the association (UMFA, 2019). Established in 1951 and certified in 1974 (UMFA, 2026), UMFA has been on strike four times (1995, 2001, 2016, 2021), and, as of April 2026, is one of only four members of the Canadian research-intensive universities (U15) to experience a faculty strike in the past 52 years.¹ UMFA has long had a culture that values "equity, parity, and member-driven bargaining priorities" (Dingwall et al., 2023) and since 2015 has been implementing organizing tools and strategies to make the union more open and transparent. Organizing efforts at UMFA are continuously ongoing, though we focus here on the highly visible bargaining years, particularly those that culminated with strikes.

In the decade since the 2016 strike, UMFA has increased its organizing efforts incrementally, building upon each skill and learning many hard lessons along the way. Organizing at UMFA has evolved over a decade, building power and increasing its effectiveness, including becoming one of the few² Canadian academic unions to open bargaining negotiations for members to view in real time. This evolution has been both a spontaneous reaction and a planned organizing response to neoliberal government policies of austerity, violation of union members' Charter rights, and the erosion of university autonomy. In sharing some of our experiences and approaches, we hope to provide encouragement and concrete examples to other

academic faculty associations to similarly embrace organizing approaches, which we see as the future of unions and collective bargaining.

UMFA's history of collective bargaining and job action

In 1995, Manitoba's Progressive Conservative provincial government pressured the university's administration to dismantle academic freedom and tenure, and UMFA members set up their first picket lines for 23 days to protect these essential aspects of the university (Kerr, 1996). One of the key lessons from this strike was the importance of sustaining a diversity of opinions and perspectives to inform decision-making during bargaining. Following the strike, to ensure that future bargaining decisions were not made by single individuals (e.g. the chief negotiator or the union's president), UMFA established a Collective Agreement Committee (CAC) to inform the bargaining process (UMFA, 2023). Membership of the CAC ranges between 18 and 35 members and includes all members of the Executive Council and Bargaining Team, as well as union members who are approached to provide perspective on particular issues, who have specific expertise (e.g. financial), or who are developing familiarity and skills within the bargaining process as a method of succession planning. The CAC makes decisions based on consensus, and in the rare cases when consensus cannot be reached, decisions are made by a vote of the Executive Council.

Five years later in 2001, UMFA launched its second strike, which lasted only four days. This strike was a critical lesson in ensuring that the activities of the union must be driven by the membership, and not a small group of members on the Executive or Bargaining Team, thereby laying the groundwork for openness and inclusivity.

The 2013 bargaining round ended on the eve of the bargaining deadline, with agreement between UMFA and the university's administration to send the last unresolved issues to arbitration. Months later, instead of entering into arbitration in good faith, the administration claimed that all the issues being arbitrated were "management rights." The arbitrator sided with the administration on all issues. This bad faith tactic, combined with the administration not responding to evidence and reasoned arguments at the bargaining table, indicated to UMFA's members that a different strategy was needed if gains were going to be achieved during future rounds of bargaining. UMFA's Board of Representatives then constituted an "Ad Hoc Strategy Committee" to develop recommendations to strengthen UMFA's position for the next round of bargaining, including coalition building, member

communications, and political strategy (UMFA, 2015). The timing was right to develop new strategies and approaches to negotiations.

Negotiations were ongoing when Brian Pallister's Progressive Conservatives formed the government after the spring 2016 provincial election. Following the wreckage of the 2008 financial crisis, austerity was at the core of the Pallister government's agenda. UMFA's negotiations were derailed in September when the government secretly demanded the university's administration withdraw their modest salary offer and instead offer a 0% salary increase and a one-year contract (Manitoba Federation of Labour, 2022). Without the flexibility to bargain salary in exchange for workload, the only way to make gains with a recalcitrant employer was to take greater action. Fuelled by a strong history of mobilizing members, in combination with the organizing methods in Jane McAlevey's new book *No Shortcuts* (McAlevey, 2016), UMFA's efforts expanded quickly in the face of what seemed an inexplicable and disrespectful shift in the administration's approach to negotiations. UMFA members thus hit the picket lines for a 21-day strike, winning protections against arbitrary increases in workload without compensation. Job action was combined with six years of legal action, and the university administration was found to be at fault for failing to disclose material changes that influenced their bargaining proposals (CBC, 2018) and the provincial government was at fault for secretly interfering in bargaining (CBC, 2022).

Embracing organizing approaches

Organizing approaches centre the work of the union on worker-led processes that are focused on building power through collective action. As highlighted throughout this volume, there are numerous ways to implement and operationalize organizing approaches, and there are nuances in the different approaches. For example, McAlevey indicates that organizing "is to transfer power from the elite to the majority, from the 1 percent to the 99 percent" (McAlevey, 2016, p. 10), whereas Labor Notes' Bradbury, Brenner, and Slaughter emphasize that organizing is "the attitude that you and your co-workers together can *do something* to make things better. It's the attitude that action is better than complaining... that problems are just waiting for a solution, and that strength in numbers is part of that solution" (Bradbury et al., 2016). Organizing approaches contrast commonly held perceptions that many unions function as undemocratic, top-down bureaucracies (McAlevey, 2016). These perceptions gained traction, particularly in the United States after the Reagan administration in the 1980s, when union density was plummeting and inequality amongst the population began to rise. The perception of

an “elite” group of members running bureaucratic unions was attributed to the “service model” approach to negotiations, where a chief negotiator and a small team conducted negotiations in confidential sessions, only asking for member input when the new collective agreement was ready to be ratified. The model centres the union as a service that members come to for help when they have an issue.

Interest in organizing approaches started gaining traction in Canadian faculty associations around the 2016 release of McAlevey’s book *No Shortcuts*. UMFA members have since taken advantage of many opportunities to learn about organizing — attending the Labor Notes conferences in Chicago, local conferences hosted by the Manitoba Federation of Labour, workshops offered by the Canadian Association of University Teachers, and utilizing the expertise of members. In 2021, McAlevey began offering massive, free, online, “Organizing for Power (O4P)” training courses (Organizing for Power, 2026). At least five groups from UMFA have attended these courses, learning the theory and practice of the Organizing for Power philosophy, then putting these philosophies into practice in UMFA’s organizing efforts. McAlevey emphasizes moving away from an “advocacy” approach where unions rely on experts (e.g. lawyers, union staff, chief negotiators, etc.) to accomplish the work of the union. McAlevey also distinguishes between organizing and “mobilizing.” She described the latter approach as “shallow organizing” which seeks to motivate like-minded people, but does not engage and involve the entirety of the union’s members.

Though evidence to support organizing approaches is limited to case studies, labour unions, including UMFA, have embraced the premise that organizing is a means to democratize unions and engage members to improve working conditions. Organizing strategies that UMFA has adopted include charting, identifying and organizing members, structure tests, union openness, and big open bargaining.

Charting

One of the first organizing methods UMFA implemented was charting. For the strike vote in 2016, UMFA members who were experienced political organizers trained members of UMFA’s Board of Representatives how to chart. Board Reps received the list of the approximately 15 members in their constituency and were directed to speak to each member and encourage them to participate in the strike vote. Over the course of the three-day vote, Board Reps received daily updates on who in their constituency still had not voted and were tasked to follow up with those members. This coordinated effort resulted in a record high, with over 80% of voting members

supporting a strike³ (Williams, 2016). The practice of charting by constituency has since become a vitally important element of UMFA organizing and is included in the annual Board Reps training.

Identifying and organizing members

To think about union members “from an organizer’s point of view,” Labor Notes recommends envisioning “a dartboard with concentric circles” with a core group of engaged members at the centre, a first ring of “activists,” a second ring of “supporters,” a third ring of those who are “disengaged”, and then a group outside of the rings who are “hostile” (Bradbury et al., 2016, p. 14). Between 2016 and 2026, through five bargaining rounds, four strike votes, and two strikes, UMFA has developed a strong understanding of which members are within each of these concentric circles, and the size of each of the circles. Mapping groups of members in this way is helpful to theoretically understand the organizing approach and also has specific practical benefits. It helps identify who to approach when specific tasks need to be completed (e.g. filling roles on the executive or job action committees), who can be counted on to participate in mobilizing efforts (e.g. rallies and demonstrations), and who may be actively organizing against the union’s goals. The concentric circles also help develop strategic organizing efforts. For example, between bargaining years, UMFA began a coordinated series of one-on-one conversations in constituencies whose members were in the outermost concentric circles to understand more about their working conditions. There have also been individual members who moved in and out of different concentric circles, and we have engaged in efforts to identify why and how to keep them moving towards the centre.

Structure tests

A key element of McAlevey’s approach to organizing is the strategic use of structure tests, which evaluate the participation and levels of support of union members (McAlevey, 2016; 2017). What differentiates structure tests from generic surveys, petitions, or actions, is the coordinated approach to collect and use data to build a “ladder of escalation” that increasingly pressures the employer to meet worker demands. Though the concept of structure tests seemed new to UMFA circa 2016, in the 12 rounds of bargaining from 1995 to 2024, UMFA organized nine successful strike votes. Admittedly, the university’s administration essentially became desensitized to the pressures of bargaining until a strong strike vote was delivered, thereby normalizing the practice of strike votes in almost every round of

bargaining. However, conducting nine successful strike votes, and increasing the number of members who voted in each of the four votes from 2016 to 2024, took significant organizing, mobilizing, and advocacy efforts in the lead-up to, and during, the strike votes.

Realizing that the longstanding bargaining timeline and practices was a ladder of escalation, UMFA members organized each step in the bargaining process as a series of structure tests. What an organizing approach added to the decades-long practices was concerted efforts to seek and encourage member participation in a coordinated and organized way. Examples of some of the organized structure tests include:

- **The bargaining survey:** Prior to 2020, the bargaining survey relied on email reminders to encourage members to complete the survey. Since 2020, UMFA has provided each member an individualized link to the survey, which ensures they can only complete it once, and also allows tracking to identify who has, or has not, completed the survey.⁴ A strategic charting approach is then implemented to encourage members who have not yet completed the survey to do so.
- **Constituency meetings:** Holding constituency meetings to inform bargaining priorities has been a longstanding practice at UMFA, with each constituency on the Board of Reps organizing their own meeting(s). However, it was not until 2020 that charting was used to track which constituencies had meetings (as well as when and where), how many members were in each constituency and how many attended each meeting, and what their top priorities and concerns were. In units slow to schedule their meetings, or who had never hosted a constituency meeting, support was provided to organize their meetings.

Additional steps in the bargaining ladder of escalation include: hosting town halls and meetings on interest-based issues (such as family care needs or health benefits), an all-members meeting to approve the bargaining priorities, an all-members meeting to approve the calling of a strike vote, the actual strike vote, a job action survey, public displays of support (including rallies and poster/button campaigns), and then (in 2016 and 2021) a strike. Each of these steps is crucial for an open, engaging, and transparent union, and each step builds pressure against the university's administration.

Bargaining timelines and the academic calendar year

In *Rules to Win By* (McAlevey, 2023), McAlevey emphasizes the importance of ladders of escalation, stressing that each structure test must have greater worker engagement before progressing to the next step in the ladder, and a supermajority of support is required before big wins can be achieved. However, a key element overlooked in emphasizing supermajorities is the importance of creating and enforcing a bargaining timeline that takes account of opportunities where job action has more force, particularly in post-secondary institutions where pressure points align with the academic calendar.

For decades, UMFA's bargaining strategy has been designed to maximize the pressure points that the academic calendar provides. Much like how the Canadian Union of Postal Workers time their bargaining deadlines in December to coincide with the increase in mail/parcels during the busy holiday season (CBC, 2024 Nov 14), or how the unions at Air Canada align their bargaining deadlines with the busy summer travel season (CBC, 2024 Aug 14; Benchetrit, 2025), UMFA has timed its bargaining deadlines based on the academic calendar. All four UMFA strikes occurred in November before midterm grades were submitted. While McAlevey's organizing approach focuses on achieving a "supermajority" of union members (90% and higher) to support bargaining proposals, UMFA has never waited until it had over 90% member buy-in but has always utilized the natural pressures created by the academic calendar. McAlevey may have argued that UMFA's wins could have been bigger, or the strikes could have been shorter, if UMFA had been able to mobilize a supermajority of its members, but UMFA has succeeded by combining bargaining timelines with organizing and mobilizing, and recommends this approach to other academic staff associations.

Union openness and transparency

To reduce barriers and create opportunities for member involvement, UMFA has implemented the Labor Notes approach and aims for "maximum participation in the whole process, not just at the table" (David Friedman, 2023). Some concrete examples include:

- **Openness of meetings:** Prior to 2016, meeting materials of UMFA's Board of Representatives were only distributed in-person in the boardroom. Now, Board Reps are encouraged to circulate the meeting materials to their constituents with reminders that Board meetings are open to all members, and follow up after the meeting about anything pertinent.

- **Empowering members through union governance:** After the 2016 strike, educational information was created to describe UMFA's decision-making processes, including the bargaining cycle. In 2021, a how-to guide was created to describe *Basic Motion Making and Processes at UMFA Meetings* (UMFA, 2021), which emphasizes that, like in the university's Senate, the rules are in place to help make decisions, not to get in the way of doing so. At the start of meetings, members are now encouraged that if they are unsure how to navigate the rules, the Chair is there to help them.
- **New structure for constituency meetings:** In the lead-up to negotiations in 2021, bargaining constituency meetings were overhauled. Previously these meetings had served as information sessions, with members of the bargaining team providing updates for 90% of the meeting, and members asking questions or providing input for 10%. Now those roles are reversed, with members talking about their bargaining priorities and working conditions for 90% of the meeting. Members are also asked how important the bargaining issues are to them, and what they are willing to do about them. Bargaining team members chart this information, and it is used to inform the bargaining strategy.
- **Increased and improved communications:** The number of communications to UMFA members has increased, including bargaining updates after each bargaining session, emphasizing that the power of the union comes when members demonstrate their support for the bargaining priorities. The messages commonly include a task for members, such as attending a rally, wearing an UMFA button, signing a petition, or voting yes in the strike vote. In the past when members expressed concern or dissent about bargaining strategies or the progress of negotiations, the response was to elide and ignore differences among members. Now, UMFA communications seek to engage the criticism, and meetings encourage discussion of these issues.

While some of these examples seem unremarkable (e.g. sharing meeting materials), collectively they have made UMFA more open to its members. Before 2013, union leaders emphasized confidentiality to protect the union's bargaining "strategy," avoided conversations with members that could undermine the official position of "the union" and only engaged members who had proven their loyalty to the union. In contrast, UMFA's organizing efforts shifted the emphasis to open and honest approaches, centring union members at the heart of their union. For example, there has been a steady increase in opportunities for member participation, such as coordinated meetings with Members of the Legislative

Assembly, advocating for safe working conditions, and more opportunities to provide input into bargaining. UMFA presidents have advocated for members to be active within their union, emphasizing that “UMFA is what all of us make it. There will be disagreement and debate along the way that will make us stronger as long as we remain focused on a better workplace” (UMFA, 2022).

Big open bargaining

Since 2021, UMFA has sought to open negotiations so members can observe the process in real time, an organizing strategy McAlevey refers to as big open bargaining (McAlevey & Lawlor, 2021). This initiative was in part a response to criticisms and frustrations following the uniquely difficult 2020 bargaining round which produced meagre gains — amidst a meddling Progressive Conservative provincial government intent on continuing severe austerity measures, and limits imposed to job action by the raging COVID-19 pandemic’s first large wave of infection in Manitoba. However, open bargaining also reflected the desires of UMFA members who participated in Organizing for Power workshops and supported the philosophy. During previous rounds of bargaining, UMFA would occasionally invite members with subject expertise into bargaining meetings, despite not being members of the bargaining team, and the administration would do the same with their own experts. Opening negotiations to more members was designed as an incremental next step to this established practice. In 2020, members on UMFA committees (e.g. the Equity and Diversity Committee) were able to observe bargaining meetings when issues relevant to their committee were discussed, however, due to a number of reasons, the fight to fully open negotiations was sidelined in 2021.

The goal of opening UMFA’s negotiations to all members was achieved in 2024 but did not come without a fight. In 2023, UMFA members updated the *Standing Rules* (UMFA, 2023) to include a section on “openness of negotiation meetings” outlining UMFA’s protocols for members to observe the meetings (e.g. only members of the bargaining unit can attend, members are there to observe but not speak, recordings are not permitted, etc.). This enshrined the practice as an important member-driven initiative within UMFA’s governance structure. After UMFA’s general membership approved the bargaining proposals on August 20, 2024, negotiations were set to begin with the university’s administration. However, the administration refused to discuss bargaining proposals in the presence of rank-and-file UMFA members. Only after organizing and mobilizing efforts demonstrated member support for open bargaining, negotiations finally began on October 16, with UMFA

members present to observe. Some concessions to the open bargaining protocols were made — for example, UMFA’s bargaining team needed to provide the administration advance notice of who would be in attendance, and the administration wanted to bring their own observers. These concessions are seen as an incremental approach to achieving openness of bargaining meetings.

Though the quest to achieve open bargaining was member-driven and supported by a majority of UMFA members, attendance at the meetings was very low. More organizing efforts could have been made to increase attendance at these meetings, though UMFA also needed to prioritize preparing for bargaining meetings, providing comprehensive updates to all members after each bargaining session, and organizing public displays of support (e.g. a rally in front of the administration building and the three-day in-person strike vote). While an opportunity to demonstrate power at the bargaining table may have been missed by not having large groups of members present at each negotiation meeting, the administration’s bargaining team was reportedly more reserved and restrained, and less offensive, when rank-and-file members were present. A small group of members did regularly attend the negotiation meetings, after repeatedly voicing their skepticism about UMFA’s ability to effectively convey arguments in support of UMFA’s bargaining proposals. Despite having read years of detailed reports of the goings-on at the bargaining table, some observers only accepted the accuracy of the union’s depiction of events when they saw negotiations for themselves.

As with most aspects of bargaining, big open bargaining is proceeding incrementally at UMFA. Now that the practice of allowing observers into the bargaining room has been established, in future rounds of bargaining UMFA will work to reduce barriers to attending negotiation meetings and will increase its efforts to increase attendance at the bargaining meetings.

Criticisms of aspects of organizing approaches

Advocacy and mobilizing to supplement organizing

McAlevy’s approach to organizing, and the Organizing for Power training largely inspired by it (McAlevy, 2016; Organizing for Power, 2026), emphasizes the importance and effectiveness of organizing, obscuring the role of advocacy and mobilizing. After a decade of implementing organizing approaches, we are compelled to emphasize the importance of all three methods. For example, a strike vote requires a strong organizing approach to ensure a high voter turnout and a

high “yes” vote. For other structure tests, such as attendance at rallies or poster campaigns, we have successfully mobilized a core group of members without organizing the entirety of the membership, allowing the bargaining timeline to remain on schedule. In a profession based on expertise, UMFA also recognizes situations when it is productive, if not imperative, to utilize experts. This includes times when expert opinion (including members’ expertise) is beneficial in the media, in lobbying the government, or in bargaining meetings. At times these mobilizing and advocacy efforts have been intentionally built into the ladder of escalation, while at other times they have been reactions that arose throughout the course of negotiations.

Bargaining for minority issues

One issue UMFA has encountered with embracing organizing approaches is the dichotomy of increasing member participation and making significant gains during bargaining on issues that benefit a minority of members. Small and incremental gains on minority issues are commonly made in each round of bargaining (e.g. issues related to equity, diversity, and inclusion) and can often be achieved by persuasive and logical arguments at the bargaining table, or through the grievance process, particularly on basic issues of justice. However, some changes cannot be achieved incrementally and require power that can only be achieved through a strike. Based on UMFA’s experiences, achieving big wins on minority issues requires a far more nuanced and strategic approach than organizing a supermajority. UMFA’s wins on minority issues, notably pay parity in 2021 (Petz, 2021), have been achieved by combining them with strike-able issues that had majority support. The literature emphasizes organizing approaches, particularly supermajorities of support, but downplays the prudent considerations and practical skills required for union success in the long term. Bargaining teams, and their larger supporting committees, must navigate bargaining proposals from inception to the end of the bargaining round, determining when to remove issues from the bargaining table, when to amend them, and when to continue insisting on improvements. Majority (and even supermajority) support for bargaining issues is an important organizing strategy, though in our experience a combination of tactics and strategies is most appropriate and most effective.

Conclusion

Many unions around the world have embraced organizing approaches to successfully win meaningful gains for workers that could not have been achieved without big strikes. Jane McAlevey's teachings have played an important part in breathing energy and excitement into the labour movement by promoting the philosophy of uniting supermajorities of workers to make large scale gains, encouraging workers to participate and take ownership within their unions and their communities. Organizing approaches have improved working conditions in some large unions and some sectors of the workforce.

Our experiences embracing organizing approaches within the University of Manitoba Faculty Association have resulted in positive change and contributed to big wins achieved in bargaining and from strikes. UMFA's organizing has deepened our democratic practices by utilizing our longstanding governance structure and past practices, increasing openness and transparency, and making space for members to be more involved in their union, which has led to better decision making. We have not exclusively embraced organizing approaches, nor one specific approach to organizing, but have used organizing to strengthen and enhance our union services, advocacy, and mobilizing practices, combining all of these essential tools as part of a broader strategy. By sharing our experiences of integrating organizing approaches throughout the last decade, we hope we have provided a complementary viewpoint to the case studies presented by McAlevey that focus only on snapshots in time, not the continuum of unions and workplaces. We encourage all Canadian faculty unions to similarly embrace organizing approaches.

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Endnotes

¹ Dalhousie Faculty Association in 1988, 1998, 2002, 2025; Syndicat des professeurs et professeures de l'Université Laval in 1990 and 2023; and Association of McGill Professors of Law in 2024.

² CUPE 3903 at York University has embraced open bargaining since at least 2008, and the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) Academic Staff Association has previously utilized open bargaining.

³ Of UMFA's 1,209 members in 2016, 779 members voted in the strike vote, with 666 (85.4%) voting in support of a strike.

⁴ The survey is anonymous and identifying characteristics are not associated with members' survey responses.