WHATEVER YOUR VIEWS ARE, PLEASE MAKE SURE YOU VOTE

A Trade Union Has Applied To Represent You In Your Relations With The University

On Friday April 19, 2013 the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) filed an application with the Ontario Labour Relations Board (“OLRB”) to be certified as the exclusive bargaining agent for a large subset of Postdoctoral Fellows (PDFs) at the University. If the OLRB orders a vote, it will likely order it to take place this Friday April 26, 2013 at specified times and locations on the St. George, UTM, and UTSC campuses. The union has also requested a polling station at the Institute for Aerospace Studies in Downsview. We will communicate with you further once we have further details from the OLRB regarding the vote.

What Unionization Would Mean

We wrote to you in March regarding the process of unionization in Ontario, and will not repeat that information. The key point is that if CUPE were certified as the exclusive bargaining agent, it would represent you in all the terms and conditions of your appointment, and individual arrangements with the University would no longer be possible. It would have the right to negotiate a first collective agreement with the University, the terms of which cannot be predicted. It would also have the right to collect union dues, to go on strike, and to take other actions. Because the nature of your relationship with the University would change to being an employee, there would be deductions directly from your stipend for income tax, CPP (Canada Pension Plan), and EI (Employment Insurance) premiums. Unionization would not result in increased funding being available from external sources.

Unionization Is A Very Important Decision – Some Things To Consider

Trade unions typically make all kinds of promises about what advantages unionization would bring. By law, the University is prohibited from making such promises. And, in any event what would actually happen would depend on what was agreed to in collective bargaining, not what the trade union promised. As extremely well educated academics you are used to scrutinizing evidence carefully. When you do so, you may want to consider the following:

- Will having a union help you in advancing the goals of your fellowship, or does it run the risk of complicating those goals?
- Will it make it easier or more difficult to compete within Canada or internationally for ongoing positions when you have completed the goals of your fellowship and it ends?
- Have you confirmed what union dues CUPE would require you to pay from your stipend? (Other CUPE units at the University have deductions ranging from 1.5% to 2.5% of income.)
- Have you considered what would happen to your research progress and other activities if CUPE went on strike?
- Have you read CUPE’s constitution and considered what it says regarding the rights of members, the possibility of discipline, or the possibility of fines?
- Would you prefer the ability to deal directly with your Principal Investigator regarding the terms and conditions of your fellowship, or would you rather they be dealt with in a collective agreement administered by a trade union?
- Have you considered statutory deductions from your stipend for Income Tax, CPP, and EI? For example, a single Postdoctoral Fellow receiving a stipend of $38,500 would likely have to contribute over $2,000 for CPP and EI.
- Do you think that having a trade union represent you will advance your career aspirations?

The University trusts your judgement and will respect your decision, one way or another.
The Nature Of The Relationship

Currently, the arrangement you have entered into with the University is not structured as an employment relationship. At some universities where the Postdoctoral Fellows are not unionized, it has been agreed in discussions with them to treat a subset of them as employees. At the University of Toronto, our Postdoctoral Fellows have not had such discussions with the University or sought to limit or change the independence of the current arrangements.

The Importance of Voting

If a vote is ordered by the OLRB, we will let you know the details. It will be a secret ballot vote. No one will know how you vote. Proxies will not be permitted – you will have to attend in person. The outcome of the vote will be determined by a majority of those who actually cast ballots. To take an example, if a proposed bargaining unit consisted of 400 people and only 100 people vote, the outcome for everyone could be determined by 51 people casting ballots in favour of the trade union.

What Are The University’s Views?

The University is permitted by law to express its views regarding unionization. The University has many collective agreements with different trade unions covering various groups of employees. It is not an anti-union employer. Indeed, the University has worked successfully with CUPE and other unions in negotiating and administering collective agreements. Strikes have been rare. However, in the case of Postdoctoral Fellows, the University thinks that unionization is not well-suited to the unique interests of this very special and very important group. For example, the University does not think that unionization will somehow expand external funding or create new and unexpected funding available for postdoctoral research. The University does not think that unionization will somehow result in better research, or an enhanced reputation, or greater opportunities in academia, research or industry when the fellowship ends. Sometimes the flexibility of individual relationships is better suited to the dynamics of certain relationships, and the University believes this to be one such case. The relationship between a Postdoctoral Fellow and a supervisor is a close one, and across the University, despite basics that are common to all, there are many individual arrangements that have been worked out. In our view, a collective agreement is not the best way of structuring the relationship between a Postdoctoral Fellow and his or her Principal Investigator.

Final Thoughts

The University values all of its Postdoctoral Fellows very highly. As you pursue your own research goals, and collaborate with leading faculty members, you have a significant influence on the excellence of research at the University both now and in the future. The University is proud of your contributions and proud to have you as a research colleague. The University knows that you will consider the issue of unionization very carefully, and it thanks you for doing so thoughtfully before casting a ballot (assuming a vote is ordered). Please vote, and please know that the University will respect whatever choice you make.

Sincerely,

Paul Young, Cheryl Misak
Vice President Research and Innovation Vice President and Provost

Brian Corman
Dean of Graduate Studies and Vice-Provost, Graduate Education