

Job Action FAQ for Graduate-Student Workers

The Association of Academic Staff University of Alberta (AASUA) has created this FAQ to address questions that many graduate-student workers have about the possibility of strike or lockout at the University of Alberta.

When can we expect the results of the mediation? This is hard to determine. So long as AASUA sees progress, we will stay at the table and try to come to an agreement with our employer.

Will the faculty really go on strike? The decision to go forward with a strike is extremely difficult and will not be taken lightly by AASUA members. We still hope to reach an agreement through mediation. If mediation does not produce an agreement, it becomes more likely that a strike could occur. The employer has claimed that “a decision to strike is exclusively in the control of AASUA.” This is not true. Avoiding a strike depends on both parties working to come to an agreement.

What Happens During a Strike?

What are the formal safety requirements if strike goes forward? An Essential Services Agreement (ESA) has been filed with the Labour Relations Board that sets out which areas of the University will be looked after by designated AASUA members. The Employer cannot hire replacement workers in place of these AASUA members under the essential services listed in the ESA. It is the Employer’s responsibility to maintain a safe work environment, through compliance with university policy, and in particular, in accordance with the *Occupation, Health and Safety Act* to ensure all students and any workers on campus are safe regardless of job action. Since there would be no academic staff supervisors on campus who are familiar with safety policies and who also have obligations under *OH&S*, the employer would have to make certain decisions: hire strikebreakers, use their management team, or shut down areas in order to comply with these legislative requirements.

Will graduate-student workers have access to lab space? It will depend on what the access is for – if the student is a Graduate Research Assistant that supports an academic staff member’s research, then they work under the supervision of the Principal Investigator (academic staff member) and access to the lab would be under the process set out in Part C of the ESA, but only if the PI wishes to monitor their research. If it is access to lab space as a learner, then the Employer would need to make some decisions: hire strikebreakers to teach and supervise these graduate students and ensure that OH&S obligations are met due to academic staff members withdrawing their labour. It is important to remember that Graduate Students workers have their own collective agreement (CA), and this CA will remain in effect.

What does it mean to be under “direct supervision”? Can I work alone in the lab?

Working alone agreements were largely developed during COVID. If you don’t know if you are allowed to work alone in a lab, this most likely means that you have not been formally approved to work alone. We recommend directing this question to your specific

Faculty, as it will be dependent on Occupational Health and Safety guidelines for your area.

[To what degree will supervisors who are AASUA members be available to provide help \(i.e. safety support by email\) to working graduate students?](#) The AASUA will not stand in the way of academic staff members communicating with their students during the strike. It will be up to the individual academic to decide whether or not to do so. The AASUA encourages academic staff to make a plan with their graduate-student workers, so that they can maintain contact, most likely through an alternate email address, during a strike. However, it is the Employer's responsibility to provide help and safety support to working graduate students.

[How am I to determine whether I am allowed to access the lab to conduct research as a Graduate Research Assistant \(GRA\) if a strike were to take place \(my supervisor is not always around when I'm in the lab\)?](#) You should discuss this with your supervisor. We recognize that every department and every lab is different. If you are in a lab where safety supervisors and coordinators are not set, or you do not know who they are, you will want to find out what the protocols are for your area. We recommend contacting your supervisor for more information on your area.

[Will virtual connections and the ability to contact faculty and academic staff via University email also be cut off?](#) The current messaging from the University explicitly states that they will cut off academic staff's email access as part of a strike or lockout. For more information on the employer's position, please see their FAQ: <https://www.ualberta.ca/bargaining/frequently-asked-questions/index.html#aasua>

[Will graduate students be locked out of Google Drives shared with supervisor?](#) The Employer, as the administrator of the Google platform system, has sole control over who they can lock out. They will, more than likely, block academic staff's access to the university's google drives, which means that more than likely students will not have access to that supervisor's account.

[Will key card/one card access for graduate students be revoked in a lockout?](#) The AASUA has no authority regarding key cards/one cards. These decisions are at the discretion of the employer.

[Will graduate students be able to continue field work if their supervisors are on strike?](#) Probably not, unless the Employer hires strikebreaker academics to act as their supervisors. [Will these student workers be able to hire and pay field techs?](#) We do not believe that graduate students have any authority to hire anyone.

[I often go out into the field without having my supervisor directly supervising. However, I require a lot of equipment and trucks that are part of this fieldwork. Is there a chance that I won't be able to access the equipment I need to complete this fieldwork?](#) If you've already been given the authority to use specific tools, it would be unexpected for the University to deny you access to these tools. The University may consider putting temporary supervisors in place, such as University administrators or managers who are not part of the AASUA. However, it is the University that is responsible for making these

decisions. AASUA is not liable for any safety issues that may arise due to a strike – those are the responsibility of the University.

Should I cross the picket line? Am I required to cross the picket line?

If classes are cancelled by the University, will graduate student led seminars continue to operate as scheduled? If you are on an Academic Teaching Staff (ATS) contract, you are part of the AASUA, and you would be part of the strike (some PhD students are also ATS members of the AASUA). If you are unsure about what Collective Agreement you fall under, or if you are unsure if you are being asked to perform duties outside of your letter of appointment, please contact the GSA at gsa.vplabour@ualberta.ca.

Would it be considered “crossing the picket line” if a graduate student (whether academically-employed or not) continues their work on campus during a lockout/strike? Graduate-student workers are not going on strike and will be expected to continue fulfilling duties outlined in their letter of appointment. AASUA will not be creating a picket line in the sense that picketers would prevent or block entrances, as the AASUA recognizes many members of the University community will still be working. However, we encourage you to join any demonstrations as a sign of solidarity in your free time.

Will Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) be able to continue communicating with students? Yes, as long as you are not working under the AASUA collective agreement (as an ATS member). Most graduate students fall under the GSA Collective Agreement and will therefore be expected to continue to perform their duties. The University is still responsible for providing the resources for those working under the GSA collective agreement to complete their duties. If you are unsure about what Collective Agreement you fall under, please contact the GSA at gsa.vplabour@ualberta.ca.

I'm instructing an online course this semester and am wondering how to best support my undergrads who want to support faculty by not crossing the picket line in solidarity? Students are welcome on the picket line! AASUA encourages the support and solidarity of students; however, it is imperative that graduate-student workers understand that the AASUA knows that many graduate student workers will need to go on campus to do their jobs. The AASUA will not consider movement on campus and/or entering university buildings as crossing the picket line. Contact the GSA or the Students Supporting AASUA for more information on how to act in solidarity.

I am facilitating a lab this semester and it is in my time use guidelines. Is it crossing the picket line to continue to facilitate the lab? What about when students have questions about the required material? As the GSA will not be on strike, you are expected to complete the duties outlined in your time use guidelines in order to continue collecting your stipend. If you have questions about your time use guidelines or your collective agreement, please contact the GSA at gsa.vplabour@ualberta.ca.

As grad students, should we be discussing a plan with our supervisors or is this premature? Yes, the AASUA encourages you to contact your supervisor to discuss a plan that would be enacted should the AASUA be forced to take job action.

I have more questions. To whom should they be directed? Since almost all graduate student workers operate under the GSA's collective agreement, the best place to start is to reach out to the GSA at gsa.vplabour@ualberta.ca.

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