

# No Justice, Only Struggle Academic Restructuring and Library Labour in Authoritarian Capitalism

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## Article abstract

2022 has been a year of overlapping crises. The so-called “Freedom Convoys” paralyzing Canadian communities, the COVID-19 pandemic continuing to cause excess death and disability, the war in Ukraine, the intensifying effects of climate change, and increasing inflation have all signaled that we find ourselves in a new era, one that can be described as authoritarian capitalism. In this article, we view the restructuring of Canadian universities as yet another facet of authoritarian capitalism, which uses overlapping crises to further proletarianize library labour and fully subsume it into the “learning factory.” Using Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson’s theorization of the politics of capital’s operations, we examine the library restructuring processes taking place at four Canadian universities: Alberta, Brock, Laurentian, and OCAD. We view the reorganizations taking place there as efforts on behalf of university administrators to use the intensification of global forces of capitalism to exploit academic librarian labour. Ultimately, we argue that Canadian librarians are witnessing both formal and real subsumption in Canadian universities, precipitated by the overlapping crises outlined earlier. As a result, we insist that librarians need to develop a politics of struggle to build collective consciousness and action in the face of authoritarian capitalism.





# No Justice, Only Struggle: Academic Restructuring and Library Labour in Authoritarian Capitalism

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## ABSTRACT

2022 has been a year of overlapping crises. The so-called “Freedom Convoys” paralyzing Canadian communities, the COVID-19 pandemic continuing to cause excess death and disability, the war in Ukraine, the intensifying effects of climate change, and increasing inflation have all signaled that we find ourselves in a new era, one that can be described as authoritarian capitalism. In this article, we view the restructuring of Canadian universities as yet another facet of authoritarian capitalism, which uses overlapping crises to further proletarianize library labour and fully subsume it into the “learning factory.” Using Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson’s theorization of the politics of capital’s operations, we examine the library restructuring processes taking place at four Canadian universities: Alberta, Brock, Laurentian, and OCAD. We view the reorganizations taking place there as efforts on behalf of university administrators to use the intensification of global forces of capitalism to exploit academic librarian labour. Ultimately, we argue that Canadian librarians are witnessing both formal and real subsumption in Canadian universities, precipitated by the overlapping crises outlined earlier. As a result, we insist that librarians need to develop a politics of struggle to build collective consciousness and action in the face of authoritarian capitalism.

**Keywords:** capitalism · collective bargaining · labour · reorganization · self-governance

## RÉSUMÉ

2022 a été une année de crises en chevauchement. Les soi-disant « Convois de la liberté » pour paralyser les communautés canadiennes, la pandémie de COVID-19 qui continue de causer un excès de décès et d’invalidité, la guerre en Ukraine, l’intensification des effets des changements climatiques et l’inflation croissante ont tous signalé que nous nous trouvons dans une nouvelle ère, que l’on peut qualifier de capitalisme autoritaire. Dans cet article, nous considérons la

*restructuration des universités canadiennes comme une autre facette du capitalisme autoritaire, qui utilise ces crises en chevauchement pour prolétarianiser davantage le travail bibliothécaire et l'intégrer pleinement dans « l'usine à apprendre ». En utilisant la théorisation de Sandro Mezzadra et Brett Neilson sur la politique des opérations du capital, nous examinons les processus de restructuration des bibliothèques en cours dans quatre universités canadiennes : Alberta, Brock, Laurentienne et OCAD. Nous considérons les réorganisations qui s'y déroulent comme des efforts de la part des administratrices.teurs universitaires d'utiliser l'intensification des forces mondiales du capitalisme pour exploiter le travail des bibliothécaires universitaires. Enfin, nous soutenons que les bibliothécaires canadiens.s assistent à une subsumption à la fois formelle et réelle dans les universités canadiennes, précipitée par les crises en chevauchement décrites précédemment. En conséquence, nous insistons sur le fait que les bibliothécaires doivent développer une politique de lutte pour construire une conscience et une action collectives face au capitalisme autoritaire.*

**Mots-clés :** *autogestion · capitalisme · négociation collective · réorganisation · travail*

**M**ULTIPLE crises unfolded across Canada as we wrote this paper: the global COVID-19 pandemic continued to cause excess death and disability (Shreiber 2022), climate change wiped highways in British Columbia (CBC News 2021a) and caused the acceleration of release of toxic gasses in the Arctic (UN News 2022), the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine, and a small number of people paralyzed multiple communities under the pretense of protesting vaccine mandates. We are referring, of course, to the insurrection of the so-called “Freedom Convoy,” which occupied the streets of Ottawa in winter 2022, blocked several border crossings in the prairies, stopped traffic on the Ambassador Bridge in Windsor, Ontario, and blockaded Calgary’s Beltline neighbourhood (Gervais 2022; Markus 2022). The intensity and overlap of these crises suggest that we have passed from the era of neoliberalism into a new phase of capitalism’s expansion, one that critics like Laurie Macfarlane have called authoritarian capitalism (2020; 2021). This era is arguably marked by national protectionism (shaped by closer integration of the state with finance), impacts of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy and culture, and disintegration of the law.

In this article, we view the restructuring of Canadian universities as yet another facet of authoritarian capitalism, which uses overlapping crises to further proletarianize library labour and fully subsume it into the “learning factory” (Popowich forthcoming). Using Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson’s theorization of the politics of capital’s operations, we examine the library restructuring processes taking place at the University of Alberta (Edmonton), Laurentian University (Sudbury), Ontario College of Art and Design University (Toronto), and Brock University (St. Catharines) as efforts by administrators to use the intensification of

global forces of capitalism to exploit academic librarian labour. Much like the way the authors of *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* examine the workings of global capitalism to understand its impacts on the state and its institutions, we look at the larger socio-political context of Canadian universities to understand its impact on librarian labour. Similarly, just as Mezzadra and Neilson ask what kind of politics is best equipped to confront capital's expanding operations to open up "new vistas of liberation and life beyond the rule of capital" (2019, 9), we look to the politics of struggle as a meaning-making practice for librarians. These crises precipitate proletarianization of labour because capitalism is a crisis-prone system, and thus, the experience of capitalism is increasingly global because its financial forces are tightly linked. Thus, universities, too, are not immune to the global waves of austerity, pandemics, and climate impact, and they respond by continuing to exploit workers and use difference to subsume them into the capitalist processes.

Ultimately, we are arguing that Canadian librarians are witnessing both formal and real subsumption in Canadian universities, precipitated by the overlapping crises outlined earlier. As a result, librarians need to develop a politics of struggle to build collective consciousness and action in the face of authoritarian capitalism. In formal subsumption, processes of production are "appropriated by capital and synchronized with the dynamics of valorization from an external position, without the direct intervention of the capitalist in the organization of labor" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2019, 78). Arguably, this was the experience of postsecondary labour prior to the 2008 financial crisis. While librarianship still served capital before the financial crash, the degree of control capital exerted on academic labour, including librarian labour, was relatively tempered by mechanisms like collegial governance structures, collective agreements, and university policies. Wage rollbacks are increasingly becoming a reality in labour negotiations in healthcare (Wright 2021; Ontario Nurses' Association 2021) and education sectors (Bennett 2019), which we view as some of the mechanisms by which authoritarian capital functions in social reproduction domains. Additionally, Henninger et al. (2020) have demonstrated a trend toward precarious employment in academic libraries in Canada, while Mowatt and McNally have suggested that non-academic library labour has declined and "other professional" categories of labour have grown in the last 20 years (2019). Thus, academics work under one big roof of the university but conceive of themselves as independent contractors with a shared grumbling around parking. However, they experience relatively little intervention into the actual delivery of academic work through implementation of specific technologies or requirements of what to teach and how to teach, for example.

Real subsumption, on the other hand, is characterized precisely by this intervention, “through the enhancement of workers’ productive cooperation and the mechanization of labor” (78). Put another way, this process is like the post-Fordist “social factory;” that is, the move from formal to real subsumption is arguably “a matter of technological development, as directed by capitalism” (Horning 2011). In the Canadian university, such mechanization may be observed in increased surveillance of students and librarians as workers, the drive to replace the living labour of teaching with the dead labour of pre-recorded lectures, grading bots, exam monitoring software, and other invasive learning technologies. It may be observed in the pressure placed by administrators to deliver hybrid learning experiences without investment in technical infrastructure or additional labour. The so-called “productivity score” generated by Microsoft 365 is another example of real subsumption. As many universities are Microsoft shops, the encroachment of surveillance tools marketed as productivity solutions continues to take place in libraries. First released in 2019, Microsoft 365 monitors the day-to-day interactions of emailing and editing documents and uses this as the basis of a largely opaque metric that can, at best, be described as surveillance (Hern 2020). While the working conditions in Canadian postsecondary institutions are by no means equal to those in meat packing plants, for example, their protection is not guaranteed without struggle. According to statistics provided by the American Association of University Professors, less than a third of academic positions in the United States still enjoy the luxury of tenure (2020). In many Canadian faculty associations, precariously employed staff (adjuncts, sessionals, lecturers) make up at least half the membership, if they enjoy the privilege of being in the faculty association at all. The erosion of job security, benefits, workload definitions, and professional development supports have been documented in both American and Canadian postsecondary environments. As librarians are often—though not always—part of the academic staff association, these macro trends impact librarians as well. In other words, we have reason to believe that these conditions will continue to be subject to deterioration, and possibly, elimination by capital. Nominally, there are mechanisms in place that should attempt to keep the balance in check, yet they are often subverted in practice. Collective bargaining, the method by which collective agreements get renewed, is increasingly becoming a difficult enterprise because interference and mandates from provincial governments seek to reduce collective power of labour. Collegial self-governance mechanisms such as academic Senates are increasingly losing their vibrancy and ability to effect change. Finally, the spectre of a library reorganization activity can be played like a trump card to circumvent all established past practice and good will. Our argument is that the financial crisis and the global pandemic crisis provide apt ground to justify the pace and intensity of real subsumption of academic labour by capital.

## Authoritarian Capitalism

The concept of authoritarian capitalism is not new and shares a genealogy with the notion of authoritarian populism, first described by Stuart Hall (1979). Hall theorized that the progress of Thatcherism, much like the strategy of political abandonment witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada, “simultaneously, dismantling the welfare state, ‘anti-statist’ in its ideological self-representation and highly state-centralist and dirigiste in many of its strategic operations” would precipitate real effects on the lives of the people (Hall and McLennan 2021, 284). Hall keenly observed the use of ideological mechanisms by the Conservative Party elected to power in 1979 Britain, to advance economic and social goals, that would shape our experience of neoliberalism today. Nevertheless, such political hegemony is rarely achieved evenly or in totality. As Hall reminds us, the goal of authoritarian populism is to struggle on several fronts at once, “not on the economic-corporate one alone; and this is based on the knowledge that, in order really to dominate and restructure a social formation, political, moral and intellectual leadership must be coupled to economic dominance” (Hall and McLennan 2021, 287). The Thatcherites, much like the conservative premiers of Alberta, Manitoba, and Ontario today, knew they must “win” in civil society as well as in the state. We see a parallel to the keen interest of provincial governments in Canada to “win” both the economic and ideological domains, especially using financial and pandemic crises as reasons to justify their strategies and tactics of austerity, alienation, and negligence. This is why Jason Kenney, the Premier of Alberta, suggested that armed insurrectionists of early 2022 should direct their protest at the Alberta Labour Federation headquarters, not the government (Thomson 2022). This is also why the Emergencies Act was passed in the context of growing calls for increased policing and military force to clear the Ottawa blockades (Tunney 2022). We believe this is also what is happening in Canadian postsecondary institutions today, with libraries being subject to the same processes. For example, the use of performance-based metrics in funding universities is one way the state intervenes in the production of the right kind of subjectivity for authoritarian capitalism (CBC News 2020; Love and Hall 2020; St-Onge 2020; Saskatchewan 2021; Spooner 2021; Bettens 2022), while Ontario colleges have developed a prescriptive formula for controlling faculty workloads and schedules (OPSEU n.d.).

Whereas neoliberalism structured society to think of each person as an independent contractor responsible for their own assessment of risk, authoritarian capitalism gives the impression that power disappears, as if no one is in charge, and that no one holds responsibility for forces that shape our daily existence. However, contrary to the exaggerated claims by anti-globalist theorists like Hardt and Negri (2000; 2004) that the state would wither away, the experience of authoritarian



capitalism, as demonstrated at every stage of the pandemic, shows that the state makes the people more dependent on it than ever before by eliminating the tools that help guide individual decision-making while simultaneously deploying a mystifying narrative of its own non-existence. This can be most keenly seen in the July 2020 press conference when the Alberta premier stated that the government respects the need for municipalities to make pandemic decisions locally, thereby explaining why it could not institute a province-wide mask and vaccine mandate (Karstens-Smith 2022). In February 2022, however, the government declared that the same municipalities did not have the authority to maintain local mask and vaccine mandates, and that in fact, it would add amendments to the Municipal Government Act which would “remove the abilities of municipalities to impose their own separate public health restrictions” (CBC News 2022). The state is therefore nowhere and everywhere at once.

In this sense, authoritarian capitalism does not rely to the same extent on the creation of the external “Other” to justify its progress toward the consolidation of power. Instead, if the people are equally abandoned in favour of capital, then perhaps labour (that is, the people) is “Other” to capital. How else can we explain the passing of laws that prevent criticism of the state and disruption to critical infrastructure (Alberta 2022)? For example, Bills 21 in Alberta and Bill 28 in Manitoba paved the way for the provincial government to impede in the labour negotiations of its largest universities (Athabasca University Faculty Association 2019; Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations 2019; Froese 2020), but their secrecy makes it challenging for workers to pinpoint their operations (UofM Faculty Assoc., 2021; Ley 2022). We view the awarding of a \$28 million settlement to the UMFA by the Manitoba government as evidence that the cost of transparency is raised by authoritarian capitalism (Crabb 2021). It makes it harder for workers to negotiate fairly and it drains them of time, energy, and money to challenge the ruling government’s decisions after the fact (University of Manitoba Faculty Association 2021a). It keeps workers struggling just to maintain a fair playing field rather than doing their jobs.

## Politics of Operations and the Need to Struggle

We rely on Mezzadra and Neilson’s development of the politics of capital’s operations because their theorization in *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* (2019) effectively explains the process of subsumption of librarian labour into the contemporary Canadian academy. We therefore connect the restructuring of Canada’s academic institutions to the larger global context, as we believe authoritarian capitalism is a totalizing force that shapes both material conditions of how universities are organized and the ideological conditions that shape their

workers. In this sense, we share Mezzadra and Neilson's basic assumption that capital is characterized by totalizing tendencies, "by a drive to reorganize the whole social fabric according to the logics and imperative of its valorization" (2019, 65). Ideology, not public health evidence, shapes the decisions to mandate public schools to throw away face masks shipped by the same government to the same public schools two weeks earlier (CTV News Edmonton 2022; French 2022). Ideology also drives the use of secret government mandates in bargaining negotiations with postsecondary labour (Manitoba Organization of Faculty Associations 2021; University of Lethbridge Faculty Association 2022) and implementing performance-based post-secondary funding (Canadian Association of University Teachers 2020).

If we understand capitalism as a difference machine, then *operations* in Mezzadra and Neilson's theory can be defined as the processes of using difference to enclose, exploit, extract, and move on to the next domain. Specifically, the authors argue that capital encounters a multiplicity of differences in the real world and retools differences—particularly those of race and gender—as part of its workings. The redeployment and exploitation of existing hierarchies is therefore not external or incidental. In other words, capital does not simply negotiate social difference; "difference is an internal feature of its operations" (37). A politics of operations, according to Mezzadra and Neilson, is "necessarily involved in the world," in that it is "messed up with dirt, extraction, and exploitation" (244) and thus requires a rethinking of the notion of the political. We believe they align well with the theorization of academic labour in authoritarian capitalism, because labour, too, is involved in the world and enmeshed in the processes and logics of extraction and exploitation, as capital moves from subsumption of manual labour to cognitive, affective, and creative labour.

The politics of capital's operations are present in the continued role of the state in creating markets, advancing technological innovation, and blurring the boundary between entrepreneurship and the state itself. Mezzadra and Neilson thus argue that contemporary states may remain relatively exterior to capital while being conducive to specific expressions of capitalism. However, in so doing, "they are increasingly subdued to capitalist logics and rationality, whether through public-private partnerships, the pressure of powerful private actors, or simply the adoption of market standards and rules" (90). In other words, we might ask whether authoritarianism more tightly binds the state and the market together. We see this in the ways in which academic libraries support startups and technology incubators on campus, for example, resulting in Entrepreneurship and Innovation committees, services, and librarian roles. In asking whether "capital itself is not characterized in its operations by a specific politics, by the deployment of political effects that have become particularly apparent in our time" (91), the authors are ultimately concerned



with the blurring of the boundary between the economic and the political. Put another way, the intervention of the state into the workings of the contemporary university “challenge the inside/outside boundary that is so foundational to the modern state” (Danyluk 2019). In this regard, capital can be understood in Mezzadra and Neilson’s theory as a direct political actor, having acquired “the power to produce territory of its own accord” (25). This boundary may be assumed to be crucial to neoliberalism, and its disappearance carries huge implications for the possibility of radical politics and an envisioning of realities outside of capitalism.

We argue that labour gains are ultimately driven by the politics of struggle grounded in Marx’s idea of praxis. The history of labour unions, struggles for a 40-hour work week, passing of laws prohibiting the use of child labour, and the continued struggle for wage parity through mechanisms like the Memorandum of Agreement on Gender Pay Equity (French 2019) have all been gained through action rather than attempting to convince employers that these issues are a good idea. The struggle has at times been violent, and resulted in withholding labour, disruption of the movement of goods and services, and massive cultural and political disagreement. Not surprisingly, the drive to discipline workers by declaring railways “critical infrastructure” is part of the authoritarian capitalist machinery. The recent Canadian Pacific Railway labour negotiations demonstrated the same arguments used against academic workers to justify limiting the power of unions to negotiate for fair working conditions. Such political moves work in favour of capital to prevent any labour disruption: much like former University of Lethbridge administrators argue that binding arbitration is better suited to the academic industry (Nicol 2022), the same calls were made by grain company executives, framing the Teamsters Canada negotiations as taking the Canadian economy hostage and causing catastrophic impacts on the lives of Canadians (Edmiston 2022; Rabson 2022). In fact, the discourse of critical and essential workers has come to the forefront over the course of the pandemic, as noted by many public and academic librarians. As some have observed, libraries are essential to the function of communities until the moment they demand adequate funding to operate (Moynihan 2020; Seale and Mirza 2020; Bonner 2021).

## **Restructuring in Canadian Academic Libraries**

Over the past decade, many libraries have undergone reorganizations, providing some evidence for the operation of authoritarian capitalism in the contemporary academy. Sometimes explicitly motivated by dire financial exigency, but often ostensibly for the purpose of modernization, these activities upend established library services and seek to replace these stalwarts with new, “innovative” services.

What is not always explicitly stated is that this modernization often carries with it deprofessionalization, unclear new roles and expectations, a higher reliance on contingent labour, and a desire to place the library more in line with the goals of the larger University enterprise. In other words, intervention takes place not just in form, but in the material mechanism of operationalizing librarian labour. Perhaps not surprisingly, collective agreements offer little protection against these activities as the language they contain is meant to address scenarios that occur more often in the daily life of an organization. A reorganization exercise is often one that is conjured up to realign the services of the library to the purported mission of the library. As these processes realign library services at a fundamental level they are treated with much gravity. Quite often the protections offered by collective agreements only cover the topic at the level of financial exigency, which defines a very high bar for restructuring based on bona fide demonstrable financial peril. This, of course, is a dire option that administration of the institution is reluctant to engage, and thus a reorganization is often conducted in a way that can proceed without explicit oversight from a collective agreement. Specific examples of contemporary reorganizations illustrate the unilateral approaches that institutions take to accomplish subsumption.

### *Laurentian University*

The first is the case of Laurentian University (located in Sudbury, Ontario), which included a drastic reduction in academic programs, large academic staff layoffs, and had a lasting impact on the post-secondary education environment of Northern Ontario. What is unique about the Laurentian case is that its library was chewed up by the politics of capital's operations due to financial mismanagement rather than a targeted plan of labour devaluation. In February 2021, Laurentian University filed for financial insolvency. In his affidavit, the President Robert Haché outlined plans to “reduce the number of faculty members as a result of the elimination of admissions into certain programs and reduce or re-deploy the number of non-faculty members as a result of internal reorganization and the elimination of unnecessary cost centres” (Thornton Grout Finnigan LLP 2021, 89). Academics at Laurentian have viewed such tactics including what in all appearances is real financial exigency, but not being treated as such by the University administration through mechanisms of the collective agreement but as processes to bypass negotiated language and make swift, unilateral decisions that impact thousands of individuals. In fact, on April 1, 2021, without consultation or deliberation with governing bodies, the university president announced the termination of federated agreements with Huntington University, Thorneloe University, and the University of Sudbury to ensure a “more efficient delivery model” (Laurentian University 2021a) for the institution. These schools offered programs including Indigenous Studies, Gerontology,

Communication Studies, Classics, Philosophy, and Religious Studies. In terminating the agreements, the administration stated that credits from the federated universities would no longer be accepted towards programs at Laurentian. On April 12, 2021, after a special in-camera Senate meeting, the institution proceeded to lay off 100 professors. Explaining that its academic offerings “will now be better tailored to the programs that most of our students gravitate towards,” Laurentian terminated 58 undergraduate programs and 11 graduate programs (Laurentian University 2021b). These included 34 English-language and 24 French-language offerings, such as Physics, Zoology, Environmental Science, Sociology, and Midwifery. Facing a deadline of April 30 under the Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act, both faculty and staff unions of Laurentian were expected to vote on tentative collective agreements on April 13, 2021. Gyllian Phillips, past president of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, noted how unreasonable it is to expect university workers to vote on agreements one day after learning about program restructuring without a full understanding of the consequences of decisions at stake (CBC News 2021b). Specifically, the crisis of financial mismanagement, years in the making, was used to justify program elimination and labour reductions. For the Library, these reductions translated into the loss of one librarian and one library staff position, bringing a total librarian complement to 5 FTE for a population of approximately 6,000 full-time students (Laurentian University 2022; Universities Canada 2022). As the President put it, “These steps allow Laurentian to focus its resources on programs and courses that students have demonstrated they are interested in taking” (Laurentian University 2021a), meaning vocational training highly valued by the Ontario Progressive Conservative government. A crisis is never framed as such by the administration, but merely as an opportunity to innovate, though only for capital and not labour.

### *Ontario College of Art and Design University*

The restructuring of the Ontario College of Art and Design University Library can also be viewed as an exercise in the operationalization of authoritative capitalism. In this case, library workers at OCAD U were protected by a collective agreement, albeit not the same one as the faculty association. Workers in the library were members of a local unit of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) rather than a faculty association. Due to their status as OPSEU employees, OCAD U librarians did not enjoy the benefits of mechanisms like collective agreement articles on academic freedom, financial exigency, and redeployment. Perhaps due to this they were unable to effectively resist the encroachment of unilaterally imposed changes by administration. Nominally, the administration conducted a consultation within various levels in the institution and ultimately brought the proposed restructuring

to the Senate for general faculty consideration. After all these processes, on June 1, 2021 four senior academic librarians were laid off and two library staff positions were eliminated in a reorganization “that was trumped as ‘decolonial’” by the University administration (OCAD Faculty Association 2021, 14). Many academics agreed that the principles of collegial governance were not upheld in this reorganization exercise (Lee, Sonne de Torrens, and Zoric 2021; OCAD Faculty Association 2021; Thompson n.d.). While the press releases offered by the institution outlined the rationale and typical justification of realignment to needs of the institution, the most perplexing part of it all was the statement that the process was consistent with practices of decolonization (OCAD University 2021). One might question how the elimination of four positions in the library environment is a step towards reconciliation, but we see such discursive moves as ideological framing that capital uses to subsume labour into its operations. As the OCAD U Faculty Association Annual General meeting summarized,

OCAD University’s Senate weighed in to support the four terminated librarians and demand transparent and meaningful consultation on the library’s reorganization at the May meeting of the Senate. However, legal jurisdiction over the library remains with the Administration and the cuts were approved by the Board of Governors. (OCAD Faculty Association 2021)

This theme plays out in our next case as well.

### ***University of Alberta***

Since 2019, the University of Alberta saw a \$222 million cumulative reduction in funding at the hands of the United Conservative Party, equivalent to 33% of its 2019 Campus Alberta Grant budget (University of Alberta 2019; Issawi 2022; Pawluck 2022). Many scholars and journalists have pointed out that the U of A, which educates about a quarter of all post-secondary students in the province, was subject to nearly half of all post-secondary budget cuts in this period (Bench 2021; Joannou 2021). Notably, in March 2021, after the university had already eliminated nearly half of the 1,100 staff positions targeted to meet the budget shortfall, the administration had announced a five-year partnership with the telecom corporation TELUS to establish a 5G “Living Lab.” It reported that this \$15 million investment would contribute to “a pipeline of new research and technology with commercial applications, while supporting the development of the talent pool needed to enhance economic recovery and diversification in Alberta” (Brown 2021). After indicating its intentions to grow admissions, the University increased tuition in undergraduate and graduate programs ranging from 40% to 104% for domestic students, including a 29% increase in the cost of a law degree, a 71% increase for an MBA, and a doubling of the cost for a master’s in counseling psychology (Turner 2021; Joannou 2022).

In this pursuit of work without labour, the institution has undergone a massive transformation, resulting in the reorganization of 17 academic faculties into three new colleges, consisting of 13 faculties and “organized by disciplinary alignment with shared administrative services” (Chisolm 2020), leaving three community-based disciplinary faculties of Augustana, Campus Saint-Jean, and Native Studies outside this new structure.

In addition, an equally significant reorganization of the non-academic operations of the university was completed through the Service Excellence Transformation (SET) program. This program resulted in the movement of the University IT department to report directly to the Vice-President of Finance, the appointment of “service partners” in departments like Finance, Human Resources, and Marketing and Communications, while eliminating positions that performed those functions within academic units, including the Library, in favour of a centralized, corporatized university structure. The administration hired the Nous Group consultant firm to lead the process, though the extent of their influence on the restructuring has been questioned by faculty at U of A. As the Library was left out of the academic restructuring process, the alignment with the new college structure translated into the transformation of existing Library Heads positions to Heads, Faculty Engagement in 2020. The budget cuts and administration-imposed hiring freeze shrunk the Library’s total labour capacity: resident librarian contracts were rescinded upon renewal in 2020, sessional librarians were terminated, and the Indigenous Librarian Internship program was suspended in 2021. Retiring and resigning librarians were not replaced. In 2022, the Library structure roughly maps out to the University College model, with three major groups of Faculty Engagement librarians reflecting the disciplinary alignment of the institution.

### ***Brock University***

On occasion there are restructuring processes that are undertaken with less financially motivated reasons, but which nevertheless result in real subsumption of academic labour. The reorganization of the Brock University Library is a good example of this scenario. The motivation for reorganization at Brock came as part of the results of an external review conducted in 2015. This review was performed by a group of both librarians and faculty members drawn from outside of the Brock Library and from across the county. The recommendations of the final report produced included the following: “That, following the hiring of the new University Librarian, a process to reassess the organizational structure be launched, including the reporting structure, levels of resourcing, supervision and management, and the

extensive use of limited term and cross-appointments” (Bird, Weir, and Connolly 2016).

By 2019 a “Project Blueprint” document generated with the guidance of perennial library consultancy group, Dysart and Jones, was shared. This document developed a set of priorities and general principles that the Library should adhere to in the upcoming substantive reorganization process. It did not go so far as to outline an organization chart with definitive allocation of staff and resources but instead used the metaphor of a blueprint on which future decisions related to library structure should be based. The document described the Library’s ambitions and what it needed to aspire to: “the Library’s approach will be influenced by the innovation and strategic lifecycles” (Brock University Library 2019a, 14). The notion of the “innovation lifecycle” is further mentioned, but no clear definition is presented; the document merely states ways a library team might treat such a subject as to “[s]uggest how to manage the Library’s innovation pipeline, starting with ideation and having staff discern which ideas should proceed through the lifecycle” (Brock University Library 2019a, 25). Seemingly, staff were encouraged to be part of the restructuring considerations but were given circular definitions of what this engagement entails.

Another defining characteristic of the reorganization process was the fact that a representative team was drawn from Library employees from all staff levels and departments, a fact that the document gladly heralds. Now with a set of guidelines firmly in place the follow up document to this report was one prepared exclusively by the Library administration. First presented in October 2019, this document entitled “Organization Design Framework: Moving From Blueprint to Structure” finally brought forth definitive changes including timelines and the new organizational structure of the Library. It stated plainly that, “The Draft Organizational Design has been created by the Library Administration Team, following closely on the vision contained in the Blueprint” (Brock University Library 2019b). At the very least this is incongruent with the vision expounded in the previously mentioned document that highlighted staff engagement with the process. Or put in other terms, the contributions were now sufficient, and staff would no longer be expected to participate further in any substantive way except in the case of following implementation decisions.

Although the Library was seemingly done with consultations on the reorganization plan, librarians and faculty members at Brock were not. Normal mechanisms afforded by collegial self-governance and collective bargaining were engaged to create meaningful check-ins and to create some transparency around this unprecedented process. First, the collective agreement was renegotiated as the restructuring process began, and language explicitly outlining the process that



must be followed during a Library reorganization was added: “The discontinuance or restructuring of any Library program, service, or department which would result in the redeployment of professional librarian members is subject to consultation with the Library Council” (130). Here, Library Council voting members included the professional librarians not on the administrative team. Additionally, a resolution was passed at the University Senate at the behest of the Senate Governance committee that outlined a completely prescribed process of steps that must be followed during the restructuring of the Library. It led with a preamble that stated the following: “Pursuant to Senate’s power under the Brock University Act to take part in planning and development of the University, consultation with Senate is required prior to any restructuring within the Brock University Library” (“Process for Senate Review of Restructuring within the Library” 2020). Perhaps undercutting the efficacy of this process was that it was not added to the Faculty Handbook—the most definitive document outlining University policies—but linked to instead as an additional document on the Senate homepage.

Having exhausted all the usual methods, both Senate guidance and contractual language were modified to create binding processes and yet, modifications to the “Organizational Design Framework” document are strictly at the purview of Library administration. In fact, the most recent version of this document, dubbed version 2.1 and dated April 15, 2021, shares almost no similarity to the original document, and all text within it, done so with the understanding that these two mechanisms have already been followed and adhered to. We view this as an example of the failure of collegial self-governance and collective bargaining to resist the subsumption of labour into the academic factory. The reorganized library plan was finally implemented May 1, 2022, close to four years after the original “blueprint” document was created, and eight years after the reorganization was first recommended in the external review of the library.

## The Limitations of Associations

Where do the academic librarians turn, then, if collegial governance processes cannot support their collective goals as global capital continues its churn? In their introduction to the collection *In Solidarity: Academic Librarian Labour Activism and Union Participation in Canada*, Dekker and Kandiuk examine this very question when tracing the emergence of the academic librarian labour movement:

But other than unionization, what means were or are available to them? Professional associations? Friendly relations with library administrators? Frustrated by a lack of progress, librarians turned away from their professional associations and local library administrators and instead looked to the national academic labour organizations, CAUT or in the US, the National Education Association, the American Association of University

Professors or other unions, as well as their local faculty associations, to further their collective professional interests. (2014, 3)

We argue that faith in our professional associations has not necessarily served librarians as workers in their struggle for fair material conditions, especially as crises intensify around us. In fact, our adherence to the duties of the profession has only worked to mystify class consciousness by deploying a sense of vocational awe (Ettarh 2018), which ultimately benefits the employing organizations. One factor which certainly contributes to the isolation librarians feel at their individual institutions is the lack of a national organization that is meant to represent the values and priorities that the profession claims to endorse. Take for instance the dissolution of the Canadian Library Association. In 2016 the organization meant to represent the field of librarianship came apart at the seams, and made the promise that one day, like some mythological phoenix, it would rise again into some other form that would this time meet the challenges facing the profession (Canadian Encyclopedia 2018). Six years later we are still without this successor and the profession has not demanded its replacement, with CFLA being structurally and philosophically different. Perhaps the lack of advocates for a replacement to CLA might be attributed to the waning efficacy it displayed in the last few years of its existence. However, as many have pointed out, whether CLA or the federation of provincial associations, or even the International Federation of Library Associations, these are organizations for *libraries*, not *librarians*. This distinction allows for a real sidestep of responsibilities associated with advocacy of the working conditions for librarians and everyone else employed within the Library, because its main politics remain recognition (through advocacy) rather than labour organizing.

Thus, perhaps Canadian librarians may turn to the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) Librarians and Archivists committee. CAUT is the national organization that supports the working conditions of academic staff on a variety of different fronts: continued defense of academic freedom, endorsement of collegial self-governance, and bargaining support. The Library and Archivists' Committee is the group of individuals drawn from across Canada, charged with the task of addressing challenges aimed squarely at this constituency. Take for instance the letter sent from the President of CAUT on behalf of the Committee as a response to the *Core Competencies for the 21st Century CARL Librarians* report. A strong opposition to this report is found in the letter:

As the document is intended to apply to thousands of librarians, we would appreciate a statement regarding the positioning of CARL vis à vis academic librarians; that is, that CARL represents administrators. CAUT, on the other hand, openly represents the labour perspectives of academic librarians and archivists. As such, we are concerned with the effects that statements such as the draft competency profile have on the working lives of

CAUT members and academic librarians more generally. (Austin-Smith and Robinson 2020)

The activities of this group are indeed valuable and have made an impact in the working lives of academic librarians in Canada, but it functions exclusively as an advocacy body for labour issues and has no jurisdiction on how the profession of librarianship defines its values or professional standards in a way that a national organization would be empowered to do.

Our argument, then, is that professional associations are not mechanisms by which librarians can advance collective labour goals, because their politics are fundamentally grounded in bourgeois individualism. Capital continues to ensure both individual librarians and the unions to which they belong continue to be defanged through essential service agreements and clauses that limit the material expression of solidarity. For example, the pandemic has been used as a justification to reduce facilities costs by deploying staff to shared-cubicle farms in the name of flexibility (McGill University 2021). Administrators of many universities used work-from-home programs to turn a crisis into surplus-value extraction opportunity. What answer do professional associations have to these developments, when, arguably, working conditions are academic conditions? In the words of Jess Goldberg, “Pedagogy questions are inseparable from labor conditions questions. Teaching philosophies are inseparable from labor politics. Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions” (Goldberg 2022).

## Conclusion

We believe the politics of struggle are important for academic librarians to consider because the move toward authoritarian capitalism demands collective consciousness and action. Given that the material consequences of climate change and the pandemic cannot be solved through individual actions, it is crucial to remember that academic libraries do not operate outside of this global context. However, change is forever discursive because librarianship lacks a material analysis of power as it is founded on the philosophy of liberalism whose “foundational commitment to individualism does not recognize the validity of collective activity (unless the wealthy do it in the form of a corporation)” (Barnetson 2021). Thus, we suggest that living in the era of authoritarian capitalism requires that new methods of struggle be explored in addition to formal and legal mechanisms, including academic-student coalitions, refusal, slow work, student boycotts, and mutual aid efforts. Failing to develop a praxis of labour struggle will lead to what Marc Schroeder calls “a docile and unthinking beast of academic capitalism” (2021) and librarians, often being one of the smallest constituent groups on campus, may witness de-designation, de-professionalization, and elimination of positions (Kreneck 2018), as is already

happening across Canada (Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians 2018; Athabasca University Faculty Association 2020).

We chose to write about Canadian academic library labour in the larger institutional context rather than at the micro-level of individual library practices precisely because such a methodology aligns with our belief in the need to develop a broader politics of struggle grounded in history. The war in Ukraine will ultimately affect us all due to the rising food prices. We also anticipate more seasons of heat waves, wildfires, floods, and hurricanes across North America. We do not yet know how the pandemic will develop in 2023, but we suspect that librarians have lost colleagues, while many others are experiencing the impacts of long-COVID. In other words, our argument for the need of politics of struggle is material because labour that makes libraries possible is also material. Institutions cannot innovate their way into the 21st century on sick and alienated labour forces, yet this seems to be precisely the strategy, as multiple feminized groups of healthcare workers in Alberta are being offered 3-10% wage rollbacks in the latest round of negotiations. Others are told to accept the 0% across-the-board wage increases as inflation approaches 10% and food prices rise. These are the same groups of workers who carried the province through devastating pandemic waves of death and suffering. From this vantage point, the regressive labour negotiations do not seem arbitrary because they fit logically into the capitalist project of continuing to expropriate surplus value. In this sense, there is no such thing as cruelty or justice; there is only the progress of extraction at the cost of human and non-human life.

Perhaps the discourse of “late capitalism” was premature, and we are still in the teen years of capitalism. Therefore, we argue that Mezzadra and Neilson’s theorization of the politics of capital’s operation is transferable to the development of the politics of struggle in librarianship, in that they both share a theoretical search for and “practical experimentation with a politics capable of confronting the operations of capital at the level of their encroachment on variegated fabrics of daily life” (250). We therefore agree that such politics must be effective at “local sites of production, reproduction, and cooperation, opening up spaces liberated from exploitation at the same time that it builds connections, translations, and even institutions within wider geographies beyond the local and the national.” Additionally, the authors remind us that these politics must also be capable of “realistically confronting and negotiating the state’s action, in its representative as well as post-representative logics, without ever giving up the unending task of a radical critique of representation and continuing to develop institutions of counterpower within a dual-power approach” (250). This is a challenging task, but its search is imperative in a moment when anti-social forces seek to alienate, dehumanize, and bring further death. For us, then, the

urgency in developing this theorization goes beyond labour unions and professional associations, as the conditions in which they emerged have departed toward a new global order that increasingly requires austerity, authoritarianism, and repression to maintain its hold on value extraction. Our argument is therefore that being integrated into ideological state apparatuses, libraries are implicated in the mechanisms of such authoritarianism and repression, even if they appear milder in comparison to the actions taken by states like the Russian Federation or Myanmar, for example. At the very least, our goal is to shake academic librarians from their comfort and faith in the administration, the state, and financial capital. If the wave of academic labour strikes across Canada in the past three years (Acadia, Ontario Colleges, York University, Concordia University of Edmonton, Lethbridge, Université Sainte-Anne, University of Manitoba, University of Northern British Columbia) reveals anything, it is that struggle with capital intensifies.

As this form of political and social order increasingly reorganizes class hierarchies by deploying social difference to advance its logics of extraction, it is not surprising that the ideas of politics of refusal are increasingly explored in librarianship as well (Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship 2021). Strategies of refusal can look like student and worker walkouts from public schools and libraries in protest of lifting of masking requirements, for example. We are suggesting that solidarity-building strategies and tactics beyond the formal and the legal may be required as the state and capital increasingly work together to coerce workers into more precarious conditions (Black Socialists in America n.d.; The BIPOC Project n.d.; Blanc 2020; Spade 2020; Kaba 2021). This is a troubling proposal for most professionals conditioned to rely on the seeming fairness of procedural justice (Kogelmann 2019; Popowich 2020), but if the rulebook is rewritten by governments who have always served capital, who else will build power but the constituents themselves? We believe this is the question with which librarianship needs to grapple while capital continues to discipline and exploit us as a new crisis unfolds.

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