

news from CUASA

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THIS PHOENIX WON'T PHLY

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on behalf of the Steering Committee*

By now most of the members of the University have undoubtedly encountered, and perhaps even enlarged and poked about in, the rummage of rumours that have been accumulating on and around the campus in recent weeks and months. All of them, one way or another, touch upon the imminence of layoffs and dismissals.

A Dean in one Faculty, for example, has privately and in several separate conversations guessed that up to 200 persons may ultimately be affected in this way. An Associate Dean in another Faculty has publicly and in writing identified the number as approximately 50, a reduction "which must be effected reasonably expeditiously". These and other figures have also been mentioned by other sources and in other places, only to be denied, then mentioned once - and more than once - again.

One can only wonder at this way of proceeding and at what it is intended to accomplish: to prepare or to soften up, to shake up or to shake out those who may be vulnerable and insecure, to invite confidence that something is at long last being done or to induce jittery and fatalistic acceptance that what may be must be, that 50 is infinitely preferable to any higher number and that 49 is a shared victory over our common adversity?

Both in its own interest and on behalf of the University, CUASA must take a different approach and a different view. We would not impose silence, but we must stand in the way of a presumption that the issue is settled. We must begin with and insist upon the recognition that it is the academic staff who are principally responsible for any claims to academic respectability and accomplishment the University may legitimately make.

Others have, of course, contributed as well, sometimes significantly, but it is the academic staff - not everyone and not always to the same degree or in the same way - who have planned, devised, shaped, implemented and, when necessary, changed the academic programs which give the University its distinction; who have taught and trained our students; who have undertaken the research and scholarship which do both them and us credit; and who have performed a variety of services for the community, their professions and disciplines, and the country as a whole. That is where we should start rather than with the apparent assumption that an excessive number of academic staff have somehow attached themselves, and persist in remaining attached, to the corporate body of the University.

CUASA and its members must not take the view that no change is necessary, whether in the University's organization, in its programs and program mix, or in the number and complement of its academic staff. On the contrary, we should be prepared, as we have in the past in negotiating the carefully and equitably balanced Article 17 of the Collective Agreement (Financial Stringency Declaration), to cooperate with the Administration and the Board, in whatever way we properly can, in order to safeguard the financial and academic integrity of the University. That may, at some point, even include a declaration of a state of financial stringency, with the runaway train of divisive decisions and layoffs that that will produce. However, that time is not now, at least not on the present evidence nor in the numbers that are being tried on for whatever effect nor in advance of other efforts to allay the University's problems.

We are aware that the University is in financial difficulty. Nevertheless, neither the simplistic forecasts of the 1982 Report nor the massive details of the 1979-80 Budget and Budget Report can be said to have demonstrated how serious that difficulty is or to have pinpointed what sort of action it requires: in respect to a possible reduction in academic staff, for example, not only how many and to what end, but how distributed, by what route, over how short or long a period and at what cost, financial, academic and human. Nor do official reports and semi-official rumours tell us very much - not nearly as much as we are entitled to know - about the Administration's efforts and intentions to reduce other expenditures (e.g., on middle and senior management) or to increase both enrolment-related and, more especially, other income.

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Simply to insist upon our own contribution and worth or upon our right to be more fully informed and persuaded of the University's plight and of the Administration's commitment to means other than just layoffs in academic staff will not be enough. At least one more step - in fact, a series of steps - needs to be undertaken as well before layoffs are even seriously contemplated, let alone pursued or imposed. The reference here is to the discussions and investigations which have been going on, and which now need to be sharply intensified, in the Joint Committee on Article 19 of the Collective Agreement (Academic Career Planning). Included in this examination are such measures as faculty transfers to other academic units, the increased provision of service courses by over-staffed for under-staffed departments, retraining and counselling for alternative careers both inside and outside the University, early retirement schemes and arrangements for otherwise-assisted separations, the increased use of reduced-time appointments and of leaves and sabbaticals, and the integration of the Summer and Fall-Winter terms.

With only one or two exceptions, none of these will by itself generate large savings. The best they can do, in combination with one another and with normal attrition, is to make some difference and to buy some time, to the point, one must hope, of making layoffs less necessary or even unnecessary altogether. In any event, CUASA's position must be that, only when these and similar measures have been considered, designed and implemented, and their results assessed, will we know whether more stringent action is necessary and advisable.

The alternatives to layoff will not be costless. Some of them require actual budgetary expenditures. Most of them call for or clearly imply certain adjustments which the academic staff have in the past sometimes found unattractive and unacceptable - e.g., an increased readiness on the part of a larger number of individuals to be transferred or to provide services to other academic units and, correspondingly, an increased willingness on the part of virtually all academic units to accept such transfers and services; probably fewer course-sections and perhaps somewhat larger classes; at times, assignments to courses, time slots, teaching terms and locations which are not one's personal preference; a possibly substantial reduction in the use of Sessional Lecturers, and so on.

Given the necessity and the logic of constraint, the pursuit of these alternatives as a means of achieving the indefinite deferral of layoffs will almost inevitably have other consequences as well - e.g., at least for a time, only marginally adequate budgets for supplies, equipment, books and journals; and, from now on, a more tough-minded peer review process and, in other ways too, more rigorous assessments for the award of tenure, CDIs, merit increases and promotions.

These adjustments and constraints, as well as the alternatives to layoff with which they are linked, obviously involve a price of one sort or another and, indeed, some real uncertainty as to their ultimate adequacy. On the other hand, what choice do we have, whether as an Association or as a University? Who can possibly prefer or benefit from the many forms of cumulative and lingering damage and self-destruction that will inevitably result from our simply acquiescing in what may or may not be inevitable?

Once again, CUASA must insist upon candid and full disclosure of the University's financial position and prospects, as well as upon the vigorous implementation of all possible alternatives to layoffs. In the same way CUASA must look to Senate, Faculty Boards, Departmental Councils, and their various committees to reassert their authority and to reclaim the initiative in academic matters which they have allowed administrative actions over several years to wrest from their control.

These and many other matters (e.g., salary rationalisation, grievance and arbitration procedures, teaching evaluations, working conditions in the Library, financial compensation, etc.) will frame the agenda for the work of various CUASA and joint committees in the coming months, for continuing discussions between the officers of the Association and senior administrators and, finally, for the lengthy and complex negotiations which may be expected to precede the expiration of the current Collective Agreement on May 1st. It will be a fateful year for the academic staff, as well as for our Association and our University.

Last spring, under an acting helmsman with maritime connections, derelict schooners and foundering ships appeared to be the official metaphor of the day. With a different leadership, a zoological imagery seems to be hinted at in the repeated references to the "New Carleton" as substantially reduced in size and featuring an elegant mix of programs. As near as one can make out at this distance, the new metaphor is some sort of bird - not the raven of the "Old Carleton", perhaps not an albatross or a pigeon or a dodo, but most probably a force-starved slimmed-down phoenix. The process of recreation usually associated with that bird and, threatened now in rumours, hints and statements, simply cannot be attractive to us.