

# Lessons Learned

## Union Organizing at Queen's University

By Andrew Stevens & Krystle Maki



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY TATA

FOR SOME YEARS NOW UNION ACTIVISTS have recognized that an effective rank and file-driven union campaign helps build a sense of community and strength amongst the future membership. That's the kind of campaign we tried to run in the summer and fall of 2008 at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, to organize graduate teaching assistants (TAs) and teaching fellows (TFs). We almost won. It is our hope that the past experience of trying to unionize at Queen's can be useful for future organizing drives, especially considering the looming financial crisis facing universities and the resulting push to cut wages of faculty and staff, not to mention the idea being proposed by the outgoing principal of unpaid "Queen's Days."

Since 2005, teaching assistants at Queen's have been covered by an employment policy overseen by the university's senate, which contains a weak framework regarding grievances, pay structure, and workload. The subcommittee that oversees the implementation of this policy does not offer a single seat for teaching assistants, despite the contribu-

Graduate students and union organizers Andrew Stevens (front, left) and Krystle Maki (second row, third from left) participated in the "Union 101" workshop led by union representative Chris Wilson (front, centre), an organizer with the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

tions they make with grading assignments, leading labs and tutorials, and interacting with undergraduate students. Teaching fellows — graduate students who are paid to instruct courses and perform the same duties as the unionized part-time faculty — are without any form of employment contract. And, unlike most of our unionized counterparts at other Ontario universities, Queen's TAs and TFs do not have access to supplemental benefits or grievance procedures. In many departments, TA and TF positions are allocated arbitrarily, and in some cases the process lacks transparency. While the rate of pay is considered sufficient by most as a source of graduate student funding, the wage levels are constantly being eroded by rising tuition and the cost of living.

In the end, this was what provided the impetus

for forming TAFE, the Teaching Assistant and Fellow Association, the organization that led the union drive.

### FAIRNESS AT WORK

Rather than focussing on wage increases, TAFE placed more attention on equity issues, fairness at work, policy development, expanding non-wage benefits, education, and building a community of workers. Considering the vital service provided by teaching assistants and fellows, there turned out to be widespread support for unionization based on the gains already achieved at other campuses, perceived inequities in the allocation of positions, poor grievance procedures, and the lack of participation by TAs and TFs in the policy development process. This provided the grounding for TAFE's campaign.

Organizers recognized the importance of recruiting numerous volunteers, constructing a public campaign, and, most crucially, winning the war of words against opponents who were often basing their judgments on false perceptions of unions, and unionized campuses, specifically. Queen's is a traditionally conservative environment and one of the last universities in Ontario to not have a union for TAs and TFs. Our opponents used this fact to promote the idea that TAs and TFs at Queen's didn't need union representation and took pride in being "different." This was one of our biggest challenges in the drive.

TAFE was initiated by a group of graduate

students, who then chose the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) as the union they wanted to work with. The PSAC was prepared to allow us to run a student-led association committed to consensus decision-making. It was supportive of our interest in leading a rank-and-file campaign, maintaining local autonomy, having open membership, and providing the necessary financial support.

TAFE's steering committee, comprised of graduate students from a range of departments, operated from campus, as well as a centrally located downtown office provided by the PSAC.

The first step we took after choosing our union was to structure TAFE's operations around tasks that needed to be accomplished, such as public relations, event coordination, and information gathering. For graduate students lacking in time, this task-oriented approach was important to helping prevent burnout and to maintaining the energy required for a sustained campaign.

### COMMUNICATION

After setting up a basic organizational structure we then developed a five-part outreach strategy, determined to build support and to confront opponents. The first part involved an effective media strategy. Press releases and editorials meant for the student-run press was one way to communicate our message. Besides using available media, we developed pamphlets and information booklets that were widely distributed. Unlike organizers at private

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workplaces we had access to many areas of our workplace — the campus — so our ability to get the information out was relatively unrestrained. Issues related to equity were included in our material, which was especially important considering the diverse nature of Canada's university population. It was particularly crucial that students from countries where free and open trade union activities are not permitted be made aware of their rights. TAFE emphasized that union organizing is a fundamental right (ideally) guaranteed by law and that students cannot be expelled or discriminated against for exercising this right.

### **PUBLIC APPEARANCES**

Public appearances were extremely important throughout the campaign. TAFE addressed departments in small talks; gave one-on-one time to individual TAs and Tfs; organized town hall meetings; and addressed international students at their introductory meetings in the fall. These public venues offered us an opportunity to hear about specific problems experienced in departments, and to dispel myths about unionization. Being approachable was important for recruiting new organizers and building a sustainable membership. A number of informal "lunch-and-learns" were also crucial in introducing new people to the benefits of unionization in general, and to the PSAC in particular.

With a tech-savvy group like TAs and TFs, it was vital for TAFE to explore on-line options as a component of our general outreach strategy. Facebook helped our supporters keep track of discussions and upcoming events. An attractive and regularly updated website was the real substance of our on-line presence. "Google Docs," a web-based word processor and spreadsheet application, allowed organizers, remotely if necessary, to keep track of card signing in particular departments, while maintaining privacy. Finally, e-mail list-serves allowed us to keep in regular contact with our supporters and activists.

Campus organizers require a detailed understanding of campus politics. They also need to recognize that allies can contribute to the legitimacy of a campaign. With the involvement of allies, people better see that unionization is not about an outside organization collecting dues and representing employees, but, instead, that unions add to the very fabric of knowledge-based workplaces and the social environment that exists within them. In our campaign, we made this connection by gaining support from the Society of Graduate and Professional Students (SGPS) as well as the Queen's University Faculty Association ([www.qufa.ca](http://www.qufa.ca)), building the understanding that a TA and TF union would contribute both to employment and academic standards. Such a perspective was, in turn, supported by the fifth component of TAFE's strategy: community building and social organizing.

## **We emphasized that union organizing is a fundamental right guaranteed by law**



Although the union had a presence (local union organizer Phil Trottier, front, centre), students took on a leadership role and organized the second "Union 101" workshop almost entirely by themselves.

### **COMMUNITY BUILDING**

TAFE was committed to creating a sense of community among graduate students. It was decided early on that the union drive would be inclusive and transparent, allowing room for those unsure about unionization a chance to get involved by attending events and educational workshops. Aware of the challenge of organizing students who are not always accessible on campus, TAFE organizers saw public events as a means to recruit more members; network with community organizations; build morale; show a strong public presence and, lastly, to gain insight and feedback from graduate students. Events became pivotal in sustaining momentum and updating supporters on the gains being made.

TAFE started off the drive with a presence at the Kingston Pride Parade, followed by an open-house BBQ at the graduate student pub. Promotional materials were available and a booth was set up to encourage students to talk to volunteers and gain insight into our goals of forming a local union with the PSAC. This successful and well-attended event set the tone for a summer of community building.

Our campaign emphasized integrating and networking with the Kingston community. Music and art festivals were not only hubs for graduate students during the summer months, but also a means to demonstrate our public presence beyond campus. Following the open house, we hosted a "Union 101" workshop lead by PSAC organizers. The workshop was designed to give supporters the opportunity to map out how they envisioned the campaign. For instance, registration week in September was identi-

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY TAFE



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY TAFa

Right from the beginning, TAFa's campaign emphasized integrating and networking with the Kingston community, including at the Kingston Pride Parade.

fied as a strategic moment to have people sign cards. The workshop resulted in a detailed timeline, created by the graduate students who attended. Working on the campaign model as a group gave us a sense of purpose and ownership that benefited TAFa immensely. This educational event showed organizers how far we had come in such a short time, as well as where we were going in the future.

In order to shift gears for the upcoming card-signing push in the fall, another Union 101 workshop was held mid-August to prepare volunteers. This workshop had a different vibe altogether as it was almost entirely assembled by the graduate TA and TF organizers. Although the PSAC had a presence at the workshop, it was clear that the graduate students had taken on a leadership role. New activists were recruited at the workshop due to the smaller and more intimate one-on-one atmosphere, which was very important in establishing confidence amongst the volunteer organizers.

During registration week in September, TAFa was everywhere! This was a crucial time to meet new graduate students, as well as students who worked off-campus. Additionally, with the help of the PSAC, we sponsored the second annual "Queen's University Educational Pow Wow," hosted by the Four Directions Aboriginal Student Centre.

These are just some of the ways we reached out to graduate students and tried to create a strong public presence and sense of community. TAFa events became a hub of activity for new and returning graduate students.

No other event illustrated the sheer impact of all the outreach work than the BBQ held shortly after registration week. At this time organizers were as trained

and ready as they could be, and over 500 students showed up to see what TAFa was all about. This was perhaps one of the largest and most successful events and we came to realize that almost everyone who attended was a supporter due to our activities throughout the summer and during registration week.

Although it might be seen as risky to have such a public campaign, based on the success of these events, we felt the initial decision to have an open and transparent drive had been the right one for our particular campaign. By this point, there had been no organized opposition and the momentum and energy for the drive had peaked.

### FINAL DAYS

Opposition during a union drive normally involves the actions of an employer working to undermine the efforts of its employees attempting to form a collective bargaining unit. In the case of TAFa, our strongest challenge came from our rank-and-file peers, since the vice-principal of human resources went so far as to issue a memo publicly stating that the university would "not interfere in the right of employees to freely choose whether or not they wish to join a union."

There is an often-divisive relationship between students in social sciences and humanities, and those in the natural and applied sciences. Still, TAFa managed to gain support and get cards signed in every department, from the school of business, to civil engineering, to sociology and geography. Regardless of the discipline, TAs and TFs want a more fair and equitable workplace throughout the university.

Based on limited anti-union mobilization and an overall positive union drive, we were hopeful that

the vote would be a success. The PSAC filed for certification with the Ontario Labour Relations Board on November 20, 2008. Then we started running into problems.

The OLRB determined the day, time and space for the vote and, in turn, denied TAFAs request to have multiple polling stations. We were left with one very open and heavily trafficked voting location within the main student centre, and we believe this had an impact on the outcome of the vote.

Leading up to the vote, an e-mail was sent out by TAFAs to all graduate students who had signed a card and provided their contact information, notifying them of the upcoming vote. The university also sent out an announcement pointing out the date and location of the ratification vote. They sent the information over the Queen's list-serve to all those employed as graduate TAs and Tfs.

Unfortunately, TAFAs had lost momentum between September and November because we didn't have the capacity (bodies) to adequately follow up with TAs and Tfs who had signed cards, and encourage them to vote. The depletion in numbers of our core group of organizers seriously affected our ongoing outreach to individuals. Nonetheless, in the days leading up to the vote, organizers made phone calls, departmental rounds, and updated the Facebook group and the TAFAs website. After TAs and Tfs were contacted, posters and postcards with the voting location and times were distributed across campus.

Despite over 800 students having signed union cards (not all of which were accepted by the university), only 359 turned out to vote, "Yes," compared to 398 "No" votes. We lost the campaign by 39 votes.

From our perspective, there were a few reasons for this. We think TAFAs needed to have improved its tactics in getting our supporters out for the vote. As well, we weren't prepared for the sudden appearance of the opposition around voting day. It was only on the days surrounding the vote that we witnessed any serious anti-union mobilizing from within the graduate student population. Up until then there had only been a small anti-TAFAs Facebook group, which seemed to be merely a place to share anti-union sentiments. On voting day itself, due to their continued disruptive presence in the voting area (which the labour board refused to control), anti-union factions within the graduate student community managed to dominate a space intended for a secret ballot.

Opposition in general was led largely by the natural science students, who we had a tougher time contacting due to the locked labs (locked due to hazardous materials), different work hours and, we speculate, a general disinterest or opposition to unionization. The disconnect between students in the humanities and sciences, and the limited involvement of students from the natural and applied sciences in the campaign, contributed to our inability to win hearts and minds in these areas.

The reality was that our core supporters came from the social sciences and humanities. We need to bridge the gap in order to increase our effectiveness at building and sustaining support.

In the end, TAFAs hard-fought campaign failed by less than 40 votes out of a total bargaining unit of 1,295 graduate TAs and Tfs. Despite the loss, we're confident that the campaign had, and continues to have, a positive impact on the graduate student body as a result of our community building. We believe it was not so much the tactics we used throughout the campaign that let TAFAs down, but, instead, our inability to pull our key supporters out for the vote.

We hope that our experience of trying to unionize at Queen's will be useful for future union drives, shedding light, as it does, on the challenges of organizing in service-oriented work environments. In light of budget cuts, fewer teaching opportunities for graduate students, dwindling resources for teaching and research, and a federal government that is far from responsive to the needs of public institutions, the conditions may yet again be ripening for another campaign.

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For more information about TAFAs visit [www.qtafa.com](http://www.qtafa.com).

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