

Marriott Workers Fighting for More

by Cindy Venema

Despite the cold and wet weather conditions, employees of Marriott food services at UPEI have decided that it is time to fight for their rights. Being the lowest paid employees on campus and the lowest paid Marriott establishment in Canada, the workers became unionized with UFCW in September so that they could improve these wages.

About ten workers depend on their jobs at Marriott as main sources of income. Yet, there are virtually no raises given to those faithful employees who have been working at this enterprise for a long time. In fact, some of the part-time employees are up to three years at the university cafeteria, and are still making minimum wage. One of the strikers commented: "I could babysit my neighbour's kids and make the same amount of money". So, the Marriott workers have taken off the uniforms, put on their walking shoes, and raised their voices, because they refuse to be bullied.

Of course, before the strike started, the union and Marriott went to the bargaining tables, but the best that Marriott could offer was a two percent increase for all employees in 1997. An offer that was refused by the employees, and so they were "forced" to strike.

Both parties are sorry that the students have to be inconvenienced in this issue, and although the university does not want to get involved, they are forced to face the concerns of the students, especially those of the residence students.

So far, the strikers have been reasonably peaceful, apart from the incident last Thursday morning when they were blocking the Belvedere entrance to the school. A cab driver, who was going on vacation to Florida that day, decided that he was not going to slow for the line. Unfortunately, he hit a pregnant employee in the process. Union strikers (not local Marriott employees, but were called in to assist the strike) took action by kicking the car. These aggressive strikers were arrested, and security forced the workers to move their line. Cst. R. Jewell of the University Security Police Department noted, when asked about securi-

ty's position on the strike, that they are taking a neutral position, maintaining order and peace. And although they are unionized, they legally must cross the picket line because they are a mandatory service on campus.

Many of the students are intimidated by the picket line, some saying that the picketers were "harassing" them. However, Steven Hubert, a student resident at Bernardine Hall, formed a petition, with 107 signatures from students on residence, supporting the striker's cause. Some of these students even boycotted the cafeteria. Although the union reps are pleased by

strike issue. When asked about a possible injunction, Crossley answered that they are not going to "flex the law" as long as the picket line remains informative; and the university supports the right of communication.

The strikers have not asked anyone openly to honour the picket line as of yet; however, there is a concern that they will interfere with deliveries of supplies to the university, considering most deliveries are from unionized companies.

Another concern of the university is that the other unionized employees on campus may decide to honour the

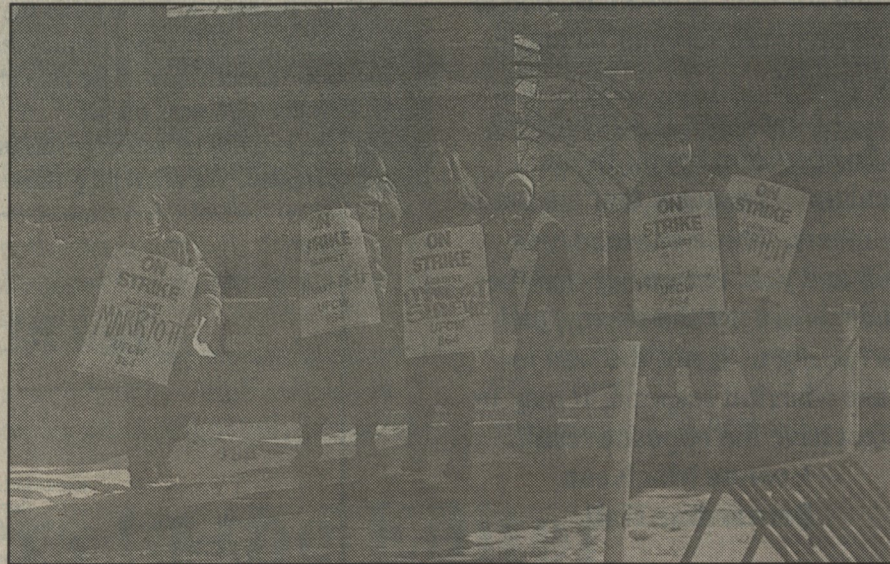
negotiate is \$1.50/hour for every employee to start with, and the pay raises after the probation period is negotiable. Marriott executives have come in to settle affairs quickly, and Dr. Crossley is very happy with how smoothly negotiations are going.

The first meeting between Marriott and the school occurred on Friday at 11:00 am. Marriott stated that if they are forced to raise their employees salaries, then the price of food might have to be increased next year. The university must take part in decisions regarding increases in student prices, and so they are looking at some interesting options, such as extending Marriott's services on campus. These are ideas that have been previously discussed, but now they are being pushed to the forefront, and are being considered seriously.

Marriott voiced its position on the strike issue to the students and media on Friday. They, like all the other parties, want to have this matter reconciled quickly. When Michel Marleau, Director of Operations for Marriott in Atlantic Canada, was asked what the possibility was for Marriott to pull out of their contract with the university, he said that "They had no intention of leaving at this point in time."

Marriott has a long standing relationship with the university, and they would like to "extend that partnership for as long as [they] can". Michel admitted that profits are not good, and that they have had some trouble with the university in the past, however, before they raise the prices of food, they are going to propose some other options to the university. In fact, raising the food prices may actually decrease their net profits, with university students being so sensitive to price increases.

The satellite services (the Pit and the AVC cafeteria) will not be opened until negotiations are complete. However, Marriott will continue to offer full services to the residence students. With scabs taken in from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, the cafeteria is getting its food out, and according to one residence student, the food tastes a lot better (interestingly, it is still the same chef cooking as before).



Marriot Workers on Strike

this support (and it is student support that they are looking for), they noted that they want the students to eat, and practically speaking, Marriott would lose more money if the students did eat.

The petition also had a cover letter stating the students' unease with the strike, particularly students who come from homes where a family member is part of a union. The students would like to be reimbursed for this "inconvenience", and have brought their concerns to the university's attention. These anxieties are being dealt with by the university executives.

Dr. John Crossley, University Vice President, stated that they are keeping in contact with their lawyers to see where the university stands in the

Photo by Jennifer Caseley

strike and not come to work: such as the administrative staff and the maintenance staff.

The Marriott on campus is a small unit, and very unprofitable. Crossley admitted that "one of the reasons that the students are getting an affordable meal plan is that Marriott is underpaying its workers." There are predictions floating around that if Marriott does not settle soon it may pull out of UPEI altogether. Raymond Gallant, the Union representative, expressed the possibility that "they [Marriott] are using [the strike] as a ploy to get the university to open their contract before it falls out".

The bottom line, according to Gallant, that the union is willing to