

THE UWFA NEWS

Academic Freedom on Campus and Beyond

By Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, *History*

On Tuesday, November 17, 2009, a timely discussion on academic freedom took place at the Eckhardt-Gramatté Hall. The panel that initiated this conversation consisted of four faculty members of University of Winnipeg: Kelly Gorkoff, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Guelph, and presently an Instructor in the Criminal Justice Department; Christopher Leo, professor in the Department of Politics; Vesna Milosevic-Zdjelar, Instructor in the Department of Physics; and Brock Pitawanakwat, Assistant Professor in the Aboriginal Governance Program.

The evening began with a spirited introduction to concerns about academic freedom at a number of universities around the globe, delivered by Milena Placentile, a local curator and writer. With examples of struggles in universities in South Africa, Poland, and the U.S., among others, Placentile illustrated the extent to which university citizens, and citizens at large, need to be vigilant in order to safeguard academic freedom which, in her opinion, should be “protected as a universal civil right.”

Continued on Page 4

UWFA Office Closure

The UWFA Office will be closed for the holiday season from December 18, 2009 to January 4, 2010.

We hope that you have a wonderful holiday season and the best of luck in the new year.

If you need assistance while the office is closed, please email uwfa@uwinnipeg.ca and someone will get back to you. Please keep in mind that it may take a day or two to respond.

Issue 6, December 2009

In this issue:

Where Acronyms Meet	2
Transforming the Academy	3
Saddle Up, Partner!	3
Pop Goes the Union 2	5
Find Your UWFA News Online at http://www.uwfa.ca	

Bargaining Update

The CF Bargaining Team met with the Employer on December 17. We agreed on a bargaining protocol and exchanged proposals on non-monetary issues. We scheduled four whole meeting days in January and we are hopeful that we will have an agreement to put before the Executive Council by the end of January and then to the Membership.

We anticipate the first bargaining meetings on behalf of the Collegiate Unit to occur in late January.

Where Acronyms Meet: UWFA Goes to the MFL Convention

By Mark Golden, *Classics*

UWFA and its members support other workers in various ways, whether by joining their picket lines (most recently, in front of the Rice Building during the strike at Brandon University) or by contributing to the CAUT Defence Fund (which provides strike pay). But our involvement is not confined to crises. UWFA is a member of the Manitoba Organization of Faculty Associations (MOFA), which lobbies COPSE and senior levels of government; in fact, our own Jim Clark (Psychology) serves as MOFA president. UWFA also sends representatives to the monthly meetings of the Winnipeg Labour Council and the triennial Manitoba Federation of Labour (MFL) conventions. Nolan Reilly (History) and Byron Sheldrick attended the 2006 convention on our behalf and Nolan returned to this year's meeting at Brandon in early October to present (to a standing ovation) the kit he and his wife Sharon developed for teaching the Winnipeg General Strike in secondary school classrooms. I was our official delegate.

Three things stood out:

1. The convention was in large part a love-in for the NDP, with leadership candidates much in evidence, Minister of Labour Nancy Allan getting a platform for a long list of her government's achievements, and Gary Doer a rousing send-off during the final afternoon. Meanwhile, many resolutions called on the MFL to prod the provincial government to act on various fronts, thereby demonstrating how much the NDP has left undone or done poorly over the last ten years. This was a clear contradiction and I was not the only delegate to notice.
2. Many of the resolutions themselves were motherhood matters for a labour convention: the minimum wage, anti-scab legislation, workplace safety and health. The only one to spark debate

concerned post-secondary education. The Manitoba Government Employees Union local 153 called on the MFL to lobby for the extension of the tuition freeze. This was one of the very few resolutions to reach the floor with a committee recommendation not to approve it, and the delegates duly voted it down by about 2 to 1. This is a real squeaker by MFL standards, the equivalent of the Florida presidential count in 2000. As a result of the vote, MFL policy (developed in consultation with faculty unions, among others) remains what it was: mainly to encourage increases in core funding for post-secondary institutions and students. Who could object? But a more interesting question is why, in an organization which does not foster debate (resolutions are not made available before the meeting, for example), this issue in particular was allowed to attract discussion and disagreement.

3. Given how seldom the MFL meets in convention, its executive plays a particularly prominent role. Larger affiliates (such as UMFA) have their own vice-presidents (or two). But UWFA is small and so is combined with other small affiliates. Our V-P had been Alex Forrest of the Fire Fighters Association, a University of Winnipeg grad and a vigorous and media-savvy spokesman for his members, but not perhaps the best representative for our academic group (with its particular interests pertaining to academic freedom, research, privacy, etc.) Another candidate stepped forward from the Sheet Metal Workers and was elected by a vote of 6 to 3. We'll see whether Larry Boyko does a good job of speaking for or even to the diverse group he now represents. But at least UWFA can claim to have had some influence on the Manitoba labour movement, for good or ill.

The Manitoba Federation of Labour represents Canadian Labour Congress affiliated labour unions in Manitoba. It was chartered in 1956 and is the province's central labour body. More information on the MFL is available at www.mfl.mb.ca.

Transforming The Academy: CAUT Aboriginal Academics Conference

Adapted for the UWFA News by Tracy Whalen

The most recent conference of Aboriginal academic staff discussed a host of challenges that face Aboriginal faculty in postsecondary institutions. For instance, Aboriginal female faculty often feel they have to prove themselves; universities do not always provide a non-threatening environment; Aboriginal faculty, both female and male, are not given the same status as other faculty. Aboriginal faculty are expected to sit on every committee involving Aboriginal students or communities and expected to remain involved in the community, an important value. However, fulfilling community responsibilities can threaten promotion and tenure.

The meeting also raised questions around curriculum and teaching evaluation. How can academics include Indigenous knowledge? Who will evaluate how one teaches Aboriginal Indigenous knowledge, particularly when it comes time for tenure applications? How will Aboriginal instructors be compared to other faculty? How can universities include Elders as faculty? How does one teach administration the significance of Indigenous knowledge?

The meeting also brought suggestions, however. One suggestion was to adopt the SAGE (Supporting Aboriginal Grad Enhancement) program from The University of British Columbia. There, graduate students are encouraged to find mentors; there is also an annual symposium where they present their research. Other universities might develop similar opportunities to mentor junior faculty. Universities could provide assistance with proposal writing and grant applications. This conference raised many concerns, but progress was also made in terms of future initiatives.

Saddle Up Partner! The 2010 Olympics and Postsecondary Classes

By Tracy Whalen, Rhetoric, Writing and Communications

The University of Winnipeg will enjoy a one-week reading break in February, but many colleges and universities across the Lower Mainland of BC have scheduled a two-week hiatus during the upcoming Winter Olympic Games. Simon Fraser University, UBC, Douglas College, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, and Langara College---to name a few--- have cancelled classes. The break will give students a chance to participate in the Games, but the decision is also an anticipatory move, given the road closures and increased traffic of the Olympics. The extended break means that the academic semester will end two weeks later.

This rescheduling is not entirely uncomplicated. Soizie Wadge, a coordinator with the Teaching Support Staff Union at SFU, argues in a recent *Georgia Straight* article that the break will affect graduate students, who are part of the union. The final weeks of term have historically been a quieter time for graduate students to pursue their own research, but such will not be the case this year. According to the *Straight* article, staff will still be expected to come to work, despite class postponements.

Some universities and colleges in Vancouver have joined the Winter Games Community Contributor Program, which involves partnerships between postsecondary institutions and the Vancouver Organizing Committee. According to the Olympics website, schools like Simon Fraser's Burnaby campus will contribute hundreds of parking spaces, becoming a departure hub for buses going to Olympic mountain venues. SFU, like other schools, will also be providing space for training volunteers, holding meetings, and housing national delegations. In exchange, these campuses will receive advertising, while students will be offered work experience with the Games. Only time will tell if these partnerships will bypass a "de-luge" of problems on what could be a slippery slope.

Academic Freedom (continued)

Although all four panellists were academics, the discussion was especially successful because it focussed on issues of concern with which both faculty and students could relate. A seemingly complex question was examined from the grassroots, with just the right combination of academic inquiry and personal stories. With topics ranging from the demands and limits placed on contract faculty, to increased privatisation and entrepreneurial models adopted by some university administrations, the panel did not attempt to arrive at some superficial common ground, but rather addressed the broader theme of the need for spaces for critical thought.

As moderator, Milena Placentile began the discussion with two probing questions: “Should academics carry on building traditional networks and hope their dissenting opinions will appear more palatable through association with moderates, or should they find altogether new ways of working? Should they speak out and risk being ostracised by their professional community, or take that chance and turn their practices of research and analysis into active resistance?”

Not surprisingly, none of the panellists had definitive answers to offer to either of these questions, but their individual stories on the challenges they each faced in their respective fields provided much food for thought. Kelly Gorkoff, for instance, outlined the path of her personal growth as an emerging academic by highlighting the “seductive illusion” of post-secondary education. Although still working on her doctorate, Gorkoff has already had an article of hers labelled “dangerous scholarship,” which was subsequently denied publication. Furthermore, with one foot in graduate studies and the other in university teaching, Gorkoff is in the unenviable position of seeing the perilous road ahead. As she jokingly admitted, she used to believe that once she became a professor, she would be free to research as she pleased, but the demands to get

tenure can dampen that freedom. Gorkoff provided a particularly articulate account of the disconcerting trends around her, from the pressure to teach larger and larger classes, and the call for academics to teach marketable or transferable skills, to the lack of incentives at the university to hire critical scholars.

Gorkoff’s poignant observations were followed by those of a more experienced scholar, Vesna Milosevic-Zdjelar, whose expertise and years of experience in former Yugoslavia proved to be inadequate in the Canadian context, despite the fact that she and her husband had been recruited by Canadian immigrant officials. Milosevic-Zdjelar’s story resonates with those of many recent arrivals in Canada, whose qualifications from their homelands do not qualify them to work in the line of work for which they were trained, a finding that Milosevic-Zdjelar found especially puzzling given the reputation that Canada has for its purported fair treatment of minority groups. On the academic front more specifically, Milosevic-Zdjelar spoke fervently of the shock she experienced when she arrived in Canada because she saw nothing but an Anglo-Saxon curriculum, and try as she might, she could not figure out the reasons for the absence of Aboriginal world views, for instance. She was equally surprised to learn that if it was difficult to ask questions in her former home, it was not necessarily any easier in her new one.

Almost in answer to Milosevic-Zdjelar’s queries, Brock Pitawanakwat stepped up to the podium with some insightful comments on the complexities surrounding post-secondary education and Canada’s First Nations peoples. On the one hand, he pointed out the ways in which the university is a colonized space that promotes a “white-stream” curriculum; on the other hand, indigenous peoples see post-secondary education as a means of empowerment in their struggles for self-governance. As a member of the Aboriginal Governance Program at The University of Winnipeg, Pitawanakwat is well placed to see the

Continues on Next Page

Continued...

challenges that First Nations peoples face in their attempts to have their experiences legitimated, not least of which is the lack of academic freedom inherent in the urban, Christian-based calendar that the university follows, a calendar that does not accommodate Aboriginal historical and cultural ceremonies.

The final discussant at this conversation on academic freedom was Christopher Leo, whose tongue-in-cheek presentation was not so much on academic freedom but on what he called “academic helplessness.” Essentially Leo bemoaned the “pathetic readership of academic articles” and promoted the internet, and “the blog” in particular, as a means for academics to reach a wider audience. As a former journalist, Leo was accustomed to having his articles widely read, but he became an academic because he wanted to do more in-depth research, which he has accomplished, but now he gets no readers, or very few in comparison to his journalistic output. Providing an entertaining and perhaps useful alternative for the dissemination of scholarly work, Leo’s critiques on the refereeing process, the inaccessibility of academic journals, and the students’ reluctance to read such journals raise interesting questions about the nature of academic work. If an increase in readership is a primary goal, should we adopt the *Reader’s Digest* as our model?

The question-and-answer segment of the evening was in many ways a feather in the cap of a very fine event, with many self-identified students in the audience articulating intelligent, and often personal, points of view in ways that highlighted the diversity of The University of Winnipeg student body, and the need for more open discussions of this kind. The themes that were raised generated such interest that the audience voted to extend the time allotted for the event. Perhaps at the next meeting organizers could invite some students to do a formal presentation as well, rather than have them react to faculty concerns alone, worthy as those may be.

Pop Goes the Union 2

By Tracy Whalen, Rhetoric, Writing and Communications

We received responses to our last piece about unions in popular culture, specifically *The Simpsons* and its union episode. Not surprisingly, the film mentioned was director Martin Ritt’s 1979 film *Norma Rae*, the story of an Alabama textile worker who literally stands up (on top of her table) for what she believes in: unionization at the factory where she works. This film, as many know, starred Sally Field as Norma Rae. It was the acceptance speech *not* for this film but for her second Academy Award (for *Places in the Heart*) that included the oft-misquoted line, “I can’t deny the fact that you like me, right now, you like me!”

About The UWFA News

The UWFA News is compiled and published by the UWFA Communications Committee.

Communications Committee
Members:

Tracy Whalen (chair)

Allen Mills

Alexander Freund

Michael Hohner

Roewan Crowe

Mark Golden

Darlene Abreu-Ferreira

Layout: Daniel Draper

Images and charts in the UWFA News are reproduced with permission.

For more information on The UWFA News, contact Tracy Whalen at:

t.whalen@uwinnipeg.ca

Mailing Address

UWFA
3502 - 515 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg, Manitoba
R3B 2E9

Your Union.
Your News.