

## **Notes for opening remarks from NASA spokesperson Trevor Zimmerman to NAIT**

(These notes made up the vast majority of remarks delivered to NAIT to open negotiations on Wednesday, July 10, 2024 but were not delivered verbatim).

Good morning. In case we haven't met I'm Trevor Zimmerman, Labour Relations Director of NASA and spokesperson for this round of negotiations.

(Note - the committee introduced themselves during NAIT's opening remarks)

I want to start out by acknowledging the work it has taken NASA members and their bargaining committee to get here today. Including those that are here today on vacation:.

That includes in attendance:

Bargaining Committee Chair and NASA President Shauna MacDonald

As well as volunteer representatives of NAIT departments as they existed in the 2022-2023 academic year:

Janet Bertsch representing Marketing, Hospitality and HR Management

Steve Chattargoan representing Media Innovation and Communication Technologies

Melissa Dobson representing Management and Bachelor of Technology

Randy Dreger representing Community Health

Komal Kumar representing Counsellors

Kirk Lamble representing Mechanical

Ashley Lawson representing Natural Sciences and Academic Studies

Christine Loo representing Librarians

Camron Rahmanian representing Finance, Entrepreneurship & Innovation

Greg Von Lipinski representing Electrical and Electronics

Krysta Westlund representing Medical Imaging and Laboratory Services

Ken Williams representing Infrastructure and Sustainable Design

Mark Zubis representing Accounting and Analytics

And I'll acknowledge those who couldn't make it here today:

James Gospodyn representing Chairs

Wanda Griesheimer representing Industrial Automation and Design

David McCoy representing Manufacturing

Mette Rasmussen representing Energy, Resources & Operations

Spenser Rawluk representing Electrical Installations

Sherry Sand representing Dental and Animal Clinical Services as well as Optical Sciences

More work has also been done by the volunteers on NASA's Executive, its standing committees, and the dozens of volunteers who do not hold positions in the union and have helped prepare for this round of bargaining through surveying their co-workers, gathering petition signatures, and supporting NASA's first bargaining rally just recently.

## **NASA members developing new approaches**

This is an unusual level of involvement in negotiations for NASA members, so an explanation is probably a good idea. The results of the last round of negotiations left a lot to be desired for NASA members who expect and deserve to have the collective bargaining process result in significant improvements in their working lives, to say nothing of having the process avoid worsening of compensation and working conditions.

In the last round of negotiations NASA members were essentially told by their government and NAIT that times were tough, and that NASA members would have to make sacrifices because of the poor financial decisions our provincial government had made. NASA members did agree to those sacrifices, although not enthusiastically, with many NASA members surveyed expressing feelings of resignation rather than having made a good choice through that sacrifice.

Since then the consistent message NASA members have given their bargaining committee is that if sacrifices were the result of the last round, improvements must be the goal today. It's time for the pendulum to swing in the other direction.

NASA members began to look for alternative ways of bargaining, with a priority of learning how employees end up more successful through negotiations. What they learned was more transparency and more participation were key elements of resisting wage suppression and using the processes of collective bargaining to actually improve the working lives of the people covered by collective agreements.

Through this education on how successful unions function, and a lot of discussion, NASA members chose to expand their bargaining committee, to encourage more member participation in their own union, and to prioritize a much more open approach to proposal development, and now negotiations.

The people who are here today to participate as bargaining committee representatives and observe as fellow members should really be seen as the encouraging beginnings of that process, and certainly not the end product. The work is not yet complete.

One unfortunate trend I've run into in less than two years here is a common articulation of fear among NAIT staff of being seen to participate in their union. Sadly this trend is not unique to NAIT either, and in a supposedly free country there are many people working for many employers who through instinct or knowledge have some credible concerns about retaliation for exercising their rights.

I'm glad to say that what we have here today with many people joining us is a start of reversing that trend. The more that NAIT staff see their co-workers participating in these processes, the easier it will be to normalize the practice and remove the stigmas around union involvement. I hope NAIT sees the erosion of that fear as a positive as well.

I want to acknowledge that despite our disagreements on processes, NAIT has shown some willingness to try new approaches and it's great to have observers attending with us in this round of negotiations.

The embracing of creative approaches to negotiations that aim to break trends of wage stagnation should be applauded by anyone that believes that employees deserve better than cuts to the real value of their wages.

This committee's approach should also be applauded by employers that value employee engagement, as it brings more transparency to what have in the past been seen as obscure and secretive processes, and now brings participation and engagement from a larger part of the NAIT community.

Unfortunately in place of acknowledgements of the improvements in processes and results that NASA members are working to accomplish, roadblocks have been put in the way of this committee just to get to this point today. Still, we know those roadblocks are only temporary. We will get past them.

There is determination and resolve from NASA members to achieve through negotiations a collective agreement that they deserve and that makes up for sacrifices they have made when they were told times were tough. This is more than achievable by the multi-billion dollar surpluses being posted by the Government of Alberta.

### **Trends at NAIT**

If you are unconvinced that NASA members deserve significant improvements in their working conditions at least out of recognition of their recent sacrifices, it is worth considering some trends at NAIT.

Since 2016, the last year that NASA members received a wage increase that just barely kept up with inflation, NAIT's investment in instructional delivery has decreased by 9.1% or nearly \$15 million a year. At the same time student enrolment has recovered from decreases experienced during the height of the pandemic, and revenues from student fees and tuition has steadily increased by over 15%, or over \$13 million a year since 2016.

### **Market value of NASA work increasing**

I say this not to take a position in support of tuition increases, but to acknowledge that as the cost of education has increased, students have kept coming to NAIT. If you happen to view students as customers, then you could say that they value the product that NASA members deliver and have been willing to pay more for it - and that product is quality education and supports that prepares students for the job market in one of the most prosperous places in the world.

Over a period where the market value of NASA members' work has increased, you would think that the market value of their wages would rise with the value of the product. We know that has not been the case.

Combine this with the reduced investment in instructional delivery, and the effect is NASA members bringing in more revenue to NAIT with less investment in their work.

### **Reducing permanent staff in favour of precarity**

In addition to the devaluing of NASA members wages, the quality of working conditions at NAIT has been eroding over time. One key measure can be seen in NAIT's prioritization of increasing precarious work over secure employment. What were formerly salaried employees, now continuing staff have seen their numbers drop from around 1,085 in Fall 2016 to just 820 in Winter 2024. In their place, what was only about 120 people employed as "sessional" in Fall 2016 has now ballooned to over 385 last semester in "temporary" and "casual" positions. That is a significant reduction in working conditions for hundreds of NASA members. There are now more positions that put members of the NAIT community under greater fear of having their employment end, while also taking away the pensions and benefits that were previously enjoyed by the previous larger portion of permanent positions.

Those precarious staff are expected to deliver the same quality of education that had in the past been done by permanent staff, just now with less value and stability to that work.

It's also an increased burden on those who remain in continuing positions who now have fewer continuing co-workers to work with to maintain and improve curriculum, as well as an increased amount of new precarious staff to onboard every semester.

### **NASA members work**

On top of this, NASA members took on the enormous task of transitioning learning at NAIT to meet the needs of early pandemic management, and then transitioning to a "new normal" back to more in person learning, now with additional expectations on flexibility and availability, increasing student mental health challenges, as well as the complexities of academic integrity in the age of ChatGPT pile on the tests of resilience that NASA members face.

NASA members have also been supporting a changing student body where the increase of international enrolment requires additional student support for those who are adapting to a new country and often an additional language.

This spring and summer NASA members are undertaking significant work to adapt to a new learning management system, while also dealing with the time constraints generated with pressures to deal with their "liability" of vacation earned for the past work they have done.

## **Instructional Assistant IIs**

But that's not all. At the ratification of the last collective agreement, it was unknown to NASA members that NAIT would be bringing in a new staffing model to change how credit programming is being delivered outside of theory classes. While NASA members have overwhelmingly voiced their opposition to this change which pays less to staff with the same qualifications as they have while carrying out much of the same work, they have also been dealing with the workload implications of this change. To be clear, NASA members are saying that if NAIT deems the people being brought in to work as Instructional Assistant IIs are good enough to teach at NAIT, they should not be paid less than others who are also qualified to teach here. NASA members want to see things improved rather than deteriorated.

So we have to ask ourselves, with all of these challenges NASA members have faced, eroding wages, eroding working conditions, the challenges of the pandemic, the prospect of seeing their co-workers replaced by someone being paid less, what should be proper acknowledgement and reward for the applaudable achievements academic staff have accomplished under these conditions?

## **No concessions**

NASA members have given their committee a lot of answers to that question. First, a recognition that there should be no concessions in this round of bargaining. The hope would be that NASA members do not see any proposals tabled by NAIT that would make their rights or working conditions worse, as staff have not underperformed or under delivered, and are not deserving of any further rollbacks.

It would be wonderful to hear that NAIT has valued the work NASA members have done, as well as valued the financial and workload sacrifices they have made to get us to this point, and that NAIT has come prepared with a package of improvements that NASA members can discuss and consider.

Nonetheless, if NAIT will choose to table proposals that deteriorate rights, compensation, or working conditions, they should not expect the support of NASA members whose vote is required to ratify any proposed tentative agreement.

This doesn't mean no negotiations and no compromising, but a recognition of the need for improvements over cuts and takeaways.

## **Restoring purchasing power**

NASA members have been clear that they expect to recover from wage losses, with wages rising to meet the cost pressures of past inflation which has gone up by **22.3%** since 2017, and to avoid any further erosion in wage value by keeping up with inflation going forward, and then also seeing an increase on top of that in recognition of the hard work I've mentioned before.

This is a significant priority for a vast majority of NASA members, and for good reason. While NAIT and the Government of Alberta may trot out figures and rhetoric about how costs have to be contained off the backs of the workforce to try to justify its wage position, I think a more important question to be addressed that can't be answered with a fiscal table is: did NASA members deserve 7 years of wage erosion, and if so, why? Do NASA members deserve 4 more years of wage erosion, and again why?

There is a trend I've seen from employers in negotiations who attempt to portray the choices they make as passive inevitabilities, that that's just the way things have to work. That simply isn't true. Employers have agency, and governments have the ability to better prioritize frontline workers generally, and then to better prioritize the academic staff who prepare workers to make significant contributions to Alberta's economy.

Employers are in a position of power, and despite being a minority of the workforce, their choices currently have an outsized influence on the working conditions of the majority of their employees.

NASA members looked for inspiration from other negotiations when considering what the wage proposal should be, including the success of the United Auto Workers who began negotiations with a proposal to increase wages by 40% plus a cost of living allowance, as well as proposals from other public sector unions including the United Nurses of Alberta and the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees.

A significant majority of NASA members do support a wage proposal matching the UAW, however even more were supportive of a proposal in line with the standard established through UNA and AUPE, and so NASA is proposing that wages increase retroactively to July 1, 2024 increasing by 25%, and then on July 1, 2025 increasing a further 10% plus a Cost of Living Adjustment to add an additional raise equivalent to inflation.

This would ensure NASA members do not fall behind other public sector settlements, and to aid household finances hurt by many years of reduced purchasing power.

### **No wage proposal from NAIT?**

We understand that NAIT is not prepared to table its wage proposal today, and does not know when it will be doing so. We also know that other employers in post-secondary and the broader public sector have tabled their wage proposals already, and they are all within a mandate of no more than 7.5% offered over 4 years, or to put another way still allowing the real value of wages to drop over a period where inflation is projected to rise another 9.1%.

Given that these proposals from other employers are public knowledge at this point, we would wonder why NAIT's wage proposal isn't being put forward. Questions will be asked if NAIT has something worse than 7.5% in mind.

NASA members will want to consider not just NAIT's language proposals, but also wage proposals when assessing how to move forward through negotiations.

### **Acknowledging and reducing workload**

So in addition to an end to the trend of wage devaluation, NASA members are hoping to see better choices to improve their workloads. NASA members will be consistently reminding the NAIT community that NASA member working conditions are student learning conditions. Students are not well served when an institute allows burnout and precarity to prevail over well-being and stable employment.

To that end NASA members are seeking improvements in line with what other academic workers and union members enjoy under their collective agreements including reduced SIHs to better balance student support and curriculum development between classes, stronger recognition for the impact class sizes have on workload and the student experience, and an improved workload review process.

There should also be recognition of the work-life-balance issues caused by evening, weekend, as well as involuntary spring-summer work. On-call work and requests to work during vacation time should also be recognized.

There also needs to be better recognition and implementation of an important aspect of the collective agreement. NASA members typical working hours are clearly stipulated in Article 15 at 36.25 hours per week, and for instructors this is further defined in 16.02 as yearly assignable workload hours, yet NASA members end up having to file workload reviews with workloads requiring hundreds of hours more than what their collective agreement says they are being paid for.

To help correct this, there should be a stronger onus on NAIT to verify that workload assignments are not in violation of the collective agreement and not surpassing an average 36.25 hours per week.

As well, in line with most workplaces and even other agreements in post-secondary, there should be compensation for non-overload work that is assigned beyond that 36.25 hours, allowing for overtime pay. The expectation that NASA members should work for free needs to stop.

### **Job security**

With the previously referenced mention of NAIT's unsupported move to bring in Instructional Assistant II positions which are replacing NASA members in delivering technical lessons, combined with the erosion of stable continuing employment, NASA members have prioritized job security in this round of bargaining.

That means an end to the practice of using IA IIs to teach, and a general prohibition on the use of any support staff to replace or reduce NASA member work.

It also means something that might appear to be a big shift - moving to only two employment types, and eliminating the casual job status. I have been reminded by many NASA members that there was a period where just salary and sessional were the only employee types, so this would be a reversion to something similar to that practice. A goal of employers and employees should be improving working conditions for all staff, and the presence of a third employee type with even worse working conditions than a temporary staff experiences goes against that goal.

Involuntary precarious work is also a problem any employer should be looking to solve, and part of the way that can be accomplished is improving the standing of precarious staff to make the jobs more desirable. NASA members are looking to see improvements for Temporary workers including benefit and pension coverage, an improved path to permanent status, and other improvements in working conditions. This comes with what is hopefully seen as a housekeeping proposal to change the name of Temporary employees to "Term", moving away from the idea that members of the NAIT community should be seen as merely temporary.

NASA will also be tabling a proposal to limit the use of Generative Artificial Intelligence to replace NASA work, a forward looking proposal that is inspired by what other union members have successfully bargained to ensure that human beings are the primary drivers of intellectual work. Human workers have created GAI and it should not be a tool used to further erode the working conditions of other humans.

We also recognize the precarious position of English as Second Language instructors who are NASA members, as well as other Continuing Education instructors including Academic Upgrading. NAIT should not be a place where a two-tier system exists where one group of instructors enjoys the benefits of a collective agreement while others do not. There is no good reason why NASA members in ESL and instructors throughout NAIT should not have the same rights as other instructors.

## **Equity**

NASA members have said there should be improvements in equity at NAIT. This should include a review of pay grid placement and job status to determine if adjustments are needed for people in equity deserving groups.

There should also be equity for classifications across NASA, eliminating gaps in wages, as well as vacation gaps for Librarians and Curriculum and Instructional Specialists.

Top ups for maternity and parental leave should be improved in recognition for the valuable work being undertaken to raise the next generation of workers, and to reduce the economic penalty people face by starting families.



In line with other workplaces including in post-secondary, there should be paid domestic violence leave that one would hope is seldom needed, but is there when it is necessary to provide a more supportive workplace for survivors.

### **Intellectual Property**

NASA members have also expressed a desire to clarify and improve intellectual property rights to recognize their work and protect their rights.

### **The new reality in bargaining**

It's probably fair to say that employers and union members are still adjusting to negotiations after the legalization of fuller bargaining rights was achieved. One consequence is that there is no guarantee of arbitration if the parties can not reach an agreement.

At the same time, despite what some may think, there is not a balance of power between the parties in this process. NAIT has the power to hire, fire, and manage staff, an equivalent power does not exist for NASA members. This is why to better balance the situation NASA first asked in 2023 if NAIT would rule out a lock out of staff, and asked again recently if NAIT would consider bargaining protocols to guarantee that NAIT would not request the right to lock out staff from the labour relations board.

There is no positive labour relations justification for lockouts. While some would see it as the equivalent to a strike, we do not have the examples of significant workplace and societal improvements through lockouts that we know have happened through the rare but powerful use of strike action by workers.

Staff and students deserve to know that NAIT will not exercise this option in what would only be an attempt to starve out staff to avoid improvements to their working conditions.

Then NASA members would be able to breathe easier at the prospect of negotiations without the threat of a lockout hanging over their heads.

### **Conclusion**

These are just some of the highlights of the improvements NASA members have envisioned for NAIT. This amounts to what is likely NASA's most ambitious ingoing proposal package in its over 40 year history. Individually or taken as a package, there is a real opportunity to use these proposals as tools to recruit, retain, and reward the valuable and necessary work academic staff do for NAIT, for the Alberta economy, and to set up students for success at work and in life.

That said, NASA's Bargaining Committee understands and has communicated with NASA members that collective bargaining is a process of compromise. There is keen interest in where

NAIT may see these proposed improvements as desirable and beneficial, and also to learn which ones NAIT feels should not be implemented.

We know that NAIT is capable and proud of its successful work advocating to the government for increased funds for things like the Advanced Skills Centre. If NAIT had taken a “we aren’t funded for that” approach to the skills centre, it would have never been greenlit, and it’s encouraging to see that willingness to push for more and better for the NAIT community. We’ve also heard of that advocacy extend enthusiastically from NAIT to discussing raises for management with the Government of Alberta. That capable advocacy can now extend to improving the working conditions of academic staff and ultimately the learning conditions of students.

One thing that has been impressed upon me in my brief time working for NASA is that many NAIT staff are long-standing employees. It is clear that people find work here rewarding, and many choose to stay despite the many challenges they overcome and still face. We know those challenges are reflected in glint results, but we also know NAIT can be a good place to work, and what we have heard from many long time staff is that it has been better before, so it can be better again.

NASA members look forward to these ongoing discussions and are excited about a future at NAIT where the bar can be raised for themselves, and possibly raised to set an example for other staff and employers in post-secondary. The people who make this Essential to Alberta institute run, and the students they support deserve nothing less.