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More Than A Bargaining Unit: York University Faculty Association's commitment to social unionism

By Natalie Coulter & Lorna Erwin | From the Spring-Summer 2015 Issue



A look inside YUFA's innovative community projects committee

Every month two dollars comes off the payslips of York University's 1,500 professors, librarians, and postdoctoral visitors, a deduction that most members don't even notice. Listed between union dues and pension plan contributions, it is just one of the many such items that appear on our monthly statements. But it is a deduction that does a lot. The two dollars is directed toward the York University Faculty Association's Community Projects committee, or YUFA-CP for short. Guided by a commitment to social justice and social unionism, the committee's purpose is to advocate for a broader political agenda that is responsive to the needs of the community in which the university is located. Referred to as Jane/Finch, it is usually stigmatized as a neighbourhood of guns, gangs, and high levels of poverty. And, indeed, it contains all of these conditions. But it is also—and more saliently—one of the most ethnically diverse communities in Toronto, and one marked by a deep commitment to activism and social justice.

HISTORY & STRUCTURE

YUFA's interest in community engagement dates back to the late 1990s, when cuts to public education associated with Premier Mike Harris' "Common Sense Revolution" were darkening the horizon of low-income communities across Ontario. It was at that time that our association, acting on a long-standing commitment to social justice, began supporting a number of community-university projects (academic enrichment, adult and community education, advocacy research, and other similar initiatives). But it was not until a meeting in 2002—billed as a "Local Hearing on Education"—that the idea of pursuing this interest locally, and especially in connection with the neighbouring Jane/Finch community, occurred to us.

The meeting was part of a series of open forums on the future of postsecondary education organized by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) on university campuses across the country. YUFA, in seizing this opportunity to

initiate a dialogue on issues of access and equality in education, insisted that the hearing take place off campus at a local community centre, and was rewarded when more than 100 people, most of them Jane/Finch residents, showed up.

What ensued was a meeting that was lively and at times disturbing –especially in light of what it revealed about the uneasy relationship between Jane/Finch and York. Indeed, the university was roundly castigated as an “absentee resident,” one that regarded the community “as a guinea pig to be talked about and discussed in classrooms.” Serious concerns were likewise raised about the increasing inaccessibility of postsecondary education. Funding cuts to public education, it was bitterly noted, were making it more difficult for local students to transition to university or college, or even to complete their high school degrees. As the meeting drew to a close, support for a grassroots collaboration between the union and the community emerged. It was the kind of collaboration that promised not only to address these issues head on, but also to do so in ways that could redefine the relationship between the community and the university.

Identifying community goals and perspectives, and establishing YUFA’s credibility as a communal resource, thus emerged as central to the creation of the partnership we had in mind. It was a slow process—the union needed to gain trust in the community as both an advocate and a resource. In fact, it was only in 2004, after two years of discussion with community groups, that we felt confident enough in the objectives of our joint project to ask for approval of the YUFA Community Projects Committee at our annual general meeting.

In its current form, YUFA-CP, a standing committee of the executive, is funded entirely by the association, which pays for half-course releases for the committee’s co-chairs and likewise for some administrative support. The money that goes to advance its projects comes from both YUFA core funding and from the two-dollar special levy. First approved by a membership vote in 2009, this levy has been reconfirmed annually ever since.

YUFA-CP’S MANDATES

The YUFA-CP committee meets regularly to review ongoing projects and to consider new initiatives. Broadly speaking, its projects fall under three separate mandates, which are described in detail below. Suffice it to say here that YUFA-CP is distinct in its emphasis on a democratic model of engagement in both process and practice. In carrying out our mandates, we collaborate with community networks on local strategies to strengthen neighbourhoods as well as on broader efforts for systemic social change. This has required forging partnerships with groups and agencies both internal and external to York.

Reducing educational barriers

The committee's first mandate is to support place-based programs that increase the participation of underrepresented populations in postsecondary education. Some of these initiatives, which also promote leadership and civic engagement, bring the community to York; others take York into the community. Campus-based projects are designed to expand learning opportunities and increase exposure and access to post-secondary education.

Among the initiatives that fall under this mandate are Readers to Leaders, a literacy enrichment and leadership program for students in Grades 9 and 10 and the Advanced Credit Experience (ACE). ACE was developed jointly with the Toronto District School Board and York's Faculty of Education. It brings Jane/Finch students to York campus, where they are enrolled in a university course and also register in a co-op program. The goal is to increase the participation rate of Jane/Finch students who might not otherwise consider attending university.

Perhaps the two most formidable examples of YUFA's commitment to social unionism is our role in creating the Transition Year Program (TYP) and Success Beyond Limits (SBL). Established in 2010, TYP (<http://transitionyear.info.yorku.ca/>) provides special access to postsecondary education for youth and adults who, due to various barriers, lack the formal credentials to qualify for admission. Every year TYP helps about 40 individuals

find pathways to college or university. Roughly half attend York University as full-time students in the Transition Year Program, while the others are directed to college programs or to university bridging programs. In the spring of 2016, members of the first graduating class of TYP will complete their undergraduate degrees.

As for Success Beyond Limits (<http://www.successbl.com/>), YUFA-CP has supported its evolution from a Grade 8 transition initiative that was piloted in 2006 into a community-based, holistic program that aims to reduce the impact of systemic barriers to educational achievement. It aims to expand opportunities and “support youth in Jane/Finch along their individual paths to success.” In addition to a six-week summer program on the York campus and an on-site youth space at local high school Westview Centennial during the academic year, SBL has developed several highly acclaimed initiatives that provide mentoring, employment, and leadership opportunities for youth in Jane/Finch.

YUFA-CP continues to work closely with SBL. Recently we have provided funding for in-school and community activities, including the expansion of after school programming from Westview Centennial to Emery Collegiate, another area school. We also funded a TEDx event for youth in Jane/Finch, and are supporting their 2015 summer credit and mentorship program at York University. Support of SBL is critical in a time of cutbacks to education and in situations where financial support increasingly requires measurable indicators of success. With fewer strings attached, YUFA-CP’s funding provides a certain degree of continuity.

Outreach and political action

Our second mandate is to create alliances on social justice issues. Hence our organization of and participation in an array of initiatives that brings York faculty and students into the community as part of a broader support network (community meetings, town hall forums, neighbourhood advocacy, educational workshops, etc.).

In this connection, one of YUFA-CP's strongest allies is Jane Finch Action Against Poverty (JFAAP), a group that emerged in 2008 amidst a demonstration in support of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. With more than 150 community residents participating in this inaugural event, JFAAP has developed into a locally led, grassroots coalition of community residents, activists, and organizations working to eliminate poverty and oppression in their own community and beyond.

Over the past three years, YUFA-CP has supported JFAAP's mobilization around a number of campaigns, including: Toronto Strong Neighbourhood Strategy 2020, Campaign to Raise the Minimum Wage, International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Mayworks at the Yorkwoods Library Theatre, International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, and the panel on the Community Assessment of Police Practices in Jane/Finch.

The YUFA-CP co-chairs have been participants in JFAAP's bimonthly meetings and strategic planning sessions. JFAAP, for its part, has made presentations on community issues to the YUFA membership, participated in Pushing Forward, a YUFA-CP symposium on austerity, and, most recently, joined picket lines on campus in support of CUPE 3903 strikers. Indeed, it is not too much to say that working with JFAAP has been the key factor in developing our relationship with the community.

Advocacy & research

Our third mandate is to facilitate collaborative research that enhances the effectiveness of YUFA-CP community partnerships. As part of our work in this area, the committee assembled a team of graduate students to carry out focus group and individual interviews for an evaluation of Success Beyond Limits—an evaluation undertaken at the behest of the executive of that organization. In a similar vein, the committee is currently supporting a focus-group study entitled Fortress York?: The Impact of Racial Bias and Neighbourhood Stigma on

Educational Experiences & Outcomes. Here the point is to assess the impacts of neighbourhood stigma on those York undergraduates who come from Jane/Finch.

Finally, we do well to mention one of our specific efforts to report on research that was carried out with our community partners. In this instance, YUFA-CP members joined with Success Beyond Limits to organize a panel discussion, Decolonizing and Re-inhabiting Places of Learning in Toronto's Jane/Finch Community. This session, with its SBL student and staff participants, fulfilled all of our ambitions. It certainly facilitated a lively discussion of the strengths and challenges of place-based community engagement models of urban education.

Much to our dismay, however, we discovered that our non-academic collaborators were expected to pay full conference and association fees for their involvement in this single event, a prohibitive \$400 per participant. For many, the choice was not to attend, or else not register and sneak in. These limited options—which, we feel, clearly delegitimizes our community partners' right to participate in research as active agents—needs to be changed. And they need to be changed especially in light of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) commitment to what it calls “community engagement.” Hence our current lobbying efforts to create a registration category—Community Partner—that waives the SSHRC fee for single-day or single-panel participation.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS SOCIAL UNIONISM

In the October 2014 issue of Academic Matters, Stephanie Ross and Larry Savage make a case for faculty associations to act beyond the bargaining and representational needs of their membership. It behooves such associations, Ross and Savage argue, “to create opportunities” for disadvantaged groups in initiatives that “build connection and common cause with each other.” Indeed, this call strikes us as all the more timely and urgent as the pressures of corporate governance bear down on our universities. With students increasingly being treated as customers whose rising tuition fees account for a growing proportion of university revenues, faculty associations have a responsibility to push back. And

they should do so in ways that chiefly address—but are not limited to—growing inequalities in access to education.

Since its inception, the goal of YUFA-CP has been to encourage both faculty researchers and students to work with our Jane/Finch neighbours and agencies, and to do so in collaborations that advance the goals of social justice. That this commitment to community engagement has enhanced teaching and research efforts on issues of education, poverty, and political efficacy goes almost without saying. In short, the benefits of our social unionism have been substantial.

And, significantly enough, YUFA-CP's Jane/Finch commitments have unfolded at a time of increasing popularity of community partnerships in university mission statements. Such recognition, limited though it has been, does allow a space for us to problematize what “community” means. Yet while taking some credit for the long-term alliances we have forged and the minor impact we have had on the York administration, we have clearly fallen short of communicating the importance of these achievements to the members of our association. While activists in the community are often aware of our union's practical activities in support of social justice, this commitment tends to go unnoticed by the dues-paying members who generously fund the community projects being advanced in their name. Clearly, if this kind of pushback against the neoliberalism that is restructuring our universities is to have any measure of success, then we must find ways of identifying and gaining more active support for our communal work. This is a goal that YUFA-CP has set for itself in the coming year. AM

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