

# AND WE DID IT!

*by Susanne Lester, Koerner Library*

I remember the very first meeting between the negotiating committees of AUCE Local 1 and UBC. We were a large group, more than 12 members. There were three of us from the Library alone. Most of the departments on campus were represented. The meeting was held in the Conference Room of Gage Towers. We were lead by our Chairperson Emerald Murphy. The university was represented by Colonel John MacLean and Wes Clark, assisted by Harvey Burien and other human resources assistants. I think most of us were a little nervous and excited. It had been a long struggle to get this far. The university had fought our certification every step of the way. I don't think the university administration ever thought that a bunch of secretaries and clerical workers (uppity women) could organise a successful union drive. But, there they were, sitting across the table from us. It was the beginning of a long spring and summer of negotiations.

Preparations for the negotiations were much the same as they are today. AUCE was seeking a just and equitable settlement for all its members--we heard many stories of injustices. In some departments, secretaries in the same classification were paid at different rates, some received two weeks vacation, others three weeks with no relation to seniority. There were cases where employees had received no wage increase for years even though the administration had budgeted for them. We in the Library were a little more fortunate. We had an association and knew exactly each pay grade and what vacation we were entitled to receive. After many well-attended meetings, the union had a package to present to the university.

It was clear from the beginning of negotiations that the university did not take us seriously, nor did they have much experience in the art of negotiation. They just said "NO" to everything and had nothing to offer us. There was one exception. My area of negotiation was our benefit package. As we went through the list....More Vacation—NO; Sick Leave—NO; Medical and Dental Coverage—NO; we came to Maternity Benefits (the university agrees to pay the difference between our wages and unemployment insurance during leave), they said YES. We were shocked and surprised. Then it dawned on us....because we were a "women's" union, they may have thought that if they gave us that one benefit we would go away and forget about everything else. We had no such intention! Negotiating meetings continued and were fruitless. There were many hilarious occasions when we drove poor Colonel MacLean apoplectic. What? A two-hour lunch for union meetings....outrageous, preposterous, impossible! The administration clearly misunderstood. It was not just the negotiating committee behind those proposals— it was the membership!

In late spring, frustrated by the lack of progress, the union called for a study session. Over 800 union members walked off the job and congregated in the SUB Ballroom to support the union negotiating committee and to reiterate their demands.

Soon after, we found ourselves in mediation, trekking each day to the mediation services branch in Burnaby. Our mediator was the much-experienced Ed Simms. In fairly short order, he was able to persuade the university that, yes, we were serious about negotiating a settlement and many of our proposals were perfectly reasonable. Progress was slow and arduous. The university was not used to having to compromise. As in most negotiations, we came to the point when all that was left on the table were wages and other money issues. The union was seeking \$250 per month across the board. At the time, our base rate was barely above the minimum wage. An LA II made about \$360 per month. Our wage rates were well below the average private sector wages. Rents and food prices were escalating. The university claimed it couldn't come close to our demands— that there was no money.

AUCE's next step was again clear— we had no options left. We called for a strike vote. So, in late summer we held our first ever strike vote. It was over 80% strong— a mandate the university could not ignore. Visions of picket lines just before registration danced in their heads. In the following mediation session, we were offered \$225 per month across the board. We accepted and after an overwhelming ratification vote, our first Collective Agreement was signed! For a short time, we were the highest paid clerical workers in the province.

Our celebration was well earned. A Collective Agreement was negotiated that ensured that all employees would be treated fairly, equitably and with respect— a Collective Agreement which contained many provisions that would enable union participation and democracy. And we did it with close to 100% membership participation.