

## BC universities reach settlement with their support staff

by Daliah Merzaban  
*The Ubysey*

Note: "This past Monday" in copy refers to January 31

VANCOUVER (CUP) - After more than a year of negotiations and a one-day strike this past Monday, support staff at British Columbia's four major universities have reached a contract agreement with their respective administrations.

Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) support staff locals at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Simon Fraser University, the University of Victoria and the University of Northern British Columbia went on strike on Monday, slowing down traffic and disrupting classes.

But although the strike was short its impact was significant.

John Geppert, president of CUPE Local 116, one of UBC's two support staff locals, believes Monday's escalated job action pressured the universities to expedite a settlement. He explained that until a full strike was declared at midnight on Sunday, the negotiations faced an impasse.

The half-day of job action ended when support staff formally agreed to a settlement at the BC Labour Relations Board. A

special mediator had been appointed two weeks ago to help seven BC locals resolve provincial issues of wages and benefits currently.

"I think the fact that we were withdrawing our services right from midnight told the universities to try to come to a collective agreement," said Geppert.

He explained that after 27 straight hours of bargaining, the CUPE locals and the universities were able to work out a satisfactory agreement on wages and benefits.

Geppert cited increased gender equity funding for all employee positions as one of the benefits of the agreement. He also named a deal that would give universities provincial funding to purchase bulk benefits at a reduced cost as one of the key achievements.

CUPE was trying to supplement strict government wage increase guidelines with value-added benefits.

"I'm extremely happy that we've finally put some closure to this. There were compromises made, but it's a satisfactory settlement," said Geppert.

Local 2278, UBC's teaching assistants' union, was also in negotiations on Monday, and managed to achieve salary protection and a meaningful benefits package.

All contracts negotiated with the universities must still be ratified by the universities, the union and the Public Sector Employer's Council.

UBC's Associate

Director

of Public Affairs Paula Martin said the University is satisfied with the agreement.

"We're pleased that it was with minimal disruption to the students of the campus and other employees on campus," she said.

UBC students coming to school by bus were dropped off far before picket-lines - located at 17 entrances to campus - forcing them to walk long distances to get to their early morning classes. Blockades also backed up traffic, leading some drivers to force their way into the picketing crowd.

Under UBC's strike policy, professors

must respect the right of students not to cross picket lines.

Martin, however, said that the majority of students crossed the lines anyway.

"We've only heard of a handful of classes [that] were not available to students," she said.

UBC campus facilities run by CUPE workers saw reduced hours, but did not close down. At Totem Park, Place Vanier, the Bookstore and the libraries, managers took over for the striking workers.

But many students did stay home, and others could be found on the picket lines as they picketed on the corner of University Boulevard and Wesbrook Mall.

"We want to let the university know that this strike concerns us all," said Nathan Allen, a Student for Fair Treatment member and the Alma Mater Society (AMS) co-ordinator of external affairs.

The AMS had previously established an advocacy office to ensure the university strike policy is upheld.

Many faculty members also respected picket lines. Charles Menzies, a professor in the department of Anthropology and Sociology, emphasised the importance of supporting picket lines on campus.

He said the underlying issues of pay equity and employment equity affect workers at all levels of the university, and have a direct bearing on education.

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**Nathan Allen**

## BC University at a loss to explain exchange student's suicide

by Kent Bruyneel  
*EDITOR-IN-CHIEF*

PRINCE GEORGE, BC (CUP) - An exchange student from the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), who went missing last month, was found dead 200 metres from campus leaving school and community officials wondering why.

Anna Sorkomova, a 21-year old native of a tiny village in Siberia, was found hanging in a forested region on January 23. The police ruled her death a suicide.

The coverage in the mainstream press largely portrays Sorkomova as a quiet, unpopular student who felt out of place in a strange culture, and who did not know where to turn last month when she was arrested by the RCMP and charged with shoplifting \$200 worth of clothing.

But Ron Van Adrichem, communications director for UNBC, said Sorkomova did have contact with many others around the university.

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