

Job Action FAQ for Students

Posted 24 February 2022

AASUA has created this FAQ to address questions that students might have about the possibility of strike or lockout at the University of Alberta. This FAQ will be updated periodically, and if you have any questions that aren't listed here, or that you'd like to ask more about, please reach out to [AASUA staff](#).

Who's Involved

What is the university?

This might seem like a silly question, but it isn't. The University of Alberta is made up of its students, faculty, and staff. When functioning properly, it is a “community of scholars” dedicated to teaching, learning, and research. Don't be fooled by the administration's implication that it alone is “the university” as they often claim in communication with students. It is students, staff, and faculty that form the core of the institution, and all of us share the commitment to high-quality teaching and learning.

What is AASUA?

AASUA is the Association of Academic Staff at the University of Alberta created under the [Post-Secondary Learning Act](#). AASUA is the union representing all academic faculty, academic teaching staff, administrative and professional officers, trust/research academic staff, librarians, temporary librarians, and faculty service officers at the University of Alberta. It is the largest post-secondary union in Canada, representing approximately 3900 members.

As the union, AASUA represents academic staff members and is the bargaining agent for all of these constituency groups. It negotiates with the University of Alberta's Board of Governors, which includes the President and members appointed by the Government of Alberta.

AASUA is run by an Executive of representatives elected by its members and supported by dedicated staff members and labour experts. As well, Council is the body of elected representatives that sets policy for the organization. The union advocates for its members on workplace issues such as compensation and benefits, health and safety conditions, workload, and equity. You can learn more about AASUA [here](#).

What are the issues?

AASUA members have been without a contract since June 30, 2020 – which as of February 2022, is over a year and a half. Offers from the Board of Governors (BoG) have consistently been unfair and unreasonable, and AASUA's best efforts at negotiations have not been able to

bring the two parties close enough for an agreement. The issues are about respect, parity, and equity. You can learn more about these issues in detail [here](#).

How did we get here?

Despite the best efforts of AASUA's negotiating team, the administration has stonewalled AASUA by delaying negotiations, wasting time, and putting forward unrealistic proposals. This is a manipulative tactic known as "anchor bargaining," in which deliberately terrible opening offers are made so that anything else will look good by comparison (even a slightly less terrible offer).

I've heard a lot about budget cuts and restructuring. Can the university afford what AASUA is asking for?

Yes. AASUA is committed to negotiating an agreement that is fiscally sound, economically sustainable, and invests strategically to strengthen the University of Alberta and make it a better place for students to learn and grow.

The University of Alberta has taken massive cuts in provincial funding in the past few years, but the Board of Governors has made demands based on their own priorities, not because of the cuts. For the last fiscal year (2020-21), the University ran a surplus of over \$50M, with an accumulated surplus of \$1.9 BILLION. This leaves a great deal of room to meet what AASUA is asking for. The below-competitive salaries of AASUA members are not creating any budget crisis; rather the administration is using the provincial funding cuts as a pretext to redistribute resources to higher levels through the restructuring process.

Why should I care about the salaries of profs making six figures while my tuition seems to go up and up every year?

While there are other issues on the table for negotiations, it's true that compensation is an important part of what a union bargains for on behalf of its members. AASUA members have seen no salary increases since 2016, while inflation means those salaries don't go as far as they used to. The university offered no funding for the shift to remote learning due to COVID-19, which means that instructors had to foot the bill for everything they needed to teach online themselves. The university's opening proposals even asked AASUA members to take retroactive *decreases*, meaning that they wanted workers to *pay back* money they had already earned for their work.

While there are some faculty members with significant salaries, there are far more academic instructors who are paid only by the course, and who must continually work on short-term contracts without any job security. As well, only a fraction of your tuition actually goes to the instructors in the classroom. In 2019-20, the University's general operating expenditures were \$1.22B, but only 21.5% of that went to academic salaries. The national average was 29.7% (see [here](#) for complete data). This means that academic salaries at the University of Alberta are well below those of other similar universities—this makes it hard to attract and retain top-tier researchers and instructors, which in turn can reduce the quality of teaching and scholarship at the University of Alberta.

Labour Terminology

What is a union?

Unions protect the rights of employees and allow them to establish good working conditions for every member of the union. Unions have been very powerful for expanding the rights of workers, limiting working hours, implementing health and safety regulations, winning rights to things like pensions and parental leave, and fighting against discrimination.

Teacher unions have long noted that “teachers’ working conditions are students’ learning conditions.” Academic unions like AASUA ensure that the working conditions at the University of Alberta allow the faculty to provide the kind of quality education University of Alberta prides itself on. An important part of this is making sure that there are enough professors, instructors, advisors, and librarians, working under fair and reasonable conditions, so that students have access to the world-class education that the university promises.

What is collective bargaining?

Collective bargaining is the negotiation of an employment contract or collective agreement between a union of employees and an employer. Collective bargaining is a legal process. In Alberta, the process is regulated by the Alberta [*Labour Relations Code*](#).

Within the U of A context, this means negotiation between AASUA and the Board of Governors (BoG) (i.e., those who are responsible for the University’s finances) regarding the terms of employment for AASUA members.

What is job action?

Job action is either a strike initiated by AASUA, or a lockout initiated by the administration. It happens when there is a bargaining impasse between the employer (Board of Governors) and the employees (AASUA). The BoG and AASUA have been negotiating for more than two years. Mediation is currently in progress, but if mediation is not able to bridge the gap between the two sides, then either party may resort to job action.

What is a strike?

A strike is a collective action in which the members of a union (AASUA) withhold their services from their Employer (the University of Alberta Board of Governors). A union is legally entitled to strike once specific negotiation and mediation processes have been exhausted. In Alberta, a union’s right to strike is governed by the [*Labour Relations Code*](#).

What is a lockout?

A lockout is when the employer suspends work or prohibits access to a workplace. It is like a strike, but a lockout is initiated by the Board of Governors. AASUA members would not be able

to access the university campuses, including their offices, laboratories and other campus resources for the purpose of their usual job activities. AASUA is not aware of any application for lockout action currently.

What Happens During a Strike

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 very much hope to reach an agreement through mediation. However, due to the lack of success in negotiation, a strike vote is now a very real possibility. A strike, or at least the threat of a strike, is the only tool that AASUA has left after more than two years of negotiations. The administration has claimed that “a decision to strike is exclusively in the control of AASUA ” This is not true. It depends on the administration’s willingness to negotiate in good faith and present a fair offer to our members.

What is the earliest a strike could happen?

The first date for mediation was February 18, 2022. A second date for mediation is set for February 25, 2022. Mediation can continue as long as both parties are willing to participate. However, if mediation fails, there is a mandatory 14-day “cooling off period,” during which neither side can take legal action. If after this, there is still no agreement, AASUA can conduct a strike vote of all of its members. If the members vote YES, then AASUA must give the university 72-hours notice of strike action. While a strike is still not a certainty, the earliest time frame for job action is in the middle of March.

Does a strike vote mean there will definitely be a strike?

No. The outcome of a strike vote by members of the union tells the union's executive whether or not the majority of workers (AASUA members) authorize the union to call a strike. A strong "Yes" to a strike vote does not mean that a strike is inevitable. For any time up to 120 days after a “yes” vote, AASUA can move to strike with 72 hours’ notice. After the expiration of the 120 day period, AASUA can apply for a new supervised strike vote.

Calling for a strike vote is a tactic to force the administration back to the bargaining table and to negotiate a reasonable offer for AASUA members. Often negotiations are concluded in the brief period between the notice of intent to strike and the strike deadline. Reaching a settlement before a strike occurs would be ideal, but this requires the Board of Governors to make a fair offer.

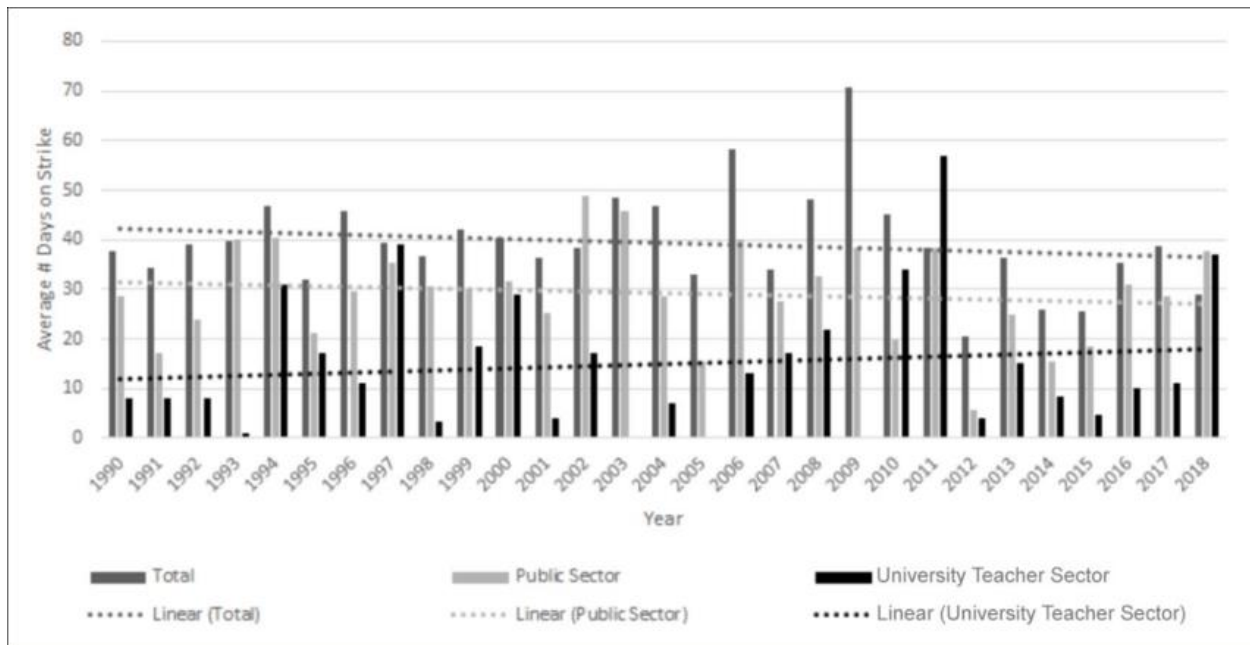
Will instructors who don’t vote to strike still be able to teach?

No. The decision to strike is made collectively – and democratically – by all members of a union, and if the majority votes YES, and the AASUA Executive decide to call a strike, then any strike action taken applies to all of the union’s members as well.

How long could a strike last?

No one can predict how long a work stoppage would last, but strikes in the post-secondary education sector normally do not last long. The recent strike at Concordia University of Edmonton, for example, lasted only 10 days including weekends. The average length of such strikes in Canada is about three weeks.

From Average length of strikes, 1990-2018. Source. Workplace Information Division at the Labour Program, Employment and Social Development Canada, Government of Canada 2019.



What Happens to Me?

What happens to me in the event of job action (a strike or lockout)?

AASUA members are committed to minimizing the disruption to our students, but in either case instructors who are AASUA members will be withholding their teaching services until the job action is ended and a return to work agreement is concluded between the Board of Governors (BoG) and AASUA.

Please know that AASUA members love our teaching and care deeply about the success and wellbeing of our university and its students. If we strike, it will be with feelings both of disappointment in our administration and concern for the hardship this will cause for our students. However, we are being forced into this difficult choice and now we will not hesitate to do what is necessary to uphold the quality and integrity of education at the University of Alberta. Our choices, actions, and the outcomes, also set the example for other institutions across Alberta

and Canada. AASUA members greatly appreciate the outpouring of support we have received from students, and we look forward to continuing to work together to keep our institution strong!

Why does this have to happen right now when we've just returned to in-person classes?

The timing isn't AASUA's choice. It's dictated by a set timetable of mandatory mediation and then a cooling-off period, when we make every effort to avoid having a strike at all. Other universities' negotiations worked on different schedules, which is why they've had strikes earlier, or are still negotiating.

We know the disruption a strike at this time would cause for students after beginning the Winter term online, especially those who have come back to Edmonton especially for in-person instruction, and we really don't want this to happen. This makes us all the more eager to avert a strike if our employer is willing to bargain in good faith. So far, they've refused to make a fair offer, and they are trying to blame AASUA for the consequences to our students.

How will classes be affected?

Since AASUA members would withhold their labour during a strike, this means that classes, labs, thesis defenses, and research projects will be postponed until the job action is settled. Students will still have access to their emails, eClass, etc., but faculty will not be conducting classes, posting online material, grading assignments, overseeing directed reading, or responding to student emails. The employer has already said that faculty email and access to other university computer resources will cease for the duration of any job action.

I'm on co-op, or practicum, or clinical placement this term. What happens to me?

Overseeing external placements is often part of the work of academic staff, who will be unable to continue this work in the event of job action. It will be up to the UofA administration to look after co-op students, possibly by hiring strikebreakers. In other situations, non-academic staff work in co-op offices, and these staff members would continue to work, because these employees are not part of AASUA.

Will I still have access to my eClass?

Yes, you will still have access to your email, eClass, digital library materials, and other learning resources during any job action.

Should I still do my coursework during a strike? Will I be able to continue my studies independently?

Course expectations may change depending on how long a strike or lockout lasts. Your instructors will not expect you to carry on with course work as normal, and you will not be penalized for not doing class work while classes are cancelled.

You can certainly keep up with your reading or assignments that have already been given during any time that classes are suspended, though you will not be able to submit work or get feedback from your instructor.

What happens to mid-terms; what about term work that has already been submitted, but not yet graded?

Mid-term exams may be rescheduled at the completion of the job action; however, the employer has the sole authority to decide changes to the university calendar. We anticipate that assignments presently handed in will be graded and returned following the end of the strike. When a strike ends, the employer and the union must negotiate a return-to-work protocol, which will stipulate how academic staff will be able to return to their positions, and thus their duties overseeing midterms and marking assignments.

Will the strike affect the end of term examination period?

The timing of the exam period is solely in the power of the University of Alberta administration; see the “What Happens Afterward?” section for more details.

Can I still go to campus?

AASUA members will not prohibit students from accessing the university campus. Parking, the library buildings, SUB and other services will remain open, as will residences. However, the Board of Governors (BoG) may choose to lock out both students and employees from the university campuses and online resources in response to a strike from AASUA. This decision lies solely with the BoG.

I am a grad student teaching a course as a Principal Instructor. Does any job action include me?

Please check to see which collective agreement your work is covered by. If you are a Principal Instructor covered by AASUA’s collective agreement as a member of the Academic Teaching Staff group, then you would be on strike alongside all other AASUA members, and you are eligible for strike pay for participating.

What happens with my TA/RA assignment, and will I still get paid?

TAs and RAs are not members of AASUA, but are represented by the Graduate Students’ Association (GSA), which is undertaking a separate negotiating process with the Board of Governors. Most graduate students fall under the GSA Collective Agreement and are expected to continue to perform their duties, and the University is still responsible for providing the resources to complete these duties. If you are a graduate-student worker, please direct your questions by email to VP Labour, [Jessica Grenke](#).

Some undergraduate students are also TAs or RAs under supervision of an AASUA member. The employer is responsible to honour its contractual obligations with these students and must compensate them for work performed up to commencement of job action. Thereafter, the TAs

duties would cease during job action since the AASUA Member would no longer be teaching the course. RAs could potentially working in research areas but only if the AASUA Member determines that the RA is necessary in order to "... prevent irreparable damage to ongoing research and/or materials for teaching such as damage to plant and animal life, loss of life, loss of live and/or decomposable materials, damage to equipment or supplies, or loss of non-repeatable research in progress..." as stipulated in the [Essential Services Agreement](#). Depending on the specific contractual terms between the TA or the RA and the employer, the employer may have further contractual obligations to the student in the event the employer unilaterally terminates the contract early. These students should seek advice from their own legal counsel.

Can my supervisor still write reference letters for me?

AASUA will not stand in the way of any academic staff member writing reference letters for any of their students. Reference letters are not an obligation under the collective agreement, but many consider this an ethical obligation to help their students. Ultimately, it is up to each individual supervisor. If you are worried about reaching your references in the event of a strike or a lockout, get in touch with them now to make arrangements for alternate contact information.

How will the strike affect me financially (i.e. tuition, refunds and scholarships)?

The university will provide students with a reasonable opportunity to complete all courses. Job action does not result in a reduction of credit hours for student courses; when courses resume, credits will be achieved as normal following any job action. Students will continue to receive their government student aid, as long as they do not reduce their credit hours below what was reported to their provincial loan agency. Students will also continue to receive their institutional awards, so long as they do not fall below the required credit hours.

I am currently in university and want to apply to another University of Alberta program for Fall 2022. Should I still apply?

Yes, applications for other programs will be posted on the website with deadline dates to apply. Any job action will not impact that process, and you should apply by the deadline date for your intended program.

What Happens Afterward

Will the term be cancelled?

This is not the decision of AASUA; the administration will make this call. However, in the history of job action in the post-secondary education sector in Canada, an academic term has never been cancelled. This is simply a scare tactic commonly used by administrations to gain favour with students.

AASUA does not have the power to make these decisions. If you are worried about these issues now, or following any job action, please [contact the Registrar's Office](#) to voice your concerns.

Will students be compensated for the disruption to our education during a strike or lockout?

We know that students have had an incredibly difficult year, compounded by the UofA Administration's inconsistent approach to the pandemic response. It is AASUA's hope that an agreement can be reached with minimal disruption to students. However, should job action occur, it will be up to the administration to determine how the rest of the term will be completed and how student needs will be addressed. If you are concerned about disruptions, please share those concerns with the [Registrar](#), or with the University of Alberta's [President](#).

Showing Support

Can I join the picket lines?

Yes, by all means! Our members would appreciate your support. If a strike occurs, information about picketing and other strike-related events will be posted regularly on the [AASUA website](#).

How can I get the latest news about what is happening?

The Association of Academic Staff of the University of Alberta (AASUA):
<https://www.aasua.ca/>

How can I support AASUA?

- Share your support for AASUA on social media. Tag us! @TheAASUA
- Find and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#) and help share our messages.
- Join [Students Supporting AASUA; follow them on Twitter or contact by email](#).
- Call or email the University of Alberta's President, Dr. Bill Flanagan at 780-492-3212 or [Email the President](#) and ask that he take every possible step to prevent the strike by negotiating a fair agreement.