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## The Class Struggle in Universities: The 2024 York University Strike

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## The Class Struggle in Universities: The 2024 York University Strike

### Abstract

The 2024 strike at York University was a powerful manifestation of the society-wide struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat under state monopoly capitalism. The striking workers of CUPE 3903 faced a level of hostility in their struggle for better pay, conditions, and job security, that exposed the capitalist imperatives of York University and its exploitative tendencies. The strike demonstrated that York, despite being a public university, is a capitalist organisation that relies on the maintenance of a cheap, disposable, and exploitable supply of labour power, in the form of contract faculty, teaching assistants, graduate students, and part-time librarians and archivists. York University's treatment of the CUPE 3903 strike is indissolubly connected to the leadership's support for imperialism, especially Israel's genocidal occupation of Palestine. Most importantly, the strike demonstrated the tremendous power of the working class. Without the labour of this class, no university can function.

### Keywords

strike, class struggle, universities, exploitation, capitalism

### Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Joe Pateman is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Politics at York University. His research encompasses the political ideas and activities of Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, and Vladimir Lenin, in addition to the figures, movements, and events that they have inspired. A major focus of Dr. Pateman's research is the relationship between Marxism and the Black liberation movement. More information about his work is available at: <https://profiles.laps.yorku.ca/profiles/jpateman/>

On the 26<sup>th</sup> February 2024, branch 3903 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE 3903) went on strike at York University (YorkU). CUPE 3903 represents contract faculty, teaching assistants, graduate students, and part-time librarians and archivists at York University. The purpose of the CUPE 3903 strike was to secure wage increases, stronger job security, and better working conditions for its members. The strike concluded on the 19<sup>th</sup> April, after nearly eight weeks of bitter struggle between CUPE 3903 and the University leadership. This struggle was a striking manifestation of the society-wide class struggle between the bourgeoisie and proletariat.

Some basic facts can demonstrate this. York University is Canada's third largest university. With a population of 55,000 students, it depends on their fees for a large portion of its revenue. Students pay fees to enroll on educational courses. Accordingly, YorkU's financial growth model requires that it maximise student course enrollment numbers. More generally, the University's financial health relies directly on the teaching of its gigantic student population. More teaching means more money, less teaching, less money.

To maintain this teaching, YorkU employs around 3000 CUPE workers, who are responsible for over 50% of the university's courses. Without their vital contributions to teaching, including the planning of classes, teaching of classes, grading of student assessments, and the provision of pastoral support and academic supervision, York University would be unable to maintain its large student enrollments, and by extension, its revenue. CUPE 3903 therefore represents a large portion of YorkU's working class; its proletariat. It is the workers who keep any productive enterprise running, and York University is no exception.

Despite serving this critically important function, CUPE 3903 workers suffer inhumane circumstances. They have poor wages, poor job security, and poor working conditions, which has meant that many struggle to afford the necessities of social reproduction, including housing, food, and childcare. The wage situation is especially bad. Before the strike, yearly wage increases for CUPE 3903 workers had been capped at 1% for years, trailing behind the rate of inflation. It is for these reasons that CUPE 3903 went on strike.

All of this shows that York University is a capitalist institution. Capitalism requires the accumulation of capital in the form of profit. Capitalist organisations profit by paying the working class less in wages than the value they create. This is called exploitation. In line with these dictates, the York University administration has subjected its CUPE 3903 workers to a system of capitalist exploitation, one that exploits their labour to extract the maximum revenue. The YorkU leadership maintains this system this by paying its workers as little as possible, by working them as hard as possible, by keeping them in a precarious working position, by opposing their attempts to democratise the university, and of course, by opposing their striking actions.

It is important to note that York University is not capitalist in the typical sense. It is technically a public, and not a private university. That is, YorkU is a state-owned organisation that receives a significant portion of its funding from the Canadian government. Capitalism,

by contrast, is typically defined as a socioeconomic system of private ownership with minimal state funding. Nevertheless, these facts do not diminish the capitalist essence of York University. As Frederick Engels explained in *Anti-Dühring*, nationalisation by a capitalist state does not eradicate capitalism, and for two reasons. Firstly, the state officials who govern the nationalised enterprises remain subordinate to the capitalist class, which retains indirect command. This is not too dissimilar to private enterprises, which capitalists own and command directly. In both cases the workers themselves are in a subordinate position with limited control. Secondly, in a capitalist state, which relies on profit, nationalised enterprises prioritise profit over working class needs, just like private enterprises. Accordingly, state capitalism is still capitalism, and public organisations owned by the bourgeois state are bourgeois organisations. York University is such an organisation. Its leaders and managers are subordinate to Canadian state monopoly capitalism, and their chief priority is not the development of quality education and knowledge for the working class, but the accumulation of capital. The CUPE 3903 strike has made this evident in several respects.

For starters, a major reason why the strike lasted so long is that the University administration opposed CUPE 3903's demands for better pay, job security, and working conditions. Meeting these demands fully would have reduced the University's revenues, which was unacceptable for YorkU's leaders. Their refusal to compromise resulted in a prolonged strike, which forced many CUPE 3903 members to work multiple jobs and rely on food banks to make ends meet. The strike ended with the CUPE 3903 workers winning an average wage increase of 2.96% a year, which cannot keep pace with rising living costs and inflation. Contrastingly, York University's administrators have given themselves a 40% pay increase over the past five years. This increase has been achieved off the backs of exploited CUPE 3903 workers. This contrast between the enrichment of the University higherups and the impoverishment of its working class vividly illuminates the capitalist system at work.

York University's capitalist orientation also explains the leadership's hostility towards the striking actions of the CUPE 3903 members. The University leadership invited the Toronto Police Service to monitor, harass, and repress the striking workers. On the 4<sup>th</sup> March, the police unjustly arrested a CUPE 3903 member peacefully protesting at a picket line. The YorkU leadership enabled these actions to scare the striking workers into submission, destroy their morale, and weaken their bargaining power. By enabling police oppression, the University leadership hoped that CUPE 3903 would give up the struggle. This strategy is tried and tested weapon of capitalist organisations in their attempts to crush working class power.

Thirdly, York University's treatment of the CUPE 3903 strike is indissolubly connected to the leadership's support for imperialism, especially Israel's occupation of Palestine. YorkU has several lucrative economic investments and academic partnerships with Israel, a racist settler colonial state. For example, in 2016, the YU Divest Coalition published a report revealing that the University has investment holdings in Western weapons manufacturers such as BAE Systems, Lockheed Martin, Northrup Grumman, Amphenol, and Bar-Tec Ltd, whose weapons have 'directly resulted in numerous human rights violations and war crimes in the Occupied

Palestinian Territories’.<sup>1</sup> York University also offers ‘Study in Israel Scholarships’ for YorkU students wanting to study for a semester or a year at one of Israeli’s universities, which have been complicit in the government’s colonial enterprise.<sup>2</sup> In the same way that the University relies financially on the exploitation of its CUPE 3903 workers, it also relies financially on the super profits reaped by the Israeli state’s imposition of colonialism, apartheid, and genocide in Palestine, against the Palestinian people.

Much to the ire of the YorkU leadership, CUPE 3903 has a long and illustrious record of publicly demonstrating its opposition to Israeli settler colonialism, its support for Palestinian liberation, and its critique of York University’s Israel investments. This record has antagonised the University leadership, and it has contributed to the University administration’s hostilities during the CUPE 3903 strike.

In 2021, for instance, CUPE 3903 passed a motion endorsing the YU Divest Coalition, its report, and the YU Weapons Divest Campaign. Besides denouncing the ‘ongoing cleansing against indigenous Palestinians’ in ‘occupied Palestine’ neighbourhoods, the motion called on York University to divest from its Israeli weapons investments.<sup>3</sup> Although the motion failed to stop YorkU’s investments, it succeeded in antagonising the University leadership.

In January 2024, on the eve of the strike, CUPE 3903’s Palestinian Solidarity Working Group published its *Toolkit on Teaching Palestine*, which provided a guide for Teaching Assistants at York University on the importance of speaking about and teaching Palestine in the classroom.<sup>4</sup> CUPE published this document because some staff and students were facing reprisals from the University for speaking up in support of Palestinian liberation. The University leadership was so indignant with the toolkit that the President Rhonda Lenton intervened in the matter herself. The University issued her public message criticizing the toolkit for violating the University’s ‘rightful expectations’.<sup>5</sup> In addition, ‘the University’s senior administration’ wrote directly to the CUPE 3903 leadership to discuss the matter,<sup>6</sup> which was an act of ‘unacceptable interference in university governance’, ‘overreach’, and ‘intimidation’.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, in May 2024, during the midst of the strike, CUPE 3903 issued a ‘Statement of Solidarity with Students Protesting in Solidarity with Palestine’, which expressed

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<sup>1</sup> YU Divest Coalition (2016) *YU Divest- A Call from the York Community*. P. 6. See also pp. 7, 9, 10, 12. <https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/yufa/pages/277/attachments/original/1560440052/York-U-Divest-Proposal.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> York University (n.d.) ‘Study in Israel Scholarships’. <https://www.yorku.ca/cjs/scholarships-awards-2/study-in-israel-scholarships/>

<sup>3</sup> CUPE 3903 (2021). ‘CUPE 3903 Endorses Motion on YU Weapons Divestment Campaign’. <https://3903.cupe.ca/2021/05/31/cupe-3903-endorses-motion-on-yu-weapons-divestment-campaign/>

<sup>4</sup> Palestinian Solidarity Working Group (2024) *A Toolkit on Teaching Palestine*. [https://ugc.production.linktr.ee/6a025b3a-0d72-4c4e-aaba-2e09f4408f6a\\_Teaching-Palestine-Toolkit.pdf](https://ugc.production.linktr.ee/6a025b3a-0d72-4c4e-aaba-2e09f4408f6a_Teaching-Palestine-Toolkit.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Rhonda Lenton, (2024) ‘A Message from the President’. <https://www.yorku.ca/yfile/2024/01/30/a-message-from-the-president/>

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Stephanie Latella (2024) ‘CUPE 3903 Chairperson’s response to the York administration regarding the Palestinian Solidarity Working Group’s Toolkit’. <https://www.yorku.ca/yfile/2024/01/30/a-message-from-the-president/>

‘unwavering solidarity with and support for the students and workers across the globe acting in solidarity with Palestinian people’.<sup>8</sup>The statement paid special tribute to those YorkU students and teachers who were brave enough to publicly discuss Palestinian liberation in the face of the University’s hostilities.

These anti-imperialist positions partly explain why the York University leadership was so aggressive in its opposition to the CUPE 3903 strike. Clearly, the CUPE 3903’s public support for Palestinian liberation, coupled with its critique of the University’s Israel investments, struck a sensitive nerve amongst YorkU’s senior leaders. Relatedly, the University leadership’s aggressive crackdown on CUPE 3903 was foreshadowed by its similarly aggressive crackdown on pro-Palestinian movements within York University, including the York Federation of Students. Both movements threatened the University’s revenue, and so the YorkU leadership sought to repress them.

Most importantly, however, the strike demonstrated the tremendous power of the working class. By withdrawing their labour, CUPE 3903 members brought teaching at York University to a near standstill. This threat to the University’s revenue forced the University leadership to concede to some of CUPE 3903’s demands, even if these concessions were ultimately inadequate. In any case, the strike showcased the decisive role of the proletariat in a capitalist society, as well as the enduring necessity of trade unions, the organised economic detachments of the working-class. To achieve greater success, university unions must connect their economic class struggle with the political class struggle to overthrow capitalism and build socialism, since only socialism can truly empower the proletariat. As the general staff of the working class, the communist party must lead the way in affecting this shift in ambition.

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<sup>8</sup> CUPE 3903 (2024) ‘Statement of Solidarity with Students Protesting in Solidarity with Palestine’ <https://3903.cupe.ca/2024/05/06/letter-of-solidarity-with-students-protesting-in-solidarity-with-palestine/>